The Sea Roads

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**MNBOT Standard:** People, Places, and Environments

**MNBOT Understanding:** How historical events have been influenced by, and have influenced, physical and human geographic factors in local, regional, national and global settings

**Thesis:** The Sea Roads of the Indian Ocean used for trade and commerce throughout the Eastern Hemisphere were not only important for trade, but also for the spread of religion, political systems, and culture.

**Learning Objective:** Students will learn the significance of the Indian Ocean Sea Roads between 500 C.E. and 1500 C.E., why these roads were sustained, and how the spread of religions, political systems, and cultures influenced maritime trade.

Between the years 500 C.E. and 1500 C.E., the Indian Ocean played a pivotal role in trade and commerce. The Sea Roads, as the book labels them, linked the entire Eastern Hemisphere and made long distance trade available. Merchants of one area could trade with others thousands of miles away, without having to take the treacherous journey on land through mountainous and rough terrain. However, these roads were significant for other reasons as well. The Sea Roads of the Indian Ocean used for trade and commerce throughout the Eastern Hemisphere were not only important for trade, but also for the spread of religion, political systems, and culture.

Before global oceanic sea trade opened after the year 1500, the Indian Ocean was the largest sea-based means of communication and commerce. The routes stretched from southern China to eastern Africa, and made the acquisition of desirable goods from other countries and regions possible. This included gold from Africa, spices from Southeast China, porcelain from China, and peppers from India. One reason trading of these goods was made possible was due to low transportation costs. Ships could carry heavier loads and cargoes than camels, and could support mass market goods, such as timber, rice, wheat, and textiles, whereas camels were limited strictly to luxury items. A second reason sea trade was made possible was the monsoons. These alternating wind patterns blew to the east in the summer and to the west in the winter. People of all countries gradually developed their knowledge of monsoons, and progressively made technological changes, such as more developed ship building and ocean navigation, to further advance sea trade.

One misconception about maritime commerce over the Sea Roads is that trade occurred between countries or regions. In actuality, it operated between towns, or urban centers. Merchants in these towns often times had more in common with their common trade partners than with the people living in the same urban center as them. The large number of urban centers located on the Indian Ocean coastlines provided the nodes of the widespread commercial network.

The heart of the Sea Roads was located in India. India's ports contained goods from both the east, such as Africa, and west, like China. Both the eastern and western coasts of India were
decorated with urban centers and ports for trade. Indian merchants were communicating with and settling in communities all around the Indian Ocean basin as early as the first century. The common understanding of Indian cultural and political practices between these Indian merchants set a friendly environment for trade. However, this did not change the landscape of the Afro-Eurasian world and weave the web of Indian Ocean trade as in comparison to two major processes that did.

The first of these processes was the economic and political revival of China. This revival, approximately four centuries after the collapse of the Han dynasty, reestablished an effective and powerful unified state where maritime trade was encouraged. Chinese economic growth enabled a wide variety of Chinese products to be sent out and traded. These circulating products provided a vast and attractive market for goods from India and Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Chinese technological advancements, like shipbuilding noted earlier, as well as magnetic compasses drove commercial growth.

The second major process which shaped the Afro-Eurasian world and continued to spark commerce was the rise and spread of Islam. Islam was quite friendly to commercial trade, compared to Confucian culture which was suspicious of merchants. "The creation of an Arab Empire, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean through the Mediterranean basin and all the way to India, brought together in a single political system and immense range of economies and cultural traditions and provided a vast arena for the energies of Muslim traders" (Strayer 228). These energies fueled maritime trade significantly, as luxury items from the Middle East such as gold and silver were exchanged in southern India for textiles, peppers, pearls and gemstones. Islamic followers and merchants settled communities all around the Indian Ocean basin, from East Africa to China. This brought rise to an Islamic maritime culture by the year 1000, which was shared by merchants living in the urban centers and towns all over the Indian Ocean coastlines. "The immense prestige, power, and prosperity of the Islamic world stimulated the widespread conversion, which in turn facilitated commercial transactions" (Strayer 228).

The Sea Roads transformed all merchants and regions in different aspects, but one area where major change occurred was in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia had a unique geographical characteristic which in turn led it to flourish and become successful in maritime trade. When Malay sailors opened up the Straits of Malacca for a trade route between China and India, many small ports and towns along the coast began to boom economically from competition. The intense competition between these ports and towns led to the emergence of the Malay kingdom of Srivijaya. The kingdom of Srivijaya attracted supporters of a bureaucracy with its supply of gold, spices, and taxes levied on passing ships. From this bureaucracy, security was established in the form of a military and naval force. Indian culture and political ideologies, as well as Buddhist religious practices brought over by Indian merchants influenced Srivijaya monarchs. These monarchs held beliefs that they possessed magical powers, and Buddhism provided them with an increased level of magical powers, as well as prestigious association with Indian civilizations. Monarchs supported Buddhist images, and teachings of Buddhism in the region attracted many monks and students from China to the area. Another kingdom in Southeast Asia, the Sailendra kingdom, also underwent vast amounts of change spurred by Indian culture. This kingdom, in close alliance with the kingdom of Srivijaya, initiated an enormous project of constructing Hindu temples and Buddhist monuments. Arguably the most
famous of these structures is Borobudur, a mountain-like Buddhist monument, located in present day Indonesia. This ten level structure, with a three mile walkway, is coated with carvings representing the spiritual travel from ignorance and illusion to full enlightenment. This is the largest Buddhist monument ever discovered in the world. "Borobudur represents the process of Buddhism becoming culturally grounded in a new place" (Strayer 230). Furthermore, Borobudur is evidence of the spread of Indian culture into Southeast Asia. This "Indianization," was a means of voluntary adaptations and borrowing which was not imperialistically forced on upon the Southeast Asian societies by a ruler or king.

A second area that underwent severe change due to Indian Ocean commerce was Eastern Africa and the Swahili civilization. The Swahili civilization was a set of commercial city-states along the eastern coast of Africa, stretching from modern day Mozambique to Somalia. The Swahili civilization was able to grow from the benefits of oceanic trade. Again, the rise and spread of Islam was a major player in this process. Islam was hastily and voluntarily adopted, first being introduced by Arab merchants and traders. Mosques could soon be found in the city-states, and these Muslim societies often enjoyed having an Arabic speaking religious leader. The majority of the population, however, spoke traditional Swahili and African languages in everyday life, according to Arab scholar Ibn Battuta. Islam also divided the Swahili people from their neighbors inland, where it was not adopted until the 19th century. Economically though, interior civilians brought products to the coastal cities, using these ports as ways of exchanging their products with Arab merchants who would trade them across the Indian Ocean.

Local Swahili civilians and merchants grew wise to gaining power and wealth from trading their products. In Arabia, Persia, and India, there was a demanding market for East African products such as gold, ivory, quartz, leopard skins, and sometimes even slaves acquired from inland societies. The result of this was local clan chiefs becoming kings, an African merchant class quickly developing, and villages expanding into towns and urban centers. Although Arab vessels primarily traveled the Sea Roads to exchange good, Swahili crafts could be found roaming the coast, concentrating goods for shipment abroad. The Swahili city-states flourished primarily between the years 1000 and 1500. City-states usually consisted of about 15,000 to 18,000 people, some of the more prestigious ones being Lamu, Mombasa and Sofala. These cities were politically independent, with a ruling chief in most cases, not under imperialistic control of other empires or leaders. Unlike the Srivijaya kingdom in Southeast Asia with the Straits of Malacca, the Swahili civilization didn't control a pivotal geographic landmark along the trade routes. These cities gained prestige and success by obtaining products from interior Africa, bringing them to the coast and trading them into the demanding market. Products the Swahili people often traded for included porcelain and from China, rugs from Persia and cotton from India.

The Sea Roads of the Indian Ocean were critical for trade and major change processes between the years 500 and 1500. India was the heart of these trade routes. Other than trade and commerce, the Sea Roads played a big part in the spread of religion, culture, and political systems all throughout the Eastern Hemisphere.

Bibliography