

GLOBALIZATION – Ancient Period

Early History: Dispersion of the Species

Hunting and Gathering Hunting and gathering societies require a lot of space – an average of over two square miles per person, depending of course on local climate and conditions. As a result, even modest population growth (and most such societies worked fairly hard to maintain a low birth rate, among other things through prolonged lactation) can force movement to a different region. We increasingly learn that even earlier versions of the human species, such as *Homo erectus*, generated bands of people who migrated long distances from the original human homeland in East Africa. Certainly *Homo sapiens* had such experience, after an initially stable period. Groups pushed out not only into other parts of Africa, but into the Middle East, where one segment ultimately branched into East Asia (and later from there to the Americas), and another group traveled into South Asia and Europe. This was all one-way migration, of course, without subsequent contact with the place of origin. But it created a situation where the effective beginnings of human world history emphasized dispersion and considerable separation. By 10,000 BCE, on the advent of agriculture, about 10 million people lightly populated virtually every area that currently enjoys human habitation; New Zealand and some of the Pacific islands were the main exceptions. This dramatic dispersion meant that local groups easily developed fairly separate habits, even languages, interacting almost exclusively with near neighbors. Far-flung contacts – save for the one-way migrations themselves – were not part of the early pattern. And some groups, like Australian aborigines, would be cut off from further contact for many millennia.

Types of Early Interaction By 10,000 BCE or so, at the point in which agricultural economies began to emerge, the domestication of animals began to allow for a new, nomadic lifestyle that would differ both from agriculture and from hunting and gathering. Nomads, particularly in central Asia but also in Central America, the Middle East and parts of Africa, could play a special role in facilitating contacts (both hostile and friendly). The advent of early cities, in largely agricultural regions such as present-day Turkey, also obviously promoted contact, at least insofar as they depended on interactions with the countryside. And the emergence of even a small merchant class, normally a part of the urban agenda, favored a group from which more far-reaching contacts might emerge. While most agricultural populations remained tied to individual regions, with little or no wider travel, changing conditions were beginning to generate some new habits that could set the stage for more ambitious interactions.

Advantages of Contact The big advantage of a wider outreach was, of course, the opportunity to trade for goods that were not available locally. The materials had to be fairly easy to transport – early long-distance trade could not be based on bulky items – but precious stones and metals, a few special minerals, a few particularly desirable condiments could easily qualify. The first evidence available for trade among regions dates from around 5000 BCE. By that point ornamentation produced in an Indian Ocean society was reaching Syria; we do not know whether individual merchants made a full trip or whether the jewelry passed from one locality to the next. By that point or soon after, seafarers from present-day Indonesia began traveling in the Indian Ocean, possibly occasionally reaching Africa – a source of transmission of some Southeast Asian food plants to Africa. Early shipping was emerging, obviously, but also the widespread use of donkeys as pack animals for overland transportation.

Ongoing Trade After 3000 or so, early civilizations in Mesopotamia were trading with their counterparts in present-day Pakistan (Harappan civilization). Egypt began trading in the Red Sea and down the African coast, receiving gold, slaves and spices in return for manufactured goods. Longer distance trade in this case definitely involved short journeys with key cities – for example, Dilmun (present-day Bahrain) -- serving as transmission centers for items like precious stones produced elsewhere. As one result, purchasers of spices and jewels often had no notion where they really came from. And knowledge of distant regions was not only scanty but often amazingly fanciful, as in the accounts of the Greek scholar Herodotus. But some characteristic symptoms of growing trade clearly

developed, including travel themes in early Mesopotamian and Indian stories and even accounts of pirates in the Persian Gulf. Interregional exchange – though in neighboring regions and without any indication of regular routes or connections – was clearly underway. And the process continued: Phoenicians ventured quite widely, through the Mediterranean but also along the Atlantic coast of Africa and Europe, even trading for tin in Britain. Commercial motivations and skills were emerging that would feed directly into the next phase of exchanges.

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From Egypt to Mesopotamia: A Study of Predynastic Trade Routes By Samuel Mark (Texas A&M University Press, 2006)

Premodern Trade in World History by Richard L. Smith (New York, Routledge, 2009).

Questions

1. What does pre-classical art reveal about early contacts among human societies?
2. Why and how as the Middle East so central in early interregional trade contacts?
3. What does food exchange suggest about early contacts?
4. What were the limitations in the range and impact of early interregional contacts?

5. What were the main motivations in early interregional contacts?

The Classical Period

Key Civilizations From about 800 C.E. onward, more extensive civilizations developed in Persia, the Mediterranean, China and India, creating great cultural and institutional traditions that echo still today. Each society, partly through military conquest, created larger territories, ultimately yielding great empires. New cultural traditions – like Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Confucianism in China – helped establish identities at least for the upper classes, and created some degree of unity throughout the regions. Distinctive social systems and accelerating internal trade also marked the emergence of the classical societies. In all this, regional factors predominated: the focus was on expansion and integration of separate entities. China, for example, devoted tremendous energy to uniting the southern and northern portions of the new empire. But the classical civilizations also generated new outreach, partly on the strength of advances in agriculture and manufacturing. This outreach maintained many of the earlier limitations of long distance trade, but innovations occurred as well. The famous Silk Roads but also new routes in the Indian Ocean established connections and experiences that would begin to build a more extensive and more durable framework for transregional exchange.

Infrastructure Classical civilizations built new roads and canals, primarily to facilitate internal communication, including the movement of troops; but the result could encourage transregional trade as well. Persia, because of its central geographical location, was a particularly important case in point. Persian emperors built an elaborate road network, stretching from India to North Africa and the Mediterranean; the highway system stretched over 8,000 miles. The Emperor Cyrus also built inns to house travelers, spaced a day's journey apart, with water supplies (he also set up the world's first postal system, but this was for internal use). A Greek later described the result: "With you Persians, every way is easy, every river is crossable, and there is no dearth of provisions." The Roman road system and the construction of new Mediterranean ports, the mix of roads and canals in China (with 22,000 miles of highway) were other instances in which improvements for internal coordination could provide new transportation resources for wider trade as well.

New Motives The sheer power and economic strength of the classical civilization inevitably attracted attention from neighbors. Persian emperors, for example, received gifts from sub-Saharan Africa (including elephant tusks), as well as India and southern Arabia. Gift exchange also played a role in new Chinese interactions with the nomadic rulers of central Asia. Chinese emperors, rightly concerned about central Asia as a source of invasion, were eager to conciliate their neighbors. Emissaries (including reluctant brides for nomadic chieftains) represented the first formal occasions in which Chinese began to travel more widely. Gifts, including silk products, were similarly the first instance in which Chinese products began to be exported for transregional trade. In fact, the Chinese sent more silk than the nomads could handle, and they began to pass the surplus westward, for sale in India or the Middle East – the origins of that great pattern of exchange. More than gift-giving was involved with central Asia: the Chinese depended heavily on the region for a supply of horses. Other cases of government sponsorship of exchange involved the Roman Empire's organization of regular fleets to India, from ports on the Red Sea. And of course merchants soon joined in directly, seeking profit; this ultimately became the principal sustainer of new exchanges.

The Silk Roads Small amounts of Chinese silk began to reach the Middle East as early as the 6th century BCE. Persians interwove silk on their military banners. By the first century BCE silks entered the Mediterranean trade routes, proving a very popular embellishment for the togas and gowns of the Roman upper classes in Europe and North Africa. Various routes thus began to link western China not only with central Asia, but also through that region to India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean world. Exchange was of course mutual. From the west came precious stones, carpets, furs, exotic (mainly African) animals, and "the eggs of great birds" (probably ostriches). The trade was almost entirely carried in short hops, mainly by nomadic merchants who would carry the goods two hundred miles or so, then transship to another merchant caravan at one of the central Asian cities such as Samarkand.

The Indian Ocean Less famous than the Silk Roads, but possibly more important (certainly more important in the future) were routes established for regular trade in the Indian Ocean. Improved ships, including the Chinese invention of the rudder, facilitated growing activity. India was the central point here, though Southeast Asia was also involved. Spices were the core of the trade. Romans, for example, developed a great fondness for pepper from India, for cooking and for medicinal purposes. Pearls and incense from East Africa entered the trade, and this was the point at which an Asian interest in rhinoceros horns began to develop. The Mediterranean world supplied goods such as wine, but also tin, linens made in Egypt, and gold. Indeed – foreshadowing a later issue – Romans found it difficult to provide enough goods to pay for the spices they sought, which is why they had to add gold to the exchange, prompting worry that too much wealth was being drained away. There was no question about the level of activity: at their height, annual Roman fleets to India included 120 ships, with archers to repel pirates; and colonies of Roman merchants operated in Indian coastal cities. Active trade also developed between China and Southeast Asia, where products like incense candles gained a strong Chinese market. India traded cottons and glass products (along with Roman gold coins) with Southeast Asia, in return for spices.

Limitations Transregional trade, and the appeals to upper-class consumer tastes and merchant profit-seeking, became genuinely important in the classical period, setting a basis for even wider efforts in later periods. Some historians quite plausibly as the essential origin of the kind of commercial exchanges that would ultimately generate globalization. But there were key limits as well, including the fact that transregional trade was only a minor category compared to the level of economic activity (and other exchanges) within the individual civilizations themselves. Far more energy was internally-focused at this point. Further, particularly along the Silk Roads, relatively little travel was really long distance. The short hops limited transregional experience and impact. Romans did not even have a very clear notion of what China was (Chinese knowledge of Rome seems to have been a bit more extensive). A Greek writer (who did visit India) wrote about “Thina”, noting that it was not easy to get to and very few people ever came from there. At most one merchant expedition made it all the way from Rome to China (in 166 CE), and we are not sure even about this (Chinese records suggest the emissaries brought gifts which did not impress the emperor); and there is no record of Chinese travel all the way west. This limitation explains another one: there were very few corollaries to the new patterns of trade. Very little cultural or technological knowledge seems to have been transmitted. No other society at this point, for example, caught on to the Chinese invention of paper. Chinese trade with India, at the end of the classical period, did facilitate the exchange of Buddhism, but while this was very important it was also exceptional. There are, admittedly, a few mysteries attached to this period of exchange. We know that the Indian Emperor Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries widely, the first such effort, beginning the process of spreading this religion to places like Sri Lanka. Did missionaries also reach the Middle East (for we know of no wide conversions)? Is this where the Middle East learned about the idea of using halos to surround holy figures in art, initially a Buddhist practice?

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Questions

1. What was China's role in the contact patterns of the classical period?
2. How did India develop a key role in interregional trade in the classical period?
3. Discuss the trade policy of the Roman Empire
4. Why were nomads so important in regional trade during the classical period?
5. What were the limitations in the contact patterns of the classical period? Is it useful to see classical trade connections as pre-figurations of globalization?