

Spice Trade: A History of a Fantasy Substance

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Spice trade has been very important and very lucrative through history. Spices, which represent convenience products in our society, were considered as luxury products in the antiquity, the middle-ages and the renaissance. This paper describes Spice trade history and offers some insights on how the business of spices was handled through time.

Trade in spices is a very old business. The spice trade was of major economic importance and helped spur the Age of Exploration. Spices brought to Europe from Asia- Pacific were some of the most valuable commodities for their weight, sometimes rivaling gold.

The term 'spice' appeared in the 12th century. The word "spice" is derived from the Latin word "species", which means a commodity of especial distinction or value as compared with the ordinary articles (Miller 1969). Spice has been defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2000) as "one or other various strong flavored aromatic substances of vegetable origin, obtained from tropical plants, commonly used as condiments, and odor or perfume arising from a resembling that of spices"

Spices were mentioned in the world of sacred presence (Bible, the Koran, and Torah), were used in gastronomy and were important in international trade. Spices were also used as a means of exchange. For instance, in the middle-ages there was no international currency exchange. All payments between countries were made in gold and silver. Spices could also be used to pay fines and mortgages, to buy land, to buy a coat of arms or to pay taxes.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the history of spice trade. It purports the importance of the distribution function and the effect of supply and demand on the mechanism of setting prices.

In ancient times, prices of spices were high mainly due to the scarcity of these commodities and due to the monopolistic power of some merchants and nations. This paper investigates the origin of spice trade and its evolution through times and provides us with a better understanding of a product that is taken for granted nowadays.

Spices in Biblical times

It is noteworthy to distinguish between herbs and spices. Herbs are leafy, whereas spices are aromatic

substances that are obtained from other parts of the plant: bark, root, flower bud, gums and resins, seed, fruit or stigma. Since the earliest civilizations herbs were easier to find than spices, which were harder to obtain and far more expensive (Turner 2004).

Spices were not only used for gastronomic purposes, they were also used for curing diseases, as well as summoning gods, and chasing away demons. Spices are mentioned in the three holy books: the Old Testament of Hebrews, the new testament of Christians, and the Koran of Muslims. Some of the most commonly used spices during the biblical time were aloes, balsam, cumin, cinnamon, coriander, dill, galbanum, henna, mint, saffron, and spikenard. The spice trade was evident in the old and new testament in the story of Joseph after his brothers threw him into a pit:" then they sat down to eat, and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt "(Genesis 37: 23-25).

Later in the Old Testament, God said to Moses when he was receiving people for dinner: "Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet-smelling cinnamon half as much, that is two hundred and fifty, and of aromatic cane two hundred and fifty, and of cassia five hundred, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, and of olive oil a hin, and you shall make of these a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; a holy anointing oil it shall be. And you shall anoint with it the tent of meeting and the Ark of testimony, and the table and all its utensils, and the lamp stand and its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils and the laver and its base; you shall consecrate them, that they may be most holy; whatever touches them will become holy and you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may serve me as priests" (Exodus 30:22-30).

In Islam, the trade in spices was regarded as so important that the Prophet Mohammed declared "if God allowed the inhabitants of paradise to trade, they would deal in fabrics and spices" (Morton 2000).

Spice Trade in the Ancient Times: from 2600 BC until 1st millennium BC

The history of spices goes at least as far back as 2600BC, when the Egyptians used spices for embalming,

for body ointment, to fumigate their homes, and to feed laborers who were building the pyramids of Cheops to give them strength (Rosengarten 1969). Other spices such as cassia and cinnamon were imported to Egypt from China and Southeast of Asia to appease the gods of death (Rosengarten 1969). Spices were also used as medicinal remedies in ancient Mesopotamia. For Instance, the code of Hammurabi, in 1700 BC, encouraged the use of spices as medicines (Morton 2000).

Ancients regarded spices as being a luxury good because they were to be had only in small quantities and after long and dangerous voyages with terrible storms in the Indian and South Pacific oceans (Morton 2000).

Spices were of such importance that they were used by Kings and Queens. The Queen of Sheba in 1005 B.C heard of the great wisdom of King Solomon of Israel and paid tribute to him in spices, and precious stones.

Spices were brought from India (pepper and cloves), from the Moluccas in the Southeast Asia (cinnamon and nutmeg) and from China (Amber and Ginger).

In fact, Arab traders were in charge of bringing pepper and cloves from China, cinnamon and Nutmeg from the Spice Islands and ginger from China. They sold their spices in Egypt, Babylon, and Nineveh and were the first to introduce spices into the European market in Rome. They became the "middleman" by 950B.C and were acting as intermediaries between the West and India.

By the 1st century BC, the Arabs monopolized the spice trade and kept their sources of supply a secret. As a result, Arab merchants acquired a lot of wealth due to the spice trade (Morton 2000). Arab merchants had an advantage over other merchants; they knew the spice routes and the way to avoid risk of being attacked by robbers.

The routes to acquire spices went from Antioch, via Babylon, to Persia into the Indus Valley (Samhaber 1964). Caravans with as many as 4000 camels were traveling across Samarkand, which extended from the desert of southern Asia and the Middle East. Transportation was also established by sea. Ships were sailing transporting spices from the Indian coast, past the Persian Gulf to the Roman Empire. Arabs kept the location of spices a secret causing an increase in prices. As Roman demand grew, the Arabs told the Romans how risky it was to acquire spices. However, the Romans became skeptical about these stories. As a result, the Romans and the Arabs trading relationship was jeopardized.

Increased use of spices in the Roman Empire: 29 B.C to A.D 641

The Roman Empire was one of the major world powers in ancient history. As the Roman Empire grew, the consumption of spices as condiments soared. In fact the Roman Empire introduced two important changes into the European Economy. The first was the opening of the direct sea route to south India for the purpose primarily of buying

pepper and the second the use of spices as condiments in food (Miller 1969).

Cleopatra herself used a "very stimulating" food to seduce Caesar. Cleopatra (69-30 BC), Queen of Egypt (51-30 BC), who was the daughter of Ptolemy XII. Huge quantities of saffron were strewn on the streets of Rome to celebrate Nero's entrance into the city. The reputed excesses of ancient Roman food consumption were apparent in the wide variety of seasonings used in the meals of the rich. Pepper, the Roman spice of choice, was as omnipresent on the Roman tables. Without a doubt, spices had become status symbols desirable articles for commerce (McCormick Encyclopedia 2003).

Spices were sold at one hundred times their original cost "Cinnamon has reached the price of 1500 Dinarii" 1 Dinarii is worth 16 cents of today exchange, which corresponds to \$240 of today's exchange rate (Miller 1969 p201). Spices were so desirable in the Sixth century, that Cassidorus, a Roman Minister (493--526) wrote a letter to the people living on Italy's coasts saying that "Men can live without gold, but not without salt" (Samhaber, 1964, 102).

As a consequence, during the reign of Augustus Ceasar, Rome encouraged commerce in spices and broke the Arab monopoly by sailing directly to the Moluccas Islands (known as the spice Islands) to acquire the spices. However, it took the Romans as long as three years to sail to and from the Moluccas (Samhaber, 1964). To shorten the voyage, navigators such as Hippalus, studied the position of the ports and sea behavior and discovered that by taking the direction of the Monsoon winds in the Indian Ocean, their journey could be reduced to one year. They were able to reach Egypt in July and the Indian ports by the end of September (Charlesworth 1925). Romans were sailing as far as Malibar and returning with black pepper.

Along the routes of trades, the Romans build "Entrepots", which are commercial centers or warehouses, in which goods are brought for distribution. The establishment of peace and good government in the Roman Empire by Augustus, lead to an increase in the demand of luxury products (especially silk, spices, gums, and jewels and precious stones) and resulting in high prices (Charlesworth 1925).

Long after Augustus, Venetians took most of the control of the spice trade in the Roman Empire. Venetians sailors brought luxury goods such as silk from China, blades from Damascus, fabrics from Mossul, and spices from India to Italy (Day 1964). The exchange of spices between the Roman Empire and India lead to a trade deficit that almost bankrupted Rome. For the luxury goods that they imported, the Romans had to pay with precious metals (gold, and Silver). According to Pliny, the youngest (62-113 AD) statesman, orator, and writer, some 25,000,000 dinarii (\$400,000,000) flowed from the Roman Empire to India (Day 1964). The fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD was partially due to the trade deficit generated by spice trade.

Spice Trade and the Muslim curtain: AD 641 to 1096

Islam spread not only by conquest in war but also by trade in spices. In the Seventh century, the prophet Mohammed was more successful in spreading Islam through spice trade than through war (Richards 1970).

Prior to the Muhammad, trading followed indirect channels of distribution through "middlemen." Spices were transported from one local merchant to another, without the entire group making the journey by themselves. Muslim merchants would travel personally and deliver the spices to other merchants in other cities and countries in order to spread the words of the prophet Muhammad (Farrell 1996). Within the death of the prophet in 632 AD, Islam spread to Arabia, Persia, and Egypt. Mohammad's successors, the Abbasids Caliphs conquered nearly the whole Middle-East. In the court of the caliphs, merchants had more prestige than court.

Arab traders created direct distribution as they crossed the desert with caravans of camels, and sailed the seas in their convoy and ships to return to court with choices of fabrics, weapons, jewelry, and particularly spices for their rulers. Arab traders were only interested in trading goods with high profits. Even though the traders paid taxes to the caliphs, they included the taxes in their prices (Day 1964).

By the middle of the 8th century, the empire extended 7000 miles across from Spain to East China. The Spice trade was centralized in prominent cities such as: Cordova, Alexandria, Damascus, Grenada, Fez, Tunis, Kairouan, Baghdad (Gies 1972). Arab traders were sailing in the Middle-East from Ports such as the port of Siraf, which were used as "Entrepots" to link sea routes to inland routes. Arab merchants sailed from Siraf and Ormuz in the Persian Gulf, and from Katif and Muscat to the Indian ports of Sendapur, Mangalore, Fandarina, and Crangamore to buy cinnamon, pearls, perfumes and peppers (Samhaber 1963).

The spice trade was so lucrative that the port of Siraf became wealthy (Whitehouse, 1970). According to one merchant, Abu Jaafar Ibn Ali Al Dimishqui (9th century), in Damascus "the spice merchant must know the different drugs, remedies, potions, and perfumes, their good bad sorts as well as their counterfeits. He must know what commodities are subject to rapid change and spoil, and which ones are not and what means ought to be used to present and restore them, and lastly he also must understand the blend of electuaries and potions of powders and drugs"(Samhaber 1964)

Due to religious beliefs, the trade between the Islamic world and the European countries was not prospering. The Jewish traders served as spice trade intermediaries. Ibrahim Ibn Yaacub, a much traveled 10th century Arab merchant was astonished by the difference that he found between two rivers, the Rhine and the Magandsha. To his surprise when he traveled to the Rhine, people relied on their own production of food and there was little need for merchants. However, having crossed the Rhine from the east, he

entered the city of Magandsha and found coins from Samarkand, and markets for spices in large quantities, such as pepper, Ginger, cloves, and galingale (Samhaber 1964). There was a gray market that have grown established by the Jewish merchants.

Spice Trade in the late Middle Age: 11th, 12th, 13th centuries

In the 10th century, the crusades, who are defined as "any of the military expeditions undertaken by Christian's powers in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries to win the Holy land from Muslims" (Merriam Webster 1997), have become interested in the economic benefits of spice trading (Rosengarten 1969).

Shippers in Venice and Genoa in Italy were promised to establish trading centers on the shores of the holy land (Samhaber 1964). The crusading soldiers were exchanging the commodities brought from the Middle-East (fruits, jewelry, and spices for food) for clothing, wool and metal.

Spices were also brought from Mediterranean countries by Italian ships. Spices were so important that pepper became currency for trade (Rosengarten 1969). In fact, pepper was used to pay taxes and rents (Globdetrends Inc 2004).

The crusaders trading led to changes in the European eating and cooking habits. The spice trade was not only restricted to the upper class anymore but slowly trickled down to the middle-class (Furber 1976). The trade of spices was mainly by sea routes. As a result, the ports of Genoa, Pisa, and Venice were experiencing a great wealth. The price of spices was still high in the West. The pound of cloves were valued at \$20 the pound, pepper however had the greatest value. It was even accepted as a currency to pay rents, taxes and even as a dowry for brides.

In the age of discovery, Marco Polo reinstated spice trade. On a journey in 1271, Marco Polo was sent to explore the possible markets in Asia. He traveled the whole of China and returned to tell the tale, and became the greatest travelogue. The purpose of Marco Polo's journey to China was to bypass Moslem middlemen and their 300-percent markup in price by convincing the Orient to trade directly with Genoa (Burland 1970). Marco Polo stated that "merchants are drawn thither by the court, are continually arriving and departing, to the city everything that is most rare and valuable in all parts of the world finds its way; and more especially does this apply to India, which furnishes precious stones, pearls, and various drugs and spices" (Burland 1970).

During the renaissance, Europeans were stimulated to find a sea route to the Far East. All the nations were eager to cut out the middleman. Christopher Columbus, who had set sail in 1492 to find out what would be the West Indies, ended up in the American continent instead (Gies 1972). Columbus brought Tobacco, Cocoa Leaves, vanilla, Potatoes, and Chilies of the Americas. Columbus kept

looking for cloves and cinnamon but could not find these spices (Influence of the spice trade 2004).

Spice trade in the Age of Discovery: 15th and 16th century

The Portuguese were the first ones who became the leaders in that market in the age of discovery. In 1498, Vasco Da Gama, a Portuguese discoverer of the sea route to East Indies goes east around Africa and reached India. Da Gama asked the Zamorin of Calicut whether he could take the pepper stalk and replant it, the courtiers answered him that he could take the pepper but that he will never be able to take the rains (Furber 1976).

King Manuel (1469-1521), found out that developing trading relations with the Indians would enhance their trading advantage. From the 1460s, the goal had become to gain direct access to the riches of India, mainly black pepper and other spices. The European merchants were aware of the lucrative business of spices and as they came ashore, they were shouting "for christ and for spices" (Encyclopedia of Spices 2004).

By 1515, the Portuguese had a well-organized spice trade running between the East Indies and Western Europe. Although the Portuguese were in control of the major shipping in the islands, they did not replace the Hindu and Muslim spice traders in India and on the islands. Business was run by treaties between the Portuguese and the Sultanates. Asians were annoyed at the power and influence of the Portuguese outsiders.

When spice cargoes arrived in Lisbon, Dutch traders were in charge of transporting the commodities into the ports of northern Europe. Dutch sailors were known for their skill and bravery and often crewed aboard Portuguese ships. Problems arose for the Dutch. In 1580/1581, the Spanish armies marched through Portugal. Once Philip had control of the Portuguese spice trade, he took the European compromises away from the Dutch (Encyclopedia of Spices 2004).

However, the sailors already knew the route to the East Indies. Cornelius, a captain fleet of Dutch ships to the East Indies. By the end of the 16th century Lisbon was securing the monopoly of the spice trade. In 1602, The Dutch East India Company was chartered and by 1605, the Dutch wanted complete control of the spice trade. Between 1605 and 1621, the Dutch managed to drive the Portuguese out of the Spice Islands, and giving the Netherlands a virtual monopoly of the trade in Nutmeg and cloves. In the 1650's, approximately three fourths of the nutmeg and cloves trees of the Moluccas were destroyed by the Dutch. This has created scarcity of the spices in Europe, driving the prices up. The penalty of death was even installed if the natives of the Spice Islands were to sell or cultivate spices (Rosengarten 1969).

Modern Spice Trade: 17th century-19th century

By 1650 the English required from the Dutch to salute English Warship every time they sailed in their seas. As a result, Anglo-Dutch war broke up in 1652. In 1654, the war ended and the Dutch lost more than 1000 vessels to English warships. Tension between the English and the Dutch became more important. In 1664, the English took over Amsterdam. However, the Dutch were so desperate to continue their spice trade that they allowed the English to keep Amsterdam (Encyclopedia of Spices 2004).

It was not until a century later that America entered the spice trade in a big way. Father of the American spice trade Jonathan Carnes, a captain sailing on one of the early American trading voyages in 1778, discovered places in the Orient, principally in Sumatra, where he could deal directly with the natives, thus circumventing the Dutch monopoly. In 1795 he made a voyage to the Spice Islands, which yielded 700% profit in spices (American Spice trade Association 2004).

This situation led America into the spice competition so actively that between 1784 and 1873, about a thousand vessels made the 24,000 mile-long trip to Sumatra and back. In 1818, 35 vessels made the long and dangerous trip to get pepper. By the 1800, the abundance of spices has contributed into its low price (American Spice trade Association 2004).

Concluding Comments

This paper provided us with the origins of Spice trade. The Egyptians used spices for embalming, for body ointment and to fumigate their homes. Arabs acted for many years as the middlemen between Africa and the Orient. For centuries spices were transported across Asia from China to Europe along ancient caravan trails.

The role of the "middleman" can be traced back to ancient times. Spice trade was held through sailing and caravan transportation. The difficulty to acquire spices had contributed to the high prices of spices. The Arab merchants had the monopoly of spice trade in ancient times and kept their origins of spices a secret so they can profit from their advantage. In the 1st century B.C, the eastern capital of the Roman Empire, the city of Constantinople was the centre for spice trading between East and West. Romans were getting spices through the Arab traders. However, at some point since the Romans were relying more and more on spices and began sailing to acquire spices. They tried to shorten their journeys, and ended up acquiring spices in few months.

For 400 years very few spices reached Europe. There was little direct trade between Muslim Arabs and Christian Europe. Spice trade was indirect trade through the ancient times and the Roman Empire; however in the Seventh century it became direct trading with the Muslims trying to spread the religion through spice trade.

In addition Spice trade provided us with evidence that even in ancient times products were classified as luxury products, and convenience products. The scarcity of spices transformed them into luxury goods, however when spices became easily available in the marketplace the prices fell and they became convenience goods. The spice trade also demonstrated that monopoly lead to high prices of the commodity. As have been noticed through this paper the Arabs monopolized the trade, followed by the Romans, the Muslims, the Portuguese, and finally when people found out about the origins of the trade , monopoly ceased and prices went down.

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