Int'l Commerce, Snorkeling Camels, and The Indian Ocean Trade: Crash Course World History

Crash Course: World History
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=====Intro (00:00)=====

John Green: Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History, and today we're going to be discussing trade here, in the Indian Ocean. Oh, my globe had a globe! We're gonna do some new-school history where we talk about a system instead of talking about individuals or some boring boring dynasty — no, Stan, not that kind of Dynasty — yes, that kind of dynasty.

So many world history classes still focus on People Who Wore Funny Hats, and how their antics shaped our lives, right? And while it's interesting and fun to note that, for instance King Charles VI of France believed that he was made out of glass, relentlessly focusing on the actions of the Funny-Hatted-People who ruled us makes us forget that we also make history.

Past John Green:
Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Did Charles VI of France really believe that he was made out of glass?

Present John Green:
Yes, he did, but today we're talking about Indian Ocean trade and it's going to be interesting, I promise. So pay attention. ALSO, NO HATS! This is a classroom, not a Truman Capote beach party!

[intro plays]

=====The Monsoon Marketplace (0:57)=====

So Indian Ocean trade was like the Silk Road, in that it was a network of trade routes that connected people who had stuff to people who wanted it and were willing to pay for it. And just as the Silk Road was not a single road, there were lots of Indian Ocean trade routes connecting various port cities around the Indian Ocean Basin, including Zanzibar and Mogadishu and Hormuz and Canton.

By the way, before you criticize my pronunciation, please remember that mispronunciation is my thing and I've been doing it since episode one, and nobody ever notices that it's a thing! Sorry, I lost it there... But Indian Ocean trade was bigger, richer, and featured more diverse players than the Silk Road, but it is much less famous probably because it does not have a snazzy name.

(1:35)

What do you think, Stan? Like the "Neptunian Network"? No. "The Wet Web"? No, that's definitely not it. "The Sexy Sea Lanes of South Asia"? No, that's too hard for me to say with my lisp... "THE MONSOON MARKETPLACE!" Thanks, Danica. And now the tyranny of dates: By about 700 CE, there was a recognizable Monsoon Marketplace, but it really blew up between 1000 CE and 1200. It then declined a bit during the Pax Mongolica, when overland trade became cheap and safe, Thanks to-- wait for it-- The Mongols. [Mongoltage] But then Indian Ocean trade surged again in the 14th and 15th centuries. So who was trading? Swahili coast cities, Islamic empires in the Middle East, India, China, Southeast Asia, and NOT EUROPE, which is probably one of the reasons that Monsoon Marketplace isn't as famous as it should be. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

=====Thought Bubble (2:20)=====

So if you live in China, and you need some ivory to make the handle for a sword, you have to trade for it, because elephants only live in India and Africa. One of the reasons Indian Ocean trade took off is that there were a wide range of resources available and a wide range of import needs -- from ivory to timber to books to grain. But the most important thing was the wind.

The Indian Ocean is home to a set of very special winds called Monsoons. You generally hear about Monsoons in the context of rain in India, but rather than thinking of Monsoons as the rain itself, think of them as the wind that bring a rainy season. The great thing about seasons is that they come regularly -- and so do the Monsoon winds. So if you were a sailor, you could count on the wind to bring you from Africa to India if you sailed between April and September, and one that would bring you back to Africa if you sailed between November and February. In fact, these winds were so predictable that early maritime travel guides often listed ideal times of departure down to the week and sometimes even the day.

Predictable winds make trade a lot less risky: Like, back in the day when the only power for ships were sails and oarsmen, your cargo might not arrive on time, or it might spoil, or you might die, all of which are bad for the health of global economic trade. But predictable winds meant lower risk, which meant cheaper trade, which meant more trade, which meant more people could have awesome sword handles. Thanks Thought Bubble.

===== More Trade Facts (3:41)=====

Okay, there are a few more facets of Indian Ocean trade worth mentioning. First, Indian Ocean trade incorporated many more people than participated in Silk Road trade. There were Jewish people and people from Africa to Malaysia and India and China, all sailing around and setting up trading communities where they would act as middle men, trying to sell stuff for more than they bought it for and trying to find new stuff to buy that they could sell later.

But despite this diversity, for the most part, especially on the Western half of the Indian Ocean basin, the trade was dominated by Muslim merchants. Why? Largely because they had the money to build ships, although we will see that in the 15th century, the Chinese state could have changed that balance completely. By the way, I need to point out that when I say that the trade was dominated by Muslim merchants, the emphasis should be on the merchants- not the Muslim or the dominated.

(4:22)
As previously noted, we tend to think that states and governments and the funny-hatted people who rule them are the real movers and shakers in history, but that's really not the case. In the Indian Ocean, the terms of trade were set by the merchants and by the demands of the market, not by the whims of political rulers. And the self-regulating nature of that trade was remarkable and pretty much unprecedented. I mean, the most amazing thing is that, except for a few pirates, all of this trade was peaceful!

For the better part of seven hundred years these merchant ships were free to sail the seas without the need for protection from any state's navy. This despite the fact that some pretty valuable crap was being traded. No, Thought Bubble, I meant that colloquially. Alright, we need to do the open letter before Thought Bubble tries more puns. Magic!

===== Open Letter (5:02)=====

For today's Open Letter, to further discuss the relationship between merchants and nobles, we're going to go inland to Kashmir where Kota Rani was the ruler until 1339. Mostly I just love this story. But first, let's find out what's in the Secret Compartment. Oh, it's Blowouts. Stan, are you asking me to make a diarrhea joke? Because I'm above that. I will, however, give you a party blower solo.

Dear Kota Rani,

So, you had a pretty crazy life. First, when you were a kid you were

kidnapped by a rival noble who disguised his army as a bunch of merchants. Then you were forced to marry your kidnapper who was the ruler of Kashmir, but, then he died. And then you became the ruler and you were really good at it and everything was going awesome and you were lining things up for your sons, but then some dude comes in and decides he's going to marry you and forces you to do it by attacking you. And so what do you do? Immediately after your second wedding you commit suicide by slicing open your belly and offer your intestines to your horrible new husband as a wedding present. Oh, Stan. I don't want to say it but I have to; That really took guts, Kota Rani! Sorry... And all this because your father welcomed an army into his house thinking they were merchants.

Best wishes, John Green

===== Effects of India Ocean Trade (6:07)=====

So, right. You wouldn't let an army, or a rival noble, into your house, but everyone welcomes a merchant -- and not just royalty. The great thing about seaborne trade is that you can trade bulk goods like cotton cloth, foodstuffs, and timber that's all too heavy to strap onto a camel or mule. So for the first time we see the beginnings of goods being traded for a mass market, instead of just luxury goods, like silk for elites.

Wood, for instance, can be used to build houses -- but it's not all that plentiful in the Arabian peninsula, however, when it becomes cheaper thanks to trade, suddenly more people can have better houses. Much of the timber that was shipped in the Monsoon Marketplace came from Africa, which is kind of emblematic.

(6:41)
Africa produced a lot of the raw materials like animal hides and skin and ivory and gold. The Swahili city states imported finished goods such as silk and porcelain from China and cotton cloth from India. Spices and foodstuffs like rice were shipped from Southeast Asia and especially Sri Lanka where black pepper was a primary export good, and the Islamic world provided everything from coffee to books and weapons. But it wasn't just products that made their way around the eastern hemisphere thanks to the Indian Ocean.

(7:06)
Technology spread, too. Like the magnetic compass, which is kind of crucial if you like to know where you're going, came from China. Muslim sailors popularized the astrolabe which made it easier to navigate by the stars. Boats using stern-post rudders were easier to steer, so that technology quickly spread throughout the Monsoon Marketplace. The Islamic world also produced the triangular lateen sail, which became super important because it allowed for ships to tack against the wind. This meant that a skilled crew could make their way through the ocean even if they didn't have a strong tailwind. And just as with the Silk Road, ideas also traveled in the Monsoon Marketplace.

(7:34)
For instance today, more Muslims live in Indonesia than in any other country. And yes, I know Indonesia has more than two islands. This is not to scale, obviously. Knowing what you've already learned about the growth of Islam and the spread of trade, it won't surprise you to learn that Islam spread to Indonesia via the Monsoon Marketplace. After the 1200s, the region which had previously been heavily influenced by the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism, like witness this temple, for instance... became increasingly Islamic as rulers and elites adopted the religion so they could have religious as well as economic ties to the people they were trading with. The conversion of most of a region to Islam, where it continues to flourish today is a pretty big deal. But Islam didn't spread as effectively to the to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia or Vietnam because they weren't centers of trade.

===== Power of Trade (8:14)=====

How do you become a center for trade? Well, let's zoom in here to the strait of Malacca. You can see how it could act as a choke point for trade. Any city that controlled that strait could stop the ships from going through it, or more likely tax them. And that's exactly what happened, to such an extent that a powerful merchant state called Srivijaya rose up on Sumatra. And for a while, Srivijaya dominated trade in the region, because there were so many ships going through the Strait of Malacca to and from China. But, as we'll see in another episode that this trade abruptly declined in the 15th century. And with it, so did Srivijaya. This brings up a key point about Indian Ocean Trade, which is that it was indispensable to the creation of certain city states, like Srivijaya and the city states of the Swahili Coast. Without trade, those places wouldn't have existed, let alone become wealthy and grand.

(8:54)
Trade was a huge source of wealth for these cities because they could tax it; through import and export duties or port fees. But the fact that they are no longer powerful shows that trade can be a pretty weak foundation on which to built a polity, even a small one. There are many reasons for this: like high taxes can motivate traders to find other routes, for instance, but the main one is this: Reliance upon trade makes you especially vulnerable to the peaks and troughs in the global economy. The legacy of the merchant kingdom in Southeast Asia is still alive and well in Singapore, for instance. But one of the great lessons of cities that have declined or disappeared is that there's usually a town nearby that's eager to take your place and happy to offer lower taxes. It's almost as if the merchants decide where the people with the funny hats go, rather than the other way around. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

===== Credits (9:36)=====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. Our graphics team is Thought Bubble, Last week's Phrase of the Week was: "Unless you are the Mongols." If you want to suggest future phrases of the week or guess at this week's you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions related to today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching. and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome. Oh! It's going to be a crash!!! Everything's fine...