



Archipelago of Trade

By Alejandro Quintana

A highly sophisticated and expansive commercial network developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries able to move things, ideas, and germs throughout Afro-Eurasia.



Archipelagos: The Foundation of the Global Trade System

The Afro-Eurasian trade system of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was not exactly global, but at the time it was the biggest integrated commercial network in the world. This pre-modern trade system had no clear hegemon (dominant society). Everyone used it in pretty much equal terms. The system depended on the highly profitable trades of silk from China and spices from Southeast Asia, including pepper, clove, cinnamon, camphor, and nutmeg. Hundreds of other products were also traded in this system, like gold, copper, diamonds, ivory, fur, honey, wax, glass, wine, and fruits. Plus there were manufactured products made of leather, brass, copper, wool, cotton, glass, and iron. They traded animals including horses, camels, hunting dogs, as well as exotic birds and mammals. Beyond trading stuff, the system also allowed people to exchange their knowledge, and technologies, bringing about the intellectual and material development of this vast section of the world.



The Silk Road Trade Network (13th and 14th centuries). Public domain.

Since most of its products were luxury items, this trade network was concentrated on strategic urban centers. The system ignored vast rural areas, which mostly continued to rely on local markets. The cities were, therefore, like islands of production in a sea of rural areas. That is why the system of long-distance trade is metaphorically described an “archipelago of trade.” (An archipelago is a chain of islands).

Hundreds of important cities, ports, and entrepôts dotted a complex network of land and water routes, known as “the Silk Road.” Long before Europeans began to explore the world in the fifteenth century, global trade was possible because the Silk Road interconnected eight geographical regions. They were:

1. The Persian Gulf
2. Central Asia’s Northern Passage
3. The China Sea
4. Southeast Asia
5. The Arabian Sea
6. North Africa
7. The Eastern Mediterranean
8. Western Europe

Let’s visit some of the most important urban centers of these regions.

The Persian Gulf Region

Perhaps the event that began the unification of this global network was the rise of Islam. About a century after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 AD, the Abbasids Caliphate ruled a vast territory. It extended from Spain in the west, through North Africa, and into Pakistan in the East. Its capital, Baghdad was strategically located at the heart of this global trade. It had easy access to the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, and the northern passage of the Silk Road. Baghdad became the most important center of learning in the world, and its scholarly community was known as the “House of Wisdom”. Scholars from all over Afro-Eurasia gathered here to exchange old ideas and develop new ones.

Then, in 1258, the Mongols attacked and destroyed Baghdad, ending a unique period of intellectual growth for the world. However, thanks to this trading system, its accumulated knowledge had already spread to the libraries and minds of scholars along the far-reaching Silk Road. Trade managed to rebuild the city, if not its intellectual glory. Commerce continued expanding through the port city of Basra at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. That’s where the fictional hero Sinbad the Sailor traveled. He sailed around Southeast Asia and East Africa, fighting supernatural monsters and making long-distance travel look extremely cool. In the real world, Basra was even more famous for imitating and improving on the finest Chinese pottery. It took centuries for even the Chinese to match Basra’s legendary blue on white technique. The region was also celebrated for its Persian rugs and Qashani tiles.



An image of scholars at an Abbasid library. Public domain.

Central Asia's Northern Passage

North of Baghdad, the city of Tabriz connected the Persian Gulf region with Central Asia's northern passage, which extended from China on the east to the Black Sea on the west. The road had been a perilous one, controlled by independent kingdoms, often at war with each other. In the early thirteenth century, Chinggis Khan, at the head of a formidable cavalry of nomadic peoples, conquered the whole of Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region. He turned most of the Silk Road into a safe and unified trade system. Europeans began traveling these roads soon after, most famously Friar John of Plano Carpini in 1245, Friar William of Rubruck in 1253, and Marco Polo in 1271. Many products and technologies from China reached Europe this way, including the technology used by Johannes Gutenberg to create his famous printing press in 1439.

The Mongols were known for their military savagery, slaughtering the soldiers and the rulers of the conquered cities. However, Chinggis Khan protected scholars, artisans, and administrators, permitting the whole of Afro-Eurasia to enjoy a unique period of commercial and intellectual growth. At the heart of this northern passage of the Silk Road was Bukhara, particularly famous for its production of Suzani carpets. Also, Bukhara connected the Silk Road southward, to India. But if glass products were what you wanted, the city of Samarkand was your stop on the Silk Road.

The China Sea

China was the key to making the whole system work. It controlled most of the silk and spice trade. Traders were constantly seeking access to China's products and markets. Chinggis Khan's grandson, Kublai Khan founded the Chinese Yuan Dynasty in 1271. He moved its capital from Karakorum (in Mongolia) to Beijing (in China). The city was connected to the port cities of Hangchow, Zaytun (or Quanzhou), and Canton (or Guangzhou). These places were producers of silk and porcelain and the gateways to the maritime spice trade route via Palembang.

India and Southeast Asia

Starting in the seventh century, the port city of Palembang had been the main connection point between the Chinese Sea and Calicut in the Indian Ocean. It managed the flow of spices until the fourteenth century. At that time, Malacca had been a quiet fishing village until China used it as a strategic location for its massive treasure fleets, causing the decline of Palembang. Trade in Southeast Asia consisted of Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist trading blocks that continued functioning after the Chinese withdrew. None of these groups attempted to dominate the region. They were simply more interested in trade than in power.

The Arabian Sea and East Africa

If you did any trading at all along the Red Sea, East Africa, the Arab Sea, the Persian Gulf, and Southeast Asia, you, and your trading products, would have been to Muscat. This naturally protected harbor was the Arabian Sea's most important entrepôt. States tended to dispute this city, but no particular state dominated the Arabian Sea. Rather, numerous states controlled key entrepôts. Among them, the Swahili-speaking port at Zanzibar was the main link from East Africa. They traded gold, ivory, and enslaved people from deep in Central Africa. It was from Zanzibar that Vasco Da Gama sailed in 1498 to India, guided by a Muslim merchant who took him safely to Calicut.

North Africa

Cairo and Alexandria were the centers of the North African economy. The trans-Saharan trade system to the west was not really part of the Silk Road. But it was the main contributor of gold, enslaved people, and iron to this trading system. The city of Timbuktu marked the west end of the trans-Saharan route. It was strategically located to connect to

a vast commercial network in West Africa. Thus, Mansa Musa, the sultan of Mali at Timbuktu (1280-1337) became one of the wealthiest men in the world.



[Trans-Saharan Trade Route](#), a Caravan Arriving at Timbuktu, Kingdom of Mali (1235-1400). By Prof. Dr. Heinrich Barth, public domain.

Looking east, Egypt reaches the Red Sea at Jeddah. This port was the main access to the Muslim Hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca. Millions of pilgrims coming from all over the Muslim world were key to its economy, but also its thriving multi-cultural entrepôt. Jeddah bridged the Arabian Sea with Alexandria on the Mediterranean shore.

The Eastern Mediterranean Sea

Since the twelfth century, the commercial rivalry between the republics of Genoa and Venice often turned into full-on wars. Nevertheless, they were the Mediterranean Sea's engine of trade connecting all its entrepôts. Constantinople (now Istanbul) was perhaps its most valuable. As the capital of Byzantium, the city was important for its wealth and power, but its location was its greatest asset. It is the gate between Asia and Europe and the connection between the Mediterranean and the Black seas. Constantinople produced fine brocades and cloths of silk and gold. This city connected the Black Sea with the port of Kaffa, the western end of the northern passage. Genoans and Venetians traded at Kaffa with Mongols. They turned this city into the largest slave market in Europe, mostly trading Russian and Ukrainian people.



[The Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul](#), formerly Constantinople, connects the city's Europe and Asia sides. When pedestrians were allowed to walk the bridge, they would stand in the middle to imagine straddling two continents. By Carlos Delgado, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Western Europe

Europeans perceived the expansive nature of the Abbasid Caliphate as a threat to Christendom (the Christian world). In the eleventh century, Pope Urban II had launched the Crusades to regain Christian control of the Holy Land. Although they failed, the Crusades had helped reopen a limited trade between Europe and the Muslim world—with the republics of Genoa and Venice as intermediaries. At the same time, these two cities connected the Mediterranean trade with Western Europe by bringing their trade northwards to Champagne (France) and Flanders (Belgium). These two regions celebrated half a dozen annual “fairs” where products were protected and merchants had access to credit and currency exchange. Merchants came from all over Europe, including England and Scandinavia.



The horrors of the plague are depicted in [The Triumph of Death](#), by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1562 (El Prado Museum, Spain). By Pieter Bruegel the Elder, public domain.

These fairs helped boost production, especially wool textiles. They encouraged merchants to organize into “companies.” That model improved European trade and finances, and of course would play a bigger role in the future global economy.

The Black Death and the Emergence of the Modern Global Trade System

Unfortunately, not everything carried along this network was beneficial. In the early fourteenth century, the (nearly) global trade system was healthy and strong. Thirty years later, it was falling apart—thanks to the Black Death. This plague was particularly lethal because of the efficient interconnectivity of Afro-Eurasia. It began somewhere in China or Kyrgyzstan in the 1330’s from where deadly germs hitchhiked thousands of miles along the Silk Road. By 1346, the disease reached Europe through Kaffa and the Middle East through Baghdad. A year later people were dying of it in Egypt. By 1352, the worst was over. In its aftermath, 200 million people died all over Afro-Eurasia.

Regions lost from 30 to 50 percent of their populations, disrupting economic and political systems throughout. Trade decreased, as ports closed to stop the spread of the disease.

Soon after, Portugal and Spain began searching for new commercial opportunities around the Muslim blockade. To almost everybody's surprise, Spain bumped upon the Western Hemisphere and Portugal found a passage to India around Africa. Their newfound control of global maritime (sea) routes allowed them to fill the vacuum created by China's isolation and to stitch together the trading system destroyed by the Black Death. The result was the emergence of the modern global trade system controlled by Europe. The West, then, became increasingly richer as the rest of the world grew vulnerable to the rapacious (aggressively greedy) nature of European trade. There was nothing predictable about this outcome. Certainly, it was as much the result of European ingenuity and daring, as the result of tremendous achievements and contributions from other societies along this archipelago of trade.

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The Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, connects the city's Europe and Asia sides. When pedestrians were allowed to walk the bridge, they would stand in the middle to imagine straddling two continents. By Carlos Delgado, CC BY-SA 3.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosphorus_Bridge#/media/File:Bo%C4%9Fazi%C3%A7i_K%C3%B6pr%C3%BCs%C3%BC_-Aerial_view.jpg

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