



chapter two

Sailing East to West

From China and Korea



▲ A Chinese gold dagger handle of the 4th Century BCE. The Chinese were extremely skilled craftsmen, as shown in this elaborate workmanship.

▶ A Chinese cargo boat.

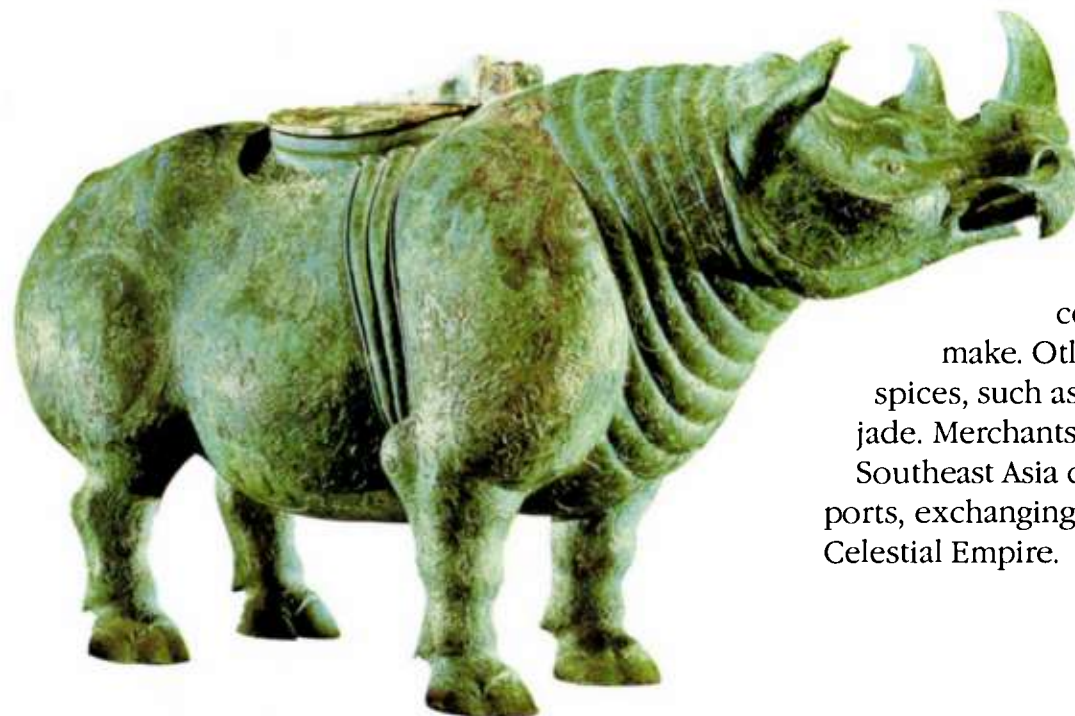
▼ A bronze rhinoceros, made in China in the late 3rd Century BCE. The rhinoceros was prized for its horns, which were used in medicines.

Trade along the Spice Routes was at first fairly localized. It was not until around the Seventh and Eighth centuries CE that ships began to travel from China all the way to the Middle East and vice versa. But these longer voyages still followed routes that had been established centuries before.

In 1207 BCE, a ruling family came to power in northern China called the Zhou. Their dynasty, as such royal families were called in China, lasted for over 800 years until 221 BCE. During this time, the area of Chinese influence was extended and there was a great increase in trade with other nations. This expansion continued under the Han (202 BCE-220 CE), one of the greatest of the Chinese dynasties.



The ancient Chinese culture had produced superb craftsmen and their goods were greatly prized, in particular the beautiful material silk, which no other country knew how to make. Other exports included spices, such as cassia and ginger, iron and jade. Merchants from Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia congregated in the Chinese ports, exchanging their goods for those of the Celestial Empire.



One of the main peoples to trade with China were the Koreans. They traded both by land and sea. From 140 BCE, regular trade fairs were held on the northern Chinese frontier where furs and other valuable merchandise from the Korean Peninsula could be bought. Korean ships coasted round the northern edge of the Yellow Sea and made port on the Shantung Peninsula, whilst others crossed the open sea to Nagasaki in Japan. From here, they headed back again to China, making for the Huai or Yangtze Rivers or even for Hang-Chou Bay.

Further south, Chinese ships – their junks – carried cargoes round the coast to P'anyu (Canton) and Cattigara in North Vietnam. At this time, trade relations also existed between China and Java. Ships left Cattigara and Foochow further north and travelled via the Philippines to the Moluccas and East Java. The journey took several months in all but the ships returned laden with cargoes of cloves, nutmeg and mace.

From at least 200 BCE, Chinese junks sailed as far south as the Malay Peninsula and the Straits of Malacca. Here they met and traded not only with Indonesian peoples but also Indian merchants. For beyond the Straits lay the vast expanse of the Indian Ocean – and the wealth of India itself.



▲ Map showing the trade routes between China and Southeast Asia.

▼ A Chinese port crowded with junks bringing goods from around the world.





‘Where the two monsoons meet’



▲ The ruins of the Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka built by a king of Anuradhapura.

▼ Map outlining the trade routes from Southeast Asia to India.

Lying at the junction between the Indian Ocean and the China Seas, the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago have always played a vital part in the trade between East and West. As the Portuguese observer Tomé Pires described it in the Sixteenth Century, it is ‘where the two monsoons meet’ – that is the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean that blow from the south-west from April to October and from the north-east from October to April, and the trade winds of the China Seas. Ships from India could sail before the south-west monsoon in April and return home on the north-east wind in October. Similarly, ships from the ports of P’anyu and Cattigara sailed for the Indonesian ports in late autumn.

There were various different routes around the Malay Peninsula. Most trade was carried through the Straits of Malacca and whoever controlled this narrow stretch of water held the key to the spice trade. It lies between the tip of the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. Cities overlooking the Straits, such as Srivijaya (near the site of modern-day Palembang) and, much later, Malaka, became rich and powerful. They would levy taxes on the ships that travelled back and forth on the Spice Route and, of course, were active in the trade themselves.



Another important trading centre was the port of Oc-eeo on the Mekong Delta. Here Indian, Chinese and, later, western traders met to exchange their wares. Merchants travelling westwards might then return through the Straits but another route was used that crossed the Gulf of Siam to the Kra Isthmus. The precious cargoes were then transported by land over the peninsula to the Bay of Bengal, and loaded again on to Indian ships. Another similar crossing was made further south. These last two routes were often favoured as they avoided the more dangerous voyage around Tumasik (modern Singapore) where ruthless 'sea gypsies' or pirates were known to lurk.

From the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra and Java, ships sailed across the Indian Ocean heading for ports on the eastern Chola Coast of India. Others made their way to Sri Lanka, 'the Island of Rubies'. The trade helped establish wealthy kingdoms in this area. One such was the Anuradhapura kingdom of Sri Lanka that flourished from about 200BCE – its cities were full of parks, palaces and Buddhist temples. Their wealth came partly from trade – in cinnamon, ebony and Sri Lanka's famous rubies.

India was another important meeting point on the Spice Routes. From the Chola Coast of India and Sri Lanka, goods from the East were transported westwards by land and sea to the ports on the western Malabar Coast, such as Nelcynda, and further north Barygaza and Barbaricon. Here, once again, goods and money changed hands with the arrival of ships from the Middle East.



The Cinnamon Route

This was one of the most remarkable journeys of all time. It was a direct sea voyage from Southeast Asia to Madagascar off the east coast of Africa. From as early as 2000 BCE, Indonesian sailors in ocean-going canoes carried cinnamon, fragrant woods and other spices. Using the trade winds and ocean currents from the Indonesian Archipelago to Madagascar and East Africa, they travelled distances of over 6,000 kilometres.



◀ An 18th Century engraving showing a ship passing through the Straits of Malacca.

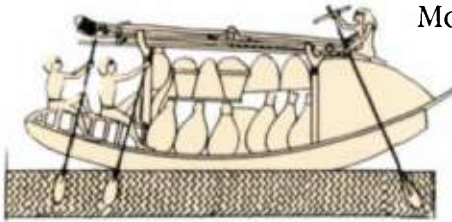
▼ Some of the gold ceremonial jewellery of a Sri Lankan prince. Sri Lanka grew rich from trade.





From India to Europe

Cargo ships of the ancient Egyptians are shown on this page. A very early record of Spice Route trade tells of Queen Hatshepsut (1490-1468 BCE) of Egypt sending ships to the land of Punt (probably in East Africa) to collect myrrh trees.



Like those between India and Southeast Asia, the paths of the Spice Routes between India and the Middle East were partly dictated by the monsoon winds. This meant that ships could sail direct from the Malabar Coast to Africa and the mouth of the Red Sea. However, from very early on routes also existed that followed the western coast of India north round to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula.

Regular trade had taken place between the cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa in the River Indus valley and Mesopotamia since at least 2000 BCE.

By 200 BCE, trade was on a far greater scale and along several different routes. Cotton cloth from eastern India and perfumed oils were traded from the west coast ports of India for cherry-red coral from

the Mediterranean and amber from the Baltic, along with the spices that were produced all around the Indian Ocean.

India and the Middle East, particularly southern Arabia, were both production and collection centres. Both regions produced important spices and other trade goods and both, by virtue of their geographical location, acted as meeting and distribution points of the different routes.



The Periplus of the Erythraeum Sea is a document written in around 80 CE believed to be by a Greek sea captain based in Alexandria. It gives a good picture of the Spice Routes of this time. From

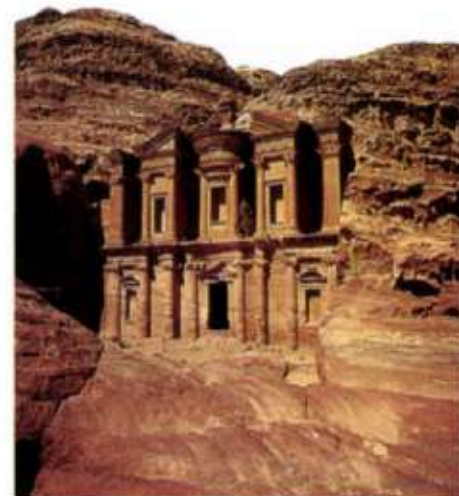
Barbaricon, ships could take a northerly route to Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf and on up to Apologos.

From here, the cargoes joined the land routes from Ctesiphon and the East to travel overland via the Tigris and Euphrates valleys to the splendid cities of Petra (now in Jordan) and Palmyra (in Syria) – cities built

with the wealth generated by trade. From these crossroads of the various overland trade routes, goods were redistributed and carried on to the ports of Gaza, Tyre and Antioch on the eastern Mediterranean and so on to Europe.

From Barygaza and the Malabar ports, ships took the more southerly route across the Arabian Sea. They sailed via the island of





◀ Map of the sea routes from India to the Middle East and Mediterranean.

▲ View of el-Deir (the Monastery) at Petra, Jordan. Petra lay at the crossroads of many trade routes, and its people, the Nabataeans, grew rich from taxing the goods that passed through their lands.

▼ A 15th Century French illustration showing the pepper harvest on the Malabar Coast of western India. Its pepper crop made the Malabar Coast an important port of call for Spice Route traders.

Socotra, the 'Isle of the Blest' – a major crossroads of the sea trade lying off the Cape of Spices (now Cape Gardafui) – and then on to Cana or later Salalah on the coast of the Arabian Peninsula. From here, cargoes were taken up the Red Sea, the route dividing after Leuce Come, when travellers could continue up through Palestine to Petra or cross the sea to Egypt and the great port of Alexandria.

Over the centuries the routes described here were to vary slightly. As cities and kingdoms flourished, trade would flow through them, but if their power dwindled so too would the trade as merchants found safer routes to follow and wealthier markets to sell to. But, partly through geographical necessity, the main links in the Spice Routes were laid down early in their history.

