**Chapter Eighteen:**   
Trade and Empire in the Indian Ocean and South Asia 1450 – 1750

**Chapter Eighteen Focus Questions:**

1. How did Swahili Coast traders link the East African interior to the Indian Ocean basin?
2. What factors account for the fall of Vijayanagara and the rise of the Mughals?
3. What factors enabled Europeans to take over key Indian Ocean trade networks?
4. Why was the tiny sultanate of Aceh able to hold out against European interlopers in early modern times?

**Chapter Eighteen Summary:**

Even before the rise of the Atlantic system, the Indian Ocean basin thrived as a religious and commercial crossroads, powered by the annual monsoon wind cycle. India was at the center of this trading system, and gunpowder-fueled empires both on land and at sea began to bring change. From the original port towns and trading centers, to the empires of Vijayanagara and the Mughals, the vast majority of people were peasant farmers, and the armed conflicts that disrupted everyday life usually meant a rise in tribute demands for most ordinary people. As the Europeans brought silver and Christianity into the basin, and forcibly took over key ports, and the Mughals brought gunpowder and Islam, they were forced to deal with different religious traditions to make a profit; thus many inhabitants did not convert, and religious tolerance remained the rule. As European interlopers arrived in larger numbers, they adapted to local cultures of trade when force was impractical, but with the decline of the great land empires, they began to alter established lifeways. Expansion into the interior by the Dutch VOC and English EIC would grow into full-blown imperialism in the nineteenth century, but a few outliers, such as the sultanate of Aceh, examined in the Counterpoint of this chapter, managed to hold out, if only for the time being.

**Chapter Eighteen Annotated Outline:**

1. Backstory
   * 1. For centuries before the rise of the Atlantic system, the vast Indian Ocean basin thrived as a religious and commercial crossroads, powered by the annual monsoon wind cycle.
     2. Ideas, religious traditions, and pilgrims moved along these routes, but the vast majority of the region’s inhabitants were peasant farmers, many dependent on rice agriculture.
     3. India was at the center of the basin’s trading system, and although American silver was brought by the Portuguese, it was not until after the decline of the Muslim gunpowder empires in the eighteenth century that the Europeans gained control on the Indian Ocean shores.
2. Trading Cities and Inland Networks: East Africa
   * 1. The history of early modern East Africa is best understood in terms of linkages among Indian Ocean traders.
     2. By 1500, Muslims predominated in these East African trading ports, but many were native Africans who spoke Swahili, a Bantu language laced with Arabic terms.
     3. Although European and Ottoman traders tried to control East African trading ports, these ports on the Swahili Coast remained largely independent until the imperial scramble of the late nineteenth century.
3. Port Towns and Beginnings
4. The East African coast had been a regional crossroads since Muslim trader-missionaries had arrived in the eighth century C.E., and early modern East African traders continued this commerce.
5. Most of these trading ports were towns, and nearly all were walled, but only the most opulent had mosques of stone or coral block, rather than adobe.
6. In exchange for tributes, local princes protected merchant families, negotiating with inland chiefdoms for trade goods and subsistence items.
7. Indian Ocean Connections Port Towns and Beginnings
8. East African traders exported ivory and gold in exchange for cloth and ceramics, along with spices and tobacco (after 1500). African gold was an essential world currency prior to European expansion into the Americas.
9. Most goods were carried in dhows, swift, single-decked ships with triangular sails, and despite the value of the goods, shippers traveled only lightly armed (violent theft at seas seems to have become a serious threat only after the arrival of the Portuguese).
10. Chinese maritime visits to East Africa were few, and most Chinese goods came to East Africa only through Southeast Asian intermediaries. The Chinese retreat from the Indian Ocean left a void that early modern European interlopers were happy to fill.
11. Links to the Interior
12. Almost all Swahili town-dwellers relied on nearby agricultural plots for survival, and many traded with independent cattle herders in the interior.
13. In additions, slaves and gold dust, two of the African products in greatest demand overseas, came from the interior.
14. Ivory, the demand for which has led to the extinction of elephants in part of Africa in modern times, appeared to be more of a byproduct of subsistence hunting.
15. By 1500 trade was thriving between East Africa and partners in the Indian Ocean basin, but the arrival of the Portuguese would disrupt the balance.
16. Since the Portuguese had nothing to offer the merchants of East Africa, India, and the Arabian Sea, they turned to force, using their guns, strong ships, and fort-building to profit from Indian Ocean trade by impeding it and enforcing monopolies.
17. Trade and Empire in South Asia
    * 1. As in East Africa, dozens of independent trading enclaves in south Asia prospered in early modern times, but populations were larger and more diverse than those of East Africa.
      2. India’s port cities maintained close ties to the subcontinent’s rich interior, home to two major empires at the time: the Muslim Mughal Empire in the north and the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara in the south.
18. Vijayanagara’s Rise and Fall 1336 – 1565
19. Vijayanagara grew into an empire around 1500, only to swiftly disintegrate, and because of its demise and the near-total loss of written records, it remains one of the most enigmatic empires of the early modern period.
20. Vijayanagara was said to have been founded by two brothers in 1336 who hoped to revive a purist version of the Hindu state. Hundreds of temples were built along the Tungabadhra River gorge to venerate the state’s deities.
21. Hindu rulers were often seen as divine kings, and their most important duties were performing sacred rituals, rather than the concerns of imperial administration, and their lives were mostly scripted by traditional sacred texts.
22. Life cycled between a peaceful period and a campaign season, when the king and his forces traveled the empire battling with neighboring states.
23. Hindu kings participated in warfare, and were seen as the exemplar of the Kshatriya, or warrior caste, not the technically higher ranking Brahman, or priestly caste.
24. Krishna Deva Raya was Vijayanagara’s most well-known king, who used both diamonds and the constant flow of tribute for the rajas that allowed him to build his “city of triumph.”
25. When the Portuguese arrived, following their 1510 conquest of Goa, they served as horse-traders to Krishna Deva Raya, which allowed him to extend his boarders, and allowed the Portuguese to send home some of the largest diamonds seen in Europe.
26. Dependent as it was on trade, the expansion of Vijayanagara required a policy of religious tolerance. Jain merchants helped like it to the world beyond India, and Muslim coastal merchants were involved as they had great access to luxury imports and warhorses, since Brahmanic law largely restricted Hindu trade to the land.
27. The early Portuguese policy was to exploit niches in this trading system, not to conquer Vijayanagara, but simply to drive out competing Muslim merchants.
28. Though trade was of great importance, the empire’s economy was based on rice cultivation, which was both grown to feed its people, but also exported.
29. Following Krishna Deva Raya’s death in 1529, Vijayanagara fell victim to internal succession rivalries and Muslim aggressors, and in 1565 the capital of Hampi was sacked, plundered, and abandoned. By the seventeenth century, only a few Hindu states remained around the fringes of South Asia.
30. The Power of the Mughals
31. As Vijayanagara crumbled in the south, a Timurid Muslim warlord named Babur was creating the Mughal Empire in the north. Accumulating wealth from plunder and tribute, and using newly introduced gunpowder weapons and swift warhorses, they subdued dozens of Hindu and Muslim principalities.
32. The Mughals were outsiders who adapted to local cultural traditions to establish and maintain legitimacy, and their rapid rise drove up demand for luxury imports.
33. Despite rule by Muslim overlords, most South Asians remained Hindus, but those who converted to Islam enjoyed some benefits, like tax exemptions.
34. Similar to religion, the economy of South Asia was little changed after Mughal conquest. New markets emerged in the Americas, supplied by the Portuguese, and since they lacked goods Indians wanted, Europeans paid in hard cash, which allowed for funding armies and fueling construction, such as the Taj Mahal.
35. True to the Timurid heritage, Mughal rule was marked by both extraordinary court opulence and near-constant power struggles and rebellions, which led to decline, and eventual fall of the Empire.
36. Gunpowder Weapons and Imperial Consolidation 1500 – 1763
37. The emperor Babur spent most of his life defeating Afghan warlords, as the fighting shifted over time from horses and archers to gunpowder weapons, that continued to prove decisive as Babur and his successors drove south.
38. Babur’s sun, Humayun, suffered numerous setbacks, but eventually regained his father’s territory before his death, and it was decided that his twelve-year-old son Akbar would be the next Mughal (emperor).
39. By Akbar’s time, the traditional Sunni Timurids had been connected to Shi’ite Safavid and Hindu royalty, and the Mughal emperors themselves had been undergoing steady “Indianization,” as the wealth and diversity of the subcontinent, and the beauty and charm of Hindu princesses absorbed them.
40. Akbar’s eclectic personality helped this process, and by the 1570s he began formulating his own hybrid religion, which was a variety of emperor worship. Although it won few lasting converts, its mere existence demonstrated an enduring Mughal tendency toward accommodation of religious difference.
41. By the end of Akbar’s reign, the Mughal Empire stretched from Afghanistan to Bengal, and south to Bombay. His son, emperor Jahangir was less ambitious, and his addictions and interests led him to hand power to his favored wife, Nur Jahan, an effective administrator, but not a conqueror.
42. New conquests under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb carried the empire south, but few innovations were made. Shah Jahan was an observant but tolerant Muslim, whereas Aurangzeb was a true holy warrior, who called for a return to orthodoxy, and his religious fervor was a major force in the last phase of Mughal expansion.
43. Under Aurangzeb’s successor, Muhammad, stagnation and contraction set in, as rebellions sapped the empire’s resources and Muhammad’s guns proved increasingly outmoded.
44. The empire fell into disarray after Delhi was lost to the successor of the Safavids in 1739, and in 1763, what was left under Shah Alam II fell under British influence, and Alam II ruled as a puppet of the English East India Company until 1806.
45. Typical of early modern empire builders, the Mughals shifted between peaceful pragmatism and deadly force, and the heightened commercial activity and influx of bullion did not beget modern industrialization.
46. Everyday Life in the Mughal Empire
47. Despite its Islamic core and general religious toleration, Mughal India remained sharply divided by status, or caste, as well as other social distinctions.
48. Women’s lives were circumscribed in all but regal and wealthy merchant circles, and the Hindu practice of sati, in which widows committed suicide by throwing themselves onto their husbands’ funeral pyres, continued under Islamic rule.
49. Lower-caste folk suffered regardless of gender, with the Untouchables, who disposed of human waste, animal carcasses, and other jobs with filth, being the worst off. While Mughal elites defined their own dignity by denying it to those around them.
50. Most subjects were subsistence farmers, many tied to landlords through tributary and other obligations, and the Mughal state thrived by inserting itself into existing structures, rather than by reordering local economies.
51. Most South Asians lived on only a small daily ration of rice or millet, seasoned with ginger or cumin, and some fruits were seasonally available, but protein sources were limited.
52. The Columbian Exchange was marginally helpful, and maize spurred population growth in some parts of India. Cities grew rapidly, and the economy become more monetized, especially after the shift to tax collection in cash.
53. Several South Asian coastal and riverside cities produced abundant cotton and silk textiles, while other artisans specialized in woodworking, leather making, blacksmithing, and gem cutting, but the most visible artisanal legacy from Mughal times was in architecture.
54. Some men found employment in the shipyards but Gujarati Muslim merchants dominated the Arabian Sea, and the Mughals never developed a navy.
55. An internal challenged emerged in the Punjab region by leaders of a new religious sect, Sikhism, which was something of a hybrid between Islam and Hinduism.
56. The Mughals ruled over the richest and most populous of Eurasia’s early modern Islamic empires, but the rule was neither intolerant nor authoritarian. There were internal threats and challenges, but the most serious were those by European commercial agents, such as the British East India Company, which formed the spearhead of a new imperialism.
57. European Interlopers
    * 1. Direct trade for Indian luxuries had been a dream of Europeans, but they had little that appealed to South Asians. Only silver and gold found universal acceptance because they functioned as money.
      2. Frustrated, the Portuguese turned to piracy, financing their first voyages by plunder rather than trade.
58. Portuguese Conquistadors 1500 – 1600
    * 1. Genuine Portuguese conquest in Asia were few but significant, as conquistadors focused on strategic sites for their fortified trading posts.
      2. The Portuguese grand plan was to monopolize all trade in the Indian Ocean by extracting tolls and tariffs from local traders.
      3. By tapping existing trade networks and setting up feitorias, they could efficiently collect spices and textiles, along with what were essentially extortion payments, but the method would only work as long as they faced no completion and remained unified.
      4. Serious competitors would not arrive until about 1600, but Portuguese unity was another matter, as the distance from Lisbon made it impossible to enforce consistent policy with Indian Ocean merchants and princes.
      5. Portugal’s efforts to convert the many peoples of the Indian Ocean basin to Catholicism failed even more miserably than in Atlantic Africa. Small Christian communities formed, but everywhere they went, missionaries faced millions of hostile Muslims and uninterested Hindus, Buddhists, Confucianists, Jains, Parsis, Sikhs, Jews, and other.
      6. Despite this religious failure, trade was brisk. The *carreira da India*, or India voyage, became legendary in Portuguese culture, but death rates were high, and Portuguese vessels were huge, and built for cargo rather than speed or maneuverability.
      7. By the late sixteenth century, Portuguese monopolies had weakened. Shipwrecks and piracy became more frequent, as did competition from northern Europeans.
59. The Dutch and English East India Companies 1600 – 1750
    * 1. As Portuguese fortunes declined and Mughal expansion continued, South Asia’s overseas trade underwent a reorganization, mostly impacted by the Dutch and English (and to a lesser extent French) newcomers, who all formed powerful trading companies back by state-of-the-art cannons and first-rate sailing ships.
      2. Only the Dutch came close to establishing a genuine Indian Ocean Empire, but the sudden, unexpected collapse of the Mughals and other gunpowder states in Asia that allowed the Europeans to conquer large landmasses and to plant colonies.
      3. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), founded in 1602, aimed to use ships, arms, and Spanish-American silver to displace the Portuguese. In the course of two centuries, the VOC extended influence from South Africa to Japan, including conquering Java, a base for the vast Dutch colony of Indonesia.
      4. Although they never drove the Portuguese from Goa, they displaced them nearly everywhere else, and conquest was followed with enslavement and plantation agriculture.
      5. The monopolistic mentality of contemporary Europe drove Dutch aggression, and the VOC began by monopolizing spices, before turning to plantations.
      6. The VOC relied on Spanish-American silver to lubricate commerce, and when these rival empires were at work, silver was sometimes plundered, but mostly acquired through both official and contraband trade.
      7. Compared with the VOC, the English East India Company (EIC) had more modest aims and much less capital.
      8. Regardless, it used force and a royal charter to displace the Portuguese in several strategic ports. However, due to England’s internal problems, progress was slow and uneven, and it was only in the late seventeenth century that English traders in India began to amass considerable fortunes.
60. Counterpoint: Aceh: Fighting Back in Southeast Asia
    * 1. The province and city of Aceh, a Muslim sultanate that lived by exchanging the produce of its interior, was transformed by not conquered in early modern times.
      2. Aceh’s rulers participated directly in trade, but unlike most such enclaves that fell to the Europeans, Aceh held out.
61. The Differing Fortunes of Aceh and Melaka
62. Aceh’s rulers were probably related to those of Melaka, which fell to Portuguese cannons in 1511.
63. Although Melakan forces had guns and fought valiantly, when the tide turned against them, they had no backcountry into which they might flee and reorganize.
64. In contrast, Aceh’s influenced reached deep into the interior, and after defeating Portuguese invaders in 1518, it emerged as one of the most assertive seaborne Islamic states in the Indian Ocean.
65. However, Aceh’s attempts to conquer Melaka failed, and by the late seventeenth century the kingdom declined. But it was not until the nineteenth century that the Dutch reduced Aceh to colonial status.
66. Aceh, “the Veranda of Mecca”
67. Aceh’s early modern history comes from many sources, including epic poems written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which express Acehnese Islamic pride as the region’s bulwark against the militant Christian Portuguese.
68. It was a great meeting place for Southeast Asian pilgrims on their way to Mecca, and it came to be known as *Serambi Mekkah*, the Veranda of Mecca.
69. Despite its Islamic identity, Acehnese culture respected female independence, as women controlled and inherited property, and men moved to their wives’ households at marriage.
70. Aceh was recognized as a powerful state by northern Europeans in the early seventeenth century, and playing competing Europeans off one another became a profitable game.
71. Aceh’s decline has been traditionally associated with the rise of female sultans in the seventeenth century. Sultana Taj al-Alam Safiyat al-Din Shah ruled from 1641-1675, and her politics focused mostly on domestic issues, as Aceh was restructuring after her father’s failed attack on Portuguese Melaka.
72. She was succeeded by three more sultanas, the last of whom was deposed following a 1699 fatwa from Mecca, declaring women unfit to serve as sultans.
73. However, careful reading of sources suggests that female sultans were not the cause of Aceh’s declining power, but rather a symptom of a general shift toward the Malay style of divine kingship.
74. Conclusion
    * 1. Thanks to reliable monsoon winds, the vast Indian Ocean basin had long been interconnected by ties of trade and religion, and this pattern continued throughout early modern times.
      2. Change came with the rise of gunpowder empires both on land and at sea, and beginning about 1500, seaborne Europeans forcibly took over key ports and began taxing trade.
      3. Despite the advances of Islamic and Christian empires, most inhabitants did not convert, and religious tolerance remained popular in the region.
      4. Europeans adapted to local cultures of trade when force was impractical, but with the decline of great land empires, such as the Mughals, this began to change.
      5. By the end of the early modern period, European imperial designs had begun to alter established lifeways throughout the Indian Ocean basin.
75. Chapter Eighteen Special Features
    1. Reading the Past: Portuguese Report of a Vijayanagara Festival
       1. Portuguese merchant Domingos Paes describes a portion of a multiday festival that served to glorify the king.
    2. Seeing the Past: Reflections of the Divine in a Mughal Emerald
       1. The Mughal court was reportedly the richest in the world, and fabulous gemstones weighing hundreds of carats were routinely exchanged and given as gifts.
    3. Lives and Livelihoods: Cinnamon Harvesters in Ceylon
       1. Long before the arrival of Europeans, Ceylon was world-renowned for its cinnamon exports.

**Chapter Eighteen Overview (Discussion) Questions:**

**Major Global Development:** The Indian Ocean trading network and the impact of European intrusion on maritime and mainland South Asia.

1. What environmental, religious, and political factors enabled trading enclaves to flourish in the Indian Ocean basin?
2. How did the rise and fall of India’s land empires reflect larger regional trends?
3. How did Europeans insert themselves into the Indian Ocean trading network, and what changes did they bring about?

**Chapter Eighteen Making Connections Questions:**

1. In what ways did Indian Ocean trade differ from the contemporary Atlantic slave trade (see Chapter 17)? What role did Africa play in each?
2. How did traditional kingdoms such as Vijayanagara differ from those of the Americas prior to the Spanish conquest (see Chapter 15)?

**Counterpoint: Aceh: Fighting Back in Southeast Asia**   
 **Counterpoint Focus Question:** Why was the tiny sultanate of Aceh able to hold out against European interlopers in early modern times?

**Chapter Eighteen Special Features:**

**Reading the Past: Portuguese Report of a Vijayanagara Festival**

1. What does the selection suggest with regard to social hierarchy and prescribed gender roles in Vijayanagara?
2. How does this description of divine kingship compare with, for example, the Incas (see chapter 000)?

**Seeing the Past: Reflections of the Divine in a Mughal Emerald**

1. How does this precious object reflect patterns of early modern globalization?
2. Why would the royal owner commission a religious object of such magnificence?

**Lives and Livelihoods: Cinnamon Harvesters in Ceylon**

1. How was cinnamon grown, harvested, and prepared for export?
2. How did cinnamon harvesting fit into traditional, pre-colonial landholding and labor systems?
3. How did Dutch rule change the lives and livelihoods of cinnamon harvesters? Of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) in general?

**Key Terms**

Monsoon

Dhow

Kshatriya

Caste

Brahman

sati

trading companies

fatwa