

Spice Route

Encyclopedia of World Trade: From Ancient Times to the Present

Spice Route

A medieval trade route connecting the Eastern and Western portions of the known world and a catalyst for the fifteenth century's epic sea voyages that led to the discovery of the American continent and the Caribbean.

The Spice Route as defined today originated in India and threaded its way through Arabia, North Africa, Egypt, and western Europe. Over the centuries, control of the world's spice trade has been passed among Arabia, the Venetian Republic, Portugal, Spain, England and the Netherlands.

Unlike the overland Silk Road, the other major East-West route, the Spice Route was primarily on water. Ships made their way to the Middle East on the Indian Ocean and returned by sailing around the Arabian Peninsula and up the Red Sea to Cairo and Alexandria or up the Persian Gulf and overland to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.

European Diet

The dismally tasteless diet of the Europeans fueled an insatiable demand for anything that would make it more savory. Before the invention of refrigeration technology in the nineteenth century, salting was the preferred method for preserving food, but this rendered it nearly inedible. Medieval diners had to find other ways to make their meals palatable.

Spices were indispensable to this goal. Peppercorn from India's Malabar Coast became the most prized spice because it could overpower the saltiness of preserved foods. During the Middle Ages (476–1453), Europeans considered it so valuable that by the eleventh century many towns used pepper as currency. A sack of pepper was as valuable as a man's life.

Other spices were nearly as precious. One pound of ginger was worth one sheep, and a pound of mace was worth three sheep. The countries of the Spice Route supplied the world with such staples as cinnamon, mustard, parsley, cardamom, marjoram, turmeric, gums, and resins.

Spices did more than add flavor. They were used in medicines, fumigants, perfumes, fabrics, and religious ceremonies.

The transportation of spices from their points of origin to their destination was based as much on politics as on shipping capabilities.

By 950 B.C.E., Arabia had become the broker between the East and West on the strength of its merchants' success in keeping the origins of the spices a secret. In the Middle Ages, these merchants acquired their spices directly from India, the East Indies, and from the Javanese and Chinese ships that moored in Indian ports. They funneled the cargo to Egypt, where Western ships picked the bounty up and returned home.

In the thirteenth century, the Venetian Republic emerged as the dominant Western power in the spice trade, owing to good fortune and crafty leadership. In 1095, Venice had the foresight to serve as a supply depot for Christians joining the Crusades. The Fourth Crusade enhanced the status of Venice as a merchant power in

1204, when the city gained control of Constantinople. This city-state eventually controlled all trade coming through Cairo, having struck a monopoly agreement with the Arabs.

Venice's main competitor was Genoa, which had itself acquired the Byzantine empire trade in 1261. This gave Genoa control of the Black Sea and cleared the way for its expansion into Africa and Central Asia. Venetians solved their differences with Genoa in 1381 when Venice defeated its rival in battle. By this time, Venice had established a stranglehold on European spice imports.

But the monopoly was already unraveling, and one of Venice's own merchants proved to be its undoing. In 1271, Marco Polo, his father, and his uncle journeyed to China, where Polo befriended Emperor Kublai Khan and wrote extensively of his travels. His account of their twenty-four years in Asia was published as *The Travels of Marco Polo* and became a sensation.

Polo revealed the information that Arab merchants had struggled to keep secret from their European customers: the source of the spices. The race was on to find a route that would shatter the Venetians' monopoly. This purpose was at the root of the sailing expeditions known as the voyages of discovery.

Pioneering the Sea Route

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Portugal was the first to succeed on these voyages, in large part owing to its unprecedented knowledge of navigation and shipbuilding. Prince Henry the Navigator, the third son of King John, founded his own shipping company and established a school of navigation. His mariners learned the science of using the magnetic compass and creating navigational charts just when Portuguese shipbuilders were figuring out how to build vessels that could sail against the wind.

Bartolomeu Dias was the first of Portugal's seamen to find a way to the East. He forged a route around Africa's Cape of Good Hope to the Indian Ocean in 1487. A decade later, Vasco da Gama's ten-month expedition took Dias's route around Cape of Good Hope to Calicut on the coast of India, a feat that broke the Venetian Republic's grip on the trade.

Spain attempted to find its own route in 1492 when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella agreed to fund Christopher Columbus's voyage. That effort failed to reach India, because Columbus stumbled onto the Americas instead. His discovery was a boon to food lovers everywhere, who could now indulge in such Native American delicacies as chocolate, tomatoes, potatoes, corn, and chili.

Spain bowed out of the spice trade when King Charles ceded his rights in this arena to King John of Portugal in favor of the Spanish conquest of Latin America. It was left to other countries to fight over which one would become the world's spice merchant.

In 1497, Britain made its quest. Giovanni Caboto, a Venetian navigator who had relocated to England and rechristened himself John Cabot, sailed under the British flag to Canada, which he mistook for Asia.

In 1519, the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan sailed under the Spanish flag and discovered a water passage at the tip of the Tierra del Fuego in South America linking the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The passage now bears his name, the Straits of Magellan. Although Magellan was killed in the Philippines in 1521,

his voyage continued under the command of Juan Sebastian de Elcano, making it the first to circumnavigate the earth. Sir Francis Drake sailed under the British flag in 1577 and arrived on the west coast of North America by way of the Straits of Magellan, only the second European after Magellan to successfully navigate this treacherous crossing. But it was the success of Portugal's voyages and its conquest of the Malay port of Malacca (Melaka) in 1511 that gave Portugal supremacy over the East Indian spice trade for the rest of the century.

In 1595, the Dutch brothers Cornelis de Houtman and Frederik de Houtman took an expedition to the Spice Islands (Moluccas). Their success led to the formation of the Dutch East India Company in 1602, two years after the British formed their own East India Company. In 1664, the French founded a similar trading endeavor.

The Dutch and British ventures were the more powerful. The Dutch East India Company monopolized trade from the East Indies while the other oversaw trade in mainland India. In 1641, the Dutch wrested control of Malacca (Melaka) from the Portuguese. The Dutch eventually took over Ceylon's cinnamon trade and nearly all trade in Java. War broke out between the Dutch and the English in 1780 that had a devastating effect on the Dutch East India Company. By 1796, the British controlled all Dutch interests in the East Indies except for Java, and two years later the Dutch East India Company was dissolved.

The British East India Company went out of business in 1873 after political upheaval and international objections to its monopoly eroded the business. The power of any one country to monopolize the spice trade faded in the intervening years, and the business of spice trading fell to the free market. By that time, the legendary spice merchants and the mariners who sought the origins of the trade had succeeded beyond their boldest expectations.

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