



Trans-Saharan Trade Routes

By Bennett Sherry

From 1200 to 1450, a huge trading network stretched across the Sahara Desert. This network linked wealthy empires of West Africa and the Mediterranean region.

970L



A dry sea

The largest desert in the world is the Sahara—3.5 million square miles stretching from the Nile River to the Atlantic Ocean. The United States would fit inside of it.

This expanse is inhospitable, with only a few islands where people can permanently settle. It seems more like a barrier. Describing the Sahara Desert is like describing an ocean. In fact, the desert's name comes from the Arabic word *sāhil*, meaning “shores.” How does our understanding of the Sahara change when we imagine it as a sea, linking people through the exchange of goods and ideas?



A sea of sand. A satellite image of the Sahara Desert. © Getty Images.

From 1200 to 1450, an extensive trans-Saharan trading system reached its peak. Huge caravans of camels and merchants transported goods across the desert. Trade across the Sahara linked the great kingdoms of West Africa to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds.

Why would someone try and cross the Sahara? The same factors that would motivate someone to hop on a wooden boat and head out across the oceans. The development of extensive trans-Saharan trade routes required valuable trade goods. Additionally, merchants needed a cost-effective way to move those goods across the desert.

The ship of the desert

Like merchants at sea, caravans in the Sahara also faced storms and wrecks that could endanger the caravan. Any successful caravan required experienced guides, and the best were Berbers. Some Berbers were pastoralists who lived on the edges of the desert and traveled with their livestock. Like pastoralists in Eurasia, the Berbers were essential to the growth of the trade. They captained the “ship of the desert”—the camel.

Developments in travel technologies enabled new long-distance trade routes across the Sahara. The introduction of the camel was by far the most important of these. Camels are superior to horses for desert travel because they are more suited to desert conditions. The Berbers improved the camel saddle, allowing them to carry larger loads over greater distances. A single camel could carry around 400 pounds of trade goods. Over shorter distances, they could carry up to 1,200 pounds.

When you think of the Sahara, you probably picture camels, but the camels native to the region went extinct during the Stone Age. Around 300 BCE, the camel was reintroduced to North Africa. Once camels arrived, the Berbers began using them to cross the desert.

Saharan caravans¹ were impressive feats of organization. Usually, the merchants making their way north or south across the desert rented camels from pastoralists. Caravans set out during the cooler months, traveling at the coolest times of day. A caravan traveled around 20 miles a day, and the main routes followed water sources.

Pastoralists were essential for the trans-Saharan trade, but they also posed a threat. Some might attack caravans for wealth. States and merchants paid tribute to pastoralists in exchange for safe passage. By the 1200s, it was common for caravans crossing the Sahara to travel with 5,000 to 10,000 camels. Timbuktu in the Mali Empire started out as a stop for caravans and grew into a major city.



Nineteenth-century watercolor painting of Bedouin encampment. © Getty Images.



Painting of a nineteenth-century caravan approaching Timbuktu. © Getty Images.

¹ A caravan is a group of people travelling together for protection, often for religious pilgrimage or trade. Caravans were common on the overland trade routes of Afro-Eurasia.

A land of gold: The Mali and Songhai Empires

Many goods traveled along these trade networks, but it was gold and salt that drove the trade. Salt is necessary for human life, but it was in short supply in West Africa. Berber tribes controlled several salt mines, which allowed them to buy high-value goods like gold from West African cities. They could also purchase enslaved people in these cities. Goods and enslaved people were taken to the Mediterranean and on to Egypt. The trans-Saharan routes reached their peak from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries.

The region of West Africa south of the Sahara was home to powerful empires and large cities. Agricultural societies like the Mali (1235–1670) and Songhai (1430–1591) empires thrived. These empires depended on trade across the desert, and emperors controlled the movement of merchants. They wanted to guard the secret locations of gold mines to the south. Their control of the trade routes enriched and expanded these empires.



Map of communities in West Africa c. 1450. By WHP, CC BY-SA 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

Waves of change: The arrival of Islam

Powerful Islamic empires and Muslim merchants in the north united much of Afro-Eurasia into one trading system. West Africans converted to Islam, and trade grew.

Arab merchants traveled to trade goods in exchange for gold in West Africa. West Africans also traveled north. Many of them were enslaved.² Yet plenty of West Africans made the journey voluntarily, many making a religious pilgrimage to Mecca.

² Slavery in this era had little to do with race or skin color. West African slaves were usually prisoners captured in war. White people from the Caucasus joined people from East and West Africa in enslavement in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean markets.

Caravans and merchants carried wealth, goods, and people across the Sahara. But perhaps the most important thing they carried weighed nothing at all: Islam. Islam was the most important factor in the expansion of trans-Saharan trade. After the Arab conquests of the 600s CE, the Berbers converted to Islam. Many West African merchants converted as well. Arabic provided a common language and value system, making it easier for traders to communicate and record their trades.

In West Africa, Islam spread first to cities. Most converts lived in cities and were merchants or members of the ruling class. Since most of the population was not urban, local religions remained important long after the arrival of Islam.

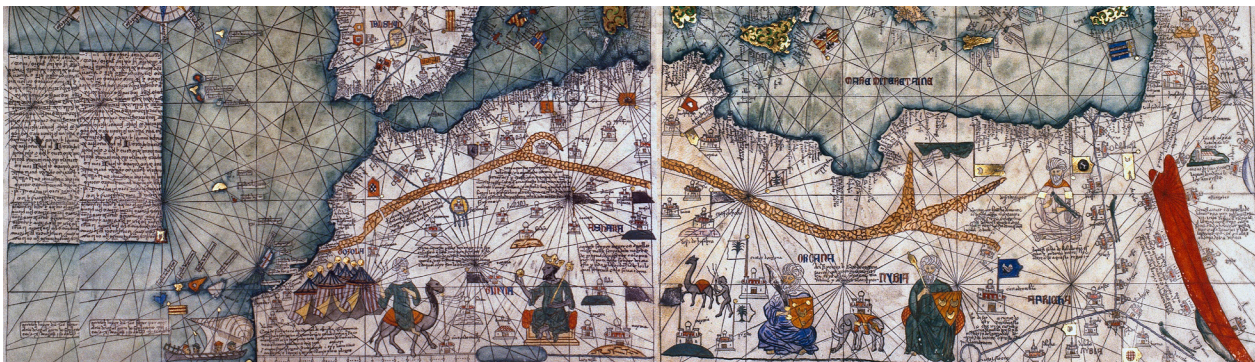


A map of trans-Saharan trade routes. By WHP, CC BY-SA 4.0. [Explore full map here.](#)

New routes

The combination of increased trade, cross-cultural exchange, and Islam created a golden age for the empires of West Africa. Trade allowed travelers and scholars to move around the world. Mansa Musa, the ruler of Mali, traveled to Mecca in the 1320s. He traveled with tens of thousands of camels and servants, carrying a fortune in gold. He spent so lavishly that he destabilized the Egyptian economy. His displays of wealth helped create myths that West Africa was a land where gold grew like plants.

Europeans began exploring the West African coast partly due to such myths. During the 1400s, Portuguese sailors looked for a route around Africa to the Indian Ocean trade. They established new sea routes, allowing traders to bypass the Sahara. But large caravans continued to cross the desert right up until the early 1900s.



A detail from the fourteenth-century Catalan Atlas, depicting caravan trade routes across the Sahara and the Mali emperor, Mansa Musa, holding a gold coin. © PHAS/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

Sources

- Abu-Lughod, Janet. *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Austen, Ralph. "Regional Study: Trans-Saharan Trade." In *The Cambridge World History*, edited by Craig Benjamin, 662-86. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Austen, Ralph A. *Trans-Saharan Africa in World History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Bulliet, Richard. *The Camel and the Wheel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- Krä and Ghislaine Lydon. *Trans-Saharan Book Trade: Manuscript Culture, Arabic Literacy and Intellectual History in Muslim Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Masonen, Pekka. "Trans-Saharan Trade and the West African Discovery of the Mediterranean." In *Ethnic Encounter and Culture Change*, edited by M'hammed Sabour and Knut S. Vikør, 116-42. London: Hurst, 1997.
- Northrup, Cynthia Clark, Jerry H. Bentley, and Alfred E. Eckes, Jr. *Encyclopedia of World Trade: From Ancient Times to the Present*. Florence: Routledge, 2004.

Bennett Sherry

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in history from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a research associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

Image credits

Cover image: oil on canvas. © DeAgostini / Getty Images.

A sea of sand. A satellite image of the Sahara Desert. © Getty Images.

Nineteenth-century watercolor painting of Bedouin encampment. © Getty Images.

Painting of a nineteenth-century caravan approaching Timbuktu. © Getty images.

Map of communities in West Africa c. 1450. By WHP, CC BY-SA 4.0. Explore full map here: <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1450-layer-2>

A map of trans-Saharan trade routes. By WHP, CC BY-SA 4.0. Explore full map here: <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1450-layer-3>

A selection from the fourteenth-century Catalan Atlas, depicting caravan trade routes across the Sahara and the Mali emperor, Mansa Musa, holding a gold coin. © PHAS/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

newsela

Articles leveled by Newsela have been adjusted along several dimensions of text complexity including sentence structure, vocabulary and organization. The number followed by L indicates the Lexile measure of the article. For more information on Lexile measures and how they correspond to grade levels: www.lexile.com/educators/understanding-lexile-measures/

To learn more about Newsela, visit www.newsela.com/about.



The Lexile® Framework for Reading

The Lexile® Framework for Reading evaluates reading ability and text complexity on the same developmental scale. Unlike other measurement systems, the Lexile Framework determines reading ability based on actual assessments, rather than generalized age or grade levels. Recognized as the standard for matching readers with texts, tens of millions of students worldwide receive a Lexile measure that helps them find targeted readings from the more than 100 million articles, books and websites that have been measured. Lexile measures connect learners of all ages with resources at the right level of challenge and monitors their progress toward state and national proficiency standards. More information about the Lexile® Framework can be found at www.Lexile.com.

OER PROJECT

OER Project aims to empower teachers by offering free and fully supported history courses for middle- and high-school students. Your account is the key to accessing our standards-aligned courses that are designed with built-in supports like leveled readings, audio recordings of texts, video transcripts, and more. Offerings include a variety of materials, from full-year, standards-based courses to shorter course extensions, all of which build upon foundational historical thinking skills in preparation for AP, college, and beyond.

To learn more about the OER Project, visit www.oerproject.com