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## *Africa in the context of world history*

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### *The rise of the Islamic world*

If a visitor had looked at the Old World at the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era and had then revisited it after five centuries – in 1100 – he might well have come to the conclusion that the world was on the way to becoming Muslim.

At the time of his first visit, the community around Prophet Muḥammad, who preached Islam in the small Arabian town of Mecca, numbered less than one hundred people fighting for their survival against the growing hostility of their compatriots. Five centuries later, the adherents of this faith were to be found on a territory stretching from the banks of the river Ebro, Senegal and Niger in the west, to the Syr-Darya and Indus in the east, and from the Volga to the East African coast. Although at this time the Islamic world had already lost its former political unity, it still represented a fairly homogeneous culture and civilization whose creativity and potential for expansion were by no means exhausted.

In the mean time, Islam had ceased to be an exclusive Arab religion; born in the sun-scorched peninsula of Arabia, it was able to acclimatize itself in various regions of the world and among many diverse peoples who in their turn became fiery champions of Islam, spreading the faith in new directions.

It is no wonder that such a magnificent achievement should have impressed our visitor, as it did many historians who did not hesitate to call the period from the seventh to the eleventh centuries – and even thereafter – ‘the Islamic age’. This label does not imply that the Muslim peoples dominated the whole world or that they exercised a decisive political, religious or cultural influence outside their own sphere. It has to be understood in relation to other cultural zones and in the sense that the Islamic world was, during that period, the most dynamic and the most progressive in several areas of human activity.

The Arab conquests in the seventh and eighth centuries produced two momentous and lasting effects. The more immediate and dramatic of these was the creation of a new world state in the Mediterranean basin and the Near East.<sup>1</sup> The second effect,

1. On the rise of the Caliphate, see Chapter 2 of this volume.

less rapid and tumultuous but no less important, was the development of a new world culture within this state.

By the end of the eleventh century, the original Arab empire had ceased to exist and had been transformed instead into the Muslim world of the Middle Ages. It was a world rather than an empire – a political realm consisting of individual states, yet aware of a common identity that distinguished it from other world regions, based as it was on a common religion rather than on ethnic or tribal bonds.

The second lasting outcome of the original Arab conquest was the creation of a new world culture. The Arab conquerors used both their new faith, Islam, and their military prowess to establish an empire, but the culture they brought from their desert home was rather unsophisticated and simple. Apart from their religion, they contributed their language as the main vehicle of administration, literature and science.

The distinctive and rich civilization which characterized the Muslim world at its height came into being through an amalgam of the varied traditions of all the peoples who adopted Islam or lived under its sway. It not only inherited the material and intellectual achievements of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations, but also appropriated and absorbed many elements of Indian and Chinese origin and was instrumental in their further dissemination.

The Muslim empire was built up in the region of the most ancient world civilization, where the conquering Arabs found an age-long tradition of urban life and urban economy. They were very quick to seize this opportunity and besides settling in ancient towns they founded many new ones. It was this urban character of the Muslim world and civilization that most profoundly marked its difference from the Christian West in the early Middle Ages. The most important centres of economic and cultural life were to be found in the Muslim core lands, whereas Western Europe at that time displayed a quite different picture of scattered rural communities, with only a minimum of commercial and intellectual activity. The growing trading currents between various parts of the Muslim world and beyond its frontiers stimulated the local production of commodities for markets in other places. It also stimulated advances in applied and theoretical techniques, such as in navigation and the allied fields of shipbuilding, astronomy and geography, as well as in commercial and banking practices.

The economic boom that started in the eighth century was, to a great extent, brought about by the flow of precious metals to the central lands of the Near East. The increase in the gold supply in the ninth century led to a change in the monetary system: the countries where only silver coins had formerly circulated went over to bimetallism and all the mints in the eastern parts of the Caliphate began to strike gold dinars. In the western part of the Muslim world, the situation was different; for a long time, the Maghrib and Muslim Spain remained in the orbit of silver currency, mainly for want of readily accessible gold mines. This began to change only in the tenth century with the increase of gold imports from the western Sudan and reached its high point with the Almoravid dinar, which became an internationally recognized currency unit.<sup>2</sup>

The Muslim empire was favoured also by its central position in the heart of the Old

2. See Chapter 14 of this volume.

World. The sheer extent of the Muslim world created a unique situation inasmuch as it was the only one of the great cultural areas to be in direct contact with all the others – with Byzantium, Western Europe, India and China alike; this geographical position also enabled the Muslims to come into contact with the great frontier areas and new peoples in the Eurasian plains, in Central Asia, across the Sahara in the Sudan, and in South-east Asia.

Its central position predestined the Muslim world to the role of intermediary – or channel – between all the other regions of the Old World. Along with commercial commodities transported by land and sea routes went also many new ideas and concepts, and innovations in technology and the sciences. The case of paper serves as an early example of an important product that travelled all the way from China through the Muslim lands to Europe. Originally a Chinese invention, it was introduced to the Muslim empire by Chinese prisoners of war who were brought to Samarkand in 751, where they taught paper-making technology to the Muslims. Indeed, Samarkand became the first place in the Muslim world to have a paper industry. From there the industry spread westwards, reaching Muslim Spain in the first half of the tenth century. In the twelfth century, it was introduced to Catalonia, the first European country to produce paper. It is hardly necessary to stress the far-reaching consequences of the spread of one of the greatest inventions for culture and civilization generally.

Similarly, the Indian invention of positional notation in mathematics, the so-called Arabic numerals, had already been adopted by the Muslims (who called them Indian numerals) by the eighth century and that system had become known to the Western world by the tenth century. The adoption of positional numeration by the Muslims paved the way for the evolution of algebra, which then became the foundation without which the modern branches of mathematics and the natural sciences could not have existed.

### The Islamic world and Africa

The history of Islamic Egypt between the seventh and the end of the eleventh centuries offers a fascinating picture of the pattern whereby an important but somewhat peripheral province of the Caliphate became the core land of a new powerful Fāṭimid empire, developing from a mere granary to the most important entrepôt for trade between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, from a situation where it was a rather poor relative in the field of Muslim intellectual activities to one where it was a major centre of Arab cultural life.<sup>3</sup> In terms of its relationship to other parts of Africa, Egypt performed a variety of roles: it was the starting-point both of the Arab conquests in the Maghrib in the seventh century and of the Hilālī invasion in the eleventh century. From Egypt the Arab Bedouins penetrated gradually into Nubia, thereby preparing the way for the final downfall of its Christian kingdoms and the Arabization of the Nilotic Sudan. Although Egypt lost its Christian character during this period, the Alexandrian patriarchate still retained its control over the Monophysite churches of Nubia and Ethiopia. Nor can it be forgotten that Egypt was also the destination of the large

3. See Chapter 7 of this volume.

number of black African slaves imported there from Nubia, Ethiopia, and Western and Central Sudan.

North Africa occupied an essential strategic place in the Muslim world both politically and economically. It was from the Maghrib that the conquest of Spain and Sicily started, with all its consequences for the history of the western Mediterranean and Europe. Muslim domination reintroduced the Maghrib into the orbit of a large world-wide economy, in which it played a very important role; during this period, it underwent further demographic and urban growth and enjoyed fresh economic and commercial prosperity.

From the religious point of view, the role of the Berbers was twofold. First, their democratic and egalitarian traditions led them from very early on to adhere to the teachings of those Islamic sects preaching those tendencies.<sup>4</sup> Although, after having flourished for some centuries, Berber *Khāridjism* was crushed and remained alive only in a few small communities, the spirit of reform and populism remained an integral part of Islam in the Maghrib. It revealed itself in the great movements of the Almoravids and Almohads, as well as in the proliferation of the *Ṣūfī* brotherhoods.

The second achievement of the Berbers – as seen in both the Islamic and the African perspective – was the introduction of Islam to trans-Saharan Africa. The caravans of the Berber traders carried not only material products but also new religious and cultural ideas, which had initially found a response among the commercial class and later at the courts of African rulers.<sup>5</sup> A second wave of Islamization of the Sudanic belt came about in the eleventh century with the rise of the Almoravids, an authentically Berber religious movement.

It was the opening up of the Sahara and the Sudan that conferred on North Africa its specific significance for the economy of the Muslim world. The inflows of Sudanese gold brought about an economic boom, which enabled many Muslim dynasties in the West to go over from silver to gold currency. The exploitation of the Saharan salt-mines was stepped up in response to the growing demand for that indispensable mineral in sub-Saharan Africa. The trade with sub-Saharan Africa was probably the most profitable branch of Muslim foreign trade for many centuries. Although the Sudan was not conquered by the Arabs or other Muslim peoples and never formed a constituent part of the Caliphate, it was exposed to the ever-increasing impact of the Muslim world through commercial and cultural contacts.

The rapid expansion of Islamic power caused considerable damage to the economic life of Ethiopia by cutting it from access to the Red Sea. A further outcome of Muslim supremacy in the coastal regions was the shifting of the centre of the Ethiopian state to the south and a more energetic movement of expansion in that direction. These southern regions in their turn became the core from which the revival of the Christian Ethiopian state started in the ninth century.

The role which the Islamic empire played in regard to Africa during these five centuries can be summarized as follows:

4. See Chapters 9 and 20 of this volume.

5. See Chapter 3 of this volume for further information on the spread of Islam.

- (1) The Mediterranean façade of the continent had been fully incorporated into the Islamic world. It ceased for ever to be part of the Christian world and served as the starting-point for further Muslim expansion in Spain and Sicily on the one hand and in the Sahara and Sudan on the other.
- (2) In North-east Africa, it brought about the weakening of the Christian states of Nubia and Ethiopia, although neither of them was conquered. Whereas Nubia eventually lost its Christian character, Ethiopia survived as an independent political and cultural unit, although it had to accommodate its external relations to the growing influence of Islam surrounding it.
- (3) The Sahara and a large part of the Sudan were linked through the trade network to the Islamic economic sphere in which their main exports, gold and slaves, played an increasingly important role. The religion and culture of Islam penetrated along the trade routes and gradually came to be incorporated into the African ways of life.
- (4) In East Africa, the role of international trade was similar, with the exception that the Islamic influence did not penetrate into the interior. But the growing demand, in Muslim countries and India, for gold from Zimbabwe seems to have led to some changes even in the Zambezi region. Some parts of Madagascar and the Comoro Islands were also made a part of the great Indian Ocean commercial network.

### *Medieval Europe and Africa*

In the seventh century, Europe was divided into three areas that differed profoundly in the stages they had reached in their overall development. These were the Byzantine empire, the former Roman provinces of Western Europe now under the domination of various Germanic peoples, and lastly the part east of the Rhine and north of the Danube inhabited by Germanic and Slavonic peoples.

#### *The Byzantine empire*

Only the Byzantine empire could claim to continue the Graeco-Roman tradition and to have a truly developed state organization with an efficient administration, a prospering money economy and a high degree of cultural activities in many fields. From its Asiatic provinces and Egypt, the Byzantines attempted to reopen the trade routes to the East both by land (the Great Silk Road to China) and by sea (through the Red Sea to India). These attempts were, however, frustrated by the other great regional power, the Sassanian Persian empire. The struggle between these empires continued from the mid-sixth century until the first third of the seventh century and exhausted both sides financially and militarily, so that they were unable to withstand the onslaught of the Muslim Arabs.

In relation to Africa, Byzantium ceased to play any significant role in the course of the seventh century. Egypt was lost at a very early date and sporadic attempts to reconquer it from the sea were not successful; some coastal regions of North Africa remained in Byzantine hands until the end of the same century. The Orthodox State Church

had never been strong in the African provinces because the Egyptians clung tenaciously to their Monophysite creed, and the North African urban population to the Roman Church. Whatever influence the Orthodox Church had had in previous centuries was lost for ever through the Muslim conquest. Although Nubia had never formed part of the Byzantine empire, Byzantine cultural and religious influence remained comparatively strong even after the Arab conquest of Egypt, especially in Makuria, the central of the three Christian Nubian states, which adopted – in contrast to the others – the Orthodox (Melkite) creed. The administration was modelled on Byzantine bureaucracy, and the upper classes dressed in Byzantine manner and spoke Greek. But gradually the links with the Byzantine culture and religion were weakened and, at the end of the seventh century, the king of Makuria introduced Monophysitism into his state, which was by then united with the northern Nobadia.<sup>6</sup>

During its struggle against Persia, Byzantium was interested in forming an alliance with Christian Ethiopia, despite its being Monophysite. The Arab expansion cut off Byzantium from the Red Sea and trade with India, thus making the alliance impossible as well as impracticable. As Monophysite Christianity increasingly became the symbol of the Ethiopian state and nation, hostile both to Islam and to other forms of Christianity, it developed its own original identity without any reference to Byzantine models, whether in theology or in artistic and literary forms of expression.

### Western Europe

Between the fourth and seventh centuries, all the territory west of the Rhine and south of the Alps, including parts of the British Isles, became the setting for great migrations of the Germanic peoples.

These migrations left Western Europe severely devastated: it ceased to be an urban civilization and became instead a civilization of small agricultural settlements which kept only the vestiges of a mutual pattern of relations.

During the seventh century, however, Western Europe was able to reorganize itself into a number of more or less stable territorial units. In the west, the Visigoths dominated the entire Iberian peninsula, while in Gaul and adjacent lands the Frankish Merovingians established their domination and in England the Anglo-Saxons founded their kingdoms. At the end of the century, Italy was divided among the Byzantines in the south and the newly arrived Germanic Longobards in the north.

The Arabo-Berber conquest of Visigothic Spain at the beginning of the eighth century amputated a considerable part of the Latin West. The Franks were able to stop further Muslim penetration into Gaul, but Arab incursions and raids on the coastal settlements in southern France and in Italy continued for more than two centuries, contributing to the general climate of insecurity in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless at the end of the same century the first – and, for a long time, the only – successful attempt was made to give a political unity to Western Europe; this was the work of the Carolingians and of Charlemagne (768–814). However, many parts of Western Europe remained outside this empire, including the British Isles, the larger part of Spain under Muslim

6. See Volume II, Chapter 12, and Volume III, Chapter 8.

rule, and southern Italy, which was still in Byzantine and Longobardian hands.

The name of Charlemagne is connected with the celebrated thesis of the Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, which has given rise to vigorous debate concerning the relationship between the emergence of the Muslim empire and the fate of Western Europe. According to Pirenne, it was not the invasions of the barbarian Germanic tribes that put an end to Rome's control of trade in the Mediterranean, but rather the creation of the Muslim empire. The Arabs' success in wresting North Africa and the eastern provinces from Byzantium created a final break between East and West. This forced Western Europe to look inwards and turn to its own resources and to find a substitute for the maritime economy of the Merovingians in the land-locked and continental Carolingian economy, as a result of which Western Europe became poor and barbarian. Stagnation was overcome only after the tenth century, with the emergence of a new European urbanism.

Although this thesis has been rejected by the majority of historians, it has drawn attention to important problems of change in medieval economies and of the rise of European feudalism. It also made historians aware of the impact of the Arabs and their domination of North Africa on developments in Europe, a neglected theme.

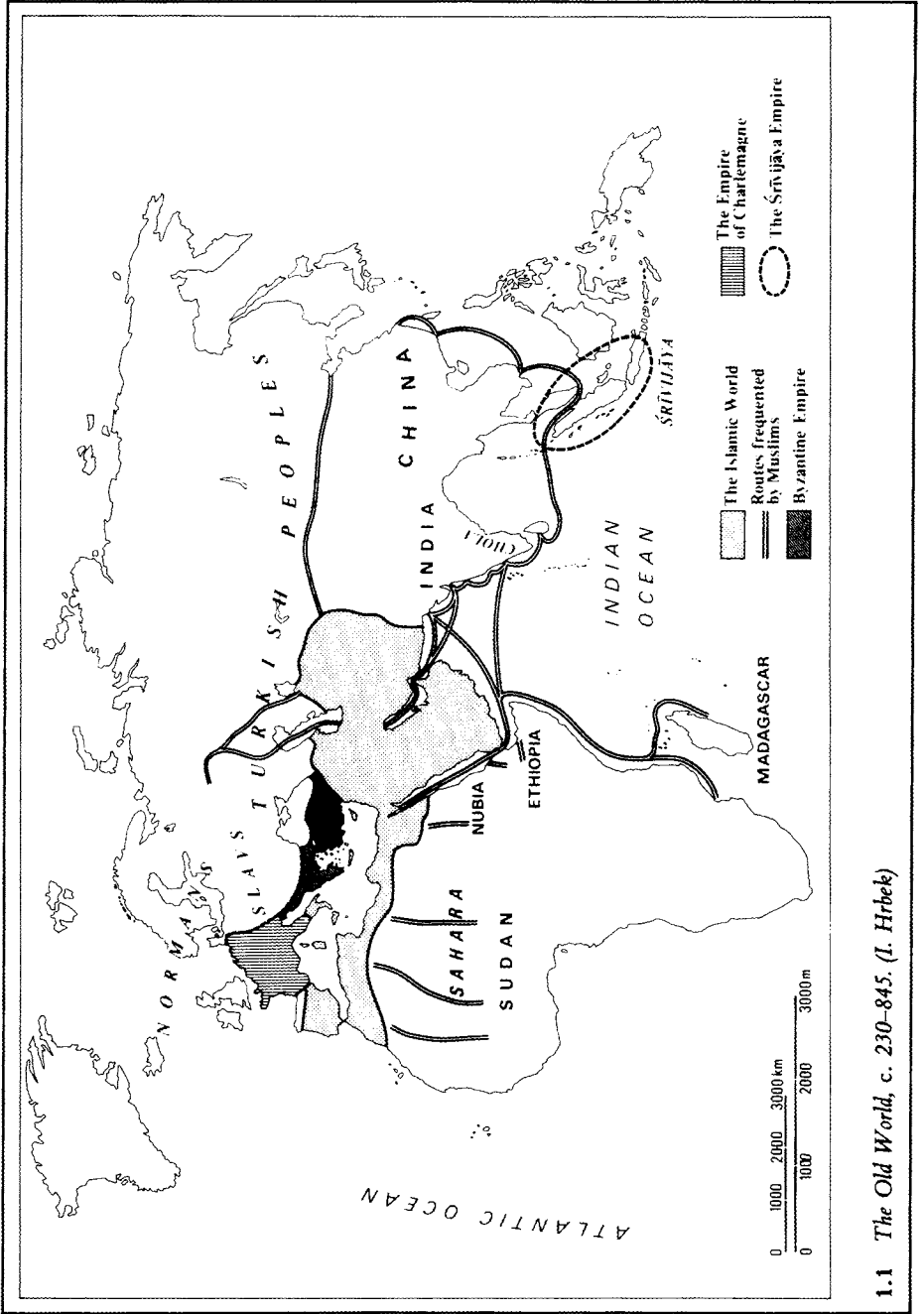
The main weak point of Pirenne's thesis was that he attributed such far-reaching consequences to the interruption of long-distance trade. Such long-distance trade, however lucrative or whatever its scale, did not play all that decisive a role in the social and economic life of Western Europe.

The lasting Arab and Islamic impact on Europe did not result from military confrontation or the interruption of trade contacts across the Mediterranean, but rather from the long years of Muslim rule in Spain and Sicily. Through the innovations brought to these regions in the shape of new crops, agricultural processes and technology, and especially in the sciences and philosophy, new concepts were introduced into Europe, which was less developed in these matters than the Islamic world. Although the European Renaissance began later – from the thirteenth century onwards – the foundations from which it arose were, in fact, laid in the period of the greatest flowering of Islamic civilization, i.e. between the eighth and twelfth centuries.

### Eastern and Northern Europe

In the rest of Europe, the westward migrations of the Germanic tribes opened the way for Slavonic expansion, which took two general directions: southwards across the Danube to the Balkans and westwards into the territory of present-day Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and eastern Germany.

With regard to the Muslim world, the Slavonic peoples were, for some centuries, to play a role similar to that of the black Africans, in that they were imported as slaves. It is significant that in all the Western European languages the word for 'slave' (*Sklave*, *esclave*, *esclavo*, *escravo*, etc.) is derived from the ethnonym 'Slav', the name which the various Slavonic peoples used for themselves. This points to the fact that, during the formative period of the European national languages, which coincides precisely with the period under discussion, Slavonic prisoners of war must have formed the bulk of the slave population in Western Europe. As victims of incessant wars and raids, they



1.1 The Old World, c. 230–845. (I. Hrbek)



were not only retained as a labour force in Europe but were also exported abroad to the Muslim countries. Those captured in Central Europe went through the Frankish state to Muslim Spain, while those from the Balkans were mostly sold by the Venetians to North Africa. The Arabs called them “al-Şaḳāliba” (sing., al-Şaḳlabī) and they were employed mainly as soldiers in state administrations and, when castrated, in harems. Whereas in al-Andalus the term “al-Şaḳāliba” was soon extended to designate all European slaves, regardless of nationality, in the Maghrib and in Fāṭimid Egypt it retained its original meaning. And it was here in particular that the Slavs of Balkan origin did perform an important role by participating as soldiers and administrators in both the consolidation and expansion of Fāṭimid power.<sup>7</sup> The most famous among them was Djawhar, the conqueror of Egypt and founder of Cairo and the al-Azhar University. Although the Slavs were soon absorbed, ethnically and culturally, by the Muslim Arab society in the Maghrib and Egypt, they nevertheless did contribute to the shaping of the destiny of these parts of North Africa in the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Between the eighth and tenth centuries, another group of peoples from beyond the horizon of the Mediterranean nations emerged on the European scene. These were the Viking (or Norman) invaders, conquerors and merchant-adventurers who set sail in their ships from their Scandinavian homes and attacked coastal regions and even some parts of the interior. Some Normans (called by the Arabs “al-Mād̲jūs”) reached as far as Muslim Spain and even Morocco.

Until the eleventh century the Normans, with the exception of their raid on the Moroccan coast in 858 or 859, which remained a passing episode, did not enter into any direct contact with Africa. A group of Normans settled permanently in northern France (Normandy), and founded a strong state there. Apart from conquering England, in 1066, these same Normans also carved another state for themselves in southern Italy, from where they embarked on the conquest of Muslim Sicily, making it their base for further expansion partly directed at North Africa. For the space of one century, the Normans of Sicily became an important factor in the political history of Muslim North Africa.

In the foregoing pages, we have pointed to various implications which the Muslim presence on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, i.e. in North Africa, had for Western Europe. Although we do not subscribe to Pirenne’s thesis, it nevertheless remains a historical fact that, with the Arab conquest of North Africa, the Mediterranean basin ceased to be a part of a single large cultural area as it had been in the preceding millennium and became divided between the European (or Christian) and the Arabo-Berber (or Muslim) zones, each with its own culture and each going its separate way.

From the European point of view, Africa became identified with the Muslim world, since it was from this region that the main incursions and invasions, but also various influences and ideas, were coming. When more intensive commercial contacts between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean developed at a later stage, Africa, which the Europeans then came to know, was still Muslim Africa; it is not surprising, therefore, that Africa was identified with the arch-enemy of Christianity

7. See Chapters 7 and 12 of this volume.

and that its inhabitants, irrespective of their colour, were regarded and treated accordingly. Europe's lack of any direct contacts with Africa beyond the Muslim sphere was bound to lead to the emergence of a very distorted image of the continent, and especially of its black inhabitants. Some recent studies have clearly shown how both this ignorance and the presumed identification of black Africans with Muslims fashioned the European image of them as the personification of sin, evil and inferiority. It was already in those early medieval times, that European negative attitudes, prejudice and hostility towards peoples of black skin first emerged, attitudes which were later to be strengthened by the slave trade and slavery generally.

### *Africa, Asia and the Indian Ocean*

Since some general aspects of the Indian Ocean factor in African history have already been discussed in Volume II,<sup>8</sup> we shall examine here only those developments that were significant in the period between the seventh and the eleventh centuries.

The important place occupied by the Islamic empire in inter-continental relations was demonstrated in the earlier parts of this chapter. The Indian Ocean very soon became an integral part of the steadily expanding Muslim commercial network which connected China, Indonesia, India and the East African coast with the Islamic core lands.

By contrast with the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean can be said to have generally been an ocean of peace. Although the trade relations between its peoples, going back to early times, were not always equally advantageous to all those participating in them, they were only rarely disturbed by wars. In the medieval Mediterranean, Muslim and Christian powers were engaged in a continuous struggle and, although commercial contacts never came to a complete halt, the state of hostilities was not generally conducive to trade. The expansion of Islam in the Indian Ocean did not have an adverse influence on the Arabo-Persian trading activities, since the merchants were anxious not to disturb established commercial relations by insisting on conversion by force.

This does not mean that the Indian Ocean trade was idyllic. In addition to the slave trade, which was often accompanied by hostile action and the use of force, large-scale piracy was rife throughout the period. However, it never reached the extent known in the Mediterranean, where it was fanned and even justified by religious differences.

In the second half of the ninth century, two incidents severely disrupted Muslim trade in the Indian Ocean. The first was the great Zandj revolt in the region of lower Iraq and the Arab/Persian Gulf in the years 866–83.<sup>9</sup> Some of the most important ports – Baṣra, Ubulḥa, Abadan – were laid waste and Baghdad was cut off from access to the sea. For more than fifteen years, maritime trade in this region marked time, owing to the lack of merchant capital, goods and ships.

The second blow to Muslim trade occurred almost simultaneously, in 878, when the forces of the Chinese rebel Huang Ch'ao sacked Canton and massacred a huge number of foreign traders, mostly from Muslim countries. The lives of some merchants

8. See Volume II, Chapter 22.

9. See Chapter 26 of this volume.

were, however, apparently spared, for the same author of the account of this disaster wrote that the rebels oppressed Arab ship-masters, imposed illegal levies on the merchants and appropriated their wealth.

In the eleventh century, there was a major shift in Muslim trade, as a result of the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate in the Middle East and the simultaneous rise of the Fāṭimids on North African soil. The age-old rivalry between the route terminating in the Arab/Persian Gulf and the route leading through the Red Sea was accordingly resolved to the latter's advantage.

So far we have only spoken about the role of the Muslim Arabs and Persians in Indian Ocean interrelations. What about the others, such as the Chinese, Indians and Indonesians? To what degree did those peoples participate in these relations and what was their impact on Africa? What role did the Africans play in the Indian Ocean context?

### China

In ancient and medieval times, Chinese contacts with the other main areas of the Old World - India, Western Asia and the lands around the Mediterranean - were established almost entirely through the export trade, in which the most important commodity was silk, later followed by chinaware.

Although China already possessed the technical knowledge and means needed for long-distance sea voyages across the Indian Ocean under the T'ang dynasty (618-906), it did not employ its own ships for trade beyond the Malayan peninsula. The Chinese came to know the Indian Ocean through the intermediary of the Indians and Persians, and later the Arabs. The fragmentary accounts of Africans and Africa in Chinese literary sources seem to be drawn from Muslim accounts. They accordingly came to think of the Africans as being the subjects of Muslim rulers and of their countries as forming part of the Arab empire.

Among the African goods that reached China, the most important were ivory, ambergris, frankincense and myrrh, as well as Zandj slaves.

For some time, the view was held that the history of East Africa had been written in Chinese porcelain. Indeed, an enormous quantity of Chinese porcelain has been found in the East African coastal cities, and hence such ware must have formed an important part of Chinese exports to Africa. With only a few exceptions, however, the bulk of this Chinese porcelain belongs to a period after the eleventh century. The same is true of the Chinese coins found on the coast.

The evidence thus points to the conclusion that, whereas African commodities formed a constant part of Chinese imports from early times, the arrival of Chinese goods in greater quantities could be placed only in the period after the eleventh century. As mentioned above, exchanges between China and Africa were not direct but transited through the Muslim trade network in the Indian Ocean.

### India

The entire problem of India's role in the Indian Ocean, especially in the first millennium of the Christian era, is still unresolved. It is primarily bound up with the participation of Indians in international trade and with Indian influence on various parts of this

region. The task of solving this complex problem is not made any easier by the virtually total lack of evidence from Indian sources in the period under discussion.

Over the period between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, relations between Africa and India seem to have been at their lowest ebb. Contacts nevertheless existed and these were mostly connected with the exchange of goods. One of the most important African export commodities to India has always been ivory. The ivory trade was already flourishing in antiquity and there are hardly any Arabic sources that do not mention it when describing the East African coast. Al-Mas'ūdī wrote that the ivory from East Africa was destined for export to India and China and added that its main entrepôt was Oman. No evidence about other export goods is available from these centuries, but it has to be borne in mind that al-Idrīsī's (d. 1154) well-known report on African iron exports to India relates to earlier times and therefore comes within the period under review. This African product played an important role in the development of one branch of Indian industry, the production of steel blades. This seems to have been one of the rare instances of African export goods that did not come within the category of primary commodities. In this connection, it should be stressed that Africa exploited not so much iron ore, which was in any event too bulky a cargo for the capacity of the vessels of the time, as an already processed product, probably in the form of pig-iron.

Some African slaves were certainly exported to India via Arabia or Persia, but no relevant documents or other evidence has so far come to light. Nor is sufficient information available about population movements in the opposite direction, i.e. of Indians towards Africa. In some oral traditions from the coast and adjacent islands, there are a large number of references to people called Debuli (Wadebuli). Their name is considered to be derived from the great port of al-Daybul (Dabhol) on the mouth of the River Indus. The date of their arrival on the east coast is highly controversial, some traditions placing it before the conversion of the coastal towns to Islam, while others connect it with the introduction of firearms and hence at a rather late date.

All this does not rule out the possibility that some people of Indian origin had settled – most probably as traders – on the coast at earlier times. In any case, they cannot have been very numerous, since more identifiable traces, in the form of written sources or material culture, would have otherwise been preserved. Indeed, Kiswahili contains many loan-words of Indian origin, but it has hitherto been impossible to determine the period at which they were introduced.

## Indonesia

Whereas contacts between Africa, on the one hand, and China and India, on the other, were, as stated, indirect rather than direct, there was one region on the other side of the Indian Ocean that left indubitable traces in at least some parts of Africa. The Indonesian contribution to the peopling of Madagascar has long been recognized. However, since it is discussed in other chapters of this work,<sup>10</sup> reference is made here only to those topics that have a direct bearing on the African continent.

10. See Chapter 25 of this volume as well as Chapter 28 of Volume II.

The impact of the Indonesians on the African mainland now appears to have been exaggerated. There is virtually no evidence for direct Indonesian penetration of East Africa similar to that in Madagascar. To date, no archaeological, linguistic or somatic data have been discovered that point to a prolonged Indonesian presence. The theory propounded by Deschamps, whereby the proto-Malagasy, before settling in Madagascar, spent some time on the coast of Africa, where they mixed or married with Africans, and only then moved to the island, lacks any supporting evidence. Raymond Kent has expanded on this hypothesis by assuming that there was a movement from Indonesia into East Africa before the arrival of the Bantu-speaking groups, and that the Indonesians and Bantu subsequently met and mixed in the interior. It is from this mingling of these two peoples that the Afro-Malagasy population is presumed to have resulted. Thereafter, the expansion of the Bantu as far as the coastal areas forced this population to migrate to Madagascar.

Much has been made, especially by Murdock, of the so-called 'Malaysian botanical complex' comprising such plants as rice, bananas, taro (cocoyam), yams, breadfruit and others that came to form the staple food of many Africans. Murdock and others believed that this complex was brought to Madagascar during the first millennium before the Christian era by migrants from Indonesia, who travelled right along the coast of southern Asia before reaching the East African coast. It should be pointed out, however, that cultivated plants do not depend for their dissemination on the physical migrations of the peoples who first started to cultivate them or who had earlier adopted them, as is amply demonstrated by the dissemination of certain American crops through West and Central Africa after the sixteenth century. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility that some of the South-east Asian plants were introduced to the African mainland from Madagascar at a later stage.

There is no doubt, however, that the Indonesians were capable and accomplished navigators and that they embarked on many voyages, radiating out in all directions from their island homelands. In the second half of the first millennium, major maritime powers were to emerge in Sumatra and Java, such as the Sumatran empire of Śrīvijāya (seventh to thirteenth centuries) and the Javan state of the Śailendra dynasty (eighth century), which later also came to power in Śrīvijāya.

We are concerned here merely with those aspects of the history of those powers that have a bearing both on the general situation in the Indian Ocean region and their possible contacts with Africa. The Śrīvijāya rulers imposed control over the main export ports of the region, thereby securing a vast monopoly over the spice trade. The control of the Malacca Straits gave them an enormous advantage, since all maritime traffic had to pass through them and to call at their ports.

At the same time, the ships of Śrīvijāya participated in the Indian Ocean trade. Although there are few written Arabic sources about these voyages, they are extremely important, and the foremost of these is the well-known account of the attack by the Wāk-Wāk people on Kaṅbalū (Pemba) in 945-6.

The fact that one whole year was said to have been needed for these people to make the voyage from their homes to East Africa had already prompted the narrator to draw the conclusion that the islands of Wāk-Wāk were situated somewhere opposite China. The Muslim authors understood the term Wāk-Wāk as referring to two regions or

peoples – one somewhere in the south-western part of the Indian Ocean, including Madagascar and the African coast to the south of Sufala, and the other in South-east Asia, in present-day Indonesia.

Some of the details of Ibn Lākīs' narrative thus point unmistakably to South-east Asia as the home of these Wāk-Wāk people. Moreover, since the Śrīvijāya empire at this period is known to have been the major maritime power in the eastern Indian Ocean, it is not altogether far-fetched to regard this long-range expedition as being an attempt to expand the area of Śrīvijāya's trade network in order to gain direct access to the sources of African commodities and thus avoid the Muslim monopoly. How far these expeditions – and al-Idrīsī confirms that Indonesian ships also continued to visit African shores and Madagascar in later centuries – were related to the new waves of Indonesian migrations to Madagascar between the tenth and twelfth centuries remains a problem that has yet to be solved. On the other hand, it is not impossible that these late migrations were in some way connected with the invasions or raids of the South Indian Cholas on Śrīvijāya in the first half of the eleventh century, which had the effect of weakening that state and may have led to an exodus and other population movements.

### *Conclusion*

By comparison with the preceding period, the extent and character of the mutual contacts between the African continent and other parts of the Indian Ocean region underwent a number of quantitative and qualitative changes.

Firstly, we can observe the steadily increasing presence of Middle Eastern peoples in all parts of the area, and especially on the East African coast. This was connected with the rise of the Caliphate as a major political, cultural and economic power. The Muslims were able to monopolize the East African trade and occupy a dominant position in the external relations of this region. While these contacts undoubtedly contributed to the flourishing of some coastal cities as centres of international trade and led to the emergence of an African entrepreneurial class, it should not be forgotten that, at the same time, large numbers of African slaves were being exported outside the continent and were to contribute to the economies of various Asian countries, chiefly in the Middle East.

Secondly, there was a marked decline in direct contacts with India. Before the seventh century, Ethiopian ships trade with a number of Indian ports and these relations are clearly borne out by the treasure-troves of Indian (Kushan) coins found in Ethiopia, as well as by the many traces of Indian influence in Ethiopian material and intellectual culture. Between the seventh and the eleventh centuries, nothing comparable is to be observed: this was due mainly to the fact that the traffic between India and Ethiopia passed into the hands of Muslims.

Thirdly, the Indonesians continued to maintain contacts with Madagascar and even with some parts of the African seaboard. However, their impact on the mainland must have been negligible; the claims which some scholars have made about the decisive contribution of Indonesia to African culture have to be considered as hypotheses for which there is not sufficient evidence.

We shall now investigate the role played by peoples of African origin in the Indian Ocean context. In assessing this factor, we should bear in mind that, during this period, only a tiny part of the African continent, i.e. the narrow coastal strip, was in contact with the outside world. The number of Africans afforded an opportunity of exercising any influence or of being exposed to it must have been rather limited. Even so, their role was by no means negligible. By contrast, the Africans made a significant contribution to the far-reaching changes that took place in the destinies of a great empire. The Zanj revolt had wide-ranging consequences in the political, social and economic fields alike: it shattered the unity of the Muslim empire and paved the way for the downfall of the old Abbasid regime. The political crisis ushered in by the Zanj revolt had deepened the cleavage between the social classes, and the affluent classes, afraid for their privileges, began to place their trust in the professional armies formed of Turkish and other mercenaries as being the only force capable of keeping order. This heralded a new era in the history of the Muslim Middle East. The revolt also taught the Muslim ruling classes a lesson: there was never again any instance in the Muslim East of a large-scale enterprise based on the concentration of slave-labour, and the exploitation of slaves in agriculture and irrigation appears to have been abandoned. This, in turn, led in the next century to the rise of feudalism as the prevailing mode of production in the eastern Muslim countries, with slave exploitation giving way to the feudal model. Another contemporary consequence of the Zanj revolt seems to have been a hardening of racial feelings, in that black Africans came to be held in contempt, notwithstanding the teachings of Islam, and many previously unknown themes expressing a negative attitude towards black people emerged in Muslim literature.

Other aspects of African history during this period stemmed in part from the interaction of the various Indian Ocean regions. Among these, mention should be made of the growth of the participation of East African coastal towns in international maritime trade. Even though the shipping was controlled by foreign merchants, the producers and exporters were African coastal peoples. Although Swahili political, economic and cultural life only came into full flower in the following centuries, it was in the period covered here that the groundwork was laid.