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## Sijilmasa, Zawila: Trans-Saharan Trade

Trans-Saharan trade dates back to antiquity. We know from numismatic evidence that from the end of the third century, an irregular gold coinage was issued at Carthage, and by the end of the fourth century there was a significant, if not regular, trans-Saharan gold trade. The solidus, a coin first issued in 312, provided the standard used for weighing gold dust in West Africa from then until now. The trade was evidently flourishing before the Arab conquest, but it is with the arrival of Arab traders and Islam that this trade became based in new Islamic centers of commerce that were built in the mid-eighth century.

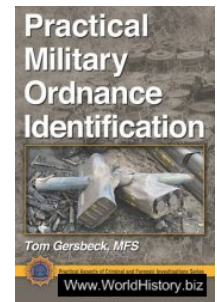
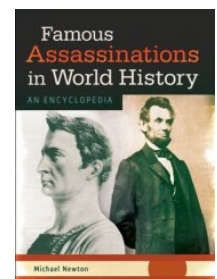
There were essentially two routes or systems of routes crossing the Sahara by the mid-eighth century. The most important connected the Maghrib to Ghana, where Muslim merchants sought gold, slaves, ivory, and ostrich feathers. The westernmost route went directly to Audaghust, and a more eastern route went to Ghana by way of the salt mines of Teghaza, halfway across the desert. Both routes converged at Sijilmasa in the Tafilelt Oasis in southeastern Morocco. A second system of routes crossed the central Sahara connecting Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and Tripoli to the kingdom of Kanem. A subordinate route, running west from the Fezzan to Tadmekka and Gao and east to Egypt, where it entered the Fatimid city of al-Qahira (Cairo), intersected the north-south road at Zawila. Both of these hubs, Sijilmasa and Zawila, were established as new Islamic cities in the middle of the eighth century.

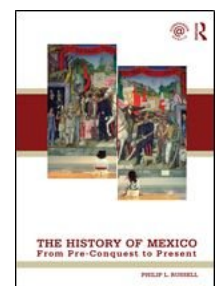
Before Sijilmasa became an urban center it served as a seasonal gathering place for Berbers at least as early as 500. It became a city when Sufriya Kharijite Muslims settled there after their failed revolt against the central authority of Islam. For the first 200 years Sijilmasa was an independent city-state under the control of the Berber Bani Midrar. Its position at the head of the trade routes crossing the Sahara placed it in an ideal position to control the flow of West African gold into the Muslim world. Control of the city-state became the object of intense competition between the Fatimids of Ifriqiya and the Umayyads of Cordoba, who alternately controlled Sijilmasa in the tenth century, either directly or through client Berber communities. This competition is vividly reflected in the gold



Trekking caravan. © Knut Mueller/Das Fotoarchiv.

Currency struck by these two regimes, alternately in greatest

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quantities when they controlled the routes passing through Sijilmasa. The increasing need for gold by them and other Muslim regimes beginning to strike dinars (gold coins) in the tenth century made the Sijilmasa trade system the dominant one from this time on.

The other crucial commodity was salt. The rise to predominance of the route through Toghazai coincided with the advance of the Almoravids (from modern Mauritania) who conquered Sijilmasa in 1054-1055. Until then, much of the salt exported to the Sudan came from Awlil, on the Atlantic coast, within the sphere of the Bani Gudala. When that tribe revolted against the Almoravids, the salt route that they controlled became more isolated from the network in the central Sahara under Almoravid protection. That network traded gold in the north for manufactured goods and food products which they exchanged for salt in the desert, which they in turn traded in the south for more gold.

For the next 250 years, under the Almoravids, Almohads, and Merinids, the city flourished as a provincial capital within a much larger empire and a broad economic network from the Ebro River (Spain) to the Niger. In 1393, the Merinid sultans lost control of Sijilmasa in a civil war. The period following the civil war is the least known in Sijilmasa's history. The sixteenth-century Arab writer Leo Africanus describes the city in decline, and it was neglected by the Moroccan Saadian dynasty. In the seventeenth century the Alaouite dynasty refortified the garrison of Sijilmasa and extended its rule over Morocco.

Tradition dates routes going through the central Sahara at least as far back as those in the west. The kingdom of Fezzan goes back to antiquity; it is the Phasania referred to by the Roman author Pliny. Herodotus recounts the Garamantes driving horse-drawn chariots from this region against the "Ethiopians" as far south, perhaps, as Kanem.

But again, it is with Islam that a sustained economic network is established. The city of Zawila was founded in the late seventh or early eighth centuries. It first appears in Arab sources when the Ibadi Kharijite Berbers of Zawila were defeated by the Abbasids in 761-762. Yet the city remained a center for the Ibadi sect for a long time. By the start of the tenth century, Zawila was still an important Ibadi town, now in the hands of the Berber dynasty of the Bani Khattab. That dynasty controlled Zawila until the last of its rulers was killed in 1190 by a Mamluk commander of the late Ayyubid regime in Egypt.

If gold was the driving commodity in the Sijilmasa trade system, in Zawila it was slaves. Authors of the late twelfth century describe Zawila as a city of modest size but with numerous, flourishing bazaars, specializing in the slave trade. Recent scholarship confirms that the Fezzan region was the largest avenue for slave traffic into the Maghrib and Egypt through the nineteenth century.

The north-south route from the Fezzan to Kamen/ Bornu continued to flourish beyond the decline of Zawila. The kingdom of Kanem maintained relations with the Hafsid dynasty of Tunis into the sixteenth century. The rulers of Bornu did likewise with the Ottoman province of Tripoli into the nineteenth century.

Islam was vital in the beginning of both Sijilmasa and Zawila. The Kharijite Berbers in both hub cities not only traded with Sub-Saharan Africa but also brought their version of Islam with them. Kharijism was predominant among Muslims in the trade centers south of the Sahara until at least the late eleventh century. A shared ideology on both sides of the desert undoubtedly made the arduous journey across the Sahara less daunting.

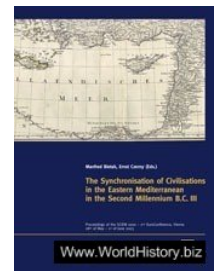
Ronald A. Messier

See also: Ibn Khaldun: History of the Berbers; Kanem: Slavery and Trans-Saharan trade; Maghrib; Slavery: Trans-Saharan Trade.

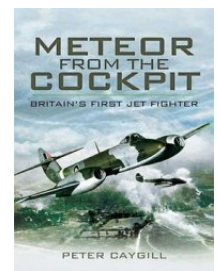
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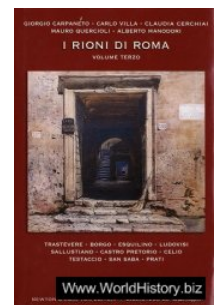
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