

# Three west african kingdoms

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To what extent did geography determine the location of the three West African kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai? Ghana, Mali and Songhai were the three largest Kingdoms to exist in the history of West Africa. They were located in West Africa during the 11th, 14th and 15th century. West Africa is the region in the western part of the African continent, it lies approximately 15° north of the equator. Geography is the study of the physical features of the earth and its atmosphere.

These three prominent western african kingdoms flourished due to strategically located trade routes, abundance of natural resources and diverse types of land. These three factors primarily determined the location of the kingdoms and sustained and supported their societies. The existing trade routes greatly influenced the location of where the empires were built and expanded upon. One of the most commonly used and oldest trade routes in the world is the Trans Sahara route which crosses the Sahara desert and leads to the West African coast.

As a result to the location of this trade route all three empires were located south of the desert to be the first civilization traders would reach after their journey. Map A (Trade Routes in Western Africa at the time of the Mali Kingdom) shows the location of the kingdoms in relation to the different trade routes coming from and to western Africa. This gave the kingdoms the direct link to different cultures from Europe, Asia and India whom all frequented this path. As the kingdoms prolonged more routes were opened up, leading northeast across the Sahara for example.

As well as this, the positioning of trade routes allowed the empires to stabilize a flourishing economy with little risk of failure. The kingdoms

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proximity to the routes gave the population exactly what they wanted from all over the world. Merchants coming from Europe, Asia and India brought a variety of goods to Africa, including ceramics, silk, spices, camels and slaves. These items could be traded for a range of natural resources the West African region was enriched with. Not only could items be traded, but the kingdoms were able to enforce taxes on all trades within the area.

The Ghanaian King imposed taxes on all people passing through the kingdom; in return he provided soldiers who protected the trade routes from unwanted intruders. The king also created the system of silent barter. An issue faced by people who traded with Ghana was the language barrier. To eliminate the use of language in trade, silent barter was used to trade goods. The location of the kingdoms in relation to the trade routes, the use of taxation and the system of silent bartering made trade with West African Kingdoms safe and efficient, helping them become prime trading centers.

The western African region was enriched with large quantities of different natural resources, which not only allowed trade and economic success but also helped prosper a sustainable civilization. As shown in Map B (Mineral Resources of W. Africa), the area occupied by the kingdoms was filled with natural resources such as gold and iron. Also shown on Map B, the areas to the north and south of the kingdoms were rich in common salt, iron, titanium, copper, diamonds and zinc.

Even though the region of the kingdom might have not been the location with the largest quantities of resources, their territories were in the middle of the northern and southern trade in Africa, allowing them to be in control of all internal African trade. The access to valuable resources subsequently

allowed the economy to depend largely on trade and due to its economic success earned the title “ Gold Coast”. Not only were natural resources used for trade, however they were also used to advance machinery and tools in order to sustain and develop the empires.

Metals such as iron and copper were used to create tools (Image of iron tools found in western Africa on right), weapons and to increase efficiency of work. Iron smelting and manufacture was not only prominent in West Africa but also among the Nokcultureof Nigeria and various other parts of the continent. The productions of iron tools let agriculture, hunting and warfare progress and improve, and soon became a fundamental part of life. In conclusion, the diversity of natural resources found in the area helped flourish the economy and extend thetechnologyand knowledge of the population in the kingdoms.

The West African regions was not only a center of trade and home to many natural resources but also possessed a number of different types of land which were successfully used to increase agriculture and make a self-dependent society. As indicated on Map C (Land use in West Africa), this region had a combination of permanent crops, arable, grazing and forest land. Native plants such as pearl millet, sorghum and cowpeas were grown in large quantities to feed the majority of the population. This permitted the population to adapt to farming and agriculture using the land for different crops.

In addition, West Africa is also coastal region bordering the Atlantic Ocean as shown on Map D. This gave the advantage of having fertile soil near the coast all year round. The European influence and steady trade greatly

encouraged farming and consequently led the region to become extremely agriculturally productive as merchants would be looking for places to stock up on food and supplies whilst passing through the trade routes. Alongside this, the introduction of iron farming tools enhanced the production of crops immensely.

This contributed to the many ways of how the African kingdoms became successful and self-sufficient civilization. After close examination, it can be concluded that an efficiently managed system of trade routes (including taxation and silent barter), diverse use of the different types of land (including arable, grazing and forest land) and an abundance of natural resources which were used to the kingdoms' advantages, Ghana, Mali and Songhai were able to sustain themselves by using the geographic factors available. Word count: 1, 044