

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?

While 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.

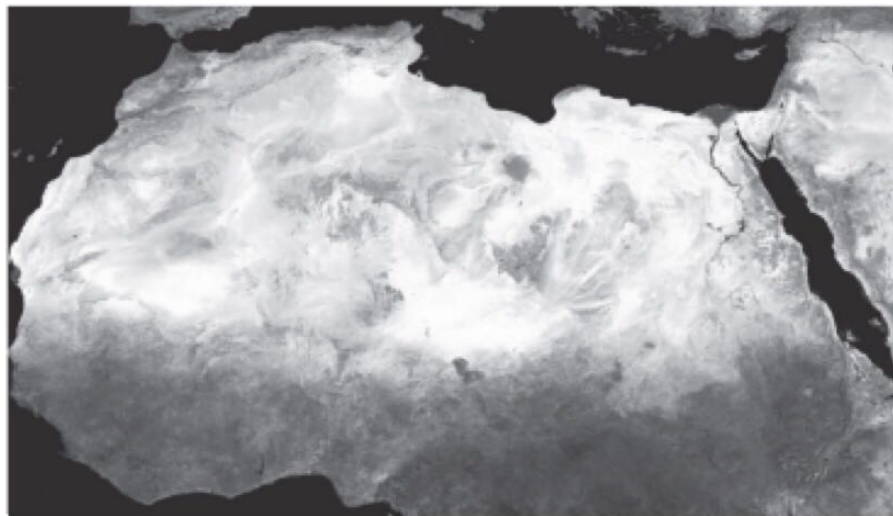
As use of the camel spread, people developed as many as 15 types of **camel saddles** for different purposes. South Arabians developed a saddle in which the rider sits in back of the hump, which makes riding easier because the rider can hold onto the hair of the hump. Northern Arabians developed a saddle 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
Camel	Northern Africa and Sub-Saharan West Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to travel long distances • Can eat thorny plants and drink salty water found in deserts • Has long eyelashes that protect against desert winds • Only animal that can cross deserts • Does not spook easily • Can carry up to 600 pounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires high level of salt to stay healthy • Can be very aggressive and even vengeful • Cannot be controlled with a bit • Cannot be boarded in a stall
Ox	Eurasia and the Americas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has high level of stamina • Can pull heaviest loads • Unlikely to stray or be stolen • Can survive on local grazing • Tolerates various climates and diets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moves slowly compared to other pack animals • Requires more water and food than other pack animals
Horse	Worldwide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can run at high speeds • Can be controlled with a bit • Can be used in battle • Can adapt to most climates and terrains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires grain to keep fit • Spooks easily • Can be stolen easily • Strays easily • Less sure-footed than other pack animals • Cannot tolerate high heat
Llama	Americas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains traction in mountains • Has calm disposition • Requires little water • Adapts well to cold and mountainous climates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cannot pull heavy loads • Can carry less than other pack animals • Cannot tolerate high heat

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

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

Cultural Consequences of Connectivity

I have not told half of what I saw, for I knew I would not be believed.

—Marco Polo (1245–1324)

Essential Question: What were the intellectual and cultural effects of the trade networks from c. 1200 to c. 1450?

Whether by caravan through the Sahara or Gobi deserts or by junk or dhow on the China Sea or Indian Ocean, goods, people, and ideas traveled with relative freedom through the networks of exchange in Afro-Eurasia in the years between c. 1200 and c. 1450. One reason for this free exchange was the stability of the Mongol Empire and the protection it offered merchants and travelers. The empire reached well past former boundaries, incorporating new people, goods, and ideas within its authority. Technological developments, such as gunpowder and paper from China, were diffused by trade. Literary and artistic interactions and cultural exchanges were documented by travelers such as Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta, who told of the wonders they saw and the extraordinary people they met. The known world became a larger place.

Religious, Cultural, and Technological Effects of Interaction

The diffusion of different religions between c. 1200 and c. 1450 had varying effects. In some cases, the arrival of a new religion served to unify people and provide justification for a kingdom's leadership. It often also influenced the literary and artistic culture of areas to which it spread, where themes, subjects, and styles were inspired by the spreading religion. In other places, it either fused or coexisted with the native religions. The interactions resulting from increased trade also led to technological innovations that helped shape the era.

Influence of Buddhism on East Asian Culture Buddhism came to China from its birthplace in India via the Silk Roads, and the 7th-century Buddhist monk Xuanzang helped make it popular. Monks related Buddhism to familiar Daoist principles, and in time Buddhist doctrines fused with elements of Daoist traditions to create the syncretic faith Chan Buddhism, also known as Zen Buddhism. Although some leaders in China did not want China’s native religions diminished as a result of the spread of Buddhism, Chan Buddhism remained popular among ordinary Chinese citizens. Under the Song Dynasty (960–1279), many Confucians among the scholar gentry began to adopt its ideals into their daily lives. The development of printing had made Buddhist scriptures widely available to the Confucian scholar gentry. Buddhist writers also influenced Chinese literature by writing in the vernacular rather than the formal language of Confucian scholars, a practice that became widespread.



Source: Nezu Art Museum, Tokyo

Detail of dusk over fisher’s village, from the handscroll “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang” by Chan Buddhist painter Mu-ch’i, c. 1250, Nezu Art Museum. Mu-ch’i is credited with starting the “sketch style” of painting that uses the fewest lines possible to suggest a subject. His work was very influential in East Asian art.

Japan and Korea, countries in China’s orbit, also adopted Buddhism, along with Confucianism. In Korea, the educated elite studied Confucian classics, while Buddhist doctrine attracted the peasants. Neo-Confucianism was another syncretic faith that originated in China, first appearing in the Tang Dynasty but developing further in the Song Dynasty. Neo-Confucianism fused rational thought with the abstract ideas of Daoism and Buddhism and became widespread in Japan and Vietnam. It also became Korea’s official state ideology.



Spread of Hinduism and Buddhism Through trade, the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism made their way to Southeast Asia as well. The sea-based Srivijaya Empire on Sumatra was a Hindu kingdom, while the later Majapahit Kingdom on Java was Buddhist. The South Asian land-based Sinhala dynasties in Sri Lanka became centers of Buddhist study with many monasteries. Buddhism’s influence was so strong under the Sinhala dynasties that Buddhist priests often advised monarchs on matters of government. (See Topic 1.3.)

The Khmer Empire in present-day Cambodia, also known as the Angkor Kingdom, was the most successful kingdom in Southeast Asia. The royal monuments at Angkor Thom are evidence of both Hindu and Buddhist cultural influences on Southeast Asia. Hindu artwork and sculptures of Hindu gods adorned the city. Later, when Khmer rulers had become Buddhist, they added Buddhist sculptures and artwork onto buildings while keeping the Hindu artwork.

Spread of Islam Through merchants, missionaries, and conquests, Islam spread over a wide swath of Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. The chart below summarizes some of the cultural influences of that expansion.

Cultural Influences of Islam in Afro-Eurasia	
Region	Influences
Africa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swahili language is a blend of Bantu and Arabic and is still widely spoken today. • Timbuktu became a center of Islamic learning. • Leaders of African states deepened Islamic ties through pilgrimages to Mecca.
South Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism were popular. • After Islam arrived, Buddhists converted more readily than Hindus because they were disillusioned by the corruption among Buddhist priests. • With its emphasis on equality, Islam also attracted lower-caste Hindus. • Architecture blended Hindu designs with Islamic patterns. • Urdu language had influences from Sanskrit-based Hindi, as well as from Arabic and Farsi, a Persian language. • Bhakti poets and missionaries sought links between Hinduism and Islam.
Southeast Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Muslim rulers on Java combined Mughal Indian features, local traditions, and Chinese-Buddhist and Confucian traits. • Traditional Javanese stories, puppetry, and poetry absorbed Muslim characters and techniques.

Scientific and Technological Innovations Along with religion, science and technology traveled the trade routes. Islamic scholars translated Greek literary classics into Arabic, saving the works of Aristotle and other Greek



thinkers from oblivion. Scholars also brought back mathematics texts from India and techniques for papermaking from China. They studied medicine from ancient Greeks, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians, making advances in hospital care, including surgery. (See Topic 1.2.)

Improvements in agricultural efficiency, such as the use of Champa rice, spread from India to Vietnam and China. With a reliable food supply, the population grew, as did cities and industries, such as the production of porcelain, silk, steel, and iron. Papermaking reached Europe from China in the 13th century and along with printing technology helped lead to a rise in literacy.

Seafaring technology improved with **lateen sails**, the **stern rudder**, the **astrolabe**, and the **magnetic compass** as Chinese, Indian, and Southwest Asians expanded their knowledge of astronomy and other aspects of the natural world. Production of gunpowder and guns spread from China and influenced warfare as well.

Thanks, in part, to the writing of Marco Polo, historians have a good picture of the city of **Hangzhou** in China. It shows how trade supported urbanization. Hangzhou was large—it was home to about one million people—but other Chinese cities were larger. Chang’an had about two million people. However, Hangzhou was the center of culture in southern China, the home of poets such as Lu Yu and Xin Qiji, and other writers and artists. Located at the southern end of the Grand Canal, it was also a center of trade. Like other important cities of the era, such as Novgorod in Russia, Timbuktu in Africa, and Calicut in India, the city grew and prospered as its merchants exchanged goods. This trade brought diversity to Hangzhou, including a thriving community of Arabs.

Other cities on the trade routes that grew and thrived included **Samarkand** and **Kashgar**. (See Topic 2.1.) They were both known as centers of Islamic scholarship, bustling markets, and sources for fresh water and plentiful food for merchants traveling the Silk Roads.

Factors Contributing to Growth of Cities

- Political stability and decline of invasions
- Safe and reliable transportation
- Rise of commerce
- Plentiful labor supply
- Increased agricultural output

Declining Cities Kashgar, however, declined after a series of conquests by nomadic invaders and in 1389–90 was ravaged by Tamerlane. (See Topic 2.2.) Another once-thriving city, the heavily walled **Constantinople** in present-day Turkey, also suffered a series of traumatic setbacks. Mutinous Crusader armies weakened Constantinople after an attack in the Fourth Crusade in 1204 (see Topic 1.6), and in 1346 and 1349, the bubonic plague killed about half of the people in Constantinople. After a 53-day siege, the city finally fell to the Ottomans in 1453, an event some historians believe marks the end of the High



Middle Ages. (Connect: Describe the relationship between urban growth in Europe and later urban decline. (See Topic 1.6.)

Factors Contributing to Decline of Cities

- Political instability and invasions
- Disease
- Decline of agricultural productivity

Effects of the Crusades Knowledge of the world beyond Western Europe increased as Crusaders encountered both the Byzantine and Islamic cultures. The encounters also increased demand in Europe for newfound wares from the East. In opening up to global trade, however, Western Europeans also opened themselves to disease. The plague, referred to as the **Black Death**, was introduced to Europe by way of trading routes. A major epidemic broke out between 1347 and 1351. Additional outbreaks occurred over the succeeding decades. As many as 25 million people in Europe may have died from the plague. With drastically reduced populations, economic activity declined in Europe. In particular, a shortage of people to work on the land had lasting effects on the feudal system. Also, exposure to new ideas from Byzantium and the Muslim world would contribute to the Renaissance and the subsequent rise of secularism.



Source: Hangzhou City Gate, China (1906), Public Domain

The pagoda behind the gate is a common Buddhist building design in China.

Travelers' Tales

As exchange networks intensified and literacy spread as a result of paper and printing technology, an increasing number of travelers within Afro-Eurasia wrote about their journeys for eager readers.

Marco Polo In the late 13th century, **Marco Polo**, an Italian native from Venice, visited the court of Kublai Khan (see Topic 2.2). Chinese cities impressed Polo. After Polo returned to Italy in 1295, he wrote a book about his travels. However, many Europeans refused to believe his descriptions of China's size, wealth, and wonders. Only when other Europeans followed Polo's route to China did people widely accept that China was prosperous and innovative. Polo's captivating descriptions of the customs of the people he met intrigued Europeans. Polo wrote extensively about the high levels of urbanization he saw in the 13th century. Polo's point of view as a merchant kept him focused on trade-related matters.

They use paper money as currency. The men as well as the women are fair-skinned and handsome. Most of them always dress themselves in silk, as a result of the vast quantities of that material produced in Hangzhou, exclusive of what the merchants import from other provinces.

Ibn Battuta He was just 21 years old, **Ibn Battuta** (1304–1353), a Muslim scholar from Morocco, set out to see the world he read about.

I set out alone, having neither fellow-traveller in whose companionship I might find cheer, nor caravan whose part I might join, but swayed by an overmastering impulse within me and a desire long-cherished in my bosom to visit these illustrious sanctuaries.

Over 30 years, Ibn Battuta traveled through Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, China, Spain, North Africa, and Mali, mainly to Muslim lands. After telling his tales to the Sultan of Morocco, Battuta was told to “dictate an account of the cities which he had seen in his travel, and of the interesting events which had clung to his memory, and that he should speak of those whom he had met of the rulers of countries, of their distinguished men of learning, and of their pious saints.” His book *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Traveling* provides a wealth of detail about the places he visited and their cultures. Unlike Polo, Battuta had the point of view of a Muslim devoted to his faith. His journey was in large part to learn as much as he could about Islam and its people and accomplishments.

Margery Kempe English mystic **Margery Kempe** (c. 1373–c. 1440), whose *The Book of Margery Kempe* was one of the earliest autobiographies in English, if not the first, could neither read nor write. She dictated her book to scribes who wrote down her descriptions of her pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, Germany, and Spain. She does relate details of her travel experiences, such as being so overcome by the sight of Jerusalem as she approached it that she nearly fell off her donkey. However, her book is also significant because it is a firsthand account of a middle-class medieval woman's life. Kempe conveys both the intense spiritual visions and feelings of her mystical experiences and the trials of everyday life for a woman with 14 children.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

ENVIRONMENT: Disease
Black Death

CULTURE: Travel Writers
Marco Polo
Ibn Battuta
Margery Kempe

CULTURE: Language
Swahili
Urdu

TECHNOLOGY: Nautical
Improvements
lateen sail
stern rudder
astrolabe
magnetic compass

SOCIETY: Cities
Hangzhou
Samarkand
Kashgar
Constantinople