

Unit 10

Connections Across Water

Introduction to Unit

This unit explores the emergence of water-based trading networks. These networks emerged gradually, first along river systems, then later across large bodies of water. Historically, there have been many motives for sea travel, but the desire for commercial connections is probably the most common. To put it simply, societies able to produce more food and other materials than they needed to support themselves often tried to find other communities with people interested in trading for the surpluses. However, the cultural and religious ties that formed across waterways survived long after material commodities disappeared. Indeed, the comforts of philosophy and religion often traveled by water; believers in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam all sailed in ships. Over the centuries, the great sailing ships linked humanity into an all-encompassing network, a web of communication into which all could enter—but from which few could escape. Three ancient routes provide varied examples of waterborne trade, expansion, and migration: Indian Ocean routes, active from around 200 BCE onward, the vast explorations of the Vikings in the ninth to twelfth centuries CE, and the riverine domain carved out by the Mississippian peoples of North America between 700 and 1700 CE.

Learning Objectives

- Determine what role water-based trade played in the development of connections between the world's peoples.
- Determine what kinds of evidence historians use to follow the transmissions of religion, disease, commodities, and the movements of peoples across sea routes or riverine networks.
- Determine how water-based trade routes and land-based trade routes were connected.

Preparing for This Session

Read Unit 10 in the *Bridging World History* online text. You may also want to refer to some of the Suggested Readings and Materials. If you feel you need more background knowledge, refer to a college-level world history textbook on this subject (look under the index for Vikings, Indian Ocean, Cahokia).

Unit Activities

Before You Begin—45 minutes

Use your textbook and background knowledge to begin the following map exercise. Do as much as you can before watching the video and reading the sources in the activities.

- Place 10 trade items in their respective places of origin on a world map: sugar, cotton, cinnamon, gunpowder, compass, printing, caravel, maize, potatoes, silver.
- Identify the dates when each trade item first spread to other regions.
- Identify the places of production and consumption of each trade item in new regions.
- Make a list of key events that caused the spread of each trade item.
- Color-code the events that caused the spread of the trade items in the key you create for the map.

Watch the Video for “Unit 10: Connections Across Water”—30 minutes

While you watch the video, look for more information to help you complete your map.

Activity 1: Water-Based Trade Connections—45 minutes

Use the following sources to discuss the role water-based trade played in the development of connections between the world’s peoples.

Source 1: Zheng He, the eunuch admiral of the Ming Treasure Ship fleet:

We have received the high favor of a gracious commission of our Sacred Lord, to carry to the distant barbarians the benefits of his auspicious example The Emperor has ordered us, Zheng He ... to make manifest the transforming power of the Imperial virtue and to treat distant people with kindness We have seven times received the commission and have visited altogether more than 30 countries, large and small. (George F. Jewsbury, *Selections from Longman World History: Primary Sources and Case Studies 1* [Longman: New York, 2003] 245.)

Source 2: Ibn Fadlan, a member of an Islamic mission to a Russian trading post, describes the Vikings:

Never had I seen a people of more perfect physique. They are all tall as date-palms and reddish in color. They wear neither coat nor kaftan, but each man carries a cape, which covers one half of his body, leaving one hand free. No one is ever parted from his axe, sword, and knife (David Whitehouse and Richard Hodges, *Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe: Archeology and the Pirenne Thesis* [Cornell University Press, 1983] 123.)

Source 3: Scholars now know that complex societies arose in North America over a period of two millennia. One era, identified by scholars as the Mississippian, lasted from around 900 to 1500 CE. Centered on the rich bottomlands of the Mississippi River and four of its principal tributaries—the Missouri, Arkansas, Ohio, and Tennessee Rivers—the peoples of this time made use of these vast waterways to participate in extensive networks of exchange.

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Activity 2: Historical Evidence for Water-Based Trade— 30 minutes

Use the following information to discuss the kinds of evidence historians use to follow the transmissions of religion, disease, commodities, and the movements of peoples across sea routes or riverine networks.

- Records made by European explorers in the sixteenth century concur with the archaeological evidence from that time, describing a powerful, well-organized society in North America. Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto described an intricate alliance system among the Mississippian peoples. Spanish records also reflect the prominence of river connections in these peoples' affairs, describing large, fearsome fleets of canoes bearing war parties "like a famous armada of galleys."
- Hordes of silver and gold traveled the seas from antiquity on. Ships were sometimes lost at sea. Even sailors voyaging into well-charted waters could be in danger, owing to storms, wind, and war. Shipwrecks create an unexpectedly rich source of historical evidence for archaeologists to later mine. Entire ships have been preserved in their watery tombs, lifted onto dry ground for analysis and study—in this way providing historians with a valuable snapshot of actual voyages, their technologies, details of the sailor's life onboard, and the trade goods the ships carried. Without the careful recovery of this submerged history, scholars are left trying to connect the dots from port to port—from the written or archaeological evidence that remains on land.
- Recently, because of extraordinary advances in the technology of excavation, new frontiers have opened up. But underwater archaeology has become prohibitively expensive. And this expense has turned historical research into a high-ticket speculative endeavor supported by private investors. It's not unusual for profits from the sale of excavated artifacts to reach more than \$100 million. So the focus of some underwater archaeology is much like digging for treasure. We can ask if this isn't another form of modern-day piracy. Who really owns the past? Should the search for gold and silver motivate the study of water in world history? Or should historical questions generate research directions underwater as they do on land?

Activity 3: Connections Across Water and Land Routes— 60 minutes

Use the following sources to discuss how water-based trade routes and land-based trade routes were connected. Develop a short skit or a series of letters between members of a trade diaspora who transport across both land and water.

There is a tradition that Al-Mansur, the caliph who founded Baghdad, remarked at the time, 'This is the Tigris, there is no obstacle between us and China; everything on the sea can come to us.' (Lynda N. Shaffer, *Maritime Trade in Southeast Asia to 1500* [Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996], 40–42.)

Svear (Swedish Viking) made excursions down to Byzantium to trade honey, mead, and wax needed for Church candles (better than tallow) for textiles, jewelry, coins, and etc. There was some population pressure (more people, not enough land, and not a long enough growing season=migration), which prompted the trading and pillaging migrations of the Svears. Tver was the center of the water route from the Viking lands to Greece, as it is possible to sail down the Volga all the way to Astrakhan. (<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~lars/thesis3.html#Chapter3>.)

Unit Activities, cont'd.

Because of the general insecurity and the slowness of communications, international trade was largely dependent on personal relations and mutual confidence. A man shipping goods overseas normally had to wait months before he could know what happened to them. He had to rely on his friends in the country of destination for the proper handling of his affairs. Mostly, though by no means exclusively, friends were chosen from one's own religious community. (S. D. Goiten, *Medieval Jewish Traders* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973], 6.)

Many of these visitors settled in the foreign quarters of Canton, which by imperial sanction was set aside south of the river for the convenience of the many persons of diverse race and nationality who chose to remain in Canton to do business or to wait for favorable winds. They were ruled by a specially designated elder, and enjoyed some extraterritorial privileges. (Lynda N. Shaffer, *Maritime Southeast Asia to 1500* [Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996].)

Archaeological digs at Cahokia produced fascinating materials: obsidian, that very hard, black rock that can be shaped into knife edges, tools; mica, that can be turned into decorative jewelry; copper, that can be shaped and embossed. Things of this sort. And what's interesting is that these come from specific areas. You can trace the copper to a certain part of the Lake Superior area. You can find this kind of obsidian only in certain parts of the Rocky Mountains. So now we know that Cahokia was at the center of a huge exchange system that covered really from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Rockies all the way toward and past the Mississippi Valley. (Gary Nash, interview with Oregon Public Broadcasting, *Bridging World History*, Oregon Public Broadcasting, October 2004.)

Homework

Read R. J. Barendse, "Trade and State in the Arabian Seas: A Survey From the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of World History* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2000), 173–225.

Reading Questions

- Why does Barendse define the Arabian seas as a network rather than a region?
- List the goods that were traded in the Arabian seas network. How were these goods transported?
- What are Barendse's arguments against classifying the Arabian seas or Indian Ocean trading network as a world system?
- What were the roles of East and West African producers and merchants in the economies of Egypt and India?
- What did Russia contribute to the economic system of the pre-modern era?
- Why does Barendse criticize Abu-Lughod's views on nomads' role in trade?
- Explain which of Barendse's examples of long-distance trade being attracted by regional trade are the most compelling to you.
- What kinds of evidence does Barendse use to prove that "Cyclical waves of expansion were interrupted by periodic contractions, which might be caused by failures of the harvest, wars, or long depressions of trade, caused mostly by a slack between the demand and the goods manufactured."

Optional: Visit the Web Site

Explore this topic further on the *Bridging World History* Web site. Browse the Archive, look up terms in the Audio Glossary, review related units, or use the World History Traveler to examine different thematic perspectives.

Notes
