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Global nexus (1500–1800)

Patrick Manning

Space-age technology enables us to gain views of the Earth at night – luminous images of what humankind has done to remake the surface of our planet. Of these views, one of the most arresting is that of the great semicircular littoral of the Indian Ocean, centred on the South Asian peninsula. It shows bright spots in Southern Africa and Western Australia, brighter spots along the coasts of Arabia and Indonesia, glimmers all along the ocean shore and a dense glow throughout South Asia. This tropical semicircle conveys at once the notion of communication along the littoral and of traversing the open ocean to link ports so as to satisfy complementary needs.

This concise overview of the Indian Ocean is an effort to honour the wide-ranging analyses of Michael Pearson, combining a look at the physical extent of the region and its long-term historical experience with citations of his works on these issues. The objective is to provide a context reaffirming the particular historical significance of the period from 1500 to 1800 in the long and deep historical experience of the Indian Ocean (Pearson 2003, 2010a).¹

Today's Indian Ocean littoral sustains the legacy of human habitation during many thousands of years. The commonality of this landscape and seascape – with shared flora and fauna, terrestrial and maritime, along its lengthy littoral – provided a welcoming habitat for the humans who began expanding ever outward from their Northeast African homeland, once they developed language. Speaking humans moved southward along the African coast and, at much the same time, moved eastward along the Asian coast, in each case moving inland along river valleys when the opportunity arose. The travel was both maritime and terrestrial from the first – across the Bab el Mendeb from Africa to Arabia, along the coast on both continents and eventually across the ocean from Sunda to Sahul. Early human settlers thus formed a great semicircle from South Africa to Australia, on and near the shores of the Indian Ocean. From this base, later generations moved inland, especially via rivers such as the Rovuma, Zambezi, Euphrates, Indus,

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Godavari, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Mekong and Red River. With the passage of more time, other settlers moved west to Africa's Atlantic, north throughout Eurasia and eventually into the Americas. Nevertheless, as widely as humans were to become dispersed, the initial semicircle of settlement around the Indian Ocean remained an important base of human population, where humanity developed many of its innovations. The descendants of these early settlers gradually developed both diversification and interconnection, as the diversifying languages, cultures and social and economic patterns were linked by recurring migrations and exchanges of heritage.

Continents and subcontinents frame the waters of the Indian Ocean: this terrestrial frame generates the monsoon-centred climate that stands as the outstanding regional characteristic. The great landmasses gain heat in the summer, forcing winds across lands and waters. Asia and Northeast Africa force winds to the south during the northern summer; continental cooling during the winter draws winds to the north. These patterns are reinforced by the heating of southern Africa and Australia in the southern summer these landmasses, when heated, force winds to the north. The seasonal shifts cause the winds to blow dependably north and south every year; the rains come from the humidity gathered over the oceans. But the monsoons vary over time according to the strength of the sun's impact on each latitude. The strength of monsoons in each part of the ocean basin changed from weak to strong, from south to north, according to the three types of change in insolation resulting from variations in the earth's orbit, from annual changes to cycles of many thousands of years. In addition, an east-west variation in climate imposed itself occasionally on the north-south alternation of the monsoons - the El Niño Southern Oscillation, created by varying insolation of the Pacific Ocean, brought alternations of heat and cold, humid and dry, that cut across the Indian Ocean in cycles ranging from two to seven years.

During the first millennium CE, mariners had learned the monsoons, how to sail them and how to link up the markets for commodities: the littoral linked each region to the next and to the islands, all across the great semicircle. In addition, a few major routes tied the Indian Ocean to other world regions facilitating long-distance commerce and migration. The Red Sea formed a path to the Mediterranean; the Persian Gulf opened the way to the West Asian interior; Khyber Pass was the route to Central Asia; and the Ganges and the Brahmaputra led to the interior of North India and to the mountainous route to Yunnan and south China. Finally, through the straits of Malacca and Sunda, maritime routes led to China and to the Spice Islands.

Michael Pearson's scholarly focus on the Indian Ocean reached back into early times but settled most seriously on the period beginning with 1500, as Portuguese and Spanish navigators entered the region from opposite directions so that global communication and commerce took form, and ending in 1800 as Britain gained hegemony throughout the region and began shipping

cotton textiles to India rather than the reverse. This chapter confirms the wisdom of Pearson's choice, by comparing the commercial fortunes of the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800, with the preceding and following periods, to show that the intermediate "early modern" era was the time in which the great tropical semicircle played the most central role in the global economy.

Commerce in an era of Islamic expansion (1200-1500)

The era of the Medieval Warm Period (as it was labelled in northwest Europe) is known to have brought a warm and humid climate to most regions of the world from 900 to 1250 CE. It therefore brought ample harvests and growing population to the Indian Ocean region. From 1250, temperatures stabilised and then declined from 1350 for some four hundred years before beginning to rise. During the period to 1500, the Indian Ocean region experienced relative peace and prosperity.

Within the confines of the Indian Ocean, the ancient commercial system continued to mature. Ships from three traditions crossed the seas, transshipped goods in harbours and underwent repair in home ports and distant workshops. The dhows of the Western and Eastern Indian Ocean, the proas of the Malay mariners and the junks from China, each type built at varying scales, maintained their original designs yet adopted innovations from each other. The principal ports changed, over the centuries, though the regions served by shifting ports changed little. An overlapping set of languages was employed in commerce, varying across the regions and over time.

Regions, ethnicities and religions served as markers of culture and identity: the ancient settlement of the region meant that there was deep cultural diversity in the Indian Ocean region, but it also meant that devices had been developed for exchange and communication across the persistent cultural divides (Pearson 1994).2 In the era from 1200 to 1500, migrations were relatively small scale and took the form of trade diasporas or missionary diasporas. Trade diasporas included those of Armenian and Gujarati merchants; religious diasporas included those of Islamic missionaries to East Africa and the Malay lands and Buddhist missionaries from Ceylon to Thailand and Burma.

Commerce of the Indian Ocean extended in various directions beyond the limits of the tropical semicircle. From the Western Indian Ocean, exchange had long taken place along the East African coast; with the Mediterranean, through the Red Sea; with West Asia, through the Persian Gulf and the Tigris-Euphrates Valley; and with Central Asia, through the Khyber Pass. From the Eastern Indian Ocean, the valleys of the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy led to southwest China, while the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Sunda led to the Spice Islands and the South China Sea (Pearson 2010b).3

In this expanded network, built around an Indian Ocean core, commerce flourished as never before in the era from 1250 to 1350. During that

century, a world economy linked markets from Europe to Japan through the Indian Ocean, with overland connections as well. Commodities in this trade included silks from China, cottons from India, pepper from India, spices from the Spice Islands, diamonds from India, pearls from South Asia and the Gulf, ceramics from China and Persia, coffee from Ethiopia, tea from China, horses from Arabia, furs from Siberia and wheat and rice from many farmlands. While the Mongol regime controlled the Silk Road, no one state controlled the commercial links through the Indian Ocean. Mongol-era warfare had spread advanced military techniques back and forth across the Old World, but many other sorts of exchanges took place in peacetime (Pearson 1997).4 These included exchanges of spoken and literary languages, religious knowledge and belief, maps, astronomy, medical and other knowledge and technical knowledge in agriculture and printing. Cowrie shells from the Maldives spread as far as the Yellow River Valley, the western Mediterranean and the Niger Valley. Cinnamon and nutmeg reached Japan and Iberia.

States rose and fell throughout this commercial network, causing disruption as they fought wars of conquest and sought to repress rebellions but protecting and facilitating commerce in intervening eras of peace. The commercial hub of Srivijava lost its long hegemony over the straits of Sunda and Malacca as did its competitor Chola on the Coromandel Coast at the end of the thirteenth century, but Majapahit rose to replace Srivijaya and Vijayanagar rose to replace Chola. Ghaznavid rule in India and Persia came to an end in the twelfth century, but the Delhi Sultanate expanded Islam in North India from 1206. Buddhist priests from Ceylon successfully spread Theravada Buddhism to the lands that are now Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia, while Hinduism rebounded in India with the fourteenth-century rise of Vijayanagar. Muslim communities, commonly maritime, spread to East Africa to North India and along the coast, carrying goods as far as China, where they established diaspora communities. Islam had won over Arabia and Persia in its early days and entered North India from Ghaznavid times. Established mosques were expanded along the Swahili coast; new mosques were constructed in Malay lands.

At a global level, the era from 1200 to 1600 was a time of collisions and crises, which made the Indian Ocean appear peaceful and orderly by comparison with other regions. The Mongol conquests (1206–1280) and the Black Death (beginning in the 1340s) were the two greatest collisions, one in human affairs, the other with the natural world. Genghis Khan had conquered all of the Eurasian steppes before his death in 1227, and his successors had seized all of Persia and China by 1280. (But Mongol expeditions against the Delhi Sultanate were unsuccessful, and their occupation of Java was brief.) The Black Death, an epidemic of plague resulting from the bacterium Yersina pestis, killed great numbers in many parts of the eastern hemisphere in the mid-fourteenth century and then returned at less severe levels

for centuries. The plague is now thought to have broken out in North China and to have killed millions there. The immense plague mortality in Europe, 1347–1351, has been well documented; a heavy but less well-documented mortality is known for West Asia, Egypt and North Africa. New research is indicating that plague mortality may also have been significant in South Asia and South Arabia and from Ethiopia west to the African Atlantic.

The Indian Ocean region was the largest region of commercial interchange and had the most fully developed practices in exchange within the region, facilitating commerce with other regions. A widely recognised emblem of the region's achievement in commerce and navigation is the work of the maritime scholar Ibn Majid (1421–c.1500), born on the gulf shore, who sailed and documented the western Indian Ocean: his numerous treatises on navigation, along with his poetry on maritime life, brought the art of seamanship to a high level in the fifteenth century (Pearson 2007a).⁵

The nexus of global commerce (1500-1800)

In the sixteenth century, two new commercial routes opened for the Indian Ocean. The cape route to the Atlantic opened with the voyage of Vasco da Gama in 1498; the trans-Pacific route opened in 1571 as the Spanish established regular galleon voyages from Mexico to Manila. This was of course also the era in which maritime travel linked all the populated regions of the world, bringing discovery and disaster at first but eventually bringing growth and transformation. These additional openings to and from the Indian Ocean created the era, from 1500 to 1800, in which the Indian Ocean played a transformed yet distinctive role as a nexus of global commerce and communication. Such expansion of global commercial contacts was to facilitate expanded and transformed trade in every region. Iberia and Northwest Europe developed as a new global commercial centre, relying on shipping routes in all directions. The East Asian commercial hub, linking China, Japan and Korea, maintained its centrality and developed new ties, especially with trans-Pacific trade linking Manila to Acapulco. Smaller commercial centres developed in the Caribbean and West Africa, but they did not thrive. The Indian Ocean arguably benefited the most, especially early in this three-century period, because of its clear links to all other regions.

The conditions of climate and disease in this era were not initially favourable to economic growth. Global temperatures declined slowly but steadily on to 1650, an unusually cool and trying time worldwide, and only then began to rise. Epidemics of plague, while declining in frequency and intensity, continued into this period. The steady expansion in interregional contact during this era meant that diseases, both old and new, struck and occasionally reduced populations. So the expansion in the volume of Indian Ocean trade after 1500 (assuming that it can be firmly documented) is all

the more impressive in that it moved ahead despite declining temperatures and the continuation of serious disease.

Changes in the Americas brought effects in the Indian Ocean. From the early sixteenth century, waves of epidemic disease led to dramatic population decline throughout the Americas, as a result of pathogens brought especially from Europe and Africa. Disease spread around the world through human communication - as an instance, syphilis, originating in the Americas, had reached Melaka in 1511 and by 1512 had reached Japan. In the "Columbian Exchange," biota from the eastern hemisphere and the western hemisphere were exchanged, especially beginning in 1492. The results brought new crops to the Indian Ocean, notably chili peppers, peanuts, pineapples, maize, potatoes and squashes, that ultimately changed diet and cuisine.

Yet the trade of the Indian Ocean, while it expanded, did so under complex conditions. From the moment of Portuguese entry into the Indian Ocean, they emphasised the militarisation of trade, an approach later reaffirmed by their Dutch, English and French successors. For the period from 1500 to 1580, Portugal was the one European state with significant trade in the Indian Ocean, monopolizing the trade around the Cape of Good Hope, facilitating trade to China and seeking to dominate trade within the Indian Ocean. While the Portuguese established great military influence, they did not succeed in monopolizing trade within the region (Pearson 1969, 1976a, 1984, 1987, 1998b, 2002, 2007b).6

The Ottomans challenged the Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century with naval campaigns to drive them from the western Indian Ocean but fell short. From 1580, competing European states offered a challenge, seeking to beat the Portuguese at their own Indian Ocean strategy: Spain (under the dual monarchy), Netherlands, England and France each attempted their own version. They neither expelled the Portuguese nor dominated regional commerce, yet they profited because they shared in the expanding total volume of Indian Ocean commerce. Exports of cowries and cotton textiles went to West Africa via Europe to nourish the Atlantic slave trade, which grew at 2 per cent per year. Silver entered the region in unprecedented quantity from the Americas, crossing the Pacific to Manila and crossing the Atlantic to Seville and then dispersing through multiple processes (Pearson 1993, 2001b).7

Throughout the early modern era, the Indian Ocean littoral hosted numerous encounters of various types, among peoples of the great oceanic basin, including expatriates. Although the East African encounters have been neglected by some authors, Michael Pearson provided several valuable explorations of the commercial, cultural, and military links along the East African coast (Pearson 1998a, 1998c, 2000, 2007c).8 Other connections included the exchange of knowledge on medical practice, notably between Portuguese and Hindu practitioners (Pearson 1996, 2001a, 2006).9 Further exchanges of knowledge in the early modern era included reform

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movements within Islam, for which ideas developed in Indian Ocean regions could be debated in Mecca during and after the annual hajj (Pearson 1986-87, 2007d).10

If one characteristic of European commercial incursions was the militarisation of trade, another characteristic of trade in the post-1500 era was the expanded focus on slavery. While slavery had characterised the previous period in the Indian Ocean (as with the purchase of Turkish slaves from Central Asia and slaves from Northeastern Africa, many of them males for military service), the level of enslavement grew after 1500. Europeans in the Atlantic world expanded the emphasis on enslavement to the greatest degree, and Europeans in the Indian Ocean relied more heavily on slavery than most other merchant and imperial groups, but the demand for cheap labour in a search for rapid profit characterised the socio-economic patterns of every region, with the number of enslaved persons rising each century from the fifteenth century to a peak in the nineteenth century. Dutch merchants in particular gathered captives in Southeast Asia to be sold in Java

and the Cape of Good Hope.

The largest states of this era were, in significant measure, successor states of the Mongols: the Safavids and Mughals (and, at greater distance, Ottomans, Romanovs and Ming). Majapahit collapsed in the early sixteenth century, defeated by Muslims. The Persianate Qutb Shahi Dynasty took power in Hyderabad; Vijayanagar survived while Majapahit came to the end of its three centuries of leadership as Muslim forces overwhelmed it. With powerful naval forces but small numbers, the Portuguese were able to join in regional diplomatic affairs without being able to dominate; the same was true for the Dutch and other Europeans after them. The Portuguese seized key ports and made them into colonial outposts: Mozambique, Hormuz, Malacca, Goa and others. The Dutch seized some of these, such as Malacca, and established others. Up to the late eighteenth century, European states in the Indian Ocean were colonial outposts and their immediate hinterland. These had replaced the independent city-states that had existed before, such as Mombasa and Hormuz. One independent city-state that preserved itself well into the eighteenth century was that of the Siddis of Janjira, an island off the Konkan Coast. Founded in the fifteenth century as an independent maritime city-state with a population descended from enslaved Africans, it specialised in naval warfare, at times in alliance with the Mughals. The Mughals declined in the face of the Marathas (Pearson 1976: 221-36).11

Although the Portuguese lost military hegemony on the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century, Portuguese language remained significant as a lingua franca, and people of Portuguese identity remained a significant influence throughout the region. People who spoke the Portuguese language and professed Catholicism, regardless of their ancestry, adopted Portuguese identity and played intermediate roles as headmen of work groups, commercial employees and domestics.

The multi-directional, multi-lingual nature of commerce in the Indian Ocean led to a complex but lively system of work and exchange of knowledge. In ship-building and repair, work on the pre-existing dhows, proas and junks was now supplemented by work on European caravels, fluyts and, briefly, Ottoman galleys. Once the Ming Dynasty reopened the doors to Chinese overseas trade in 1568, merchant vessels went especially to Manila, to exchange silks for silver, and to Batavia, where Dutch vessels assumed the task of distributing their wares throughout the Indian Ocean. In addition, however, Chinese vessels voyaged throughout the eastern Indian Ocean, as is confirmed in the Selden Map, a detailed map of ports and sea routes prepared between 1607 and 1619, identified in Chinese characters. A division of labour developed in which the larger ships were European owned and operated while the smaller vessels were owned and operated by people of the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, as indicated in Dutch records of ships and crews, the polyglot crews became mixed to a considerable degree.

Commodities flowed within the region and beyond it. Textiles and cowries went to West Africa, to nurture the European-led slave trade that built plantations in the Americas. Textiles went to Europe as well; cottons went to China in return for silks. The spice trade became more worldwide. An expanded commerce in silver chased rising demand - silver from the Americas reached the Indian Ocean by crossing the Pacific, by crossing the Atlantic and then to the east. Demand for gunpowder brought expanded mining

of saltpeter.

Late in the eighteenth century, the Indian Ocean revealed hints of big changes to come. As the English East India Company gained military and civil control of much of Bengal with its 1757 victory at Plassey, the company gradually developed a plan for seizing the subcontinent as a whole. The Mughal state had declined significantly in power, especially because of the rise of Maratha influence in the west. The English failed in their first effort to displace the Maratha (1775-1782). Yet during and after the Napoleonic Wars, the English achieved hegemony in India through battles from 1803 to 1818.

Colonisation and decolonisation, since 1800

With the nineteenth century, European-led capitalism expanded outward from the Atlantic basin. Within the Atlantic, North America arose as a supplementary and competing nexus of commercial and industrial activity. The growth of this pair of hubs enabled them to exceed the other great commercial hubs, the Indian Ocean and East Asia, in the volume of commerce and commodity production. Two great canals, across Suez and Panama, facilitated oceanic commerce significantly. Yet in a time when markets in manufactured goods were expanding, the workers of the Indian Ocean found themselves producing primary goods and raw materials. India came

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to export opium to China, along with cotton yarn and wheat to England, while sugar plantations expanded in India and the Dutch East Indies.

The lands of the Indian Ocean benefited from rapid technological change that brought them telegraphs, steamships, railroads, printing presses and photography, yet at rates in arrears of the advances in Europe and the North Atlantic, Meanwhile, a second slavery had been expanding throughout the tropics from the late eighteenth century, despite the concurrent movement for slave emancipation. In the Atlantic, this second slavery centred in Cuba and Brazil. In addition, it grew in eastern Africa, the Middle East, the western Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia and India - to a peak in about 1860 and an overall decline only thereafter. In other regions, migration of free people rose from the 1840s to an unprecedented level, as Indian workers moved independently or as contract labourers to Fiji, the West Indies, Southeast Asia and western Indian Ocean destinations. At the same time, migrants from South China moved in great numbers, especially to Southeast Asia. Out of these migratory movements, voluntary or involuntary, there arose diaspora communities that later became powerful in the cultural and political affairs of their lands of residence and in their ancestral homes.

Britain had already taken hold of Rangoon and Singapore (and would soon annex Hong Kong) when, in the 1840s, British Indian Ocean patrols began efforts to suppress the oceanic slave trade. This soon led to annexation of ports along the African and Arabian littoral. These ports expanded into protectorates, and, by the 1890s, Great Britain had achieved imperial hegemony over the Indian Ocean. Britain's Indian Ocean empire was complemented by the smaller-scale colonial regimes of France, Netherlands, Germany, Portugal and Italy, thus putting virtually the entirety of the Indian Ocean under direct European rule. For another fifty years, none were in a position to contest British hegemony. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, British officials sought with some success to place themselves as leaders in the Islamic community of the Indian Ocean, for instance in conveying pilgrims by sea to Arabia for the haji (Pearson 1977: 87–103).12

Nevertheless, by 1970, virtually all of the Indian Ocean was politically independent, and by 2000, the whole region was economically growing (Pearson and Tonsich 1972: 132-73).13 Empire had declined, and independent city-states arose where colonial outposts had earlier been: Singapore, Brunei, Qatar, Abu Dhabi and Djibouti. The Indian Ocean, which had been the principal nexus of the world economy from 1500 to 1800 (though in a situation of contested political leadership), lost its economic leadership and lost all political independence in the nineteenth century. By the twenty-first century, however, the region had regained a position as a major nexus in the global economy, although now ranked fourth after North America, Europe and China.

This narrative has recounted the rise of the Indian Ocean region to global centrality (though not global control) in the sixteenth century, as the world

economic system completed its intercontinental connections. What followed was the eclipse of the Indian Ocean as the North Atlantic gained the central role in the world economic system during the nineteenth century. This tale is not proposed as an explanation of why Indian Ocean commercial leadership did not reproduce itself from period to period. It does, however, suggest that further study of this question could take place on a scale somewhat larger than that of the previous analysis. That is, rather than investigate the Indian Ocean alone or the Atlantic alone, it may be that resources are becoming available that can enable investigation of the Indian Ocean, East Asia, the North Atlantic and other regions in the context of the world economy as a whole, for the period from the fourteenth century forth. Perhaps then we will learn the causes of what we observe.

Notes

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