A strongly held misconception about the Sahara, both in popular culture and in academia, is that this desert constitutes both a physical barrier and a fundamental cultural divide between northern Africa—a constituent part of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern historical realms—and “sub-Saharan” Africa, a world apart. As a result of this misconception, African Studies, as a field of inquiry, has often been conducted in isolation from the northern, “white,” part of the continent, while Islamic Studies and Middle Eastern Studies, of which the Maghrib is a poor cousin, take little account of links with “Black Africa.” Saharan Studies, which could bridge this epistemological divide, is still in its infancy. So far, only the “Islam in Africa” subfield within African Studies has situated the Sahara as a space of flows, a zone characterized by trade and intellectual exchange. Considering the Sahara in the très longue durée as a conduit rather than as a barrier, this chapter provides a broad overview of the historical geography of trade from the Neolithic era to the present. Insight is provided into the role played by migration, pastoralism, tribal and caste social structures, transportation technologies, religious scholarship, pilgrimage, warfare and the wider world economy in the configuration of trans-Saharan trade routes. It will be demonstrated that the Sahara has far more often served as a link than as a barrier; and perhaps at no time in its long history has this desert been as closed to trade and travel as it is today.

The Sahara, extending over 9,000,000 square kilometers (or 3,500,000 square miles), is by far the largest desert on Earth. It is larger
than the next three largest deserts—the Arabian, the Australian and the Gobi—combined. Straddling the Tropic of Cancer, the Sahara extends 5,500 kilometers across the breadth of Africa from the North Atlantic to the Red Sea (from 17° W to 37° E) and is nearly two thousand kilometers wide (from 15° to 34° N at its widest). Furthermore, the Sahara is but the western lobe of a nearly continuous band of aridity that traverses the Afro-Eurasian continental mass along its widest axis. Eastward, this arid band extends across Arabia and central Iran, through Central Asia to Inner Mongolia.

Prior to the consolidation of global maritime trade routes by European merchants, largely accomplished by the end of the 16th century C.E., this band of deserts was essential to world trade as it afforded nearly continuous terrestrial communication between China, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, Russia, the Mediterranean and West Africa. Trade, travel and communications between these world regions was assured by a system of caravans: Bactrian camels in the northern, or “cold,” deserts of Persia and Central Asia, and dromedaries in the southern, or “hot,” deserts of Africa, Arabia and India. By the end of the 10th century C.E., these transcontinental caravan networks were largely in Muslim hands. All the major routes, including those across the Sahara, were manned by Muslim traders, and most lay within or between Muslim states. The Sahara was thus part of a much larger world-system, a system of exchange centered on the Muslim world and which included the Indian Ocean, China and Christian Europe.2

Trans-Saharan trade was particularly important in the medieval and early modern periods (8th to 19th century), when powerful and relatively wealthy states in Egypt, the Maghrib and across the Sahelo-Saharan zone actively engaged with each other. While the commodities transported across the desert—chief among them gold, salt, iron, copper, leather, horses and slaves—are commonly accounted for in the current economic history literature,3 manufactures such as textiles and manuscripts are not.4 The trade in manuscript books flourished

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4 An exception to this trend is provided by Ghislaine Lydon in On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).