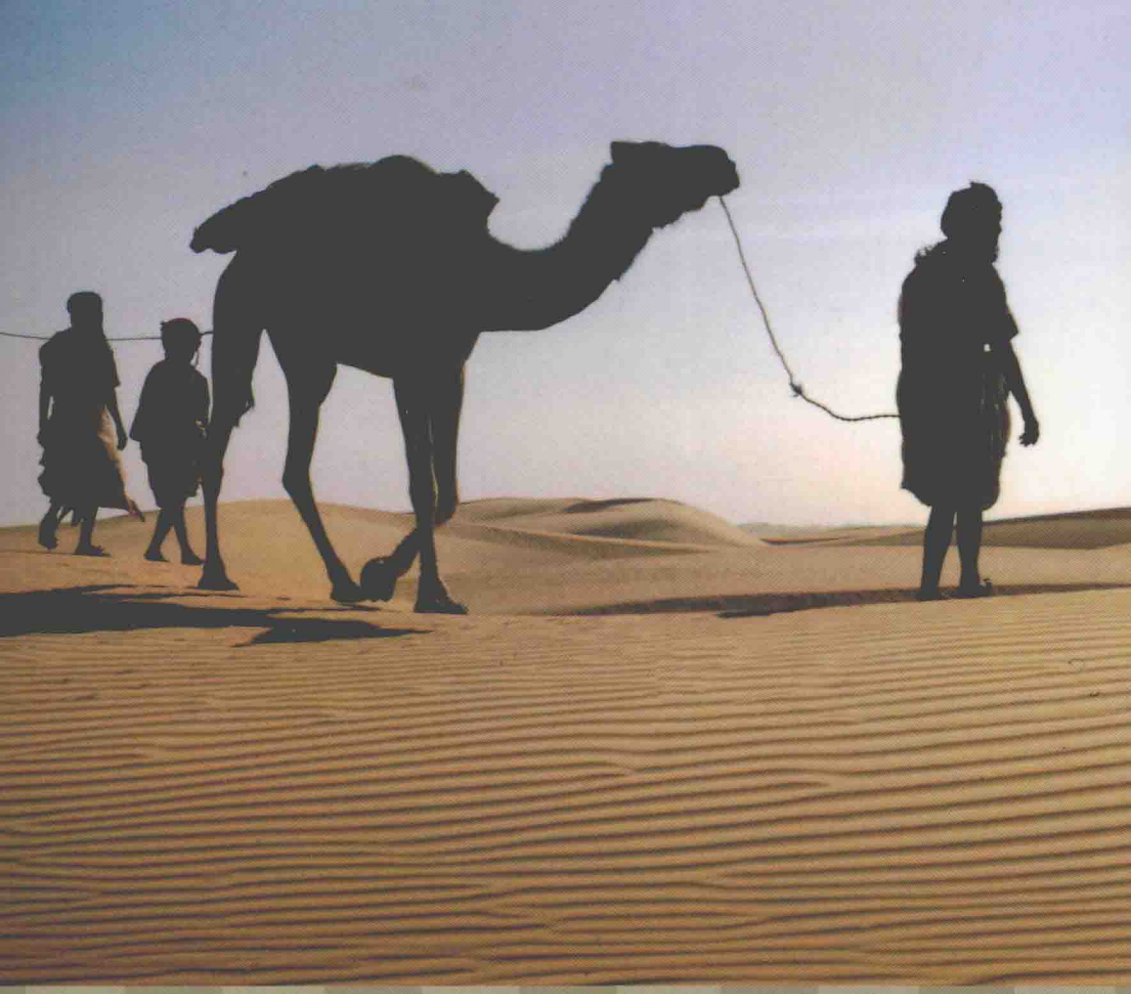

TRANS-SAHARAN AFRICA *in* WORLD HISTORY

RALPH A. AUSTEN

Trans-Saharan Africa in World History

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Frontispiece: A marketplace around the Great Mosque in the Sudanic West African city of Jenne. This scene embodies the two most important legacies of trans-Saharan trade: commerce and Islam.
UNESCO/Alexis N. Vorontzoff

To my grandchildren: Maiya, Lusia, Noble, and Jonah

Editors' Preface

This book is part of the New Oxford World History, an innovative series that offers readers an informed, lively, and up-to-date history of the world and its people that represents a significant change from the "old" world history. Only a few years ago, world history generally amounted to a history of the West—Europe and the United States—with small amounts of information from the rest of the world. Some versions of the "old" world history drew attention to every part of the world *except* Europe and the United States. Readers of that kind of world history could get the impression that somehow the rest of the world was made up of exotic people who had strange customs and spoke difficult languages. Still another kind of "old" world history presented the story of areas or peoples of the world by focusing primarily on the achievements of great civilizations. One learned of great buildings, influential world religions, and mighty rulers but little of ordinary people or more general economic and social patterns. Interactions among the world's peoples were often told from only one perspective.

This series tells world history differently. First, it is comprehensive, covering all countries and regions of the world and investigating the total human experience—even those of so-called peoples without histories living far from the great civilizations. "New" world historians thus share in common an interest in all of human history, even going back millions of years before there were written human records. A few "new" world histories even extend their focus to the entire universe, a "big history" perspective that dramatically shifts the beginning of the story back to the big bang. Some see the "new" global framework of world history today as viewing the world from the vantage point of the Moon, as one scholar put it. We agree. But we also want to take a close-up view, analyzing and reconstructing the significant experiences of all of humanity.

This is not to say that everything that has happened everywhere and in all time periods can be recovered or is worth knowing, but that there is much to be gained by considering both the separate and interrelated stories of different societies and cultures. Making these connections is still another crucial ingredient of the "new" world history.

It emphasizes connectedness and interactions of all kinds—cultural, economic, political, religious, and social—involving peoples, places, and processes. It makes comparisons and finds similarities. Emphasizing both the comparisons and interactions is critical to developing a global framework that can deepen and broaden historical understanding, whether the focus is on a specific country or region or on the whole world.

The rise of the new world history as a discipline comes at an opportune time. The interest in world history in schools and among the general public is vast. We travel to one another's nations, converse and work with people around the world, and are changed by global events. War and peace affect populations worldwide, as do economic conditions and the state of our environment, communications, and health and medicine. The New Oxford World History presents local histories in a global context and gives an overview of world events seen through the eyes of ordinary people. This combination of the local and the global further defines the new world history. Understanding the workings of global and local conditions in the past gives us tools for examining our own world and for envisioning the interconnected future that is in the making.

Bonnie G. Smith
Anand Yang

Preface

This book tells the story of an African world that grew out of more than one thousand years of trans-Saharan trade linking the Mediterranean lands of North Africa with the internal Sudanic grasslands stretching from the Nile River to the Atlantic Ocean. It traces the early role of the Sahara, the globe's largest desert, as a divider that separated these two regions into very different worlds. During the heyday of camel caravan traffic—from the Arab invasions of North Africa in the eighth century CE to the building of European colonial railroads that linked the Sudan with the Atlantic in the early twentieth century—the Sahara became one of the world's great commercial highways. Gold, slaves, and other commodities traveled northward while both manufactured goods and Mediterranean culture moved south. Along with Muslims, North African Jews also played an important role in this commerce.

Over time, cities in the Sudan developed versions of imported handicraft industries and Islamic learning, which they diffused not only throughout their own region and southern forest hinterland but also back across the Sahara. The most enduring impact of this trade and the common cultural reference point of trans-Saharan Africa was Islam. This faith played various roles throughout the region, as a legal system for regulating trade, an inspiration for reformist religious-political movements, and a vehicle of literacy and cosmopolitan knowledge that inspired creativity—often of a very unorthodox kind—within the various ethnolinguistic communities of the region: Arab, Berber, and Sudanic (Mande, Fulani, Hausa, Kanuri, and others).

From the mid-1400s, European voyages to the coast of West and Central Africa provided an alternative international trade route that marginalized trans-Saharan commerce in global terms but stimulated its accelerated local growth. Inland territorial conquest by France and Britain in the 1800s and early 1900s brought more serious disruptions. Trans-Saharan culture, however, not only adapted to these colonial and postcolonial changes but often thrived on them to remain a living force well into the twenty-first century.

Trans-Saharan Africa in World History

Contents

CHAPTER 1

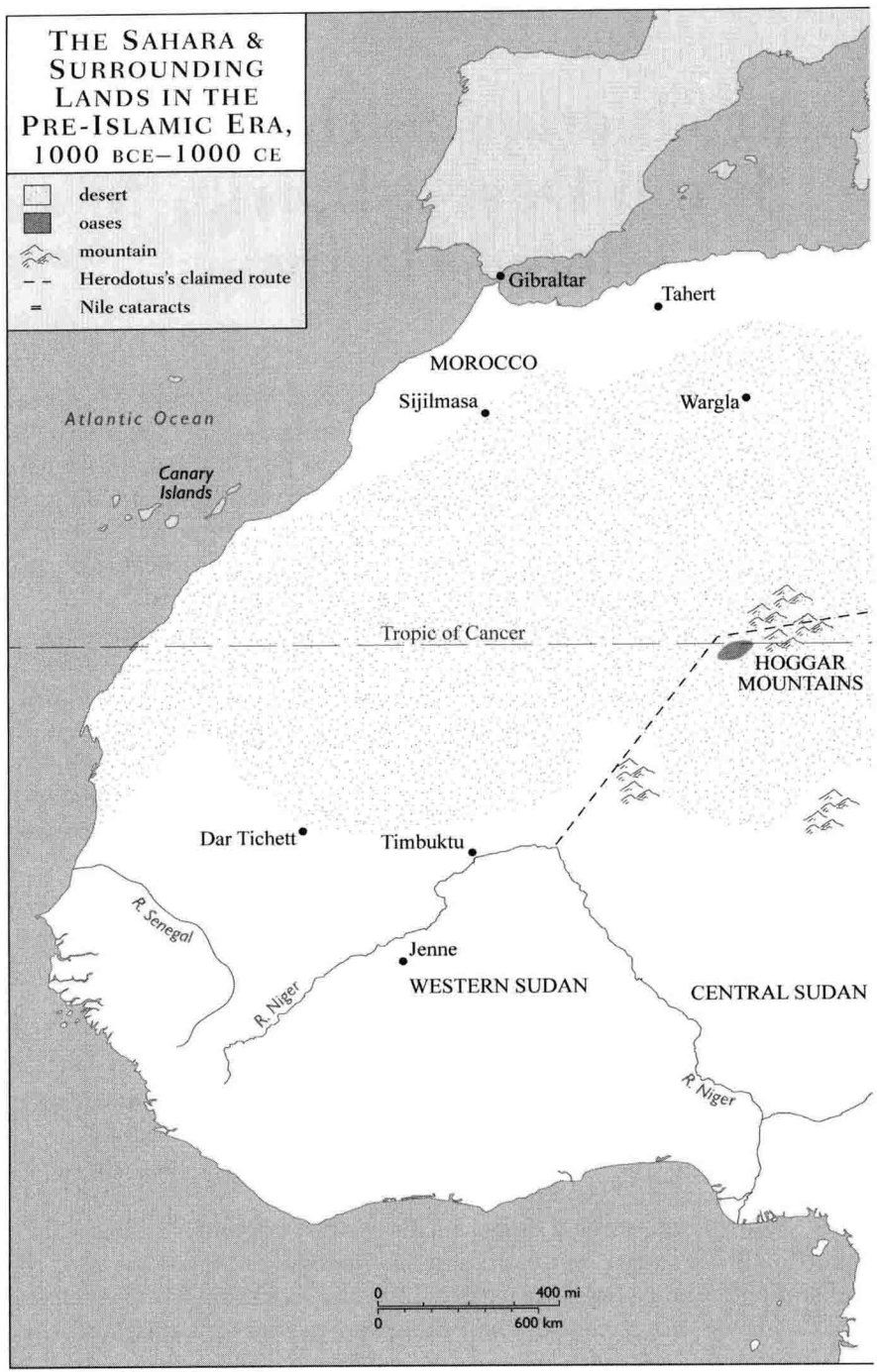
Introduction to the Sahara: From Desert Barrier to Global Highway

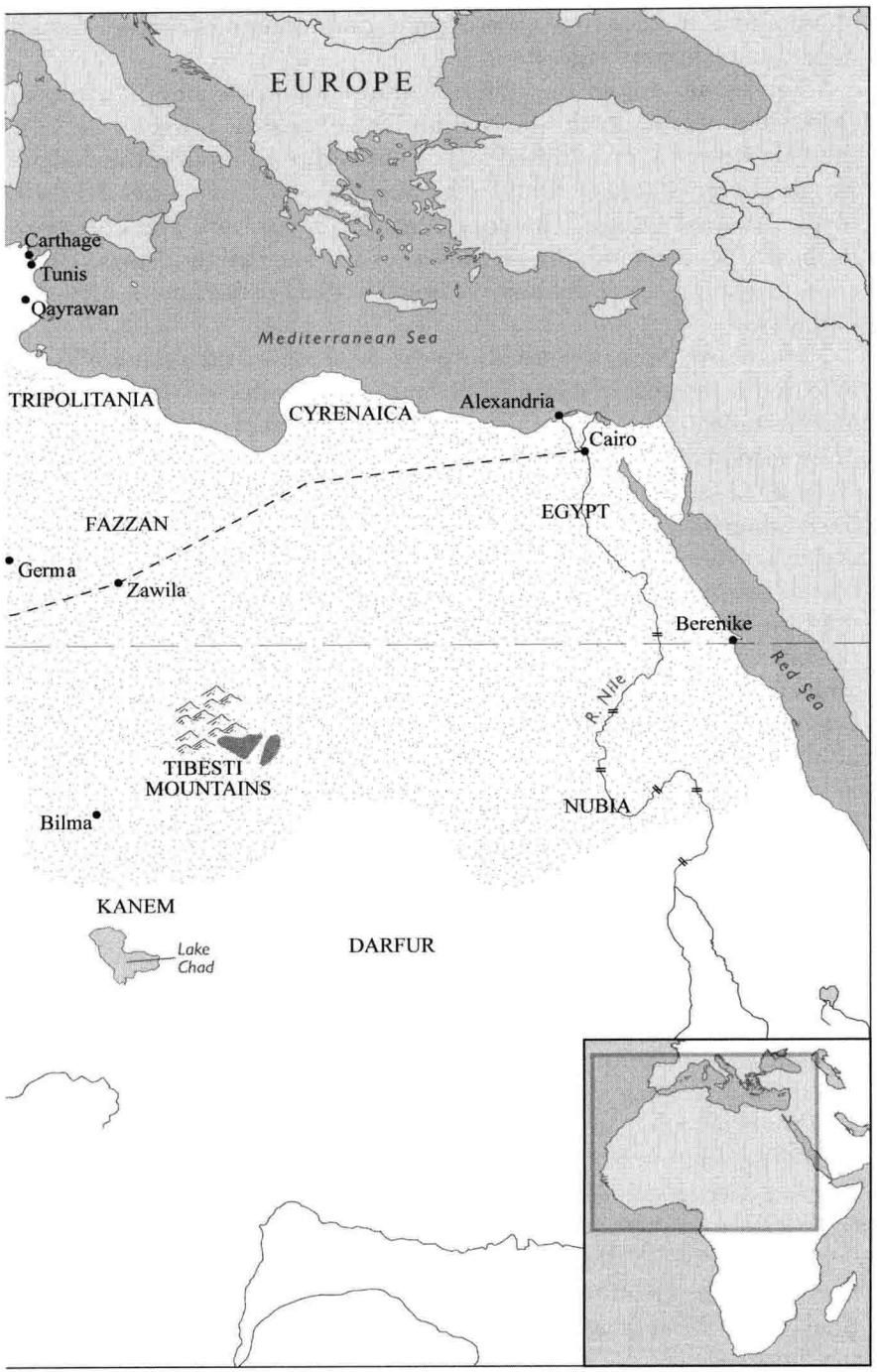
The Sahara desert is a paradoxical place. When most of us hear its name (which means "desert" in Arabic) we picture a vast sea of sand, where very few people could possibly live and where travel is highly dangerous. On maps and in common understandings of geography, the Sahara separates two worlds: the Mediterranean, one of the most dynamic centers of human civilization, and tropical (or "sub-Saharan") Africa, a region often caricatured as "uncivilized."

Yet for more than a thousand years, transportation routes across the Sahara connected the Mediterranean and the rest of the African continent. Camel caravans not only brought highly valued commodities such as gold and slaves to the north but also carried the material goods and culture of Islamic merchants into the desert and across it to the cities of adjoining regions. The Sahara during this era became the center of its own African world, just as traffic on the oceans of the globe created rich, multicultural civilizations around their shores.

Most histories date the beginnings of trans-Saharan trade to some time after the arrival of Islam in North Africa, during the seventh century CE. But the fifth-century BCE Greek author Herodotus describes a trade route from Egypt far into the desert during his own lifetime. When and how did trans-Saharan commerce really commence? Which African peoples, both around and within the desert, were involved in the first stages of this enterprise? What did the new religion and society of Islam add to the impact of earlier civilizations on this region?

Before trying to understand human struggles with the Sahara, we need to look at the geography and natural history of the desert itself. The Sahara is the largest desert in the world, but only 25 percent of its 3.5 million square miles are actually covered by sand. Most of the remaining terrain is almost as dry, however, consisting of gravel and rocky plains and plateaus. The only green portions of this landscape are scattered oases with permanent water and palm trees, as well as

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Berenike
Red Sea
R. Nile
TIBESTI
MOUNTAINS
NUBIA
Bilma
KANEM
Lake
Chad
DARFUR

mountains and other large outcroppings that sometimes capture enough moisture to support vegetation.

The Sahara adjoins more fertile and populated zones of Africa on three sides: to the north, the Mediterranean coastal plain; to the east, the Nile River valley and Red Sea coast; and to the south, the Sudanic savannahs (grasslands).[1] Only in the west does the desert extend directly to the Atlantic Ocean. The conditions for agriculture and commerce in these three surrounding regions are very unequal, and these differences explain a good deal about how the Sahara became a historical highway.

The North African lands above the desert enjoy the same soil types, mild temperatures, and well-distributed rain cycles as the rest of the Mediterranean and most of the northern temperate zone. Indeed "Mediterranean climates," also found at the other end of Africa around the Cape of Good Hope, are among the most favorable in the world for cultivating such staple and luxury crops of the ancient world as wheat, olives, and wine grapes. To the east, Egypt and Nubia (the northern portion of the present-day Republic of Sudan) do not have much more rain than the Sahara. However, the Nile River brings them regular supplies of water and silt (water-borne earth), a gift from the generous rainfall and soils of the East African lands to their south, where the Nile has its origins. Agriculture in the Nile Valley is thus based on the irrigation of a thin but extremely fertile strip of land that is surrounded by desert.

The boundary between desert and cultivated lands at the south of the Sahara is much less clear than in the north, especially in recent decades when the desert has been expanding in this direction. Even within the regions clearly defined as savannah, agriculture is a far more precarious undertaking than on the Mediterranean coast or in the Nile Valley. Rainfall is less plentiful and reliable here and occurs in short seasons that define the time of year when farming is possible. Temperatures in this fully tropical zone also remain quite high, a condition that, in combination with concentrated rainfall, tends to leach nutrients from the ground, leaving very thin topsoil. Wheat, olives, and most fruits will not grow here. Sudanic populations had to develop their own systems of agriculture based on millet and sorghum. These are hardy cereal crops, native to tropical Africa, but they play only a secondary role in temperate zone diets and cannot be exported very far.

As in the Nile Valley, the savannah has a great river, the Niger, which flows from the moist zone of the Guinea highlands through a large portion of the Western and Central Sudan. In some places, especially in the "inner Delta" of central Mali, where the Niger splits into branches

and regularly floods the adjacent land, the river's waters also provide the basis for more intensive agriculture, including the growing of native African rice. Before (or at least in a very early stage of) trade across the Sahara, urban centers grew up here and also in the Senegal River valley and around the ancient settlement of Dar Tichett in present-day Mauritania. But even in the most favored of these regions, the possibilities for irrigation from the often sparse Niger waters are limited, as shown by the spectacular failure of the modern Office du Niger. From 1932 to 1984 the French colonial rulers of Mali and their African successors invested millions of dollars in this huge project of dams, canals, and agricultural resettlement, with little or no positive gains. As a result of these difficult agricultural conditions, populations in the Sudanic lands of Africa have always been much sparser than those living directly on the Mediterranean.

Along with a beneficial climate and favorable soil conditions, North Africa and Egypt received great transport advantages from the Mediterranean, a narrow sea touching on three continents. This body of water provided an ideal setting for commerce before the era of mechanized land or air transport, and it is no coincidence that the Mediterranean region became the birthplace of ancient urban civilizations that influenced a much wider world. Egypt enjoyed the advantages of not only Mediterranean contacts but also a second coast to the south. From the third century BCE, ships using the Red Sea port of Berenike could sail directly into the Indian Ocean and establish commercial connections reaching all the way to Southeast Asia.

For internal transportation, Egypt also had the Nile. However, like all African rivers, the Nile is easily navigable only for a limited distance inland, in this case just north of the present-day border with Sudan. Below this line, the flow of water is interrupted by a series of cataracts. Trade between Egypt and Nubia did nevertheless develop as early as 3000 BCE. Water transport was sometimes used for the longer stretches between cataracts, and donkey caravans carried goods along the relatively hospitable landscape near the river and even over short routes through the desert.

Until Europeans sailed to the Atlantic coast of West Africa in the 1400s, the lands to the south of the Sahara had no regular contact with the outside world except via the desert. Even within the Sudan, internal transport is difficult. The Niger River, like the Nile, is blocked by rapids, in this case just as it moves across the present-day border of Niger into the more fertile farmlands of Northern Nigeria. Unlike the Nile, the sources of the Niger do not provide enough rainfall to keep even its

flat stretches navigable during all seasons. Land transport in the Sudan is also not easy because in the more southern zones pack animals such as oxen and donkeys fall victim to local diseases, particularly sleeping sickness.

The differences between the ways people lived on either side of the Sahara provide the starting point for the history of trans-Saharan contacts. But the narrative of how these conditions came into being belongs to prehistory, because it occurred in a time for which there are no written accounts or recorded memory. Instead, scholars must rely on evidence from archaeology and geology, which is often difficult to decipher.

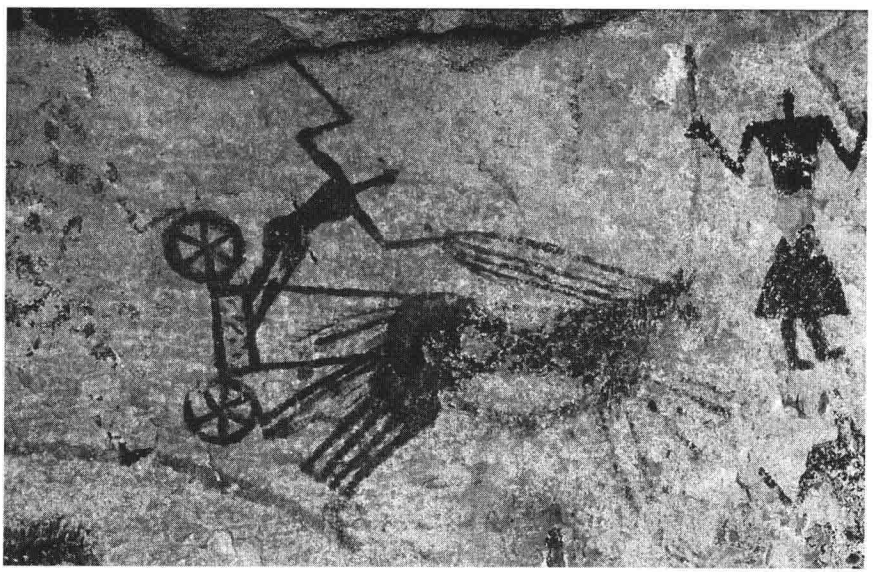
One major actor in this narrative is the Sahara itself, which grew and shrank very dramatically in the period immediately preceding its entry into written history. Geologists have established that the desert reached its greatest size around 19,000 BCE, during the Pleistocene epoch (Ice Age), when arid landscapes extended far south into the savannah areas of present-day West and Central Africa. From the end of the Pleistocene period (ca. 9000 BCE) to about 3000 BCE, northern Africa experienced a "wet phase" when greater rainfall shrank the Sahara far below its present size. After 3000 BCE, much drier conditions returned. Although significant smaller-scale climate and landscape shifts continued to take place, by about 300 CE the desert assumed the general proportions we are familiar with today.

These transitions between humidity and aridity played a major role in the human settlement of the Sahara and its surrounding regions. The time of abundant rainfall that preceded 4000 BCE coincides, throughout the Mediterranean world, with the beginning of the Neolithic, or Late Stone Age. During this era, small wandering bands of hunters and gatherers moved into fixed settlements and their populations increased. This new way of life included the addition of clay pottery to stone tools and direct control over food sources. The Sahara was no exception to these changes, although here, as in most of tropical Africa, animal herding and farming occurred only late in the period, mainly as a drier climate began to return. Archaeologists have found evidence of stable communities practicing fishing along with hunting and gathering around the lakes that dotted this region during its early wet phase. Later, when moderate declines in rainfall began to diminish fish and game, people took control over local breeds of cattle and sheep and became herders. The diets of Saharan populations at this time also included some cereals, but it is not clear whether they came from wild or cultivated plants.

Although the Sahara presented few transportation barriers during its wet period, it does not seem that people here established regular contacts

with either the Mediterranean coast or the Nile Valley. Saharan populations in this era had neither the motivation nor the means to engage in long-distance trade. Under such favorable climatic conditions, each small community in the region could produce its own basic food, although neighboring groups apparently exchanged some items such as pottery. Movement of goods over wider land expanses would have required animal transportation, and this was not yet available. Saharan peoples did not breed cattle for these purposes, wild donkeys had not been domesticated, and horses reached the region only in the first millennium BCE, when the desert had already returned to a very dry state.

In that later period, Saharan populations became much smaller, and the inhabitants of the scattered oases in the midst of the desert needed goods that had to be brought from distant areas. Rock illustrations made in this time show Saharans using not only draft animals but also wheeled vehicles, so some kind of cross-desert commerce was now possible. But this evidence does not reveal much about the origins and form of such trade.



This rock drawing from the Hoggar Mountains of southwestern Libya indicates that wheeled, horse-drawn vehicles were known in the ancient Sahara. The purpose and extent of this means of travel remains unclear, and it was eventually replaced by the camel. DeA Picture Library/Art Resource

In the southern regions of the Sahara, the drier climate definitely produced new contacts with farming peoples to the south. Some desert communities migrated into better watered areas of the Sudan, such as the inner delta of the Niger River. Here they relied on agriculture for their main food supplies and lived in even more dense settlements than those of the Neolithic Sahara. Settlers in these grasslands suffered from one major limitation. Any cattle kept there throughout the year would fall severely ill during the rainy season, when they were attacked by tsetse flies bearing sleeping-sickness parasites.

This handicap became a stimulus for interdependency between separate communities of farmers and cattle-keepers, involving multiple forms of exchange. Not only could grain be traded for milk products but herds came south from the desert edge during the dry season to graze on already harvested fields. The fields, in return, received the fertilizing benefit of manure deposits. Iron working, which also began in the Sudan during the first millennium BCE, produced further specialization and incentives for regional exchange. As a result of these contacts, urban centers with active regional markets grew up in the savannah regions just south of the Sahara by at least the first century CE.

During its transitions from dry to wet and then to dry again, the Sahara acted like a pump, drawing various populations into it and then sending them back out in somewhat different forms. The resulting distribution of communities around trans-Saharan Africa challenges one of the most powerful and widely-shared beliefs about the division between the northern and southern shores of the desert, that of race.

The earliest written records in North Africa refer to people from the interior of the continent as black: the Greek term "Ethiopian" (also used by Romans and not denoting any specific region of Africa) means "burnt face." The Arabic word for the regions south of the Sahara, Bilad-es-Sudan, translates as Land of the Blacks. The people from other regions of the Mediterranean who made these observations arrived only in the first millennium BCE, well after the Sahara had again become an arid expanse separating the northern half of Africa into two distinct regions. At that time, as now, the native populations of the Mediterranean coast and its immediate hinterland, called Berbers or Libyans, were olive-skinned. Those coming from farther south had much darker complexions, as well as the hair texture and facial features still associated with "black" Africans.

Skeletal remains and Saharan rock paintings from the period of Neolithic settlement, however, show varied racial types inhabiting the same regions. After drier climates returned, Mediterranean Berber-speaking