

## Gold and Salt – Resources That Built Kingdoms

Mineral resources – gold and salt – were the major reasons for the trade that built the wealth and power of the West African kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. The locations of these three kingdoms gave them access to generous supplies of both these valuable resources.

The earliest West African kingdom was Ghana. It was located just north of the gold mines in the African rain forest and just south of the salt mines in the Sahara. Muslim Arabs living near the North African coast wanted the gold available in the south. The people of the south, living inland in the hot and saltless rain forest, needed salt to survive. As a result, a lively trade grew up between the north and the south.

The trade route crossed the trackless wastes of the Sahara, which had to be navigated, almost like a sea. Surrounding the desert were inland “ports,” places where camel caravans would form to travel together to a common destination. Traveling in groups was necessary as protection against robbery along the way. Some caravans had as many as 12,000 camels. Using the stars or familiar rocks, pilots would guide the caravans along routes that took them to oases, where they could replenish their water supplies. These slow moving processions could take up to six months to reach their destination, another inland “port” across the desert.

Over the centuries, trade expanded both in types of goods traded and in ports reached. Koala nuts and slaves from the south were traded for manufactured goods, foods and horses

from the north. Trade routes were extended to seaports along the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, opening West African trade to the Europeans.

This vital trade was helped by the prosperous kingdoms of West Africa. To the Arabs of the north, Ghana became known as the “Land of Gold” and its ruler, the “King of Gold.” He was the richest and most powerful leader in what the Arabs called the “Land of the Blacks.”

Later, Mali grew even stronger and richer than Ghana. It too amazed and impressed the Muslim Arabs. When making a pilgrimage from Timbuktu to Mecca, Mali’s great leader Mansa Musa was accompanied by 60,000 people. Among the pilgrims were 500 slaves, each carrying a 4 pound bar of gold. Mansa Musa spent the gold freely along his route. It is said that all of this lavish spending depressed the value of gold in Egypt and Arabia for at least twelve years.

Songhai carried on Ghana’s and Mali’s trading tradition. In the end, though, salt and gold helped to bring down the kingdom of Songhai. Relations between Songhai and Morocco to the north became strained. Morocco was eager to displace Songhai as the leader in Saharan trade and to get control of the gold that Songhai owned. Furthermore, Morocco claimed sole right to a valuable Saharan salt mine that was vital to Songhai’s survival. In the late 1500s, Morocco attacked Songhai and destroyed it.