

## Exchange in the Indian Ocean

*Seek ye knowledge, even to China.*

—Hadith (9th century)

**Essential Question:** What were the causes and effects of the growth of networks of exchange after 1200, and how did environmental knowledge support that expansion?

The saying from the Hadith, traditionally attributed to the prophet Muhammad, provides guidance to Muslims, encouraging them to travel and learn. Following this advice, it is understandable that Dar al-Islam—literally the House of Islam, or Muslim world—might be called the world’s first global empire. It connected societies from North Africa to South Asia.

Even before missionaries and imperial armies spread Islam around the world, Muslim merchants traveling to non-Muslim lands in search of trading partners were paving the way. In fact, Arab merchants had been traveling to South Asia for centuries before Islam began expanding. Muslim merchants’ connections to Dar al-Islam interacted with developments in sailing technology and environmental knowledge to transform the Indian Ocean into an economic hot spot during the Postclassical Era.

### Causes of Expanded Exchange in the Indian Ocean

South Asia, with its location in the center of the Indian Ocean, benefited enormously from the trade in the **Indian Ocean Basin**. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing the Islamic global empire with the Mongolian Empire. See Topic 2.2.) Although some of the causes of expanded trade in the Indian Ocean Basin were the same as those of expanded overland routes, some related specifically to ocean travel and knowledge.

**Spread of Islam** Although the Indian Ocean trade had existed as early as 200 B.C.E., the expansion of Islam connected more cities than ever before. Trading partners existed in East Africa, East and Southeast Asia, and South Asia. Muslim Persians and Arabs were the dominant seafarers and were instrumental in transporting goods to port cities across the Indian Ocean. Cities on the west coast of India, such as **Calicut** and Cambay, became thriving centers of trade due to interactions with merchants from East Africa and Southwest Asia.

Calicut, especially, became a bustling port city for merchants in search of spices from southern India. Foreign merchants from Arabia and China met in

Calicut to exchange goods from the West and the East, respectively. Local rulers welcomed the presence of Muslim and Chinese merchants, as it brought the city wealth and prominence in the Indian Ocean Basin.

**Increased Demand for Specialized Products** As the Indian Ocean trade grew, so did the demand for specialized products. Every region involved in trade had something special to offer its trading partners.

- India became known for the high quality of its fabrics, particularly cotton. In addition, merchants traveled to India in search of meticulously woven carpets as well as high-carbon steel (used for knives and swords), tanned leather, and artisan-crafted stonework. Merchants also sought pepper from India's southern coastal cities.
- Modern-day Malaysia and Indonesia became known as the **Spice Islands** because of the fragrant nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom they exported.
- Slaves, ivory, and gold came from the Swahili coastal cities of Mombasa, Mogadishu, and Sofala.
- China exported silks, and Chinese porcelain became coveted worldwide, which is why people in the West still refer to their fancier dishes as "fine china."
- From Southwest Asia came horses, figs, and dates.

Trade in enslaved people also played a role in exchanges in the Indian Ocean. While most Africans who were enslaved and transported to the Americas after 1500 came from west and central Africa, there had been a long-running slave trade in the eastern part of the continent. By routes over land or in the Indian Ocean, slaves from eastern Africa were sold to buyers in northern Africa, the Middle East, and India. Many were transported to the islands off the southeast coast of Africa, such as Madagascar. The trade reached its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Enslaved people taken in the Indian Ocean trade suffered fates different from those who were taken across the Atlantic. Slaves in the Indian Ocean trade were more likely to provide forced labor in seaports in the shipping industry and as household servants. Some worked as sailors or even soldiers. Living in towns or cities, they had more opportunity to develop communities and to work alongside free laborers than did enslaved people taken to the Americas. Slaves who ended up in Islamic communities had certain rights, such as the right to marry. As a result of the **Indian Ocean slave trade**, African words, musical styles, and customs can be found in Oman, India, and elsewhere.

**Environmental Knowledge** Knowledge of **monsoon winds** was essential for trading in the Indian Ocean. In the winter months, winds originated from the northeast, while in the spring and summer, they blew from the southwest. Thus, merchants had to time their voyages carefully, often remaining in port cities for months at a time, depending on when favorable winds would come their way.

**Advances in Maritime Technology** Travelers needed ships capable of navigating the Indian Ocean's winds. Arab sailors used sailing technology to aid their travel. It is debatable whether Arab sailors invented the triangular **lateen sails** that they used, but the sails were popular because sailors found that the triangular shape could easily catch winds coming from many different directions. Chinese sailors during the classical period had invented the **stern rudder**, which gave their ships more stability and made them easier to maneuver. The small wooden dhows used by Arab and Indian sailors dominated the seas during the Postclassical Era. Trade facilitated the rapid spread of sailing technology across the many lands bordering the Indian Ocean in this period. (See Topic 4.1 for later Chinese maritime technology, such as the magnetic compass and improved rudder.) The **astrolabe**, improved by Muslim navigators in the 12th century, allowed sailors to determine how far north or south they were from the equator.

**Growth of States** The trading networks in the Indian Ocean fostered the growth of states to help institutionalize the revenue from trade. One Muslim city-state, **Malacca**, also spelled **Melaka**, became wealthy by building a navy and by imposing fees on ships that passed through the Strait of Malacca, a narrow inlet that many ship captains used to travel between ports in India and ports in China. The Sultan of Malacca became so powerful in the 1400s that he expanded the state into Sumatra and the southern Malay Peninsula. As in city-states in East Africa, Italy, and the Americas, Malacca's prosperity was based on trade rather than agriculture or mining or manufacturing.

The sultanate ended when the Portuguese invaded the city in 1511. The Portuguese hoped that by conquering the key city on the Strait of Malacca, they could control the trade that flowed through it between Europe, India, and China. They were successful enough to generate great wealth for their empire. However, they were less successful than they had hoped. Their conquest touched off conflicts among the other states in the region and caused traders to diversify their routes and the ports they used.

## Effects of Expanded Exchange in the Indian Ocean

Some of the very factors that caused expansion of exchange networks in the Indian Ocean also, in time, became effects.

**Diasporic Communities** Without the arrival of merchants in distant lands, trade could not have expanded. As a natural result of waiting for favorable winds for travel, these merchants interacted with the surrounding cultures and peoples of the region. In fact, many Arab and East African merchants stayed in western Indian port cities permanently because they married women they met there. Arab and Persian merchants settled in East Africa. Thus, these merchants from Dar al-Islam were the first to bring Islam to southern Asia, not through missionary work or conquest, but through intermarriage. Their children would generally be raised within Muslim traditions.



Settlements of people away from their homeland are known as a **diaspora**. In these communities, settlers introduced their own cultural traditions into the indigenous cultures. Those cultures, in turn, influenced the culture of the merchants. Diasporas arose through trade in many parts of the world.

Merchants in Diasporic Communities		
Merchant Community	Region(s)	Products
Muslim	China, Indian Ocean Basin, Europe	Silk, paper, porcelain, spices, gems, woods, gold, salt, amber, furs
Chinese	Southeast Asia, Africa	Cotton, tea, silk, metals, opium, salt
Sogdian (in Samarkand)	Main caravan merchants along Silk Roads, China	Silk, gold, wine, linens
Jewish	China, India, Europe	Glass beads, linens, dyes, spices
Malay	Sri Lanka	Nutmeg, pepper, cloves

Source: Iranica Online. "Sogdian Trade," <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sogdian-trade>

**Response to Increased Demand** In a similar way, increased demand for products caused trade to expand. At the same time, however, it resulted in several effects with long-lasting impact. For example, to meet rising demand, producers needed to find ways to become more efficient—to grow more crops, to make more textiles, to manufacture more iron. In some places, the role of the state increased even more to oversee these efforts at efficiency and to raise money through customs—taxes on imported goods—and fees for the use of seaports. The western Indian Rajput kingdom of **Gujarat**, for example, became the go-between for trade between the East and West. The revenue from customs in Gujarat was many times more than the entire worth of some European states.

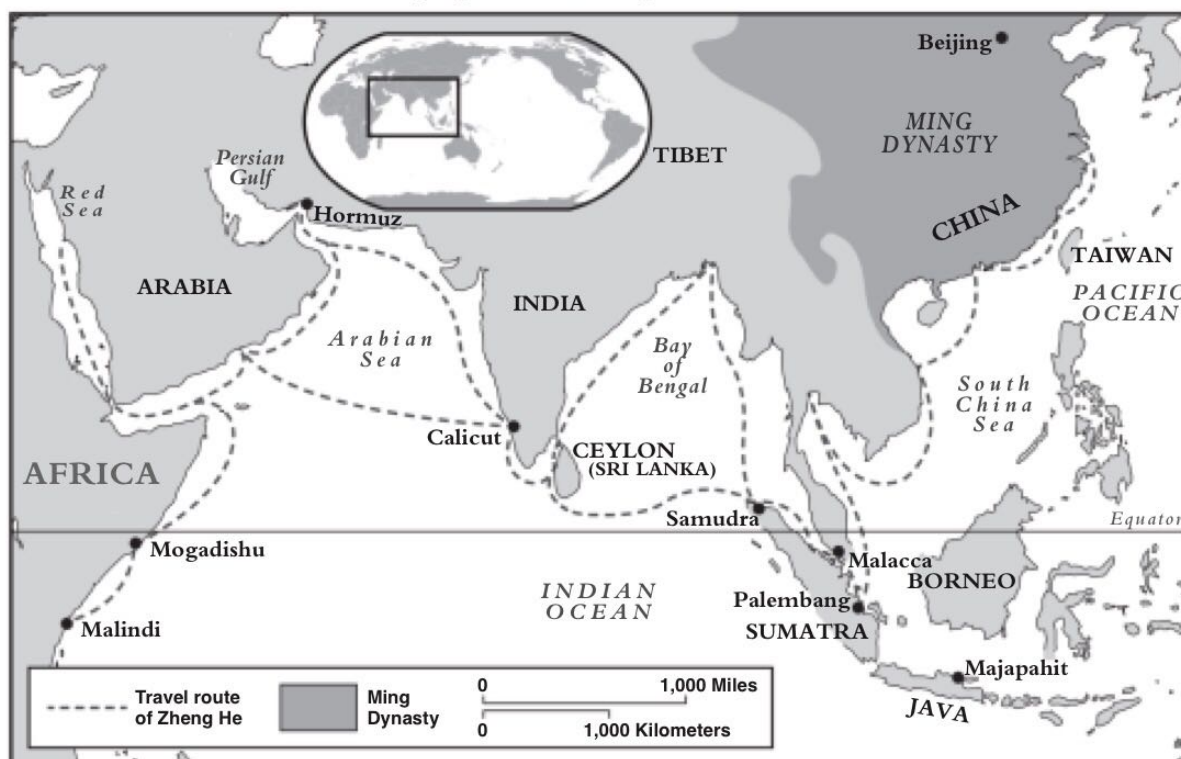
**Swahili City-States** The Indian Ocean trade also created thriving city-states along the east coast of Africa, sometimes known as the **Swahili city-states**. "Swahili," which literally means "coasters," referred to the inhabitants of bustling commercial centers, such as Kilwa, Mombasa (in modern Kenya), and Zanzibar (in modern Tanzania). The traders of the Zanj Coast, as it was known in Arabic, sold ivory, gold, and slaves to their Arab trading partners, as well as more exotic goods such as tortoise shells, peacock feathers, and rhinoceros horns. In exchange, the "Zanj" cities acquired Chinese porcelain, Indian cotton, and manufactured ironwork. Trade was so vigorous with East Asia that Chinese porcelain remains a common find among the ruins of Swahili cities.

Trade brought considerable wealth to the cities on the East African coast. Architectural ruins in Kilwa suggest the wealth and grandeur that once existed there. For example, most buildings had traditionally been constructed of mud and clay. However, at the Indian Ocean trade's height, many mosques and wealthy merchants' homes were made of stone or coral.



**Significant Cultural Transfers** The transfer of knowledge, culture, technology, commerce, and religion intensified as a result of thriving trade in the Indian Ocean Basin. The voyages of the Muslim admiral **Zheng He** (1371–1433) reflect this transfer, as well as the conflicts it sometimes generated. In 1405, the Ming emperor Yongle sent Zheng He on the first of seven great voyages. Zheng traveled to Indonesia, Ceylon, and other coastal areas on the Indian Ocean, to Arabia, and to the east coast of Africa as well as to the Cape of Good Hope. The main purposes of the voyages were to display the might of the Ming Dynasty to the rest of the world and to receive tribute from the people he encountered. Zheng’s fleet was impressive: At its height, his fleet included more than 300 ships that carried 28,000 people.

**The Voyages of Zheng He, 1405–1433**



The expeditions won prestige for the Chinese government and opened up new markets for Chinese goods. Zheng He and his crew returned to China with exotic treasures, such as the first giraffe the Chinese had ever seen. They also brought back a new understanding of the world beyond China’s borders. The voyages inspired some to immigrate to ports in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

Zheng He’s voyages stirred controversy, though. Confucianism promoted a stable, agrarian lifestyle, and scholars worried that greater interaction and trade with foreign cultures threatened China’s social order. Some critics simply looked down upon other cultures, deeming them barbaric and vastly inferior to Chinese culture. Some thought the voyages were too expensive.

Emperor Yongle’s successor, his son Zhu Gaozhi, ended Zheng He’s travels, and he also discouraged all Chinese from sailing away from China. To emphasize his point, he made building a ship with more than

two masts a punishable offense. Zheng's voyages did have one positive short-term result: They put a stop to pirate activities off the coast of China and in Southeast Asia. However, after China stopped sending armed merchant ships into the ocean, the pirate activities resumed, especially on the China Sea.

### KEY TERMS BY THEME

#### **GOVERNMENT:** States

Malacca (Melaka)

Gujarat

Swahili city-states

#### **ECONOMY:** Trade

Calicut

Spice Island

#### **ENVIRONMENT:** Ocean

Indian Ocean Basin

monsoon winds

#### **TECHNOLOGY:** Sailing

lateen sails

stern rudder

astrolabe

#### **CULTURE:** Disruptions and Transfers

Indian Ocean slave trade

diaspora

Zheng He