

Indian Ocean Travelers in the Medieval Era: Networks of Exchange Across the Hemisphere

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Overview and Purpose of the Lesson:

Most students are acquainted with the importance of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in world history, but know little of the world's third largest ocean, the Indian Ocean, which for centuries provided a medium of exchange among the world's great civilizations. In this lesson students focus on famous travelers in the Indian Ocean during the Medieval Era (300-1450 CE). For much of this time China was a stable and technologically advanced society, eager to trade via land and sea with other places in the world. On the opposite side of the Indian Ocean, Muslim societies flourished in Southwest Asia under the Umayyad and Abbasid empires. Like their Chinese counterparts, Muslim mariners ventured forth on the Indian Ocean, eager to trade with and learn from other societies rimming the ocean's coastlines. India was the hinge of this trading system, developing a system of trading ports that became cosmopolitan centers of commerce.

In Part I of this lesson students become acquainted with the geography of the Indian Ocean and how it affected trading patterns. In Part II students work in pairs as they focus on one traveler, or part of one traveler's journey. By filling out Handout A, pairs assess what can be learned from the primary sources many travelers bequeathed to history, and how their explorations and accounts furthered trade, travel, and learning across the region. Student pairs share what they have learned in Part III as they appear before the class in the role of traveler and interviewer. As classmates listen to the interviews they fill in Handout B, integrating each traveler's story into the big picture of trade and commerce during this time period. In the extension activities offered in Part IV students create an imaginary account of a traveler using the Indian Ocean in World History Website as a resource for choosing their destinations, cargo, navigation tools, and so forth. Alternatively they compare travelers in the Indian Ocean during the Medieval Era to those in the First Global Era as they discover what happened on the Indian Ocean when European travelers entered the region in force.

Performance Objectives:

- To understand how geographical features of the Indian Ocean played a role in how trade and exchange developed in the Medieval Era.
- To assess the role that individual travelers made on their contemporaries, as well as what historians can learn from them today.
- To assess the impact of inter-civilizational maritime trade in the Medieval Era.

Materials Needed:

- The Indian Ocean in World History Website.
- Handouts included in the lesson.
- Miscellaneous props, costumes and items of trade for student presentations.

Time: Two class periods to implement parts I-III.

Procedure:

Introduction and Context

Introduce students to the Indian Ocean, the third largest ocean in the world after the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean (the world's largest). By clicking on the geographical icons for Indian Ocean Description and the Monsoon Cycle on the Website map of the Prehistoric Era the class can learn about some of the features that influenced how humans learned to sail on the Indian Ocean, which has seasonal winds such that mariners had to catch the wind blowing northeast for one half of the year, and southwest in the second. In order to do this sailors often remained in ports far from their home base as they awaited the shift in winds. This fostered inter-cultural exchange and even intermarriage along the Indian Ocean coastlines.

Tell students that they are going to learn about trade and travel on the Indian Ocean during the Medieval Era (300-1500 CE) when mariners, from many regions of the world, navigated the Indian Ocean. Elicit from students the ways historians might know about both the travelers and the goods they carried during this era (artifacts, primary source documents).

Part I: Trade Patterns During the Medieval Era

In order to help students get the “big picture” of the geography of the Indian Ocean, project the Medieval Era map on the Indian Ocean in World History Website such that the whole class can see it at one time. If this is not possible, assign students to look at it individually (in a computer lab or at home, etc.) and reconvene to share answers.

From their observations, you will want students to see that the Middle East and China are the main hubs of trade during this era, with the coastline of the Indian subcontinent forming the hinge of trade.

Questions to pose as students look at the map:

- Looking at this map, name as many continents and regions of the world as you can.
- Name as many bodies of water as you can.
- Look at the solid orange lines, which represent water routes. What are the busiest areas of trade on the Indian Ocean? Which areas form the hubs of trade, the locations from which goods and people are going in and coming out?
- Look at the peripheral areas of the map. Has extensive ocean-faring trade reached the western coastlines of Africa, Southeast Asia or Australia?
- Now look at the dotted orange lines, which represent overland trade routes during these centuries. How were China and Southwest Asia (the Middle East) connected via overland routes?

- Where on the map do water routes and overland routes converge such that goods transported via water can then be carried to another destination overland, or vice versa?
- If they used both overland and water routes, how could travelers transport goods from China, (and Southwest Asia) all the way to Europe?

Part II: The Travelers of the Medieval Era

Tell students that they are going to look more closely at the Medieval Era by learning about some of its famous travelers, many of who wrote primary source documents in the form of travel accounts and letters.

1. Assign students to research one of the fourteen travelers below, working in pairs or in any other configuration that works for the number of students in your class. All of the travelers can be found on the Medieval Era map.

Note that some students will read primary sources, what the travelers themselves wrote in letters, travelogues, or dictated to others (such as Ibn Battuta). In other cases students will read secondary sources, summaries of what we know about famous journeys (such as Zheng He). Because there is much more information on the Website about Ibn Battuta and Zheng He, student pairs working on their journeys will undertake to analyze only one portion of their journeys.

2. Ask students to read the background essay on Travelers, which accompanies the icon for Traveler on the map of the Medieval Era. Assign students to use that essay and answer the questions it poses, or to read that essay and then answer the more detailed questions posed in Handout A.

List of travelers:

1. Ibn Battuta¹ on the Malabar Coast
2. Ibn Battuta in East Africa
3. Ibn Battuta in the Arabian Sea
4. Ibn Battuta on Chinese Ships
5. Ibn Battuta in the Maldives
6. Zheng He² First Voyage
7. Zheng He Third and Fourth Voyages
8. Zheng He Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Voyages
9. Allan bin Hassun
10. Gil Eanes
11. Rabbi Benjamin
12. Fa Shien
13. Marco Polo
14. Al-Ya'qubi (History of Al-Ya'qubi)

¹Note: Everyone assigned to Ibn Battuta should first read Ibn Battuta in Morocco as an introduction.

² Note: Everyone studying Zheng He should first read Ming Voyages Stone Stele as an introduction.

Handout A: The Journey of _____

THE JOURNEY	
Type of account (primary/ secondary, letter, diary, etc.)	
Home region/country of the traveler	
Purpose of the journey/dates	
Success/failure of the journey as related to its purpose.	
Sponsors of the trip, if any	
On board what type of boat*	
What types of navigational technology were available to mariners on this trip?*	
Dangers encountered	
PLACES VISITED	
Places visited, marked on a map	
Notable geographic features	
Strategic importance	
Natural resources available there	
Manufactured goods in use/for sale	
Goods traded/exchanged on the journey	
PEOPLE ENCOUNTERED	
Customs, hospitality, trustworthiness	
Provincial or cosmopolitan?	
Representing diversity, if so how?	
PRIMARY SOURCE**	
Tone of the account (factual, persuasive, fantastical)	
Ethnocentric? Does the narrator believe his own society superior to others?	
Can we trust that the account given is factual, in whole or in part? Why or why not?	
ASSESSMENT	
How might the experiences of this traveler been useful to others living at the same time period?*	
How is information supplied by this traveler useful to historians today?*	

*Answers to these questions must be inferred from the account and/or by accessing other types of information from the Website (types of boats, for example).

**To be answered only if students read a primary source document written by or about the traveler.

3. Ask each pair to plan a report of their traveler's journey. Tell students that the first person in the pair must speak as the traveler himself, in the first person present tense. (Costumes are a welcome addition.) The second student must interview the traveler and pose questions. In addition he or she must:

- Introduce the traveler.
- Point out on a map where the traveler went.
- Provide the class with some examples of the material goods the traveler encountered on his travels (e.g. nutmeg, silk).

Call on pairs to interview their traveler such that Ibn Battuta's journey and Zheng He's journeys are told in sequence.

Part III: Assessing Information Presented by the Travelers

Before students present their travelers to the class, distribute Handout B, which summarizes information about the Medieval Era. It is taken from the Historical Overview available under "Learning Tools" on the Indian Ocean in World History Website. Alternatively, ask students to read the complete essay (which provides much more detail) and then distribute Handout B. This is a good opportunity to enhance student's geographical knowledge by making sure that students can point to the geographical areas listed in the handout.

Tell the class that as they listen to the interview with each traveler, they should take notes on Handout B. Explain to students that they are looking for evidence to support the historical patterns. (In fact, historians have used the accounts of travelers to help them make generalizations about trade and cultural exchange.)

Handout B

Medieval Era, 300 C.E. to 1450 C.E. – Networks of Exchange Across the Hemisphere.

As you listen to the interviews, find all the evidence you can to support the following statements:

Eastern Indian Ocean:

- In the eastern part of the Indian Ocean Chinese maritime trade grew, with exports of Chinese goods going out to the rest of the world, and some goods flowing into China via sea routes.

Malay Peninsula and Southeast Asia

- “The Malay and Southeast Asian regions were active in this time. Traders used the route to China through the Strait of Malacca, and several shipwrecks show the huge quantity of goods that flowed through.”

India, Hinge of Indian Ocean Trade

- “India was the central hinge for trade in the medieval era. On the Malabar and Coromandel coasts, in Gurajat in the northwest, and Bengal in the northeast, colonies of traders from an astonishing mix of places gathered to trade...”

Western Indian Ocean

- In the western part of the Indian Ocean, the spread of Islam “encouraged trade and created opportunities as it spread a universal belief system, Arabic language, and system of law. .. The Muslim lands, with their growing cities, were wealthy and demand for goods of all kinds was high....Like the Chinese at the time, science, learning and the arts were prized...”

The Coastline of East Africa

- “Arab and Persian traders stopped at ports in the growing East African city-states, where a Swahili, or coastal, culture combined African, Islamic and regional influence.”

Goods North into Europe

- “Trade on the Red Sea and the Arabian (Persian) Gulf linked to land routes and the Mediterranean trading system. Byzantine, Persian, and Italian traders carried goods into the western and northern lands.”

Ships and Navigation

- Ships and navigation flourished during this time, with many inventions spreading with the circulation of goods and people.”

Class discussion should focus on processing evidence in support of the statements in Handout B. If some statements cannot be supported with evidence provided by this particular set of travelers, where else on the Website can students look for more information? For example, to verify the importance of trade along the Malay Peninsula and in parts of Indonesia, students can click on the Belitung and Cirebon shipwrecks, which tell us a lot about trade during the Medieval Era.

Finally, pose these questions either for class discussion or as a writing assignment. Students should marshal evidence to back up their opinions.

- Is one political power dominating others to the detriment of the system of trade on the Indian Ocean? Why or why not?
- Do the dangers of seafaring seem so great as to discourage travel? Why or why not?
- In terms of Indian Ocean trade, does the Medieval Era seem to be a time of relative tranquility and tolerance or a time of turmoil, religious persecution, and discord?
- In the upcoming centuries following 1450 C.E. what trends in world history do you think might change this situation?

Part IV: Extension Activities

1. Ask each student to write an imaginary travelogue or *rihla*, like the one written by Ibn Battuta. Their year-long journey should reflect their knowledge of the trade winds and geography of the Indian Ocean, the technology of the time period, and trends in global trade during the Medieval era. The final story should be turned in with a map on which they chart their year-long course.

Ask students to include the following information:

- The biography of their mariner: his or her place of birth, culture, religion, educational background, knowledge of the world as they embark on the journey.
- The purpose of their journey and what they hope to accomplish on it.
- From whom and how they will gain financial backing for their journey.
- The storyline of their journey, which can include exciting adventures as they roam the seas.

Require students to write about the following:

- The **type of boat** in which they will travel. Choices from this time period include the Chinese junk, Arab dhow, Kadakkarapally boat, and Austronesian boat, all of which can be found on the Medieval Era map.
- Information acquired about three of the following **technologies** that were of help to mariners in the Medieval Era: the astrolabe, pilot chart of Sulaiman ibn Ahmad, the map of Al-Idrisi, knowledge of longitude and latitude (book of Al-Biruni), the lateen sail, gunpowder, magnetic compass, paper, Polynesian stick maps, stern and rudder

for steering ships, wootz steel. These can be found by clicking the icons for Technology.

- Detailed information about three **places** they visited, found by clicking on the Place icons. Students should list the latitude and longitude of these places by consulting a modern atlas.
- Information about three of the **goods** available for trade (click on the Goods icons). What reason is there to buy these goods and transport them elsewhere?
- Information about three manufactured **objects** (Object icons). If transported and traded elsewhere, how might these objects make a profit and alter the way people live?

2. Compare trade and travel during the Medieval Era to that in the First Global Era. Start by comparing the orange solid lines of sea travel and broken orange lines of trade routes over land. In what ways has trade expanded? Into what new geographical regions? Ask students to read the Historical Overview about the First Global Era and make comparisons to trade and travel in the Medieval Era. In what ways will the Indian Ocean be different after European navigators, in the employ of nations such as Portugal, Spain, England and Holland, enter the scene?

For a closer look at the First Global Era, you can repeat this lesson using the following set of travelers from the First Global Era.

- Ferdinand Magellan
- Bartholomeu Dias
- Vasco da Gama
- James Cook
- Sidi Reis
- Ahmad Ibn Majid
- Captain Kid
- Jan Pieterszoon

3. While historians have much to learn from the travel accounts of real voyagers on the Indian Ocean, folklore can also be mined for what it has to tell us about the past. The Seven Journeys of Sindbad the Sailor from the *Thousand and One Nights* is great fun to read with students, and offers them much to learn. How does the tale exemplify Muslim values and the spread of Islam, the exchange of goods, and relationships between patrons and clients in the Indian Ocean? What real places are mentioned in the fictional Sindbad stories?

For ideas about how to implement such a lesson see:

Susan Douglass and Karima Alavi, *The Emergence of Renaissance: Cultural Interactions Between Europeans and Muslims*. Council on Islamic Education, 1999. Pages 59-66.

Joan Brodsky Schur, "Sindbad the Sailor and the Eastward Journey of Islam." *Education About Asia* (Association for Asian Studies). Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 2005).