

Ancient Era, 5000 to 1000 BCE: Early Seafaring and Trade

Trade among the lands and along the coasts and estuaries (river mouths) of the Indian Ocean began long before the rise of agriculture. Trade originates locally with the exchange of goods among individuals. Trade expands with migration and the spread of information about different resources available in other areas. Salt, metal, types of useful or decorative stone, wood for building, and foods were among early trade goods transported on land, river, and coastal routes. This trade, along with fishing, is one of the continuous threads in human history from earliest times to the present day. These simple exchanges paved the way for longer and more daring voyages, and helped trade to expand and persist over time. Sea routes, as they expanded over time, existed alongside overland routes, and often connected to them, bringing goods produced on land to shore, and carrying imports into the lands beyond the coasts.

Oceanic voyages began in the eastern and western parts of the Indian Ocean. In Southeast Asia, the thousands of islands between the peninsulas of the Southeast Asian mainland and Australia were home to early mariners sometime before the first millennium BCE. Distances between the many islands were short, and the seas relatively shallow. The wild winds of the open ocean were tempered. The climate was tropically warm all year round. The irregularly shaped islands had many coves and harbors. Tropical forests provided tall trees whose wood was resistant to rot, and many other resources. It was a well-protected environment for experimenting with boat-building and learning winds, currents and navigation. The Austronesians, as they are called, were the ancestors of mariner-migrants in many places around the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific. These early mariners carried crops such as yams, coconuts, bananas, sugar cane, and taro-root, as well as other rare plants, to new homes. Beginning with logs lashed together, or dugout canoes, ships in the region developed into sea-going craft. A unique feature of their boats was the outrigger, a log attached to poles alongside the main hull, which kept the boat from rolling in heavy waves. Coconut fiber ropes held the parts together. Woven grass and fiber mats held on masts developed into flexible sailing systems that allowed the boats to maneuver with the wind.

On the western end of the Indian Ocean region, the river valley civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus Valley began to trade by sea. Artifacts and inscriptions dated to between 4000 and 3000 BCE show that trade from Mesopotamia along the shores of the Arabian Gulf took place. With the rise of civilizations and division of labor, the need for different types of goods and the demand for luxuries increased. Resources such as wood, stone for carving and jewelry, metals for war and crafts, and fine ceramics attracted early traders and royal expeditions. Cotton goods and wool, copper, gold, silver and turquoise, pearls and coral from the sea were among the goods. Surplus grain from Mesopotamia was an important export. From the gulf, Sumerian traders ventured along the coast into the Indian Ocean, making contact with traders in cities of the Indus Valley. Weights and seals show that trade became more organized, and with the appearance of writing systems, records of voyages, lists of goods, places and royal expeditions testify to trade.

Mesopotamian societies traded with Egypt across the Eastern Mediterranean around this time, using both overland and coastal routes. The domestication of the camel helped join

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coastal water routes with land routes, and joined bodies of water across the desert. From Egypt, mariners set out along the Red Sea coast, and gradually learned to navigate its dangerous reefs, rocks and winds. Trade along the coasts for fish, shellfish, and other goods expanded to include rare items from Africa such as animal skins, feathers, and ivory. Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt sent an expedition south into the Red Sea in 1493 BCE which reached the land of Punt, near Somalia. It returned with incense, plants, animals, rare woods, and ivory. From the Horn of Africa, ships may have started down the coast of Africa, or out into the Indian Ocean, but it is not known for sure. Ancient ships of Southwest Asia and the Mediterranean developed from river craft to meet the challenges of deeper coastal water and winds. From dugout logs to bundles of reeds lashed with rope, boats developed into ships made from wooden planks held together with pegs of wood or stitched with rope, with caulking to make them watertight. Planked ships may have been built as early as 3000 BCE. The ships had sails made of linen or matting, with ropes of twisted palm fibers. Sailing and rowing craft also set out in other lands, coasting over long and short distances to carry necessary goods, in India and Southeast Asia, but these early mariners left no traces.