

Trans-Saharan Trade
AP World History
Kienast

The regular commercial and cultural exchange between Western Africa and the Mediterranean world did not start properly until the 8th century CE. Yet the beginning of trans-Saharan trade was not such a sudden and dramatic event like the coming of Europeans to America, but it had a long history of sporadic encounters for more than 1000 years. When and how the very first contacts took place is still obscure, although their origins can be traced already to the prehistoric times. Archaeologists have, for example, found in southern Mauritania some copper objects of Hispano-Moroccan style, which are dated to the 11th century BC. The reciprocal action between Moroccan and Mauritanian prehistoric inhabitants was possible, for the northern and southern 50 mm isohyets are close together in Western Sahara, forming there a kind of natural corridor along which the desert can be crossed.

Establishment of the early trans-Saharan contacts is customarily attributed to early Libyan tribes. According to the Greek historian Herodotus, they traded with people who lived in the desert. This account has been associated with the rock paintings depicting horse-pulled chariots, the first of which were found in the Sahara in the early 1930s. Subsequently, a theory was created, according to which Saharan people had carried West African gold and ivory to the markets of Carthage and Rome.

The theory of chariot routes became soon widely accepted, and it is still found in numerous general histories of Africa, although severe criticism against its historicity began in the early 1970s. Opponents of the theory have correctly pointed out that the existence of paintings depicting chariots is not sufficient proof that the desert was ever crossed with such vehicles. Furthermore, all paintings depict light, two-wheeled chariots. According to the experimental tests made by French researchers, these tiny vehicles, which have hardly room enough even for the driver, cannot be used for transporting heavy material for long distances. It is also interesting that no skeletal remains of horses, contemporary to the paintings which were created during a long period reaching from 1000 BCE till 500 CE, has been found in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus it is likely that the rock paintings represent nothing but the diffusion of a form of art from the Mediterranean coast to the southern Sahara.

The real initiators of trans-Saharan trade were the Berber nomads of North Africa who frequently crossed the desert with their camel flocks. The nomads, who resided at southern edge of Sahara, left to the north in the beginning of the rainy season, returning back by the eve of the dry season. While staying in their pastures in southern Morocco and the Atlas mountains, these nomads have certainly met people who, in their turn, had contacts beyond the Roman limes. As the nomads learned to know the great value of gold in Roman world, they perhaps started bartering it from the peoples of West Africa for salt and copper. The gold was carried to the north, where it was probably used for payment of dates, corn and other products which the nomads could not produce themselves. The nomads may have bought also some luxury objects made in the Roman world, which they bartered for gold in the south. This trade could have started only after the adoption of dromedary camels by the Saharan peoples, for horses do not survive in the harsh conditions of the desert. The camels were important not so much as mounts than beasts of

burden, for they enabled to transport efficiently both the merchandizes and the food and water which were needed during the crossing of the desert; the traders usually walked all the way. Customarily the adoption of the dromedary in Northern Africa is dated to the beginning of our era, and on the grounds of classical literature its introduction is attributed to the Romans. However, some camel bones have been found recently in the Senegal valley, and they are dated to the third century CE, suggesting that the dromedary was domesticated by Saharan inhabitants at least by that time, since there never lived any wild camels in Africa.

The conditions of trans-Saharan trade changed remarkably after Northern Africa became a part of the Islamic world in the late 7th century CE. The vast Umayyad caliphate, reaching from the slopes of Pyrenees in modern Spain to the banks of Indus, formed a solid market area the monetary system of which was based on gold. In fact, it seems that regular and intensive trade across the desert was organized quite soon after the Arabs had consolidated their power in Northern Africa.

Before the European discovery of America, West African mines were the most important single source of gold both for Northern Africa and Europe; it is estimated that two-thirds of all the gold circulating in the Mediterranean area in the Middle Ages was imported across the Sahara. This made the uninterrupted continuity of trade more important for North African rulers than their West African counterparts. The demand for salt, for which the Arabs bartered the gold in Western Africa, is usually overemphasized in the historiography. Contrariwise, the Saharan rock salt was an expensive luxury product and available to the wealthy people only. Furthermore, it could be quite easily substituted by locally produced salt from plants and soil, whereas the North African rulers could not obtain gold for their coins elsewhere.

With the increased volume of trans-Saharan trade in the Islamic period, new cultural influences began to spread in Western Africa. The most important of them was a new religion, Islam, which was adopted in the states belonging to the sphere of the caravan trade by the end of the eleventh century. The conversion was peaceful and it had been preceded by a long period of coexistence in the cities of the trade route.

The golden age of the trans-Saharan trade ended with the collapse of Songhay Empire in 1591. Nevertheless, the trade continued, until the railroads gave it the final death blow in the beginning of the 20th century. The shift in favor of the Atlantic trade began with the arrival of the first Portuguese ships on the West African coast in 1443.