

- LECTURE -

History of Capitalism Series

Global Trade: The Beginnings

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I

I intend to talk today about parts of the world that lie far beyond the stretch of water with which much of my work has been associated, the Mediterranean. In fact, I am going to offer you some snatches from the companion volume to my history of the Mediterranean, *The Great Sea*, for I am now, wisely or unwisely, engaged in writing a history of the oceans. I do not want this to become simply an accumulation of separate maritime histories, but a work about inter-connections across the globe, and, as in my work on the Mediterranean, trade routes feature prominently in what I have written. There is, of course, a big obstacle. To write authoritatively about those parts of the world demands linguistic competence of a very high order: one should probably begin with a knowledge of the ancient languages of Iraq, written in the formidably difficult cuneiform script—Sumerian and Akkadian. At least one could breath a sigh of relief at the thought that the ancient script of the Indus Valley still remains undeciphered. Moving into the Middle Ages, one might expect to find an ability to read the Malay annals in the original, to handle Chinese and Japanese texts, to make sense of the Judaeo-Arabic letters written by India traders and brought from the Cairo Genizah to Cambridge, Oxford and elsewhere; probably too a mastery of Malayalam to cope with the ninth-century copper plates from the Indian port of Kollam that have been known for over a century, but are only now being slowly deciphered. One scholar, Paul Wheatley, showed that he could deal with a great variety of languages in his fundamental book *The Golden Khersonese*, where he translated dozens of Chinese, Persian, Arabic and other relevant texts concerning the Malay peninsula in antiquity and the early Middle Ages. I unashamedly confess, then, that what is said here is drawn from translated texts. This is certainly one of the big challenges that historians face as they become more insistent on the global view.

In fifty or sixty minutes, I do not have time to mobilize all the examples I should like to cite: just from the Middle Ages, Hakata in Japan, Quanzhou in China, Aden in Arabia, Mangalore in India. Nor, unfortunately, have I reached the point where I feel able to produce any grand generalizations. The main argument is a simple one. From the Greco-Roman period onwards maritime networks linked the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and the Indian Ocean to China, funnelling goods in both directions in often astonishing quantities (one thinks of the hundreds of

thousands of porcelain bowls aboard ships setting out from Quanzhou in the twelfth century, as well as the hundreds of thousands of sherds of Chinese pottery found on medieval sites in Cairo). The scale of this trade, and its continuity over time, casts doubt on Janet Abu-Lughod's contention that a global network came into being during the age of the *pax mongolica*, which saw the revival of the overland Silk Road across Asia. To me—but a maritime historian would say that, wouldn't he?—the maritime routes were capable of carrying far more, and did so from a much earlier date. As I shall point out at the end, the same is true today.

All this focusses attention on the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, but it is important to regard those seas as gateways to other seas beyond: the route along the western Pacific to Japan and Korea, the route up the Red Sea to the Mediterranean which, by the end of the Middle Ages, was passing prodigious quantities of eastern spices through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic, and all the way to Bruges and up the Baltic towards Riga and Tallinn. Beyond this relatively simple observation lies an important and difficult question about the impact of what was predominantly a luxury trade aimed at elite consumers on the economic development of the lands that this trade touched. The port cities that I am going to describe today owed much or all of their fortune to long-distance traffic, notably the spice trade. But it is, of course, important to remember that these spices were harvested on the islands of the East Indies or along the coast of India; the towns I shall be talking about acted as redistribution centres for what were, in an important sense, agricultural products, however expensive and prestigious they had become by the time they had been weighed in countless customs houses, and however often they had been transferred from ship to ship until they reached Venice or Genoa.

II

There are two gateways that link the Middle East to the Indian Ocean, and that have played a role of the first importance in the trade between further Asia and either the Middle East itself or the Mediterranean beyond: the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. I am aware that the term 'Persian Gulf' has gone out of fashion in most Gulf countries, for political reasons; but it was already called the *Κολπος περσικος* by the ancient Greeks, so I shall persist with that name. Although I intend to concentrate on the period we in the West call the Middle Ages, I would not wish to pass by the remarkable evidence that Indian Ocean trade can be traced right back to the third millennium BC. Although there were certainly hiccups in this trade, its history shows remarkable continuity by comparison with that of the Mediterranean, where periods of deep recession interrupted the trade networks of the ancient world, or of the South China Sea, where the Chinese emperors sometimes discouraged maritime trade or attempted reduce it to exchanges of gifts for tribute.

The early history of Persian Gulf trade takes one all the way back to 2500 BC millennium BC, when merchants trading on behalf of temples in what is now Iraq, and later on trading on their own account, established a sea-route linking the great Sumerian civilization of Ur and its neighbours to a mysterious land known as Meluhha, which we now can say with some confidence was the area of modern India and Pakistan covered by another great civilization, that of the Indus Valley. They stopped off in the great emporium of Dilmun, located in modern Bahrain; and they also paid close attention to the mountainous terrain of what is now northern Oman, a source of vast amounts of high-grade copper. Reading the documents left by Sumerian merchants leaves one with the uncanny feeling that merchant capitalism already existed in 2000 BC and that the documents merchants produced before setting out on their journeys were almost indistinguishable in conception from those that might have been produced in thirteenth-century Barcelona or Genoa:

Lu-Mešlamtaë and Nigsisanabsa have borrowed from Ur-Nimmar 2 *minas* of silver, 5 *kur* of sesame oil, 30 garments, for an expedition to Dilmun [Bahrain] to buy copper there. On the safe return of the expedition, the creditor will not make a claim for any commercial losses. The debtors have mutually agreed to satisfy Ur-Nimmar with 4 *minas* of copper for each shekel of silver as a just price; this they have sworn before the king.

The contract just cited forms part of the business correspondence of Ea-nasir, a wealthy merchant of Ur, whose house was identified by the British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley during his triumphant excavation of Ur of the Chaldees; it was not a particularly large house, and consisted of five rooms around a main courtyard, though a couple of rooms had been ceded to a neighbour. He lived around 1800 BC; his speciality was South Arabian copper, which was delivered in ingots, and he apparently supplied the royal palace. He was surely one of the most prominent businessmen of his day, maybe a little unscrupulous, but looking at his wealth it is impossible not to be impressed: one of his shipments weighted eighteen and a half metric tons, of which nearly one third belonged to him.

Far from being a dry enumeration of imports and exports, Ea-nasir's private archive conjures up the passionate disputes that were bound to arise about the quality of goods and the obligations to fulfil a contract:

Speak to Ea-nasir; thus says Nanni: now when you had come you spoke saying thus: "I will give good ingots to Gimil-Sin"; this you said to me when you had come, but you have not done it; you have offered bad ingots to my messenger, saying: "If you will take it, take it, if you will not take it, go away." Who am I that you are treating me in this manner—

treating me with such contempt? And between gentlemen such as we are!"... Who is there among the Dilmun traders who has acted against me in this way?

By and large, though, the Gulf was of secondary importance compared to the Red Sea, as a channel through which spices, perfumes and precious goods from the Far East reached western Asia and the Mediterranean. The ancient Egyptians had not been greatly interested in long-distance maritime trade, apart from some mysterious expeditions to a land called Punt, probably corresponding to Yemen, Eritrea and Somalia, where they obtained ivory, ebony and other rare goods. But when the Greeks and Romans took control of Egypt from the fourth century BC onwards, the Indian Ocean became a very attractive source of the perfumes and spices in demand at royal courts, as well as providing gigantic quantities of pepper and other spices, which were taken to Red Sea ports such as Bereniké, recently excavated by teams of American archaeologists. Once the Greeks had mastered the monsoons, and understood when it was safe to sail and—more importantly still—how to exploit these strong winds to cut across the open ocean, it was possible to trade intensively with the west coast of India, where finds of Roman coins confirm how far the reach of these merchants and their local partners reached. Even on the eastern side of India there existed important bases for so-called Roman (really Greco-Egyptian) merchants, notably at a place called Arikamedu corresponding to modern Pondicherry. Indian poetry spoke of the *Yavanas*, or Greeks, who became familiar figures in the ports along the coasts of India; an anonymous Greek merchant wrote a guide to sailing the Indian Ocean that described the hazards of various harbours but that also drew attention to the riches to be obtained within them.

The Red Sea lost and gained primacy during the early Middle Ages, because the rival passage-way, the Persian Gulf, also flourished for a while. Which of the two narrow seas was the more important depended on the political convulsions that were taking place within the Middle East. When in the eighth century the Abbasid dynasty seized control of the Islamic caliphate and established its headquarters in Iraq (eventually at Baghdad) the trade of the Indian Ocean was to a large extent diverted up the Gulf and away from Aden and the Red Sea. However, the really significant point is that the sea-route, whether it passed Aden bound for Egypt or the Straits of Hormuz bound for Iraq and Iran, remained busy, functioning not just as a channel along which fine goods from East and West were passed, but as an open duct along which religious and other cultural influences flowed: Buddhist monks, texts and artefacts; and Muslim preachers and holy books. Islam was a new arrival, but Buddhism too, despite its great antiquity, intensified its contact and influence in South-East Asia during the early Middle Ages, as it became increasingly fashionable at courts in India, Sri Lanka, Malaya, Indonesia and, along the shores of the Pacific, in China, Korea and Japan. The crisis of the Roman Empire within the Mediterranean during the fifth to seventh centuries did not fatally damage the networks that had come into being in the

days of Pliny and the *Periplus*. Bereniké faded, and the Red Sea temporarily lost its attraction; but the overall sense is of continuity in contact across the seas, even if the market for eastern perfumes and spices in western Europe shrank as Roman power in the West shrivelled away. Yet there was always enough business to keep the merchants of Arabia busy. On the eve of the rise of Islam, the Nabataean traders, famous for their rose-red city of Petra, ably managed trade routes that linked Ayla, corresponding to modern Aqaba and Eilat, to Gaza and the Mediterranean. As well as the sea-route up the Red Sea, caravans followed overland routes bearing myrrh and frankincense northwards through cities such as Mecca and Yathrib, later known as Medina.

The rise of the Abbasids had a great impact on the Indian Ocean world of the eighth to tenth centuries. The Persian Gulf re-emerged as a lively passage-way bringing goods from the Far East; 'Persian' (*Pos-su*) merchants became familiar in the coastal towns of China though this was a catch-all term that must have included plenty of Jews, Arabs and even Indians as well. This is not to deny that much of the silk and many of the perfumes, precious stones and spices that reached Baghdad came overland through Persia, beyond which, in Transoxiana and Uzbekistan, lay rich silver mines whose ore was purified and minted as coin in Bukhara. These were places that pointed towards the overland route, the Silk Road, leading across the deserts of central Asia to Tang China, a route that at this period was still flourishing. Other routes led across western Asia towards Scandinavia, taking vast amounts of silver and swathes of Chinese silk through the empire of the White Bulgars and that of the Jewish Khazars towards the gloomy and frozen lands of the Swedes and their neighbours.

That there were links to China is plain from a statement by the tenth-century Arab geographer ibn Hawqal. Here he is describing the port of Siraf on the Iranian shore of the Persian Gulf:

Its inhabitants are very rich. I was told that one of them, feeling ill, made his testament; the third part of his fortune, which he had in cash, amounted to a million dinars not counting the capital which he laid out to people who undertook to trade with it on a commission [*commenda*] basis. Then there is Ramisht, whose son Musa I have met in Aden, in the year 539 AH... I have met 'Ali al-Nili from the countryside of al-Hilla, Ramisht's clerk, and he told me that when he came back from China twenty years before, his merchandise was worth half a million dinars; if that is the wealth of his clerk, what will he himself be worth! It was Ramisht who removed the silver water-spout of the Ka'aba and replaced it with a golden one, and also covered the Ka'aba with Chinese cloth, the value of which cannot be estimated. In short, I have heard of no merchant in our time who has equalled Rāmisht in wealth or prestige.

The same Ramisht appeared in letters written by Jewish merchants based in Cairo and in India as the fabulously wealthy owner of massive ships, the sort of businessman whose palatial style of life is celebrated in the *Thousand and One Nights* (as in the case of Sindbad the Sailor after his return from his voyages). Sirafi merchants implanted themselves in many corners of the Indian Ocean: some traded to Zanzibar, while the head of the Muslim community at Saimur, near Bombay (Mumbai) was from Siraf. Other Arab writers describe complex maritime routes carrying dhows laden with goods beyond Ceylon to the Spice Islands and (as reported by a ninth-century merchant from Basra named Sulayman) China itself.

Siraf is especially interesting, because in addition to the testimony of these writers, there is the evidence from excavations conducted by the British Institute of Persian Studies in the 1960's. Siraf turned out to be rather older than had been assumed: inhabited by Zoroastrians, the town acquired the distinctive red pottery of the Roman Empire, and a gold coin of a mid-seventh-century Byzantine emperor, Constans II, was found as well. Its high point was in the ninth to the tenth centuries, but it was already a lively centre of business soon after AD 700. In the eighth century coins from Iraq, Afghanistan, Persia and even Spain were buried in a coin hoard, only to be rediscovered as much as 1,200 years later. During the excavation of what had been the platform of the Great Mosque, plenty of Tang pottery from the same period was found as well. Ramisht in fact lived at a time when Siraf was long past its best. Another factor was the increasing importance of the rival route taking spices up the Red Sea, following a political revolution in Egypt. At its peak, Siraf was rather less than half the size of the circular inner core of Baghdad, but that actually speaks for its very great size, given the vastness of the Abbasid capital. Shops and bazaars stretched along the sea-front for a kilometre or more, which was about half the length of the town. Two-storey buildings with paved courtyards were probably the residences of prosperous merchants and officials, but one building, said to be larger than Hatfield House in southern England, was, one would imagine, the palace of someone like the merchant-prince Ramisht. The town lay in an unpropitious setting, dry and stony. It was not easy to produce food locally. But, as a citizen of another city set in a rocky landscape, Dubrovnik, argued several centuries later, the very sterility of the surrounding countryside made trade an imperative.

While it would be a mistake to under-estimate the importance of the Persian Gulf in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, changes further west stimulated the revival of Red Sea commerce from the tenth century onwards. The Abbasid Empire began to fragment; the greatest challenge came from the rise to power of the Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty, first in Tunisia (where they founded the city of Qayrawan, 'the caravan', with its Great Mosque), and then in Cairo, where they were able to compete for domination over the Levant. Partly as a result of these political changes, the Mediterranean began to re-awaken, and this re-awakening was further stimulated by the

emergence of Christian trading republics, first Amalfi and Venice, then Pisa and Genoa, that eagerly bought the spices of the East and passed them across the sea to Europe, and then along land and river routes that reached as far as Flanders, Germany and England. And all of these developments had major repercussions in the Indian Ocean as well. The sea-routes across the Mediterranean have already been traced in my book *The Great Sea*. But now it is time to trace a sea-route that leads all the way from the Nile to Indonesia and China. This will involve occasional jumps back and forth in time, depending on what evidence survives, within the period from about 850 to about 1220, and it goes without saying that there were significant changes, notably in the role of Egypt in a great network that stretched from China to Alexandria. While it may seem an exaggeration to describe this as a global trade network, I think the term actually does apply: what we are looking at is the creation of vigorous, prosperous and continuous links between the great centres of civilization of the period—between the greatest cities in the world (always bearing in mind that the civilizations of the Americas were a world apart). Japan, China, India, the Islamic world, Byzantium, the medieval west were actually linked together, even though the extreme ends of this chain interacted very little with one another. But joining these areas together was the great maritime highway that stretched across the Indian Ocean and into the South China Sea; and along this route passed merchants and missionaries, pilgrims and migrants, of many religions and ethnic origins, carrying everyday goods and rare ones through the customs houses of many different kingdoms that greatly enriched themselves from the trade.

III

Persia and Mesopotamia lost their primacy; the old Greco-Roman routes down the other coast of Arabia were reborn. The Red Sea revival is plain from the archaeological record along its shores. From the late ninth century onwards, sherds of Chinese celadons and white porcelain appear in excavations as far north as Ayla. Goldmining in Sudan began to produce handsome returns. Egyptian emeralds were exported in the direction of southern India, and were traded by Tamils from there towards Sumatra and beyond. Further afield, Chinese ceramics arrived in Cairo. Around 700,000 sherds from shattered Chinese pots have been found on medieval sites in Cairo.

Much of what we know comes from the mountain of papers, or rather fragments of paper, that make up the Cairo Genizah documents, most of which were sold to Cambridge University following their discovery in the attic store-room of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, or Old Cairo, at the end of the nineteenth century. The Genizah is a giant rubbish basket of material. The Genizah is not an ordered archive, but a random assortment of documents thrown away because no one could be bothered to sort out those that might contain the divine name (and thus need to be preserved with reverence, or buried if too dilapidated). Precisely for this reason, the documents, including merchant letters, pages of account books, rabbinic decisions, or

responsa, magical, medical and of course religious texts, the Cairo Genizah sheds a brilliant light on the daily life of Jews and also Muslims in Egypt between the tenth and the twelfth century. In particular, the documents expose to view the business affairs of Egyptian Jewish merchants who traded westwards into the Mediterranean, particularly towards Tunisia and Sicily, but who also had very substantial trading interests in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean up to the late twelfth century. The Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade became increasingly important during the twelfth century, in response to growing demand within the Mediterranean for exotic eastern products used as food flavourings, dyestuffs and medicines. There is a flip side to this argument: the increasing dominance of the Genoese, Pisans and Venetians in the spice trade linking the Levant to Europe, and the success of their navies in dominating the Mediterranean sea-routes, prompted the Genizah merchants to look with greater interest at the opportunities offered by the Red Sea and the route bringing from India, where some of them even installed themselves for a while. The letters left by these merchants trading towards Aden and India permit an intimate portrait that goes beyond their account books and reveals their daily life, their contacts with Muslim and Hindu merchants, and the trials and tribulations of those seeking to bring goods across what were for those times vast distances.

Fustat, long the nucleus of Cairo, was displaced by a new city built a couple of miles away by the new Fatimid caliphs. The creation of a new capital transformed Fustat into a suburb inhabited by non-Muslims: legends about the Ben Ezra synagogue went far back in time, so that it became known as the synagogue Moses had used when he was living in Egypt. In any case, it was certainly the synagogue where another famous Moses, the philosopher Moses Maimonides, based himself after his own flight to Egypt. His brother David was one of the India traders, and when he was drowned in the Indian Ocean in 1169 Maimonides was plunged into despair for several years. Yet it is in the nature of this evidence that reports of disasters tend to survive, just as modern newspapers will report an emergency landing but not, of course, an ordinary, safe journey. Modern travellers may feel alarmed when the sleek jet they expected would take them to Amsterdam or Brussels turns out to be a small propeller plane that shakes its way across the sky; in the same way, the sight of an Arab dhow whose planks were tied together by ropes, in the traditional way, could shock a traveller familiar with the vessels that sailed the 'Sea of Tripoli', that is, the Mediterranean: 'we set sail in a ship with not a single nail of iron in it, but held together by ropes; may God protect it with His shield!... I am about to cross the great ocean, not a sea like that of Tripoli; and I do not know if we will ever meet again.'

Studies of these records have transformed knowledge of the India trade and have shown how discarded letters thought to be of no value, discovered in a synagogue storeroom, can in fact shed more light on the conduct of trade than official documents. But this material, though quite plentiful, is not unique. There has always been a worry, ever since S.D. Goitein announced his

discoveries in the Genizah documents, that the Jews of Fustat might not be typical of a society in which, after all, Jews were only a minority. It was obvious, for instance, that Jews were not especially interested in the grain trade, but were very interested in flax and silk. No one could say, and no one can as yet say, whether the family ties that bound together Jewish trading families from Sicily, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen were replicated among Muslim trading families – probably not. That is why it was so exciting when the excavators of the so-called Shaykh's House at Qusayr al-Qadim on the Red Sea found the remains of about 150 documents that had mostly been torn to shreds, but could nonetheless be reconstructed. The Qusayr documents reveal the business affairs of an early thirteenth-century Muslim merchant, and the information they contain can once again be compared with the archaeological record, including evidence that ceramics arrived in the Red Sea from as far away as China, and gold probably came up the African coast from Kilwa and Zanzibar.

The letters from Qusayr al-Qadim fill out our picture of trade in the region by shifting the emphasis away from the spices and fine goods enumerated in the Genizah documents towards humbler but more vital products such as wheat, chickpeas, beans, dates, oil and rice, the staples of daily existence. The quantities mentioned were considerable: as much as three tons in one document, which was enough to feed four or five households for an entire year. Qusayr was a vital link in the chain linking the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to the Nile and the Mediterranean. It lay at the closest point to the Nile of any of the Red Sea ports. One constraint on its growth was the lack of good-quality water; in the nineteenth century, drinking water was brought from a well six miles away, but the water stank of sulphur, while another spring in the area produced saline water laced with phosphorus, which was only good for animals, if that. Ships that arrived in Qusayr would sometimes be taken to pieces and carried on the backs of camels across the desert to the Nile city of Qus, where they would be re-assembled and refloated for the journey down-river. As was the case in the age of the Ptolemies and under the Roman emperors, the Nile functioned in part as an extension of the Red Sea, the vital link not just to Islamic Cairo but to ancient and medieval Alexandria and the Mediterranean. Physical remains from Qusayr confirm the passage through the little town of a great variety of foods brought from all around the Indian Ocean. Some tubers of taro, which is a south-east Asian vegetable, have been found, along with coconut shells, as well as citron, the large lemon-shaped citrus fruit that was much in demand in Jewish communities, for use during the rituals of the Feast of Tabernacles. Dates, almonds, watermelons, pistachios, cardamom, black pepper, rice and aubergine all appear among the finds from Islamic Qusayr. All told, the sheikh's business was much more humdrum than that of the best-connected Genizah merchants; his agents bought and sold hawsers and tools such as mattocks; but perfumes and pepper were also an interest. The sheikh ran something grander than the Qusayr General Stores, but his interests were very

eclectic, and it can be deduced that he was one of the town's main provisioners, whether in food (especially grain) or in what would have been called fancy goods in the nineteenth century. He was well versed in the commercial practices of his day, offering credit and arranging transfers, which avoided the need to handle cash.

The fascination of the Qusayr letters derives from their sheer ordinariness. The sheikh was a wealthy man, at least by the standards of his small, hot, dust-blown town, and the grand trade routes that linked Aydhab and Qusayr to the Far East were not his real concern. Those routes produced great profits for some people, but they had to be serviced, and Qusayr was a convenient service station. It was not a place of high culture, but eastern influences seeped into Qusayr. Exotic links are well represented by the fragments of Chinese pottery recovered in two bouts of excavation at Qusayr al-Qadim. The types of pottery found are typical enough: green celadons and white or bluish white wares, so these were not rare gifts that were accidentally smashed as they passed through the port, but the sort of pottery that was becoming familiar on the streets of Fustat in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One influence from China was block-printing. A few Arabic texts have been found in Qusayr which were printed from a carved wooden block, rather as Chinese printed texts were created in this period, and the view has even been hazarded that the blocks used for printing were made in China, and texts were then printed off there and exported to Middle Eastern consumers. These printed texts were used as amulets: 'he who wrote this amulet, and he who carries, it will stay safe and sound.' These amulets may seem banal: praying to stay safe and sound was a natural reaction to the perils of the open sea. Yet they are a reminder that the account-books of the sheikh, or of the Genizah merchants, only tell part of a human story of worries about how to survive in a maritime world full of danger from storms, reefs, pirates and capricious rulers.

IV

Heading down from Aydhab and Qusayr al-Qadim, the straits linking the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean (the Bab al-Mandab) were of crucial strategic importance. Just beyond the straits, ships entered a small gulf that debouches into the Indian Ocean. There the major centre of exchange was Aden, a thriving town sunk in the crater of an extinct volcano that was well-situated to watch comings and goings through the straits. Aden possessed its own resources, which were in part derived from the sea and the coastline: salt, fish and the highly-prized whale product ambergris, which was occasionally washed up on the shore and was used in the production of perfume. Water, however, was in short supply, and an ingenious feat of engineering exploited the fact that the town lay within a crater by channelling water that had fallen on higher ground into a series of cisterns. There were even filters that removed some of the impurities from the water as it flowed downwards. The overall picture is, then, not vastly dissimilar from that of Siraf: the city

flourished as a centre of trade precisely because local resources were rather meagre; and Aden was very well placed to supervise the traffic heading out of the Red Sea towards India, but also down along the coast of East Africa. Of course, this attracted the envy of rivals. The rulers of Kish or Qays, just inside the Persian Gulf, hoped to gain control of the trade routes not just through the Gulf, which had withered by the mid-twelfth century, but along the southern flank of Arabia, past Oman and Yemen. So in 1135 they attacked Aden, hoping at the very least to seize the port installations and customs house; the town was already divided between two cousins, one of whom was in charge of the port. However, the lord of the port offered to surrender and then plied the attackers with so much food and wine that they were unable to resist when the lord's men waded into the staggering mass of invaders, and it was later said that they beheaded so many of them that this part of town was henceforth known as 'the Skulls' (*Jamajim*).

Its rulers were well aware that Aden was the jewel in their crown. There were eagle-eyed customs officers who prodded and probed the merchandise that passed through the government checkpoint or *furda*; detailed records were kept as every piece of cloth was patiently counted in front of the no doubt impatient merchants. This was the sort of treatment Genizah merchants were familiar with from the customs house at Alexandria, and all this acts as a reminder that the high cost of spices was less the result of rarity or even the long voyage that brought them to Aden and Alexandria, than it was the result of a sequence of payments to one government after another, not to mention bribes and sweeteners—it would be good to know how much smuggling took place, but Aden looks as if it was the sort of walled and well-guarded city where that was well-nigh impossible. Jews, Christians and other non-Muslims were supposed to pay twice the taxes of the faithful, but there is no evidence they did so, except briefly. From the *furda*, one door gave on to the harbour-front and the other on to the city streets with their multi-storied merchant houses built of stone—whether they were quite as tall as the town houses of modern Yemen is uncertain, but the most desirable houses stood near the sea, from which cooling breezes blew that were unlikely to reach the lower depths of the crater. The general impression is of communities of diverse origins living peacefully side by side, though there was a difficult moment at the end of the twelfth century when the Jews were ordered to convert to Islam.

Aden was also a base from which the Cairo merchants sent letters eastwards to India, with information about the state of the pepper market – anticipating where prices would be profitable was fundamental to the business practice of these merchants, who were not mere passive agents. The sailing-season out of Aden was, by natural circumstances, well co-ordinated with that of the Mediterranean, with ships setting out for India at the start of autumn, which gave time for goods that were being carried down the Red Sea to reach their eastern Mediterranean destinations from as far away as Sicily, Tunisia and Spain. Aden was therefore a nodal point not just in the Indian Ocean maritime networks, but in what can reasonably be called (before the

discovery of the Americas) a global network that stretched from Atlantic Seville to the Spice Islands of the Indian Ocean. Broadly speaking the port was very lively from the end of August to May of the following year. Ships converged on Aden from India, Somalia, Eritrea and Zanj (East Africa), so that Aden became a market where the produce of Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean was exchanged.

V

Moving deeper into the Indian Ocean, the Egyptian merchants who had called in at Aden took advantage of the monsoons to head across the open sea to India. The Fustat traders had plenty of contact with Indian princes, merchants and shipowners. Indian sailors had no fear of the western Indian Ocean, and there were also local Jewish and Muslim ship-owners, such as a certain ibn al-Muqaddam, whose religion is unknown; after several voyages from Aden to the Malabar Coast he lost his ship at sea, replaced it, and lost the replacement. It should be stressed once again that these were not everyday occurrences; they are known from the legal cases that then arose – it was very important in Jewish law to be able to certify that those who had been shipwrecked had indeed died, so that any widows could remarry without fear of the particularly severe but fortunately quite rare bastardy that any new children would then bear.

The risks of travel did not prevent ambitious Fustat merchants from reaching India, rather than simply relying on the Indian and Muslim shippers who reached Aden. The greater the risks, the higher the profits. In the mid-twelfth century a group of Jews, including Salim ‘the son of the cantor’ and several goldsmiths, set out from Aden to Ceylon in partnership with a very wealthy Muslim merchant named Bilal. Ceylon was considered a good source of cinnamon. The Jewish ben Yiju family provides a marvellous example of how spices were transmitted all the way from India to major Mediterranean cities such as Palermo and Mahdia, a flourishing centre of exchange on the coast of Tunisia where the family originated before moving to Fustat.

In 1132 Abraham ben Yiju found himself at Mangalore on the Malabar Coast. This area was known as far away as China, where, in the early thirteenth century, Zhao Rugua (Chao Ju-kua) described the people as dark brown, with long earlobes; they wore colourful silk turbans and sold pearls fished locally, as well as cotton cloth; they used silver coins and they bought silk, porcelain, camphor, cloves, rhubarb and other spices that arrived from further east, but in his day (he claimed) few ships made the long and difficult journey from China. This was a pessimistic judgment, for the quantities of Chinese goods found in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East prove that contact was intense and continuous, and also very profitable, though it was clearly achieved in a series of stages and the mariners were Malays and Tamils rather than Chinese. In addition to the rich information in the Genizah letters and the evidence from excavations in Cairo, remarkable Indian texts survive that shed light on the maritime connections and town life

of the Indian coast around this time. The light they shed is obscured by the great difficulty in making sense of a series of copper plates in the difficult Mayalam language. They are legal

documents, such as a royal grant of land and privileges to a Christian church, and they were inscribed in the port city of Kollam, or Quilon, in the far south-west of India not far from Ceylon, in AD 849. Important privileges were preserved in this permanent form in order to express the intention that they would hold 'for as long as the Earth, the Moon and the Sun shall endure'. The simple fact that the texts carry signatures in several scripts brings into focus the ethnic and religious diversity of the major trading towns along the coast of India at this period: 25 witnesses to these texts wrote their names in their everyday alphabet and language, whether Arabic and Middle Persian (written in Arabic script) or Judaeo-Persian (written in Hebrew script); there were Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Zoroastrians, who described themselves uncompromisingly as 'those of the Good Religion'. The copper plates mention the two guilds that brought together merchants trading out of Kollam; one, called *Manigraman*, specialized in Sumatra and the Malay peninsula, and the other, *Ancuvannam*, looked in the other direction entirely, towards Arabia and East Africa. While the Sumatra-bound merchants were themselves south Indian Tamils, those trading towards Asia were Arabs, Persians and Jews, the sort of people who signed the copper plates. The guilds operated under royal supervision; as one of the plates states: 'all royal business whatsoever, in the matter of pricing commodities and suchlike, shall be carried out by them.' The rajah believed he could trust both native and foreign merchants to act responsibly on his behalf; it was only natural that he should show such a warm welcome to the foreign traders, because without them Kollam would have been nothing, and his own income would have shrivelled.

Kollam does not seem to have interested Abraham ben Yiju; but he certainly prospered while he was based in Mangalore. He bought a slave girl there; he then freed her, which had the effect in Jewish law of converting her to Judaism (he gave her the Hebrew name **ברכה**, or 'Blessing'), and after that he married her and raised a family. Meanwhile, he was sending goods up and down the coast of western India; he made a lengthy visit to Aden around 1140, but he stayed most of the time in India until 1149. He set up a factory where bronze goods were produced – trays, bowls, candle-sticks, sometimes quite intricate in design, to judge from a letter from Aden ordering some custom-made metalwork from him. He imported arsenic from the west, for he was told there was strong demand for it in Ceylon, where it was used in medicine. He brought in Egyptian cotton, and sent out iron, mango and coconuts, working with *Banyan*, or Hindu, Muslim and Jewish partners. Among Muslim partners of ben Yiju was the wealthy merchant of Siraf, Ramisht, whose large ships were well trusted; but even then things could go badly wrong, for one letter says that two of his ships were 'total losses', including valuable cargo belonging to Abraham ben Yiju. Wealthy merchants needed some resilience; it was important not to place all

one's eggs in the same basket. Not for nothing did they interest themselves in a variety of goods, for one never knew what would prove most profitable, however closely one read letters coming in from Palermo, Alexandria, Fustat and Aden, with their information about prices, political conditions and which merchants should be trusted.

The news network of which he was part extended all the way from India to Sicily and perhaps Spain. Now wealthy, he had hoped to settle for the rest of his days in Mahdia or somewhere near there; but just after he left India for Aden, he heard that the king of Sicily had conquered the coast of Tunisia (he assumed that there had been massacres, but the conquest was in fact relatively peaceful). It is hard to recover a sense of what it was like to live in Mangalore, so far from home; but the nostalgia for North Africa that ben Yiju showed when he had made his fortune reveals that he saw his trading career in India as just that, a career which would eventually, if luck held, make him rich enough to return to the land of his ancestors, taking with him his Indian wife and his children, for whom this would be a new world.

The Malabar coast looked in two directions, as it had in Roman times. The thirteenth-century Chinese geographer Zhao Rugua remarked that one could reach that part of India from the Indonesian kingdom of Śrī Vijaya 'in little more than a month'. Not very often, but sometimes, Middle Eastern traders ranged far beyond India. A tenth-century book called *Wonders of India* was composed by a Persian author called Buzurg, but written in Arabic. Buzurg told the 'curious tale' (his own words) of Isaac the Jew who was sued by a fellow-Jew in Oman and took flight to India somewhere around AD 882. He was able to take his goods with him, and for thirty years no one back in the west knew what had happened to him. In fact, he had been making a fortune in China, where he was taken for an Arab (as Jewish traders often were). In 912-13 he turned up in Oman once again, this time aboard his own ship, whose cargo was estimated to be worth a million gold dinars, and on which he paid a tax of a million silver dirhems, which may have amounted to a tax of about 12% and which kept the local governor happy, but which also aroused the jealousy of other merchants who had no hope of supplying treasures of comparable quality. (Since a lower middle-class family could subsist quite well on 24 dinars per annum, a million dinars can be thought of as comparable to nearly one billion pounds sterling or more than a billion and a half dollars, though such comparisons are not particularly meaningful.) Silks, Chinese ceramics, jewels and high-quality musk were just some of the exotic goods he brought to Arabia. So after three years he decided he had experienced enough hostility, and commissioned a new ship which he filled with merchandise, and sailed east in the hope of reaching China once again. This meant that he had to pass 'Serboza', which must be the maritime kingdom of Śrī Vijaya. Its rajah saw a good opportunity to mint money, and demanded a fee of 20,000 dinars before he would let him leave for China. Isaac objected and was seized and put to death that very night. The rajah expropriated the ship and all the merchandise.

VI

Śrī Vijaya had become an important source of perfumes and spices, notably camphor, during the early Middle Ages, when Chinese demand for its products stimulated the production there of goods that had previously reached China from India or even lands further west than that. The outcome was a vigorous expansion of Indonesian trade across the South China Sea, further enhanced by the liberal policies of the Song emperors in China, who encouraged trade, even maritime trade by Chinese merchants, since their loss of control of northern China meant that they could not obtain the goods they required along the old overland Silk Road, which ran well to the north of their centres of power, and was in any case subject to interference from their 'barbarian' rivals. Were there time, it would be possible to describe the extraordinary expansion of commerce linking Malaya, Indonesia, Korea, Japan and other lands to imperial China, and the golden age of the South China Sea that then resulted—an era in which the South China Sea has been described as a second Mediterranean. But it makes more sense to turn back to the land that stood astride the Indian Ocean routes, India. For India was the interchange point between what at first sight appear to be two trading networks, or even three: from Egypt via Aden to the Malabar Coast, and from the Malabar Coast to Malaya and Indonesia, with a further extension to Quanzhou and other Chinese ports. But when the goods traded come under consideration, this looks more like a single line of communication linking Alexandria in the Mediterranean to China, along which silk, spices, porcelain, metalwork and also religious ideas were transmitted, along with all those humdrum materials—wheat, rice, dates, and so on—in which the sheikh of Qusayr, among many others, mainly dealt.

The flow of precious metals that resulted from these exchanges can be likened to a pair of rivers that converged on India. India was, as it has always been, a land in which a rich elite lived a luxurious life far removed from the daily grind of the poor, and the same picture can be painted of medieval China. Payments for Indian luxuries continued to flood into the coffers of the rajahs, in gold and silver, and some of this income was spent on courtly magnificence and warfare. But the *thésaurisation* (to use a handy French word) of bullion flowing in from the west and from China proceeded apace, as the treasuries of Indian princes immobilised the precious metals that came into the country; Egypt, Syria and North Africa found themselves short of silver, which was needed for smaller payments, though expedients to solve the problem included glass tokens and lead coins. These countries could obtain silver from northern Iran, to some extent; but Iranian silver tended to drain towards Baghdad. They could obtain silver from western Europe; and the growing demand there for eastern spices, from the late eleventh century onwards, meant that merchants from Venice, Genoa and Pisa were keen to establish a presence in Alexandria and other Levantine cities, and to pay in white money for prodigious amounts of pepper, ginger and other Indian or Indonesian goods. Meanwhile, vast amounts of Chinese cash, made of copper, were being taken out of the Middle Kingdom towards surrounding lands, including Japan and

Java. It is often said that the beating of a butterfly's wings can affect the climate of the whole world. It can at least be said that the transactions that took place along a series of maritime trade routes that stretched from Spain—and eventually the Atlantic—to Japan had knock-on effects that could reach far down the line. Setting aside the Americas, still unknown to the inhabitants of other continents (ignoring for the moment the Vikings), a global network existed, one that had gained in strength and permanence since the days of the Greco-Roman trade towards India.