

EMPIRES OF MEDIEVAL WEST AFRICA

Revised Edition

DAVID C. CONRAD

EMPIRES OF MEDIEVAL WEST AFRICA

REVISED EDITION

常州大字山书馆藏书章

Great Empires of the Past: Empires of Medieval West Africa

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REVISED EDITION

GREAT EMPIRES OF THE PAST

Empire of Alexander the Great
Empire of Ancient Egypt
Empire of Ancient Greece
Empire of Ancient Rome
Empire of the Aztecs
Empire of the Incas
Empire of the Islamic World
Empire of the Mongols
Empires of Ancient Mesopotamia
Empires of Ancient Persia
Empires of Medieval West Africa
Empires of the Maya

EMPIRES OF MEDIEVAL WEST AFRICA

GHANA, MALI, AND SONGHAY

REVISED EDITION

DAVID C. CONRAD



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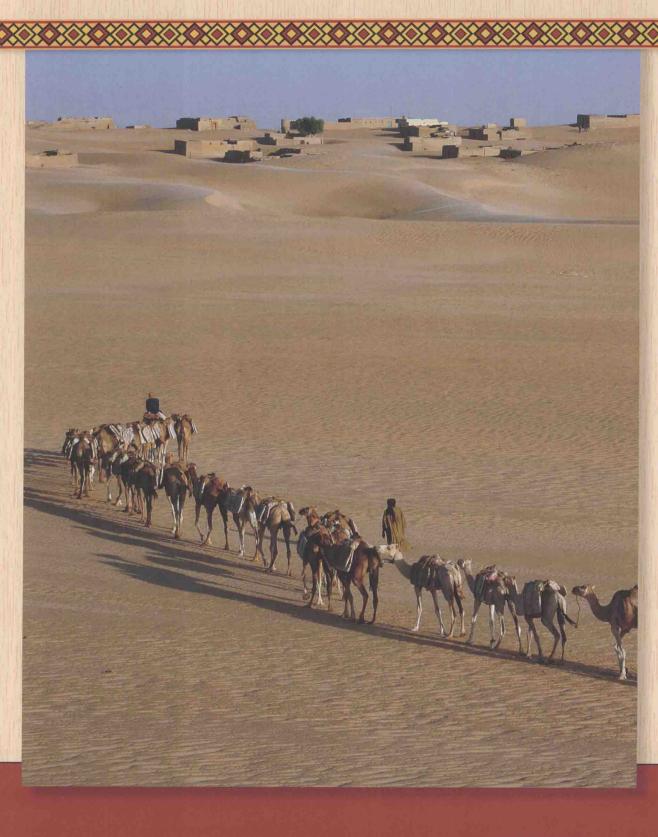
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INTRODUCTION

THE GEOGRAPHY OF NORTHWESTERN AFRICA HAS SHAPED its history in dramatic ways. The Sahara Desert was an extremely important geographical feature in the history of the three great medieval African empires described in this book. Today the Sahara is the largest desert in the world. But it was not always so.

Rock paintings found in the mountains of the Sahara reveal that until about 5000 B.C.E., the region was a land of rivers and lakes. It was populated by hunters and fishermen, grassland animals such as rhinoceros, elephants, and giraffes, and water creatures including hippopotami, crocodiles, and fish.

By around 3000 B.C.E., the region had begun to dry out. Rock paintings from this period show that the big animals were gone. They had moved north and south to wetter climate zones. Many of the humans also moved northward into the Maghrib, which is the Arabic word for northwestern Africa (modern Morocco and Tunisia, with their shorelines on the Mediterranean Sea). Eventually, the dry region became known as the *Sahara*, which is the Arabic word for "desert."

Although it became more and more difficult to survive in the Sahara, many people stayed there. Some of them settled in oases—areas in the desert with springs and wells that enabled them to grow date palms and vegetable gardens. Today, the population of the Sahara is still about 2.5 million.

In addition to people living in the scattered oases, there are large communities along the fringes of the desert. The southern regions are the lands of the Sanhaja, who are nomads (people with no permanent

OPPOSITE

A salt caravan approaching Araouane, Mali, in its journey across the Sahara from the mines of Taoudenni to Timbuktu. This 2007 photo shows territory that was part of the medieval empires of both Mali and Songhay.



CONNECTIONS

What Are Connections?

Throughout this book, and all the books in the Great Empires of the Past series, there are Connections boxes. They point out ideas, inventions, art, food, customs, and more from this empire that are still part of the world today. Nations and cultures in remote history can seem far away from the present day, but these connections demonstrate how our everyday lives have been shaped by the peoples of the past.

home who move from place to place), and other groups of Berber peoples (Caucasian peoples of northwestern Africa). These people were important participants in the history of the great empires that developed below the Sahara Desert.

THE SAHEL

On the southern fringe of the Sahara is an area called the Sahel. This is where the land

changes from desert to savanna (grassy plains with few trees). Sahel is the Arabic word for "shore." It is as if the Sahara were a great ocean of sand and rock, the camels that transport goods across the desert were ships, and the large market towns were seaports.

Nowadays the Sahel is semi-arid. The rainfall is irregular and there are cycles of drought (a shortage of water). The Sahel is drier now than the savanna grasslands. Camels are almost as important in the Sahel as they are in the nearby Sahara, because they can travel long distances in the dry region.

During the period from about 1000 B.C.E. to about 1000 C.E., however, the Sahel had a wetter climate. There was enough grass for cattle, sheep, and goats to graze. The soil was fertile enough for farmers to grow grains such as millet, sorghum, and *fonio* (a type of millet). In those times, it was possible to produce enough extra food to support people living in cities, who could not grow their own food.

Archaeologists (scientists who study past human civilizations) studying in the Sahel have found that the Mande people who lived there organized themselves into small settlements by about 1000 B.C.E. By about 600 B.C.E., there were large villages, and from 400 to 900 C.E., urban centers appeared in several areas of the Sahel. One of these urban centers was a place that is now called Kumbi Saleh. Some archaeologists believe it was the capital of the Ghana Empire, the first of the three great medieval empires in this book.

The Biggest Desert in the World

The Sahara stretches across Africa from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, covering 3.3 million square miles. This represents about a third of the African continent, and is an area about the size of the United States.

The Sahara is one of the hottest places on Earth, with temperatures that can rise to 136 degrees Fahrenheit. What makes it a desert is not the heat, though, but the dryness. The Sahara receives less than 3 inches of rain a year. In comparison, a typical city in the United States such as Chicago gets 33.34 inches a year of rain, snow, and sleet. There are places in the Sahara where

rain might fall twice in one week, and then not again for years.

Some people think of the Sahara as a great ocean of sand dunes. But the dune part of the desert, called the *erg*, actually makes up only about 15 percent of its area. Even so, the Sahara is so vast that some of the dunes are truly enormous. There is one known as the Libyan Erg that is the size of France.

About 70 percent of the Sahara consists of rocky plains covered with stones and gravel. The rest is mostly flat, stony plains of shale and limestone. There are also two mountain ranges: one in Algeria and the other in Chad.

THE BILAD AL-SUDAN

The savanna of sub-Saharan (that is, south of the Sahara Desert) West Africa was first described in writing by Arab travelers and geographers. They called it the Bilad al-Sudan, which means "land of the blacks" (sudan is the Arabic word for "black person"). Because that Arabic term was in the first written record of the region, the West African savanna came to be called the Western Sudan. The area has vast grasslands, widely scattered giant trees, and rainfall only during specific seasons. The Niger River and its many tributaries (rivers or streams that flow into a larger river) run through it.

Because the savanna offered grasslands for grazing and fertile soil for farming, the people who lived in the Western Sudan made the transition from basic survival by hunting animals and gathering plants, to methods that offered a more consistent food supply. They kept herds of animals such as cattle, sheep, and goats, and grew grains such as millet, fonio, and sorghum.



CONNECTIONS

Humped Cattle

Before 5500 B.C.E., there were no cattle of any kind south of the Sahara. But by 2000 B.C.E., cattle, sheep, and probably goats had been introduced to the area. The cattle herding peoples of the Western Sudan raise a breed of cattle called zebu that have a hump between their shoulders.

Zebu cattle were probably introduced from India. They are used primarily for milk production and are only rarely eaten for their meat. They are also sometimes used to carry heavy loads or for riding. These cattle cannot survive in the rainforest regions to the south of the savanna, because the forests are infested with tsetse flies. Tsetse flies are



Nomadic Fula herd their Zebu cattle to market.

carriers of trypanosomiasis, or sleeping sickness, and the zebu have no immunity to that disease.

They produced more food than they needed themselves, so they began trading the surplus (extra) with neighboring peoples. Eventually, they learned how to use iron to make tools and weapons. Later, they began to use horses for transportation. These advances made it possible for some peoples of the Sudan to put together powerful armies and dominate others. The economic and military successes of these more powerful groups eventually led to the founding of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay—three of the greatest empires in African history.

THE NIGER RIVER

The Niger is the third longest river in Africa, after the Nile and the Congo. Its headwaters (the source of a river) rise less than 200 miles from the Atlantic Ocean. They flow northeast from the Fouta Djallon mountain range that spans the border of modern Sierra Leone and Guinea. The Niger River eventually empties into the Atlantic Ocean on the coast of Nigeria, about 2,585 miles from its mountain sources.

After flowing down from the highlands of Guinea, the Niger River is joined by many smaller rivers. It is about 1,000 yards wide by the time it slowly flows over the rocky riverbed at Bamako (the capital of today's Republic of Mali). Large riverboats cannot navigate on the Niger until a point that is about 37 miles past Bamako, near the town of Koulikoro. Even there, riverboat traffic is only possible during the months when the river is swollen by heavy rainfall in the highlands of Sierra Leone and Guinea.

When the Niger gets beyond the city of Segu in Mali, it joins the Bani River and flows into a flat plain. On this flat plain, the Niger branches into many different channels, creating a huge network of waterways—the Inland Delta.

South of the Sahel during the period after 5000 B.C.E., the great floodplain (an area of low-lying ground next to a river that sometimes floods) of the Middle Niger River became a refuge for populations who were leaving the desert. Gradually, through the centuries, the Inland Delta changed from a vast swamp into the kind of floodplain that exists there now. It is known as the Inland Delta to tell it apart from the other great delta in southern Nigeria, where the Niger River flows into the Atlantic Ocean. (A delta is a piece of land at the mouth of a river that is shaped like a triangle and formed by the mud and sand from flowing water.)

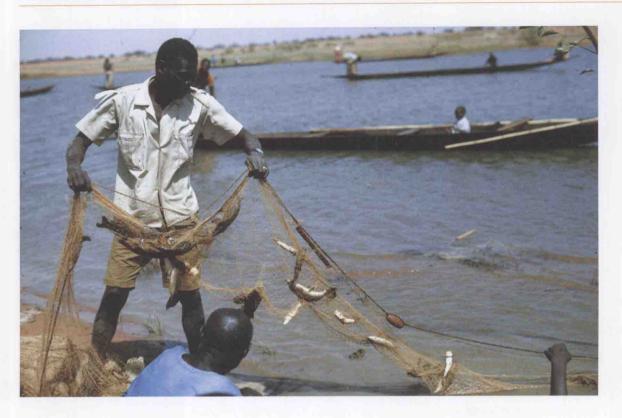
In a good year, heavy rains (up to 80 inches) begin falling in the Fouta Djallon mountains of Sierra Leone and Guinea in March and April. By July, the swollen waters begin to reach the Inland Delta, causing the river to overflow. This creates a massive, shallow lake up to 150 miles wide and 300 miles long.

The seasonal pattern in recent centuries has been that the Middle Niger River floods the Inland Delta. Then the floodwaters recede (go back), leaving behind a network of small creeks and waterways. In the northern regions, the floods leave behind many lakes. The Niger River and all the streams and lakes of the Inland Delta support many animals who live on and around the water, including hippopotami, manatees, crocodiles, and many species of fish.

The annual flood deposits a rich layer of silt (fine particles of ash, clay, and other material) that turns the region into an extremely productive agricultural zone. Through the centuries, more and more farming peoples competed for space in this rich environment to cultivate

One River, Many Names

The Mande people of the Mali Empire called the Niger River the Joliba. The people of Songhay called it the Issa Ber. The area on the Niger where the three great empires of the medieval period were located is called the Middle Niger.



For more than 1,000 years, even to today, the Niger River has been the lifeblood of millions of people in West Africa. Fishing (shown here), transportation, and irrigation are the main uses of the waterway.

their food crops. Meanwhile, herders competed for the best pasture land for their cattle.

Beyond the major cities of Segu and Jenne in Mali, the Niger River reaches the great trading port of Mopti. There it turns north. Then, through hundreds of miles, the river gradually turns back to the east as it passes Timbuktu, until it is flowing southeastward past Gao. This great turn in the river is called the Niger Bend.

Archaeological work has uncovered evidence that by 250 c.e. an urban population had developed at Jenne-Jeno in the floodplain between the Niger and Bani Rivers. Jenne-Jeno became one of the earliest cities of the Western Sudan. This probably happened about the same time that Kumbi Saleh was becoming the center of activity for the Ghana Empire far to the west. For some time at least, Jenne-Jeno would have been a prosperous city in the Inland Delta when the emperors of Ghana were ruling from their capital at Kumbi Saleh.

By 1000 c.e., the Niger River and neighboring regions supported widely scattered populations of fishermen, hunters, herders, and farmers. These people spoke a variety of languages. In the lands around the Sahara, the Berber peoples based their economies on raising camels, sheep, and goats, long-distance transportation, and raiding merchant caravans or forcing them to pay a toll.

Along the fringes of the Sahara, nomadic herders followed their livestock in yearly migrations to seasonal grazing lands. In the savanna, hunters pursued wild game such as lions, elephants, giraffes, gazelles, and hyenas. (All of these animals can still be found there.) On the rivers and lakes, fishermen using spears and nets harvested the many varieties of life that lived in the water.

But after 1200 c.e., the people of Jenne-Jeno began to move away. In the 13th century, that ancient city was abandoned. The question of where all those people went remains a mystery. However, about the time that Jenne-Jeno was going into decline, another city was rising a short distance away. In fact, it could be seen from the old city. Some of the people likely moved there. This newly developing city was called Jenne. Eventually, it became one of the most important cities of the Mali and Songhay Empires.

The Niger Bend area, which includes the vast Inland Delta, was the heartland of the Songhay Empire. It was such a desirable region that sometimes neighboring peoples would try to take control of the area. These attempts kept the armies of Songhay busy maintaining their control.

HISTORICAL RECORDS

The West Africans who laid the foundations of their medieval empires during the centuries before 900 c.e. did not develop a written language they could use to record historical events. Therefore, historians have a limited amount of evidence to draw on. Many of the events and dates in history from this time can only be approximate.

To learn more, archaeologists excavate (dig out) ancient cemeteries and the buried ruins of early towns and cities. Climatologists (scientists who study climate) examine ancient weather patterns and environmental changes. Linguists (scientists who study languages) who specialize in Arabic and Berber early scripts figure out writing on tombstones

dating from as early as 1013 c.e. Specialists in the Arabic language examine the writings of geographers who lived in Spain and North Africa. Ethno-historians (historians who study the history of particular ethnic groups) study the modern descendants of early peoples and think about how their ancestors lived. Other scholars interpret oral traditions passed on by word of mouth through many generations. These traditional stories contain no dates—just the local people's own sense of what happened to their ancestors in the distant past.

It takes experts to study and learn from each of these historical sources. Taken together, they provide all the information that is available on the history of West Africa's medieval empires.

The first people to write about ancient Ghana were Arab geographers who lived in North Africa and Spain. They began writing in the

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Which Way Does the Niger Flow?

Mungo Park (1771–1806) was born in a Scottish village, one of eight children in a poor farming family. He was an excellent student and eventually became a doctor. But he was more interested in adventure than in practicing medicine. He made two journeys to the Niger River: one from 1795 to 1797, and one in 1805.

In his day, Europeans knew the Niger River existed but none had ever seen it. They did not even know in which direction it flowed. Maps of the time showed it wandering across the Sahara and connecting to the Nile River. In fact, Arab geographers called it the "Nile" in their writings.

On Park's second trip, he tried to follow the river all the way to where it flows into the Atlantic. But he died at Bussa in what is now northern Nigeria. Park kept a detailed day-to-day diary of his travels, and collected valuable information in it. This description is of the moment he first saw the Niger. He compared its width to the River Thames, which runs through London past Westminster Cathedral.

[L]ooking forwards, I saw with infinite pleasure the great object of my mission—the long sought for majestic Niger, glittering to the morning sun, as broad as the Thames at Westminster, and flowing slowly to the eastward. I hastened to the brink and, having drunk of the water, lifted up my fervent thanks in prayer to the Great Ruler of all things, for having thus far crowned my endeavors with success.

(Source: Miller, Ronald, editor. *The Travels of Mungo Park*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1954.)