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History of trade routes in the Horn of Africa



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Abstract:

The Horn of Africa, comprising the modern states of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia, is an important region from the point of view of international relations. It is located at the confluence of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the western Indian Ocean. The Horn of Africa has experienced the evolution of international trade networks from ancient times to the present. Archaeological and literary sources are available for the role of the region in international commerce. The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, the ancient Greek travel and trade manual from the 1st century AD, mentions the Adulis trade center in the contemporary area of Zula, Eritrea, as a 'port established by law' (a nomimon emporion). This port was the chief maritime outlet of the Kingdom of Aksum until the 7th century. The strategic trade centres and the trade routes in the interior have all played an important role in the trade history of this region. The ports of Xiis (Heis), Opone (Hafun), and Avalites (Zeila) have all been significant centres in the Indo-Roman trade history, as indicated by the findings of amphorae, glasses, coins, and other imports from South Arabia. The inland centres, such as Harlaa in Eastern Ethiopia, have also played an important role as redistribution centres, facilitating the movement of imported commodities into the interior. The nomadic herders have also played an important role as middlemen who controlled access to water and pastures. The spread of Islam has also facilitated the integration of this region into the long-distance trade routes with its unique system of law and religion, which has helped in facilitating business transactions in this region. The trade routes in this part of Africa have experienced a period of unrest due to various political and military conflicts in this region. Besides historical records, there are various archaeological findings that have shed light on this subject.

***NOTE:** The views expressed in the Analysis Papers are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

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Trade routes, Maritime commerce, Caravan networks, Nomadic herders, Indo-Roman trade

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Introduction

The Horn of Africa is a geopolitically important region that includes Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti. It is situated where the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Western Indian Ocean meet (Figure 1). Historically, this area has served as a crossroads connecting Africa, Arabia, and Asia, facilitating the transfer of goods, people, and ideas (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021; Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022). The Horn of Africa has actively participated in regional and interregional trade networks, which have significantly shaped the economic, cultural, and political landscape of the area and beyond.

Historical records and archaeological findings show that trade in the Horn of Africa has been ongoing since at least the 1st century AD. For instance, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek sailing guide from the 1st century AD, detailed sailing routes, traded commodities, and ports across the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean (Casson, 1989). It indicates that the Kingdom of Aksum traded ivory and other goods from the African interior to ports like Cyeneum near what is now Asab, and to Adulis and Avalites (Zeila) on the Red Sea.

On the other side of the region, ports such as Xiis (Heis), Opone (Hafun), and Avalites (Zeila), connected to the Red Sea-Indian Ocean trade network, served as key points for economic exchanges with the Roman Mediterranean, South Arabia, and India (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022; Huntingford and Chittick, 1989). These ports acted as major hubs on long-distance trade routes where goods such as amphorae, glass containers, beads, coins, and ceramics were imported. Inland settlements like Harlaa in eastern Ethiopia utilized routes passing through dry lowlands and river valleys, leveraging the knowledge and mobility of nomadic pastoral groups to distribute goods (Torres, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2025).

In addition, there was an incentive to extend trade connections with the advent of Islam in the 7th century. During this period, the Horn established trade connections with Persia, India, the Maldives, and East Africa in the Indian Ocean trade (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, there were various dynamics in the region, including local conflicts, which impacted trade. For instance, trade routes had to be adjusted periodically (González-Ruibal, 2023).

Drawing on archaeological, historical, and ethnographic information, this chapter seeks to explore the history of trade routes in the Horn of Africa. It aims to illustrate how certain crucial factors enabled the Horn to participate in trade activities from ancient to modern times.

Geographic and environmental context

The Horn of Africa is a geographically significant area that connects the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Western Indian Ocean (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021). Its unique landscape includes plains, arid lowlands, river valleys, and highland plateaus. These variations in geography and environment have given rise to unique zones of ecology, which have impacted the settlement and movement of people and the formation of commercial routes over the centuries (Insoll, 2021). The plains in the Horn of Africa have served as natural docking stations for maritime trade, while the valleys and highlands have served as the commercial centres for imported goods (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).



Figure 1. Location map of the Horn of Africa (© Rainer Lesniewski, 2025)

The monsoon rains allowed for dependable navigation of sea routes between Somalia and Arabia. This was because the rains were seasonal, enabling traders to plan maritime routes with confidence (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, land routes were generally affected by the availability of water, pasture, and accessible pathways. Caravans typically travelled through valleys, wells, and grazing areas. These routes were guided by the knowledge of nomadic herders, who controlled access to key resources (Torres, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2025). The availability of these essential resources also played a role in establishing trade centres.

The various terrains in the Horn region also affect the movement of goods and people. The mountain ranges in the region, for example, provide routes for transporting goods, while the desert and semi-arid areas in the Horn require strategic planning. The coastal regions and natural harbours of the Horn of Africa connect it to long-distance trade routes that link the region to South Arabia, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean (González-Ruibal, 2023).

The subsequent parts of the chapter will present the historical development of trade routes in the Horn of Africa, with special emphasis on the roles of geography, environment, and politics in shaping these routes from ancient times to the present. The study shows the long-term connections between the historical trade networks and the contemporary economic networks in the region.

Trade networks in Antiquity

Between the 1st and the 3rd century AD, the Horn of Africa was a major participant in both maritime and inland trade networks, promoting economic and cultural exchange across Afro-Eurasia (Seland, 2014). Both archaeological and historical data reveal that the integration of coastal regions and inland settlements in the region into these maritime and inland trade networks had taken place before the rise of Islamic maritime trade (Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022).

The Horn of Africa has played a very important role in the commerce and economy of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean during Antiquity. The ports along the coast in modern-day Eritrea and Djibouti were significant gateways linking the Ethiopian highlands to the markets in Arabia, the Mediterranean region, and India. The port city of Adulis was one

of the major commercial hubs through which goods from the highlands were exported to the international market (Figure 2). The items of trade exported from this region of Africa comprised ivory, gold, rhino horn, animal hides, incense, and slaves, while the imported goods were cloth, glass, metals, ceramics, and spices from Arabia, the Mediterranean region, and India (Casson, 1989; Munro-Hay, 1991).

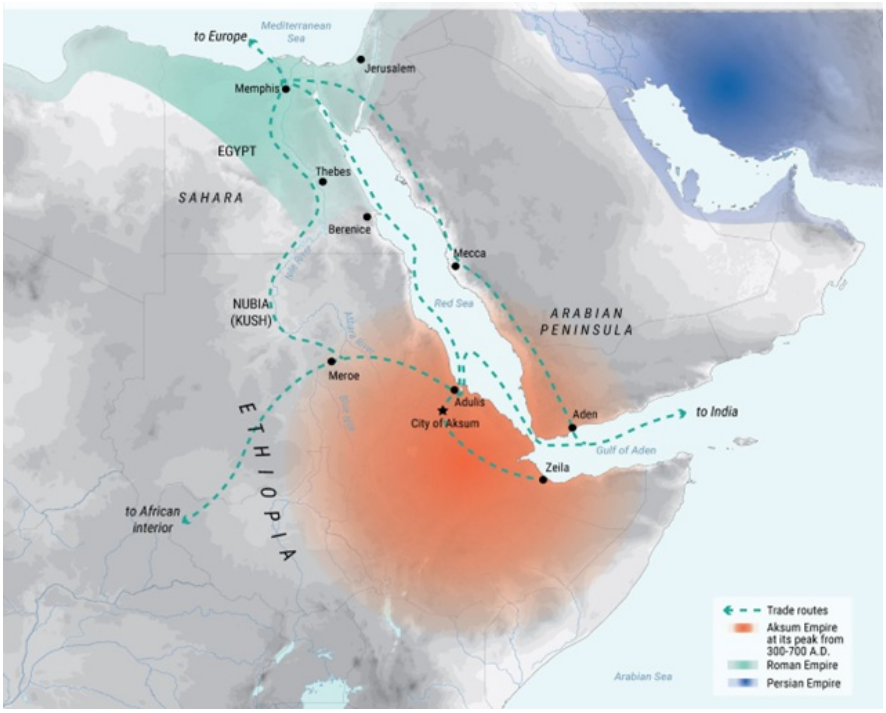


Figure 2. The Aksumite port of Adulis in the Red Sea (© Geopolitical Futures, 2018)

During the Kingdom of Aksum, the commercial activities in the Horn of Africa were greatly expanded. Commodities were moved by the state, local, and foreign merchants from Arabia and the Mediterranean region (Phillipson, 2012; Hatke, 2013).

Archaeological and historical research suggests that ports on the Red Sea corridor/Gulf of Aden facilitated the integration of the Horn of Africa with the wider Red Sea/Indian Ocean trade systems (Fattovich, 2010; Power, 2012).

Some of the most valuable sources of information about the early maritime trade of the Horn of Africa come from the coastal settlement of Xiis (Heis) in Eastern Somalia. The sources of archaeological excavations and surveys have shown that the region was connected to various parts of the world through trade.

This has been supported by imported Roman and Parthian pottery, glasses, and South Arabian ware dating to the 1st-3rd centuries AD (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022). The mentioned categories of sources, particularly imported goods, indicate a high level of trade activity instead of sporadic contacts. Imported goods were carried to the region, then to another country, via sea routes that connected the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, and the Mediterranean via the region's ports, including Xiis, Mundus, Zeila, and Berbera (Seland, 2014).

The ancient ports of the coastal region, such as Opone, or modern Hafun, have been very important in the history of the early Indian Ocean trade. The presence of material evidence has confirmed their involvement in the Mediterranean world, including Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Persian partners (Huntingford and Chittick, 1989).

Likewise, the excavations conducted at Xiis have shown the involvement of these ports in long-distance trade through the presence of imported ceramics.

Inland trade routes in the Horn of Africa

The inland routes of the Horn of Africa traversed the deserts, semi-arid plains, and highland valleys. They helped in the movement of various commodities of trade, such as livestock, ivory, salt, cereals, among many others (Woldekiros, 2014). Archaeological findings indicate that the trade routes of the Horn of Africa, known as the caravan trade routes, were close to places with water resources, hence an important feature in trade (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022).

Nomadic pastoral communities in the Horn not only served as an intermediary in trade between inland and coastal markets, but also provided pack animals and guided traders across harsh environments (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022; Woldekiros, 2014).

On the other hand, local social structures helped to control access to major resources and expedited collaboration among stakeholders in trade. There was integration of the inland production zones in the Horn and the inter-regional trade networks, which included the Incense Trade Route, into international markets.

Natural resins such as frankincense and myrrh from Southern Arabia, Ethiopia, and Somalia were carried by caravans to the ports for further transportation via the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean exchange networks (Ben-Yehoshua *et al.*, 2012).

Both archaeological and historical data are evident that the trade routes enabled the exchange of various commodities such as ivory, gold, tortoiseshell, and textiles, which formed a complex economic network that involved the exchange of foreign goods (Schneider, 2018).

This interaction between maritime and inland networks enabled the Horn of Africa to be vigorously involved in international trade. Overland trade routes were used to transport local products such as livestock, frankincense, and ivory to the trading centres along the coast, where they were traded for other foreign products such as ceramics, glassware, textiles, and metalwork (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022). This exchange of goods promoted interregional exchange, which was carried inland (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2022).

While maritime trade opened the gates for the connection of the Horn to distant lands, caravan routes connected the ports on the coast to the hinterland. The ports on the Gulf of Aden, such as Zeila, Berbera, and Bulhar, became gateways linking the trade routes to the Ethiopian highlands and inland settlements.

Northern Somaliland was the transit region where the seasonal towns of caravans and exchange fairs took place at critical constrictions. This facilitated interaction among herders, coastal communities, and inland urban centres (Torres, 2022).

Caravan routes were flexible and tended to follow areas with water and pasture rather than fixed roads. Archaeological features that help identify these routes include wells, campsites, and cairns (Insoll, 2021).

Historical and archaeological studies also indicate that trade routes could change in response to political turmoil, aridity, or other environmental pressures (Seland, 2014; Woldekiros, 2014).

Socio-economic and cultural implications

Trade in the Horn of Africa has significant economic, social, and cultural implications. From the economic point of view, it ensured the flow of materials, ideas, and techniques from and to the region, particularly between Africa and Eurasia. In addition, nomadic herders served as middlemen in the process.

This, in turn, affected the formation of settlements, movements, and alliances between nomadic communities (Torres, 2022). Moreover, trade in the region reinforced the region's participation in international trade, hence assuring participation in the overall maritime economy.

Between the 1st and the 3rd centuries AD, the Horn of Africa actively engaged in practicing both maritime and inland trade. In the process, coastal ports and caravan trade routes served as complementary channels of trade.

The involvement of the region in these trade networks shows an economic system characterized by the supply of locally produced goods, the intermediary role of herders, and international exchange. These trade connections have shaped the region's social, economic, and cultural landscapes throughout the subsequent centuries (Ben-Yehoshua *et al.*, 2012; Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022; Schneider, 2018; Seland, 2014; Woldekiros, 2014).

Nomadic herders as intermediaries in trade

The nomadic herders of the Horn of Africa actively facilitated trade between the Red Sea region and the Gulf of Aden region and countries like Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Somalia. While major ports, like Adulis, Zeila, and Berbera, played a significant role in the trade between these countries, they also played a critical role in the movement of goods between inland and coastal areas.

The nomadic societies in these countries, like the Afar in Eritrea and Djibouti, and the Somali nomadic societies along the coast of the Gulf of Aden, used camels and donkeys to exchange goods in these arid lands. The caravan method played a critical role in the exchange of goods from landlocked countries, such as ivory, gold, hides, frankincense, and myrrh, to the ports.

On the other hand, goods like textiles, glass beads, metal goods, and ceramics from Arabia, the Mediterranean region, and South Asia passed from these ports to the landlocked countries. The trade was made possible by the caravan routes between these ports and the landlocked countries (Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2012).

Through these activities, nomadic herders became vital intermediaries connecting maritime trade networks with the economic systems of the Horn of Africa's interior.

Archaeological and ethnohistorical records indicate that the herders helped in the transportation of goods such as frankincense, myrrh, ivory, salt, livestock, and cereals from the inland regions of production using their herds of animals, labour, and guidance (Woldekiros, 2014).

The trade activities in the region received an impetus from the pastoral communities, who took advantage of guiding the caravans, facilitating access to the resources in the difficult environments.

The herders' awareness of the seasonal variations, availability of water, and pasture was essential for the long-distance trade, especially in the semi-arid and desert environments where the availability of resources was critical for the survival of the traders (Seland, 2014).

Apart from the above contributions, herders maintained relations with diverse communities, and this helped them to mediate trade agreements, settle conflicts, and guarantee a safe route for the movement of merchants and items of trade (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2022).

Herders' advantage in controlling strategic trade networks influenced regional exchange systems. Hence, herders gained economic and social benefits from long-distance trade.

The involvement of the nomadic herders in the Horn of Africa as an intermediary is further supported by material evidence. Excavations carried out in Somaliland and Northern Somalia have shown that the they took an active part in the exchange and consumption of imported Roman, South Arabian, and Indian Ocean products (Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022).

Therefore, the herders were not just passive actors but took an active part in the trade and influenced the movement and structure of trade.

Islamic expansion and trade integration (7th-15th centuries)

The spread of Islam that started in the seventh century also marked a period of change in the business system in the Horn of Africa, which further added to the integration of the region into the business system in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean region.

The Islamic traders residing in the Horn of Africa, most of whom came from Arabia but also from the rest of the Islamic world, played a key role in the development of business centres in the region, including Zeila, Berbera, and Massawa. The trade hubs played a major role in connecting the hinterlands of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia into the commercial networks in the Red Sea/Indian Ocean region. The commodities exported from the Horn of Africa included cattle, ivory, gold, incense, hides, and slaves, while imported items comprised textiles, glassware, ceramics, and metals from Arabia, Persia, and South Asia (Munro-Hay, 1991; Power, 2012).

From the 7th century CE onward, significant changes occurred in trade and lifestyles in the Horn of Africa, mainly due to Islamic influence and the region's integration into the Islamic trade network.

Port towns such as Zeila, Berbera, Mogadishu, and Sofala became key trade hubs. They connected the Horn of Africa with the Arabian Peninsula, Persia, India, and eventually the Swahili Coast (Pouwels, 2002). These port towns were vital not only for trade, but also for Islamic education and tradition in the region. The growth of Islamic practices helped boost trade because of shared laws and spiritual principles.

Archaeological evidence shows an increase in goods imported from Yemen, Persia, and other Islamic countries. All these trade centres were linked to the Indian Ocean trade network, which strengthened trade relations and connected people (González-Ruibal, 2023; González-Ruibal *et al*., 2021).

The emergence and development of the Islamic religion along the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea coastlines marked the beginning of new forms of trade and maritime connections.

The Muslim traders not only traded goods such as textiles, glassware, and spices, but they also traded banking methods and financial instruments that facilitated the process of financial transactions over long distances (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

This marked the beginning of the enhancement of the effectiveness and reliability of the market networks, which eventually led to the emergence and development of both coastal and inland trading centres.

The expansion of the Islamic religion in the Red Sea region and the Horn of Africa marked the beginning of the promotion of trade through the use of the common religion as a way of promoting trust among the traders.

The expansion of the Islamic religion in the area encouraged the development of long-distance trade through the application of institutions, pilgrimage, and scholars. This was the onset of the promotion of cultural interactions (Gonzalez-Ruibal, 2003).

Archaeological findings also suggest that the area received imports from Yemen, Persia, and other Islamic territories.

Archaeological evidence from ports in Somalia, such as Mogadishu, and ports in Northern Somaliland is indication of continuous growth in maritime trade under the influence of Islam. Excavation of these sites has yielded evidence of ceramics from China, India, and Persia, as well as glassware and coins, which show regional and international exchange of goods and currency (Bradbury, 2007). These archaeological sites confirm that the Horn of Africa was fully incorporated into Indian Ocean commerce. The region actively took part in the exchange of valuable and ordinary goods.

The spread of Islam also enhanced inland trade networks. Caravan routes connecting highlands in the hinterland and pastoral areas to coastal ports turned into a gradually organized system within the framework of Islamic trade regulations (sharia-based practices) and social networks of Muslim merchants (Pouwels, 2002).

Nomadic herders maintained their role as intermediaries and transported goods like ivory, gold, and incense from interior regions to markets on the coast. These inland-coastal networks were further strengthened by urban nodes from which both locally produced and imported commodities were distributed (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

Islam's close link with trade has both political and cultural impacts. The Sultanate of Mogadishu and the Adal Sultanate on the coast used revenues from trade to reinforce political power and maintain political and strategic ties with surrounding regions and distant trading partners (Bradbury, 2007).

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the Horn was a crucial centre in the Indian Ocean trade network. Commodities from China, India, and the Middle East were exchanged through ports on the coast to the hinterland. On the other hand, locally produced goods from the hinterland, including gold, ivory, and livestock, were exported to distant markets. Consequently, the economy of the Horn saw commercial integration and transformation under Islam. It also facilitated inter-regional connection between the Horn and Afro-Eurasian trade routes, and familiarized societies of the region with an inter-regional trade network, cultural, and religious interaction (Pouwels, 2002; Horton and Middleton, 2000; Bradbury, 2007).

In addition, the spread of Islam helped in the commercial integration of people as a result of the shared religion, culture, and law, which were useful in promoting long-distance trade and cooperation among merchants.

Islamic sultanates and their trading communities along the coast, for example, the Sultanate of Ifat and the Adal Sultanate were instrumental in promoting trade routes between the coast and Ethiopia (Fattovich, 2010; Phillipson, 2012).

Therefore, between the 7th and 15th centuries, the Horn of Africa became integrated into the commercial systems of the Red Sea and Islamic world.

Available literature indicates that the spread of Islam in the region from the 7th century to the 15th century was crucial in shaping the economic and social structure in the Horn of Africa region. This region was connected by a series of ports along the coast and by caravans, enabling trade in the Indian Ocean region under the principles and laws of Islam. This region was characterized by trade, which enabled interactions across culture, religion, and politics, making it a focal point in Afro-Eurasia.

Medieval trade in the Indian Ocean (11th-16th centuries)

The Horn of Africa remained active in the Indian Ocean trade network from the 11th to the 16th century.

Ports connecting the region to South Arabia, India, the Maldives, and Madagascar include Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2022). The findings from archaeological surveys conducted in this area, near Berbera and other ports along the

Red Sea, show that this period was marked by long-distance trade, especially through ceramics and goods shipped to these ports (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2021).

Berbera, as a trading hub in the Indian Ocean, stayed active throughout the medieval era. Archaeological evidence reveals numerous foreign goods, with a large portion of imports consisting of Asian ceramics. These findings suggest that goods brought into Berbera were redistributed inland, supplying pastoral and highland communities with essentials (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2021).

Medieval states, such as the Adal Sultanate (*c.* 1403-1577), further reshaped trade routes. Adal's government structure and alliances expanded the commercial roles of ports like Berbera and Mogadishu, boosting trade activities and connecting them to wider Indian Ocean networks.

However, starting in the late 16th century, external forces—mainly Portuguese naval interventions and regional conflicts—disrupted these trade routes and weakened long-distance commerce (González Ruibal *et al*., 2021).

Overall, between the 11th and 16th centuries, the ports of Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu served as key centres within the Indian Ocean trade network, facilitating the exchange of goods between the interior Horn of Africa, Asia, Arabia, and beyond. This trade was deeply embedded in local customs and administrative systems, notably under the influence of the Adal Sultanate. These developments highlight the significant role the Horn of Africa played in medieval maritime trade (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2021).

To conclude, the Horn of Africa has been significant in the trade network of the Indian Ocean between the 11th and 16th centuries.

Trade centres like Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu linked the region with Arabia, India, and other places. The archaeological records, particularly the ceramics, indicate the trade and the exchange of goods with the interior region.

The Adal Sultanate further developed the trade network by connecting the trade centres with the interior region. But the trade network declined in the late 16th century because of the wars and the interference of the Portuguese Empire.

Modern history of trade routes in the Horn of Africa

From the 16th to the early 20th century, trade in the Horn of Africa responded to changing regional politics, European expansion, and integration into a global economy.

The ports along the coast, such as Massawa and Assab in Eritrea, Djibouti, and Berbera in Somalia, were major centres for importing textiles, firearms, sugar, coffee, and other manufactured commodities, as well as for exporting regional commodities such as coffee, hides, salt, gum arabic, and livestock (Fattovich, 2010; Power, 2012).

Inland caravan routes continued to link production centres to the ports, and while nomadic pastoral networks were indispensable in earlier eras, they are here referenced only briefly, since their intermediary role has already been discussed (see «Nomadic herders as intermediaries in trade»).

The emphasis in the modern period lies on the emergence of port politics, colonial interventions, and infrastructure developments that reshaped trade dynamics. Portuguese naval incursions in the 16th century challenged traditional Indian Ocean networks operating through Berbera, Zeila, and Mogadishu (Newitt, 1995).



Figure 3. Map showing Red Sea ports (© Google, n.d).

In the 17th-19th centuries, British and Italian colonial interests continued to influence the region's trade. The British Somaliland wanted to control the flow of commerce and taxation via Berbera, and the Italian Somaliland built ports and roads connecting the coastline with the hinterland (Samatar, 1989). The Eritrean ports of Massawa and Assab continued to cater to Ethiopian and other regional trade, and the Somali ports of Bosaso were international ports in their own right (Ahmed, 2011; Mohamoud, 2014).

Despite all these geopolitical problems, the historical patterns in trade have been sustained. The coastal ports continue to be centres for international trade, while pastoral and rural networks continue to facilitate trade from production centres to marine outlets.

The development of new infrastructure, such as new roads, railways, and port expansion, has integrated the Horn of Africa into world trade, following centuries of historical interconnectedness (Ahmed, 2011; Mohamoud, 2014).

To recapitulate, the contemporary trade routes in the Horn of Africa attest to the continuity of the historical trade routes that have been influenced by geography, the role of the nomads as intermediaries, and the strategic location of the ports.

European colonialism and contemporary geopolitics have changed but not altered the essential character of the historical trade routes in the region. The ports of Massawa, Assab, Berbera, and Djibouti, and the land routes, have continued to keep the region engaged in intercontinental trade for over two millennia.

Political, military, and geopolitical implications for trade in the Horn of Africa

Trade in the Horn of Africa has historically been shaped by political power, military influence, and strategic control over key corridors. From ancient caravan networks connecting highland and lowland regions to modern port-based logistics, access to trade routes has always reflected the interests of multiple regional actors (Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022).

In the case of Eritrea, after it was granted independence in 1993, Ethiopia was left landlocked, and this meant that access to ports was a necessity.

In the past, emperors of Ethiopia, such as Emperor Menelik II, have attempted to access the ports of the Red Sea so that they can link the highland region with international routes

for the export of products such as coffee, ivory, and hides, and the importation of products such as textiles, metals, and ceramics (Bahru, 2001; Munro-Hay, 1991; Phillipson, 2012). The loss of the ports of Assab and Massawa to Italian colonial powers only serves to underscore the point that Ethiopia has never been able to access the sea.

In the modern world, Ethiopia has mainly utilized the Port of Djibouti, and this has given Djibouti significant influence over Ethiopia's trade activities.

In a bid to improve access to alternative trade routes, Ethiopia signed a Memorandum of Understanding to lease land in the area of the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, and this has improved trade logistics as well as political relations. However, Somalia, which claims that Somaliland is part of its sovereign state, has been opposed to this Memorandum of Understanding and recalled its envoy due to violations of sovereignty (Intergovernmental Authority on Development, 2022; Somaliland Reporter, 2024).

For Eritrea, control over Massawa and Assab is a historic strategic advantage. These ports give Eritrea control over its trade, fishing, and shipping activities, and enable it to influence regional and international negotiations (Fattovich, 2010). Eritrea's strategic position illustrates that access to the Red Sea is not only an economic gain but also gives Eritrea political leverage in its relations with Ethiopia, Djibouti, and other Red Sea nations.

Somalia's interest in the ports of Berbera and Bosaso shows the balance between sovereignty and economic interests. The ports allow Somalia and Somaliland access to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, thus ensuring the economic stability of this region, as well as encouraging foreign investment and partnership (Power, 2012). The position of Somalia regarding Ethiopian agreements in Somaliland shows how there is a balance in interests.

The Horn of Africa is still in a state of geopolitical instability. The Ethiopia-Eritrea relations and occasional instability in Somalia pose risks to overland and marine trade routes (GIS Reports Online, 2025; Council on Foreign Relations, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2025; Lyons, 2020). The involvement of Gulf state proxies, as well as changing allegiances in the region, has an impact on the security and reliability of trade routes (The Century Foundation, 2026; Dawan Africa, 2026; Chatham House, 2025; Verhoeven, 2018; Gebru et al., 2023).

This competition for access to ports holds geopolitical and military importance. The expansion of access to Ethiopian ports, along with Eritrea's independence and Somalia's independence, has created a complex, interconnected situation. In summary, regional trade is not purely economic. Gaining access to ports, controlling routes, and forming alliances carry significant geopolitical weight. Analysing the issues from the perspectives of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Somaliland reveals that regional trade patterns have been shaped by centuries of intertwined historical, military, and geopolitical events. The dispute over routes and port access stems from these longstanding geopolitical patterns.

Cultural and economic impacts of trade in the Horn of Africa

Traditionally, trade in the Horn of Africa has affected the economic structures as well as the composition of the culture in the region. From the ancient period to the present day, trade in the Horn of Africa has enabled the formation of urban centres, social stratification, and culture that have linked the region to the rest of Afro-Eurasia (Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022).

From an economic point of view, trade activity contributed to the economic diversification of local and regional markets through the connection of coastal ports with inland economic centres. For example, in Antiquity, the ports of Xiis (Heis) and Mundus were key in facilitating trade exchanges in commodities such as Africa's ivory, tortoiseshell, and frankincense in return for Roman, Parthian, and South Arabian commodities (Fernández Fernández *et al*., 2022; Seland, 2014).

While trade helped the creation of wealth among regional elites, it encouraged the involvement of nomadic pastoralists as intermediaries in the trade redistribution of imported goods into inland regions (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2022).

In the medieval period, ports like Berbera, Bulhar, and Mogadishu emerged as centres of economic specialization, with urban residents like artisans, merchants, and traders participating in complex supply chains with the Horn of Africa, India, and the Maldives (González-Ruibal *et al*., 2021).

Trade had an impact on the type of labour and production styles. For instance, towns on the coast had unique economies, such as weaving, shipbuilding, and ceramics. On the

other hand, the interior had cattle, incense, and agricultural surpluses to cater to the needs of the local and international markets (Horton and Middleton, 2000). This led to economic interdependence between the urban, interior, and coastal societies. This contributed to the social and economic resilience.

From a cultural perspective, trade promoted the exchange of religion and ideas, particularly after the advent of the Islamic religion in the 7th century. The coastal towns became major Islamic centres of learning. Mosques, madrasahs, and waqf not only promoted prayer and learning, but also facilitated trade through credit systems that were based on Sharia law (Pouwels, 2002; Bradbury, 2007). In the process, craftsmen, scholars, and travellers introduced new designs, languages, and art forms that are evident in the cities of Mogadishu, Zeila, and Harar (Horton and Middleton, 2000).

Socially, trade impacted ritual and cultural practices, with the use of imported luxury items during ceremonies and marriages, which signified local identity as well as participation in international networks (González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2022). In addition, the transmission of coins, textiles, and pottery ensured that people within the Horn region and beyond shared a common culture.

In the modern period, trade has continued to carry economic and cultural implications. The availability of ports like Djibouti, Berbera, and Bosaso provides international trade opportunities, urbanization, and the continued participation of herders in regional markets, while modern goods and culture move at rapid rates throughout the region to preserve historical interconnectivity patterns (Ahmed, 2011; Mohamoud, 2014).

In summary, trade in the Horn of Africa has always impacted economic development as well as cultural activities. Trade has linked the inland and coastal dwellers, facilitated the creation of wealth, promoted social complexity, and integrated the region into the larger Afro-Eurasian world (Fernández Fernández *et al.*, 2022; González-Ruibal *et al.*, 2021; Horton and Middleton, 2000).

Table 1. Summary of imports and exports through the major ports of the Horn of Africa

Country	Port	Location / Notes	Main Exports	Main Imports	Historical / Modern Use	References
Eritrea	Massawa	Red Sea coast	Coffee, livestock, hides, ivory; enslaved persons (historical Red Sea trade)	Textiles, machinery, metal goods	Key Aksumite and Islamic trade port; still active today	Munro-Hay (1991); Phillipson (2012); Fattovich (2010); Pankhurst (1961)
	Assab	Southern Red Sea coast	Coffee, salt, livestock	Manufactured goods, textiles	Ethiopia's main outlet in the late 19th-20th century; later controlled during Italian colonization	Bahru (2001); Munro-Hay (1991); Pankhurst (1961)
Djibouti	Port of Djibouti	Gulf of Tadjoura	Livestock, salt, coffee	Petroleum, foodstuffs, manufactured goods	Modern major transit hub for Ethiopia's imports and exports	Bahru (2001); Power (2012)
Somalia	Berbera	Gulf of Aden	Livestock, hides, gum arabic; enslaved persons (regional trade in some periods)	Textiles, sugar, ceramics	Historical trade with Arabia, India, and Europe; modern development as a commercial port	Power (2012); Fattovich (2010); Pankhurst (1961)
	Zeila	Gulf of Aden	Livestock, frankincense, myrrh; enslaved persons (medieval trade networks)	Textiles, ceramics	An important medieval Islamic trade hub linking Ethiopia and Arabia, it declined after Berbera grew	Munro-Hay (1991); Fattovich (2010); Pankhurst (1961)
Ethiopia	–	Landlocked since 1993; earlier access through Red Sea ports	Coffee, hides, ivory	Textiles, machinery	Depended on caravan routes linking the interior with Red Sea and Gulf of Aden ports	Bahru (2001); Pankhurst (1961); Power (2012)
Kenya	Port of Mombasa	Indian Ocean coast	Ivory, hides, agricultural products; enslaved persons (Indian Ocean trade)	Textiles, metalware, luxury goods	Major Swahili and modern port connecting East Africa with Arabia, India, and Europe	Fattovich (2010); Power (2012); Chittick (1974)
	Lamu	Indian Ocean coast	Spices, ivory, agricultural produce; enslaved persons (regional trade)	Textiles, beads, ceramics	Important Swahili trading town connecting the interior to maritime networks	Fattovich (2010); Power (2012); Chittick (1974)
Sudan	Suakin	Red Sea coast	Gold, ivory, gum arabic; enslaved persons (Red Sea slave trade transit)	Textiles, spices, and manufactured goods	Medieval and early modern Islamic port linking the Nile corridor trade to the Red Sea routes	Fattovich (2010); Power (2012); Pankhurst (1961)
	Port Sudan	Red Sea coast	Gum arabic, livestock, minerals	Machinery, petroleum, foodstuffs	The modern principal port of Sudan, handling most international trade	Power (2012); Fattovich (2010)

Concluding remarks

In tracing the historical evolution of trade routes in the Horn of Africa, it is clear that this region of Africa has always been in a strategic position in terms of its relationship with the larger Afro-Eurasian world system.

From the beginning of the Common Era until the modern era, the Horn of Africa was a dynamic bridge between Africa and Arabia.

From archaeological evidence, it is clear that both the maritime trade routes and the inland caravan routes worked in tandem in order to ensure the free flow of goods, people, and ideas in different ecological and political zones. While the coastal trade centres of Adulis, Zeila, Berbera, and Mogadishu linked the hinterlands of Ethiopia with the international maritime system, the inland caravan routes ensured the free flow of goods between the production zones and the international market.

Another equally important factor was the involvement of nomadic pastoral societies in supporting these networks. The pastoral societies were aware of the routes that the caravans would follow during different seasons and the water and pasture resources that were available. The involvement of these societies as intermediaries was quite instrumental in forming the regional trading networks. The involvement of these societies in the regional trading networks in the Horn of Africa shows the relationship between the environment and the economy.

Another important factor that played a major role in the influence of trade in the region are the religious and political changes. The emergence of Islam from the 7th century onward helped to enhance trade in the region because it laid down cultural norms that contributed to connect the region through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. The establishment of towns on the coast helped to create a platform for the advancement of learning, hence further consolidating the integration of the region. The developments that followed in the region, such as the European expansion and colonialism, helped to change the nature of the region while still emphasizing the ports on the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

It is under the aforementioned context that the need for Ethiopia to have access to the sea has been a key issue in the region's geopolitics. In this case, various countries that made up Ethiopia sought to have access to ports like Massawa and Assab to link the

economy of the highlands to the international economy. However, following the emergence of colonialism in the region towards the end of the 19th century, coupled with Eritrea's independence in 1993, Ethiopia was left as a landlocked country. Ethiopia had to rely on the support of the Djibouti port for international trade, although it has sought to have access to the region via the Berbera port. In essence, this means that the control of sea routes has been a key issue in the region's geopolitics.

Despite the many changes that have taken place over time, the underlying nature of trade within the region has been remarkably consistent. Maritime ports, inland caravan routes, and intermediary groups have remained key components of the region's economic landscape. Contemporary infrastructure and international trade networks have clearly reshaped the historical trade networks, but they are nevertheless reminiscent of the interregional interdependence that was first established many centuries ago.

Finally, the history of the trade routes of the Horn of Africa is meant to illustrate the significance of the region as a crossroads for trade, culture, and politics. The fact that the region is a link for the African continent with the rest of the world for the purposes of trade, both by sea and by land, only serves to underscore the fact that the Horn of Africa has been a significant hub for trade for the last two thousand years or so. The historical background of the region is not only relevant for the history of the region, but is also relevant for the current debate on the economy of the region.

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