

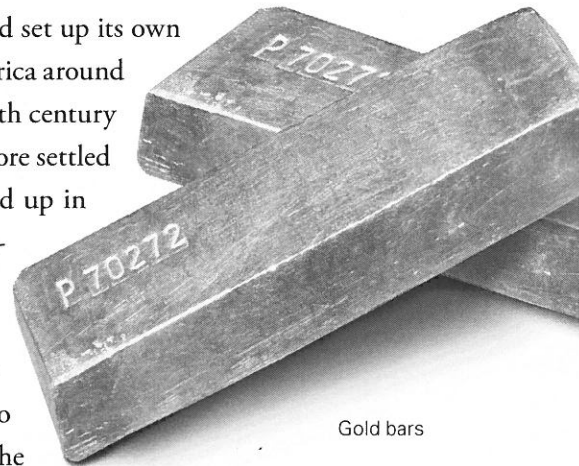
GOLD AND SALT ^{1/2}

Flourishing trade was the crucial factor for why there were so many prosperous West African empires. That there was so much trade is, in some ways, surprising. Around 5000 BCE in North Africa, temperatures increased and rainfall declined, causing a process called desiccation that led to the creation of the Sahara Desert. Those living in the land south of the Sahara Desert became isolated from the Mediterranean world, which soon became a hotbed of civilizations. It was not until after the introduction of the camel in 100 CE that trade across the Sahara became common again. But crossing the Sahara by camel was not a fast trip; even today the average trip can take weeks.

Before the camel helped connect these groups, West Africa had set up its own trading networks. Farming communities had developed in West Africa around 1000 BCE. The smelting of iron may have started as early as the sixth century BCE in West Africa, and when applied to farming tools, it led to more settled people and, consequently, more trade between them. Trade picked up in the fifth century CE when the Berbers and West Africans established caravan routes. This grew even greater after Arab empires took over North Africa in the seventh century. As historian John Iliffe put it, “The chief reason why trans-Saharan trade grew so swiftly in the early Islamic period was probably that it linked two flourishing regional economies.” Throughout this time, and for the next thousand years, innumerable items were traded. But, probably the most important transaction in West Africa was the exchange of gold for salt.

Between the ninth and sixteenth centuries, three West African kingdoms (Ghana, Mali, and Songhai) ruled powerful, wealthy empires. At their heights, all three controlled the West African gold mines, which contributed greatly to their wealth. The importance of the gold trade increased after the Saudi Arabian-based Umayyad Dynasty, which made their coins partly from gold, increased their territory by conquering North Africa. West Africa’s gold mines met this heightened demand, producing an impressive amount of gold. They provided Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East with the majority of their gold until Europe began importing it from the Americas. The Ghana Empire produced so much that the tenth-century Persian geographer Ibn al-Faqih claimed that gold grew “in the sand, as carrots do, and is picked at sunrise.” Because the rulers of the West African kingdoms taxed much of the items being traded, the kings quickly grew rich. The Muslim historian al-Bakri wrote in the eleventh century how the dogs in Ghana wore golden collars and horses had golden saddles. An Arabic traveler, Ibn Battuta, visited Mali in 1352 and commented on how a king sat under a silk umbrella with a golden bird attached to it, wore fine clothes, and donned a golden scull cap. Also, Mansa Musa, who was emperor of Mali in the fourteenth century, gained international notoriety for his lavish display of wealth during his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Gold not only supported these kingdoms, but it also decided their fates. Ghana rose to prominence because of its control of the gold trade. However, by the twelfth century gold



Gold bars

mines to the east opened up, and Ghana lost its gold monopoly. Soon after, the holders of the biggest mine to the east conquered Ghana and started the Mali Empire. The Songhai Empire, whose biggest trade item was also gold, soon supplanted the Mali Empire. But gold also proved to be Songhai's undoing as Moroccans attacked the kingdom to get control of the gold mines. Morocco would not succeed in gaining much control of the area, but the attack resulted in the demise of the Songhai Empire, which is considered the last of the great West African kingdoms.

Today we mostly just think of salt as something we add to our food. But it used to be valued as far more than a flavor enhancer. Before refrigeration, the best way to preserve many



Salt crystals

food items was by salting them. In the Sahara Desert, there were large salt deposits, remnants of the great lakes that were there before desiccation. Ibn Battuta actually reported that one city, Taghaza, had so much of this valued mineral that the houses and mosques of the town were built from salt slabs. The Songhai Empire contained multiple salt mines and valued them so much that its rulers had them guarded and kept their locations secret. Salt also could be found in Africa outside the Sahara. Some smaller kingdoms evaporated water from the Niger Delta and Lake Chad to make salt. Still, salt was scarce in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Some sources

claim that salt was so desired by the West Africans, that, at times, salt was literally worth its weight in gold (meaning a pound of salt was worth a pound of gold). The salt trade was also a major factor in the spread of Islam, as it brought together Muslim traders from North Africa with West African merchants; today, many of the countries in West Africa remain predominately Muslim. Even in modern times, the salt trade has not completely disappeared, as salt slabs are still loaded onto camels and carried across the Sahara Desert.

Both of these items continue to be highly valued. In 2015 a pound of gold was worth almost twenty thousand dollars. Gold's most popular use is being formed into jewelry, but it has also become a key ingredient in electronics due to its conductivity; the World Gold council estimated that a standard cell phone has around 30 milligrams of gold in it. Salt may have lost some of its value with the onset of refrigerators and numerous spice competitors, but it certainly has not gone away. It actually has become a bit of a health problem, with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) projecting that in 2009 and 2010 over 90 percent of children ate too much sodium (what salt mostly is made up of), which is linked to high blood pressure and obesity. The principal way sodium becomes part of one's diet is not by adding too much salt at the table, but by consuming sodium-loaded processed foods. The CDC estimated that the average child eats 3,300 milligrams of sodium each day, 1,000 more milligrams than recommended, before they even add their own salt. Now if only we could trade all that salt for its weight in gold!

MANSA MUSA ^{1/2}

The Richest Person Ever?

In 1324, on Mansa Musa's way to a pilgrimage to Mecca, he stopped in Cairo. From there, tales of his riches spread around the world. More than six centuries later, in 2014 the website Celebrity Net Worth made a list of the richest people ever, with Mansa Musa topping the list. At an estimated net worth of \$400 billion in today's dollars, the website determined he had been worth almost three times as much as Bill Gates.

Clearly, Mansa Musa had a lot of money. He was the king of the Mali Empire, one of the largest in the world at that time, which contained huge, important gold mines. Mansa Musa not only took copious amounts of gold for himself, but also taxed much of the considerable trade that occurred in his empire.

Mansa Musa did much with his money to help Mali. Notably, he paid for Arab architects to come to Mali. The architects built many buildings, including a palace and impressive mosques in Gao and Timbuktu. Additionally, he did much to improve education in Mali, constructing libraries and schools. After his trip to Cairo, he brought back various Islamic scholars, helping to establish Timbuktu as a center of learning.

Although Musa's heirs inherited his wealth, the fortune depleted quickly. His sons fought each other, and in 1375 the Songhai town Gao successfully rebelled against Mali. Between these civil wars and Songhai's conquest of Mali, much of Mansa Musa's vast fortune disappeared.

In Cairo

The Arab historian al-Umari came to Cairo a few years after Mansa Musa's famous 1324 visit and wrote the following about it.

From the beginning of my coming to stay in Egypt I heard talk of the arrival of this sultan Musa on his Pilgrimage and found the Cairenes eager to recount what they had seen of the Africans' prodigal spending. I asked the emir Abu . . . and he told me of the opulence, manly virtues, and piety of his sultan. "When I went out to meet him [he said] that is, on behalf of the mighty sultan al-Malik al-Nasir, he did me extreme honour and treated me with the greatest courtesy. He addressed me, however, only through an interpreter despite his perfect ability to speak in the Arabic tongue. Then he forwarded to the royal treasury many loads of unworked native gold and other valuables. . . .

This man [Mansa Musa] flooded Cairo with his benefactions. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The Cairenes made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall. . . .

Gold was at a high price in Egypt until they came in that year. The mithqal did not go below 25 *dirhams* and was generally above, but from that time its value fell and it cheapened

in price and has remained cheap till now. The mithqal does not exceed 22 *dirhams* or less. This has been the state of affairs for about twelve years until this day by reason of the large amount of gold which they brought into Egypt and spent there.

Source: Al-Umari. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Edited by J. F. P. Hopkins and Nehemia Levtzion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

The below excerpt is by Abd al-Sadi, who wrote the *Tarikh al-Sudan*, in the seventeenth century.

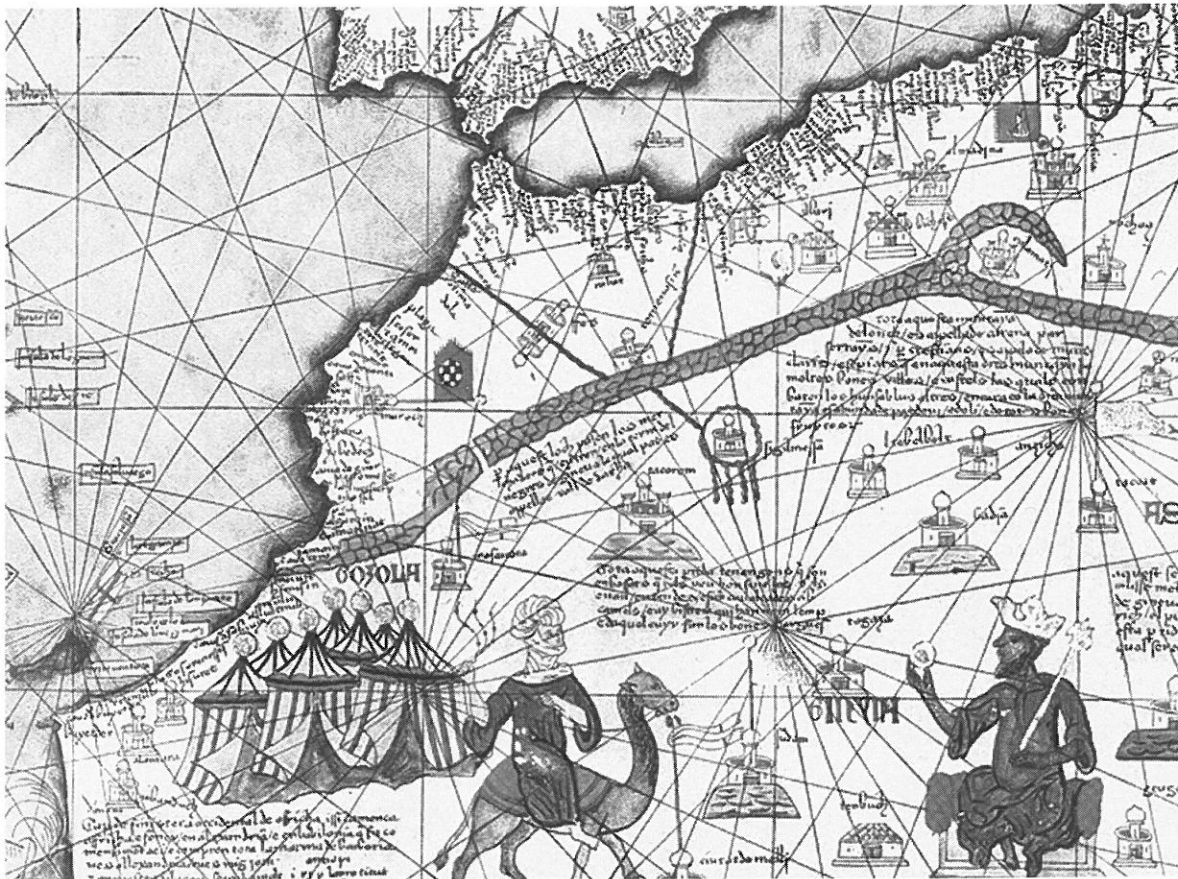
He made the pilgrimage to the Sacred House of God departing—God knows best—in the early years of the eighth century [of the hegira]. He set off in great pomp with a large party, including 60,000 soldiers and 500 slaves, who ran in front of him as he rode. Each of his slaves bore in his hand a wand fashioned from 500 mithqals of gold [that is, over 4 pounds of gold each, for a total of 2,200 pounds]. . . .

The Easterners who chronicled his visit were astonished at how mighty a ruler he was.

Source: Villiers, Marq de, and Sheila Hirtle. *Timbuktu: The Sahara's Fabled City of Gold*. New York: Walker and Company, 2007. Pages 76–77.

On the Map

Mansa Musa's wealth had, both literally and figuratively, put Mali on the map. Word of his visit to Cairo made it to Europe, and for the next two hundred years, many European cartographers made sure to include Mali on their maps. In 1375, soon after his visit to Cairo, a Spanish cartographer made the below map, which includes Mansa Musa and the Mali Empire.



Catalan Atlas, 1375

Image source: Detail of the *Atlas Catalan*. By Cresques Abramham, 1375, the National Library of France