Ghana and Mali: Trans-Saharan Trading Empires (Overview)

Measuring at least 800 miles from north to south and about 3,000 miles from west to east, the Sahara Desert stretches across most of northern Africa. Crossing it is an arduous task, but for several hundred years, it was the site of a set of flourishing trade routes controlled by rich empires.

The traders who crossed the desert were known as Berbers. They consisted of several groups of nomads who traveled across the Sahara in camel caravans. There were several different camel routes, and each had planned stops at specific oases—places with permanent access to water, generally with a settlement nearby. The Berber tribes controlled (by force of arms) the oases on particular routes, as well as key territories both to the north and to the south of the desert. One important route included the salt mine at Taghaza, in the middle of the Sahara. At that mine, salt blocks were quarried from the ground in 200-pound blocks and transported, two per camel, to the African nations to the south. Salt was such an important import in the region south of the Sahara that some sources said it was exchanged for an equal weight of gold.

Just to the south of the Sahara were cities where the Berber caravans from the north met the routes of Sudanese traders from the south. There, salt, horses, copper, and dates from the north were exchanged for gold, ivory, kola nuts, and slaves from the rain forests and other regions to the south. Over time, those rich cities became richer and more powerful, and they gained control of larger territories to form empires. Those trading empires patrolled the trading routes in their territory to keep them safe from bandits and robbers. The source of their wealth came from tariffs levied on goods traded in their cities and from their monopoly of much of the gold trade.

Medieval Ghana

Ghana was located at the western end of Africa, just south of the Sahara in modern Mali and Mauritania (medieval Ghana did not actually include any of the modern nation of Ghana). It controlled the most important trading cities at the time. While the first historical reference dates from about 800 CE, it is unknown when the medieval kingdom of Ghana was first established. It is certain that by 1000, Ghana was a wealthy and powerful empire.

Ghana's main item for trading was gold. The area near Ghana included many rich gold mines. (Historians are uncertain whether the gold mines were within Ghana or if Ghana simply controlled the trade routes that led from the mines.) The Soninke kings of Ghana strictly controlled the sale of gold: any gold nuggets transported through or mined in Ghana became the property of the king. The miners and merchants directly traded only gold dust.

Beginning in about 1054, the Almoravids, a group of Muslim Berbers, conquered many of Ghana's key trading cities, including the capital itself. The Berber coalition did not remain united, and Ghana regained independence within several years. However, Ghana was left weakened, both militarily and economically. Several vassal states took
advantage of Ghana's weak position to try to gain independence, and a struggle for power resulted. The volume of trade in Ghana's principal cities declined. Furthermore, the central area surrounding the capital had been so damaged by overgrazing by the invaders that it was no longer capable of producing crops to support the cities.

Medieval Mali

In about 1203, the Susu, who had been part of Ghana's empire, captured Ghana's central territory and became the dominant power. They followed by invading the territory of the Malinke, south of Ghana. About 30 years after the Susu conquest of Ghana, the southern Malinke, led by their legendary general and king Sundiata, repelled the Susu and invaded their territories. Ultimately, they conquered the Susu and established the empire of Mali from their capital at Niani.

The new empire of Mali, employing the trade practices of Ghana on a somewhat larger scale, became a rich and powerful state. After Sundiata, the mansas, or emperors, continued to expand Mali's territory. During the reign of Mansa Musa in the early 14th century, Mali reached its greatest extent. It included all the territory that had been ruled by Ghana, plus additional holdings, and reached from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the cities of Timbuktu and Gao in the east.

Neither Ghana nor Mali had written languages during those periods. However, Arab historians kept contemporary written records of Mali during Musa's reign. According to those chronicles, in 1324, the Muslim Musa went on a religious pilgrimage to Mecca. The trip was also intended to establish diplomatic relations with the rulers of North Africa and the kingdoms of the Near East. Musa brought so much gold with him that, on his arrival in Egypt, the price of gold in Cairo dropped significantly for years.

Most of Mali's kings were Muslim, with Muslim scribes and officials in their courts, and most went on pilgrimages to Mecca if they lived long enough. The majority of the common people, however, kept their pagan beliefs and traditional ceremonies, and the mansas continued the traditional observances and rituals as well as their Islamic duties.

A great empire, Mali lasted more than 200 years, but it was plagued by problems of succession. The rules of succession were not well established, and several times there were disputes and even civil wars led by princes competing for the throne. During periods of weakness, provinces took the opportunity to rebel and become independent. During the 15th century, a nomadic group from the southern Sahara conquered the strategic trade city of Timbuktu, and the eastern territory of Gao gained power and conquered a large section of the empire. Mali remained a country for several more decades, but it was no longer the rich empire it had once been.

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