

Classical Era, 1000 BCE to 300 CE: Contacts and Trade Expand

By 1000 BCE, the picture of trade in the Indian Ocean becomes clearer, with many more written records and artifacts. Always keeping in mind the local and regional coasting trade in all settled parts of the ocean, long-distance trade expanded greatly in the 1300 years from 1000 BCE to 300 CE. The monsoon wind pattern became well established during the first millennium BCE though it may have been discovered as early as 3000 BCE. With the discovery of the seasonal monsoon winds, combined with the ability to navigate by reckoning with the stars, mariners now sailed across the Arabian Sea in open water. During the third and second centuries BCE, Indian and Arab ships are known to have sailed directly from Southern Arabia to the Malabar (western) coast of India and back. About the same time, in the eastern ocean, Austronesian mariners sailed toward the West. They reached India, and mysteriously, they settled on the East African island of Madagascar. Evidence comes from the Malagasy language, crops like banana, coconut, and yam, and construction of houses in Madagascar. There is little evidence of return voyages, however, or communication.

Historians think that long-distance trade from Egypt and Mesopotamia may have declined around 1000 BCE. During the second half of the millennium, trade expanded among new groups of people. Greek and Roman sailors and traders entered the Indian Ocean after 500 BCE, sent there by the Persian ruler Darius I. Alexander the Great sent Nearchus from the Indus to the Arabian Gulf in 326 BCE, and other Greeks sailed to India and around the Arabian Peninsula to Oman. The Phoenicians may have circumnavigated Africa, but they probably did explore some of the West African coast. The *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* from the first century CE names many ports, lands, and goods in the Indian Ocean, including information about the east coast of Africa and of India. Mediterranean traders and mariners entered a system in the Indian Ocean that was already developed. Goods from China and Southeast Asia appear in records of trade with India. India exported many goods, and imported silver, copper, and gold. Several strong states existed at this time, including the Mauryan Empire (323-185 BCE) of India, the Persian Empire, the Roman Empire in Europe, and the Han Dynasty in China. Roman coins have been found in Indian hoards with Indian coins. Cloth, ceramics, pottery, metal wares, glass, beads, incense, rare woods, and spices, pearls and coral were traded alongside common goods, and have been found at archaeological sites on the Indian coast. Silk traveled overland between Rome and China during the Han dynasty, but also appeared on the sea route. Goods were portaged across the Isthmus of Kra on the Malay Peninsula to reach the South China Sea. Crops such as sugar cane, cotton, sesame, and rice were grown for export with irrigation, and became known elsewhere through the Indian Ocean trade.

A major story of the Classical Era is the spread of religions. Between 600 and 300 BCE, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism spread across the Bay of Bengal to Southeast Asia. Pilgrims' and missionaries' travel accounts tell about journeys in search of knowledge and to found religious communities, collect sacred texts, and visit shrines. Sacred texts influenced languages, scripts, storytelling material and deities were exchanged among Indians and Southeast Asians. Construction of temples influenced the arts and architecture. Merchant communities spread the religions more widely. Religious exchange also took place at the

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level of royal courts, supporting dynasties, diplomatic and military interactions. The rise of Judaism and Christianity during the Classical Era also resulted in migrations of both groups to colonies in Ethiopia, Arabia and India. Jewish and Christian communities in India today claim links to those early groups.

Historians are cautious about imagining the Indian Ocean as a huge arena of circulating trade during this time. They stress that most people still lived on the land, and empires drew most of their wealth and strength from land. Still, trade and travel on the seas played a gradually expanding and important role, both locally and over longer distances. Long-distance trade routes such as the Silk Road set the stage for expanded trade between east and west. Wooden ships of different regional styles and sizes with oars, and with linen, cotton, bamboo and matting sails grew larger to carry heavier cargo. Navigation arts developed with astronomy and knowledge of mathematics and geography.