

Module 1: Religions and Empires

Topic 2 Content: Early Trade Routes

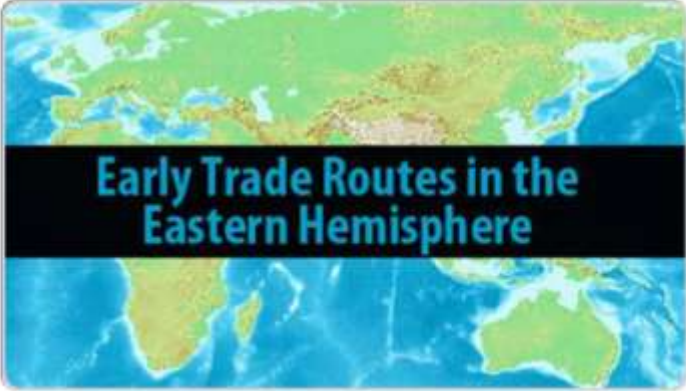
Early Trade Routes

The Silk Road

Trans-Saharan Trade Routes

The Indian Ocean

European Trade Routes



Early Trade Routes in the Eastern Hemisphere

By the year 1500, the African, European, and Asian continents were linked through several trade routes. These trade routes allowed people in these regions to exchange resources, goods, and ideas. Click on each of the tabs on the left to explore these unique trade routes.

The Silk Road



The Silk Road was a series of trade routes that spread across Asia from China to the Middle East, and ended in the Mediterranean Basin. This route linked the civilizations through which it crossed.

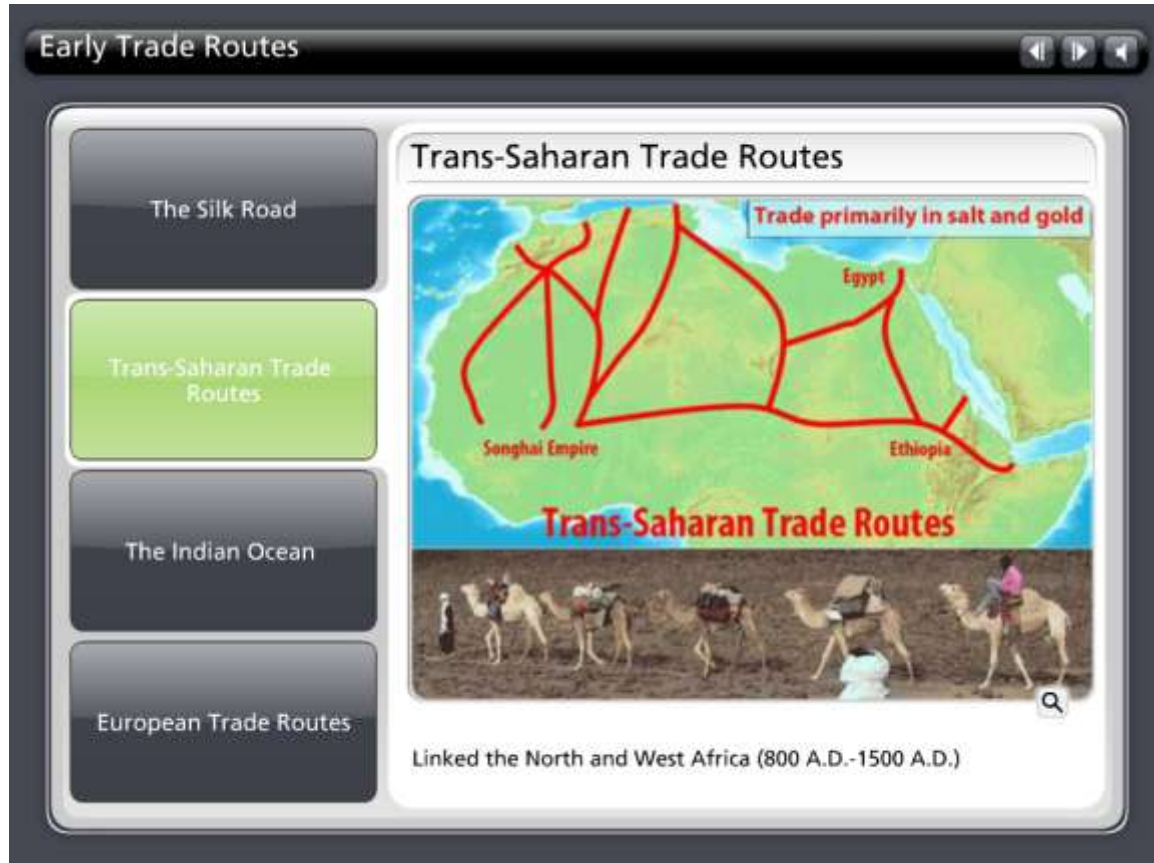
The history of the Silk Road goes back to the second century B.C. when the Han Dynasty in China started trading with central Asia. Soon after, Chinese products such as silk, gunpowder, porcelain, paper, and the compass started appearing in the Roman Empire, over five thousand miles away. Trade on the Silk Road was mainly conducted through a series of middlemen rather than one trader traveling the entire length of the route.

In the late thirteenth century, a Venetian merchant by the name of Marco Polo traveled the length of the Silk Road to China. He ended up living in China for 17 years as the guest of the Mongol Emperor. When he returned to Venice, he stimulated an interest in Chinese goods.

A maritime route across the South China Sea was also considered to be part of the Silk Road. This route linked China with Southeast Asia and the territories currently known as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

The Silk Road eventually came under the control of the Mongol Empire and started to disintegrate as a trade route by 1400. After Vasco da Gama discovered a sea route around the southern tip of Africa, Europeans used that as their preferred method of trading with the East.

Trans-Saharan Trade Routes



The trade routes across the vast Sahara desert in North Africa were important to the world's economy from 800-1500 A.D. Mediterranean cities wanted to trade their large supply of salt to West African Empires such as the Songhai, in exchange for gold, which could be found in West Africa. The Sahara was extremely difficult to cross. Caravans of traders relied heavily on camels and guides to make the journey through more than a thousand miles of desert.

Along with the trade in goods, ideas and beliefs followed these trade routes. One example is the Islamic religion, which quickly became the dominant religion in the areas most closely linked to the Trans-Saharan trade. Muslim scholars brought new ideas about medicine and mathematics to the West African kingdoms.

This trade route declined in importance with the rise of European shipping along the coast as traders made their way to Asia.

[Image of camels courtesy W. Robrecht.]

The Indian Ocean

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East Africa

Summer Monsoon Trade Winds Winter Monsoon Trade Winds

Monsoons: Seasonal winds in Asia that switch directions during different times of the year

East Africa became a large center of trade and many of the people living along the coast converted to Islam.

Most sea trade prior to 1500 A.D took place in the Indian Ocean. Sea routes in the area connected India, East Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

Monsoons are seasonal winds in Asia, and they had a large impact on trade in the area. Traders navigated using the strong Monsoon winds, and were able to move their goods across the ocean quickly. These winds would change direction depending on the season, so traders would have to wait for the season to change to make a return voyage.

Along the western edge of the Indian Ocean, East Africa had a thriving trade zone since it had numerous port cities and was relatively peaceful. It was an ideal market for traders to buy ivory, gold, and iron, and to sell cotton textiles from India, and silk, porcelain, and paper from China.

As trade increased, the Islamic religion spread to many of the coastal societies of East Africa, as well as areas of Southeast Asia. East Africa became a multicultural area. The Swahili language, which is now spoken in many countries, developed as a blend of Arabic, Bantu, and Persian languages.

As with the other trade routes in this area, Vasco da Gama's voyage around the southern tip of Africa had a huge impact. As the European ships became involved in trade, especially for spices, they tried to dominate shipping in the region.

European Trade Routes



In Western Europe, major rivers like the Seine, Rhine, and Rhone were the major trade pathways for exchanging goods. The Mediterranean and Atlantic Oceans also carried many goods between countries.

From Scandinavia, the Vikings were great sailors and warriors who invaded Europe from 800 A.D. to 1100 A.D. One major impact of their invasion was the establishment of a trade route that linked Northern Europe to the Black Sea in Eastern Europe. Later, this trade route would be used by countries, such as Russia, to link them to Asian markets through the Silk Road.