Sea Roads

The Mediterranean and Indian Ocean Trade Networks
The Mediterranean

- The Mediterranean Sea was an avenue for commerce from the time of the Phoenicians and through the Greek and Roman eras
  - Venice was a center of commerce by 1000 CE
    - Controlled trade of expensive and profitable imports from Asia
  - Linked Europe to the much greater trade network of the Indian Ocean
The Indian Ocean

- The Indian Ocean network was the world’s most important until after 1500.
  - Stretched from southern China to eastern Africa
  - Trade grew from environmental and cultural diversity
  - Transportation was cheaper by sea than by land because ships could handle larger and heavier cargoes than camels
  - Made transportation of bulk goods possible (textiles, pepper, timber, rice, sugar, wheat)
  - Commerce was possible thanks to monsoons (alternating wind currents) and a more extensive knowledge of shipbuilding and oceanic navigation
  - Commerce was between towns, not states
A Web of Trade

– Indian Ocean trade started in the age of the First Civilizations with trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley through the Persian Gulf
  • Indus Valley writing may have been stimulated by cuneiform
  • Ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians traded down the coast of the Red Sea
  • Malay sailors reached Madagascar in the first millennium BCE using double-outrigger canoes
    • Introduced the Austronesian language and crops (bananas, coconuts, cocoyams) which spread to the mainland
A Web of Trade

- Tempo of commerce increased in early centuries CE with greater understanding of monsoons
  - Merchants from Roman Empire settled in southern India and East African coast
    - Introduced Christianity
  - Growing trade in the eastern Indian Ocean and South China Sea
    - Chinese traders reached India by 100 CE
- Fulcrum of trade was India
  - Spread of Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia as well as political ideas
Influence of China

– 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 which actively encouraged maritime trade
    - Chinese products flooded into the Indian Ocean network
    - China provided a vast market for Indian and Southeast Asian goods
    - China developed larger ships and the magnetic compass
Influence of Islam

- Rise of Islam in seventh century CE
  - Islam was friendly to trade (Muhammad was a trader) while Confucianism was suspicious of merchants
  - Arab Empire reached from the 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 provided workers to Iraqi plantations and salt mines
  - Creation of an international maritime culture by 1000 CE
  - Widespread conversion to Islam made trade easier
A Catalyst for Change

• Sea Roads as a Catalyst for Change: Southeast Asia and Srivijaya
  – Ocean commerce transformed Southeast Asia and East Africa
    • Trade stimulated political change as rulers grew wealthy and powerful enough to construct larger and more centrally governed states or cities
    • Introduction of foreign religious ideas
    • Like the Silk Roads, trade was a conduit for culture
A Catalyst for Change

- 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 CE
  - Led many small ports to compete to attract traders
Srivijaya

- Malay kingdom of Srivijaya emerged from competition, dominated trade from 670 to 1025 CE
  - Gold, access to spices, and taxes on ships provided resources to create a state with military forces capable of providing security on the seas
Srivijaya

- Local belief: chiefs possessed magical powers
- Also used Indian political ideas and Buddhism
  - Multitudes of Indian merchants and teachers settled
  - Srivijaya became a major Buddhist center attracting thousands of monks and students
Sailendra

- Sailendra kingdom (central Java) was also influenced by India
  - Massive building of Hindu and Buddhist centers (eighth–tenth centuries)
    - Borobudur (the most famous of the temples) – largest Buddhist monument anywhere in the world but distinctly Javanese in its figures and features
    - Shows Buddhist cultural grounding in Javanese custom
Angkor Wat

- Burma and the Khmer state of Angkor (modern-day Cambodia) also show Indian culture
  - “Indianization” of the region but no imperial control – voluntary borrowing by independent societies that found Hindu or Buddhist ideas useful and were free to adapt those ideas to their own needs and cultures.
  - Angkor Wat - largest religious structure in the pre-modern world
- Islam penetrated the region later
A Catalyst for Change

- Swahili civilization (a set of commercial city-states) of East Africa developed from blend of Bantu-speaking farmers and fisherman with the commercial life of the Indian Ocean (especially Islamic)
A Catalyst for Change

- Growing demand for East African products (gold, ivory, quartz, leopard skins, some slaves, iron, wood products) allowed local people and aspiring rulers an opportunity for wealth and power.
- African merchant class developed, with towns and kingdoms.
Swahili City-States

- Swahili civilization flourished on East African coast between 1000 and 1500 CE
  - Very urban, with cities of 15,000–18,000 people (much different than the farming and pastoral communities of the East African interior)
  - Each city was politically independent, ruled by a king (like the Greek polis)
  - 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
Islamicization

– 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) where religious leaders often spoke Arabic and visitors from the Arab world were eagerly welcomed
    – Voluntary much like Buddhism in Southeast Asia
    – Islamic mosques were evident in many East African cities
Coast vs. the Interior

– Islam and Swahili culture didn’t reach much beyond the 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 CE)

  – Had the labor and resources to construct huge stone enclosures without mortar