**Muslim Trade and City Growth before the 19th Century: Comparative Urbanization in Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia**

**Gist:** In the year 1200 CE, most of the largest cities in Western Europe were inhabited by just tens of thousands of individuals while Middle Eastern and Central Asia cities — like Baghdad, Marrakesh and Merv — had upwards to 100,000 residents each. By 1800, however, this pattern had reversed. In this discussion, we explore the importance of historical Muslim trade in explaining patterns of urban growth and decline in the run-up to the Industrial Revolution. Using a difference-in-differences approach, we look at Eurasian urbanization patterns as a function of distance to Middle Eastern trade routes before and after 1500, the turning point in terms of Europe’s breakthroughs in seafaring, trade and exploration. The proximity to Mulsim trade routes was positively associated with urbanization in 1200 but not in 1800. Here, we will discuss why Middle Eastern and Central Asian cities declined as Europeans found alternative routes to the East and opened new trade opportunities in the New World.

**Introduction:** The late 15th century is often heralded as a world historic juncture, ushering in exploration, and eventual exploitation of the New World; the Columbian Exchange of crops, people and diseases; and an age of colonial rule by Europeans. While the New World discoveries were history-changing in their significance for world economic and institutional development, Columbus’s discovery of the New World in 1492 CE often overshadows another important circumnavigation which took place only years later. When Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sailed around Africa’s Cape of Good Hope in 1498, this event was momentous for economic development in the Middle East and Central Asia, world regions which long benefitted from connecting markets in Western and Southern Europe with South and East Asia.

Both Columbus and Vasco da Gama were desperately seeking opportunities to trade with societies of Asia when they began their risky journey West and East, respectively. Up until that point, **spices**, **textiles** and other **“Eastern” commodities** often moved from China and India through Middle Eastern cities, like Aleppo and Cairo, before continuing to Venice or other European destinations. Da Gama’s feat of exploration meant that Europeans would be able to create a route to Eastern ports, allowing them direct access to valued commodities. Observers commenting at the time believed that Cairo and Mecca would be “ruined” as a result. Cities that indirectly benefited from the Middle Eastern trade were also concerned about the new developments. For example, merchants believed that Venice would “obtain no spices except what merchants are able to buy in Portugal” and a sense of “shock, gloom and hysteria” set in among Venetians who believed that da Gama’s discovery marked an end to their city’s prosperity.

Let us compare the impact of historical, Middle Eastern trade route proximity to city growth before and after breakthroughs in Europe’s “Age of Exploration.” We examine Eurasian urbanization patterns as a function of distance to Middle Eastern trade routes before and after 1500, the turning point in terms of Europe’s breakthroughs in seafaring, trade and exploration. Cities proximate to Middle Eastern trade routes were larger in 1200 than areas further from those routes; this pattern reverses between 1500 and 1800. To address the issue of the endogenous development of trade routes, we exploit the fact that prior to European advances in seafaring, the world’s most important trade routes connected land and sea choke points.

The role of international trade on city growth provides a different perspective on the question of the economic divergence between Muslim and Christian societies than those which exist in the current literature. Existing literary works focus on the effects of Islamic law, Islam’s outsized political influence relative to other world religions or the way that cultural institutions common in Muslim societies may have hindered economic growth. Blaydes and Chaney argue that Europe’s reliance on decentralized feudal institutions to manage state-society relations proved to perform better in the long run compared to the centralized mamluk institutions common in the Muslim world. While institutional advantages may have helped pave the way for European exploration, the benefits this conferred in trade are responsible for some of the reversal in economic fortune observed for the historical trajectories of Muslim and Christian societies. In other words, part of the “long” divergence between the Middle East and Europe can be explained through a causal channel associated with changing global trade patterns, a factor subject to sudden and unforeseen disruptions.

**Trade, Islam and City Growth**

If agricultural development created the earliest forms of wealth for world societies, it was **historical trade** that encouraged new heights in human prosperity. The first towns and cities typically arose in empires of the alluvial lowlands of places like Mesopotamia, as these were the first locations of systematized agriculture. As urban living began to spread to other areas, political, economic and cultural life began to consolidate in cities where merchants and artisans increasingly found markets for their products. Wickham calls the Roman Empire a “union of cities,” each of which enjoyed forms of autonomy but shared a common commitment to “citiness or civilitas.”

Antiquity was a period of intense and lucrative trade which fed dramatic increases in prosperity. A byproduct of that exchange was the growth of major urban centers, particularly in Southern Europe, North Africa and the Levant where relatively high levels of urbanization reflected prosperity and increases in standards of living. The rising living standards might be attributed, at least in part, to growing trade. Pre-Islamic Persian societies, for example, built sophisticated administrative systems with educated bureaucracies that eased trade by validating the quality of goods at market and maintaining a road system which crisscrossed the empire. Roman provinces in North Africa and the Levant were considered the “bread basket” of the empire, providing wheat, olive oil and other commodities valued by city dwellers in Rome and elsewhere. So important was the Carthage-Rome trade “spine” that when that trade ended, “population of the city of Rome began to lessen precipitously,” dropping more than 80 percent. While Europe became isolated from the richest Roman lands, the Roman provinces of the East continued to be urban, wealthy and sophisticated.

Long distance trade, which leveraged the unique locational advantages of the Middle East and Central Asia, served as a driver for economic prosperity and urbanization during the medieval period. Finlay and O’Rourke point out that the Islamic world was the only major world region to maintain sustained and direct contact with all other major world regions of Eurasia during the late antique and medieval periods. Many of the cities in the region thrived as trade centers drawing specialized goods from different places as middlemen profited from these exchanges. Lombard goes as far as to describe Muslim cities during this period as a “series of urban islands linked by trade routes.” This also meant that they were, perhaps, less likely over the long run to develop themselves as producers of tradable goods leading their economic prosperity to become unsustainable when Europeans overtook the region in trade capability.

**Medieval Long Distance Trade:**

While the medieval period did not witness a rebirth of the intense, short-haul trade of the Roman Empire, long distance trade was an important feature of the medieval economy. As a result of its location between producers of highly demanded products from India, China and Sub-Saharan Africa with Mediterranean markets, Middle Eastern societies were well positioned to participate in trade which sought to connect distant world population centers. And even during the so-called “darkest” years of the Middle Ages, Middle Eastern trade routes continued to connect the Mediterranean region to East Asia with Italian port cities maintaining a trade connection with Muslim societies. In particular, trade connecting the Middle East to South and East Asia continued to be robust with merchants utilizing both Central Asian overland routes as well as sea routes connecting the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea. Spices, like **pepper** which made meat palatable, and **textiles,** including **Indian cottons** and **Chinese** **silks**, were in much demand. Holy Land Crusades beginning in the late 11th century opened new opportunities for the economic reintegration of Western Europe into this trade. But the Crusades were not only critical for stimulating economic markets in Western Europe — they also had the effect of enriching “Muslim middlemen who discovered that new markets could produce rich rewards”. Merchants made fortunes in the 12th century as they met growing demand for goods from China and India (Frankopan 2016, 144).

Increasing trade fed the growth and development of what historians have called the “classical period” of the Islamic city, typically described as the period between the 12th and 15th centuries. **Cairo** — situated at the intersection of Red Sea trade routes and overland routes to **Africa** — home to palaces, city fortifications and large mosques. Proximity to **Alexandria** linked Cairo to the Mediterranean Sea. The Seljuks introduced major innovations in the development of the urban citadel, typically located on high ground with sizable walls and towers. From **Samarkand to Damascus**, massive buildings and monumental structures were undertaken as elites sought to leave a physical imprint on cities characterized by growing prosperity. Keene argues that these grand cities were the ultimate expression of civilized living during the medieval period, with amenities beyond the imagination of even the most sophisticated urban dwellers in Europe.

Middle Eastern and Central Asian states had a strong incentive to maintain security in the interest of maintaining long distance trade, which posed significant financial and other dangers. Caravan routes could be disrupted by war, political change and Bedouin incursions; sea traffic was susceptible to naval action and piracy. States also sought to secure and maintain trade routes when they had the capacity to do so; this included building roads and armed fortresses at stopping points on major routes as well as constructing rest houses to serve both merchants and pilgrims.

How were trade routes affected by political instability and shocks to security? Beginning in the 11th century, the Islamic world’s Eastern frontier became increasingly insecure, targeted by nomadic marauders and Turkic migrants. While Middle Eastern states were long impaired by vulnerability to invasion by nomadic forces, this susceptibility seems to have been more acute at this historical juncture and more so in the Middle East than other world regions. Among the most noteworthy of these nomadic attacks came from the rise of the Mongols, a steppe people who succeeded in creating the largest land empire ever witnessed.

The conventional narrative about how the Mongol invasions impacted urban life in the settled cities of the Muslim world suggests a highly negative effect. Black finds that the Mongol invasions devastated Islam’s Eastern frontier, from the Oxus River to Damascus. In this process, ancient cities were destroyed and underground irrigation systems in Persia were irrevocably damaged. A surprisingly large number of cities opposed the Mongols through popular rebellion and resistance was associated with high levels of destruction. Mongol leaders met resistance with “methodical mass murder on a scale not previously seen in Middle Eastern warfare.

While there is no doubt that there was a negative, short-term impact of the Mongols on forms of urban life, there has been little work which explicitly considers the empirical impact of the Mongols on urban development more generally. Indeed, a growing literature suggests a positive impact of the Mongol empire on trade. For example, Abu-Lughod argues that the Mongols — through their political unification of large swathes of trade route lands — created “an environment that facilitated land transit with less risk and lower protective rent...by reducing these costs they opened a route for trade over territories that...broke the monopoly of the more southerly routes.” In the process, the Mongols provided forms of stability across Eurasia where “rule of law was fiercely protected when it came to commercial centers”. Taxes were lowered and prices were rationalized in the Mongol Empire. The net result was a dramatic increase in the movement of people and goods, leading money to “pour” into the towns of Central Asia. When a Spanish envoy was asked to describe early 15th century Samarkand, he called it a vibrant commercial center with merchants and merchandise from across Asia.

**Changing Patterns of Trade in the Early Modern Period**

While overland trade remained active and stable in Central Asia through the 15th century, trade patterns after that point were considerably less certain. Technological improvements, including advances in ship building, were critical to shifts in trade routes. Da Gama’s explorations, for example, allowed the Portuguese were able to create their own “silk road” linking Lisbon with Angola, Mozambique, East Africa and, then, India and the Spice Islands, with important implications for the relevance of existing routes. English and Dutch seafarers arrived in the Indian Ocean by the end of the 16th century, consolidating European trade influence in South and East Asia.

In response to the changing nature of trade, imperial administrations in Muslim societies were keen to maintain the continued health and relevance of the trade routes they controlled. The Ottoman Empire sought to strengthen their commercial position by modernizing roads and upgrading castles as well as sea and land fortifications. Muslim rulers in Central Asia, Persia and South Asia invested in maintenance and improvement of trade routes by upgrading roads, providing security for caravans and quieting tribal peoples who obstructed commercial traffic. In 1600 CE, Cairo remained a major commercial metropolis at the center of a number of important routes, bringing profits to local traders. Late 17th century reports from a French merchant who visited Isfahan found that Persian products, including textiles, ceramics, metalwork, leather tanning, gun-smithing, fireworks manufacturing and stone-cutting were of higher quality than what could be found in Europe.

Yet despite efforts to maintain the competitive edge enjoyed by trade routes passing through the Middle East and Central Asia, there existed considerable variance in the prosperity of cities as a result of fluctuations in the benefits derived from trade. Basra is an important case, as it has historically been both a sea port and a desert or caravan city communicating with Aleppo and the Arabian peninsula. Merchants of Basra imported goods from India, sending back Arabian horses — which were highly valued in India — and dates — which served as both a valuable commodity and as ship’s ballast. But by the early 18th century, conversations between the Ottoman governor in Basra and local merchants suggested a decline in the number of ships from India, likely as a result of the resurgence of alternative routes commodities traveled from India to Europe (rather than decline in demand for Indian goods). While the trade eventually rebounded, there was tremendous instability in levels of trade, damaging the prosperity of the city. By 1840, the French consular agent in Basra reported that the city’s population had fallen to just 5,000 inhabitants.

The Atlantic explorations also impacted the nature of Old World trade patterns. In particular, dynamism in international trade shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic with New World discoveries. Cities like London and Amsterdam rose in prominence relative to declining economic prospects of cities in Italy and the Adriatic, which had largely linked the Middle East to Europe. According to Frankopan, “Old Europe in the east and the south which had dominated for centuries...now sagged and stagnated...New Europe in the north-west...boomed.” Formerly prominent Middle Eastern societies were unable to effectively compete in the new world economy — while European cities were growing rapidly, “in the Ottoman world...the number of cities with populations of more than 10,000 remained broadly the same between 1500 and 1800 CE”. Karaman and Pamuk shows that per capita revenue in the Ottoman Empire was also flat over this interval, while England and the Dutch Republic were growing at an impressive rate.