Paralleling traffic along the Central Asian land routes of the Silk Roads for more than 2000 years has been traffic over the Indian Ocean. Pointing up its parallel nature, sometimes even the same commodities were carried. The Indian Ocean was, in fact, long a conduit of trade and cultural exchange, even before formal land routes were established. The trade only gained in intensity and body as time passed.¹

Although there had always been some trade in the area, along the coasts at least, the key developments came in late Hellenistic times (here circa the 2nd century BC) with the probably accidental discovery of the patterns of the Indian monsoons and their usefulness for coasting longer distances to trade.² At first, this trade was conducted in stages, with traders of different nationalities involved, usually in association with one or more major entrepôts, intermediate points along the way, for loading, unloading and the exchange of goods and people. Later the practice grew of direct voyages over long distances.

As these voyages initially related to China, where the trade had begun in stages, as elsewhere, goods were mostly carried in Arabic and Persian ships. Some of these were from nearer bases, but many came all the way from the Persian Gulf or, for that matter, the Red Sea or Africa directly.³ The Middle East emerged as a natural focus of one side of the exchanges and China, distantly at first, another.

Chinese ships became involved directly, perhaps as early as late Tang 唐 times.⁴ After Song 宋 times, particularly during Mongol Yuan 元, which also had a major interior Eurasian presence and controlled many areas marginal to China (including their land Silk Roads trade), as well as the China coasts driving the ocean trade, Chinese ships carried a growing proportion of the total trade. This was in large part because of superior Chinese nautical technology, larger ships among other things, fore and after rigging, and technological breakthroughs such as the compass.⁵ During the Mongol period, the existence of a Mongol state in Iran, the principal ally of Mongol China in its struggles in Central Asia, resulted in a Mongol drive into Southeast Asia⁶ and further stimulated the trade. Those taking part included no less
a personage than Marco Polo. He returned to Europe via Iran by sea and recorded
what he saw on the way.7

So well-developed did the trade become that when the Portuguese entered the
Indian Ocean, they had only to seize certain critical points, including Malacca, to
dominate the entire system. Their ships sailed as far as China by the early 16th cen-
tury. The Dutch and English followed, but none of this was anything new by their
era. Here we focus on the Mongol period when the Indian Ocean trade first assumed
the form and shape that it was to have subsequently.

BECOMING A NAVAL PRESENCE

Due to the many things they lacked, from grain to textiles to metals, commerce
was vitally important to the early Mongols, even when they were still confined to
the steppe. Even after, commerce and consumer goods – some for conspicuous con-
sumption, such as the best pearls, popular among the Mongol elite themselves but
also important for patronage – played a major role in Mongol life, as Thomas T.
Allsen makes clear in a wide-ranging study focusing on much more than the pearls
in its title.8 To control their supplies of goods, also to govern conquered regions, the
various Mongol groups that became the Mongol successor khanates maintained
advanced positions near the trade routes and capitals, although courts continued
to live a nomadic life, except during the winter. Most relevant to us here are two of
these advanced positions, the Daidu 大都 (Khanbaliq) complex in China, including
the “summer” capital of Shangdu 上都 and the directly linked coastal maritime zone
via what became the Grand Canal, and Tabriz in Azerbaijan and its complex. Tabriz
was also linked to the maritime zone, in this case both the Persian Gulf, although
more tenuously via areas not even directly controlled by the Mongol government;
and also the Black Sea, less tenuously, and via the Black Sea with the Italian trading
republics. These two centers and also, in the case of China, a parallel complex of
coastal ports are well-described in full detail by Roxann Prazniak.9

As Mongol power expanded, so did their commercial links. This included the
development of formal associations of merchants and Mongol princes (and imperial
and successor state governments), who could offer resources such as use of the jam
to traders called ortaq that loom large in our sources. At first associated with land
transport almost exclusively, as Mongol horizons expanded ortaq also took to the
seas. The key events were the campaigns along the coasts of China leading to the
capture of the Song capital of Hangzhou 杭州 (1276) and then the total capture
of the southeastern and southern coasts, culminating in the great naval battle of
Yaishan 崖山 (1279), off an island near modern Macao. There the Song navy was
either destroyed or forced to surrender. Some loyalists did escape farther south to
continue the struggle, or at least the Mongols were afraid that they might.

Besides the destruction of Song, the Mongol campaigns of the 1270s in China had
two other major impacts. One was the fact that after 1277, Mongol China was no
longer simply a northern state peripheral to the Chinese maritime zone, focused as
it was on the south, but in direct contact with it. The pivotal event in this case was
the capture of the great trading city of Quanzhou 泉州 in Fujian 福建, Marco Polo’s
Zayton, taken in 1277. Secondly, Qubilai Qa’an (r. 1260–1294) had to create his
own navy to respond to the Song pretenders, the “two princes,” and their supporters
who, although continuing to be based on the land, also took to the seas, where they ended up surrounded by Mongols in a great floating fort comprised of Song battleships lashed together for one final confrontation.\footnote{10}

Once positioned along the coast, the Mongols not only built up their political position but their commercial as well. Cities such as Quanzhou and Canton, definitively conquered by 1279, not only continued to be commercial centers in and of themselves and much involved with the South Seas and Indian Ocean trade, but now became bases for further Mongol adventures using the new Yuan fleet and imperial resources, but also, at the same time, foundations for the largely private activities of ortaq merchants. Overseas they functioned side-by-side with the Chinese trading organization during the incursion into Java (1292–93), for example. The fit was, in fact, good since, particularly from Zayton, merchants involved in the long-distance trade often had strong Islamic connections. This was also apparently the case for the ortaq merchants as well.\footnote{11} Allsen suggests that the Mongols preferred commercial connections with Muslims in part because of their commercial networking skills.\footnote{12}

Mongol overseas adventures principally used the new fleets developed to fight the Song coupled with surrendered ships, principally Song but also ships from Korean allies. The thrust was in several directions at once, with a long-range Indian Ocean connection associated with the main offensives against Vietnam, with Champa, on the central Vietnam coast, considered the key to the Indian Ocean, and against Java. Also taking place were attacks on competing commercial centers outside the khanate (that is Yuan China) – the city of Hakata in Japan (1274 and 1281), for one example, and Van Don in Vietnam (1285 and 1288). The attack on Champa (1283) can be considered in this connection too, since it was basically a major trading center on the Vietnam coast. The ultimate destination was, of course, Java, where a local struggle had gone on to control the area in succession to the old commercial empire of Srivijaya (fl. 8th to 12th centuries).\footnote{13} This was a name applied to a succession of states controlling northwestern Java and nearby areas, and the Indian and Southeast Asian trade moving along their coasts. By Mongol times, all were long defunct, but other states had arisen to contend for control of the area and its trade, drawing Mongol interest and Mongol intervention in 1292. Eventually the rise of Majapahit after 1293 ended the conflict, but by then the trade was increasingly harder to control for anyone due to improved maritime technology and a shift more and more to direct voyages.

How contemporaries saw all this and the Mongol diplomatic thrust to the west is perhaps best seen from the great survey, a veritable itinerary, of Late Yuan trading focuses and partners by Wang Dayuan (fl. 1311 to 1350), the Daoyi shilue, “Short Monograph on the Island Barbarians.” Wang, who travelled just about everywhere he could by sea and land, including up the Red Sea to Mamluk Egypt, a popular destination for Chinese traders, even into interior Africa,\footnote{14} significantly states that connections to the “nations beyond the seas” begins with the Ryukyus,\footnote{15} that is to say, from Okinawa and those other islands off Japan so involved even then with international trade. If this is true, then the Mongol effort against Hakata makes sense as an effort to bring an entire trading system under its control.

The military attacks were ultimately unsuccessful, although Hakata and Van Don were severely damaged, as was the trade based on them. But the Mongol diplomatic offensive that had gone on simultaneously ultimately proved more successful, and by
the end of the 13th century such direct assaults had been more or less abandoned. In their place were direct voyages. Java was less important in such a context (one could sail right past) and Champa, for sure, was close to China and could be dominated at least, if not controlled. Exploration to and contacts with India and beyond now became the main thrust. How all this played out is currently the focus of major work by Francesca Fiaschetti.\textsuperscript{16}

**THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY**

Bearing considerable light upon what happened and what, for that matter, led up to later developments is a new field of inquiry, maritime archaeology. We now have the technology not only to carry out serious excavations under water, sometimes deep under water, but we can preserve and study the artifacts produced in a sophisticated manner, just like we have studied dry-land artifacts in the past, with the added advantage that a shipwreck complex is more precise. Shipwrecks happen once in a particular circumstance, and their recovery provides a specific cross-section of information, including what a ship was carrying and when. Underwater archaeology also provides a great deal of information, not only about how the ships of the time were structured, thanks to the surviving remains of large parts of them, but even where their building materials came from.

What can be accomplished can be seen from a number of timely publications. A recent work by Kimura Jun 木村純, for example, is his *Archaeology of East Asian Shipbuilding*.\textsuperscript{17} It generalizes in a careful way from specific wrecks described in detail and analyzed comparatively. A chapter is entitled “East Asia’s Link to the South China Sea and Gulf Traders” (209–237), which explores the issue of hybridization of ship types and long-distance trade, something on-going in the China Seas and within a wider Indian Ocean region. Focusing on a somewhat later period than what we are concerned with here, but still including early material by way of comparison, is Wu Chunming’s edited collection *Early Navigation in the Asia-Pacific Region, A Maritime Archaeological Perspective*.\textsuperscript{18} In addition to general works such as Kimura’s book and Wu’s collection, there are a number of more specific studies now being published as well. This includes what is now an extensive archaeology of the wrecks produced by the great Kamikaze when Qubilai tried to invade Japan by sea, both his attempts ending in disaster, the last spectacularly so.\textsuperscript{19}

What these sites and associated materials can show us is clear when we look at specific sites. Earlier than our period but yielding spectacular finds is the Belitung shipwreck\textsuperscript{20} of an Arab ship that included Chinese goods in its cargo. The ship’s cargo, 60,000 items, was mostly 9th-century pottery, including blue and white dishes,\textsuperscript{21} the earliest known, and a variety of other pottery types known also from China but in some cases decorated with their audience in mind, including Buddhist lotus symbols, even Koranic inscriptions and pottery colors that would appeal to the Islamic world. There were also miscellaneous items such as jars, ewers and inkwells; a large gold cup and a silver flask, both decorated; resins and spices; and even ballast ingots.\textsuperscript{22}

More recent wrecks and associated archaeology, in this case connected with Java, are the subject of an in-depth study by Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz in her “Sea Routes in Sumatran Waters, Indonesia: Surveys of Historic Shipwrecks in the Straits of Bangka,
Gaspar and Karimata.” In her paper, she surveys Indonesian shipwrecks from the 10th through the 19th centuries. She also looks at the contexts of shipwrecks, including ports and trade networks, but also Indonesia’s dominant position in trade, which often was carried on coasting via Indonesian ports (during the time of Srivijaya domination, in particular), although voyages tended to become more and more long-distance and direct as time passed. Other similar regional considerations like Tjoa-Bonetz’s also exist – that of Miksic based on Singapore, for example.

How trade and interchanges played out in practice can be seen, to be sure, in the archaeology, mostly unpublished – we are just beginning to analyze the wealth of material available fully – but also in literary and historical sources documenting Mongol activities in places such as Malabar. Malabar was a region in southern India facing the Arabian Sea and thus strategically located. It and surrounding states were among the major targets of Qubilai Qa’an’s India diplomacy. It extended towards India not only across the sea, from South China and past Java, but also from the north, via the advanced Mongol positions in Burma and Tibet. Several missions were exchanged between the Yuan 元 and the Malabar regions, most notably through the diplomatic efforts of Yuan officials on the spot in the 1270s and 1280s. The goal of such missions was apparently, at one level, submission and tribute, but on another, Mongol courts also wanted trading partners and, of course, commercial intelligence.

**TRADE AND DIPLOMACY**

As a consequence of such efforts, also the many diplomatic exchanges between Mongol China and local powers, not just in India, the shipping of Mongol China dominated the Indian Ocean from about 1290 until around 1340. There it was also connected to Indian, Arabic and Iranian shipping, even if the Chinese continued to be the active participants of the entire system at home in China, where they and their allies held ultimate control in the key homeland maritime zone.

One important route led along India to Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, then north to Shiraz, Tabriz and Trebizond, and from there primarily into the Genoese Black Sea trade, where exotic goods from the east were sent on to Europe. Typically, Marco Polo came by land but went back by sea via Iran, where he dropped off his princess. She was not the only princess involved in the area’s traffic. As Bade shows, from the Javanese perspective, women were what Qubilai was looking for to begin with. But intermarriages with the locals was a standard part of Mongol foreign policy to the point that Koryo Korea, thanks to all the princesses, became almost more Mongolian than Korean.

And what was carried in the trade, other than princesses? Almost everything that was carried by land was carried by sea but often in greater bulk, pottery, including porcelain, as one example. One surprise was horses, not just from Arabia to India but beyond.

Also popular were medicinals, and there was a lively trade. We know this because our principal source for Arabic medicine in China, the fragments of a hospital manual from Ming Dynasty times called *Huihui yaofang* 回回藥方, “Muslim Medicinal Recipes,” shows clearly that the medicinals called for in it are virtually identical to the medicines called for in the Cairo Genizah materials from Egypt, for example. Most of them came over the seas due to almost continual disruptions of the
land silk roads in Yuan and Ming times and the growing convenience of shipment by sea.\footnote{Of the individual medicinals called for in the Huibui Yaofang (HHYF), pepper seems strange as the most common, but pepper (both white and black) is a most important component of Galenic medicine, as are honey and saffron. Both are very popular in the HHYF. Pepper was primarily from India and saffron was from various places in North Africa, also from the Middle East and India. Of the items that follow in common use, myrobalans were primarily supplied by India when the HHYF was written, although they do grow elsewhere, even in China and Vietnam. Its medicinal aloes came from various places, but the best were from Socotra. In fact, Socotran aloe is specified several times in the HHYF. Chinese spikenard, also commonly called for in the text, is, as its name implies, Chinese but here is probably just a stand-in for Indian spikenard, \textit{Nardostachy jatamansi}. The roses grew in many places, but rose water and the other rose products used as medicinals were typically Middle Eastern. They were likely imported. The cardamoms, both the large and small varieties, were mostly from India. Long pepper, called for commonly, was mostly from India, although there is a similar plant found in Java. Grapes were grown in China, in the Inner Mongolian borderlands of the time, but wine, often called for in the HHYF, is typically western, as are the grape vinegars (other vinegars are called for just as vinegar and many of these may, in fact, be grape vinegar). The myrrh of the text was a well-known product of South Arabia, and dodder was another largely Middle Eastern plant, as is the text’s rue. Only with ginger, also often called for, do we come to a purely Chinese medicinal but one that was grown the world over and certainly used in Arabic medicine. Clearly, the most common medicinals in the HHYF were Middle Eastern or Indian, and most were likely direct imports.}

Just how Arabic and Western the medicinals of the HHYF really are can be seen from a comparison of the HHYF list with the most important Cairo Genizah medicinals. To be sure, the HHYF sample, even with a fragmentary HHYF, is larger and more detailed than the Genizah materials and includes kinds of material excluded by Lev and Amar as not likely to find practical use, but the results of comparisons are still striking.\footnote{The East and West made use of the same medical system. So the medicinals suggest trade and exchange in a highly significant way, and trade in medicinals is extremely easy to trace since many medicinals, as suggested above, come from specific places and areas. The Indian Ocean was clearly an important conduit in Mongol times, and Mongol official policies contributed to the upswing in its world importance. The existence of a Mongol regime in Iran was a major incentive but not the only one. Pure trade considerations were also important, as Ciočiltan makes clear, with the Italian city-state of Genoa functioning as a dominant influence and running the whole show, as it were, with a presence obviously in Europe but also in Iran and at points beyond, including China and Southeast Asia. In the end a pattern was created, one that persisted until the whole system, after a Chinese attempt, was dominated by an interloper, the Portuguese, but soon also by the Dutch and the English. The Indian Ocean had become the true interface fueling a world economy, but in most respects, this began with the Mongols.}

Genoa’s most important source of power was that it was established in all the major areas from which the trade developed.\footnote{In China, this soon meant the great
maritime cities which passed under Mongol control between 1276 and 1279 during the final period of the Song conquest.

Cities taken included the Song capital of Hangzhou itself, then the ports of what is now Fujian Province, including Quanzhou, also called Zayton by foreigners including Marco Polo, later Guangzhou, that is, Canton. Guangzhou and particularly Zayton were associated with colonies of Arabo-Persian merchants and others, still maintaining Western Asian connections even if assimilated to Chinese norms in some cases. In the case of Zayton, the city was even surrendered by one of them, the famous Pu Shougeng, who later provided a large fleet to help the Mongols finish off Song.32

Marco Polo was an eye-witness to the subsequent development of the area and the trade that passed through it. To him, Zayton was unquestionably one of the world’s great cities because of its trade and connections. He records:

In this city is the port where all the India (Indian?) ships come, with many commodities and luxuries, with many precious stones of great worth, and with many big, good-quality pearls. To this port come all the merchants of Mangi (which totally surrounds it), consequently, such a great abundance of commodities and stones come and go through this port that it is a marvelous thing to see; and from this city and port, they go throughout the entire province of Mangi. I tell you that for each shipload of pepper going to Alexandria, or other places to be carried to Christian lands, a hundred come to this port of Zaytun, for you must know that this is one of the two ports in the world where the most merchandise comes from.33

Polo also describes in similar terms other Indian Ocean trading points as well as some from outside, Champa, for example, and even Japan (for him it was all one larger zone called India). Like the Yuanshi, he has something to say about Malabar, part of his Greater India, to distinguish it from a more diverse “India.”34 For Polo and other travelers of the times, India was thus obviously greater than the geographical reality of the simple Indian Ocean. It was a significant system and commercial and cultural way of life, unified by past development and increasingly through an energetic Mongol presence, even if long-range.

NOTES

1 For a long-term view of the traditional commerce of the Indian Ocean from a world system perspective, see, in particular, Beaujard 2005, 411–465.
2 The classic study of this period of the trade, now old, is Schoff 1912.
3 See, as an introduction, the survey by Hourani 1995. For late Greek and Roman commerce, see also Innes Miller 1969.
5 The best introduction to the history of Chinese nautical science is Needham et al. 1971. See also Lo 2012 and Deng 1999.
7 On the voyage, see Cleaves 1976, 181–203. For a full Marco Polo bibliography, see Buell and Fiaschetti 2018.
8 Allsen 2019.
9 Praziak 2019.
11 Praziak 2019, 199–221; Allsen 2019, 154–166.
13 See Wolters 1970.
14 On geographical information of the time, see, as an introduction, Bretschneider 1967 (1888).
16 Fiaschetti, Forthcoming.
17 Kimura 2016.
18 Wu 2016.
19 See as a sampling: Sasaki 2015; Delgado 2008; Delgado 2010; Conlan 2001.
20 See Note 5.
21 This is not yet the classic Blue and White of Yuan 元 and Ming 明 times. Finlay 2010; Carswell 2000.
22 For the trade routes of the time and a bit later, see the map at https://easyzoom.com/imageaccess/ec482e04c2b4d49969c14156bb6836f (accessed 7 June 2019). For more maps, see also Allsen 2019.
23 Tjoa-Bonatz 2018, 79–90.
24 E.g., see Miksic 2013. I am grateful to Mai Lin Tjoa-Bonatz for supplying this reference.
25 See Fiaschetti, Forthcoming.
26 Ciocîltan 2012. According to Praziak, Tabriz’s Genoa connection really only began in the 14th century. See Praziak 2019, 202f and passim.
27 Bade 2013.
29 See Buell 2019, 261–293. See also Buell 2014, 133–140. See Allsen 2019 on pearls.
30 Lev and Amar 2008; Chipman 2010; Buell 2019; Buell and Anderson 2021.
31 Ciocîltan, op. cit.
33 Polo 2016, 141; Shottonhammer 2001.
34 Polo 2016, op. cit., 157.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Fiaschetti, Francesca. (Forthcoming) Limits of Belonging, the Concept of Foreign Land in Yuan China.


