

World History For Us All – Big Era 6

Student Handout 3.1—Spice It Up.

“No man should die who can afford a cup of tea.” This belief was prevalent in some European cities as the practice of drinking tea became fashionable among the wealthier classes of society. By the end of Big Era Six (1400-1800), tea became more available, but in the fifteenth century, few could afford it, even though many people believed in its restorative powers. Historians believe that perhaps the health properties of tea may have been mainly due to boiling and purifying water. But as demand for this product grew, so did the pressure on merchants to supply it.

Many Europeans believed that good health depended on a balance of the fluids or “humors” in one’s body. It was further believed that by adding spices to one’s food, these humors were put into balance. Spices such as cinnamon, cloves, ginger, nutmeg, mace, saffron, and pepper were in high demand in growing European cities, but only a minority could afford them. As Big Era Six opened, Arab traders sold their cargoes of these precious goods to Italian shippers, who, in turn, sold them to people in European towns and cities. Other merchants, in addition to Arab traders, such as Indian, Chinese, and Malay, were actively trading as well, as we have seen in our Case Study of Malacca. Each time these goods changed hands, their price increased.

In addition to medicinal purposes, spices were highly desired to add flavor to foods, to preserve meats (no refrigeration), or to conceal the flavor of partly spoiled meat. Spices were used to produce medicines, perfumes, and dyes, and to flavor drinks. Wealthy ladies sometimes carried ginger around their necks in order to sweeten their breath.

Sugar was another highly desired commodity. Produced on a large scale in India and Southwest Asia and exported by Arab, Indian, and Persian merchants, it attracted the palates of the European Crusaders who went to Southwest Asia on military expeditions between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries.

But who would have thought that one of the most highly desired spices was a small, black, wrinkled berry called pepper? The sale of pepper in the marketplace required the same kind of protection for the commodity as one might expect for an expensive jewelry store.

Pepper merchants sell their product individually, by the peppercorn; because of its expense, a housewife was able to buy just one peppercorn if she wished. The popularity and costliness of pepper resulted in its being guarded like diamonds. Longshoremen, [who unload ships and] who handle the peppercorns are closely watched and frequently searched. Crossbows and blades of the guards bristle on the galleys that bring the pepper through the Mediterranean. . . . But these precautions do not protect the pepper from being tampered with by grocers, wholesalers and middlemen, any of whom may mix a bit of something with it making a few fake peppercorns. They were made to look like peppercorns by using some clay, oil, and mustard, which was difficult to distinguish from the genuine peppercorn.⁵

Many Europeans could not afford peppercorns or any spices. Others used them only for special

occasions, such as weddings. In richer homes, the spice cabinet was kept locked.

Other products sought from the Asian-centered trading networks included manufactured goods as well: rugs, Chinese lacquer-ware, and cotton cloth which was more comfortable and lighter than clothing made out of European wool. Some of the names for cotton fabrics we use today can be traced to their place of origin:

The very names by which cotton fabrics are known in English and other European languages reveal the places from which they were thought to come. “Madras” and “calico” refer to the Indian cities of Madras and Calicut, “muslin” to the Arab city of Mosul. “Gingham” comes from a Malay word meaning “striped,” and “chintz” from a Hindustani word meaning “spotted.”⁶

The demand for cotton textiles was so high that those involved in the wool, linen, or silk commercial ventures in Britain pressured for laws that would forbid the importation of these fabrics. Daniel Defoe observed in 1780: “Despite the laws, cottons were not only sought as clothing by all classes, but crept into our houses, in our closets, and bedchambers; curtain, cushions, chairs and at last beds themselves were nothing but calicoes or Indians stuffs.”

This, then, is essentially the picture at the beginning of Big Era Six. Europeans simply did not have access to the knowledge of the spice routes and trading networks that were known to the Chinese, Arabs, Indians, and Africans. Even if they did, the Europeans did not have the maritime technology, skills, and knowledge needed to participate in these oceanic ventures in the early fifteenth century. Despite being sought after, the control of these commodities remained in the hands of non-Europeans who essentially controlled the supply and price.

But the word beginning is stressed because soon after it began, Europeans borrowed basic maritime technology, such as the compass and sternpost rudder from China, the Arab lateen sail, and Muslim charts and maps. By the time Big Era Six drew to a close, the situation changed dramatically. It is important to note that while Europeans were in conflict with non-Europeans, they were also in conflict with each other. They competed for trade in Asia and the Americas, and their efforts to establish markets, conquer, and drive out competition, often led to clashes. These commercial and political rivalries led to wars between ships flying different flags. European warfare dominated much of Big Era Six.

⁵ Joseph and Frances Gies, *Life in a Medieval City* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 281.

⁶ R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971), 267.

⁷ Palmer and Colton, *A History of the Modern World*, 268. <http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/>