



Trade Routes

Before [Vasco da Gama](#) discovered an all-water route from Europe to Asia in 1498, trade between Europe and Asia followed overland routes or a combination of overland and water routes. Merchants in Northern Italy dominated trade by sea between southern Europe and the Mediterranean coast of the Middle East. Arab merchants, however, dominated the overland routes in the Middle East and the sea routes in Asia. A number of different overland-water routes were followed. One was to ship goods by water to the Isthmus of Suez, travel overland across the narrow stretch of land between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula where the Suez Canal was later built, down the Red Sea by ship into the Arabian Sea, and then to India or China. Another route was by water to ports on the Mediterranean Sea in what is now Lebanon and Israel, overland to the Euphrates River, down the river to the Persian Gulf, and then across the Arabian Sea to Asia. Other routes went overland through Central Asia. A Venetian merchant named [Marco Polo](#) was the first European to travel to China. He followed an overland route from the eastern Mediterranean, across the Middle East into Central Asia, and then across mountains and deserts to the capital of China. On his return journey, Marco Polo traveled by sea from China to the Middle East before going overland to the eastern edge of the Black Sea. The final leg of his journey was by ship to Venice. Da Gama's discovery of the first all-water route helped break the Italian and Arab monopoly on trade between Europe and Asia. Economic power shifted away from the nations around the Mediterranean Sea to those bordering the Atlantic Ocean. The construction of the Suez Canal in 1869 had a significant impact on trade between Europe and Asia. Before the canal, ships from London had to sail south along the coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope, and then northeast across the Indian Ocean to India, a distance of 12,400 miles. The Suez Canal reduced the trip to only 7,270 miles. Ships could now pass through the Mediterranean Sea to the Suez Canal, travel through the canal into the Red Sea, sail down the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea, and across to India.

MAP: Question 1

The Sinai Peninsula joins what two continents?

Question 2

Who controlled the overland routes from Europe to Asia before da Gama discovered an all-water route? Why were Europeans anxious to find an all-water route to Asia?

Question 3

What was the economic and cultural impact of Marco Polo's journey to Asia?

Question 4

What would be the later economic and political impact of the construction of the Suez Canal in the 19th century?