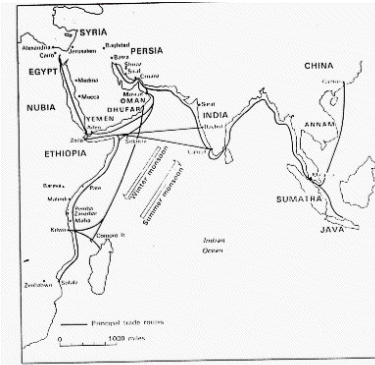


Background Information on the Indian Ocean Trade Network



14 The Indian Ocean and its trade in about AD 1200

The Indian Ocean Trade Network began with small trading settlements around 800 A.D., and ended in the 1500s when Portugal invaded and tried to run the trade for its own profit.

As trade intensified between Africa and Asia, powerful city-states flourished along the eastern coast of Africa. These included Kilwa, Sofala, Mombasa, Malindi, and others. The city-states traded with inland kingdoms like Great Zimbabwe to obtain gold, ivory, and iron. These materials were then sold to places like India, Southeast Asia, and China. These were Africa's exports in the Indian Ocean Trade. These items could be sold at a profit because they were scarce in Asian countries.

At the same time, the East African city-states were buying items from Asia. Many residents of the city-states were willing to pay high prices for cotton, silk, and porcelain objects. These items were expensive because they were not available in Africa at the time. These were Africa's imports in the Indian Ocean Trade.

The city-states along the eastern coast of Africa made ideal centers of trade. An important attraction was the gold obtained from inland kingdoms. The gold was needed mainly for coins, although it was also used for works of art, ornamentation on buildings, and jewelry. And, the city-states were easy to reach from Asia by ship because of the favorable wind and ocean currents. Ships had no trouble docking at the excellent ports and harbors located on the coasts of the city-states, making it easy to unload and load cargo. And, merchants, tired after their long overseas journey, enjoyed the fine restaurants, lodging, and entertainment offered by the port cities. Finally, East Africa was a peaceful region, and the few conflicts that did occur were small and brief. All of these factors created an ideal setting for import-export companies to conduct business.

Many of the merchants from the Arabian peninsula, India, and Southeast Asia stayed in the city-states of East Africa. Interracial marriages were not uncommon, and gradually over the centuries, a new and distinct ethnic group developed, known as the Swahili. Today millions of Swahili people live in the nations of East Africa, where the Swahili

language is widely spoken. (You can take Swahili courses at many colleges here in the U.S.) The Swahili language is a mixture of the Arabic, Hindi, and Bantu languages. The Swahili city-states steadily grew and prospered, and were a major world economic power by the 1400s. Although the city-states were famous throughout Africa and Asia, no European countries knew of them. You can imagine the surprise, then, of Portuguese captain Vasco da Gama when, in 1498, he came upon the bustling port cities of Sofala, Kilwa, Mombasa, and Malindi as he sailed up the eastern coast of Africa. He and his crew were welcomed by each of the cities he visited, although neither his ships nor the European items they attempted to trade were of much interest to the Swahili governments.

Da Gama's mission was to find a route to Asia by sailing from Portugal, around Africa, then on to India. European countries had been buying Asian goods for years through other, more difficult routes. But now the countries of Europe had begun looking for faster, cheaper routes to Asia. Vasco da Gama did eventually reach India with the help of a navigator from Malindi named Majid. In 1499, da Gama returned to Portugal and told the king and queen, who had sponsored his voyage, everything that he'd seen, including the shiploads of gold, ivory, porcelain, silk, and cotton being bought and sold in the port cities along the eastern coast of Africa.

The Portuguese government took immediate interest in the Swahili city-states. They sent more ships to the eastern coast of Africa with three goals: to take anything of value they could find, to force the kings of the city to pay taxes to Portuguese tax collectors, and to gain control over the entire Indian Ocean trade. The city-states had never needed forts or huge armies, and they were unprepared for the Portuguese attacks. One-by-one, the Portuguese captured the port cities, then wrecked, looted, and burned them to the ground. The residents of the cities who were unable to escape were killed. Shiploads of priceless goods were sent back to Portugal. However, the Portuguese attempt to take over and run the Indian Ocean trade was a failure.

If the Swahili city-states were destroyed by the Portuguese invaders, then how can we know so much about the Indian Ocean trade? One way is through archaeological evidence. For instance, pieces of Chinese porcelain vases and dishes can still be found along east African beaches. Another source of knowledge is the many documents written by people living at the time. For instance, Ibn Battuta, an African scholar, traveled to Kilwa in 1331 and wrote of its immense buildings and its countless other splendors. Vasco da Gama, and other Europeans who visited the Swahili city-states, also kept logbooks detailing both the wonders of the port cities—and, later, their violent destruction at the hands of the Portuguese invaders. And of course there are the records kept by African and Asian companies and governments of purchases and sales made via the Indian Ocean trade network. Archaeologists and historians are still working to piece together this great chapter in African history.

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