Morocco and black soldiers served the Almoravids. The army’s strength was maintained by marrying male and female slaves and training up the resultant offspring – boys for the army, girls for palace service. From the 17th century the trans-Saharan slave trade provided the Ottoman sultans with eunuchs to guard the harem of the Topkapi palace in Istanbul, while others were sent to serve in the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina or the Mosque of the Ka‘ba in Mecca.

The oasis of Tuwat in the northern Sahara served as an entrepot where slaves from the south were interrogated before being sent north. In the 16th century, Ahmed Baba provided advice to traders who were trying to determine whether humans brought to Tuwat could be enslaved according to Islamic law. If they could demonstrate that they were true Muslims, according to his interpretations, the enslaved individuals should be freed. In one of Ahmed Baba’s legal works he divided the lands of West Africa into two: lands of Muslims, and lands of ‘unbelievers’. He stated that it is only permissible to enslave those who live in one of the lands of the ‘unbelievers’. According to the 14th-century legal authority Khalil ibn Ishaq, when non-Muslims were conquered, the imam had the discretion to kill them, free them, make them pay a tax or enslave them. Setting a slave free was considered an act of piety and the abolition of slavery would therefore deprive Muslims of the opportunity of a personal good deed.

The average price for a slave was less than the price for a book, and the rather nonchalant attitude towards purchasing slaves in Timbuktu is demonstrated in a letter in which a shaykh asks a freed slave to buy him a great boubou and to have it cut by a very good tailor. He then asks him to purchase a slave for him with the remaining amount.

GHANA, THE KINGDOM OF GOLD
According to early accounts by historians and travellers of the Arab world, the ancient Soninke Empire of Ghana located west of Timbuktu gained a
reputation for its great wealth in gold from as early as the 10th century. Gold dust was brought up from the banks of the River Senegal to towns in the southern Sahara such as Awdaghast and Tadmekka to be exchanged for North African goods and transported northwards. Accounts tell us that ‘[The ruler of] Ghana is the wealthiest king on the face of the earth because of his treasures and stocks of gold’ and that ‘no other mine in the world is known to have more abundant or purer gold.’ The king was reported to ‘tether his horse with a gold nugget as large as a big stone.’

As the Almoravids gained control over the trade routes of the western Sahara in the later 11th century, the merchants of ancient Ghana dispersed and the Empire’s prosperity diminished. According to Ibn Khaldun, ‘the authority of the people of Ghana waned and their prestige declined as that of the veiled people, their neighbours on the north next to the land of the Berbers, grew. These extended their domination over the Sudan (people from the ‘land of the blacks’), and pillaged, imposed tribute and poll-tax, and converted many of them to Islam. Then the authority of the rulers of Ghana dwindled away and they were overcome by the Susu, a neighbouring people of the Sudan, who subjugated and absorbed them.’

THE MALIAN EMPIRE
As ancient Ghana slowly collapsed, the Malian Empire of the Malinke people, probably based near what is now the Bamako area, established itself as the leading power of the region in the 13th century. The Malian Empire inherited the riches of Ghana and extended its borders to the Atlantic Ocean. By the late 13th century both Timbuktu and Gao were occupied and the empire’s territory covered an area about the size of Western Europe or ‘four or more months’ journey in length and likewise in width’. The empire profited both from the gold mines within its lands and from gold passing through. But the Malian ruler was hesitant to occupy the gold fields in the forest regions further south. He claimed that each time he conquered...
these territories, the gold would miraculously disappear, reappearing in neighbouring heathen countries: 'If we conquer them and take the land, it does not put forth anything... but when it is returned to them it puts forth as usual.' In reality the Malians did not know precisely where the gold fields were and had to rely on local producers, who only had an incentive to mine gold when they were the middlemen and the Malians the outsiders.

In the year 1325, the Malian Emperor Mansa Musa famously made a pilgrimage to Mecca laden, we are told, with 2,200 lbs (1,000 kilos) of gold. As described in the *Tarikh al-sudan*, ‘Mansa Musa was a just and pious man, whom none of the other sultans of Mali equalled in such qualities. He made a pilgrimage to the Sacred House of God, leaving – God knows best – in the early years of the 8th century [i.e. 14th century CE]. He set off in great pomp with a large party, including 60,000 soldiers and 500 slaves, who ran in front of him as he rode. Each of his slaves bore in his hand a wand fashioned from 500 mithqal (about 2 kilos) of gold.'

Upon arrival in Egypt, Mansa Musa’s gifts and purchases in gold were so lavish that they greatly upset the Egyptian economy. Al-Umari related that Mansa Musa ‘flooded Cairo with his benefactions. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The [people of Cairo] made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall...’

Mansa Musa recognized that fostering Islam was to his advantage for ruling his large empire. On his return from Mecca, he purchased works on Maliki law, the school of Islamic law dominant in West Africa. He also ordered the construction of the Djingerebe Mosque in Timbuktu under the supervision of the Andalusian scholar and poet Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Sahili, who had travelled back with him from Mecca. Some years later during his reign, another large mosque was built in the Sankore quarter in the north of the city, financed by a woman from the Aghial.
a religious Tuareg tribe. The Sankore quarter became a dwelling place for many scholars, especially the Massuafa, who established the quarter as the pre-eminent location for Islamic teaching and study in the city.

The city of Timbuktu represented both the Islamization of Africa and the Africanization of Islam. When Ibn Battuta visited in 1352 he was greatly impressed by the city and its inhabitants — their lack of injustice, complete security, their care for the goods of a deceased visitor, their conscientious worship, their beautiful clothes, their ability to recite the Koran by heart. He was, however, taken aback by some of their customs, for example that a man could have female companions. And he was thoroughly shocked by the practice of some local women of going naked in public. ‘The women’s custom when they go into the sultan’s presence is that they divest themselves of their clothes and enter naked...their female servants and slave girls and little girls appear before men naked, with their privy parts uncovered... I saw about 200 slave girls bringing out food from the Sultan’s palace naked.’

Islamic traditions established under Mansa Musa were threatened when in 1343 the pagan Mossi tribe attacked Timbuktu: ‘The Mossi sultan entered Timbuktu, and sacked and burned it, killing many persons and looting it before returning to his land.’ But the Malians recovered from the devastation and went on to rule the city for a further hundred years.

As Malian power eventually did wane in the early 15th century, the Tuareg took advantage of the growing political vacuum. ‘The Tuareg began to raid and cause havoc on all sides. The Malians, bewildered by their many depredations, refused to make a stand against them. [The Tuareg] said: “The sultan who does not defend his territory has no right to rule it.”’ In 1433 the Tuareg drove the ‘Mali’ans’ out of Timbuktu and back to their southern regions.
THE SONGHAY EMPIRE

In the early 15th century, the Songhay from Gao took over the territories of the former Malian Empire, including Timbuktu. The Timbuktu chronicles describe the ‘bad’ and ‘good’ rulers of the Songhay Empire. The expansionist Songhay ruler Sonni Ali Ber distrusted Timbuktu and became the pagan villain. He ‘perpetrated terrible wickedness in the city, putting it to flame, sacking it, and killing large numbers of people.’ He also presided over a decline in the city’s commercial fortunes. Gold traders from the south feared that under Sonni Ali they would lose control over their goods and transactions, so instead they started to export the gold via Kano in modern Nigeria, thus bypassing the Songhay territories.

Following a coup d’état, Timbuktu continued to be ruled by the Songhay for another century under a succession of benign and effective rulers of the Askia dynasty who moved the centre of power northwards and not only restored the prosperity of the region and its scholars but presided over what is regarded as the city’s Golden Age. According to the Tarikh al-fattash, ‘One cannot count either the virtues or the qualities of [Askia Muhammad], such is his excellent politics, his kindness towards his subjects and his solicitude towards the poor. One cannot find his equal either among those who preceded him, nor those who followed. He had a great affection for the scholars, saints and taikhs (men of learning).’ Askia Muhammad was also honoured further afield. During his pilgrimage to Mecca, ‘the Sharif of Mecca...put on him a black turban and named him imam’, while the Abbasid caliph of Cairo gave him authority to rule Songhay in his name, legitimizing him as an Islamic authority, at least in the eyes of Timbuktu’s elites.

Like all the great kingdoms of this region, the Songhay Empire flourished by maintaining the security of the transsaharan trade routes and controlling the means of transportation, whether that be a camel caravan or a fleet of canoes. However, this was the beginning of the period...
of European exploration and expansion, which brought new challenges. The Songhay Empire was greatly weakened when the Portuguese occupied ports on the west coast of Africa and diverted the gold trade to the Atlantic Ocean, bypassing the traditional trans-Saharan routes. By the time Leo Africanus visited Timbuktu in the early years of the 16th century and wrote about the city in his *Description of Africa*, the gold trade was already waning, as much as half of it rerouted to the coast.

**JEWISH SETTLEMENTS IN THE SAHARA**

In the 15th century or earlier Timbuktu was visited by Arab traders from the oasis of Tuwat in the northern Sahara together with Jews who had settled in North Africa after being exiled from Palestine by the Romans in the 1st century CE. Many Jews were also living in the city of Timken, north of Tuwat near the Mediterranean coast, where they had settled together with Muslims when Spain was overtaken by Christians. The actual status of these Jewish merchants is not easy to decipher, for Muslim scholars had mixed feelings about them: some portrayed them as wealthy merchants, others as impoverished ghetto dwellers. Antonius Malfante, a Genoese merchant who tried to do business in Tuwat in 1447, described an affluent and secure Jewish community:

"There are many Jews who lead a good life here, for they are under the protection of several rulers, each of whom defends his own clients. Thus they enjoy very secure social standing. Trade is in their hands, and many of them are to be trusted with the greatest confidence...."

However, in a letter to North African scholars seeking a legal opinion (*fatwa*) on whether local Jews should be allowed to maintain a synagogue, the qadi or judge of Tuwat claimed that the Jews were "down-trodden and humiliated, mainly living in a single street where their synagogue was situated among the houses." The North African scholar al-Maghili wrote a treatise on the Jews, describing them as "enemies of God"
and providing scurrilous anecdotes intended to portray them as treacher- 
ous and filthy in order to justify killing their men, enslaving their women 
and children and seizing their property. He later persuaded the Songhay 
Emperor Askia Muhammad to forbid the entry of Jews into his territory.16

Although Jews were officially banned from the Songhay Empire – 
on the advice of al-Maghili – this policy was not systematically enforced. 
When Mungo Park explored Western Africa in the late 18th century, he 
was told by an Arab he met near Walata that ‘there were many Jews at 
Timbuctoo, but they all spoke Arabic, and used the same prayers as the 
Moors.’17 In the 19th century more Jews came from North Africa (especially 
Morocco) to Timbuktu to pursue commerce, and some of the documents 
they created – in Arabic, but often with Hebrew remarks inserted – still 
exist in Timbuktu (see page 92). One Jewish community is known to have 
survived just south of Timbuktu, for the Tarikh al-fatash (completed 1665) 
tells of a Jewish settlement where numerous wells with ‘glazed’ sides sup-
plied water for horticulture, producing vegetables of much higher quality 
than those grown in the flood plains of the Niger River.18

THE MOROCCAN OCCUPATION

In 1591, the Songhay Empire rapidly succumbed to an invasion force from 
Morocco. The Moroccans had already used both diplomacy and force to 
wrest the salt pans of Taghaza from Songhay control.19 But this was 
not enough: Sultan al-Mansur of the Sadian dynasty sought control over 
riverine transport, both boats and their crews, and he also had ambitions to 
take over territories as far as the gold fields further south – ambitions that 
gave him the nickname Dhababi or ‘the Golden’. The Sultan sent an army 
of Spanish, Berber and Arab mercenary soldiers called the Arma to 
conquer Gao and Timbuktu. The Arma included 4,000 musketeers, while 
the Songhay military had but bows and arrows.20 As al-Mansur’s forces 
were in the process of subduing the Songhay, they wrote to the local chief
demanding that he hand over 'the whole of the annual quota of boats which you used to give to the [Songhay] askiya and that they continue to perform their necessary duties'.

At first the Arma soldiers treated the Timbuktu population with brutality: ‘Pasha Mahmud entered their houses and removed all the valuables, household goods, and furnishings in quantities that no one but God could measure, some being the scholars’ own property and some the property of those who had deposited it with them. His followers plundered whatever they could lay their hands on, and brought dishonour upon the scholars, stripping their womenfolk and committing acts of indecency.’

A contemporary English observer in Morocco, Jasper Thomson, reported the arrival from Timbuktu of the leader of the Arma, Pasha Jawdar, on 28 June 1599 with thirty camel-loads of gold dust, as well as great quantities of pepper, unicorn (probably rhinoceros) horn, a certain wood used for dyeing, fifty horses, many eunuchs and dwarfs, men and women slaves, and ‘15 virgins, the Kings daughters of Gago [Gao] which he sendeth to be the Kings concubines’.

Large numbers of fighting men were sent from Morocco to keep the Sadian flag flying in the Middle Niger, but with diminishing economic returns for the Sadian state. The Moroccans had put an end to the initial wave of pillaging and established Timbuktu as the administrative capital of the occupied areas, which were ruled by a Pasha appointed from Marrakesh. But in reality they never fully dominated the region. The Arma integrated with the local population, marrying women from noble Songhay families and creating a new social elite. In 1612 this elite deposed the Pasha and seized power. The Arma went on to dominate the Niger Bend for another century. But as the trans-Saharan gold trade declined, so their power and prestige diminished. Ultimately a new power vacuum was created, this time eventually to be filled by the desert shaykhs.
THE DESERT NOMADS

Life in the great desert or Azawad was made possible by man-made wells. Various groups gained control over the region by digging wells, which allowed desert towns such as Arawan and Boujebha to flourish. As well as being masters of the trade routes, the Tuareg also had control over the wells until the mid-18th century, when both the salt mines and most of the wells were taken over by the Kounta.

The early history of the Kounta is unclear, but from the mid-16th century they began to emerge as a distinct and relatively large tribe, roaming over wide areas of the Sahara, and eventually settling in the oasis of Tuwat. In the mid-to-late 18th century a rift occurred in the dominant family. One brother migrated to what is now southern Mauritania, while another, Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir, combined pastoralism with commerce and established a network of trading posts from Wadi Dar’a through Tuwat to Timbuktu in the west and Katsina in the east. This great leader of the Kounta was known for his qualities of learnedness and sanctity, political astuteness and commercial acumen. The Kounta produced numerous scholars in the 19th and 20th centuries, of whom the best-known and most prolific were direct descendants of Shaykh Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kabir. They provided spiritual leadership for a great part of the region through the establishment of zawiyas, religious schools or lodges where they also disseminated the teachings of the Qadiriyya Sufi order. Arawan eventually served as a refuge for scholars fleeing from conflict and political feuding in Timbuktu.

Kounta and Kel al-Suq Tuareg scholars provided learned council, kept accounts, gave legal and medical advice, and educated youth. While the scholars provided the pen, others wielded the sword. Various Tuareg warrior groups exerted considerable control in the region through both protecting and raiding passersby. There was substantial rivalry between the various Tuareg factions, and the Kounta often acted as mediators; indeed this role seems to underpin a good deal of their political influence.