

Three Kingdoms of West Africa



The continent of Africa has a diverse range of communities, each with their own history. In medieval times, three major kingdoms in West Africa did stand out.

Ghana Empire

The Ghana Empire was formed around the beginning of the fourth century when the tribes of the Soninke peoples united under their first king, Dinga Cisse. "Ghana" translates as "warrior king" in the Soninke language.

It was located in Western Africa, south of the Sahara Desert (a source of salt mines, a major trade good) and was mostly savanna grasslands. The area had various rivers that provided means of transportation and trade, helping the development of a thriving society. It is estimated, for example, twenty thousand people lived in and around the capital city alone.

The Ghana Empire had a feudal system where local rulers paid tribute to the lead king, but was provided local discretion. Major sources of wealth were gold and iron mining. Iron was used for tools and weapons while gold was for trade for needed items like livestock, tools, and cloth. The Ghana Empire traded with Muslims in North Africa and the Middle East, camels used to transport goods across the Sahara Desert. In time, the empire itself became Muslim.

Mali Empire

The Mali Empire was formed in the thirteenth century when Sundiata Keita united the Malinke people, who then over time took over surrounding kingdoms, including the Ghana Empire. The empire was located in Western Africa with the Sahara Desert on its northern border. The capital city was Niani.

The emperor was known as "the Mansa." Islam played an important role in culture and government. Mansa Musa, a Mali leader famous for his wealth, became well-known for his lavish pilgrimage to Mecca, the Muslim holy city. But, other religions were allowed. Gold and salt were major sources of wealth for the empire.

After the reign of Mansa Musa, the empire began to decline in the mid-fourteenth century, including the rise of the Songhai Empire. The end came in 1670 with the attack of its capital by foreign forces.

Songhai Empire

Sunni Ali, of the Songhai, in 1464, seized control of the city of Gao in the Mali Empire. This would be the capital of the Songhai Empire, which soon also included nearby regions including the important trading cities of Timbuktu (a major cultural region as well) and Djenne. The slave trade, including with Europeans for use in the Americas, and gold was also a major trade good.

In 1493, Askia Muhammad became the leader of the Songhai. He brought the Songhai Empire to its height of power and founded the Askia Dynasty. Islam was the official religion though local beliefs also played a part in day-to-day life.

The empire struggled with internal conflict and civil war in the mid-1500s and collapsed at the end of the century after Moroccan invasion.

Three Early West African Kingdoms 500-1600 C.E.



Salt and Gold Trade



If someone offered you an ounce of salt OR an ounce of gold which would you choose? You might be surprised to find that in ancient times salt was worth its weight in gold, so choosing salt was a good trade. Salt was life to many early people as much as water. It is a vital mineral that everybody needs, especially in hot climates. And before refrigeration it was used to preserve food. It was not readily available in many places.

The Sahara Desert had many salt mines. Gold was plentiful south Africa. Traders would travel by camel and meet in Mali, Ghana or Songhai to do business. The empire would charge a tariff (tax) on goods traded in their kingdom.

Why was salt so much more valuable historically than it is today?

Who made out the best in the salt and gold trade, the gold traders, the salt traders or the kingdom where the trades took place? Explain.

How did the Sahara Desert become a source of great wealth for the West African kingdoms?

Study the map. Describe the location of Mali and Ghana with relation to the Sahara Desert using geographic terms.