Indian Ocean Trade Routes

By Bennett Sherry

From 1200 to 1450, the Indian Ocean was the center of world trade. The world's largest empires traded in this diverse network of merchants from all over Afro-Eurasia.

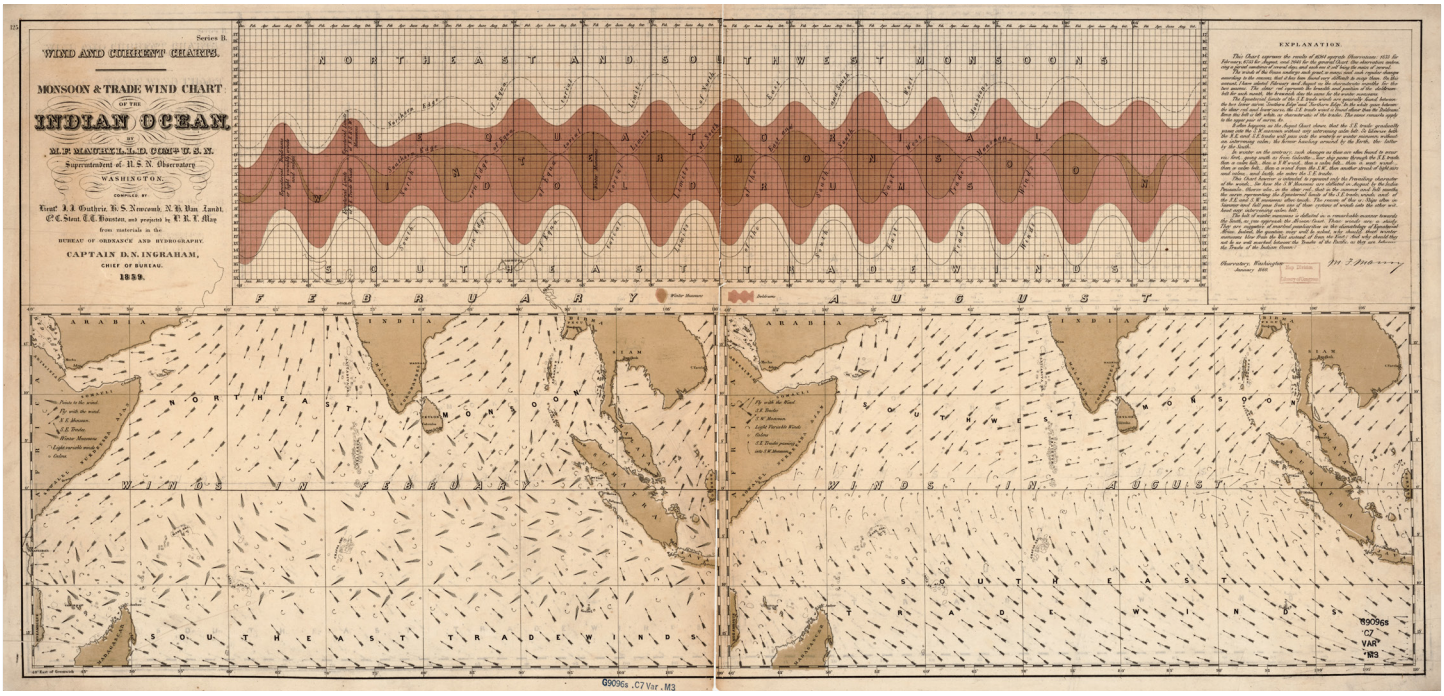
A world of trade

Where do you get the things you want? It's easy to go to a store or order things online. But most things you buy have to cross thousands of miles over oceans aboard giant container ships before they get to you. Obviously, things were very different 800 years ago. Or were they? Around 1200 CE, China was the world's largest manufacturer. And, back then, people paid top prices for things from far away that they couldn't get at home. Both of those statements are true today.

From 1200 to 1450, the Indian Ocean was the center of world trade. Trade routes crossed the waves, linking the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. Peoples and languages mingled in the great trading cities along the shores of the Indian Ocean. Luxuries like Chinese porcelain and silk, East African gold and ivory, and Southeast Asian spices like cinnamon, clove, nutmeg, and mace were in high demand far from where they were produced. Traveling thousands of miles from merchant to merchant, port to port, these goods made their way through the network, their prices increasing the further they traveled.

Moist winds

What made this remarkable world of trade possible? Wind. Specifically, the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean. These winds were the engine that drove trade because they predictably change direction twice a year. In the spring and summer, the Indian subcontinent heats up and draws cool air from the ocean over the continent. These winds blow northeast, dumping heavy rains on the coast. In the fall and winter, the winds change direction to the southwest as the land cools off. It makes more sense on the map below.



An nineteenth-century map of the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean. On the left is a map of the winds in February (blowing toward the southwest). On the right is a map of the winds in August (blowing toward the northeast). Notice how the winds make it easier to travel in different directions at different times of the year. Library of Congress. Public domain.

Why did monsoon winds improve trade? Because they changed direction at the same time every year. The monsoon winds allowed merchants to plan voyages and to know when they would arrive at a distant port. Travel guides written by Arab merchants listed ideal departure times from port to port, down to the best week and even day for travel and return. Most merchants stayed closer to home, but there are many records of Arab, Persian, and Indian merchants visiting distant Chinese ports. With so many merchants passing through, port cities became diverse places, home to people from many far-flung regions.

A network of ports

A network of merchants and trading cities linked with each other from Mozambique in East Africa to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, Calicut in Western India, Malacca in Southeast Asia, Quanzhou in China, and dozens of other places in between. Indian cities like Calicut, on the western coast of India (the Malabar Coast), were the busiest ports in the Indian Ocean. They were situated at a half-way point between the western and eastern halves of the ocean. Merchants could use the monsoon winds to make a round trip to Calicut and back in a single year. Since they interacted so frequently, merchants in these port cities often found that they shared more in common with other merchants from distant cities than they shared with those in their home communities who lived further inland.

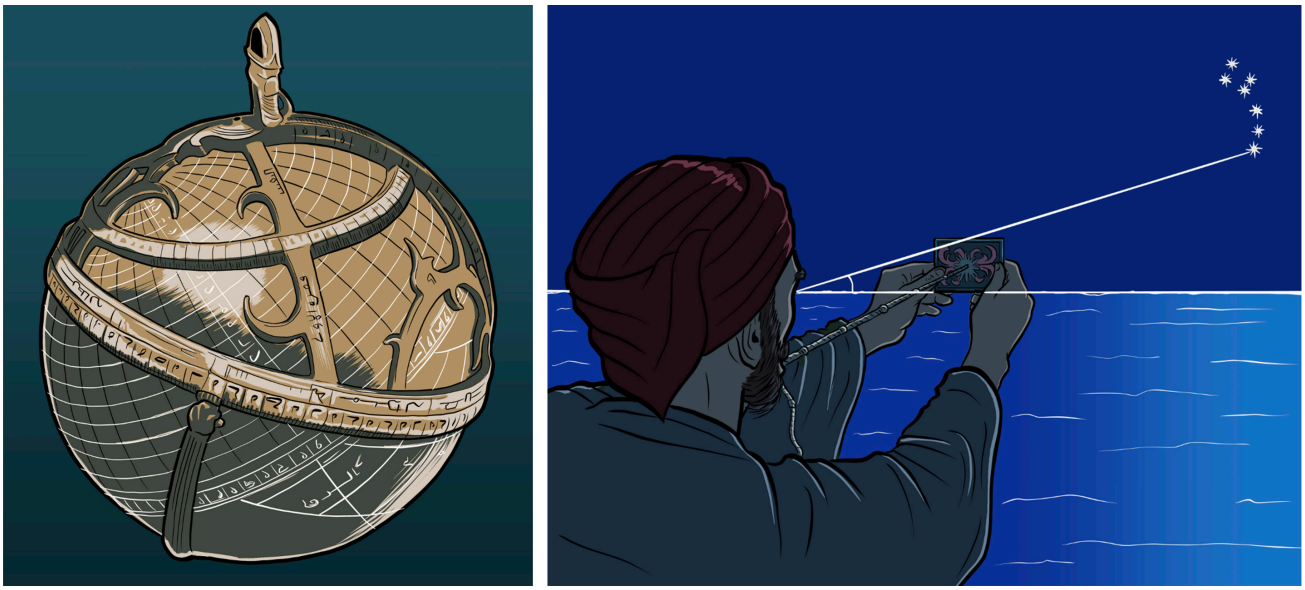
A sixteenth-century painting of Calicut port (top) by a European geographer. © Getty Images.

Several diaspora[1] communities were active in the Indian Ocean trade. Armenian, Gujarati, Jewish, and Fujianese merchants built extensive networks. Sharing a common language, home, or set of beliefs allowed merchants of these ethnic and religious communities to build the networks of trust necessary for conducting long-distance business.

Religions and technologies traveled with goods and people on the waves, and both helped extend the trade. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam all spread to Southeast Asia. Merchants along the Swahili coast in East Africa brought Islam with them, winning many new converts. As Islam spread south, local Bantu languages, like Swahili, adopted several Arabic words and often used the Arabic script.

1 A *diaspora* is a population of people who have spread to several different regions of the world, though they have a common origin in a different place. Many diasporas share a common ethnic or religious identity.

The spread of trade sped up technological exchange, and technological innovations expanded trade. Merchants carried new plants and animals to new places, along with new agricultural techniques. Arab merchants improved the astrolabe and developed the *kamal* (see images below), improving navigation. Chinese mariners improved the magnetic compass. Indian, Chinese, and Muslim shipbuilders upgraded ship designs in this era, designing larger ships that could travel farther with more cargo.



Astrolabes (left) are pretty complex instruments that help sailors determine latitude using stars. But not all technologies had to be complex. The kamal (right) was basically just a board with a knotted string that was held in the teeth and lined up with the North Star to determine latitude. OER Project.

A rising tide lifts all boats

The Indian Ocean might have been a world of trading cities, but the rise of several large empires helped drive the trade. In the years leading up to 1200, the Song Dynasty in China and several Islamic states in the western Indian Ocean brought stability to their regions, and their wealth encouraged trade. Chinese Song emperors introduced reforms that gave more freedom to merchants and monetized their tax system. Instead of paying taxes with crops, Chinese farmers sold their crops and paid the government with money. With more currency circulating, more people could buy things at market, increasing domestic trade. As Chinese merchants grew wealthier, they had more resources to devote to foreign trade.

The rise of the Mongol Empire in the thirteenth century expanded trade across Afro-Eurasia by bringing many regions under one imperial system. In the fourteenth century, the Black Death pandemic devastated overland trade, but sea-based networks recovered quickly. The collapse of the Mongol Empire meant that overland trade was once again risky, driving more merchants to trade on the sea routes.

The most important factor driving the Indian Ocean trade was not political or economic, but cultural. The expansion of Islam connected diverse parts of the system more than any empire. Muslim merchants extended trade networks around the Indian Ocean, and those networks spread Islam to new places. Muslims paid lower taxes in states controlled by Muslim rulers. So, as Muslim states expanded to new places or local rulers converted to Islam, conversion had both spiritual and economic benefits. Merchants traveling to Muslim ports often converted to avoid taxes. Even some who didn't convert, including several Buddhist rulers in Southeast Asia, still adopted Muslim names to improve relations with Muslim states and merchants.

When they returned home, converts brought their new religion with them. Arabic became the common language of commerce throughout the Indian Ocean. Muslim merchants could travel across an ocean and meet other Muslim merchants who spoke the same language and had similar cultural values. Long-distance trade depended on trust. You had to trust the people transporting your goods to market. You had to trust that the currency you were paid had value. You had to trust that goods you bought were authentic. Like diasporic communities, a shared language and set of beliefs improved trust between Muslim merchants, who could also rely on local Islamic courts to enforce contracts.

Map of Southeast Asia, showing the Sultanate of Malacca (purple, center of image). The Strait of Malacca was the fastest route for maritime trade between China and the Indian Ocean. Parameswara, the founder and ruler of Malacca converted to Islam and took the name "Iskandar Shah" sometime around 1400. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. Explore full map here.

The Admiral

Innovations in the Islamic world reshaped trade networks, but the most powerful state in the Indian Ocean was not in the Indian Ocean. After 1368, the Mongol Yuan dynasty fell, and the Ming Dynasty ruled China. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Ming China developed the most impressive maritime technology the world had ever seen. Their wealth and naval mastery gave the Ming the opportunity to dominate the Indian Ocean. But they chose a different route.

The greatest admiral in China was a Muslim Chinese eunuch named Zheng He. From 1405 to 1433, he led seven expeditions of huge treasure fleets into the Indian Ocean. He sailed with hundreds of ships, but these weren't your average sailboats. They were the largest ships in the world, some as large as 200-400 feet long. On his first voyage, he was accompanied by as many as 30,000 sailors—that's about half the population of London at the time. Each ship held dozens of cannons. Some of the largest ships were constructed with water-tight compartments in

their hulls, which could help keep the ship afloat in the event of a hull breach. These compartments also held fresh water and the exotic animals Zheng He received as tribute to the emperor. European ships didn't incorporate this design until centuries later.

A model of one of Zheng He's ships, at the Maritime Experiential Museum in Singapore. © Getty Images.

You might think that the Ming emperor sent Zheng He with these armadas on missions of conquest. However, the Chinese weren't out to conquer or even control the Indian Ocean trade. Zheng He's voyages were diplomatic. He traveled to display the might of China and to collect tribute from rulers around the ocean. Many rulers were happy to do so, some even returned to China with Zheng He and paid tribute to the emperor in person.

Zheng He's voyages highlight one of the most remarkable things about this Indian Ocean trade system: it was pretty peaceful. Of course, there were wars. Empires competed with each other. Pirates made life miserable for the merchants they captured. Slavery was prevalent in every region and was part of this trading system. But despite all this violence, no state in this period attempted to assert dominance over the trade. Merchants were allowed to operate freely, carrying new goods and ideas to the diverse ports of the Indian Ocean.

Sources

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Image credits

Cover image: A 13th century Arab manuscript illustration depicting a merchant's sailing dhow. Sultanate of Oman, 1994. © Arne Hodalic / CORBIS / Corbis via Getty Images.

A nineteenth-century map of the monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean. On the left is a map of the winds in February (blowing toward the southwest). On the right is a map of the winds in August (blowing toward the northeast). Notice how the winds make it easier to travel in different directions at different times of the year. Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/resource/g9181c.ct009510/

A sixteenth-century painting of Calicut port (top) by a European geographer. © API/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images.

Astrolabes (top) are pretty complex instruments that help sailors determine latitude using stars. But not all technologies had to be complex. The kamal (bottom) was basically just a board with a knotted string that was held in the teeth and lined up with the North Star to determine latitude. OER Project

Map of Southeast Asia, showing the Sultanate of Malacca (purple, center of image). The Strait of Malacca was the fastest route for maritime trade between China and the Indian Ocean. Parameswara, the founder and ruler of Malacca converted to Islam and took the name "Iskandar Shah" sometime around 1400. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0. Explore full map here: https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1450-layer-2

A model of one of Zheng He's ships, at the Maritime Experiential Museum in Singapore. © ROSLAN RAHMAN/AFP via Getty Images.