

C3

## CROSSING THE SAHARA DESERT: TRADE ROUTES AND ISLAM

The Sahara desert covers most of Northern Africa. It also separates people in Central, Western, Eastern, and Southern Africa from the Middle East and Europe. Gradually, brave West Africans and Middle Easterners developed ways of crossing the desert. These routes across the Sahara helped spread trade and religion from the Middle East to the rest of Africa.



Traveling across the Sahara desert is extremely difficult. At night, the temperature dips below freezing. During the day, temperatures soar above 130°F, making it much hotter than even the hottest day in North Carolina. There is almost no water in the Sahara. The Nile river and a few scattered oases (sources of water in the desert) are the few exceptions. Sandstorms, sharp rocks, and high mountains also make travelling difficult.

Two different ethnic groups, however, slowly managed to make trade across the Sahara possible. Arabs in the Middle East have a long history of trading across long distances in *caravans*. A caravan is a large group of traders travelling together. The Berbers in Northern Africa were experts at breeding camels. Working together, they built created trade caravans that traveled by camel instead of by horse across the desert. They carried with them salt from the desert. The land near the Niger river in Western Africa was very rich in gold. The trans-Saharan caravans then traded their salt for the West African's gold. ("Trans" means "across," so "trans-Saharan" means "across the Sahara desert.")

Islam also entered Africa across the Sahara, but it did so in different ways. At first, the religion was spread by force. The powerful armies of Islam conquered Egypt by force. Later, however, the Arab armies met a fierce opponent, the Berbers of Northern Africa. The Arabs could not defeat the Berber armies. Instead, they captured Berber leaders and promised to release them only if they converted to Islam. Once they converted, the Arabs put those Berber leaders in charge of Muslim armies. Thus, many Berbers converted to gain more power.



The trans-Saharan trade created a third way that Islam spread into Africa. The Arab trade caravans took their religion with them and taught it to people they met. Islam taught many values that made trade easier. The

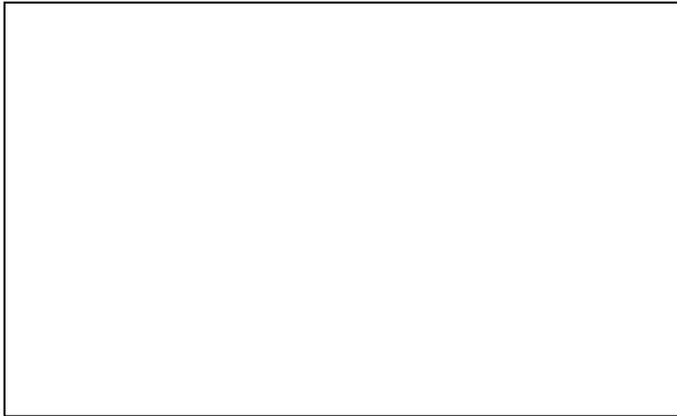


religion taught morals and ethics. It taught people not to steal and to respect others. As Islam spread, traders could trust other Muslims that they met more easily than non-Muslims. In these ways, the trans-Saharan trade helped spread Islam across the desert to Western Africa.

**Answer each of the following questions in complete sentences:**

1. Describe what made crossing the Sahara desert difficult: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. How did the Berbers make it easier for caravans to cross the Sahara? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What goods were traded along the trans-Saharan trade? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

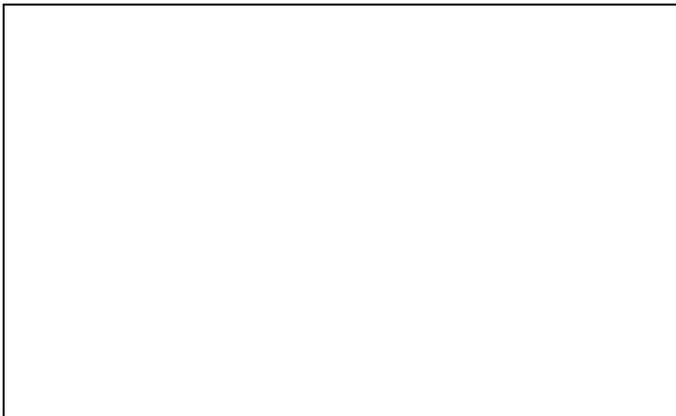
**In each box, create a sketch to match the description below that box.**



A caravan in the Sahara at night.



Arabs promoting a converted Berber  
in the Muslim army



Two groups of traders meeting who  
are suspicious of each other



Those same two groups once they  
realize that they are both Muslim

8. Why might traders south of the Sahara convert to Islam? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_