Name: _____

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Mansa Musa's Great Journey

It was perhaps the greatest spectacle in history.

In 1324, thousands upon thousands of people arrived in North African cities in waves from the mysterious land beyond the vast Sahara Desert. They were enormously wealthy and generous. Along the route, carpenters and masons stayed behind to construct mosques, Islamic houses of worship, for the faithful. The travelers were on a holy pilgrimage to Mecca in present-day Saudi Arabia.

They were led by Musa, the king whom they called a mansa. Mansa Musa was the great-grandnephew of Sundiata, the founder of the Mali Empire. Estimates of the caravan's size range from 8,000 to 60,000, but even at the lower end, the journey was a massive logistical undertaking.

The Journey

Their 2,700-mile desert crossing was on foot and by camel, following caravan routes that had been used for centuries. Experienced guides knew the routes between oases, wells, and settlements where the expedition could resupply.

Portions of the route crossed deep sand, making wagons and carts impractical. People walked or rode while camels carried food, water, and other supplies through temperatures that could climb above 110°F. Even known oases presented a problem. Thousands of travelers and their animals could overwhelm the water and grazing available at a stop, so the expedition likely spread out along the route, with smaller groups reaching water and supplies at different times. The journey must have been meticulously planned because there are no accounts of mass starvation or other calamities.

Mansa Musa

Mansa Musa ruled Mali from approximately 1312 to 1337. A later account reports that he became mansa after the previous mansa sailed west on the Atlantic with a huge fleet and was never heard from again. Another later story states that he undertook the journey as penance for accidentally killing his mother, but none of the accounts give details.

Islam had reached West Africa centuries before Musa's reign, carried largely by Muslim merchants traveling across the Sahara. Musa, like other Muslims, was expected to make a hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, at least once if physically and financially able.

A Sensation in Cairo

When the travelers reached Cairo in 1324, their wealth caused a sensation. Musa gave gold as gifts, and his enormous entourage spent it in the city's markets. So much new gold entered circulation that its value fell. Musa's generosity had unintentionally made gold less valuable in Cairo. Years later, people in Cairo were still telling stories about the African king who had passed through their city on his way to Mecca.

Mecca and the Journey Home

Musa reached Mecca and completed the hajj with his caravan. The pilgrimage had connected Mali more closely with the Islamic world, and Musa returned with scholars and skilled craftsmen. Back in Mali, he sponsored the construction of mosques at Gao and Timbuktu and encouraged Timbuktu's development as a center of Islamic learning. Musa had carried Mali's gold and reputation across the Sahara. On the journey home, he brought new people, ideas, and connections.

The Aftermath

Musa's journey made Mali's wealth famous far beyond West Africa. In 1375, about fifty years after the hajj, the Catalan Atlas, a map made on the Mediterranean island of Majorca, pictured Musa seated on a throne holding a large piece of gold. Europeans already knew that gold crossed the Sahara, but maps such as the Catalan Atlas helped identify West Africa as the source of enormous wealth. A century after Musa's journey, Portuguese explorers sponsored by Prince Henry the Navigator sailed down Africa's Atlantic coast. Their voyages would eventually bring Europeans into sustained contact with West Africa, with consequences far beyond the search for gold.

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Fill in the Blanks

In 1324, M__n__a Musa, r__l__r of the Mali E__pi__e, began a remarkable Islamic p__l__r__ma__e across the S__h__ra Desert to M__c_a with a c__r__v__n of thousands. They w__l__ed or rode c__m__ls along routes that connected wells, o__s__s, and settlements. Experienced g__i__es helped the travelers find w__t__r and s__p__l__es during the difficult __,700-mile journey. When his caravan reached C__i__o, Musa gave away so much g_____ that its v__l__e fell. Mansa Musa returned to Mali with s__h__l__rs and skilled c__a__t__m__n and supported the construction of m__s__u__s in G__o and T__m__u__tu. Musa's journey made the w__al__h of Mali f__m__us far beyond West Africa. A c__n__u__y after Musa's pilgrimage, P__r__u__u__se explorers sponsored by Prince H__n__y the N__v__g__t__r sailed down Africa's A__l__n__ic coast.

Answer in Complete Sentences

★1. The first line of the article says, "It was perhaps the greatest spectacle in history." Explain what that means.

2. Explain why the caravan did not travel with wheeled vehicles.

★3. Why do you think gold lost value in Cairo after the caravan passed through? Explain your reasoning.

★4. Many historians argue that Mansa Musa's hajj was a significant moment in world history. What is their reasoning?

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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