Marks, “Marks, Starting with China”

Historians agree that the voyages of Christopher Columbus across the Atlantic in 1492 and of Vasco da Gama around Africa’s Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean in 1498 constitute important developments in the emergence of the modern world. Indeed, they were. Where historians disagree is *how* important they were: Did they represent a new era? Did they really change all that much? Eurocentric interpretations tend to see them as major steps taken toward the inevitable rise of the West. Some, on the other hand (myself included), think it is important to place those voyages of discovery in a broader global context of the real structure of wealth and power in the world around 1500. From that perspective, the Indian Ocean can be seen as the most important crossroads for global exchanges of goods, ideas, and culture, with China, India, and the Islamic Near and Middle East meeting there as the major players, and Europe as a peripheral, marginal player trying desperately to gain access to the sources of wealth generated in Asia. Our story in this chapter thus starts in Asia, with China.

China

When the founding emperor of China's Ming dynasty (1368-1644) died in 1398, succeeding him to the throne was not one of his sons, but his grandson. The emperor had wanted his eldest son to succeed him, to establish a firm principle of primogeniture to be followed for the rest of the dynasty, but when that son died, the emperor anointed his eldest son's eldest son as heir to the throne. This decision did not sit well with the emperor's fifth son, the Prince of Yan, a man with impressive military credentials, who waited only eighteen months after his father's death to begin unseating his nephew, now the emperor. In a civil war that lasted from late 1399 to mid 1402, the Prince of Yan destroyed his nephew's forces and captured the throne, but not without some ambiguity, for rumors abounded that the nephew had escaped the inferno that had burned down his palace.

As the new emperor, the Prince of Yan sought to extend China's power and influence in all directions. He campaigned to the north and northwest against the Mongols, trying to push China's previous rulers so far into the steppe that they would never again threaten China. As part of this policy, he moved the capital from Nanjing ("Southern Capital") on the Yangzi River farther north to Beijing ("Northern Capital”), less than one hundred miles from the Great Wall and the last defense against Mongol invasions. He sent embassies far into Central Asia to secure the acknowledgment by those rulers of China's preeminence. He also intervened in affairs in Vietnam, hoping not just to put rulers favored by China on the throne, but actually to incorporate Annam, as northern Vietnam was then called, into the Chinese empire, In one of the greatest adventures in world history, he launched massive maritime expeditions into the Indian Ocean.

The Voyages of Zheng He, 1405-1433

In the autumn of 1405, the largest fleet of ships the world had ever seen—or would see for another 500 years—began assembling in the mouth of the Yangzi River on China's eastern coast.[1] Over 300 ships manned by 27,000 sailors waited for the reliable winter monsoon winds to begin blowing from the northwest to take them south toward Indonesia and then west through the Strait of Malacca into the Indian Ocean where they had set Calicut, a major trading city on India's west coast, as their destination.

Under the command of Admiral Zheng He, this armada had three primary objectives. First, the emperor ordered it to track down his nephew, the emperor he had deposed, who was rumored to have escaped. Second, the emperor was outward looking and wanted to "show the flag,” impressing all of the foreign countries in that part of the world. Confident that China was the wealthiest, most powerful civilization in the world, he wanted to prove it. And finally, the emperor wanted to encourage overseas trade.

In this regard, the emperor was like the emperors of earlier dynasties, especially the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279), and even the hated Mongols who had ruled China under the Yuan (1279–1368), who had encouraged overseas trade, well aware of the wealth that could be generated both for society and the state. His father and nephew, though, had wanted a China that returned to and celebrated its agrarian roots with a staunchly conservative and inward-looking Confucian philosophy.[2]

But when the emperor took the throne (literally), China was experiencing some economic difficulties. To be sure, his father's policy of "agriculture is the foundation" had some success as farmers reclaimed land and set about growing food for themselves and to support the empire. But China's monetary system, based on paper money, had collapsed along with the Mongols. Initially, the Ming (as the new dynasty was called) government simply printed large amounts of paper money, resulting both in inflation and loss of public confidence in the currency. Soon, the government decided to abandon paper money altogether, leaving a huge unmet need for currency.

At first, copper coins from previous dynasties were used, but eventually the regime reopened silver mines and allowed unminted silver bullion to be used to settle private commercial transactions. China's domestic production of silver was insufficient for its uses, so it imported more from Japan. Eventually, sufficient amounts of silver were circulating in some parts of the empire that the government commuted taxes there from payment in kind (grain, silk, etc.) to silver, creating a huge demand within China for silver. We will return to this part of the story in the next chapter. Here, suffice it to say that the collapse of the Mongol empire in the mid-1300s led to the severing of overland trade routes linking east and west Eurasia and a recognition by the emperor that an aggressive foreign policy might bring some rewards to China, pushing back the Mongols in the north and exploring opportunities in what the Chinese called the "Western Ocean," that is, the Indian Ocean.

To prepare for these voyages, China had undergone "a frenzy of shipbuilding." Between 1404 and 1407, some 1,681 ships were built, the largest—the gigantic nine—masted "Treasure Ships" of Admiral Zheng He—were about 400 feet long and 160 feet wide, bigger than a football field. Other ships of the fleet, ranging in size and function, carried horses, goods for trade, Supplies, water tankers, and marines; some were warships bristling with cannons and rockets. So much wood was required to construct the fleet that much of the coast was deforested, and timbers had to be floated a thousand miles down the Yangzi River to the shipyards.

When the first armada assembled under Admiral Zheng He that fall day in 1405, it must have been an impressive sight: hundreds of colorfully painted, watertight ships unfurling bright red silk sails. Altogether, the Chinese mounted seven two-year voyages (they had to await favorable winds to return to China) between 1405 and 1433. During that period, Chinese ships sailed as far as Mozambique on the east coast of Africa, into the Persian Gulf, all around the Indian Ocean, and throughout the Spice Islands of Southeast Asia. They navigated their huge ships through unknown waters and into unfamiliar harbors, traded with local rulers, collected curiosities such as rare gems and even a giraffe, and in a few instances intervened in local affairs to install rulers more friendly to China. (See map 2.1.)

For the fourth voyage (1413-1415), planned for the Arabian port city of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf, the admiral took on board Ma Huan, a Chinese Muslim well versed in both Arabic and classical Chinese. Being Chinese and Muslim was not unusual: Admiral Zheng He himself was Muslim, and his father's given name, Hajji, suggested that he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Pilots speaking Arabic had been on all the previous voyages, since the language of commerce and shipping in the Indian Ocean from eastern Africa to the Spice Islands was Arabic, and the Chinese needed Arabic-speaking guides to get around. For the fourth voyage, which apparently had the express aim of establishing diplomatic relations with the Islamic world, Admiral Zheng He and his emperor brought their own interpreter, Ma Huan.[3] Indeed, as a result of the fourth voyage, ambassadors from a large number of Muslim lands, including those in east Africa, returned with the fleet to the Chinese capital, and on the seventh voyage (1431-1433), while in the Red Sea, Admiral Zheng He contacted the sultan of Egypt who allowed him to call at the port of Jedda, just a few days from Mecca on the Arabian peninsula. On the return trip, China established formal relations with twenty more realms.

By 1435, it appeared that a powerful Chinese presence in the waters of the Indian Ocean was secure, opening a sea route linking the eastern and western parts of the Eurasian continent with trade circuits in India and in Africa, and placing much of the ocean-going trade in the world under Chinese eyes, if not control. Surprisingly, though, the seventh voyage was the last, and Chinese seaborne power declined so rapidly and thoroughly that by 1500 not only were there no Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean, but the Chinese navy had even ceased to exist in the waters of China's own shores.[4] Fortunately for Chinese merchants, the Indian Ocean was a mostly peaceful place to conduct trade, and they continued doing so, even after the withdrawal of the navy.

As we will see, China's withdrawal of the most powerful navy on earth from periodic patrols on and around the Indian Ocean turned out to be of immense importance for the course of world history. For now, though, we have to ask why the Chinese court abandoned the Indian Ocean. The short answer is that political struggles within China, struggles that had been going on for some time at the imperial court between those who wanted the voyages to continue and those who wanted China to apply its resources to the greater threat of the Mongols to the north, finally resolved themselves in favor of the latter when the emperor died in 1435. From that point forward, the Chinese state abandoned the seas, paid attention to how an agrarian economy could feed a growing population, and saw their main enemy being the nomads roaming the steppe to the north. Rebuilding and lengthening the Great Wall became of greater importance to China's rulers than continuing the expensive voyages of the Treasure Ships.[5] The abandonment of a navy, though, did not mean that Chinese commercial voyages ended as well; quite the contrary, for the Indian Ocean was the world's most important crossroads of trade.

India and the Indian Ocean

The Mongols' overland trade route linking east and west on the Eurasian continent had not been the only, or even the most important, trade route. Where the collapse of the Mongol empire and the ravages of the Black Death may have been part of a wider mid-fourteenth century crisis that affected much of Eurasia, there is little evidence of much of a slowdown in trading on the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the Indian Ocean had been, and would remain, not just a crucially important link in the global trading system, but a source of great wealth and access to luxuries, spices, and manufactured goods to any and all who get their merchants, goods, or ships to the major trading cities on the Indian Ocean. The Chinese thus had not been wrong in seeing the importance of the Indian Ocean and wanting to send their ships there.

In fact, the Chinese excursion was but one episode in a longer history of the Indian Ocean, starting in about 650 with the expansion of the Islamic world and the establishment of the Tang dynasty in China, and ending around 1750 with the British colonization of India on the eve of the Industrial Revolution.[6] During those 1,100 years, the Indian Ocean arguably was the single most important crossroads of trade and generator of merchant wealth in the world, and for our purposes its history can be usefully subdivided into three periods.

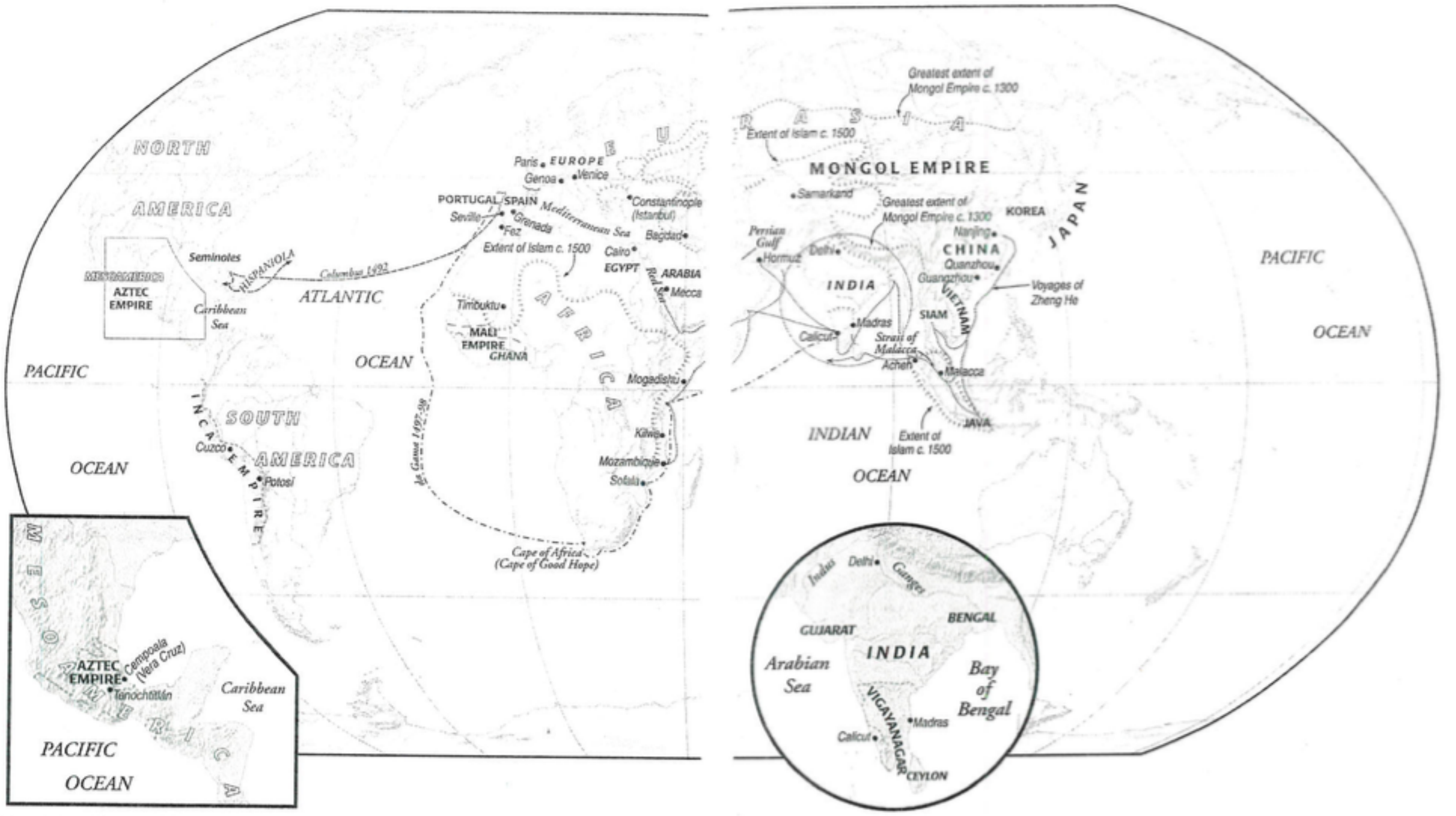
From 650 to 1000, Arab traders and mariners carried goods and ideas all the way from the Islamic Near East to Southeast Asia and China, and back again. Arab traders spread their language and the Islamic religion throughout the region, from east Africa to Indonesia, providing a common language and culture for those who traveled there. In the ninth century, for instance, over 100,000 Arabs, Persians, and Jews had taken up residence in the south China city of Guangzhou, and the Islamic mosque built there served as a beacon for ships sailing into its port. In the second period, beginning around 1000 and lasting until 1500, Chinese merchants saw the profits to be made in the trade, and, with or without the support of their government, sailed into the Indian Ocean to compete with the Arabs.

The Chinese entrance into the Indian Ocean divided trade in the Indian Ocean into three overlapping trade circuits, determined largely by the pattern of monsoon winds and hence the opportunities for sailing. Arab traders were still important throughout the region, but they were not the only ones plying the waters of the Indian Ocean. In the western zone, from east Africa to the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the west coast of India, Arab traders were most active, although Indian merchants also participated in that trade. The central circuit from Ceylon to the Bay of Bengal and to Southeast Asia was dominated by Indian merchants, although Arabs and other Muslims were very active there too. The Chinese dominated the South China Sea trade circuit from China to Indonesia and the Strait of Malacca.

Within and among these three zones, great trading cities arose to handle the trade. In the western circuit, the ports of Aden, Hormuz, Cambay, Calicut, Mogadishu, and Kilwa (the latter two on the east coast of Africa) were the most important. Linking the eastern and middle circuits was Malacca, a trading port that arose in a strategic strait where the monsoon winds shifted, thereby making a convenient layover place for traders waiting for the next leg of their journey. Nothing else accounts for the rise of this city, but the economic and strategic importance of Malacca was not lost on either the Chinese in the early 1400s or, a century later, the Portuguese. (See map 2.1.)

During the first two periods (spanning 650 to 1500), trade in the Indian Ocean seemed to have been self-regulating. No one political power dominated, or tried to dominate, the trade linking those three zones; that was true even during the voyages of the Chinese Admiral Zheng He, for Arab and indian merchants continued on with their activities unobstructed by the Chinese or shut out in favor of Chinese merchants. Another notable feature of the trade was that it was conducted largely without resort to force of arms. African dhows (traditional boats), Chinese junks, and Indian and Arab merchant ships all sailed without naval convoys from their native Countries. None of the great Ports of trade-Aden, Hormuz, Calicut, Puri, Acheh, or Malacca—were walled or fortified. The assumption in this wide-ranging trade seems to have been that force of arms was not needed to protect shipping or to enforce deals.

During the third period, from 1500 to 1750, all of this changed when first the Portuguese and then the Dutch, English, and French introduced "armed trading" into the Indian Ocean, forcing others already there to arm themselves in defense or to pay the intruders for protection (this topic will be taken up in more detail later in this chapter). Europeans literally tried to muscle in on the huge and profitable trade in the Indian Ocean, to control shipping lanes and port cities by force, and to monopolize, if they could, trade in commodities valued in Europe. Despite the fact that Europeans introduced a new element into Indian Ocean trade, the trade was so great that they did not



Map 2.1. The World circa 1400–1500

dominate it until the advent of steamships in the late 1800s enabled them to undercut trade carried by Arab, Indian, or Chinese ships.

Four great centers of civilization and economic power provided the impetus for the Indian Ocean trade: the Islamic Near and Middle East, Hindu India, China, and Indonesia, or the Spice Islands. To Malacca, the Chinese brought manufactured goods, in particular silk, porcelain, and iron- and copperwares, and in return took to China spices, other edibles, pearls, cotton goods, and silver. Indians brought cotton textiles and returned with spices. To the Middle East and east Africa, India exported cotton textiles, some of which found their way to west Africa, and other manufactured goods. From Africa and the Arabs, Indians received palm oil, cocoa, ground nuts, and precious metals. In general, agricultural and other raw or primary products of the Ocean, forest, or mines, including silver and gold, flowed to China and India, while those two areas exported manufactured goods, especially textiles (cotton in India and silk in China).

The engines of this immense global trade were primarily China and India. In the fifteenth century, in the words of one historian:

> *China was still the greatest economic power on earth. It had a population probably in excess of 100 million, a prodigiously productive agricultural sector, a vast and sophisticated trading network, and handicraft industries superior in just about every way to anything known in other parts of Eurasia. After a visit to the great Asia political and commercial center of Samarkand early in the fifteenth century, for example, a European diplomat described the Chinese goods he found there as "the richest and most precious of all [imported into the city]. . . . , for the craftsmen of [China] are reputed to be the most skillful by far beyond those of any other nation.*

As a great agrarian empire, China produced much of what it needed, although it did have to trade for horses, some raw materials, preciosities, and silver. Its rulers mostly saw foreign trade as useful if it could bring additional wealth to the state or satisfy consumer demand for black pepper (which had become an integral part of Chinese cuisine) or other exotic foods like edible bird's nests or sea slugs. The rulers of the Chinese empire found most of these imports to be nice, but saw the potential troubles caused by Chinese and foreign merchants to be large, so for most of the time China controlled foreign trade through its trade-tribute system of official monopolies, in addition obtaining substantial revenues for the imperial treasury as a result. However, beginning in the early 1400s, China's new and growing demand for silver to keep the wheels of its domestic economy going could not be satisfied by domestic mines alone. Thus to obtain its silver, China had to engage in foreign trade, at first getting most of its silver from Japan, but then increasingly in the 1500s from Europeans, which we will explore in the next chapter.

India had three great textile manufacturing centers: Gujarat on the west coast, Madras in the south, and Bengal on the east. Cotton was spun and woven in artisan homes with material advanced to them by merchants who then collected the thread and cloth for dyeing and printing before being brought to market to sell. Most of this cotton cloth met internal Indian demand, but a considerable amount was produced for export. Some, as we have seen, was bound for Africa or China, but Indian textiles traded as far as Poland and the Mediterranean. To meet both domestic and foreign demand for their cotton textiles, Indians had created a whole manufacturing system from growing the cotton to finishing it. In turn, those Indians who participated in the textile industry had to look to the market to supply their food needs, further Commercializing the Indian economy and increasing both production and productivity. Much like the Chinese economy, the Indian was highly developed and was the source of selected but important manufactured goods for much of the Old World.

Unlike China, though, India at this time was not a unified empire and indeed had a history of both political disunity and unity imposed by outside conquerors. Although India looks like a "place" on a map because of its distinctive geography, it was never really politically unified until the mid-1500s, and then only tentatively because it broke apart again by the mid-1700s.