



Kingdom of Ghana

Primary Source Documents

The following description of the Kingdom of Ghana was written by Al-Bakri, a member of a prominent Spanish Arab family who lived during the 11th century.

The city of Ghana consists of two towns situated on a plain. One of these towns, which is inhabited by Muslims, is large and possesses twelve mosques, in which they assemble for the Friday prayer. There are salaried imams and muezzins, as well as jurists and scholars. In the environs are wells with sweet water, from which they drink and with which they grow vegetables. The king's town is six miles distant from this one....

Between these two towns are continuous habitations. ...In the king's town, and not far from his court of justice, is a mosque where the Muslims who arrive at his court pray. Around the king's town are domed buildings and groves and thickets where the sorcerers of these people, men in charge of the religious cult, live. In them too are their idols and the tombs of their kings. These woods are guarded and none may enter them and know what is there.... The king's interpreters, the official in charge of his treasury and the majority of his ministers are Muslims. Among the people who follow the king's religion only he and his heir apparent (who is the son of his sister) may wear sewn clothes. All other people wear robes of cotton, silk, or brocade, according to their means. All of them shave their beards, and women shave their heads. The king adorns himself like a woman (wearing necklaces) round his neck and (bracelets) on his forearms, and he puts on a high cap decorated with gold and wrapped in a turban of fine cotton. He sits in audience or to hear grievances against officials in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the (vassel)

kings of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited with gold. The governor of the city sits on the ground before the king and around him are ministers seated likewise. At the door of the pavilion are dogs of excellent pedigree who hardly ever leave the place where the king is, guarding him. Round their necks they wear collars of gold and silver studded with a number of balls of the same metals. The audience is announced by the beating of a drum which they call *duba* made from a long hollow log. When the people who profess the same religion as the king approach him they fall on their knees and sprinkle dust on their head, for this is their way of greeting him. As for the Muslims, they greet him only by clapping their hands....

Their religion is paganism and the worship of idols....

On every donkey-load of salt when it is brought into the country their king levies one golden dinar and two dinars when it is sent out. ... The best gold is found in his land comes from the town of Ghiyaru, which is eighteen days' traveling distance from the king's town over a country inhabited by tribes of the Sudan whose dwellings are continuous...

The king of Ghana when he calls up his army, can put 200,000 men into the field, more than 40,000 of them archers.



Kingdom of Mali

Primary Source Documents

The following description of the visit to Cairo in 1324 by the King of Mali, Mansa Musa, was written by Al-Umari, who visited Cairo several years after the Mansa Musa's visit.

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, many 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. I tried to persuade him to go up to the Citadel to meet the sultan, but he refused persistently saying: "I came for the Pilgrimage and nothing else. I do not wish to mix anything else with my Pilgrimage." He had begun to use this argument but I realized that the audience was repugnant to him because he would be obliged to kiss the ground and the sultan's hand. I continue to cajole him and he continued to make excuses but the sultan's protocol demanded that I should bring him into the royal presence, so I kept on at him till he agreed.

When we came in the sultan's presence we said to him: 'Kiss the ground!' but he refused outright saying: 'How may this be?' Then an intelligent man who was with him whispered to him something we could not understand and he said: 'I make obeisance to God who created me!' then he prostrated himself and went forward to the sultan. The sultan half rose to greet him and

sat him by his side. They conversed together for a long time, then sultan Musa went out. The sultan sent to him several complete suits of honour for himself, his courtiers, and all those who had come with him, and saddled and bridled horses for himself and his chief courtiers....

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. ...



Kingdom of Songhay

Primary Source Documents

Leo Africanus, an Arab traveler visited Timbuktu in the Kingdom of Songhay early in the 1500s and left this description of that city.

There is a most stately temple to be seen, the walls are made of stone and lime; and a princely palace also built by a most excellent workmen of Granada. Here are many shops of artificers, and merchants, and weavers of linen and cotton cloth. And hither do the Barbarie merchants bring cloth of Europe. All the women of the region except maidservants go with their faces covered, and sell all necessary victuals [food]. The inhabitants, & especially strangers there residing, are exceeding rich, insomuch that the king that now is, married both his daughters to two rich merchants. Here are many wells, containing most sweet water; and as often as the river Niger overfloweth, they continue its path by certain slices into the town. Corn (sorghun), cattle, milk, and butter this region yields in great abundance: but salt it very scarce here; for it is brought here by land from Tagaza, which is few hundred miles distant. When I myself was here, I saw one camel load of salt sold for 80 ducates. The rich king of Tombuto (Timbuktu) hath many plates and scepters of gold, some weigh 1300 pounds; ... He hath always three thousand horsemen, and a great number of footmen that shoot poisoned arrows, attending upon him. ...Here are great store of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the kings cost and charges. And hither are brought diverse manuscripts or written books out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize...