



# THE TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE ROUTES

IN AFRICA



## THE SAHARA

The Sahara is the third largest desert in the world and covers a region of 3,600,000 square miles. The Sahara stretches in the west from modern-day Mauritania, to Tunisia in the north, to eastern Sudan in the east and in the south as far as modern-day southern Mali, Chad and Niger. The Sahara can be divided into several regions including: the western Sahara, the central Ahaggar Mountains, the Tibesti Mountains, the Aïr Mountains, the Ténéré desert, and the Libyan Desert. To south the Sahara is bounded by the Sahel. The Sahel is a narrow

band of semi-arid land that forms a transition zone between the Sahara to the north and the green savannas to the south. It is made up of flat, barren plains that stretch roughly 5,400 kilometers (3,300 miles) across Africa, from Senegal to Sudan. The Sahel also contains the fertile delta of the Niger River has much green vegetation which emerges during the rainy season. Up until about 5000 BC the Sahara had been a fertile land with rivers, lakes and streams, it was only later in time that much of it began to transition into a desert.

## THE TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE ROUTE

The Trans-Saharan Trade Route refers to the interconnected set of trade routes which linked the kingdoms of West Africa, North Africa and East Africa across the region of the Sahara in Africa. Some of the major African kingdoms within the

region who developed and utilized the trade routes included the Empire of Ghana, the Kingdom of Morocco, The Empire of Mali, The Songhai Empire, The Kanem-Borno Empire and The Hausa Kingdoms. The area is also sometime known as 'the



Sudan' which is derived from the Arabic word 'Bilad al-Sudan' which translates as 'the land of the black peoples'. The water oases dotted across the Sahara at the time provided resting and re-fueling places for

the African traders. The Africans had established the Trans-Saharan trade route by 500 AD and from then onwards it simply expanded to encompass a greater and greater territory.

## TRADE BETWEEN THE AFRICAN KINGDOMS

The Africans utilized caravans of camels to transport their goods to different kingdoms and empires. Trade promoted the exploitation of the resources of the western Sudan as well as increase the peaceful spread of the religion of Islam. The Trans-Saharan trade route transported goods such as salt, gold, copper, kola nuts, fruits, linen, cloth and glass. The Empire of Ghana by 800 AD completely controlled the gold trade from Ghana to northern Africa. The Empire of Ghana gained control over the area of Bambuk (located in modern-day eastern Senegal) which was a major gold producing center. The Empire of Ghana then expanded north and secured control over the Berber town of Aoudaghost,

(located in modern-day southern Mauritania) another important trading center.

Later, the Empire of Mali took over the gold trade and established the trading centers of Timbuktu and Djenne in west Africa. The city of Timbuktu became the book trading center of the world at this time. From Timbuktu trade took place across the Sahara near to the town of Takedda (modern-day Niger) which was later controlled by the Mali Empire. Takedda became well known for producing copper and a route from Tekedda near the Tibesti Mountains (modern-day northern Chad) east to the city of Cairo was created (modern-day Egypt).



The Empire of Mali also secured the gold fields of Bure (located in modern-day central Niger) and began to produce gold for sale to other kingdoms in the region.

The Hausa Kingdoms were located in modern-day northern Nigeria and Niger and was also known as 'Hausaland'. The greater part of Hausaland was extremely fertile and was developed by the farmers within the kingdom. These Hausa farmers were able to cultivate crops such as rice, millet, maize, sorghum, peanuts, onions, beans, cotton and indigo. In addition to their crops, the kingdom also produced leather items such as sandals, harnesses, tunics and baskets. These leather goods became very popular, for example the Hausa supplied leather goods to the Akan people in exchange for gold and kola nuts.

The Akan people were an African group located in the region of modern-day Ghana. From the Hausa Kingdoms of western Africa trade routes were

established from their region to the capital city of the Kanem Empire named Njimi (modern-day Chad and Niger).

The Kanem Empire was located northeast of Lake Chad and they established a thriving trade from the region through the Central Sahara to northern Africa. For example, Fezzan (located in modern-day Libya) was an important trading center for the empire as well as Bilma (located in modern-day Niger) which was a large salt mining center. Trade routes from the Kanem Empire north to the city of Tripoli (modern-day Libya) also became popular. From Libya (modern-day Libya) there was a north-eastern trade route to the city of Egypt. In northern Africa, trade routes from Marrakesh (modern-day eastern Morocco) to Fez (modern-day northern Morocco) across to Qayrawan (modern-day Tunisia) ending in Libya were created. However, by 1591 AD the trans-Saharan trade routes began to decline as new developments in the transportation of goods became more popular.