

Unit 10

Connections Across Water

Section 1

Unit Materials

Questions To Consider

Question 1.

What role did water-based trade play in the development of connections between the world's peoples?

Question 2.

What kinds of evidence do historians use to follow the transmission of religion, disease, commodities, and the movements of peoples across sea routes or by riverine networks?

Question 3.

Why have water-based trade routes that developed prior to 1500 tended to receive less historical attention than land-based trade routes of the same period?

Question 4.

How were water-based trade routes and land-based trade routes connected?

The Big Picture

How is this topic related to Increasing Integration?

Connections made by water routes have helped integrate distant peoples through trade, contact, and cultural influences for thousands of years.

How is this topic related to Proliferating Difference?

As in land-based trade, the contacts made through water-based trade also caused people to become more aware of cultural differences.

Unit Purpose

- Water-based trade and travel have linked widely separated cultures since antiquity. Therefore, water should be seen as a conduit for connections rather than a barrier.
- Although water-based trade routes have not received as much historical attention as land-based routes, they have been equally as — if not more — important in the history of the world.

- Studying water-based trade routes allows historians to see the complex ways that they were connected to a larger network that also included land-based trading routes. For example, the rise of the Swahili people was only possible because they were able to profit from both land-based trade with Africa's interior and seaborne trade in the Indian Ocean.

Unit Content Overview

The lore of sea travel — sagas of sudden storms and mysterious wrecks, of pirates and mutinies, of sea battles and ghost ships bearing only the dried husks of the men who had sailed them — illustrates the dangers of the seas. Yet despite the hazards, the seas have long been a lure to humans. Some historians theorize that the invention of canoes and other types of boats predated the discovery of the wheel. We can only speculate about these matters; the origins of water travel lie in a past currently beyond the reach of archaeology. We do know that forms of nautical transportation were around before the invention of pottery, and that people were using boats to travel from place to place long before they settled down and took up farming.

This unit explores the emergence of water-based trading networks. These emerged gradually — first along river systems, and then later across large bodies of water. Navigating the seas can be even more hazardous than trudging along bandit-infested mountain trails or following stars across desert wastelands. No doubt, the first aquatic voyagers determinedly stayed within sight of the shoreline, but there were occasional surprises, such as sudden winds arising to send them off course into the open seas. With increasing experience in star-based navigation, brave souls began venturing greater distances from the shores.

There are many motives for sea travel, but the desire for commercial connections is probably the most common. To put it simply, societies that were able to produce more than they needed to support themselves often tried to find other communities 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; 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.

Unit References

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Global Historical Context

- Time Period: 200 BCE–1500 CE
- Waterways have connected peoples and places for thousands of years. Yet, water-based trading routes have not received as much historical attention as land-based trading routes — such as the Silk Roads that connected China to the Mediterranean, or the Gold Roads that linked North and West Africa. At the same time that peoples were traveling across Eurasia on the Silk Roads, however, sailors from Persia, India, Africa, and China were plying the waters of the Indian Ocean. Just after the Gold Roads of Africa efficiently connected North Africans to West Africans across the Sahara desert, Viking raiders and traders sailed the rivers and seas of Europe and West Asia, linking Europe more firmly to the Islamic world. Finally, as Mesoamerican peoples connected with the Anasazi to their north across land, Mississippians in North America developed a rich and vibrant culture based on trade and communication through the river network of the Mississippi river.

AP Themes

- Examines interactions in economies and politics by exploring water-based trade networks between societies.
- Explores technology, demography, and environment because technological innovation and environmental conditions were important to the development of water-based trade. In addition, water-based trade helped diffuse disease across large regions of the world.
- Discusses cultural and intellectual developments because water-based trade facilitated the transmission of religious, cultural, and ideological traditions across frontiers.

Related Units

- Unit 9. Connections Across Land: How were land-based trade routes conduits of both commerce and culture? The Eurasian Silk Roads, the Trans-Saharan Gold Roads, and the Mesoamerican Turquoise Roads trace the transmission of commodities, religions, and diseases, as well as the movements of people. This unit is related to Unit 10 because land-based trade networks were the counterpoint — and partner of — water-based trade networks.
- Unit 14. Land and Labor Relationships: What factors shape the ways in which the basic resources are exploited by a society? From Southeast Asia to Russia to Africa and the Americas, the ratios between land availability and the usable labor force were the primary basis of pre-industrial economies; however, politics, environment, and culture played a part as well. This unit is related to Unit 10 because the movement of peoples during the slave trade was possible only because of sea trading routes and because it re-oriented earlier land and sea trading networks.
- Unit 15. Early Global Commodities: What is globalization and when did it begin? Before the sixteenth century, the world's four main monetary substances were silver, gold, copper, and shells. It was China's demand for silver and Spain's newly discovered mines in the Americas that finally created an all-encompassing network of global trade. This unit is related to Unit 10 because these early global commodities moved around the globe by water-based trade.

- Unit 16. Food, Demographics, and Culture: What role has food played in human societies? Studying the production and consumption of food allows historians to uncover hidden levels of meaning in social relationships, understand demographic shifts, and trace cultural exchange. This unit examines the earliest impact of globalization, including changing cuisine, environmental impact, and the rise of forced labor as a global economic force. It is related to Unit 10 because many of the changes that occurred in the foodways and cultures of these regions were the result of connections made by water-based trade.

Section Two

Video-Related Materials

Video Segment 1: The Indian Ocean World

This segment explores the thriving trade that developed between lands adjoining the Indian Ocean as early as the third millennium BCE. Crucial to the navigation of the Indian Ocean was learning to navigate using the monsoon winds. In summer, the winds carried merchants east from Africa and Arabia to India; in winter, the winds brought merchants back the other way. Over the centuries, both the volume and variety of trade goods expanded dramatically in the Indian Ocean region, which gave rise to numerous port cities and enriched state leaders. Also, while early Indian Ocean voyages tended to be long-distance affairs, by the eleventh century such voyages were replaced by much shorter voyages that created a series of overlapping trade zones centered around the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea. Chinese mariners grew particularly strong in the South China Sea between the second century BCE and the fifteenth century CE. Other traders plied the waters of the Indian Ocean, including Indian, Persian, and African mariners. One group that proved to be particularly successful was the Swahili, who emerged on the East African coast in the eighth century CE. The Swahili developed their distinctiveness from extensive interactions with Islamic traders, who came in search of gold, ivory, and slaves. Soon, Swahili rulers adopted Islam, absorbed Arabic words into their language, and imitated Arabic architectural styles. They grew wealthy from controlling and taxing the trade that came from inland states like Great Zimbabwe through Swahili port cities. In such ways, trading relationships in the Indian Ocean both encouraged connections between distant peoples and strengthened participating ports and states.

Video Segment 2: The Vikings

When the Roman Empire declined, trade in Europe deteriorated. This segment explores the Norsemen of Scandinavia — also known as the Vikings — and how they took advantage of Rome's decline to establish themselves as important traders and raiders in the east, south, and west. Viking expansion most likely occurred as a result of adverse climate trends or overpopulation. Whatever the reason, by the ninth century they had begun to leave Scandinavia in narrow, open ships that could travel well on the open ocean and on rivers. With these ships, Vikings sailed along the rivers of Russia all the way to the Black Sea and Constantinople. They also brought Persian silver to the Carolingian Empire and exchanged it for local products, thereby linking Europe to Islamic trading networks. In addition to their roles as traders, Vikings also established a fearsome reputation as raiders, attacking major cities such as London and Paris, as well as many smaller cities. Finally, Vikings used their seafaring skills to establish colonies in Europe, in addition to very distant Greenland and Newfoundland. Overall, the water-based skills of the Vikings allowed them to gain tremendous influence in Europe and beyond.

Video Segment 3: The Mississippians

Between 900 and 1500 CE, a rich, complex society arose in the Mississippi bottomlands of North America. This segment explores the Mississippians and how they used the waterways of the Arkansas, Missouri, Ohio, and Tennessee rivers to place themselves at the center of a vast trade

network. Modern archaeology has demonstrated that the Mississippians built vast earthen mounds, which itself demonstrates a complex, hierarchical society able to devote significant energies to art and artisans. The most recent of these mound sites, called Cahokia, included more than 100 mounds, covered six square miles, and supported a population of about 30,000 to 40,000 by the year 1200 CE. Archaeological evidence taken from Cahokia demonstrates the existence of a wide array of trade goods, such as copper, obsidian, and mica. Moreover, these goods have been traced to very distant areas: from the Great Lakes region all the way to the Rocky Mountains. Sixteenth century Spanish sources tend to corroborate the complex nature of Mississippian culture: They speak of a powerful, well-organized society that was able to muster huge fleets of river canoes to transport war parties along the mighty rivers surrounding them. Thus, it seems likely that the Mississippians emerged as a hub for a vast network of trade — at least in part because of their ability to command critical waterways.

Perspectives on the Past: Who Owns the Past?

Should historical questions generate research directions for underwater research, just as they do on dry land? Historian Candice Goucher discusses recent trends in underwater archaeology, which have made impressive advances in locating old shipwrecks. At the same time, these technologies are extremely expensive, and are often financed for the purpose of recovering treasure rather than learning about the past. Goucher asks us to consider who owns the past, and whether such treasure-hunting isn't just another form of modern-day piracy.

Video Details

Who Is Interviewed

- Candice Goucher
- Jerry H. Bentley
- Gary Nash

Primary Source Materials Featured in the Video

- Zheng He, Chinese navigator
- Ibn Fadlan, Arab chronicler

Program Contents

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