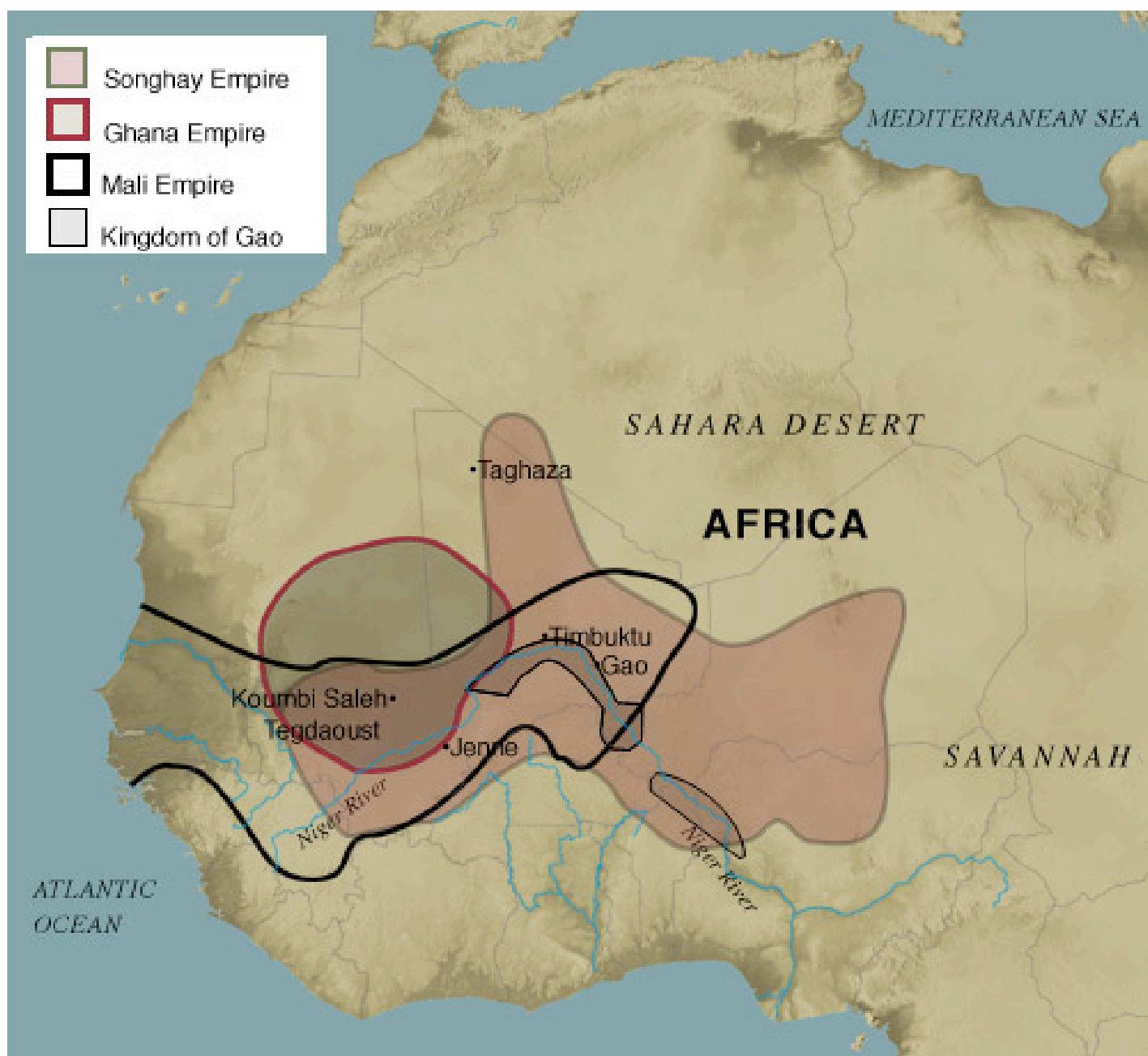


Africa Before the Slave Trade



Overview of African Kingdoms



Ghana and Songhai

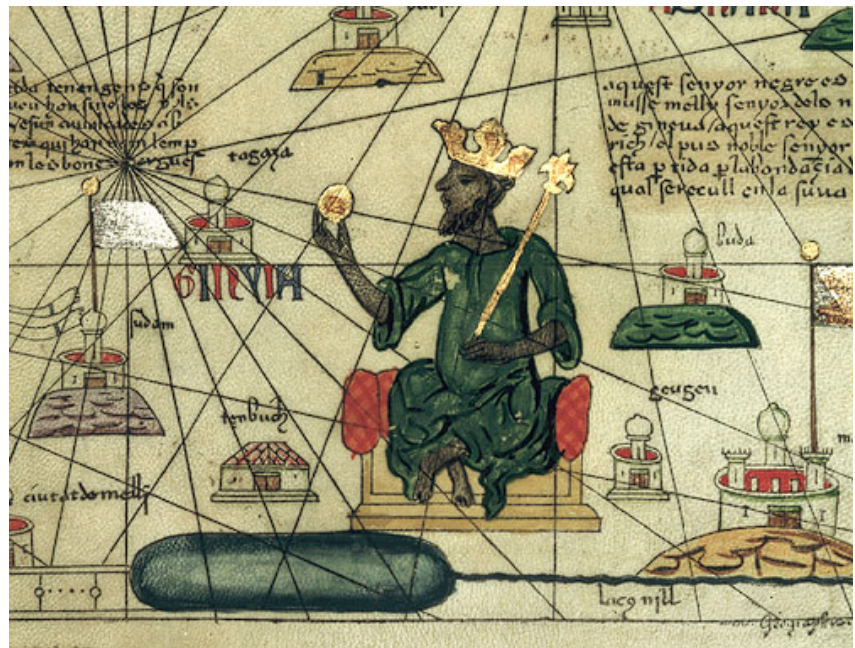
Ghana (Wagadu) is the earliest known empire of the western Sudan, came into the history books around the eighth century but probably started long before. Very little is known of the Empire of Ghana apart from that it was called the "Land of Gold". Ghana was said to have a very developed government, large armies and almost total control of well hidden gold mines. Although they never fully adopted Islam as their religion, they had good relations with Muslim traders. However, by the end of the 11th century, Ghana was taken over by the Soso kingdom.



It was from one of Mali's former conquests, the kingdom of Gao, that the last major empire of the western Sudan emerged. Although the city of Gao had been occupied by a Songhai dynasty prior to being conquered by Mansa Musa's forces in 1325, it was not until much later that the Songhai empire emerged. It began to rise in 1464 when Sonni Ali Ber came to power. Sonni Ali conquered much of the weakening Mali empire's land as well as Timbuktu, famous for its universities and the important trading city of Jenne. Following Sonni Ali's death, Muslim groups went against his successor and chose Askia Muhammad as their ruler. Under the Askias, the Songhai empire reached great power and Timbuktu and Jenne grew as places of learning.

Mali

One of the most famous rulers of the Mali empire is Mansa Kankan Musa I. Musa was not the first emperor of Mali to follow Islam. However, Musa's hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) of 1324-25 drew the attention of both the Islamic world and Europeans, who were not ready for the wealth and generosity that the Malian king showed during his stopover in Egypt. Accompanied by an enormous group of people, Musa apparently brought and gave away so much gold in Cairo that the value of it fell and did not recover for many years after. The Mali empire, little known beyond the western Sudan, now became legendary in the Islamic world and Europe. The image of Mansa Musa bearing nuggets of gold was placed on maps of the African continent.



Copy of a map drawn in Spain and dated to 1375, showing the King of Mali holding a gold nugget.



The fourteenth-century traveler Ibn Battuta visited Mali a few decades after Musa's death and was impressed by the peace and lawful society he found there. The Mali empire covered over an area larger than western Europe and consisted of numerous kingdoms and provinces.

Following Mansa Musa's death, Mali went into a long decline, shrinking to the size of its original territory by 1645.

Timbuktu

Many people think the place is a myth, but it is a real city with a real history. Its name literally means 'Buktu's Well', after a woman named Buktu who found food and water for her animals.

For West Africans, however, Timbuktu was as important as Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, and Mecca are to many other cultures. In the thirteenth century, Timbuktu became the center of a thriving trade in Africa. The trade routes brought great wealth to the city. By 1330, Timbuktu was part of the powerful Mali Empire, which controlled the lucrative gold-salt trade routes in the region. Two centuries later, Timbuktu reached the height of its power under the Songhai Empire, becoming a central place for learning.



From the early part of the fourteenth century to the time of the Moroccan invasion in the late sixteenth century, the city of Timbuktu became an important place for religion and learning, with people travelling large distances to learn there. Great mosques, universities, schools, and libraries were built, some of which still stand today.

Timbuktu's golden age ended in the late sixteenth century, when a Moroccan army destroyed the Songhai Empire. Around 400 years ago, European ships began trading along the West African coast, and the trade routes that made Timbuktu important were not used. Having lost the source of its wealth, Timbuktu declined and became known as a lost city.

Trade, Culture and Civilisation in Africa.



Africa made a large contribution to the world, some of which are still marvelled at by people today.

Ancient Egypt, which first developed over 5000 years ago is one of the most notable of these civilisations and one of the first monarchies anywhere in the world. Egypt of the pharaohs is best known for its great monuments and feats of engineering (such as the Pyramids), but it also made great advances in many other fields too.

The Egyptians produced early forms of paper and writing. They developed the calendar too and made important contributions in various branches of maths, such as geometry and algebra. In medicine, the Egyptians understood that the body relied on the brain over 1000 years before the Greeks. Some historians now believe that ancient Egypt had an important influence on ancient Greece, and they point to the fact that Greek knowledge borrowed from work done in Egypt. For example, what is commonly known as Pythagoras' theorem, was known to the ancient Egyptians hundreds of years before Pythagoras' birth.



European views of Africa before the Slave Trade

Before the Slave Trade, there were many important links between Africa and European countries. Some of the earliest European visitors to Africa recognised that many African societies were as advanced or even more advanced than their own. In the early 16th century, the Portuguese trader Duarte Barboosa said of the east African city Kilwa:

'There were many fair houses of stone and mortar, well organised in streets. Around it were streams and orchards with many channels of sweet water.' Of the people who lived in Kilwa he reported, 'They were finely clad in (wore) many rich clothes of gold and silk, and cotton, and the women as well; also with much gold and silver in chains and bracelets, which they wore on their legs and arms, and many jewelled earrings in their ears.'

A Dutch traveller to the kingdom of Benin in the early 17th century sent home this report of the capital.

'It looks very big when you enter it for you go into a great broad street, which, though not paved, seems to be seven or eight times broader than the Warmoes Street in Amsterdam. This street continues for about four miles and has no bend in it. At the gate where I went in on horseback, I saw a big wall, very thick and made of earth, with a deep ditch outside. Outside the gate there is a large suburb. Inside as you go along the main street, you can see other broad streets on either side, and these are also straight. The houses in this town stand in good order, one close to the other and evenly placed beside the next, like our houses in Holland.'