From the first century C.E., people, goods, and ideas moved over several well known and long-established routes: the Indian Ocean route by sea and the Central Asian Silk Road by land, as well as the two established African connections, the trans-Saharan roads and the East African coastal system. In Europe, middle-distance systems, including the Viking route into Russia, were well established by the tenth century. Along such major systems of communication and exchange and at their ends were regional and local distribution networks.

The Silk Road

For a thousand years before the Mongol conquest of Eurasia in the early thirteenth century, one of the most important east–west interconnections was the Silk Road across Central Asia, created between the second century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. By the first century C.E., large and wealthy market zones lay at the eastern and western ends of Asia: Han China to the east and, to the west, the Parthian Empire in Persia with its connections to the Roman Empire in Europe. Routes through Central Asia linked trade between these markets, but there was little guaranteed security to reassure cautious merchants. Before the Silk Road, goods moved sporadically and in small quantities. For 1500 years following its establishment, the Silk Road provided the main land connection over which people, technology, trade, and ideas moved between East and West Asia, Europe, and North Africa. As West Asian merchants and Roman soldiers reached eastward and Chinese merchants and Han armies stretched westward, Central Asian oasis states thrived along this caravan route. Gold was one of the most important items of trade, but spices and other luxury items were also traded. Han mirrors and coins found their way into Roman tombs as symbols of an era of rich contacts between East and West.

Origins of the Silk Road

The beginning of the Silk Road can be dated from expeditions sent out by the Han government (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). In 139 B.C.E., the Chinese emperor commissioned an expedition into Central Asia to solicit support against the Turkic Huns who were pressing China’s northwest borders. The Chinese government sought to bring Central Asian states into tributary relations, but it also wanted to establish trade relations to obtain commodities such as the famous horses of the Central Asian kingdom of Ferghana. Although the ten year expedition failed to gain the support the Han sought, it brought to the Chinese knowledge of peoples and places as distant as Syria, and by the end of the first century C.E. China had succeeded in imposing sufficient political control to ensure security for trade across Central Asian regions.

Commerce and Culture along the Silk Road

Not only goods such as silk, for which the caravan route was named, but also ideas traveled the Silk Road. For example, Buddhism was initially brought to China via the Silk Road from India in the beginning of the first century C.E. Commerce along the Silk Road reflected the course of Chinese political history. During times of imperial vigor, trade was protected and goods moved expeditiously. When Chinese imperial power weakened and became ineffective, trade declined. With the fall of the Han Empire in the early third century, the Chinese presence in Central Asia waned. But with the rise of the Tang dynasty (618–907) and the restoration of Chang’an in the northwest as the capital of a powerful Chinese empire, the Silk Road once again flourished with its eastern terminus at the Chinese capital.
Han Chinese Diplomacy and Exploration along the Silk Road

Zhang Qian, a Han ambassador, traveling on missions which began in 139 B.C.E., not only developed military and political intelligence of great use to Han policy but also had an eye for commercial opportunities. While in Bactria about 128 B.C.E., Zhang Qian noticed for sale Chinese bamboo and textiles which came from southwest China by way of Bengal. This suggested to him the possibility of establishing safe roads from China to Bactria through India, thus protecting trade from the unfriendly peoples in Central Asia. His report on the famous horses of Ferghana inspired Han Wudi to send an expedition of 30,000 soldiers on a campaign to obtain them. Zhang Qian not only served Han diplomatic interests, he alerted Central Asian people to the possibilities of Chinese trade, and the resulting commercial relationships served to carry Chinese products west. The subsequent Western demand for Chinese silk and other products, and the Chinese interest in Western horses, had a powerful commercial and cultural impact on Eurasia.

The Indian Ocean

The maritime routes of the Indian Ocean were established about the same time as the overland Silk Road and were its primary competitor in east–west world trade. They were less subject to breakdowns of security and political disruptions than the overland routes were and consistently carried larger quantities of goods and people. Long-distance maritime trade in the western Indian Ocean existed from the third millennium B.C.E., and by the first century C.E. the number of ports had significantly expanded. Shipping linked East Africa and Southwest Asia with India, Southeast Asia, and China. The earliest connections were made by ships that moved slowly, hugging the great northern loop of coastline between East and West. Early in the first century B.C.E., at both the eastern and western ends of this long, complex route, market conditions and political circumstances forced a change in the pattern of coastal trade: the Indian Ocean route became a maritime highway spanning the ocean between eastern and western ports.

Conflicts accompanying the Chinese expansion into Central Asia in the period 100 B.C.E. to 100 C.E. interrupted commerce along the Silk Road and access to the Siberian gold that had provided the main currency of Asian trade. Merchants moved south to the maritime routes as a safer means of increasing exchanges with West Asia and the Mediterranean, where the wealthy and stable Roman Empire could provide new supplies of gold. In response to the new demand for the rapid movement of larger amounts of goods through the Indian Ocean, the main shipyards of the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the southern Arabian coastline built larger ships for heavier loads and refined sailing rigs to add speed. Supported by larger, faster ships and tempted by the larger market demand, Indian Ocean mariners were able to cut the four-month west–east coasting voyage to forty days by taking advantage of steady monsoon winds to sail directly from southwest Arabian ports to India.

Expansion of Indian Ocean Connections

The effects of the first-century expansion of Indian Ocean trade were felt all along the route. From the west, the Roman government expanded its shipping down the Red Sea and into the Indian Ocean. To reinforce its new trading position, it signed international trade agreements with Indian governments, setting price ranges and guaranteeing protection for Roman shipping. Increased Roman trade along the Indian Ocean route meant a steady flow of gold to Asia, a fact commented on by Pliny the Elder (23–79), who in his *Natural History* speaks with disapproval of the drain on Roman gold reserves. According to Pliny, more than half of Rome’s gold went to India, primarily for pepper and cotton textiles.

India and the Indian Ocean Route

Following the withdrawal of Alexander the Great from India in 326 B.C.E., the centralized government of the Mauryan Empire (ca. 326–184 B.C.E.) developed administrative offices to cultivate and control the flow of wealth derived from increasing trade. The *Arthashastra*, a book of statecraft begun by the first Mauryan prime minister and probably completed around 250 C.E., describes how certain ports for international trade were managed and controlled by a port commission headed by a director of trade, whose job it was to set fair prices on international goods based on costs of production, customs duties, shipping costs, warehouse rent, and other
expenses. Even with the decline of Mauryan power and regulations, port towns, concentrated on the southern coasts of India, continued the trade with Southeast Asia and China as well as with West Asia and Africa, developing a demand for goods and services to support their activities and thereby maintaining southern India’s population and economy with the east–west connections of the Indian Ocean trade routes.

China and the Indian Ocean Route

China, too, was affected by the emerging Indian Ocean highway, especially in its southern coastal provinces. First-century Chinese sources document the trade facilities and goods available along the route, as far west as Persia and Roman Egypt. Even more than China, Southeast Asia was shaped by the burgeoning east–west long-distance maritime trade. Sustained by the wealth of such commerce, regional empires were established and became the standard pattern of large government in the area during the first 1500 years C.E.

To a large extent, Southeast Asian ports served as a conduit for Chinese trade with the Arabs and Africans. Arabian frankincense, one of the main ingredients in incense used in religious ceremonies and also in many medicines, and African ivory, along with Southeast Asian spices, were among the staples of Indian Ocean trade destined for Chinese markets that passed through the ports of Southeast Asia. Chinese products in demand by its trading partners included silk, tea, and manufactured goods such as ceramics. Technology, people, ideas, and institutions also diffused along the same trade routes used by merchants. The Record of Foreign Countries (1225), by Zhao Rugua, a Chinese maritime official probably based in the southern port of Quanzhou, provides detailed descriptions of such distant places as Baghdad, information gleaned from his contact with both Chinese and foreign traders. Built on market demands and innovations in maritime technology, the economic power of the Indian Ocean trade network was impressive. By the second century, despite the efforts of some states to monopolize the ocean trade, the east–west maritime route helped create an interdependent Indian Ocean world. The Indian Ocean connection provided societies and cultures along its borders with a constant fertilization of new goods, people, and ideas.

African Routes: Trans-Saharan and East African connections

Africa, at the far western end of the Silk Road and Indian Ocean routes, in addition to participating in the east–west exchange, provided a south–north connection which added another dimension to established global commercial and cultural interaction. Across the huge continent, main highways were developed to link the inter-African markets and to connect them with Asia and Europe.

The Saharan Land Route

There were two major historical frontiers of global interconnection in Africa: the Red Sea and Indian Ocean frontier of East Africa, and West Africa’s Sahara frontier. Although the commerce of the Red Sea–Indian Ocean frontier was maritime and that of the Sahara frontier was land-based, both seemed to border on oceans: the Sahara, a formidable desert some 3 million square kilometers (3 million square miles), may be considered an ocean of sand. The Arabic word sahel translates as “coastline,” and in the Sahel region that borders the desert’s southern edge were situated many “ports” of entry. Like the oceans of the East African frontier, the desert sands were not a barrier but rather a space to be regularly traversed, which Africans did along well established trade routes beginning at least as early as the second century.

Of the southbound caravans we know little. Mediterranean and North African goods certainly must have included foodstuffs such as wheat and honey, textiles, books and paper, perfumes, jewelry, and other luxury items. The remains of a twelfth-century caravan found near Majabat al-Koubra included 2000 brass rods, in all weighing a ton, tied to the backs of camels. Historians can only surmise that the caravan became lost in the desert between oases. Salt mined in the Sahara was also a significant part of the desert’s commercial relations. Northbound caravans carried southern products: kola nuts and pepper from the forest, ostrich feathers, leather goods, and gold. Kola nuts were especially important in the Muslim world from Asia to Africa, where they were chewed as a stimulant and used socially in place of alcohol, which the teachings of Islam forbade.
In the centuries before 1500, trans-Saharan trade with Europe is documented by the regular appearance in European markets of such items as “Moroccan” leather, a product actually manufactured in the Sudanic region of present-day Nigeria. For the centuries of the Common Era, no African goods captured the attention of world trade so much as West African gold. Like Siberian gold, that of Africa supported many contemporary European currencies. It was the rumor of gold, as well as other wealth on the African continent, that inspired the Portuguese and later European sea voyages that were to change the established global connections and significantly affect the global balance.

The Impact of the Camel on Commercial Connections

Traders made up the largest number of world travelers. By the second century, travel by ship and caravan was adequate for both regional and long distance commerce. Trade moved steadily through a series of regional exchanges between West Africa and East Asia and culminated in large markets where both ordinary and exotic goods were traded. Along the lines of communication connecting Asia and Africa with the Mediterranean coast, basic types of ship and sail construction, as well as navigation and caravanning routes and practices, were commonly known and used, regions borrowing from one another and each using what suited it best.

Between 100 and 500 C.E., the camel, the “ship of the desert,” was introduced to the Sahara from West Asia via Egypt. The use of the camel was an innovation in African overland trade equivalent to improvements in maritime technology. The camel led to faster, more frequent, and more regular commerce. Bred in different sizes and structures for different terrains, the standard one-hump camel could carry loads of up to 250 kilograms (550 pounds) while traveling more than a week without water. Sometimes described as a difficult and disagreeable pack animal, those who used camels paid homage to them in poems and essays by extolling their beauty, gentleness, speed, and patience or by comparing the human experience to that of the animals, as in this northeast African love poem by the Somali poet Maxamed Good:

Unless I see you I never get nourishment from sleep  
Like a young camel I bellow out to you  
I am to you as a she-camel is to her adopted calf when her own has been killed.

Other poetry, such as this excerpt from a poem by the Somali poet Axmed Ismaaciil Diiriye, reveals the realities of desert journeys:

The camels are packed and ready for the weary trek  
And men’s thoughts dwell on distant destinations.

By both land and sea, merchants moved luxury goods and commodities between towns, regions, and continents, delaying or changing their shipments according to shifting markets, wars, rumors, and weather. Driven by hopes of profit, they sought out trade items that might increase their wealth. Commodities in general demand, such as salt, which is essential to both humans and animals but is not readily available everywhere, were commonly traded in both regional and international commerce.

Problems and Profits of the Saharan Trade

Journeys across the Sahara were filled with danger, as the bones and debris of lost caravans show; they could last for months, and oases could be as far as ten days apart. Even once tolls and duties were paid to local authorities to ensure safe passage, caravans were under constant danger of attack by thieves and bandits. Shifting dunes and blowing sands could confound even experienced guides. The hazards were great, but so were the potential fortunes to be made. Reliable estimates of Akan gold production, a major source of Saharan trade, suggest that during the 1400s, 5,000 to 22,000 ounces of gold were produced each year. This enormous wealth was supplemented by fortunes to be made in the trading of brass vessels, kola nuts, and salt. In addition, the Saharan commercial network served as a conduit for the transfer of technology and ideas. The great Saharan ports of Sijilmasa, Timbuktu, Gao, and others were the entry points for a lively exchange of peoples and
cultures. Through these ports passed traders and travelers from Genoa, Venice, Ghana, Cairo, Morocco, and beyond. The area known as Ghana was reportedly ruled by the Kaya Maghan, or “Lord of Gold.” In the eighth century, the Arab writer al-Bakri reported that the king had a thirty-pound nugget of gold to which he tethered his horse.

African Indian Ocean Routes

The second African long-distance trade network focused along the East African coast and was linked to the Indian Ocean trade. The area’s seasonal winds and the Indian Ocean’s currents reverse their direction every six months, which enabled voyages to return to the East African coast from southern Arabia, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian subcontinent within a single year. Beginning at least as early as the first century, the East African coastal strip thrived on regularized seaborne trade, which proved as profitable as that along the West African trans-Saharan routes. Ports from Adulis on the Red Sea down to Mogadishu on the Somali coast of the Horn of Africa supplied products from the hinterland to the Indian Ocean world.

In East Africa, coastal settlements served as trading posts in a complex African commercial system; there, goods were produced both for Indian Ocean export and for trade with the interior of the continent and for local conspicuous consumption. Archaeological excavations of East African settlements dating from the ninth to fourteenth centuries confirm a wide array of exotic imports, such as glazed Arab, Persian, and Indian ceramic wares, Chinese porcelain, glass beads, and the like. Chinese coins and ceramics have also been excavated in inland sites such as the fourteenth-century city of Great Zimbabwe, located 300 miles inland from the Mozambican coast.

Great Zimbabwe was the capital of a twelfth-century state which controlled large goldfields that made it very important to Indian Ocean trade. Cloth was also of special significance along the East African trade frontier. Locally woven cotton textiles were exported, and silks and other exotic fabrics, in locally unavailable patterns, were imported. In exchange for imports, Africans exported products they manufactured, natural resources, and their labor: iron and steel, stone vessels, gold, ivory, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn, frankincense, myrrh, ebony and other hardwoods, and slaves, who were prisoners of war or victims of famine and debt.

The Social and Cultural Impact of Trade

As in West Africa, the development of long-distance commercial relations added to the prosperity of the East African coastal settlements. Such prosperity rested on preexisting African mercantile interests, a well established, stable indigenous foundation that could welcome the arrival of foreign merchants and support the increasing complexity of coastal society. A distinctive culture that was influenced by other Indian Ocean trading peoples, particularly the Arabs, developed along the East African coastal strip. It was urban, literate, and cosmopolitan, and its large and impressive centers were cities along the coast and on islands such as Lamu, Zanzibar, and Kilwa. From the mix of Arabic and Bantu-speaking residents developed the uniquely African language and culture known as “Swahili.” In turn, that culture spilled back along the trade routes to influence, among other things, the architectural style of coastal and southern Arabia.

While historians once viewed the East African coast as being on the periphery of an international maritime commercial network and subject to external influence or even colonization, the participation of coastal cities and settlements in trans-African and Indian Ocean commerce has now come to be viewed in a different light. No massive immigration seems ever to have taken place. Rather, local coastal economies and cultures increasingly became centers of a remarkable process of urbanization and state formation. Here, as elsewhere, the selectivity of Africans resulted in the adoption of some ideas and items of material culture brought there by Indian Ocean voyages and the rejection of others. Like the cities, states, and empires connected with the West African and trans-Saharan trade routes, East African coastal cities were products of indigenous peoples and cultural traditions enriched by foreign contact.