

## Trans-Saharan Trade Routes

*From Timbuktu I sailed down the Nile [Niger] on a small boat, hollowed out of a single piece of wood...I went on . . . to Gawgaw [Gaogao], which is a large city on the Nile [Niger]... The buying and selling of its inhabitants is done with cowry-shells, and the same is the case at Malli [the city of Mali]. I stayed there about a month, and then set out in the direction of Tagadda by land with a large caravan of merchants from Ghadamas.*

—Ibn Battuta (1304–1353)

**Essential Question:** What were the causes and effects of Trans-Saharan trade, and how did the growth of empires influence trade and communication?

**W**hile the East African Coast had been fairly well populated for many centuries before the arrival of Islam, few societies had inhabited the **Sahara Desert** because its arid climate made it nearly impossible to farm. Though nomadic communities did conduct some trade across the Sahara, the volume of trade increased with the arrival of Muslim merchants in the 7th and 8th centuries. When empires such as Mali took over the area in the early 1200s, commerce expanded dramatically. As illustrated in the commentaries of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim scholar and explorer of the 14th century, merchants and traders used caravans to facilitate commerce. Africans traded gold, ivory, hides, and slaves for Arab and Berber salt, cloth, paper, and horses.

### Trans-Saharan Trade

The Sahara Desert is immense, occupying 3.6 million square miles—about the same size as China. Of that vast expanse of sand and rock, only about 800 square miles are **oases**—places where human settlement is possible because water from deep underground is brought to the surface, making land fertile. In some oases, the water comes from underground naturally. In others, humans have dug wells to access the water.

**Camels, Saddles, and Trade** Muslim merchants from Southwest Asia traveled across the Sahara on camels. Native to the Islamic heartland (Arabia), camels began to appear in North Africa in the 3rd century B.C.E. Accustomed to the harsh, dry climate of the **Arabian Desert**, camels adapted well to living



in the Sahara. Compared to horses, camels can consume a large quantity of water at one time (over 50 gallons in three minutes) and not need more water for a long time. They began to replace horses and donkeys after 300 C.E.

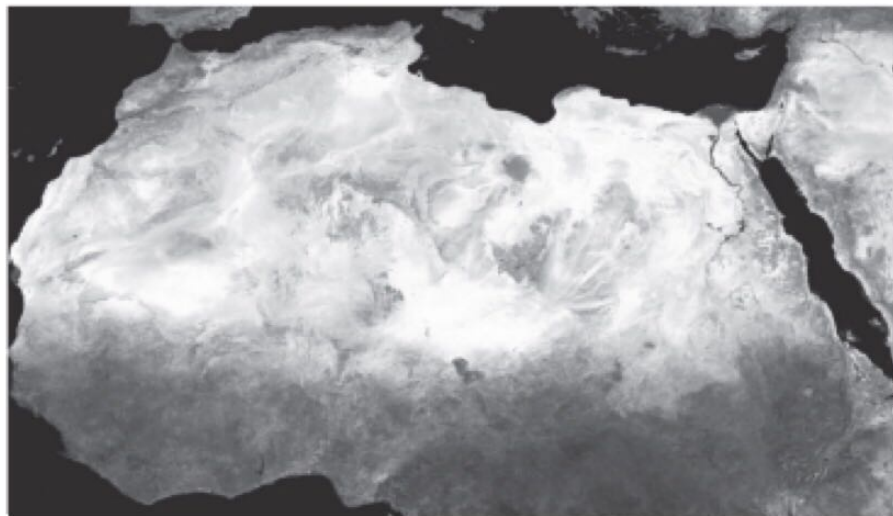
As use of the camel spread, people developed as many as 15 types of **camel saddles** for different purposes. South Arabians developed a saddle in which the rider sits in back of the hump, which makes riding easier because the rider can hold onto the hair of the hump. Northern Arabians developed a saddle for sitting on top of the hump, putting them high in the air, which gave them greater visibility in battles. Being near the head gave the rider the best possible control over the camel.

However, the saddle that had the greatest impact on trade was one the Somalis in Eastern Africa developed. They were semi-nomadic and needed to carry their possessions with them, so they designed a saddle for carrying loads up to 600 pounds. Without the development of this type of saddle, camels could not have been used to carry heavy loads of goods in trade.

Comparing Pack Animals			
Animal	Location	Benefits	Drawbacks
<b>Camel</b>	Northern Africa and Sub-Saharan West Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to travel long distances</li> <li>• Can eat thorny plants and drink salty water found in deserts</li> <li>• Has long eyelashes that protect against desert winds</li> <li>• Only animal that can cross deserts</li> <li>• Does not spook easily</li> <li>• Can carry up to 600 pounds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires high level of salt to stay healthy</li> <li>• Can be very aggressive and even vengeful</li> <li>• Cannot be controlled with a bit</li> <li>• Cannot be boarded in a stall</li> </ul>
<b>Ox</b>	Eurasia and the Americas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has high level of stamina</li> <li>• Can pull heaviest loads</li> <li>• Unlikely to stray or be stolen</li> <li>• Can survive on local grazing</li> <li>• Tolerates various climates and diets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moves slowly compared to other pack animals</li> <li>• Requires more water and food than other pack animals</li> </ul>
<b>Horse</b>	Worldwide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can run at high speeds</li> <li>• Can be controlled with a bit</li> <li>• Can be used in battle</li> <li>• Can adapt to most climates and terrains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires grain to keep fit</li> <li>• Spooks easily</li> <li>• Can be stolen easily</li> <li>• Strays easily</li> <li>• Less sure-footed than other pack animals</li> <li>• Cannot tolerate high heat</li> </ul>
<b>Llama</b>	Americas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintains traction in mountains</li> <li>• Has calm disposition</li> <li>• Requires little water</li> <li>• Adapts well to cold and mountainous climates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot pull heavy loads</li> <li>• Can carry less than other pack animals</li> <li>• Cannot tolerate high heat</li> </ul>

The caravans that crossed the Sahara often had thousands of camels laden not only with goods to trade but also with enough provisions, including fresh water, to last until the travelers could reach the next oasis. The people leading the caravans generally walked the entire way. The map on page 44 shows some of the main trade routes across the Sahara. There were seven north-south trade routes and two east-west routes. These put the people in Sub-Saharan Africa in touch with an expanding number of cultures and trading partners.

By the end of the 8th century C.E., the **trans-Saharan trade** had become famous throughout Europe and Asia. Gold was the most precious commodity traded. West African merchants acquired the metal from the waters of the Senegal River, near modern-day Senegal and Mauritania. Foreign traders came to West Africa seeking not only gold but also ivory and slaves. In exchange, they brought salt, textiles, and horses. For more than 700 years, trans-Saharan trade brought considerable wealth to the societies of West Africa, particularly the kingdoms of Ghana and Mali. They also brought Islam, which spread into Sub-Saharan Africa as a result. (Connect: Compare the impact of trade across the Sahara and throughout the Andes. See Topic 1.4.)



Source: Wikimedia Commons (NASA)

Satellite image of the expansive Sahara

## West African Empire Expansion

By the 12th century, wars with neighboring societies had permanently weakened the Ghanaian state. (See Topic 1.5.) In its place arose several new trading societies, the most powerful of which was **Mali**. North African traders had introduced Islam to Mali in the 9th century.

**Mali's Riches** The government of Mali profited from the gold trade, but it also taxed nearly all other trade entering West Africa. In that way, it became even more prosperous than Ghana had been. Most of Mali's residents were farmers who cultivated sorghum and rice. However, the great cities of **Timbuktu** and Gao accumulated the most wealth and developed into centers of Muslim life in the region. Timbuktu in particular became a world-renowned center of Islamic learning. By the 1500s, books created and sold in Timbuktu brought prices higher than most other goods.

**Expanding Role of States** The growth in trade and wealth gave rise to the need to administer and maintain it. For example, rulers needed to establish a currency whose value was widely understood. In Mali, the currency was cowrie shells, cotton cloth, gold, glass beads, and salt. Rulers also needed to protect both the trade routes and the areas where their currencies were made or harvested or their other trade resources were produced. Sometimes empires expanded their reach to take over resource-rich areas. They did so with military forces well provisioned with horses and iron weapons bought with the tax revenue. With each expansion, more people were drawn into the empire's economy and trade networks, bringing more people in touch with distant cultures.

Mali's founding ruler, **Sundiata**, became the subject of legend. His father had ruled over a small society in West Africa in what today is Guinea. When his father died, rival groups invaded, killing most of the royal family and capturing the throne. They did not bother to kill Sundiata because the young prince was crippled and was not considered a threat. In spite of his injury, he learned to fight and became so feared as a warrior that his enemies forced him into exile. His time in exile only strengthened him and his allies. In 1235, Sundiata, "the Lion Prince," returned to the kingdom of his birth, defeated his enemies, and reclaimed the throne for himself.

Sundiata's story made him beloved within his kingdom, but he was also an astute and capable ruler. Most scholars believe he was a Muslim and used his connections with others of his faith to establish trade relationships with North African and Arab merchants. Sundiata cultivated a thriving gold trade in Mali. Under his steady leadership, Mali's wealth grew tremendously.

**Mansa Musa** In the 14th century, Sundiata's grand-nephew, **Mansa Musa**, brought more fame to the region. However, Mansa Musa was better known for his religious leadership than for his political or economic acumen. A devout Muslim, Mansa Musa began a pilgrimage in 1324 to **Mecca**, Islam's holiest city. His journey, however, was unlike that of any ordinary pilgrim. Mali's prosperity allowed him to take an extraordinarily extravagant caravan to Arabia, consisting of 100 camels, thousands of slaves and soldiers, and gold to distribute to all of the people who hosted him along his journey. His pilgrimage displayed Mali's wealth to the outside world.

Mansa Musa's visit to Mecca deepened his devotion to Islam. Upon his return, he established religious schools in Timbuktu, built mosques in Muslim trading cities, and sponsored those who wanted to continue their religious studies elsewhere. Though most West Africans continued to hold onto their traditional beliefs, Mansa Musa's reign deepened the support for Islam in Mali.

However, in fewer than 100 years after Mansa Musa's death, the Mali kingdom was declining. By the late 1400s, the **Songhai Kingdom** had taken its place as the powerhouse in West Africa. Following processes like those Mali had gone through, Songhai became larger and richer than Mali. In spite of Mali's fall, Mansa Musa's efforts to strengthen Islam in West Africa succeeded: The religion has a prominent place in the region today.



Empires in Western Eurasia and Africa in the 13th Century				
	Mali	Al-Andalus	Byzantine Empire	Kievan Rus
<b>Location</b>	West Africa	Spain	Middle East	Russia
<b>Major City</b>	Timbuktu	Cordoba	Constantinople	Kiev
<b>Peak Years</b>	1200s to 1400s	711 to 1492	330 to 1453	900s to 1200s
<b>Key Figures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sundiata: founder who built a strong trade network</li> <li>• Mansa Musa: political and religious leader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ibn Rushd: Islamic legal scholar and philosopher</li> <li>• Maimonides: Jewish scholar of ethics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Justinian: ruler responsible for the <i>Body of Civil Law</i></li> <li>• Heraclius: shifted focus to the East</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vladimir I: converted to Christianity in 989</li> <li>• Yaroslav I: codified the legal system</li> </ul>
<b>Legacy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connected West and North Africa through trade</li> <li>• Spread Islam in West Africa</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Created vibrant, tolerant society</li> <li>• Preserved classical Greek learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fostered trade between Asia, Europe, and Africa</li> <li>• Carried on Roman legacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developed first large civilization in Russia</li> <li>• Spread Christianity eastward</li> </ul>

KEY TERMS BY THEME	
<p><b>GOVERNMENT:</b> Sub-Saharan Mali Sundiata Mansa Musa Songhai Kingdom</p> <p><b>CULTURE:</b> Islam Timbuktu Mecca</p> <p><b>ECONOMICS:</b> Trade trans-Saharan trade</p>	<p><b>ENVIRONMENT:</b> Africa Sahara Desert oases</p> <p><b>ENVIRONMENT:</b> Southwest Asia Arabian Desert</p> <p><b>TECHNOLOGY:</b> Pack animals camel saddle</p>