

# 07 Commerce and Culture, 500–1500



# Introduction

- Modern highways are being built across Africa and Asia.
  - part of modern process of globalization
  - but also evoke older patterns of global commerce
- The roots of economic globalization lie deep in the past.
  - exchange of goods between people of different ecological zones is a major feature of human history
  - at times, some societies have monopolized desirable products (like silk)
  - long-distance trade became more important than ever in 500–1500 c.e.
    - most trade was indirect
    - creation of a network of communication and exchange across the Afro-Eurasian world; a separate web in parts of the Americas

- Why was trade significant?
  - altered consumption
  - encouraged specialization
  - diminished economic self-sufficiency of local societies
  - traders often became a distinct social group
  - sometimes was a means of social mobility
  - provided prestige goods for elites
  - sometimes the wealth from trade motivated state creation
  - religious ideas, technological innovations, plants and animals, and disease also spread along trade routes
- The network of long-distance commerce is a notable feature of the third-wave civilizations.

## Timeline

3 <sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE	Beginnings of silk industry in China
200 BCE-200 CE	Initial flourishing of Silk Road commerce
Bt 1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE	Spread of Buddhism to Central Asia and northern China
460 BCE	Trade-borne disease enters Greece and Egypt
Early centuries CE	Knowledge of monsoons enables expansion of Indian Ocean commerce
300-400 CE	Beginning of trans-Saharan trade
350	All-water route opened between India and China
6 <sup>th</sup> century	Chinese monopoly on silk production broken
7 <sup>th</sup> century	Rise of Islam
670-1025	Srivijaya kingdom
800-1300	Khmer kingdom of Angkor
1000-1500	Swahili civilization along East African coast
13 <sup>th</sup> & 14 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Mongol Empire revitalizes Silk Road commerce
1250-1350	Kingdom of Zimbabwe in southeastern Africa
1275-1292	Marco Polo in China
1346-1350	Black Death enters Europe via transcontinental trade routes
1354	Ibn Battuta visits West Africa
15 <sup>th</sup> century	Aztec and Inca empires facilitate commercial exchange in the Americas

# Silk Roads



# Economic Exchange along the Silk Roads

Region	Products Contributed to Silk Roads Commerce
China	Silk, bamboo, mirrors, gunpowder, paper, rhubarb, ginger, lacquerware, chrysanthemums
Forest lands of Siberia and grasslands of Central Asia	Furs, walrus tusks, amber, livestock, horses, falcons, hides, copper vessels, tents, saddles, slaves
India	Cotton textiles, herbal medicine, precious stones, swords
Middle East	Dates, nuts, almonds, dried fruit, dyes, lapis lazuli, swords
Mediterranean basin	Gold coins, glassware, glazes, grapevines, jewelry, artworks, perfume, wool and linen textiles, olive oil

## – The Growth of the Silk Roads

- Eurasia is often divided into inner and outer zones with different ecologies
  - outer Eurasia: relatively warm, well-watered (China, India, Middle East, Mediterranean)
  - inner Eurasia: harsher, drier climate, much of it pastoral (eastern Russia, Central Asia)
  - steppe products were exchanged for agricultural products and manufactured goods
- creation of classical civilizations and imperial states in 500–0 b.c.e. included efforts to control pastoral peoples
  - by early centuries of the Common Era, there was a network of transcontinental exchange, often brokered by pastoral peoples
- trading networks did best when large states provided security for trade
  - when Roman and Chinese empires anchored commerce
  - in seventh and eighth centuries, the Byzantine Empire, Abbasid dynasty, and Tang dynasty created a belt of strong states
  - in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Mongol Empire controlled almost the entirety of the Silk Roads

## – Goods in Transit

- a vast array of goods traveled along the Silk Roads, often by camel
  - mostly luxury goods for the elite
  - high cost of transport did not allow movement of staple goods
- silk symbolized the Eurasian exchange system
  - at first, China had a monopoly on silk technology
    - » led to drain of resources from Roman Empire to east
    - » Romans regarded silk as morally decadent
  - by the sixth century c.e., other peoples produced silk
    - » Byzantine Empire, Korea, Japan, India, Persia



- silk was used as currency in Central Asia
- silk was a symbol of high status
  - » sumptuary laws restricted silk clothing to the elite in China and the Byzantine Empire
  - » silk was linked to the sacred in Buddhism and Christianity
- silk industry only developed in Western Europe in twelfth century
- volume of trade was small, but of economic and social importance
  - peasants in the Yangzi River delta of southern China produced market goods (silk, paper, porcelain, etc.) instead of crops
  - well-placed individuals could make enormous profits

## – Cultures in Transit

- cultural transmission was more important than exchange of goods
- the case of Buddhism
  - spread along Silk Roads through Central and East Asia
  - had always appealed to merchants
  - conversion was heavy in the oasis cities of Central Asia
  - conversion was voluntary
    - » link to the civilization of India
    - » winning religious merit by founding monasteries
    - » monasteries provided rest stops for merchants
  - many of the Central Asian cities became centers of learning and commerce
    - » e.g., Buddhist texts and cave temples of Dunhuang

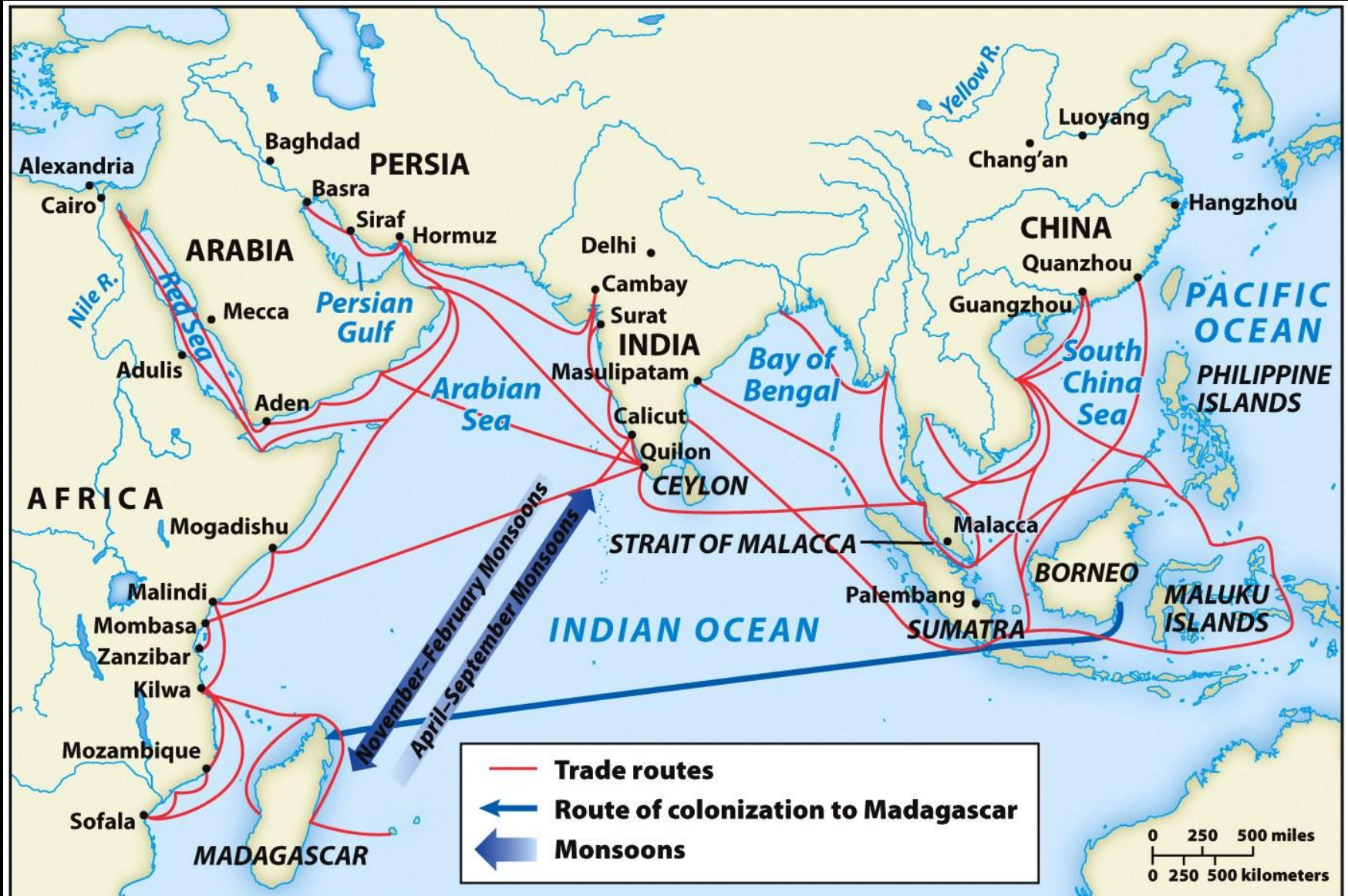
- spread much more slowly among Central Asian pastoralists
  - » pastoralists didn't have a written language
  - » monasticism is central to Buddhism, but pastoralists are nomads
  - » Shi Le, ruler of the nomadic Jie people (ruled northern China after collapse of Han), accepted conversion along with thousands of others, thanks to the monk Fotudeng
- in China, was the religion of foreign merchants or rulers for centuries
- Buddhism was transformed during its spread
  - » monasteries became rich and involved in secular affairs
  - » Mahayana form of Buddhism flourished
  - » picked up Greek influences

## – Disease in Transit

- the major population centers of the Afro-Eurasian world developed characteristic disease patterns and ways to deal with them
- long-distance trade meant exposure to unfamiliar diseases
  - early case: great epidemic in Athens in 430–429 b.c.e.
  - during the Roman and Han empires, smallpox and measles devastated both populations
  - in 534–750 c.e., bubonic plague from India ravaged Mediterranean world
    - » kept the Byzantine Empire from regaining Italy
    - » made it harder for Christendom to resist spread of Islam

- the Black Death spread thanks to the Mongol Empire's unification of much of Eurasia (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries)
  - could have been bubonic plague, anthrax, or collection of epidemic diseases
  - killed one-third of European population between 1346 and 1350
  - similar death toll in China and parts of the Islamic world
  - Central Asian steppes were badly affected (undermined Mongol power)
- disease exchange gave Europeans an advantage when they reached the Western Hemisphere after 1500
  - peoples of the Americas had little immunity to European and African diseases

# Indian Ocean



# Economic Exchange in the Indian Ocean Basin

Region	Products Contributed to Indian Ocean Commerce
Mediterranean basin	Ceramics, glassware, wine, gold, olive oil
East Africa	Ivory, gold, iron goods, slaves, tortoiseshells, quartz, leopard skins
Arabia	Frankincense, myrrh, perfumes
India	Grain, ivory, precious stones, cotton textiles, spices, timber, tortoiseshells
Southeast Asia	Tin, sandalwood, cloves, nutmeg, mace
China	Silks, porcelain, tea

- The Mediterranean Sea was an avenue for commerce from the time of the Phoenicians.
  - Venice was a center of commerce by 1000 c.e.
  - controlled trade of imports from Asia
  - linked Europe to the much greater trade network of the Indian Ocean
- The Indian Ocean network was the world's most important until after 1500.
  - trade grew from environmental and cultural diversity
  - transportation was cheaper by sea than by land
  - made transportation of bulk goods possible (textiles, pepper, timber, rice, sugar, wheat)
  - commerce was possible thanks to monsoons (alternating wind currents)
  - commerce was between towns, not states



## – Weaving the Web of an Indian Ocean World

- Indian Ocean trade started in the age of the First Civilizations
  - Indus Valley writing may have been stimulated by cuneiform
  - ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians traded down the Red Sea
  - Malay sailors reached Madagascar in the first millennium b.c.e.
    - » introduced language and crops (bananas, coconuts, cocoyams)
- tempo of commerce increased in early centuries c.e. with greater understanding of monsoons
  - merchants from Roman Empire settled in southern India and East African coast
    - » introduced Christianity
  - growing trade in eastern Indian Ocean and South China Sea
    - » Chinese traders reached India by 100 c.e.
  - fulcrum of trade was India
    - » spread of Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia

- two great encouragers for the Indian Ocean exchange:
  - » economic and political revival of China
    - Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279) reestablished an effective and unified state
    - Chinese products flooded into Indian Ocean network
    - China provided a vast market for Indian and Southeast Asian goods
    - China developed larger ships and the magnetic compass
  - » rise of Islam in seventh century c.e.
    - Islam was friendly to trade (Muhammad was a trader)
    - Arab Empire reached from Atlantic Ocean to India
    - Muslims (and Jewish and Christian subjects) established trade communities from East Africa to southern China
    - large-scale East African slave trade to work Iraqi plantations and salt mines
    - creation of international maritime culture by 1000 c.e.
    - widespread conversion to Islam made trade easier



Middle  
East

India



# Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: Southeast Asia and Srivijaya

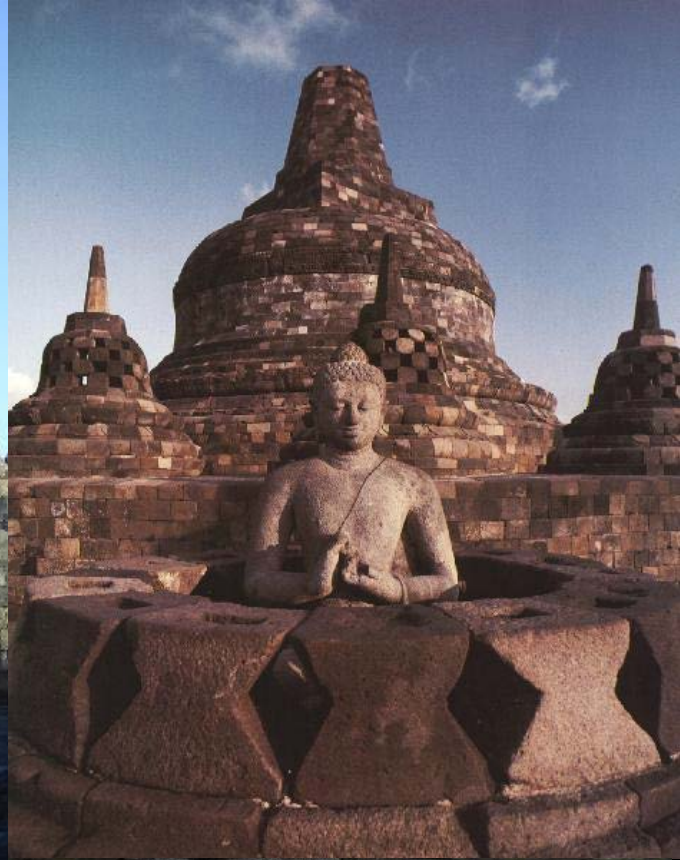


- ocean commerce transformed Southeast Asia and East Africa
  - trade stimulated political change
  - introduction of foreign religious ideas
- Southeast Asia: location between China and India made it important
  - Malay sailors opened an all-sea route between India and China through the Straits of Malacca ca. 350 c.e.
  - led many small ports to compete to attract traders

- Malay kingdom of Srivijaya emerged from competition, dominated trade from 670 to 1025 c.e.
  - gold, access to spices, and taxes on ships provided resources to create a state
  - local belief: chiefs possessed magical powers
  - also used Indian political ideas and Buddhism
    - » multitude of Indian merchants and teachers settled
    - » Srivijaya became a major Buddhist center
- Sailendras kingdom (central Java) was also influenced by India
  - massive building of Hindu and Buddhist centers (eighth–tenth centuries)
  - 3 shows Buddhist cultural grounding in Javanese custom
- Burma, the Khmer state of Angkor, etc. also show Indian culture
- Islam penetrated later



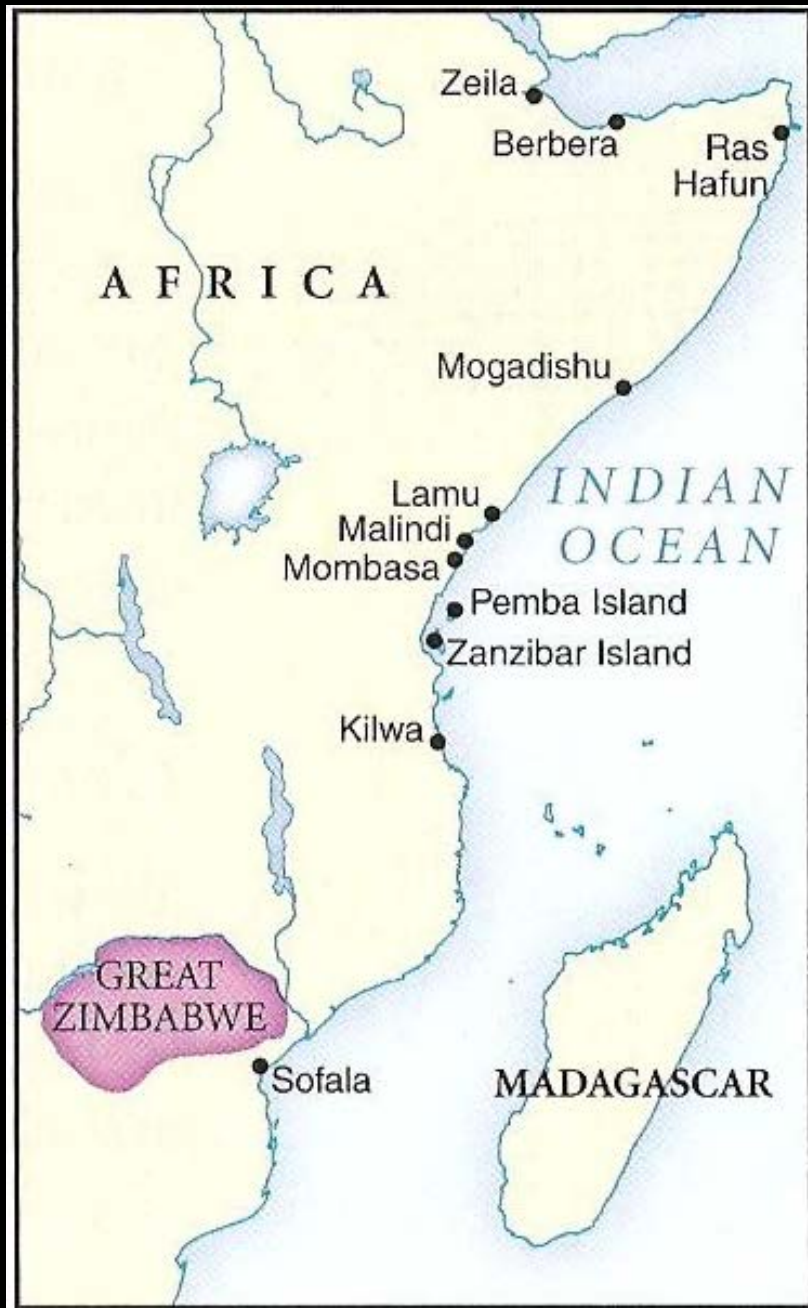
Borobudur, Srivijaya



Buddhist  
Temple







# Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: East Africa and Swahili Civilization

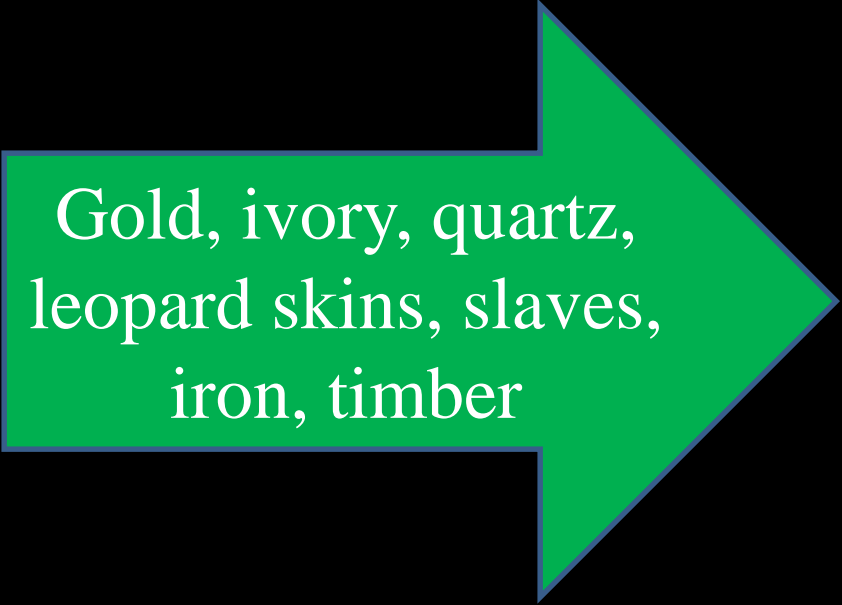
- Swahili civilization of East Africa developed from blend of Bantu with commercial life of the Indian Ocean (especially Islamic)
  - growing demand for East African products (gold, ivory, quartz, leopard skins, some slaves, iron, wood products)
  - African merchant class developed, with towns and kingships
- Swahili civilization flourished on East African coast between 1000 and 1500 c.e.
  - very urban, with cities of 15,000–18,000 people
  - each city was politically independent, ruled by a king
  - accumulated goods from the interior and traded for Asian goods
  - sharp class distinctions
- most of trade was in Arab ships; Swahili craft traveled coastal waterways

- deep participation in the Indian Ocean world
  - regular visits by Arab and Indian (perhaps Persian) merchants; some settled
  - many ruling families claimed Arab or Persian origins
  - Swahili was written in Arabic script, with Arabic loan words
  - widespread conversion to Islam
    - » society was heavily Islamicized (account of Ibn Battuta)
- Islam and Swahili culture didn't reach much beyond coast until the nineteenth century
  - but Swahili region traded with the interior, had an impact
  - trade with interior for gold led to emergence of Great Zimbabwe (flourished in 1250–1350 c.e.)



# Great Zimbabwe

Swahili Africa



Gold, ivory, quartz,  
leopard skins, slaves,  
iron, timber



Chinese porcelain  
and silk, Persian  
rugs, Indian cottons

Indian Ocean Trade



**Trans-Saharan  
Sand Roads  
Trade**

## – Commercial Beginnings in West Africa

- trans-African trade was also based on environmental variation
  - North Africa manufactured goods
  - Sahara had copper and salt deposits, dates
  - agricultural peoples further south grew crops, mined gold
- earliest trade in the region was among agricultural peoples in the Sudan
  - emergence of urban clusters in the early centuries c.e.
  - most famous was Jenne-jeno (Niger Valley civilization)

## – Gold, Salt, and Slaves: Trade and Empire in West Africa

- introduction of the camel in early centuries c.e. was a turning point.
  - camels can go 10 days without water
  - made it possible to cross the Sahara
- regular trans-Saharan commerce by 300–400 c.e.
- merchants especially wanted gold from West Africa (along with ivory, kola nuts, slaves)
  - peoples of Sudan received horses, cloth, dates, manufactured goods, salt in return
- the Sahara became a major international trade route
  - huge caravans (as many as 5,000 camels)
  - caravans traveled the desert for over 1,000 years
- trade encouraged new and larger political structures
  - creation of a series of states in western and central Sudan between 500 and 1600 c.e., including Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem, and Hausa city-states
  - all were monarchies with elaborate court life and at least some administration and military forces
  - all had a reputation for great riches



- slavery was present in West Africa
  - at first, most slaves were women
  - with development of civilization, male slaves were used as officials, porters, craftsmen, miners, agricultural laborers
  - most slaves came from societies raided farther south
  - some 5,500 slaves a year came from across the Sahara between 1100 and 1400
    - » most were sold in North Africa
    - » a few ended up in Europe
    - » Slavic-speaking slaves were much more common in Europe (origin of word “slave”)
    - » African slaves only became common in Europe starting in 1440s (Atlantic slave trade)
- substantial urban/commercial centers (such as Koumbi-Saleh, Jenne, Timbuktu)
  - some became manufacturing centers
  - Islam was established in towns

# Jade Roads



- There was no sustained interaction between the Western and Eastern hemispheres before the voyages of Columbus
- American trade networks were not as dense as Afro-Eurasian ones.
  - important limitations:
    - lack of domesticated large mammals, wheeled vehicles, large oceangoing ships
    - geographical or environmental obstacles, including north/south orientation
  - local and regional commerce flourished, but not long-distance trade
  - cultural traditions did not spread as widely as in Eastern Hemisphere

- But there was a “loosely interactive web” from the Great Lakes to the Andes.
  - cultural elements spread gradually
  - evidence of at least indirect contact
  - Cahokia was at center of a widespread trading network
  - Chaco canyon culture also interacted with Mesoamerica
  - Amazon and Orinoco river exchange networks
  - Caribbean peoples conducted interisland trade
  - Chincha people traded along Pacific coast of South America
- There was a major trade network in Mesoamerica.
  - Maya and Teotihuacán traded by land
  - Maya traded by sea on both coasts (with dugout canoes)
  - Aztecs of fifteenth century had professional merchants (*pochteca*)
- There was a major trade network in the Andes.
  - Inca trade during fifteenth century was run by the state

# Reflections: Economic Globalization— Ancient and Modern

- The interconnections of the modern era have their roots in much earlier patterns.
- But premodern networks had important differences:
  - most people still produced for their own consumption
  - a much smaller range of goods was exchanged
  - far fewer wageworkers
  - trade was in luxury goods
  - circuits of commerce were more limited
  - had no single center; units were much more equivalent
- The world of third-wave civilizations was more balanced and multicentered than that of the modern era.
  - relationships among major civilizations were much more equal
  - perhaps the twenty-first century is returning to that pattern