



**chapter one**

*The Trade in Spices*

# What are the Spice Routes?



▲ An 11th Century CE Chinese pottery incense burner.

▼ The busy Spice Route port of Antioch in the 15th Century CE.



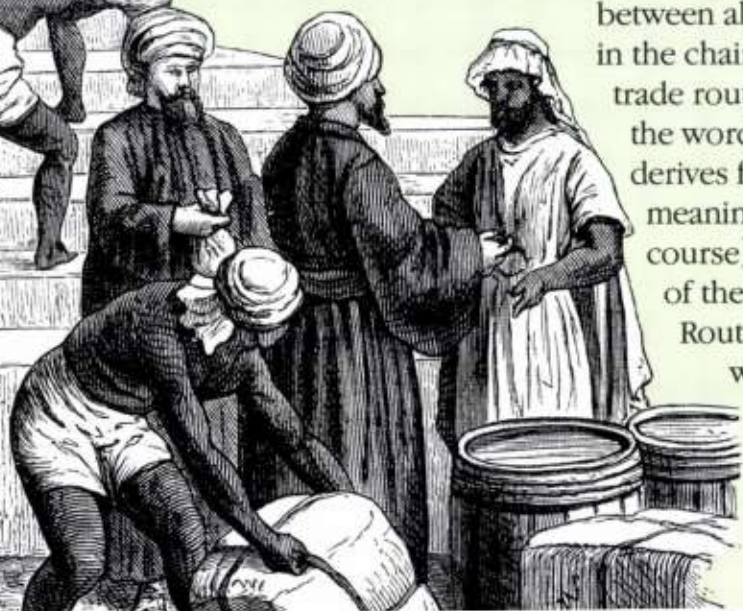
The Spice Routes is the name given to the network of sea routes that link the East with the West. They stretch from the west coast of Japan, through the islands of Indonesia, around India to the lands of the Middle East – and from there, across the Mediterranean to Europe. It is a distance over 15,000 kilometres and, even today, is no easy journey.

From our very earliest history, people have travelled the Spice Routes. At first, they probably ventured only short distances from their home ports but over the centuries their ships sailed further and further across the oceans. They braved treacherous seas and a possibly hostile reception on arrival in an unknown land. These journeys were not undertaken purely in the spirit of adventure – the driving force behind them was trade. The Spice Routes were, and still are, first and foremost trade routes.

Trade is a central part of our lives. When we buy something we are trading, exchanging one item (usually money) for another. However, our purchase is the final link in a long chain of buyers and sellers: from the supplier of raw materials, to the manufacturer, to the wholesaler, to the shop – and if the goods we buy come from abroad there may be several other stages in between.

The journey of the goods between all these links in the chain is called a trade route (in fact, the word 'trade' derives from a term meaning a track or course). In the case of the Spice

Routes the links were formed by traders buying and



selling goods from port to port. The principal and most profitable goods they traded in were spices – giving the routes their name. As early as 2000 BCE, spices such as cinnamon from Sri Lanka and cassia from China found their way along the Spice Routes to the Middle East. Other goods exchanged hands too – cargoes of ivory, silk, porcelain, metals and dazzling gemstones brought great profits to the traders who were prepared to risk the dangerous sea journeys.

But precious goods were not the only thing to be exchanged by the traders. Perhaps more important was the exchange of knowledge: knowledge of new peoples and their religions, languages, artistic and scientific skills. The ports along the Spice Routes acted as melting pots for ideas and information. With every ship that swept out with a cargo of valuables on board, fresh knowledge was carried over the seas to the ship's next port of call.



▲ Carving marble Buddhas in Burma. Ideas on religion spread along the Spice Routes.

▼ Colourful spices are still sold in the East today, just as they were thousands of years ago.





# The Demand for Spices



Today, it seems strange that the demand for spices should be one of the central causes for such large scale trade across such massive distances.

We probably think of them simply as a flavouring for food. Yet, the word 'spice' comes from the Latin *species*, which means an item of special value, as compared to ordinary articles of trade.

The great distances are easy to explain: many of the important spices grew only in the tropical East, from China south to Indonesia, southern India and Sri Lanka. In particular, they grew in the Moluccas or, as they are better known, the Spice Islands. These are a chain of mountainous islands strung out like jewels in the Pacific Ocean between Sulawesi (Celebes) and New Guinea. From here came the fragrant spices of cloves and nutmeg which grew nowhere else in the world. To reach the spice markets found across Asia and Europe, the spices *had* to be transported thousands of kilometres over the seas.

▲► The two creatures shown on these pages are phoenixes from a Chinese silk tapestry of the 16th Century CE. The phoenix was a fantastic bird of ancient legend closely associated with the burning of incense. People believed that it burned itself in a fire and that another phoenix rose from its ashes.

► Spices have been used in the preparation and flavouring of food for thousands of years. Many of the great cuisines of the world have developed through the use of spices.



How people came to know and value these spices which grew so far away is an impossible question to answer exactly. As trading links from Indonesia fanned out through south and central Asia, so they met with links that spread from the Middle East and the north. Goods were exchanged and traders would return to their homeland carrying the beautifully scented, exotic spices. Perhaps it was their strangeness and rarity that led great medicinal and spiritual values to be attributed to them.

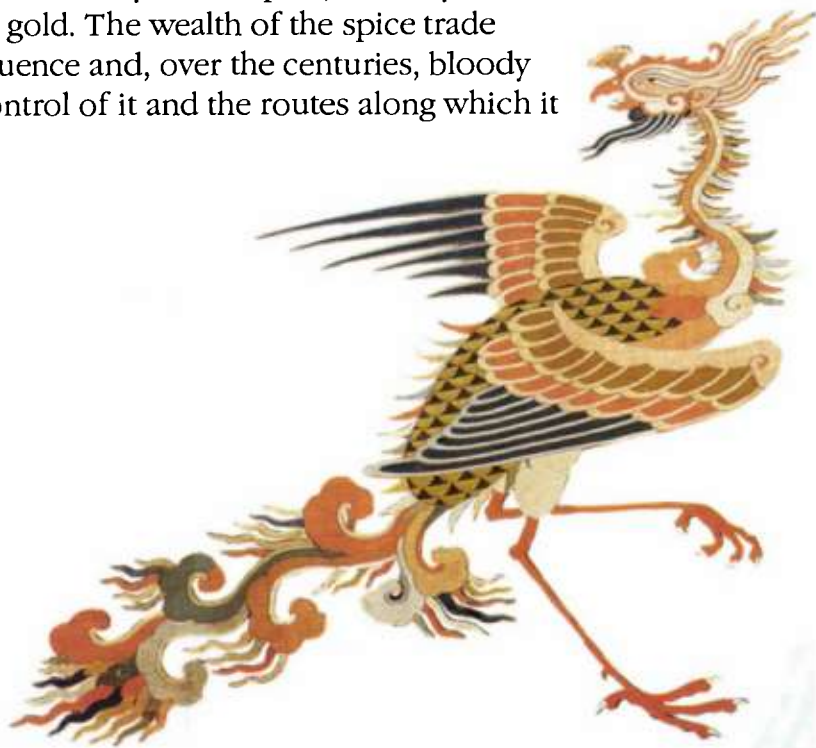
From the dawn of civilization, spices were burned as incense in religious ceremonies, purifying the air and carrying the prayers of the people heavenward to their gods. They were also added to healing ointments and to potions drunk as antidotes to poisons. To hide the many household smells, people burned spices daily in their homes. They were used as cooking ingredients very early on – not only to add flavour but also to make the food, which was often far from fresh, palatable, particularly in hot climates.

Myths and legends were woven around these exotic substances. They were linked to strange beasts like the phoenix, giant eagles, serpents and dragons. In the Fifth Century BCE, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote how the spice cassia grew in a lake 'infested by winged creatures like bats, which screech alarmingly and are very pugnacious'. Some of these stories were probably created by the traders who, wishing to protect their profits, tried to hide the sources of the spices.

For the profits to be made from spices were huge. Because they were so small and dried, they were easy to transport, but they were literally worth their weight in gold. The wealth of the spice trade brought great power and influence and, over the centuries, bloody battles were fought to win control of it and the routes along which it took place.



▲ Early 19th Century CE English spice boxes. Spices were extremely expensive and carefully stored in special boxes and cupboards.





# The Different Spices

A spice is the strongly flavoured dried flower, fruit, seed, bark or stem of a plant. For example, cloves are the unopened flower buds of the clove tree; nutmeg is a seed; cinnamon and cassia are bark; ginger and turmeric are both underground stems. In the past, as well as being used in food, spices were included in the ingredients of oils, ointments, perfume-powders, cosmetics, incense and medicine. Fragrant woods, such as sandalwood and aloe-wood, were also much in demand. Some of the most precious and sought-after spices carried along the Spice Routes are listed here.



**Cloves (*Eugenia aromatica*) ▲**

The clove tree is indigenous to the Moluccas of Indonesia. Today, they are also grown successfully elsewhere such as Madagascar and Grenada. Cloves are the dried flower-buds of the tree. They are used in curing meats, cooking and medicine.



**▲ Nutmeg and Mace (*Myristica fragrans*)**

The evergreen nutmeg tree is native to the tiny volcanic Banda Islands at the southern tip of the Moluccas. Now it is also grown in the West Indies, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Inside the fruit, the heavy seed, the nutmeg, is covered by a scarlet lace-like mesh, the mace. Both were used in medicines and as an incense and, as is still the case today, in cooking.

**Frankincense (*Boswellia sacra*) ▲**

This is the resin of the frankincense tree. It was considered the highest quality incense. It was gathered from trees grown in the Zufar (Dhofar) region in the south of the Arabian Peninsula and in Somalia in Africa. **Myrrh (*Commiphora myrrha*)** is a fragrant resin from a shrub mostly grown in Somalia. Valued as highly as frankincense, myrrh was used as incense and as an ointment.



**Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) ▲**

This spice is the rhizome (an underground stem) of the ginger plant. It is used in food and medicines. The ginger plant originally grew in Java, India and China but is now farmed elsewhere as well. **Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)** is a plant of the ginger family, native to India and Indonesia. Oil from its rhizomes was used in food and as a bright yellow dye.



**Camphor (*Dryobalanops aromatica* & *Cinnamomum camphora*) ▲**

Camphor is sometimes called gum arabic. It is a strong-smelling crystalline substance obtained from the sap of two types of tree found in parts of the Far East. It was used mainly in incense and medicine.



**Black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) ▼**

One of the earliest spices known. It was once so valuable that it was often used as a substitute for money, ransoms, tributes and rents. The pepper plant is a climbing vine, with berries called peppercorns. It grows wild in the equatorial forests of India and Asia but is now cultivated. For many centuries, the best quality pepper has been grown on the western Malabar coast of India.



**Saffron (*Crocus sativus*) ▲**

Saffron is now the most expensive spice in the world. It is made from the stigmas (the pollen stalks) inside the saffron crocus flowers. Thousands of stigmas are needed for just a few grams. It can be used in foods, wines, perfumes and as a dye or a drug. It was grown mainly in Iran and India, but also now in Spain.

**▲ Cinnamon and Cassia (*Cinnamomum macrophyllum* & *Cinnamomum cassia*)**

These spices are two of the earliest known. Both were used to flavour food and in embalming ointments. They are the dried bark of the cinnamon and cassia trees – the first being native to Sri Lanka, the second to China and Burma, but now both are grown successfully elsewhere.

