

## **Medieval Era, 300 CE - 1450 CE: Networks of Exchange Across the Hemisphere**

Two major changes on the eastern and western ends of the Indian Ocean affected trade in the period from 300 CE to 1450 CE. In China, the Tang and Song Dynasties (618-1279 CE) reunited large areas of China and began a time of prosperity and development. Some historians compare it to an industrial revolution. Earlier dynasties had built up tribute trade systems with Central Asian nomads and developed the Silk Road trade. Under the Tang and Song, maritime trade grew rapidly. A bureau of trade was established and an Imperial Navy to protect against pirates. China received Indian Ocean goods such as spices and cottons, and exported porcelain and silk. A new variety of rice from Southeast Asia increased production and nutrition for the Chinese people. Tang rulers encouraged trade, industry and river transport to bring goods to port. According to Tang sources, 4,000 ships per year visited the port of Guangzhou (Canton). Though foreign merchants were kept from mixing with the Chinese, the port became a cosmopolitan place where Christians, Jews, Muslims, Zoroastrians, Buddhists and others lived and kept houses of worship. Religious tolerance was celebrated on carved stones, or stele. Buddhism spread and became a popular religion in China, and pilgrims traveled on land and sea as scholars and missionaries. Later Tang rulers were less tolerant of religion and trade, but it revived under the Song after 960 CE. Spices, silk, sandalwood and rice were traded. Tea and porcelain, or "china," in which to drink it became common luxury exports. The Mongol invasion disrupted China in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and invasions of Southeast Asia and Japan took place under the Mongol Yuan dynasty. The Ming dynasty (1368-1644 CE) restored Chinese rule. In 1405, they began the great maritime adventure of the Ming Voyages under Admiral Zheng He. These five voyages with hundreds of huge treasure ships visited ports from one end of the Indian Ocean to the other.

In the western part of the Indian Ocean, a major empire rose after Muhammad (d. 632 CE) brought Islam to the Arabian Peninsula. A century of rapid expansion brought huge territories under Muslim rule. The Umayyad and Abbasid Empires controlled territories from Spain in the west to the borders of China in the east. In the following centuries, both Islam and the Arabic language spread through much of this territory. The Arabs had already been active traders in the Indian Ocean, and Islam encouraged trade and created opportunities as it spread a universal belief system, Arabic language, and a system of law. Sufi mystical orders or brotherhoods spread and popularized Islam along the trade routes, and annual pilgrimage journeys to Makkah reflected a diverse and growing Ummah, or Muslim community carrying out this religious duty. The Muslim lands, with their growing cities, were wealthy and demand for goods of all kinds was high. Like the Chinese at the time, science, learning and the arts were prized, and production rose. Crops such as sugar, rice, hard wheat, vegetables and fruits spread from east toward the west. All sorts of imports flowed into the Arabian (Persian) Gulf and the Red Sea, and exports flowed out. Recent finds of shipwrecks from the medieval period are beginning to show the large volume of this trade, which travel accounts have described in detail.

No Muslim empire set out to control trade in the ocean, but merchant communities spread widely, and through them, Islam spread around the lands bordering the Indian Ocean. It spread along the Silk Road and into West Africa. Arab and Persian traders stopped at ports in the growing East African city-states, where a Swahili, or coastal, culture combined African,

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Islamic and regional influence. Trade on the Red Sea and Arabian (Persian) Gulf linked to land routes and the Mediterranean trading system. Byzantine, Persian, and Italian traders carried goods into the western and northern lands. Crusaders from Europe occupied the Eastern Mediterranean during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, but when they left, they carried a taste for eastern goods with them, and demand grew.

India was the central hinge for trade in the medieval era. On the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, in Gujarat in the northwest, and Bengal in the northeast, colonies of traders from an astonishing mix of places gathered to trade cottons and silks, spices and perfumes, gold, silver and ivory, and hundreds of other goods, fancy and simple. Indian manufacturing, especially of beautiful and practical cloths, boomed. Indian traders from Gujarat and other areas went out in search of goods, bringing together a mix of cultures and a practical tolerance that allowed prosperity for all. The Gupta (320-550 CE) and the Chola Empire (800s to 1300s CE) were major Indian powers with wide influence and prosperity.

The Malay and Southeast Asian regions were active in this time. Traders used the route to China through the Strait of Malacca, and several shipwrecks show the huge quantity of goods that flowed through. Southeast Asian states at Angkor, Srivijaya and the Majpahit carried, contributed and imported goods and centered cultural activity like the building of great temples at Borobudur and Angkor Watt. During this era, between about 300 and 1200 CE, the Austronesians migrated into the Pacific Ocean, eventually populating the islands of Polynesia and Micronesia as far as Hawaii.

Ships and navigation flourished during this time, with many inventions spreading with the circulation of goods and people. Arab dhows made of teak sewn with coconut fiber carried triangular sails and stern rudders. They navigated with instruments like the kamal and the astrolabe, and pilots wrote exact records of their routes. Indian and Malay ships suited to their trading journeys and need for protection can be seen on temple carvings. The Austronesians' prahu, or prau had unique, wing-shaped sails, outriggers and they navigated by signs and stick charts. Chinese junks in sizes from large to huge were the 18-wheeler trucks of the Indian Ocean. Their hulls had watertight compartments, stern rudders, comfortable apartments, and many masts with bamboo matting sails. The Chinese introduced the mariner's compass, an innovation that moved across the ocean toward the west, from the Arabs to the Mediterranean and Atlantic. Pilot charts, knowledge of astronomy and use of mathematical geography led to maps using coordinates for cities and landmarks. Archaeology, travel accounts and official records have filled in the picture of a time when trade flourished in the Indian Ocean and gradually drew many more regions into its orbit.