

First Global Era, 1450 CE to 1770 CE Indian Ocean at the Beginning of World Trade

Events happening far beyond the region brought significant changes to the Indian Ocean in the period after 1450 CE. Ironically, the flow of goods, technologies and belief systems from the Indian Ocean over centuries were in part the cause of those very changes. The entry of Western and Northern European mariners into the Indian Ocean was a series of events that caused significant changes in trade and other exchanges during the First Global Era.

By the 13th century, European cities were growing, and knowledge of the sources of luxurious spices, silks, jewels, carpets and metalwork from lands east of the Mediterranean increased demand. Marco Polo's journey to China and his return via the Indian Ocean was celebrated in a popular book. These luxury goods reached European market towns, but the goods changed hands many times along the way, and prices were high. Italian, Muslim and Armenian merchants were the middlemen, making good profits. Everything came through Mediterranean ports, including knowledge of commerce, ships, and faraway lands. Sources of gold were known to exist beyond the Sahara in Africa. Muslim-ruled al-Andalus (Spain) was another entry point of knowledge and technology, with its rich trade and libraries.

When Spain fell to Christian Spaniards and Portuguese from 1085 to 1492 CE, knowledge about navigation, maps, engineering and other fields passed into Europe through translations from Arabic into Latin. At the same time they were defeating the Muslim rulers, the Portuguese and Spanish, with help from some Italian mariners, experimented with voyages along the coast of West Africa. It took almost a century, but in 1492 and 1498, Portuguese and Spanish seafaring experience and knowledge resulted in ships and navigation techniques that carried the Spanish to the Americas across the Atlantic, and the Portuguese into the Indian Ocean by sailing around Africa. As they did so, they established the Atlantic slave trade and built colonies with their labor.

When they arrived in the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese brought with them a desire for wealth, conquest and victory of the Catholic Church. Islam was especially viewed as the enemy. The Spanish went with the same vision to the Americas, and brought it to the Indian Ocean when they conquered the Philippines after Magellan crossed the Pacific Ocean in 1519. They arrived with cannons fixed on the decks of their carracks, bearing both square and triangular sails. What they lacked in fine goods to trade, they made up with force and threats of violence. After 50 years, the Portuguese occupied port cities in east Africa, on the Malabar coast, at Hormuz, Melaka, and Macao, an island near the Chinese port of Guangzhou, where they traded Japanese silver to China. They tried to control the spice trade and issued permits to any other ships on the routes, or else sank them. The Portuguese met resistance from the Ottomans, the Ya'ruba of Oman, the Gujaratis of India, the Acehnese of Sumatra, and others. The Portuguese did not succeed in controlling the enormous Asian trade, but they made an impact. They gradually accommodated to local ways of trading.

In Europe, the Dutch entered the Indian Ocean as the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in 1602, with the idea of challenging Portuguese power and gaining wealth for themselves. In 1641, the Dutch took Melaka, and Portuguese power declined while theirs rose. They took Cape Town, Ceylon and Formosa. They enforced a new monopoly on spices by taking over

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the islands that produced them. The VOC was dominant in the Indian Ocean until 1680. The British entered about the same time as the Dutch, chartering the East India Company (EIC) in 1600. They did not at first imitate the violent behavior of the Portuguese and Dutch, but established trading "factories" or warehouses in India at Bombay, Calcutta and Madras in the 1600s. The French and Danish followed as smaller players. From 1680 to 1740, the British gained the advantage in the region, taking advantage of growing European demand for cotton and silk cloth, coffee, and tea. Later, they made inroads on Dutch territory and the spice trade.

Throughout these centuries, trade with Europeans was not an exchange of European for Asian goods. Europeans did not have desired goods to trade in Asia. They had to pay in silver or gold. English success came from developing triangular trades. This was what other groups in the region had always done. Buying cloth in one place, they sold it for spices in another. Indian cloth, American goods, and cowry shells went to purchase West African slaves. The British traded opium, a strong narcotic drug, from India for costly Chinese goods such as tea, silk and porcelain. Finally, though, the Europeans had to pay for luxury goods with gold and silver, much of it from America. Without this, their role in the Indian Ocean would have been quite small.

Between 1600 and 1800, the European role in the Indian Ocean became more dominant. They developed finance and banks, improved ships and weapons, and gained footholds with the rulers of lands where they traded. Empires like the Mughal, Safavid and Chinese were weakening in the face of growing European power. The East India Companies actually fought wars, defeated local rulers, and won rights from governments. They received taxes, gained control over production of goods, and used troops to police territories. They introduced New World crops like vanilla, maize, sugar, and chocolate to new places, and moved slaves and laborers onto their plantations to raise these cash crops, or to sail ships and colonize islands. Demand in Europe was high, and wealth from the Americas helped pay for Asian goods.

Missionary work was carried on by every European group in the Indian Ocean, and small Christian communities emerged. At the same time, Europeans began to learn other languages and study other cultures, their arts and literature. Some married local women. The Protestant Reformation brought another branch of Christianity besides Catholicism. This set European against European. Missionaries did not make many religious converts, but they spread new ideas, started European-type schools, and built churches. Religious ideas were spread through migration as well, including the continuing spread of Islam in Indonesia during this time. Chinese merchants migrated into Southeast Asia in greater numbers, bringing their culture and religion. African slaves were the largest migrant group, though European merchants and colonial officials were a small but influential group. As officials, they were responsible for projects that brought more migrants to faraway places around the Indian Ocean. Migrants settled uninhabited islands, populated Australia with Europeans, and sought their fortunes through adventures in foreign lands.

The technologies that brought European ships to and from the Indian Ocean were the compass, the stern rudder, the lateen sail, and new methods of hull construction. The navigation instruments developed in Asia were improved during the period. The wooden

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ships called cogs, carracks, caravels, Indiamen, and many other types grew in size, number of sails, and masts. The Europeans improved the accuracy of mapmaking, bringing into focus the true shape of the world's lands and oceans. They explored further on land and sea during this time. A highly accurate clock was invented to measure longitude at sea for navigation. Weapons like muskets and cannon gained greater power to kill and destroy forts and cities. Sailing was still very dangerous, and many ships were lost on the long voyage to the Indian Ocean from Europe. Pirates, both official and unofficial, might attack in the Atlantic, or in the Indian Ocean. As many as 10% of ships were lost at times. As for controlling the spice trade, Europeans carried only about a tenth of Asia's total production to Europe. The rest was sold to Asians by other Asians, who sought new opportunities wherever they were found, as they had always done. Europeans died of tropical diseases, shipboard diseases, and disasters.

After 1750, methods of manufacturing of iron, ceramics and textiles began to change and become mechanized in Europe. The wealth of the trading nations brought new possibilities for agriculture and manufacturing. Demand for goods increased among newly wealthy upper and middle classes of Europeans. Money from the colonies and plantations was invested. This capital wealth was used to build up manufacturing and transportation. These changes were gradual at first, but continued in the next century at a faster pace, with powerful results.