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R O U T E T O G L O R Y

*THE DEVELOPMENTS OF THE
TRANS-SAHARAN AND TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN
TRADE ROUTES*

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Professor E. O'Day

History 492

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The Renaissance in Europe has been described as a time of intellectual awakening and cultural prosperity. Voltaire characterized the time between the early fourteenth to the late sixteenth centuries as one of the greatest ages of human cultural achievement. This time period, known as the Renaissance, was qualified in the nineteenth century as a distinct historical period, the birth of the modern era, characterized by the rise of humanism, scientific inquiry, geographical exploration and the growth of secular values. Today the concept of “Renaissance” is firmly established as one of the most well known cultural and intellectual movements of Europe.¹

The causes for such a strong movement in European society have been fuel for debate as long as the early modern period of European history has been studied by historians. Many scholars maintain that one of the primary reasons for the transition from the Middle Ages into this era of human history is the development of European commerce. One such scholar is Alan Smith, who states the renewal of trade within Europe, beginning with the commercial centers in Italy and then spreading to the northern cities of Europe, was one of the most influential factors in the onset of this early modern period.²

Probably the single most important development in this newly defined European trade is that of the trans-Mediterranean trade. It can be argued that the commodities imported into Europe from the coast of North Africa and elsewhere were instruments of

¹Grolier's Encyclopaedia (Grolier Electronic Publishing, Inc. 1992), “Renaissance” by Benjamin G. Kohl.

²Alan Smith, Creating a World Economy: Merchant Capital, Colonialism and World Trade, 1400-1825 (Oxford: West View Press, 1991), 47-48.

inspiration and motivation not only for those wishing to enrich themselves but also for those seeking adventure and glory in the conquest of new places. In addition, the trade routes were also means for the beginnings of the fateful European expansion into Africa. It was a quest for gold, pepper, and eventually African slaves that caused the first wave of invaders into the continent.

Philip Curtin has pointed out that “one of the myths of African history is the old view that commerce in Africa was largely pioneered by outsiders who penetrated a stagnate continent.” Evidence has shown quite the contrary. In addition, European invasion into Africa has been characterized as adventuresome, daring, and dangerous, the result of a God-given quest to explore the continent in search of gold and opportunities to evangelize.³

Historians in the past ... depicted a “Muslim Monopoly” over ... trade, taking it for granted that if Western Christians were to enter that trade at all, they would have to come “with guns blazing” as they actually did. Muslims were no doubt the most important single religious community in ... maritime trade, but they were not a monolithic group.... Jews were important traders. So too were [non-European] Christian communities. It is safe to assume that peaceful Portuguese shipping could have joined in free competition with existing traders.⁴

The existing trade was one of great complexity and enormous vitality. The trans-Saharan trade was a two-way exchange between sub-Saharan regions and the North

³Philip Curtin, Cross-Cultural Trade in World History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15; John W. Blake, West Africa: A Search for God and Gold 1454-1578 (London: Curzon Press, 1977), 4.

⁴Curtin, 137.

African coast. Although the merchandise varied somewhat, depending upon political conditions or demand within the trading area, the existence of the routes themselves can be traced back to the African empire of the Phoenicians, based in Carthage. By the time of the Islamic expansion into Africa, the cities on the trade routes were already a part of a flourishing commerce. According to Benjamin Thomas, "The various trans-Saharan caravan routes ... rose to prominence and declined with changing conditions of human geography.... The general pattern of the later routes is still traced upon the surface of the Sahara." James Wellard suggests that this trade was "one of the richest in the world." Peter Spufford suggests that the trans-Saharan routes were some of the strongest reasons for North African prosperity during the Middle Ages. The main routes crossing the desert connected sub-Saharan Africa with the thriving trade centers of the Maghreb, Muslim Spain, and Alexandria.⁵

In order to fully grasp the extensive nature of the trade in West Africa, it is necessary to delve into the background of the empires responsible for their development and control. Misconceptions regarding the nature of the political and economic state of West Africa before the European invasions have abounded for centuries, partly due to a lack of primary materials, which were virtually unavailable before this century.⁶ For

⁵Benjamin E. Thomas, Trade Routes of Algeria and the Sahara (Berkeley: University of California Publications in Geography, University of California Press, 1957), 236; James Wellard, Samarkand and Beyond: A History of Desert Caravans (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1977), 85; Peter Spufford, Money and Its Use In Medieval Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 164.

⁶Within the last century, a good deal of information has been recovered regarding the empires of West Africa. Some of the best-known primary materials have only recently been translated from Medieval Arabic and have been available for general research. This includes the works from the University of Sankore in Timbuktu (among them, the Tarikh es Soudan and the Tarikh el Fettach). It is presumed that more materials have as yet to be retrieved from the Sahara. For more information, see the preface of the translated

example, the idea that the exchange of gold and other goods was based on a primitive type of barter system seemed to endure throughout popular thought. James Wellard points out one of the stories in existence:

[There were] naked gold miners who lived in holes in the ground and only emerged to heap little piles of gold at the edge of the shafts where the Arab traders placed their goods for exchange. When both parties were satisfied, the miners withdrew down their shafts and the merchants rode off on their camels.⁷

In fact, the commerce described in the primary sources Tarikh es Soudan and Tarikh el Fettach was extensive and exceedingly well-organized. By the eighth century, entire merchant classes consisting of citizens and foreigners⁸ were able to carry on a thriving commercial enterprise. The existence of a well-circulated currency, fixed market days, a well-organized tariff system and an extensive route system were all noted by Sadi in the Tarikh es Soudan.⁹

What, then, were the forces behind this immense trade? Because of the rather extensive time frame encompassing the history of the routes, it is a virtually insurmountable task to cover this background in its entirety for the purpose of this study. However, three empires must be alluded to in order to fully comprehend the powerful

Tarikh es Soudan.

⁷James Wellard, Samarkand, 88.

⁸In general, citizens were native to the numerous city-states in West Africa, such as Gao, Timbuktu, and Djenne. Foreigners included Arabs from North Africa, Egypt, and Persia as well as Europeans, especially from Spain. All were subject to the control of the emperors of Ghana and subsequently to those of Mali and Songhai. For more on the power of the emperors, see Diop, Precolonial Black Africa, Political Organization, 43-131.

⁹Cheikh Anta Diop, Precolonial Black Africa: A Comparative Study of the Political and Social Systems of Europe and Black Africa from Antiquity to the Formation of Modern States (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1987), 136.

control the leaders in West Africa exerted over the trade and economy of the Sudan and the Maghreb.¹⁰

The first was the empire of Ghana, established five hundred years before the Carolingian Empire. Al Bakri, cited by Cheikh Anta Diop, points out that it was defended by a vast army:

[The army was made up of] two hundred thousand warriors, forty thousand of them archers. Its power and reputation, renowned as far as Baghdad in the East, were no mere legend: it was actually a phenomenon attested to by the fact that for 1250 years a succession of Black emperors occupied the throne of a country as vast as all of Europe, with no enemy from without nor any internal tensions able to dismember it.¹¹

When the Ghana Empire was established five hundred years before the Carolingian Empire, it was done with vast political, administrative, and economic resources.

According to Mahmoud Kati, merchants and others who traveled to the region suffered no poverty. “The Emperor of Ghana, seated upon a platform of red gold, daily treated the people of his capital to ten thousand meals.” Clearly, Ghana possessed vast political, administrative, and economic resources.¹²

The population of the empire was undoubtedly a flourishing one. Abderrahman Sadi mentions a demographic density of 7,077 villages in the Djenne region. A herald from the emperor could stand at the outer gates of the general Djenne region and proclaim his message. It would then be repeated from village to village until the person it was

¹⁰See map for areas encompassed by the Sudan and the Maghreb.

¹¹Diop, 91.

¹²Mahmoud Kati ben El-Hadj El-Motaouakkei Kati, Tarikh El-Fettach, Timbuktu (Begun 1519), translated to French by O. Houdas and M. Delafosse, (Paris: Librairie d’Amerique et d’Orient, 1914), 77.

meant for received it. This seems to indicate an urbanization not shared with Europeans at this time.¹³

In 1230, Ghana was overtaken by the kingdom of Mali. Mali had existed as a small kingdom since the early part of the millennium. It was at this time, however, that a young and energetic leader by the name of Sundiata succeeded in uniting the forces in the kingdom, turning Mali into a powerful empire. By the time of Sundiata's death in 1255, Mali encompassed several former dependencies of Ghana and some territory further east as well. Its boundaries extended from Gao to the Atlantic and from the tropical sub-Saharan region through the entire expanse of the Sahara.¹⁴

After Sundiata, the most influential emperor during Mali's period of glory was Mansa Musa, a Muslim ruler who established himself as a great leader. Joseph Harris states that Mansa Musa's reign was glorified because of his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, the first made by a Sudanese ruler, and renowned especially because of the splendid nature of the trip. He was accompanied by approximately 80,000 people carrying two tons of gold bars and gold dust which he distributed along the way.¹⁵

Ibn Battuta wrote of the emperor's supreme dignity:

Our merchants stood up in his presence and even though they were close to him, he spoke to them through a third person. This was a mark of the little consideration he had for them and I was so unhappy at this that I regretted bitterly having

¹³ Abderrahman Ben Abdallah Ben 'Imran Ben 'Amir Es'Sadi, Tarikh Es-Soudan, Timbuktu (Written around 1629), translated to French by O. Houdas, (Paris: Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient, 1913), 24-25.

¹⁴ Diop, 92.

¹⁵ Joseph E. Harris, Africans and Their History (New York: Penguin Group, 1987), 60.

come to a country whose inhabitants display such bad manners and give evidence of such contempt for white men.¹⁶

Whatever distress Battuta possessed he eventually put aside, for a year later he traveled to Cairo with the emperor during Musa's renowned pilgrimage to Mecca.¹⁷

After Mansa Musa's death in 1332, the empire of Mali gradually gave way to the smaller city-states dominated by the Dia dynasty and their kingdom of Songhai.¹⁸ Centered in Gao, the kingdom had begun to expand its frontiers and control the other city-states by the end of the fourteenth century. Most of the expansion, however, took place during the Sovereign Sunni Ali Ber's reign from 1464 to 1492. He succeeded, according to Ajayi, in the subsequent campaigns to control the important trading towns of the Sudan.¹⁹ Once established as a strong leader, the emperor began to secure peace within the empire. After his death in 1492, Islam became the Songhai imperial religion, due in great part to Sunni Ali Ber's successor.

Askia Muhammad inherited an empire that was quite strong, well-organized and efficient. His rule, until 1529, established the Songhai as great military leaders, wise scholars, devout religious men and wealthy inhabitants of the greater part of West Africa. Askia attempted to exceed the reign of the famed Mansa Musa in every way, including

¹⁶Ibn Battuta, Travels in Asia and Africa (Written around 1304-1369) Translated to English by H.A.R. Gibb. (London: Broadway Travelers Series, 1953), 10.

¹⁷Norah Latham, editor, The Heritage of West Africa (London: Hulton Educational Publishers, 1964), 54.

¹⁸Dia Assibia, king of Gao in the seventh century, was the patriarch who, according to Asante, fathered the Dia dynasty that lasted for sixteen generations. His last descendant, Sunni Ali Ber, became Sovereign Ali the Great during his successful quest to unite the West African city-states into the Songhai Empire. For more information, see Asante, 225.

¹⁹J.F.A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder, History of West Africa, Vol. One (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 4.

the undertaking of a grand pilgrimage to Mecca in 1495. He too carried vast amounts of gold and surrounded himself with an immense entourage. He also brought back from Arabia and Egypt Muslim scholars and other professionals who, working with the nobles and scholars already established in Timbuktu and other cities, created a cultural revival within the empire and a reputation of grandeur without.²⁰

Under the influence of the leaders of these empires, the cities in the Western Sudan flourished, many as centers of the thriving commercial routes developed even before the Islamic expansion in the eighth century. According to Philip Curtin, the cities on these routes became an urban network “arranged in a hierarchy of multifunctionality”.²¹

Probably one of the best known of these cities is Timbuktu. It had already been established as a center of learning and culture under Mansa Musa’s reign. As the reputation of its Islamic scholars grew, so too did the wealth of its commercial center. According to James Wellard, Timbuktu was the principal trade terminus of the African caravan routes. It became “not only a major commercial centre, but a crucible of the Arab-African races, religions and cultures.”²²

²⁰Harris, 62.

²¹Curtin, 9.

²²Ajayi, 141; Wellard, 117.

The origins of the city date back to the early middle ages²³, but documented evidence shows the existence of an already thriving market town by 1000AD. It became a transit area for the goods that passed between Morocco and the sub-Saharan Sudan. Egypt has been described as the ‘gift of the Nile’, and it is in much the same way that Timbuktu can be characterized as ‘the gift of the Niger’. According to Elias Saad, the city could flourish as a commercial, cultural and political center because of its position as a port on the Niger River, allowing it to become a meeting place for many cultures.²⁴

By far the foremost resource for the history of the city at this time is the Tarikh-Es-Soudan. Abderrahman Sadi, a notary in Timbuktu who later became administrator at the University of Sankore, describes Timbuktu as a city where caravans from all countries, scholars, devout pilgrims and rich merchants of every race meet and communicate. Its civilization was the result not only of religious influence but also of commercial influence.²⁵

Timbuktu connected three of the most significant trade routes of the Sahara. Because of its location on the bend of the Niger River, it was a key link between cities for merchants and other transients through the empire. The Niger was an important transportation route between Timbuktu and Djenne, especially after these cities were

²³The general consensus among historians is that the Middle Ages is comprised of several major periods. The early Middle Ages are usually designated the years between the fall of Rome and the Carolingian Empire in Europe (5th to 9th centuries), while the high Middle Ages constitute the centuries of the crusades and afterward (11th to 14th centuries). Generally, the end of the 10th century is what is used as a division point in European history and for the purposes of this paper, we will discuss African history in conjunction with these time periods.

²⁴Elias Saad, Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables 1400-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 5.

²⁵Sadi, 34-37.

established as primary junctions on the trade routes. Scholars maintain that Timbuktu's glory is linked to that of its commercial equal - the city of Djenne. J.D. Fage goes so far as to maintain that Timbuktu was glorious because of the "brains" of her sister city. Djenne's position on the routes as well as on the Niger River made it resistant to raids and invaders, making it a haven for traders.²⁶

It was the river that established Djenne's importance as a trade city, although its greatness as an intellectual center for the empires of West Africa had been well established before the fourteenth century. Hunwick gives evidence that Djenne was an educational center of the empire, for it was here that were found the medical schools. He maintains that surgeries were routinely performed there as early as the eleventh century. Nevertheless, it is for its commerce that Djenne is the best known.²⁷ The Tarikh describes Djenne as one of the grandest markets of the Muslim world. "It is there," says Sadi, "that meet the merchants of salt coming from the Taghaza mines and those who bring gold from the [Wangara] mines."²⁸

The capital city of the Songhai Empire was Gao, located southeast of Timbuktu on the river. Although, according to Ajayi, Gao had developed as a trading center on a trans-Saharan route by the eighth century, it was the position of the city as the royal nucleus of first the Songhai kingdom from the eighth to the fourteenth centuries which established it as the seat of the Dia dynasty:

²⁶J.D. Fage, A History of West Africa: An Introductory Survey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 37; Ajayi, 41.

²⁷Hunwick, 17.

²⁸Es'Sadi, 22.

In 985 the Egyptian author al-Mahallabi described Gao [or in the Arabic, Kawkaw] as divided into two towns on both sides of the Niger. On the right bank (facing the desert) was the traders' town and on the other bank was the royal town. The king of Kawkaw was then Muslim. His Islamisation was a result of the influence of the Muslim traders resident in Kawkaw. He was probably the first important Sudanese ruler to adopt Islam.²⁹

Besides trading cities such as Timbuktu and Djenne and the capital city of Gao, there were a few major oasis-cities on the routes that developed into booming commercial centers. Cities on the Barbary coast, too, had developed into centers where Arab and Jewish merchants had long established trading markets. Egypt also shared in the trans-Saharan trade. There was an old route from Ghana through Gao to Egypt, and it is obvious that it had been established as a strong, safe route at some point, because Mansa Musa, and then Askia Mohammed used it to travel to Mecca through Egypt.

The importance of trade in the Western Sudan has been well documented. Communication between traders in the Songhai Empire and those in North Africa led to the collection of valuable information regarding economics and commerce within the areas encompassed by the trade routes. The onset of Islam and its subsequent expansion throughout the Levant and Africa gave way to ideological differences and new tensions between this new religion and Christianity. For centuries, Muslims controlled the Mediterranean and its trade. Before the eleventh century, the Muslims did not find goods in the west generally worth trading. Pryor suggests, however, that although the

²⁹Ajayi, 143.

commerce on the sea was dominated by Muslims, it was not exclusive to them.³⁰ A wealth of information also exists at the other end of the routes - the European destinations of many of these commodities and of the merchants who traded them.

The true debate about what can essentially be termed the beginnings of trans-Mediterranean trade is not that it ended after the Roman Empire and recommenced before the Renaissance. Some argument exists that would see trade in Western Europe, and therefore exposure to non-European cultures, continue almost without a break through the entire medieval period. According to J.F.A. Ajayi:

Royal steles discovered near Gao in 1929 have epitaphs calling kings and other members of the royal family by their Arabic names, which they had besides the traditional ones. The steles are dated between 1100 and 1256, and some of these are carved on marble, the work of an Andalusian sculptor. This suggests some contact between the Muslim kings of Gao and Spain.³¹

However, most historians agree that Europe did indeed experience a “renewal” of commercial activity sometime after the ninth century. The question to ask, therefore, is at what point the renewal took place.

The consensus has been that trans-Mediterranean trade connecting Europe with North Africa and the Barbary coast (which in turn allowed for commercial contact with West African traders) began around the fourteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries. In fact, some would claim that the trade was indeed negligible, even at that point. Eugene Van

³⁰ John H. Pryor, Geography, Technology, and War: Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean, 649-1571 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 137- 138.

³¹ Ajayi, 143-144.

Cleef, for example, maintains that the trade Europe shared with the Maghrebian ports was, at most, of little importance. He dedicates two pages to the trade throughout Africa from Roman times to the twentieth century out of the almost three hundred totaling his work on trade centers and trade routes.³²

John Blake supports Van Cleef's thesis. He maintains that Europe and West Africa did not have contact, including commercial contact, in the Middle Ages. Blake additionally maintains that European contact with North Africa was limited and most commerce was confined to Arabic-African traders before the end of the fourteenth century. He blames this lack of cultural and commercial exposure to what he terms the Muslim domination of the Mediterranean. He qualifies the beginnings of European contact with Africa as being in the fifteenth century with Prince Henry the Navigator and his obsession with the origins of the West African gold.³³

The amount of material dedicated to the trans-Mediterranean trade routes and the theory that they flourished after the fourteenth century is abundant. However, there is an abundance of primary and secondary material that points to an earlier time period for their beginnings and their success. Exceedingly varied in cultural origin, the primary material that exists is nevertheless undeviating on more than one point. First and foremost, it is agreed generally throughout these documents that an active trade existed far earlier than the fourteenth century. Second, the widespread agreement upon

³²Eugene Van Cleef, Trade Centers and Trade Routes (New York: Appleton Century Co., Inc., 1937), 192.

³³Blake, 4-5.

commodities traded between merchants leads to the logical deduction that the trans-Saharan links to North Africa allowed West African goods to be traded expansively in Europe.

Probably the best known of the primary documents in existence are the merchant manuals and records from the high Middle Ages. The term “merchant manual” has been used in the more recent past to describe a particular type of document originating with the increasing amount of trans-Mediterranean trade during this time. Although it might be impossible to study every merchant manual in existence today, it is quite feasible to use one in particular as an illustration of the genre.³⁴

The Zibaldone da Canal, written anonymously about 1320, devotes approximately 25% of its material to the centers of trade in the Maghreb. Furthermore, John Dotson suggests that the Zibaldone, although completed about 1320, was actually written earlier over a longer period of time. This would seem to imply that the trade had been thriving for some time between Italy and North Africa, as the familiarity in Venice with cities on the Barbary Coast and their unities of exchange is evident in the amount of material appropriated for it.³⁵

Additional material to support this theory exists in the form of ship logs, correspondence, lists of merchandise, and merchant contracts. Many of these can be found in Lopez and Raymond’s well-annotated Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean

³⁴John E. Dotson trans., Merchant Culture in Fourteenth Century Venice: The Zibaldone Da Canal. (1311-1331) (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1994), 22.

³⁵Dotson, 19, 22, 88, 89.

World, a collection of documents from the period of the high Middle Ages to the Renaissance. One such document is merchandise list from another of the well-known merchant manuals. Francesco di Balduccio Pegolotti wrote The Practice of Commerce in Florence around the earlier part of the fourteenth century. Included among the commodities listed are 280 spices and medicinal herbs from Africa and Asia. The extensive list interestingly differentiates the valuable Benin pepper from the malagueta pepper as well as mentioning salt, ivory, and kola nuts obviously from West Africa.³⁶

According to Robert Lopez, trade between Europe and the Muslim world never completely ceased, even during the early Middle Ages. As evidence of this, a letter from Arles dated around 798 describes gold coinage inscribed with Arabic words. This would support a theory proposed by N.J.G.Pounds that the gold currency used during Charlemagne's reign, since it could not have been native to Western Europe, was imported directly from the North African coast. This can even be taken one step further, as it will be demonstrated later that gold in North Africa came from the Sudanese centers of trade.³⁷

The notarial chartulary of Giraud Amalric of Marseilles, dated 1248, is still in existence and has been edited and annotated by John Pryor. Included in this wealth of information is a list of "the ships in the harbour of Marseilles in 1248." The numerous

³⁶Robert Lopez and Irving Raymond, translated and annotated, Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World (New York: Norton & Co., 1972), 109-114.

³⁷Lopez, 35-36; Pounds, 116-117.

ships listed with destinations on the North African coast indicate a thriving trans-Mediterranean trade between the French port and the Muslim ones.³⁸

Not to be overlooked as primary material supporting evidence of the earlier trade contacts between Europe and Africa are the Geniza documents of Cairo. Philip Curtin mentions them as important resources for the record of merchants, both in the Jewish and in the Islamic merchants' worlds,³⁹ whom he characterizes as being part of a "single trading community". These documents contain evidence which dates back to the eleventh century describing a flourishing trans-Saharan as well as North African coastal trade. Some Western European ports are mentioned as well (Sicily, Spain, and even Italy).⁴⁰

While the Geniza documents contain much information regarding western commerce, they reflect a vastly wider trading sphere. By far the most important exports included gold used to fund Indian industry in the east. It can be assumed that this gold came from West Africa for two reasons. First of all, Ibn Khaldun, writing in the fourteenth century, points out that caravans from West Africa, originating in the gold mine areas and travelling to Egypt, would number more than ten thousand annually. As further evidence to this data, Ibn Battuta writes of his own voyage accompanying Mansa

³⁸John H. Pryor, Business Contracts of Medieval Provence: Selected Notulae from the Cartulary of Giraud Amalric of Marseilles, 1248 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1981), 72-77.

³⁹Because of a Jewish law that no document containing the name of God could be destroyed, many Jewish records, including mercantile records, were kept in a small room adjacent to the synagogue - a geniza - and allowed to decay naturally over time. The Geniza documents from the Jewish community in Cairo were not destroyed, but instead preserved remarkably well, probably in great part because of the dry, warm temperatures in Egypt. These documents, some dating to the beginning of the tenth century, are a valuable insight into Jewish communities during the middle ages. They are written in Arabic language with Hebrew characters, and therefore also provide a wealth of information into the Egyptian Muslim society of the time as well.

⁴⁰Curtin, 112-114.

Musa on a gold-laden caravan to Cairo. Battuta then continues his travels all the way to India. Secondly, it seems that West Africa was the primary source for gold within the Egyptian sphere of influence. Not only does Peter Spufford suggest that gold from the Sudan was often bound for Egypt, the Levant, and destinations further east, he also maintains that the standard of gold at a purity of 20¹/₂ carats was West African in origin. This standard was generally accepted from the tenth century forward, which includes the era of the Geniza documents.⁴¹

There is also a quantity of correspondence from Jewish merchants, like Benjamin of Tudela, a merchant from Spain who spent a considerable amount of time traveling to various Mediterranean ports during the mid-twelfth century. His accounts are a treasure of information about the Mediterranean world.⁴²

There is a considerable amount of material available about merchandise traded on both sides of the sea. What James Wellard has termed one of the richest commercial undertakings in the world was largely based on the transport of gold, salt, pepper, and slaves. Other commodities less important but nevertheless found throughout Europe in the high Middle Ages included leather, textiles, and ivory.⁴³

Probably the most common West African commodity to appear in primary documents of this period was Sudanese gold. The gold trade had been a part of the trans-Saharan trade routes since the Phoenician empire, although no one at that time was ever

⁴¹Latham, 54; Spufford, 164-171.

⁴²Sarah Benjamin, The World of Benjamin of Tudela: A Medieval Mediterranean Travelogue (London: Associated University Press, 1995), 9.

⁴³Wellard, 85.

able to pinpoint the location of the gold mines. Even Europeans who traveled to the interior were never informed of their exact location. Malfante, a merchant from Genoa who lived for some time in Tuat, wrote a letter to a compatriot stating:

I frequently inquire where the gold was found and how it was collected and invariably was told by my host, "I have lived fourteen years in the country of the Blacks, and I have never seen or heard anyone who could say with certainty, 'This is what I have witnessed, this is how they find and collect the gold.'"⁴⁴

In fact, the three largest gold mines were the Bambuk, or Walate, (on the Senegal and Faleme Rivers), the Bure, or Wangara, (on the Niger River) and the Akan Forest mines, where the gold was transported on the route to Djenne and then to Timbuktu.⁴⁵

Most of the gold traversed the Sahara in the form of dust and was then minted into *dobras*, or *doplas*, in North Africa. A *dobra* was a double dinar, and it would vary in value depending on the city that minted it. The Zibaldone da Canal contains several entries regarding the superior quality of the Tunisian *dobra*, worth five bezants. 50 Tunisian *dobras* were worth one mark. In the manual, the information regarding the exchange rates and the purity of the gold implies that it is West African in origin.⁴⁶

The exact amount of gold that traversed the Sahara is unknown, although records from the Tarikh es Soudan indicate that the gold transported from the Akan Forest mine was traded in the amount of more than one half ton annually by 1500. Another estimate

⁴⁴Wellard, 90.

⁴⁵Ajayi, 149.

⁴⁶For more information on the rate of exchange in the Mediterranean commercial world, see Dotson, 83-92.

suggests the total exported into Europe ranged from 170,000 dobras of pure gold per year to 200,000 between the mid-fifteenth century and the end of the sixteenth century.⁴⁷

These amounts should not be underestimated, for it was the vast amounts of Sudanese gold that seems to have first drawn Europeans to West Africa. The Arab merchants arrived in Western Europe with gold and tales of gold without end beyond the Niger River. These legends of the Timbuktu gold were largely promoted by Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca and by Askia Mohammed's journey one and a half centuries later. Leo Africanus, too, wrote tales of wonder, including accounts of gold in plates and scepters, "some of which weigh 1,300 pounds, belonging to the rich king of Timbuktoo [sic]."⁴⁸

Historians concur that Prince Henry of Portugal (Henry the Navigator) initially sought to explore the African continent in search of the Timbuktu gold:

Diogo Gomes, who took part in the discoveries under the inspiration of the prince, relates that when Henry heard of the gold, for which the Carthaginians had once bartered at Timbuktu and Cantor, he bade [Goncalo Velho] seek those lands by sea in order to traffic with them.⁴⁹

Before the exploitation of the resources of the New World, the European banking and commercial industries had to count on the gold from West Africa to pay for the imported goods from the East:

This lucrative traffic, in its heyday, occupied a prominent place in the royal accounts. There are indications, in the

⁴⁷Sadi, 180; Blake, 83.

⁴⁸Wellard, 119.

⁴⁹Blake, 5, 83.

correspondence of King John III, that the crown came to depend upon a regular annual supply of gold from [Mina], and loans would be raised to tide over temporarily financial difficulties on the credit of the anticipated receipts from the gold.⁵⁰

Although gold was the best known commodity from Africa found in trade with the Mediterranean world before 1500, salt was worth its weight in gold in the Sudan. This was mainly meant for trade within the empires, but it is important because the areas where the gold mines were located lacked the much-needed mineral. The salt from the mines of Taghaza and Taodeni were distributed throughout the empire by Muslim merchants and traded for gold and pepper.⁵¹

There were two methods of producing salt in the Sahara. In Taodeni, the method used was mining. In Taghaza, slave-workers panned the mineral. Salt from the Taghaza mines was carried from Timbuktu to Djenne and then to Wangara where it was traded for gold. Ajayi maintains that it is possible the salt was also meant for other sources of gold, found on the coast and in the Akan Forest.⁵²

Another important commodity continually found on merchandise lists as an African import was pepper. Evidence seems to suggest, according to Blake, that pepper was even more profitable than gold after 1450 in Europe.⁵³ In 1156, a promissory note from Genoa lists a payment requirement in pepper or coin. Lopez, in a notation, points

⁵⁰Wellard, 92.

⁵¹Ajayi, 151.

⁵²Ajayi, 139.

⁵³Blake, 80.

out that merchants often “made payments in pepper or other spices instead of coins. These commodities are almost as durable as gold, and they were almost as valuable.”⁵⁴

The two types of pepper were malagueta pepper and Benin pepper. The former was not a “true pepper”, the black peppercorn type that was found in Benin. It was a more pungent variety, related to ginger and native of the more tropical areas to the south. Another name for malagueta was “grains of paradise”. Benin pepper could fetch higher prices on the European market and could be preserved much longer than the malagueta. However, lists of merchandise continually mention both as valuable commodities. According to Blake, before 1498, the average amount of pepper exported into Portugal alone was probably in the range of 500 quintals annually.⁵⁵

Among some of the more minor but lucrative products of the trans-Saharan and trans-Mediterranean trade were kola nuts, ivory, civet, musk, and leather. According to Thomas, the red-dyed leather commonly known as “Morocco leather” because of its frequent appearance in North African markets had its origin in Kano. In the twelfth century, the Spanish troubadour who penned the legend of *The Cid* mentioned a chest made of Moroccan leather Rodriguez traded to two Jewish merchants.⁵⁶

Historians have long maintained that the high Middle Ages gave rise to a new merchant class in Western Europe. After the fall of the Roman Empire and the decline of classical Roman culture among the warrior-kingdoms in the Western half of Europe,

⁵⁴Lopez, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, 145.

⁵⁵Encyclopaedia, pepper; Blake, 85; Spufford, 163.

⁵⁶Thomas, 235; Rita Hamilton & Jane Perry, trans. *The Poem of The Cid* (around 1207, trans. London: Penguin Books, 1984), 27.

commercial endeavors began to disappear, giving way to a wholly agrarian society. The greater part of the population was barely able to maintain an existence with no resources left with which to trade.

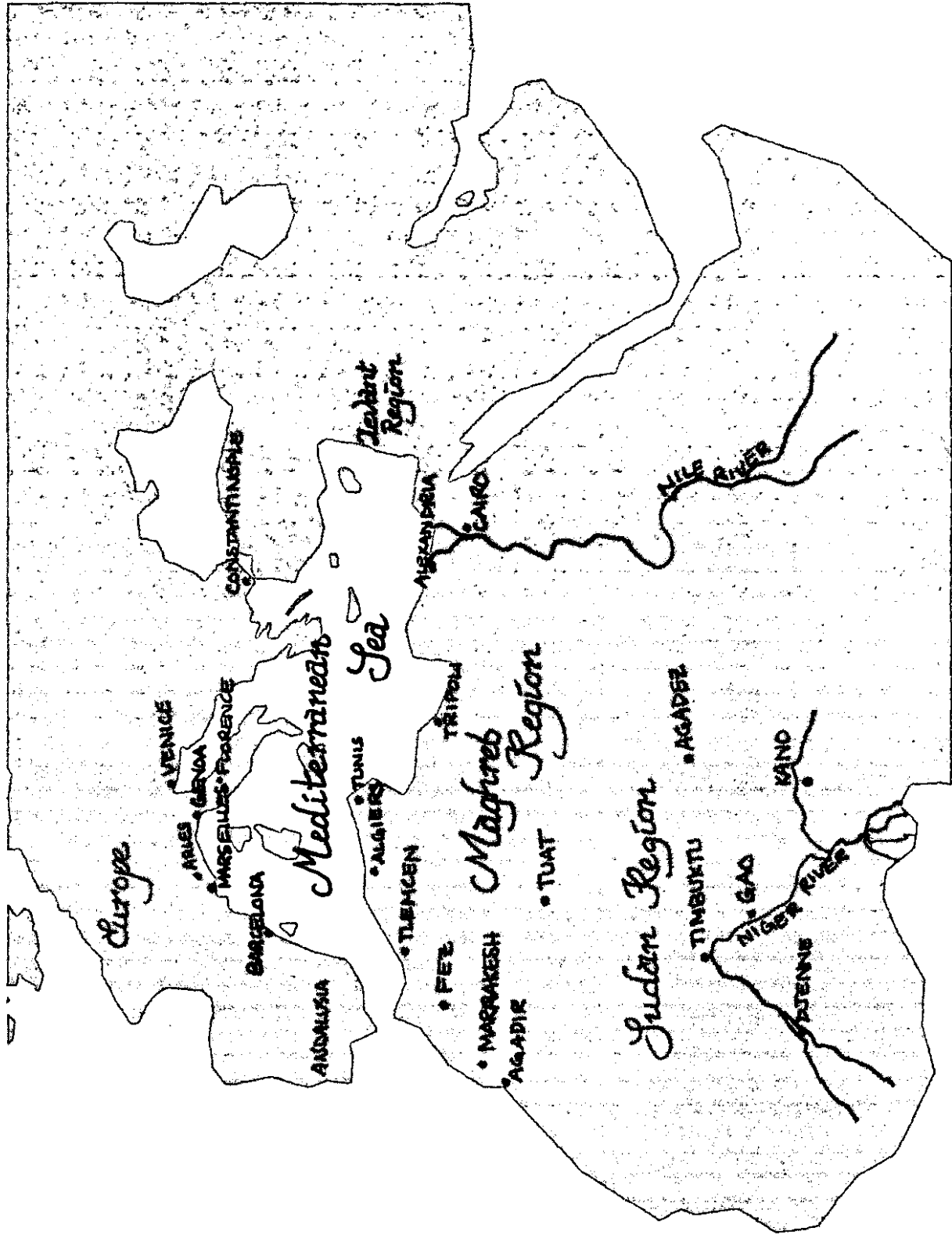
Some scholars have suggested that trade in Europe was a result of the social and economic changes taking place after the commencement of the high Middle Ages. It was only after exposure to the culturally advanced Byzantines and Muslims during the crusades that the concept of trade was renewed for Western Europe.

However, primary sources have given evidence that points to a much earlier contact between Europe and Africa, especially through the trade routes. There are sources such as the merchant manuals and ship records which furnish irrefutable evidence of a thriving Mediterranean trade between Europe and the Barbary coast and therefore the trans-Saharan routes. Many of these records are dated far earlier than trade was thought to have taken place in Europe. In addition, the vast nature of the mercantile industry leads to the conclusion that it was not established overnight - it therefore must have been in existence for some time prior to the actual generation of these primary materials.

The existence of gold currency of Muslim origin throughout Europe even as early as the Carolingian dynasty must call into question Blake's theory (and subsequently that of Van Cleef) that there was no or little contact, even indirectly, with West Africa before the end of the fourteenth century. This gold could not have come from anywhere but the mines of West Africa.

There is no question that the trans-Saharan trade routes were an important aspect of trans-Mediterranean trade. It would be virtually impossible, however, over the course

of so few pages, to fully explore the influence of the trade routes upon the establishment of European hegemony during the Renaissance. However, future research in the form of an exhaustive study of this influence would contribute greatly to the overall historical understanding of the cross-cultural significance of trade during this time.



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