

## Introduction

The idea that the study of a civilisation might be named after a sea originated with Fernand Braudel. Arab geographers were aware a thousand years ago of the relationship between different oceans and the Bilad al-Islam. In our own times, Braudel remains one of a select group of French historians and geographers who have perceived, with rare clarity, the connection between the sea and the people who lived around its shores. For them the interaction between space, the passage of solar time, and the identity of civilisations constitutes one of the most important latent forces of history. Ten years' work and residence in an Islamic country (Algeria) bordering the Mediterranean, as Braudel himself has told us, no doubt sharpened his insight into and awareness of cultural and geographical unity (and by definition differences), the memory of which has gradually been lost over the last two centuries and has had to be recaptured through long and painstaking research in a dozen different archives.<sup>1</sup> The title of the present work is an inadequate acknowledgement of a profound intellectual debt owed to Fernand Braudel and a recognition of the trend in social and economic history set in motion by the publication in 1949 of *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Since its first appearance a whole generation of European historians have learnt their craft from this great teacher at the Collège de France and the VI<sup>e</sup> Section, L'École Pratique des Hautes Études. The French power-house in Paris is even sending out its signals and energy to the historians of Asia, who have laboured for so long under the fierce tropical sun, shackled to one another by the relentless, unchanging discipline of a sacred school tradition.

In the preface to the English edition of *The Mediterranean*, Braudel claimed that from the time of its first completion and subsequent revision two major truths have remained unchallenged. "The first is the unity and coherence of the Mediterranean region. I retain the firm conviction", he wrote, "that the Turkish Mediterranean lived and breathed with the same rhythms as the Christian, that the whole sea shared a common destiny, a heavy one indeed, with identical problems and general trends if not identical consequences."<sup>2</sup> The historian of the Indian Ocean must ask himself whether a similar claim is valid for the countries bordering that vast ocean, and if so whether the period from the rise of Islam to the mid-eighteenth century has the same coherence as the reign of Philip II chosen by Braudel. Before an attempt is made to look at

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the problem, an important fact needs restatement. Historians who have to struggle daily with primary archival material and its interpretation know that Braudel's work is incapable of direct imitation. It is the result of an inborn intuition, an understanding of the complex interplay of events and impersonal forces, which does not explicitly make clear its theoretical reasoning and rigorous logic. His methods and approach however are not beyond comprehension and even mastery.

Is it possible then to discover the unity and diversity of Indian Ocean civilisations through the study of long-distance trade, which of necessity takes place across geographical and cultural watersheds and which has a compelling temporal dimension? Cast in this way, the question enables us to see clearly that the triple analytical foundations of Braudel's historical logic – space, time, and structure – also support our study of Asian trade and the social systems associated with it. But comparative analysis always contains contradictions. The question of unity in the Mediterranean was underlined by Braudel in the following lines:

To pass from the true Mediterranean, as defined by its climate, to that greater Mediterranean where its influence is felt, is to pass from a physical unit to that human unit with which this book is concerned. This human unit is not merely the result of nature, or more particularly of the waters of the Mediterranean. The sea is everything it is said to be: it provides unity, transport, the means of exchange and intercourse, if a man is prepared to make an effort and pay a price. But it has also been the great divider, the obstacle that had to be overcome . . . The Mediterranean has no unity but that created by the movements of men, the relationships they imply, and the routes they follow.<sup>3</sup>

There is no contradiction in this statement if we resort to the formal theory of causality as propounded by mathematicians of time.<sup>4</sup> In the philosophical conversation between the Buddhist teacher Nagasena and King Milinda (*c.* 155–130 BC), both agreed that the fire which burned through the night was the same fire and yet the fire which burned early in the night was not the same as the fire which burned late.<sup>5</sup>

The Arab geographer al-Muqaddasi (*c.* 980) was perfectly aware of the geographical nuances of the Empire of Islam. The sun set on the extreme side of the territory of al-Maghreb, he observed, where it was seen to descend into the all-circling ocean. The peninsula of the Arabs was encompassed by the Sea of China from Egypt to 'Abbadan.<sup>6</sup> The Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean seemed to provide for the members of the faithful a physical cohesion that was already spiritually strong. But the key to al-Muqaddasi's thinking lies in the use of the phrase the "Sea of China". Muslim geographers were not ignorant of the military might of the rulers of Hindustan or the world of islands and sea in Indonesia. Yet the Indian Ocean derived its identity from an unspoken role assigned to the Celestial Empire. They could see, as we can,

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that the sea which washed the desolate beaches of Suez or the marshes around Basra provided an unbroken means of travel all the way to China, beyond which lay an unnavigable ocean, the Pacific. Islamic Near and Middle East, Hindu India, and China constituted zones of separate cultural identity. Geographical and economic ties between them strengthened an invisible sense of unity. The Indian Ocean as defined by climate also embraced another contrasting area far from the actual sea. The monsoon winds carrying rain-bearing clouds originated near the Equator and ran into the Himalayan barrier, where they stopped. But the north east monsoon during the winter months could be traced back to the high pressure forming in Central Asia. While the two seasonal monsoons held Asian food production in an iron clamp, Central Asia, with its pastures, deserts, cities, and caravan routes, was an indispensable backdrop to trans-regional economic activities.

The countries of the Indian Ocean did not share a common destiny during the period under review, as those of the Mediterranean may have done under Philip II. But there was a firm impression in the minds of contemporaries, sensed also by historians later, that the ocean had its own unity, a distinct sphere of influence. Means of travel, movements of peoples, economic exchange, climate, and historical forces created elements of cohesion. Religion, social systems, and cultural traditions, on the other hand, provided the contrasts. Historians of comparative civilisations must necessarily work with such dialectic tools. There are no positive numbers unless there are negative ones. The first set is verified by experience, the second only by a concept. In the historical context of Asia, as Charles Boone, the English Governor of Bombay, propounded in 1718 as an axiom of Indian statecraft, “if no Naval Force no Trade; if no Fear no Friendship”.

His corporate masters in London were fully aware that the Society served by Boone and others was a Company of Trading Merchants and not Warriors.<sup>7</sup> The East India Company’s officials in Asia could not purge their attitudes of a political ideology which had been in force from the time that the Portuguese conquistadores first arrived in the Indian Ocean. A commonly held ideology can, of course, give rise to a recognisable pattern, especially if the participants are maritime traders possessing the physical means of travel from one end of the Indian Ocean to the other. The rise of European sea-power and commercial expansion from the sixteenth century onwards provide only one example of the unifying influence of history. The astonishing success of Islam as a religion, a political empire, and a way of life was fully measurable in terms of our triple dimensions of time, space, and structure. From the mid-seventh century to the fifteenth, Islamic civilisation continued to expand towards the four points of the compass. From Alexandria to Canton, the Friday mosque symbolised its presence and raised an unanswerable question: how and why did it happen? The migration of nomads from Central Asia and the foundation of great military empires represented another catalytic force in Asian history;

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and no one in the period of our study forgot the massive presence of Chinese civilisation and political power, expanding and receding through the ages like the rising and ebbing tides of the Indian Ocean. If Asian historians see a kind of chronological unity in the period from 650 to 1750, it is perhaps because they are aware of the course of Asian history during the two centuries from 1757 to 1947.

Is the “Indian Ocean” as a geographical space the same as Asia? The usage adopted in this study may confirm that impression. Both the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf are included in the list of seas of which the Indian Ocean is composed. Cartographers will find such liberty objectionable. Even the trans-Himalayan and T’ien Shan regions are discussed as if they were a natural complement to the Indian Ocean. The present line of argument can be justified once again by going back to the imagery emphasised by Braudel. He speaks of the Mediterranean as a physical unit and as a human unit. The frontiers of the two were not coterminous. Asia as a continent was an abstract concept, and during the period with which we are concerned people were unsure where Europe ended and Asia began. They were, of course, familiar with the difference between Muslims and Franks, between the people of Misr (Egypt) and those of Rum (Byzantium). From Constantinople to Andalusia, al-Muqaddasi commented, Christians were the feared masters of the northern Mediterranean and possessed the most accurate knowledge of its description, limits, and gulfs.<sup>8</sup> He was aware of the contradictions between the conventions of geography and those of everyday life, and the answer he gave to resolve them was perceptive. “If it were said”, he wrote, “how is it possible that one and the same sea could be made into eight different seas? We reply that this is well-known to every one who undertakes a sea voyage.”<sup>9</sup>

The caravan traders may have thought in the same way that they were travelling along a single continent divided by political frontiers, by secure and insecure zones, and by arid and fertile land. A historical study of long-distance trade enables us to see the underlying cohesion of the Indian Ocean and the contrasting nature of its different civilisations. Students of pre-modern Asia are often daunted by the formidable problem of comparative history. There are few studies which examine the historical past of the Indian Ocean countries before 1800 as a single subject. The tendency of history schools to divide themselves into regional branches has led to intense specialisation, adding greatly to our knowledge of finer details; but the task of integrating this knowledge into a general mosaic of interpretation is still incomplete. The purpose of this work is to begin a personal pilgrimage along that long road. Inter-regional trade conducted by sea and land symbolised at that time one of the most powerful features of social systems. If the pre-Industrial Revolution man was forced to live on bread or rice produced within walking distance, he was not altogether satisfied with clothing woven under his own roof. The daily necessities of life – clothing, pottery, tools, prophylactics, and even articles of

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food – assumed through the application of specialised skills and artistic imagination the status of valued, luxury objects. The process of exchanging such items incorporated many different forms, social customs, ritual usage, economic considerations, and above all, the problem of distance. Furthermore, long-distance trade as an international movement of goods and people provided a measure, even in our period, of the role of money and prices and of the state of the arts. It could not survive without universal agreement on the notion of safe-conduct, on a law of nations, and on the means to distribute the economic gains.

These themes provide our study with its subject matter. At the risk of stating the obvious, a few comments may be added on its structure and arrangement. Part I contains a discussion of the general problems (Chapter 1), followed by a description of the main historical events. The analytical logic is determined first by chronology – or, as the theorists would say, by the different components of time, long-term trends, cycles, and the random. But within each chapter runs another line of questions – to account for commercial events in relation to structures, whether these are identified in terms of space or of organisation. The arguments and ideas developed in Part I can be easily listed: the typology of single long-distance voyages mounted across the whole breadth of the Indian Ocean, methods of emporia trading, peaceful and armed trade, the individual partnerships of Asian merchants, and the bureaucratic operations of the Dutch and English East India Companies. Part II adopts a method of analysis which Fernand Braudel himself calls *la longue durée*. It will be readily seen that the chapters in this section are arranged by themes, though the logic of the actual sequence is not immediately apparent. It may also be asked what is *la longue durée* – a phrase and a concept that have aroused among historians of positivist inclinations much irritation and no little interest. Braudel himself defined it in the preface to his *Mediterranean* as “a history whose passage is almost imperceptible, that of man in his relationship to the environment, a history in which all change is slow, a history of constant repetition, ever-recurring cycles”.<sup>10</sup> In another place, Braudel further elaborated his vision of time:

Among the different sorts of time that make up history, the long term thus presents itself as a troublesome, complicated, often entirely new character . . . it is in relation to such vast expanses of slow-moving history and to this infra-structure that the totality of history is to be rethought. Every one of the thousand levels, the thousand explosions of historical time, can be grasped if one starts with this concept of depth and semi-immobility; that is the centre around which everything revolves.<sup>11</sup>

In this study we have followed the broad direction of Braudel’s definition of the various components of time; but no attempt has been made to develop a rigorous theory of historical change. The arrangement of Part II in particular relies on an identification of the environment, of the structural systems

through which long-distance trade operated, and, finally, of the results or objects of the systems. Thus the two chapters on the sea and shipping analyse the physical domain of maritime trade, man's response to its mastery (as evident in knowledge of navigation and techniques of shipbuilding), and the slow-moving changes associated with them. Chapters 8 and 9, on land, commodities and markets, follow a similar logic, while in the final chapter we return to the problem of systems and structures created by man in his efforts to intensify economic exchange. The main historical movements are also retraced, to remind us of the relationship between *events* and *la longue durée*. It should be realised that the work can be read in many different sequences. For example, those who are interested in tracing the movements, the rationale, and the organisation of long-distance trade might take Chapters 1, 2, 5, 8, and 9 as a single unit. Similarly, trade as a process of economic exchange is discussed in Chapters 1, 9, and 10. Students of European expansion will find no difficulty in recognising the relevance of Chapters 3 and 4. The kind of history that is related in this study resembles in many ways the thinking and vision of early Arab architects: within the severe lines and the unitary plans will be found more than one obvious pattern.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-28542-1 - Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750

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Excerpt

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PART I

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**General problems  
and historical events**

## 1

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## Trade and civilisation in the Indian Ocean: social, cultural, economic, and temporal dimensions

This study is concerned with the cultural and economic role of long-distance trade in an age when the technological breakthrough of the late eighteenth century had not as yet fundamentally changed the structure of Asian and European societies and state-systems. The period of history covered is long by any standard other than those of astronomers, geologists, historians of climate, and archaeologists. From the rise of Islam in the mid-seventh century to the beginning of European imperialism in the 1750s eleven centuries are spanned, a period during which the world saw the completion of an entire lifecycle for civilisation in general. In ecological terms alone, the old balance between human society and its environment was about to be replaced by a new order. The effects of the changes involved still continue to haunt us today, and there is no sign as yet of a possible equilibrium. For the period under study, the main historical movements stand out in bold relief. The diffusion of Islam as a religion and a way of life, if it marked the final break between the classical age and the new forces of expansion in much of the Mediterranean and the Near East, also created distinct zones of political tensions which ultimately checked its growth and destroyed the earlier sense of Arab intellectual triumph. The process of Christian *reconquista* in the Iberian peninsula was a forerunner in its chronological context of the great oceanic discoveries which the Spanish and Portuguese explorers were to initiate in the fifteenth century. These quickened the pace of seaborne trade and at the same time delivered a mortal blow not only to Muslim supremacy in the western Indian Ocean but also to the introspectiveness of India and China. Alone among the nations of Asia, the Japanese empire succeeded in keeping its frontiers closed to the outside world until it was ready to change its way of life from within. Of course, in the middle of the eighteenth century the Chinese empire still remained intact, as did also its political strength. Nor did the people of India contemplate as yet any real change to their social and cultural values. But neither the Chinese nor the Indian civilisation was able to isolate its economy from the unfolding effects of expanding world trade and industrial capitalism. Few observers would have believed, watching the international scene in the 1750s, that in a space of a hundred years the two great political and commercial nations of Asia would prove helpless in the face of foreign intervention which would actively change their economic destinies.



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Map 1. The area of the Indian Ocean and trans-continental trade, 618–1750.

That the long millennium under review has a temporal unity we can take for granted without perhaps too much elaboration. The question is whether the historian, when handling such an extended period of history, is able to make any original contribution at all either to the analysis or to the narrative. The answer will surely depend on our ability to evaluate the significance of trade or economic exchange in civilisation and the way that time is an explicit component of human life. Long-distance trade has always occupied a large and important place in the study of history. However, the main focus of interest is

generally on questions and problems that are easily interpreted by historians. Merchants and their social role provide a perennial subject for research, not merely because of the survival and volume of personal and business records, but also because of the way that the ruling elites and the politically powerful react to the activities, influence, and demands of those who are able to command a large amount of money. Pre-modern rulers, forced to depend on the economic surplus of agriculture, always suffered from the twin scourges of a shortage of ready cash and unending military expenditure. They knew only too well that ill-paid, mutinous soldiers were as much a threat to their power and authority as any known enemy outside. If the great merchants could be persuaded to become, partially at least, indirect paymasters of the army, so much the better. Persuasion could take the form of granting special privileges to the mercantile class in general, or more often of threats of violence to their personal safety and business property. Whether a ruler would take the short-term view of trade and its benefits or the long-term was conditioned by his financial needs and sense of desperation. In all the Asian civilisations with which we are concerned in this study, the merchant and his double, the banker, remained indispensable intermediaries in converting agricultural surplus into disposable state income.

Merchants are, by definition, generally obliged to travel. The organisation of trade, which reflected the scale of distances, revealed at the same time the mental world of the commercial community. Whether a great and wealthy merchant would actually accompany his goods to the overseas markets, use junior partners to fulfil that function, or follow the method of consigning the cargo to agents and friends abroad was decided by the institutional character of the market and its legal conventions. While most of the windows into the private lives and business decisions of medieval merchants are firmly shut, the chance discovery of a large body of papers belonging to the Jewish community of North Africa, who traded extensively in the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean (in the tenth and eleventh centuries), has suddenly opened for the detailed scrutiny of the historian the whole range of the considerations that influenced the activities of a group of pre-modern merchants. Members of the medieval Jewish community refrained from destroying documents bearing the name of God and “buried” their redundant papers in a “genizah” – the Hebrew name of a depository. The unique collection left by the merchants of Tunisia and Morocco, who had settled in Egypt during the period of the Fatimid rule, was found in the second half of the nineteenth century and brought to Europe. Their painstaking decipherment and collation in recent years represents a marvellous achievement in historical scholarship.

The geographical dimensions of long-distance trade are clearly visible in the correspondence of Cairo Genizah merchants. The presence of fellow-members of the community in towns as far apart as Qayrawan in Tunisia, Alexandria and Fustat in Egypt, and Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea facilitated the sale