

## Mediterranean Trade Routes prior to 1450 C.E.

Improved transportation technologies and commercial practices led to an increased volume of trade, and expanded the geographical range of existing and newly active trade networks.

Existing trade routes continued into this period but all experienced significant changes, including the integration of growing commercial cities.



"Although Afro-Eurasia and the Americas remained separate from one another, this era witnessed a deepening and widening of old and new networks of human interaction within and across regions. The results were unprecedented concentrations of wealth and the intensification of cross-cultural exchanges. Innovations in transportation, state policies, and mercantile practices contributed to the expansion and development of commercial networks, which in turn served as conduits for cultural, technological, and biological diffusion within and between various societies. Pastoral or nomadic groups played a key role in creating and sustaining these networks. Expanding networks fostered greater interregional borrowing, while at the same time sustaining regional diversity. The prophet Muhammad promoted Islam, a new major monotheistic religion at the start of this period. It spread quickly through practices of trade, warfare, and diffusion characteristic of this period."

## THE MEDITERRANEAN NETWORK

Since the days of the Phoenicians, Greeks, Minoans, and the Romans, the Mediterranean Sea was a major trading region. This trend of valuable commerce carried into the era of 1000 C.E. when Venice became a major center for merchants who sailed to and from the Black Sea, Atlantic Coast, and other Mediterranean cities. Much of the wealth came from the sale of Asian goods, via the Red Sea through Alexandria, Egypt. The Venetian merchants sailed to the North African coast and sold these goods across the Mediterranean Basin as well as within their home city.

*Strayer, Ways of the World p.324-325. ed.*

In the previous period (600 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.) the Mediterranean saw its heyday of trade under the territorial height of the Roman Empire. Like the Silk Road trade, this network declined when Rome weakened. However, the rapid spread of Islam across North Africa and the continuation of Roman civilization in the **Byzantine Empire** would revive trade in the post-classical age. As with all networks in this era, the religion of Islam had a positive impact on trade. Sharia law, the establishing of qadis and courts, along with the high regard with which Islam holds merchants (Muhammad was a merchant) all led to an increase of commercial activity where Islam had a significant presence. The Egyptian cities of Cairo and Alexandria, now under Muslim rule, became powerful commercial centers of the Mediterranean network. Muslim and Jews established trading firms in Cairo which benefited from the lucrative trade in silk yarn and cotton textiles. Into the Mediterranean flowed precious gems and perfumes from India, along with the long standing trade items of olive oil and glassware.

**Constantinople**, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, became an important hub of trade owing to its location between Europe and Asia. A major portion of the Silk Roads ended on the Black Sea, where goods would be loaded onto ships and carried through the Bosphorus into the Mediterranean. The city's control of trade provoked the jealousy of the merchants of Venice, a powerful commercial city-state that thrived on the Italian peninsula at this time. Venetian merchants helped steer the Fourth Crusade toward Constantinople in order to gain a larger share of this trade.

*[http://apworldipedia.com/index.php?title=Key\\_Concept\\_3.1\\_Expansion\\_and\\_Intensification\\_of\\_Communication\\_and\\_Exchange\\_Networks](http://apworldipedia.com/index.php?title=Key_Concept_3.1_Expansion_and_Intensification_of_Communication_and_Exchange_Networks)*

Between 534 C.E. and 750 C.E. outbreaks of bubonic plague were common around the coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea. Black rats from India came on cargo ships through to North Africa and spread into the region, especially ravaging the city of Constantinople. Disease played an important role by preventing the Byzantium linking back with Rome and by weakening the Christian armies when under siege by Muslims from Arabia in the seventh century.

*Strayer, Ways of the World p.324-325. ed.*

**Key Questions to consider and discuss.**

1. How did the spread of Islam after 625 C.E. change trade within the Mediterranean region?
  
2. The text states that the main demand during these times was for goods from Asia. What specific goods do you think they were? Why were they in such great demand?
  
3. Why do you believe that the Europeans wanted these goods?
  
4. What is the relationship between the Bubonic Plague in the Mediterranean to the Age of Exploration and the Discovery of the Americas?
  
5. Italian merchants became very wealthy during this time period. What was a major effect of their wealth?