

African kingdoms and empires

[History](#), [Empires](#)



African Kingdoms and Empires During 400 AD, West Africa witnessed the rise and fall of the indigenous medieval empires of ancient Ghana, medieval Mali, and Songhai. Many other states and kingdoms arose during this time but Ghana, Mali and Songhai achieved the status of fully-fledged, functioning and long-living conquest states and expansionist empires. These empires regulated the Trans-Saharan trade by offering protection for trade caravans as well as taxing slaves, gold, firearms, textiles and salt.

Ghana reached its height by 1200 AD and was ruled by the Serahule people which eventually broke apart by in the 13th century. The Mali Empire was a Mandinka territory but also took on Ghana's territory and extended into the 13th century. At the peak of the empire, Mali covered an area over 24, 000 sq. km. Songhai succeeded Mali in the 14th century and grew to be the largest land empire in tropical Africa. Throughout the presentation I will cover each Empire in grave detail.

Ghana may have existed as early as the 5th century, however, by the 8th century it was known as " The Land of Gold. " In 1068 Ghana was the largest, wealthiest, and most powerful state in West Africa. The empire was situated in the vast Savannah area between the Senegal and Niger Rivers with its authority extending from the frontiers of Futa Toro to the Western banks of the Niger, and from the Mandinka area in the south to beyond the fringes of the desert in the north. Ghanaweb) The Serahule were the founding people of " The Land of Gold," who established their capital at Kumbi Saleh, which at that time was the leading trading centre of the Western Sudan and the focus of all trade with a systematic form of taxation. The Serahule formed themselves into a strong trading state which spread its

power over many neighboring people and in the process became an empire. With the introduction of the camel during the Trans-Saharan trade, Ghana derived power and wealth from gold and increased the quality of goods transported.

As stated earlier, the Soninke people also sold slaves, salt and copper in exchange for textiles, beads and finished goods. (Ghanaweb) According to Ghanaweb, " The wealth of ancient Ghana is mythically explained in the tale of Bida, the black snake. This snake demanded an annual sacrifice in return for guaranteeing prosperity in the Kingdom, therefore each year a virgin was offered up for sacrifice, until one year, the fiancé' (Mamadou Sarolle) of the intended victim rescued her. Feeling cheated of his sacrifice, Bida took his revenge on the region, a terrible drought took a hold of Ghana and gold mining began to decline.

There is evidence found by archaeologists that confirms elements of the story, showing that until the 12th century, sheep cows and even goats were abundant in the region. " Traders took the route from Maghreb to Ghana starting in Tahert, North Africa through Sijilmasa, Southern Morocco. The trail led south running parallel with the coast, then south-east through Awsaghust and ending in Kumbi Saleh. Through their travels the traders brought the Islamic community to Kumbi Saleh but the Islam's managed to remain a separate community a distance away from the King's palace. (Ghanaweb) McKay wrote, " The city of Ghana consists of two towns lying on a plain, one of which is inhabited by Muslims and is large, possessing twelve mosques- one of which is congregational mosque for Friday prayer; each has its imam, its muezzin and paid reciters of the Quran. The town possesses a large

number of jurisconsults and learned men," (McKay, pg 279) Ghana was originally known as Wagadou (Ouagadougou, Aoukar) by its rulers, but was changed into the general use, "Ghana" because one of the king's titles "Ghana" meant war chief. Each succeeding king kept the title Ghana but went by their own name.

The kings were in charge of organizing the trade and keeping good relations with the Saharan traders, as well as acting as senior religious leader and representative on earth of the founding ancestors of the Serahule people. To increase the wealth of Ghana, the kings were able to make lesser kings or chiefs obey their laws and pay them taxes. This in turn gave the kings of Ghana more power and could command the services of many descent lines. They were able to raise big armies and employ larger numbers of messengers and other servants. (Ghanaweb)

The International trade was causing the empire continuous growth so the Serahule were inventing new methods of governing themselves by raising money to pay for a government and producing wealth. They decided the central authority would need to be a king that would rule over many lesser authorities or governments. Since Serahule had already occupied the lands to the north of the upper waters of Niger, their towns and trading settlements became the middlemen between the Berber and Arab traders of the north and the gold and ivory producers of the south. This position made Ghana strong and prosperous and gave its rulers glory and power. Accessgambia) The empire included many arrears of people who were not Serahule and therefore had different religious loyalties to their Gods other than the king. In order to ensure the continued allegiance of the conquered

states, the kings of Ghana insisted on the son of each vassal king being sent to their court. Both provincial governors of Serahule areas and tributary rulers of the conquered peoples had the duties of loyalty to the king, provisions of annual tribute, and the contribution of bands of warriors to the imperial army when they were required for active service.

In return for their loyalty, the king provided protection against external enemies. However, by 1240 Ghana was no more. There are many reasons for Ghana's decline and fall, starting with the royal treasury placing a monopoly on the export of gold. The gold industry was the fame of what Ghana rested on because it was the king's largest source of income. Secondly, the way the empire was organized. At its peak, Ghana was made up of many states and people and lacked political and cultural unity which the kings failed to achieve.

The different ethnic groups such as the Soninke, Susu, Serer, Berber and Tuclor each had its own language and cultures owed allegiance to the king. Conquered states such as Futa Toro, Silla and Diara were only expected to pay annual tribute contingents to the kings in times of war but were left to operate under their own traditional rules. Lastly, during the second half of the Eleventh century, the military became weakened and broke up into component parts. Later, there was an invasion by the Berber Almoravid dynasty that conquered Ghana and forced its rulers and people to convert to Islam.

McKay stated that " while Almoravid and Islamic pressures certainly disrupted the empire, weakening it enough for its incorporation into the rising Mali empire, there was no Almoravid military invasion and subsequent

forced conversion to Islam. " (McKay, pg 280) The kingdom of Ghana split into several small kingdoms that feuded among themselves. The Mandinka, from the kingdom of Kangaba had been part of the Ghanaian empire and soon dominated the feuding kingdoms.

Building on the Ghanaian foundations, Kangaba formed the core of the new empire of Mali and developed into a better organized state than Ghana. There were two rulers for the Mali Empire, Sundiata and Mansa Musa which combined, had military success and creative personalities. Mali had a large agricultural and commercial base that provided for a large population and enormous wealth. (McKay, pg 280) McKay also noted that dating to the early eleventh century, the Mandinka were extremely successful at agriculture.

Consistently large harvests throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries provided a supply of food, which helped steady the population growth. The Mandinka also acted as middlemen in the gold and salt traffic that flowed north and south during the Ghanaian hegemony. In the thirteenth century, Mandinka traders formed companies and gradually became a major force in the entire West African trade. Sundiata, the founder of Mali, set up his capital at Niani and transformed the city into an important financial and trading center.

McKay stated, " through a series of military victories, Sundiata and his successors absorbed into Mali's other territories of the former kingdom of Ghana and established hegemony over the trading cities of Gao, Jenne, and Walata. Into the fourteenth century, these expansionist policies were continued by Sundiata's descendant Mansa Musa. " (McKay pg 280) In the language of the Mandinke, Mansa means " emperor. " Musa consolidated the

foundations laid down by Sundiata and ruled the empire at its greatest height.

Musa's influence extended northward to several Berber cities in the Sahara, eastward to the trading cities of Timbuktu and Gao and westward as far as the Atlantic Ocean. He maintained a strict empire and it grew twice the size of the Ghanaian kingdom and contained roughly eight million people which brought Musa Fabulous wealth. (McKay, pg 281) It was the Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 that put the empire on the map. He travelled with thousands of porters and servants that carried six-pound staffs of gold and one hundred elephants each bearing one hundred pounds of gold. On his way to Mecca, Musa stayed in Egypt and spent and gave away so much gold that there was a devaluation of the local currency and it sparked an inflationary crisis in Egypt as well as depressing world prices of the commodity. Twelve years later, al-Omari, one of the sultan's officials, recounted. " This man Mansa Musa spread upon Cairo the flood of his generosity: there was no person, officer of the court, or holder of any office of the Sultanate who did not receive a sum of gold from him. The people of Cairo earned incalculable sums from him, whether by buying and selling or by gifts.

So much gold was current in Cairo that it ruined the value of money. " (McKay, pg 281) As a result of Musa's display of wealth, his fame spread as far as Europe where the Catalan map by Abraham Cresques of about 1375 shows Musa seated on a gold throne wearing a gold crown while holding a gold nugget, describing him as " the richest and most noble king in all the land. " Mansa Musa extended his borders of Mali and set up an effective system of government that had a justice administration that was relatively

impartial. The field of diplomacy was able to establish friendly relationships with other African states such as Morocco and Egypt.

To help the king in his work, he had judges, scribes, and civil servants that helped to strengthen the administrative machinery of the empire. There were fourteen provinces in Mali that were ruled by governors who were typically famous generals. The others such as the Berber province were governed by their own Sheikhs. All of the provinces administrators were responsible to the Mansa and they were all said to be well paid. Under Musa, Timbuktu began as a campsite for desert nomads and grew into a thriving trading post or entrepot, attracting merchants and traders from North Africa and all parts of the Mediterranean world.

In the fourteenth century, Timbuktu developed into a center for scholarships and learning for Architects, Astronomers, Poets, Lawyers, Mathematicians, and Theologians. The tradition and reputation for African scholarships lasted until the eighteenth century. (McKay, pg 282) The rise of the Mali Empires was swift but its decline was gradual. In the fifteenth century, Mali lost its ability to dominate the affairs of the Western Sudan because it became a tiny principality of kangaba. It wasn't until the seventeenth century that Mali completely lost its political identity as it had broken up into a number of small independent chiefdoms.

Between 1337 to 1341 Musa's son, Maghan I, ruled the Empire. During this period, the Mossi of present day Burkina Faso raided across Manding and devastated Timbuktu. Then the Tuareg of the Sahara conquered the Northern part of the Mali Empire. During the periods of 1360 to 1400 there were as many as six kings and a series of civil wars. During the fifteenth

<https://assignbuster.com/african-kingdoms-and-empires/>

century, the Songhai, under their leader Sunni Ali, conquered Jenne and Timbuktu and replaced Songhai as the most important power in the Western Sudan. Songhai succeeded Mali and became the third great West African empire. (Accessgambia)

The Songhai Empire originated in the ninth century as a medieval civilization that was a small principality in West Africa on the banks of the Niger River called Al-kaw kaw. The kingdom had a very fertile area suitable for livestock rearing, agriculture, and fishing. As early as 800 AD, the kingdom made full use of their resources and divided into two specialized professional groups; the Gabibi who were agriculturists and the Sorko who were fishermen. The Songhai borders extended from the central area of present Nigeria to the Atlantic coast and included parts of what is now Gambia, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea and Mauritania.

The areas of the land being rich and fertile allowed the people of Songhai to attract traders to their kingdom and become very astute traders and merchants themselves. As early as the tenth century the leaders of Al-kaw kaw moved their capital from Kukia to Gao. Gao became the last stop for three major trade routes. The routes included the trans-Saharan route from Egypt into Fezzan, Ghat and Agadez, the Tripoli and Tunis from Ghat and the route from Algeria and Morocco.

During this time is when the Arab traders brought the Islamic influences which contributed to shaping the direction of the empire. In the thirteenth century Gao was part of the Mali Empire and in 1275 Gao managed to break away from Mali. It wasn't until 1464 when the small kingdom of Gao was transformed into the Songhai Empire and signaled the start of a new royal

dynasty. Sources McKay, pgs 280-280 <http://www.accessgambia.com/information/african-empires.html> <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/history/>