



# INDIAN OCEAN TRADE

## International Commerce, Snorkeling Camels, and The Indian Ocean Trade: Crash Course World History #18

Indian Ocean trade—or, as John Green calls it, the “Monsoon Marketplace”—was bigger, richer, and more diverse than the Silk Road. It totally transformed production and distribution, communities, and networks in Africa and Asia. Merchants moved with monsoon winds carrying goods, technologies, and ideas to faraway places, connecting many societies to one another.



**00:01**

*Photo from the 1981 tv series "Dynasty";  
Portrait of the Habsburg family*

*Montage of portraits, all of which depict men in funny hats*

*John Green as his younger self, wearing a fedora*

*CCWH theme music plays*

**00:58**

*Animated map shows locations of port cities connected by the Indian Ocean trade networks*

**01:46**

*Drawing of the Mongols with a speech bubble "we're the exception!"; video of Mongols riding on horseback, dragging bodies behind them*

**02:20**

*Animation of a trade ship carrying an elephant*

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to be discussing trade here, in the Indian Ocean. Oh, my globe had a globe. We're going to do some new-school history today, where we talk about a system instead of talking about individuals or some boring dynasty—no, Stan, not that kind of dynasty—yes, that kind of dynasty.

So many world history classes still focus on People Who Wore Funny Hats, and how their antics shaped our lives, right? And while it's interesting and fun to note that, for instance, King Charles VI of France believed that he was made out of glass, relentlessly focusing on the actions of the funny-hatted people who ruled us makes us forget that we also make history.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Did Charles VI of France really believe he was made out of glass?

Yes, he did—but today we're talking about Indian Ocean trade, and it's going to be interesting, I promise. So pay attention. Also, no hats! This is a classroom, not a Truman Capote beach party.

So, Indian Ocean trade was like the Silk Road, in that it was a network of trade routes that connected people who had stuff to people who wanted it and were willing to pay for it. And just as the Silk Road was not a single road, there were lots of Indian Ocean trade routes connecting various port cities around the Indian Ocean basin, including Zanzibar and Mogadishu and Hormuz and Canton. By the way, before you criticize my pronunciation, please remember that mispronunciation is my thing, and I've been doing it since episode one, and nobody ever notices it's a thing! Sorry, I lost it there.

But Indian Ocean trade was bigger, richer, and featured more diverse players than the Silk Road, but it is much less famous probably because it does not have a snazzy name. What do you think, Stan, like the Neptunian Network? No—the Wet Web? No, that's definitely not it. The Sexy Sea Lanes of South Asia? No, that's too hard for me to say with my lisp. The Monsoon Marketplace. Thanks, Danica.

And now, the tyranny of dates—by about 700 CE, there was a recognizable Monsoon Marketplace, but it really blew up between 1000 CE and 1200. It then declined a bit during the Pax Mongolica, when overland trade became cheap and safe, thanks to—wait for it—the Mongols. But then Indian Ocean trade surged again in the 14th and 15th centuries. So who was trading? Swahili coast cities, Islamic empires in the Middle East, India, China, southeast Asia, and not Europe, which is probably one of the other reasons that the Monsoon Marketplace isn't as famous as it should be. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So, if you live in China, and you need some ivory to make the handle for a sword, you have to trade for it, because elephants only live in India and Africa. One of the reasons Indian Ocean trade took off is that there were a wide range of resources available and a wide range of import needs, from ivory to timber to books to grain. But the most important thing was the wind. The Indian Ocean is home to a set of

*Animation of a market flooding and being carried away by a monsoon*

*Animation of trade ships being carried by the monsoons*

**03:20**

*Animation of many trade ships traveling, (one of them is sunk by a sea creature)*

*A trade route map shows the Seven Voyages of Zheng He*

**04:17**

*Animation: piles of literal crap*

**05:01**

*John Green moves into the golden chair next to the fireplace*

very special winds called monsoons. You generally hear about monsoons in the context of rain in India, but rather than thinking of monsoons as the rain itself, think of them as the wind that brings a rainy season. The great thing about seasons is that they come regularly, and so do monsoon winds. So if you were a sailor, you could count on the wind to bring you from Africa to India if you sailed between April and September, and one that would bring you back to Africa if you sailed between November and February. In fact, these winds were so predictable that early maritime travel guides often listed ideal times of departure down to the week and sometimes even the day.

Predictable winds made trade a lot less risky. Like, back in the day, when the only power for ships were sails and oarsmen, your cargo might not arrive on time, or it might spoil, or you might die, all of which are bad for the health of global economic trade. But predictable winds meant lower risk, which meant cheaper trade, which meant more trade, which meant more people could have awesome sword handles. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Okay, there are a few more facets of Indian Ocean trade worth mentioning. First, Indian Ocean trade incorporated many more people than participated in Silk Road trade. There were Jewish people and people from Africa and Malaysia and India and China, all sailing around and setting up trading communities where they would act as middlemen, trying to sell stuff for more than they'd bought it for and trying to find new stuff to buy that they could sell later. But despite this diversity, for the most part, especially on the western half of the Indian Ocean basin, the trade was dominated by Muslim merchants—why? Largely because they had the money to build ships, although, as we will see, in the 15th century, the Chinese state could have changed that balance completely.

By the way, I need to point out that when I say the trade was dominated by Muslim merchants, the emphasis should be on the merchants, not the Muslim or the dominated.

As previously noted, we tend to think that states and governments and the funny-hatted people who ruled them are the real movers and shakers in history, but that's really not the case. In the Indian Ocean, the terms of trade were set by the merchants and by the demands of the market, not by the whims of political rulers. And the self-regulating nature of that trade was remarkable and pretty much unprecedented. I mean, the most amazing thing is that, except for a few pirates, all of this trade was peaceful. For the better part of 700 years, these merchant ships were free to sail without the protection from any state's navy. This despite the fact that some pretty valuable crap was being traded. No, Thought Bubble, I meant that colloquially. All right, we need to do the Open Letter before Thought Bubble tries more puns.

Magic! For today's Open Letter to further discuss the relationship between merchants and nobles, we're going to go inland to Kashmir where Kota Rani was the ruler until 1339. Mostly, I just love this story. But first, let's find out what's in the secret compartment. Oh, it's Blowouts. Stan, are you asking me to make a

*Green plays “Tetris” theme  
on party blowers*

diarrhea joke? Because I’m above that. I will, however, give you a party-blower solo.

**05:26**

Dear Kota Rani, So, you had a pretty crazy life. First, when you were a kid, you were kidnapped by a rival noble who disguised his army as a bunch of merchants. Then you were forced to marry your kidnapper, who was the ruler of Kashmir, but then he died. And you became the ruler, and you were really good at it, and everything was going awesome. and you were lining things up for your sons, but then some dude comes in and decides that he’s going to marry you and forces you to do it by attacking you. And so what do you do? Immediately after your second wedding, you commit suicide by slicing open your belly and offer your intestines to your horrible new husband as a wedding present. No, Stan, I don’t want to say it, but I have to. That really took guts, Kota Rani—sorry. And all this because your father welcomed an army into his house thinking they were merchants. Best wishes, John Green.

**06:08**

So, right, you wouldn’t let an army or a rival noble into your house, but everyone welcomes a merchant, and not just royalty. The great thing about seaborne trade is that you can trade bulk goods like cotton cloth, foodstuffs, and timber that’s all too heavy to strap onto a camel or mule. So, for the first time, we see goods being traded for a mass market, instead of just luxury goods, like silk for elites.

*Images of animal hides; a  
photo of a group of people  
holding up elephant tusks*

Wood, for instance, can be used to build houses, but it’s not all that plentiful on the Arabian peninsula. However, when it becomes cheaper thanks to trade, suddenly more people can have better houses. Much of the timber that was shipped in the Monsoon Marketplace came from Africa, which is kind of emblematic. Africa produced a lot of the raw materials, like animal hides and skin and ivory and gold. The Swahili city-states imported finished goods such as silk and porcelain from China and cotton cloth from India. Spices and foodstuffs like rice were shipped from southeast Asia and especially Sri Lanka, where black pepper was a primary export. And the Islamic world provided everything from coffee to books to weapons.

**07:03**

*Image of an astrolabe, a  
brass disk that was used  
to measure the position of  
stars*

But it wasn’t just products that made their way around the eastern hemisphere thanks to the Indian Ocean. Technology spread too. Like the magnetic compass—which is kind of crucial if you like to know where you’re going—came from China. Muslim sailors popularized the astrolabe, which made it easier to navigate by the stars. And boats using stern-post rudders were easier to steer, so that technology quickly spread throughout the Monsoon Marketplace.

*Drawing of a ship with  
triangular lateen sails*

The Islamic world also produced the triangular lateen sail, which became super important because it allowed for ships to tack against the wind. This meant that a skilled crew could make their way through the ocean even if they didn’t have a strong tailwind. And just as with the Silk Road, ideas also traveled in the Monsoon Marketplace. For instance, today, more Muslims live in Indonesia than in any other country. And yes, I know Indonesia has more than two islands. This is not to scale, obviously. Knowing what you’ve already learned about the growth of Islam and the spread of trade, it won’t surprise you to learn that Islam spread to Indonesia via the Monsoon Marketplace.

**07:49**

*Photo of an elaborate,  
Hindu-inspired temple*

After the 1200s, the region, which had previously been heavily influenced by the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism—like, witness this temple, for instance—became increasingly Islamic as rulers and elites adopted the religion so they could have religious as well as economic ties to the people they were trading with. The conversion of most of a region to Islam, where it continues to flourish today, is a pretty big deal.

*Map shows the Strait of  
Malacca, which could stop  
trade by not allowing ships  
to pass through*

But Islam didn't spread as effectively to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, or Vietnam because they weren't centers of trade. How do you become a center for trade? Well, let's zoom in here to the Strait of Malacca. You can see how it could act as a choke point for trade. Any city that controlled that strait could stop the ships from going through it, or at least tax them. And that's exactly what happened, to such an extent that a powerful merchant state called Srivijaya rose up on Sumatra. And for a while, Srivijaya dominated trade in the region, because there were so many ships going through the Strait of Malacca to and from China. But, as we will see in another episode, this trade abruptly declined in the 15th century. And with it, so did Srivijaya.

**08:42**

This brings up a key point about Indian Ocean trade, which is that it was indispensable to the creation of certain city-states, like Srivijaya and the city-states of the Swahili coast. Without trade, those places wouldn't have existed, let alone become wealthy and grand.

*Photo of modern-day  
Singapore is contrasted  
with a photo of the ruins  
of a former-city*

Trade was a huge source of wealth for these cities because they could tax it through import and export duties or port fees. But the fact that they are no longer powerful shows that trade can be a pretty weak foundation upon which to build a polity, even a small one. There are many reasons for this, like high taxes can motivate traders to find other routes, for instance, but the main one is this: reliance upon trade makes you especially vulnerable to the peaks and troughs in the global economy. The legacy of the merchant kingdom in southeast Asia is still alive and well in Singapore, for instance. But one of the great lessons of cities that have declined or disappeared is that there's usually a town nearby that's eager to take your place and happy to offer lower taxes. It's almost as if the merchants decide where the people with the funny hats go, rather than the other way around. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

**09:37**

*Credits roll*

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Last week's Phrase of the Week was "Unless You Are the Mongols." If you want to suggest future Phrases of the Week or guess at this week's, you can do so in comments, where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians. Thanks for watching Crash Course, and as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome. Oh, it's going to be a crash! Everything's fine.