

African Climate and Its Impact on Development The southern Sahara, though today a desert, was once covered in savannah grasslands that supported cattle raising. Rich concentrations of rock art, the painted and carved images on boulders and cliffs in the Sahara desert, date back several thousand years and testify to pastoral societies in areas that are now completely arid. Between 300 B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and 1500 C.E. (Common Era), the Sahara region experienced progressively drier periods, a process known as *desertification*. Although interrupted by occasional wet periods, human adaptation to the desert's southward expansion resulted in the cultivation of drought tolerant crops, such as millet and sorghum. Desertification led eventually to the introduction of camels in place of cattle herding in the northern Sahel regions and to new trade networks and other sociocultural, political, and economic patterns. Indeed climate shifts and changing terrain over millennia provide the backdrop against which occurred migrations, agricultural innovation, metallurgy (the development of iron and copper smelting), urban settlement, and state formation. A significant body of writings in Arabic by Islamic geographers, cartographers, historians, and travelers in West Africa confirm the impact of desertification. Spanning the ninth through fourteenth centuries, the travel narratives of geographers such as Al-Bakri, Al-Idrisi, and Ibn Battuta provide a window onto the landscape, climate, social structures, and culture. Their first-hand accounts of their visits to trading centers along the trans-Saharan caravan route describe far wetter conditions than the dry, unlivable desert conditions in some of those same places today.