

## GOLD IN THE ANCIENT AFRICAN KINGDOMS

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### RESUMEN

En la antigüedad, el oro fue explotado en África no sólo por los egipcios sino también por los africanos en la región conocida actualmente como Ghana y regiones vecinas, área denominada por aquel entonces como Costa del Oro. Los orfebres proliferaron en los nuevos distritos mineros y crearon talleres en las ciudades y aldeas costeras para comerciar con el oro. El Museo del Oro de África, en Ciudad del Cabo, muestra una excelente colección de oro africano.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Minería, oro, historia, África.

### ABSTRACT

Gold in Africa was exploited in ancient times not only by the ancient Egyptians but also by black Africans in the region known today as Ghana, and once known as Gold Coast, and its neighbours although at a later date. Goldsmiths proliferated in the new mining districts and they set up workshops in the coastal towns and villages where the gold trade was carried on. The Gold of Africa Museum in Cape Town displays an excellent collection of African gold.

**KEY WORDS:** Mining, Gold, History, Africa.

### INTRODUCTION

Metals in black Africa had magico-religious associations. The smith was, in some places, considered as a religious leader, and in others he was cursed because he made weapons. The bellows and the hammers do supernatural work. Mining taboos were many and various. Miners had to pacify the hill spirit presiding over the mines, not only to obtain good metal, but also to prevent the mines from collapsing.

### NORTH AFRICA AND THE ARAB INVASION

Gold was exploited by the ancient Egyptians in Nubia. It has been estimated that Nubia was yielding 40 tonnes of gold every year. The capital of Egypt was moved to Thebes, the modern Luxor, and there was intensive trade with the Sudanese country called Kush with its capital at Napata (Figure 1). At the beginning of the first millennium BC, Egypt was in decline and the rulers of Kush were strong enough to conquer Egypt in 750 BC and

for a brief period Napata became the capital of the ancient world. The kings of Kush continued to call themselves the kings of Upper and Lower Egypt. By the middle of the first century AD, the kingdom was in decline due to the rise of a rival trading empire, with its centre at Axum in the northern corner of the Ethiopian highlands whose rulers were Semites from Sheba (the present-day Yemen). In the middle of the fourth century its rulers invaded Kush.

When the Arabs swept through North Africa in the late seventh century, they became aware that there was gold beyond the desert which was traded by the rich Sahelian kingdoms, and they hoped to find its source. The Sahelian kings took care not to reveal the location of the gold mines to strangers. Between the dense Akan forest and the commercial centres of the Middle Niger lay a vast expanse of inhospitable savannah where, for centuries, groups of hunters and farmers were victims of slave-raiding expeditions launched from the Sahels. This left them suspicious of strangers and hostile to Islamic penetration.

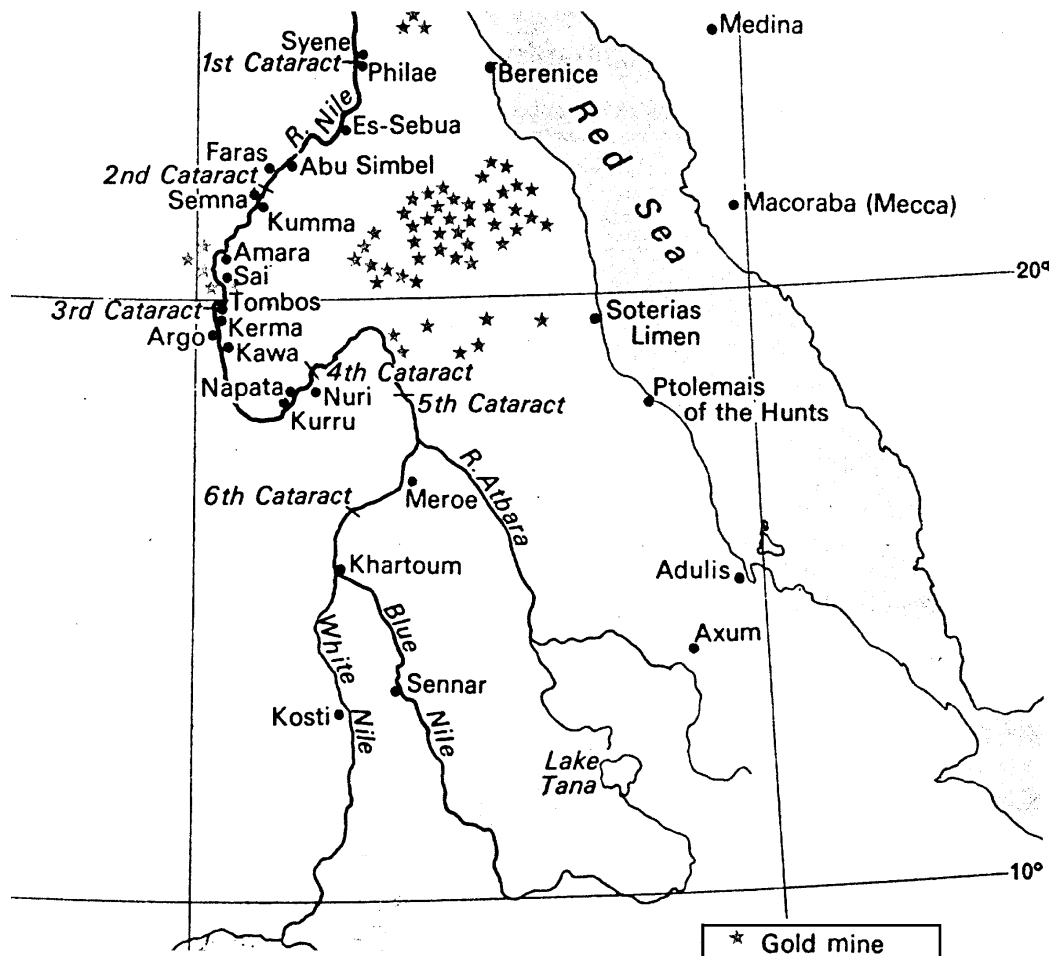


Figure 1. Gold mines in the Kingdom of Kush.

It was not until the fourteenth century that the Sahelian merchants were able to extend commercial contacts as far south as the lands of the Akan. When this occurred, the discovery of gold seems to have been made quickly. The new mines attracted caravans from long distances. Early settlements on the borders of Akan territory grew into important gold-trading towns. The Akan, stimulated by the appearance of exotic imports from the north, were now induced to search for gold. Over the next few centuries, new goldfields were discovered and exploited, some as far as the Côte d'Ivoire, and the Akan region became the focus of a vigorous commercial activity in West Africa. It is said that king Mansa Musa (1307-1332) of Mali led 8000 of his subjects on a pilgrimage to Mecca, during which he is said to have presented fabulous amounts of gold to other rulers he met, thereby earning himself the title of king of the Gold Mines.

At the courts of the great Sahelian kings, the demand for gold ornaments and jewellery was met by engaging foreign goldsmiths. In the 1590s, when Moroccan armies invaded the towns of the Middle Niger, North African goldsmiths were brought in to supervise the exportation of loot and tribute. Over the centuries there had been a

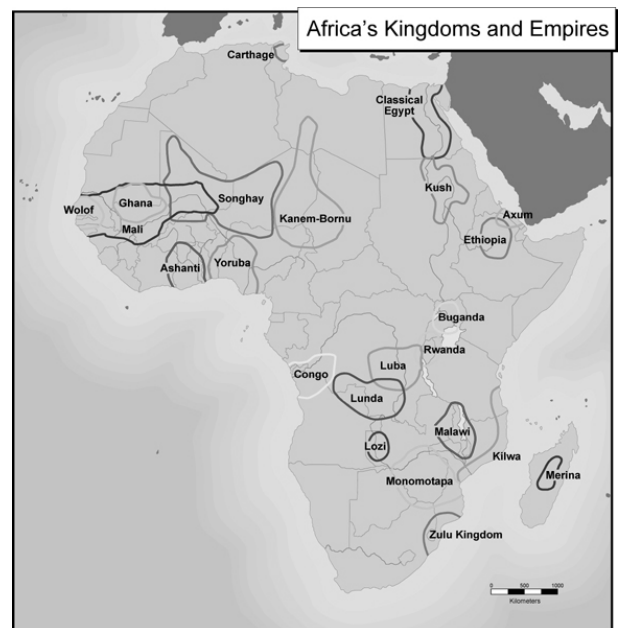


Figure 2. Africa's kingdoms and empires.

lot of movement of goldsmiths in the Sahel. They went wherever they could earn a livelihood, tending to settle in towns with a good market for gold and close to the courts of kings. From time to time they may have been dispersed by political upheavals.

## WEST AFRICA

The region today known as Ghana takes its name from the first of the great Sudanic empires, but medieval Ghana was several hundred kilometres northwest of present-day Ghana (Figure 2). She was a centre of gold trade when first discovered by the Portuguese in 1471, and was known as Gold Coast. Within a few years Spaniards, English, and French were actively disputing the Portuguese claims to a monopoly of trade on the Gold Coast. A book published in Amsterdam in 1605 describes the gold riches of Africa (Figure 3).

Little has survived of the gold riches once possessed by the ancient kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Darfur, or of the gold ornaments of the king of Ashanti and the king of Monomotapa. Since gold was only appreciated for its material value, and little attention was paid to its artistic worth, gold objects were melted down again. For this reason the Ashanti gold mask, one of the treasures of King Kofi Kakari, is almost the only surviving evidence of a splendour that vanished long ago (Figure 4). Other small gold objects are shown in Figure 5. On festive occasions, the ruler of Ashanti wore large embossed and hammered gold breast-plates; his garments, and the hilts and sheaths of the ceremonial weapons he carried, were ornamented with gold; and his throne was decorated with golden bosses, rosettes and stars.

West African gold comes from many widely scattered localities in the forest and savanna. It occurs in quartz reefs, sands and river gravels, especially after flooding, because the flood waters wash the auriferous earth down the hill and makes it available for panning. The greater part is in the form of tiny grains but nuggets are also found. The three most important auriferous zones are Bambuk (Bambuhu), lying between the Senegal and Faleme rivers, Bure around the Upper Niger and its tributaries, and the Akan region of Ghana, together with the adjacent Anyi and Baule regions of Côte d'Ivoire. There were also a few medium-sized goldfields, some of which have been exploited over long periods of time.

In most of the West African goldfields it was rare for digging to take place all the year round, for two rea-

# DESCRIPTION ET RÉCIT HISTORIAL DV RICHE ROYAVME D'OR DE

GVNEA, autrement nommé, la coste de l'or de MINA, gîante en certain endroit d'Afrique: avecq leurs foy, persuasions commerces ou trocs costumes langages, & situations du pais, Villes, Villages, Cabannes, & personnes, les ports, haures, & fleuves selon qu'iceulx ont esté recognez iusques a ceste heure.

*Parcelllement enq brieff dedaill du passage que les nauires prennent pour y nauiguer, passant au trauers des Isles de Canarie, Cabo verde le loing de la Coste de M'ambique iusques au Cap des Trespointes ou que ladicte ceste cerbence: en outre quelque description aussi des riuieres qu'on y fait en singlant de ladicte Coste, vers le Cap de Iopo Confalues, & ou qu'on se depart, pour retourner de par deca, Je tous diligement & exactement descript par l'auteur qui par diuers fois y a esté.*

P.D.M.



A AMSTERDAMME.  
Imprime chez Cornille Claesfon demourant sur leau au liure d'escripture  
Anno M.VIC.V.

Figure 3. A book published in Amsterdam in 1605 describes the gold riches of Africa.



Figure 4. Gold mask weighing 1.5 kg, two thirds life-size, from the treasure of the Ashanti king Kofi Kakari.

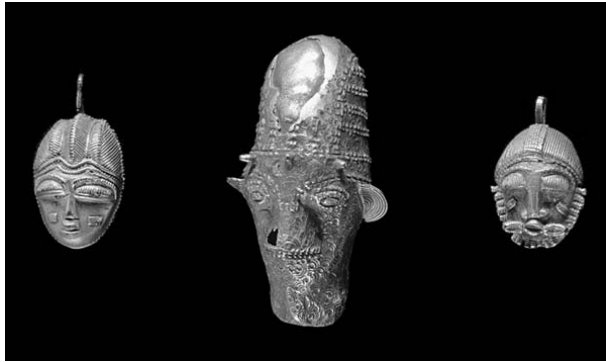


Figure 5. Small gold objects from Ghana.

sons. In the first place, the miners were also farmers, who had to produce enough food to feed themselves and their families. Part of the year was, therefore, spent in planting, tending crops, and harvesting. Secondly, gold mining required an ample supply of water for panning operations, and in many places this was not available in the dry season, when rivers and streams tended to dry up. Thus, the digging season was short, often no more than two or three months. A book published in Amsterdam in 1668 showed an African boy diving in the river to

scoop up gravel containing gold from the river bed (Figure 6).

Akan gold production fluctuated, reaching its peak in the seventeenth century. At that time, gold output averaged around 1.2 tonnes a year, which indicates a labour force of around forty or fifty thousand persons. In the following century, output declined, largely as a result of warfare and the slave trade. Slaves were being used to pay for foreign imports.

For a millennium and a half, a great quantity of gold was traded north across the Sahara by camel caravan to North Africa and Egypt. With the arrival of European ships, from the mid-fifteenth century onwards, coastal kingdoms grew in wealth and prominence, and gold-mining activities were intensified in the heavily forested regions. Goldsmiths proliferated in the new mining districts and they set up workshops in the coastal towns and villages where the gold trade was carried on, and close to the courts of kings. Mungo Park (1771 - 1806), who travelled through Senegambia in 1795-1797, left detailed descriptions of gold mining and working. He mentioned how they drew the gold into wire, and form it into a variety of ornaments, some of which were executed with a great deal of taste and ingenuity. The Saharan peoples had a passionate liking for jewellery, not



Figure 6. On the Ankobra River in southern Ghana, men dived for gold, scooping up gravel from the river bed. Large nuggets were sometimes found in this way. This engraving appeared in Olfert Dapper's description of Africa, first published in Amsterdam in 1668.



Figure 7. Interior of Gold of Africa Museum in Cape Town, South Africa. (Courtesy of the Museum Curator).

simply for its beauty but on account of its supposed magical and protective powers.

### GOLD OF AFRICA MUSEUM

The Gold of Africa Museum is located in Cape Town in the historic Martin Melck House. The Museum is dedicated to the history and artistry of African gold. It contains the world-renowned collection of West African gold artefacts originally from the Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva, as well as artefacts from the ancient gold civilisations of southern Africa. It displays the world's most comprehensive collection of African gold and also includes photographs about the Apartheid system that once existed in South Africa. Figures 7 and 8 shows the interior and the exterior of the Museum.



Figure 8. The exterior of Gold of Africa Museum in Cape Town, South Africa. (Courtesy of the Museum Curator).

