

Indian Ocean: the World's Oldest Maritime Ocean

EARLY HISTORY - INDUS VALLEY TO ROME (3000BCE to 300CE)

Family groups migrated out of Africa around one million years ago and settled on coastal areas around the rim of the Indian Ocean. Indigenous people crossed the sea to reach Australia at least 60,000 years ago.



Early ships dock? From wikipedia

By 3,000BCE city to city trade and sea travel had developed between Mesopotamian cities and the Indus Valley. Trade included barley, carnelian, steatite, timber, ivory and small manufactures.

Maritime traditions and skills survived the decline of the Indus Valley society with a resurgence paralleling agriculture and urbanisation along the Ganges and Sri Lanka. By about 500BCE, riverine and coastal trade networks had developed in South Asia.

A feature of the 500BCE to 400CE period is the development of ports and routes for commerce within the Red Sea and for trade between Egypt and India and later down the coast of Africa in emeralds, copper, porphyry, coral and incense.

On the east coast of India and Sri Lanka, the Gupta and Cholas competed for South East Asian trade with naval excursions from as early as 200BCE

SOUTH ASIA & SOUTHEAST ASIA (500CE TO 1200)

Key phases during this period include:

- the emergence of the ceramic trade within the region and the rise of entrepots such as Brunei;
- the development of trading posts for the through-trade between China, India and Rome;
- trade routes and ports well established in the period 100CE to 600CE on the east and west coasts of the Kra Isthmus for transshipment of goods through the Funan intermediaries at Qc Eo, and also through Pyus in the Bay of Bengal to China,
- traders and naval forces embarking from ports such as Tarnralipti and Amaravate to South East Asia.
- The ever expanding intercontinental trade in spices

CHINA (400CE TO 1500)

The Chinese networks across the region were maintained over a long period. For example, pilgrims used the trade routes with South East Asia from around 400CE. Trade and imperial interest reached a high point in the years 1368 to 1644, particularly with the seven voyages of Zheng He between 1405 and 1433 to Africa.

RISE OF THE MIDDLE EAST (600CE TO 1500)

This period featured the outreach of Arab, Persian and Jewish traders and the spread of Islam across the region.

EAST AFRICA (500BCE TO 1300)

Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Indian and Chinese trade occurred from at least 500BCE sometimes using local trading resources and expertise. The development of maritime trade in the period 600CE to 1492 introduces Africa as a separate historical entity in the region.

THE EUROPEANS (1500 TO 1800)

This period introduces the European exploration and aggressive linking of their global maritime networks with local commercial arrangements.

EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURY TRADE REVOLUTION

The European agrarian and industrial revolutions led to radical changes in trade and the sovereign landscape and seascape of the region. The changes included the use of European and local capital and enterprise to establish large-scale production of raw materials and manufactures for the mass market in Europe, replacing the traditional trade in bullion for 'exotic' high value relatively low volume goods. The Indian Ocean was also the last theatre of the naval war between Britain and Napoleonic France.



Königsberg at Dar es Salaam Bundesarchiv, Bild 105-DOA3002 / Walther Dobbertin / CC-BY-SA 3.0

COLONIALISM AND WORLD WAR 2

The Indian Ocean region receives little attention in general histories of World Wars 1 and 2. Securing the sea lanes and the countries of the region for the allied cause was no given thing. Both wars featured sea and sea supported battles: the British naval bombardment in August 1914 of Dar es Salaam, the capital of German East Africa, the invasion and capture of Mafia Island, and the Indian Ocean's own 'Gallipoli' - the failed allied seaborne invasion in November 1914 of Tanga. Other battles included the sinking of the SMS Emden by HMAS Sydney and the sinking of HMS Pegasus at Zanzibar by the SMS Königsberg.

It is little known that the Indian Ocean was also the only theatre of the Second World War where the US, Britain and her allies fought it out with all the Axis partners (Germany, Italy and Japan) over the course of war.