**China**

Trade and Foreign Contacts Under the Tang and Song emperors, foreign trade flourished. Tang imperial armies

guarded the great Silk Roads, which linked China to the West. Eventually, however, China lost control over these

routes during the long Tang decline. After this time, Chinese merchants relied increasingly on ocean trade. Chinese

advances in sailing technology, including use of the magnetic compass, made it possible for sea trade to expand. Up

and down China’s long coastline, the largest port cities in the world bustled with international trade. Merchant ships carried trade goods to Korea and Japan. They sailed across the Indian Ocean to India, the Persian Gulf, and even

the coast of Africa. Chinese merchants established trading colonies around Southeast Asia. Many foreign traders, mostly Arabs, resided in Chinese cities. Through trade and travel, Chinese culture spread throughout East Asia. One major cultural export was Buddhism. This religion spread from China to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The exchange of goods and ideas was two-way. For example, foreign religions, including Islam and some Eastern sects of Christianity, spread to China and won followers.

Foreign Trade Foreign trade increased under Kublai Khan (Mongol ruler). This was largely due to the Mongol Peace, which made the caravan routes across Central Asia safe for trade and travel. Traders transported Chinese silk and porcelain, which were greatly valued in Europe and western Asia, over the Silk Roads and other routes. These

traders also carried with them such Chinese products and inventions as printing, gunpowder, the compass, paper currency, and playing cards.

Kublai further encouraged trade by inviting foreign merchants to visit China. Most of them were Muslims from India, Central Asia, and Persia. Many European traders and travelers, including Christian missionaries, also reached China.

**The Spread of Indian Trade**

In addition to knowledge, India has always been rich in precious resources. Spices, diamonds, sapphires, gold, pearls, and beautiful woods—including ebony, teak, and fragrant sandalwood—have been valuable items of exchange. Trade between India and regions as distant as Africa and Sumeria began more than 4,000 years ago. Trade expanded even after the Mauryan Empire ended around 185 B.C.

Groups who invaded India after Mauryan rule ended helped to expand India’s trade to new regions. For example, Central Asian nomads told Indians about a vast network of caravan routes known as Silk Roads. These routes were called the Silk Roads because traders used them to bring silk from China to western Asia and then on to Rome. Once Indians learned of the Silk Roads, they realized that they could make great profits by acting as middlemen. Middlemen are go-betweens in business transactions. For example, Indian traders would buy Chinese goods and sell them to traders traveling to Rome. To aid their role as middlemen, Indians built trading stations along the Silk Roads. They were located at oases, which are fertile spots in desert areas.

Sea trade also increased. Traders used coastal routes around the rim of the Arabian Sea and up the Persian Gulf to bring goods from India to Rome. In addition, traders from southern India would sail to Southeast

Asia to collect spices. They brought the spices back to India and sold them to merchants from Rome. Archaeologists have found hoards of Roman gold coins in southern India. Records show that some Romans were upset about the amount of

gold their countrymen spent on Indian luxuries. They believed that to foster a healthy economy, a state must collect gold rather than spend it.

Rome was not India’s only sea-trading partner. India imported African ivory and gold, and exported cotton cloth.

Rice and wheat went to Arabia in exchange for dates and horses. After trade with Rome declined around the third

century A.D., India’s sea trade with China and the islands of southeast Asia increased. The Chinese, for example,

imported Indian cotton cloth, monkeys, parrots, and elephants and sent India silk.

Increased trade led to the rise of banking in India. Commerce was quite profitable. Bankers were willing to lend money to merchants and charge them interest on the loans. Interest rates varied, depending on how risky business was. During Mauryan times, the annual interest rate on loans used for overseas trade had been 240 percent! During the Gupta Empire, bankers no longer considered sea trade so dangerous, so they charged only 15 to 20 percent interest a year.

A number of Indian merchants went to live abroad and brought Indian culture with them. As a result, people

throughout Asia picked up and adapted a variety of Indian traditions. For example, Indian culture affected styles in art,

architecture, and dance throughout South and Southeast Asia. Indian influence was especially strong in Thailand,

Cambodia, and on the Indonesian island of Java. Traders also brought Indian religions

**Muslim Trade Network**

By the early 600s, trade routes connected Arabia to the major ocean and land trade routes. Trade routes through Arabia ran from the extreme south of the peninsula to the Byzantine and Sassanid (Persian) empires to the north. Merchants from these two empires moved along the caravan routes, trading for goods from the Silk Roads of the east. They transported spices and incense from Yemen and other products to the west. They also carried information and ideas from the world outside Arabia.

At this time, two major sea-trading networks existed—the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Through these networks, the Muslim Empire could engage in sea trade with the rest of the world. The land network connected the

Silk Roads of China and India with Europe and Africa. Muslim merchants needed only a single language, Arabic, and a single currency, the Abbasid dinar, to travel in the empire.

To encourage the flow of trade, Muslim money changers set up banks in cities throughout the empire. Banks offered letters of credit, called sakks, to merchants. A merchant with a sakk from a bank in Baghdad could exchange it for cash at a bank in any other city in the empire. In Europe, sakk was pronounced “check.” Thus, using checks dates back to the Muslim Empire.

At one end of the Muslim Empire was the city of Córdoba in alAndalus. In the tenth century, this city had a population of 200,000; Paris, in contrast, had 38,000. The city attracted poets, philosophers, and scientists. Many non-Muslims adopted Muslim customs, and Córdoba became a dazzling center of Muslim culture. In Córdoba, Damascus, Cairo, and Baghdad, a cultural blending of people fueled a period of immense achievements in the arts and the sciences.

**East African Coast Trade Cities**

Villages along the east coast began to develop into important trade cities. By 1100, waves of Bantu-speaking people had migrated across central Africa to the east coast. There they established farming and fishing villages. Slowly, the existing

coastal villages grew into bustling seaports, built on trade between East African merchants and traders from Arabia, Persia, and India. As trade increased, many Muslim Arab and Persian traders settled in these port cities. Arabic blended

with the Bantu language to create the Swahili (swah•HEE•lee) language.

Persian traders moved south from the Horn of Africa, a triangular peninsula near Arabia. They brought Asian manufactured goods to Africa and African raw materials to Asia. In the coastal markets, Arab traders sold porcelain bowls from China and jewels and cotton cloth from India. They bought African ivory, gold, tortoiseshell, ambergris, leopard skins, and rhinoceros horns to carry to Arabia.

By 1300, more than 35 trading cities dotted the coast from Mogadishu in the north to Kilwa and Sofala in the south. Like the empires of West Africa, these seaports grew wealthy by controlling all incoming and outgoing trade. Some cities

also manufactured trade goods for export. For example, weavers in Mogadishu and Sofala made cloth. Workers in Mombasa and Malindi made iron tools.

**West Africa**

By A.D. 200, trade across the Sahara had existed for centuries. However, this trade remained infrequent and irregular because of the harsh desert conditions. Most pack animals—oxen, donkeys, and horses—could not travel very far in the

hot, dry Sahara without rest or water. Then, in the third century A.D., Berber nomads began using camels. The camel could plod steadily over much longer distances, covering as much as 60 miles in a day. In addition, it could travel more

than ten days without water, twice as long as most pack animals. With the camel, nomads blazed new routes across the desert and trade increased.

The trade routes crossed the savanna through the region farmed by the Soninke (soh•NIHN•keh) people. The Soninke people called their ruler ghana, or war chief. Muslim traders began to use the word to refer to the Soninke region. By the 700s, Ghana was a kingdom, and its rulers were growing rich by taxing the goods that traders carried through their territory.

The two most important trade items were gold and salt. Gold came from a forest region south of the savanna between the Niger (NY•juhr) and Senegal (SEHN•ih•GAWL) rivers. Miners dug gold from shafts as deep as 100 feet or sifted it from fast-moving streams. So me sources estimate that until about 1350, at least two-thirds of the world’s supply of gold came from West Africa. Although rich in gold, West Africa’s savanna and forests lacked salt, a material essential to human life. The Sahara contained deposits of salt. In fact, in the Saharan village of Taghaza, workers built their houses from salt blocks because it was the only material available.

Arab and Berber traders crossed the desert with camel caravans loaded down with salt. They also carried cloth, weapons, and manufactured goods from ports on the Mediterranean. After a long journey, they reached the market towns of the savanna. Meanwhile, African traders brought gold north from the forest regions. Merchants met in trading cities, where they exchanged goods under the watchful eye of the king’s tax collector. In addition to taxing trade, royal officials made sure that all traders weighed goods fairly and did business according to law. Royal guards also provided protection from bandits.

By the year 800, Ghana had become an empire. Because Ghana’s king controlled trade and commanded a large army, he could demand taxes and gifts from the chiefs of surrounding lands. As long as the chiefs made their payments, the king left them in peace to rule their own people. In his royal palace, the king stored gold nuggets and slabs of salt (collected as taxes). Only the king had the right to own gold nuggets, although gold dust freely circulated in the marketplace. By this means, the king limited the supply of gold and kept its price from falling. Ghana’s African ruler acted as a religious leader, chief judge, and military commander. He headed a large bureaucracy and could call up a huge army.

In 1067, a Muslim geographer and scholar named al-Bakri wrote a description of Ghana’s royal court:

The king adorns himself . . . wearing necklaces and bracelets. . . . The court of appeal is held in a domed

pavilion around which stand ten horses with gold embroidered trappings. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the subordinate [lower]

kings of his country, all wearing splendid garments and with their hair mixed with gold.

AL-BAKRI, quoted in Africa in the Days of Exploration