The Impact of Arab "Eastern Maritime Trade" from the 7th to the 15th Century on the Southeast Asian Archipelagic Region

Liu lihua

School of International Studies, Sun Yat-sen University.

Email : liulh3@mail.sysu.edu.cn

: 0009-0007-5891-7224

Received	Accepted	Published
18/04/2026	01/05/2026	31/05/2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63939/JAAS.2026-Vol9.N29.9-19

Lihua, L .(2026). The Impact of Arab "Eastern Maritime Trade" from the 7th to the 15th Century on the Southeast Asian Archipelagic Region. Journal of Afro-Asian Studies, 9(29), 09-19.

Abstract

From the 7th to the 15th century, Arab seafarers navigated extensively and were active in the major ports of the Indian Ocean, gradually emerging as one of the principal forces in maritime commerce across the region. They established a vast trading network that stretched westward to the Iberian Peninsula and East Africa, and eastward to the coasts of China. Particularly noteworthy was the maritime route linking the Arabian Peninsula with China. The Southeast Asian archipelagic region, as a crucial segment of this voyage, was profoundly affected.

In this historical process, Arab trade exerted three core influences on Southeast Asia. Politically, the prosperity of long-distance commerce facilitated the formation and development of centralized states. Economically, the trade network incorporated Southeast Asia into the broader global economic system. Socio-culturally, Arab merchants—acting as transmitters of Islam—contributed to the widespread dissemination of Islam along the coastal areas of Southeast Asia, laying the foundation for the modern Islamic cultural sphere in the region. By systematically examining the development trajectory and mechanisms of Arab trade in Southeast Asia, this study highlights the decisive role of external commercial forces in regional historical evolution and provides an important historical perspective for understanding premodern cross-cultural interactions and early globalization.

Keywords: *Arabs; Eastern Maritime Trade; Southeast Asian Archipelagic Region*

1.Introduction

At that time, Arab commercial activities in the Indian Ocean relied primarily on two maritime routes. The first extended southward from the Arabian Peninsula to the East African coast, reaching ports such as Mogadishu, Mombasa, Kilwa, and Sofala. The second proceeded eastward from the Arabian Peninsula, crossing India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and Southeast Asia by sea before finally arriving at Chinese ports such as Guangzhou and Quanzhou. In this article, the trade conducted along this second route is referred to as the Arabs' "Eastern Maritime Trade."In terms of route geography, the Southeast Asian archipelagic region discussed here includes the southern Malay Peninsula, Kalimantan (Borneo), Sumatra, Western New Guinea (West Papua), Sulawesi, Java, and the Philippine Islands. This region constituted an essential component of the operational sphere of the Arabs' "Eastern Maritime Trade."

Scholarly research on Arab commercial activities in the Southeast Asian archipelagic region from the 7th to the 15th century remains relatively limited. Existing literature can be broadly categorized into four types:

First, Arabic sources. Geographers and merchants of the Arab Empire left valuable records. Representative works include *Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) by Ibn Khordadbeh, *Muruj al-Dhahab* (The Meadows of Gold) by al-Mas'udi, the anonymous *Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind* (Accounts of China and India, often associated with the "Sulaiman Narrative"), and the *Rihla* (Travels) of Ibn Battuta. While these works document Indian Ocean routes and social conditions, their descriptions of the Southeast Asian archipelagic region remain relatively fragmentary.

Second, Chinese historical records. Works such as *Lingwai Daida*, *Zhu fanzhi* (Description of the Barbarian Peoples), *Daoyi Zhilüe* (Brief Account of the Island Barbarians), and *Yingya Shenglan* (Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores) provide detailed accounts of the countries of the South Seas, maritime routes, and the natural and social conditions from Southeast Asia to East Africa, and constitute indispensable sources for the study of the region's history.

Third, indigenous sources. Original local texts are extremely scarce. Representative works include the *Malay Annals* (*Sejarah Melayu*), which records the rise and fall of Malay polities and their external relations, and the *Nagarakretagama* (also known as the *Desawarnana*), a court poem reflecting the political, religious, and cultural life of the Majapahit kingdom.

Fourth, modern scholarly monographs. Scholars have approached the subject from the perspectives of Indian Ocean history—such as Kenneth McPherson and Michael N. Pearson—regional and national histories, including A History of Malaysia and An Outline History of Indonesia, and maritime trade history, notably the works of George F. Hourani. These studies address trade systems, sea routes, commodities, and the spread of Islam. Nevertheless, systematic and specialized research focusing specifically on Arab commercial activities in the Southeast Asian archipelago and their overall impact remains insufficient.

This study carries significant academic value and theoretical relevance. The selection of the Southeast Asian archipelagic region as the focal point is based on two principal considerations. First, this region constituted an indispensable corridor for Arab merchant vessels en route to China, occupying a crucial strategic position within the broader East–West trading network. Its political, economic, and cultural development was deeply influenced by Arab commercial engagement. Second, systematic scholarship on this issue remains limited. Existing studies tend to be fragmented, often concentrating on single dimensions such as trade routes, commodity circulation, or religious transmission. Comprehensive analyses of the overall impact of Arab trade in the Southeast Asian archipelago—including its role in shaping political configurations, transforming economic structures, and reshaping social and cultural landscapes—are still lacking.

Against this academic backdrop, the present article seeks to integrate diverse historical sources and construct an analytical framework for a more comprehensive understanding of the role played by Arab maritime trade in the historical development of Southeast Asia.

2. Promoting the Formation of Indigenous Centralized States

Karl Marx once pointed out that "the development of commerce and commercial capital everywhere drives production toward exchange value, expands its scale, diversifies it, and gives it a cosmopolitan character; it transforms money into world money. Therefore, commerce everywhere exerts a disintegrating influence on pre-existing forms of production that are primarily oriented toward use value." (Marx, 2004, p. 370). The development of maritime trade powerfully impacted clan- or tribe-based societies that were closed, self-sufficient, and founded on blood ties. The accumulation of commercial and monetary capital created a new form of wealth independent of land. A wealthy merchant could wield authority surpassing that of a tribal chief who possessed land. In pursuit of commercial interests, people traveled far from their homelands and established new settlements (colonies). These emerging communities were no longer grounded solely in kinship ties, but rather in shared economic interests and geographical space.

Around the beginning of the Common Era, under the influence of Indian expansion, a series of commercial city-states arose in the island regions of Southeast Asia, most of which were established along the major maritime trade routes linking East and West. On the Malay Peninsula, there were states such as Tun-sun, Pan-pan, Tan-tan, Chitu, and Langkasuka. Beyond the Malay Peninsula, in the insular regions, there were Yavadvipa, Vijaya, Kalingga, Java, Ku-tai-wang, Tarumanagara (Taruma), Ho-ling, Kantoli, Malayu, Srivijaya, the Sanjaya Dynasty, and the Sailendra Dynasty. These early polities were largely organized as tribal confederations or city-states.

After the flourishing of Arab maritime trade with the East, a wave of ethnic consolidation and localization swept across the island regions of Southeast Asia. As Indianization deepened and social stratification became increasingly pronounced, indigenous tribal forces gradually rose in strength. Local chieftains—who had initially facilitated the process of Indianization—eventually mobilized to overthrow the rule of Indians or their descendants. Meanwhile, polities located along major maritime routes took advantage of expanding commerce and overseas trade, gradually evolving into centralized, trans-island kingdoms.

During this period, the principal sea route passed through Sumatra, Java, and the Strait of Malacca, then northward to Champa and onward to China. Arab merchants procured goods from local intermediaries along the way and transported them to markets in the Indian Ocean and East Asia. While regional trade contributed to the transformation of early Southeast Asian social relations, it was long-distance maritime trade—linking Southeast Asia with the Mediterranean and China—that more decisively fostered the rise of coastal commercial states. Srivijaya and Majapahit stand as representative examples of such trans-insular commercial empires.

Srivijaya, which emerged around the seventh century in Sumatra, was a Malay-founded polity with its capital at Palembang. At its height, its domain encompassed Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula south of present-day Surat Thani in Thailand, western Java, and western Kalimantan. It exercised full control over the maritime passages of the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, becoming both the commercial hub of the "Southern Seas" and a major maritime power in Southeast Asia (referred to as "Sanfoqi" in Chinese historical records). The annotated edition of Zhu fanzhi records that it had fifteen subordinate states, including Pongfong and Terengganu (Chengjun, 2022, p. 38) .The Account of Suleiman's Eastern Journey notes that the sea voyage from Java to China took approximately one month and that the king ruled over numerous islands. Among these dependent islands were sources of precious timber as well as flourishing commercial centers. One island, situated roughly midway between China and the Arab lands, reportedly had ships sailing directly to Oman (Abu Zayd al-Hasan, 1999, p.25). The Meadows of Gold also makes repeated reference to Srivijaya's geographical position and its products. These records collectively demonstrate the region's crucial role within the Arab maritime trading system of the East: it was not only a key transshipment point along the China–Arab sea route but also an important source of commodities and a commercial nexus. As noted in The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia, Srivijaya's control over international trade relied primarily on its capacity to provision passing ships and supply food to merchants waiting in port for the monsoon winds.

This logistical support for maritime commerce constituted the essential foundation of its political and economic strength (Tarling, 1999, p. 202).

After the decline of Srivijaya, the Majapahit Kingdom (founded in 1292 in Java) rose to prominence. In the fourteenth century, it unified most of the archipelago and became the most powerful insular empire in Southeast Asia. At its height, its territory encompassed present-day Indonesia, most of Malaysia, and parts of the Philippines. By controlling the Strait of Malacca, it secured the principal maritime trade artery and emerged as a major commercial center in the island world of Southeast Asia.Steven Drakeley has observed that Majapahit's advantageous coastal location enabled it to exercise effective control over maritime trade and reap substantial benefits. At the same time, amid the sharp rise in international demand for spices, Majapahit firmly controlled access to the spice-producing regions of the Maluku Islands, becoming a crucial supplier of these commodities to markets across the world (Drakeley, 2005, p. 18).

Politically, Majapahit practiced a highly centralized system of governance with a well-defined administrative hierarchy. Local administration was divided into two major spheres: the "inner territories" (Java proper) and the "outer territories" (tributary or subordinate regions). The inner territories were organized into four levels—province, county, township, and village—all under direct central supervision. Officials at each level were appointed and dismissed by the central authority, and their offices were non-hereditary. The outer territories, comprising lands beyond Java, were governed by local chiefs acting as representatives of the Majapahit king. In The Maritime Silk Road, Roderich Ptak summarizes that the wealth and prestige of Majapahit's rulers derived primarily from agriculture, a sophisticated taxation system, and the ports along northern Java, which gradually came under its influence and generated considerable profits (Ptak, 2019, p 187).

After the fifteenth century, however, the rise of Malacca and the widespread spread of Islam posed a significant challenge to the Hindu Majapahit state. The kingdom gradually weakened, internal rebellions became frequent, and peripheral territories declared independence. Following its disintegration, a series of Islamic polities emerged, including Malacca Sultanate, Temasek, Pahang Sultanate, Banten, and Aceh.

Compared with these regions, the Philippine archipelago developed more slowly. Because it lay off the main maritime routes and its overseas trade began relatively late, early Philippine societies were largely organized as tribal confederations, and centralized states emerged at a later stage. As previously noted, the Huang Chao Rebellion in the late Tang period prompted some Arab merchants to open a new sea route from Quanzhou to Penghu, Taiwan, the western coast of Luzon, Mindoro, and Palawan. Archaeological studies of excavated ceramics indicate that during this period Arab merchants traveled through southern Asia, sailed past southern Kalimantan, continued eastward to the Philippines, and then turned north toward China (Keyu, 2022). Moreover, Persian blue-glazed pottery and Chinese celadon and white porcelain have been discovered along Philippine coasts, confirming that the archipelago served as a transit point for Arab merchant vessels en route to China. Some scholars suggest that Arab traders first conducted commerce along the western coasts of the Philippines, after which local inhabitants pioneered direct maritime contacts with the southern coast of China (Keyu, 2022).

Under these influences, states began to emerge in the Philippine archipelago around the tenth century. The polity most thoroughly recorded in Song-dynasty sources was Ma-i (c. 10th–14th centuries). At its height in the thirteenth century, its territory reportedly included Mindoro, Palawan, and parts of western and northern Luzon, serving as a major trade center and distribution hub in the northern Philippines.

The Zhu fanzhi provides a vivid account of its distinctive trading practices: when merchant ships entered the harbor, they anchored in front of the official trading compound, which functioned as the state's administrative and commercial center. Local officials would board the ships and reside alongside the traders. In transactions, indigenous merchants would gather and freely carry away goods using baskets, at first glance in a seemingly incomprehensible manner. Yet, upon careful observation, the identities of those who removed the goods were clearly recognized, and no losses were reported. These merchants would then transport the commodities to other islands for further trade, typically returning in the eighth or ninth lunar

month to settle accounts with the foreign merchants according to the proceeds obtained (Chengjun, 2022, p 109).

After the fourteenth century, however, with the rise of subordinate polities such as Sanyu and Pulilu, Ma-i declined. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a wave of Islamized Malay migrants from the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra settled in the archipelago, establishing a number of Islamic sultanates, including the Sulu Sultanate.

3. International Trade as a Driver of Economic Development in the Island Regions

Karl Marx noted in Capital Volume III that in pre-capitalist stages of society, commerce dominated industry (Marx, 2004, p368). This observation is particularly evident in the economic development of the island regions of Southeast Asia. As the Indian Ocean trading network gradually took shape and Arab merchants increasingly frequented the eastern seas, the island regions of Southeast Asia were progressively incorporated into a transregional maritime trading system. Maritime international trade not only promoted the development of port cities but also profoundly influenced the local agricultural production structure, prompting a gradual transformation from traditional subsistence-oriented agriculture to commercialized agriculture geared toward the demands of trade.

The geographical conditions of the Southeast Asian islands vary considerably. Java and Bali benefit from fertile volcanic soils and abundant rainfall, making them well suited to the cultivation of various grains and enabling them to become important centers for rice and spice production. In contrast, many other islands are characterized by mountainous terrain, extensive marshlands, and poor soils. The eastern islands in particular suffer from arid climates, limited rainfall, and infertile land.

In the early stages, agriculture in these island polities remained relatively underdeveloped, and local economies largely relied on gathering rainforest resources such as aromatic woods, resins, and rattan. As Arab merchants increasingly sailed eastward along the Indian Ocean routes, the need to supply visiting traders and sailors with provisions and anchorage, as well as to facilitate the exchange of goods, gradually prompted local societies to modify their traditional slash-and-burn modes of production. As a result, agricultural production experienced notable development.

Historical sources provide abundant evidence. Ibn Khordadbeh recorded in Kitab al-Masalik wa al-Mamalik that Borneo produced camphor, bananas, coconuts, sugarcane, and rice, while Java—described as a vast island—abounded in coconuts, bananas, sugarcane, sandalwood, cloves, and other valuable products (Ibn Khordadbeh, 1889, p66).

In the Zhu fanzhi, the Song-dynasty author Zhao Rukuo recorded that the states of Java and Sukadana (located on Java) possessed flat and fertile land suitable for cultivation. They produced rice, hemp, millet, and beans, though wheat was absent. Farmers ploughed their fields with cattle and paid a tax of one-tenth of their harvest. The land yielded abundant grain, and wealthy households were said to store more than ten thousand shi of rice in their granaries. Pepper was especially plentiful (Chengjun, 2022, p 109).

Marco Polo likewise noted that “Lesser Java” (modern Sumatra) produced many precious commodities, including various spices, agarwood, brazilwood, ebony, and other aromatics (Polo,1931, p. 281). Similarly, Ibn Battuta recorded in his travel account that Java produced coconuts, betel nuts, cloves, sandalwood, oranges, camphor, and mangoes. He also described how, upon his arrival at a Javanese port, local inhabitants approached merchant vessels carrying coconuts, bananas, fish, and other local products, while the merchants offered compensation in return (Ibn Battuta,1987, p. 629). These accounts, from different perspectives, indicate that under the impetus of a maritime trading system in which Arab merchants were long active, the island regions of Southeast Asia gradually developed an agricultural structure based on the production of grain, spices, and tropical crops, and became closely connected with international trade.

Among these regions, Java was particularly prominent in this process. It not only emerged as an important producer of various spices, timber, and food crops, but also gradually formed a pattern of development in which agriculture and maritime trade were mutually interdependent.Particularly

noteworthy was the emphasis placed on agriculture by the Majapahit dynasty. The rulers established specialized institutions to manage farmland and irrigation systems, and both the king and his officials conducted regular inspections. Agricultural techniques such as fallow rotation were promoted to maintain soil fertility and increase yields, while extensive hydraulic works were constructed to prevent floods and droughts. In addition to traditional crops such as rice and beans, economic crops including cotton and mulberry were also widely cultivated (Minhe, 2019, p72).

The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia records that a Majapahit ruler once emphasized the foundational role of agriculture in an important public address, stating that without agricultural produce neither the royal court nor the towns could survive. He specifically pointed out that Java's international standing rested upon its rice production—precisely the commodity most sought after by spice merchants. Consequently, safeguarding the livelihood of farmers was regarded as a crucial task of the state (Tarling, 1999, p.220). As noted earlier, this highly developed agricultural system not only brought Majapahit immense wealth and prestige but also laid a solid foundation for its thriving commercial activities.

Second, trade hubs and distinctive local commodities.

Within the Indian Ocean trading network in which Arab merchants had long been active, the island regions of Southeast Asia gradually developed into an important intermediary zone linking China, India, and the Arab world. Among them, the Malay Peninsula, by virtue of its control over key maritime routes, played a crucial hub role in the eastern maritime trading system and significantly promoted the export of local products.The list of export commodities was extensive, particularly various spices and aromatic products. These included yellow wax, bamboo, betel nut, camphor, cardamom, sappanwood, aloeswood, lignum aloes, sandalwood, ivory, rhinoceros horn, high-grade incense wood, processed aromatic resins, tin, turtle shell, and hornbill casques (Ruolan et al, 2018, p.37). *An Outline History of Malaysia*, Beijing: World Book Publishing Company, 2018, p. 37. During the period of the Srivijaya empire, trading ports gathered agricultural, forest, and marine products from across the Indonesian archipelago and other eastern islands. Pepper from the Indonesian islands—partly produced in Sumatra but more commonly transported from Java through the Sunda Strait—as well as sandalwood from Timor were among the most important commodities. As noted in Outline History of Malaysia, "cloves, nutmeg, and mace—the products that in fact made this maritime kingdom most famous—were likewise brought from other islands far to the east."(Van Leur,1955, p.125).

After Majapahit replaced Srivijaya, the center of trade gradually shifted to Java. At this time, the principal ports and markets circulated a wide range of indigenous Indonesian products. These included pepper from the Sunda region of West Java, coconut oil from Balambangan, salt from Madura, cotton textiles from Sumbawa and Bali, white sandalwood from the Lesser Sunda Islands, batik textiles from Central Java, dried fish from Banjarmasin, diamonds from Kutai, tin from Bangka Island, honey from Palembang, iron from Kalimantan, and rhinoceros horn and ivory from Sumatra (Minhe, 2019, p.72).

Marco Polo also described the prosperity of Java in The Travels of Marco Polo, noting that the region produced abundant pepper, nutmeg, saffron, ginger, cloves, and many other rare spices. These commodities attracted large numbers of merchant ships, which gained substantial profits through trade (Polo, 1931, p.279). The wide circulation of these commodities in international markets was, to a large extent, made possible by the maritime trading network established and long maintained by Arab merchants. Through stable sea routes and sustained commercial connections, the island regions of Southeast Asia gradually developed a regional economic pattern centered on spice production and port trade. At the same time, local rulers, by controlling major ports and providing a secure and stable environment for visiting merchant ships, were able to derive considerable revenue from both domestic and foreign trade, thereby further strengthening the role of maritime commerce in driving regional economic development (Tarling, 1999, p.218).

Third, the global circulation of spices.

Spices—especially cloves and nutmeg—were re-exported to Western Europe by Arab merchants, making Europe one of the most important consumer markets for Southeast Asian spices. During the period of the Crusades (1095–1291), large quantities of Eastern commodities—including cloves and nutmeg—were transported through Baghdad and then shipped to Venice, from where they were distributed across Europe.After the end of the Crusades, the increase in meat consumption in Western Europe and changes in dietary preferences led to a surge in demand for Asian spices (Tarling, 1999, p.217). By the fourteenth century, spice consumption in Europe had reached a considerable scale. Studies indicate that during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—and even earlier—a significant proportion of spices imported into Western Europe originated from the island regions of Southeast Asia, including pepper from Indonesia, nutmeg from Malaysia and Indonesia, and cloves from the Maluku Islands (Ruying, 2013, pp:20-21).

Fourth, advances in shipbuilding.

The prosperity of maritime trade also stimulated remarkable progress in shipbuilding technology in the island states of Southeast Asia. Shipbuilding in this region was strongly influenced by Arab techniques, particularly the method of constructing sewn-plank vessels. The Arab sewn-boat tradition originated from skin rafts used in the Babylon period and was later improved into sewn-plank wooden ships. In this method, planks were not fastened with iron nails; instead, holes were drilled along the edges of the boards and the planks were stitched together with coconut-fiber cords.

This sewing technique has a long history. Early prototypes included palm-rope–stitched vessels known as madarata. Later, in maritime centers such as Siraf and Oman, the technology evolved into a new type of sewn vessel using coconut-fiber ropes, with the seams sealed by pitch or resin. Al-Masudi noted in The Meadows of Gold that sewn-plank vessels were widely used in the Indian Ocean because iron nails were prone to corrosion or dissolution in seawater, which could weaken the structural strength of ships. Plant fibers coated with oil or grease were therefore used to fasten the hull instead of iron fittings (Al-Mas‘udi, 2005, p.127).

The distinctive shallow seas, strong monsoon winds, and frequent inter-island transportation needs of Southeast Asia encouraged the development of diverse shipbuilding technologies. Different transportation requirements for people and goods led to various vessel types, ranging from outrigger canoes carved from single logs to large sewn-plank ships made of thick wooden boards. Later designs incorporated wooden dowels joining plank hulls, while retaining elements of sewn construction, along with sails extending from bow to stern.

In general, Southeast Asian ships were characterized by relatively large hulls, heavy keels, multiple layers of wooden planking, and several masts. The planks were joined using plant-fiber sewing or lashing techniques without metal fittings; in later periods wooden pegs gradually replaced fiber stitching, resulting in more sophisticated fastening methods. The French scholar Pierre-Yves Manguin, after examining shipwreck evidence from Southeast Asia, concluded that stitched-plank shipbuilding had a long history in the region. Shipwrecks discovered in Pahang, Butuan, Sumatra, Medan, and South Sumatra all reveal the use of this technology in their construction (Rouxing,2017).

4. The Widespread Spread of Islam in the Island Regions of Southeast Asia

With the flourishing of maritime trade between East and West, Indian religious and cultural traditions exerted a profound influence on the island regions of Southeast Asia. After the first century CE, Indian merchants introduced Brahmanism into the Indonesian archipelago, among which the Shaivite tradition of Hinduism became particularly influential. As a result, the earliest Hindu kingdom in Southeast Asia—the Kutai Kingdom—emerged in eastern Kalimantan (Renshu, 1988, p.437). The religious diffusion during this period laid the groundwork for the later introduction of Islam.

Islam emerged in the early seventh century on the Arabian Peninsula. By the mid-seventh century, the Arab empire, characterized by the unity of political and religious authority, began its rapid expansion. Arab merchants subsequently arrived in Southeast Asia as Muslim traders, and Islam spread alongside their commercial activities.

From the seventh century onward, Islam began to establish initial contacts with the island regions of Southeast Asia. The Arab historical work Studies on the History of the Far East notes that following the emergence of Islam in the seventh century, Arab merchants carried both their religious beliefs and trade goods to the archipelago (Massad Abdel, 2000, p.209). At a symposium held in Medan in March 1963 on the theme "When Did Islam Enter Indonesia?", most participants concluded that Islam was introduced during the seventh to eighth centuries directly by Arab Muslim merchants. These traders first arrived along the coasts of Sumatra, where they combined commercial activities with missionary work.At another symposium held in Aceh in September 1980 on "The Introduction of Islam into Indonesia and Its Historical Development," scholars similarly argued that Arab Muslim merchants had reached northern Sumatra as early as the seventh century, spreading Islam while engaging in trade (Minhe, 2019, p.112).

Chinese historical sources also provide important evidence for the early spread of Islam. They indicate that Arab communities had already begun establishing settlements in the island regions of Southeast Asia from the seventh century onward. The New Book of Tang records that in Kalingga (located in present-day Java) there was a famous story about a just female ruler named Queen Sima. According to the account, a ruler from Dashi placed a bag of gold on the roadside to test the honesty of the kingdom's people; for three years no one dared touch it until the crown prince accidentally stepped on it. The queen punished him severely to uphold the law. When the ruler of Dashi heard of this, he was greatly impressed and did not dare launch a military expedition (Xiu et al, 1975, p.6302). Based on contextual analysis, the "Dashi" mentioned in the text likely did not refer directly to the distant Umayyad Caliphate but rather to an Arab settlement located near Java. Such records collectively provide evidence for the early presence of Arab communities and the initial spread of Islam in Southeast Asia.

According to historical records from Malaysia and Indonesia, between the 6th and 13th centuries large numbers of Arab and Indian merchants had already settled along the northern coast of Sumatra, where early Muslim communities began to emerge in several coastal port areas (Yijiu, 2006, p.34). The earliest surviving Islamic relic in the Southeast Asian island region is said to be a Muslim tombstone located in Leran, East Java, dated to 1082 CE. However, the tomb belonged to a Muslim woman who was not a local inhabitant (Fatimi,1963, p.39). Local Javanese records also recount that in Sunda there were two princes. The elder brother engaged in overseas trade and traveled abroad. He once lived in India, converted to Islam, and adopted the name Haji Puwa. His younger brother succeeded their father to the throne in 1186 and was known as Pabu Mengting Sari. Seven years later, Haji Puwa returned home accompanied by an Arab, attempting to persuade his brother and the royal family to convert to Islam, but he failed. Fearing the anger of the local people, he left Sunda and sought refuge in Cirebon, which at that time was still sparsely inhabited. This episode is often regarded as the earliest reference to Islam in Java (Raffles,1817, p.97).

Chinese historical sources also record the presence of many foreign residents in Srivijaya, particularly Arabs. Zhu fanzhi (Description of the Foreign Lands) notes that "many people of the country bear the surname Pu." Similar records appear in Shilin Guangji, History of Song – Biography of Srivijaya, and Dao Yi Zhi Lue. The surname "Pu" is a simplified transcription of Abu, which in Arabic means "father," a prefix commonly used in Arabic names. The History of Song – Account of Dashi also states that most envoys sent by the Arab lands bore the surname Pu. Therefore, the inhabitants of Srivijaya with the surname Pu were likely Arab immigrants or their descendants, though some local people may also have adopted the surname under the influence of Arab culture. These Arab settlers arrived in Srivijaya through trade and later traveled from there to China for commerce or were dispatched by the Srivijayan king as envoys to visit China.

Ma Huan, in his Yingya Shenglan (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores), also recorded the situation in Java, noting that "there are three classes of people in the country: the first are the Huihui (Muslims), all of whom originally came as merchants from various western regions and settled here; their clothing and daily life are neat and refined… many people have accepted the precepts and fasting of the Muslim faith."(Huan, 2019, p.12).

After the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in 1258, merchants from different parts of the Islamic world began to migrate on a large scale. At the same time, driven by the pursuit of spices, Muslim merchants from India, Arabia, and Persia no longer sailed directly to China as they had previously done. Instead, they penetrated into the island regions of Southeast Asia, establishing ties with local rulers, encouraging them to convert to Islam, and engaging in trade, intermarriage, and the spread of Islam among the local population.

Some sources that record the conversion of Samudra to Islam also mention that an Islamic missionary mendicant departing from Mecca stopped successively at four states—Fansuri, Thobri, Haru, and Perlak—before finally arriving at Samudra (Mou, 2021, p.181). These four states likewise converted to Islam one after another. Samudra corresponds to present-day Sumatra in Indonesia, and its conversion to Islam likely took place around the 13th century.

Archaeological discoveries show that the first ruler of Samudra-Pasai died in 1297 CE. His tombstone bears the date 635 in the Islamic calendar and the name "Sultan Malik al-Salih," which corresponds with the account recorded in the Malay Annals and is also broadly consistent with the descriptions found in The Travels of Marco Polo and Ma Huan's Yingya Shenglan (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores) (Mou, 2021, p.184). While traveling from China back to Italy, Marco Polo passed by the island of Sumatra and recorded the port town of Perlak on its northeastern coast. He observed that many of the inhabitants of this port town had converted to Islam under the influence of "Saracen" merchants (Polo, 1931, p.279).

By the 14th and 15th centuries, Islam had entered a stage of widespread dissemination across Southeast Asia. After its development, Malacca became the largest commercial center in Southeast Asia and a powerful Islamic kingdom. From Malacca, Islam spread successively to western and northern Borneo and the western coast of Sumatra. In the eastern part of the archipelago, Islam spread along the northern coast of central and eastern Java to the Banda Islands, Ambon, and the Moluccas (Yiping, 2005, p.71). In the following period, a number of Islamic kingdoms emerged, including the Temasek Kingdom, the Pahang Kingdom, the Banten Kingdom, the Aceh Kingdom, and the Gowa Kingdom.In the 14th century, Ibn Battuta reached Sumatra and met the Javanese sultan Malik al-Zahir, whom he described as a noble and generous ruler belonging to the Shafi'i school of Islam and one who greatly respected jurists (Ibn Battuta, 1987, p.630). In addition, in 1390 a prince from Minangkabau in Sumatra went to Buansa in Sulu and established an Islamic polity there. In 1450, Abu Bakr, who arrived in Jolo, founded the Sultanate of Sulu. In 1475, the Arab Sharif Kabungsuwan led followers from Johor to Mindanao to preach Islam and established a sultanate there (Yiping, 2005, p.72), marking the firm establishment of Islam in the Philippine archipelago.

5. Conclusion: Trade, Civilization, and Historical Interactions in Early Globalization

Before the Age of Discovery, trade across the Indian Ocean constituted the main body of maritime commerce in the world. During this remarkable historical period, countless merchants and travelers sailed between ports throughout the Indian Ocean, jointly composing a vivid chapter in the history of maritime trade. The Southeast Asian island region was an indispensable part of this network.

The Indian Ocean trading network has a long history. As early as the initial stages of West Asian civilization, people in the western Indian Ocean region had begun to exchange natural resources and handicrafts through maritime and overland routes. Between approximately 2500 and 1950 BCE, frequent interactions between the Mesopotamian civilization and the Indus Valley civilization led to the first flourishing of maritime routes in the Persian Gulf (Xiukun, 2020, p.14), marking the beginning of relatively

frequent exchanges between the two civilizations. The development of Southeast Asian civilization occurred somewhat later. The exchange network across the eastern Indian Ocean between India and Southeast Asia was established only several centuries after the middle of the first millennium BCE (Xiukun, 2020, p.14). Subsequently, the Southeast Asian trading network expanded westward and connected with the eastward-expanding Indian Ocean network, eventually linking maritime routes from East Asia to the Mediterranean and forming an integrated system characterized by frequent exchanges and mutual influences.

Between the 7th and 15th centuries, Indian Ocean trade, with the Arabs as its core driving force, exerted a profound influence on the history of world maritime activity. Its significance went far beyond navigation techniques and cultural transmission; the Arabs were in fact among the key founders of the early global trading system. For the Southeast Asian island region, trade generated a virtuous cycle at the political, economic, and social levels. The prosperity of trade facilitated the rise of centralized states in the region. Relying on local specialties—such as spices and other agricultural products, as well as certain handicrafts—these states participated actively in trade, which effectively promoted the development of productive forces. More importantly, Indian Ocean trade profoundly influenced local cultures and promoted the integration of diverse civilizations. Islam spread widely in the region and coexisted alongside Hinduism and Buddhism, together shaping the diverse cultural landscape of Southeast Asia and enriching its spiritual and cultural life.

Therefore, the development of the “Eastern maritime trade” led by the Arabs in the Southeast Asian island region was not merely an economic interaction but rather a historical process of deep exchanges and integration in politics, culture, technology, and religion. The trade activities of this period not only laid the foundation for Southeast Asia’s position within global economic and cultural networks but also provide an important perspective and valuable case for understanding the process of globalization in the medieval world.

References;

- Abu Zayd Hasan. (1999). *Sulaiman's Account of His Journey to the East* (Arabic ed.), Abu Dhabi: Abu Dhabi Cultural Center.
- Al-Mas'udi .(2005). *Muruj al-Dhahab* (The Meadows of Gold) (Arabic ed.), Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya.
- Chengjun, F. (2022). *Annotated and Collated Edition of Zhu fan Zhi*, Beijing: Cultural Relics Press.
- Drakeley, S. (2005). *The History of Indonesia*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2005.
- Fatimi, S., Q.(1963). *Islam Comes to Malaysia*, Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute Ltd.
- Huan, M.(2019). *Yingya Shenglan* (Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores), annotated by Feng Chengjun, Nanjing: Nanjing Publishing House.
- Ibn Battuta.(1987). *That al-Nuzzar fi Ghara'ib al-Amsar wa 'Aja'ib al-Asfar* (The Travels of Ibn Battuta) (Arabic ed.), Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Ibn Khordad (Arab), *Kitab al-Masalik was al-Mamalik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) (Arabic ed.), Leiden: Brill, 1889, p. 66.
- Keyu, Z. (2022). "Foreign Factors in the Cultural Evolution of the Philippine Archipelago from the 9th to 13th Century from a Global History Perspective- Focusing on Archaeological Discoveries," *National Navigation*, No. 1.
- Marx, K. (2004). *Capital, Vol. III*, Central Compilation and Translation Bureau (trans.), Beijing : People's Publishing House.
- Massad, A., A. (2000). *Studies in the History of the Far East* (Arabic ed.), Alexandria: University Knowledge Publishing House.
- Minhe, L. (2019). *An Outline History of Indonesia*, Beijing: World Book Publishing Company.
- Mou, L.,(ed). (2021).*Collection of Historical Materials on Ancient Southeast Asia (Vol. II)*, Beijing: Xianzhuang Shuju, 2021.
- Polo, M. (1931). *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. Aldo Ricci, New York: The Viking Press.
- Ptak, R. (2019). *The Maritime Silk Road*, trans. Shi Minyue, Beijing: China Friendship Publishing Company, 2019.
- Raffles, T., S.(1817). *The History of Java*, London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1817, Vol. II.
- Renshu, W.(1988). *Ancient History of Indonesia*, Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Rouxing, D.(2017). "Archaeological Gaps, Research Misconceptions, and Historical Forms of Guang Ships," *Southern Cultural Relics*, No. 2.
- Ruolan, F. et al. (2018). *An Outline History of Malaysia*, Beijing: World Book Publishing Company.
- Ruying, T. (2013). "'As Precious as Pepper': Spices and Western European Social Life in the 14th–16th Centuries," PhD diss., Capital Normal University, 2013, pp. 20–21.
- Tarling, N. (1999). *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol. I: From Early Times to c.1500, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Van Leur, J. C. (1955). *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, The Hague: W. van Hoeve Ltd.
- Xiu, O., Qi, S.(1975). *New Book of Tang*, Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975, p. 6302.
- Xiukun, Y.(2020). "The Indian Ocean World Shaped by Long-Distance Trade," *Guangming Daily*, September 21, (accessed November 30, 2024).
- Yijiu, J.(2006). *History of Islam*, Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.
- Yiping, L. (2005). "On the Spread of Islam to the Island Regions of Southeast Asia," *Nanyang Issues Research*, No2.