

The Gold and Salt Trade

Read the passage. Then answer the questions on page 2.

A string of more than five hundred camels moves slowly through the constantly shifting dunes of the Sahara. The men leading it south do not find their way using landmarks in the never-ending sands. Instead, these men look to the stars and winds to guide their way, often journeying for months at a time. Traveling in the Sahara can be deadly. The summer heat can reach over 120 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and plummet to as low as 25 degrees at night. So what precious cargo do the camels carry that makes this risky journey worth it? Salt.

Salt, the Stuff of Life

For centuries, salt was worth its weight in gold in West Africa. All people require mineral salt in their diets to stay healthy, and salt has always been valued for flavoring and preserving food. Salt occurs naturally in some environments and foods. However, this was not the case in the savannah and forests of West Africa. In coastal regions, people could use salt from the ocean, but sea salt didn't travel well. So, inland people needed a reliable source of the mineral.



Camels were the perfect work animal for the gold salt trade. They can carry over 400 pounds comfortably. Not only that, camels can survive for weeks without water!



Trade Makes Empires

West Africans in search of salt turned north. The desolate Sahara held a deep and seemingly endless supply of salt beneath the desert sand. By about 700 CE, Berber traders from North Africa were crossing the Sahara to bring many **commodities**, including salt, south to the cities of West Africa. They understood West Africa's need for salt and demanded high prices for it. While West Africa was poor in salt, it was rich in gold. So, salt was often traded for gold pound for pound. Gold and salt were so closely linked that some West Africans even used salt as currency.

The salt trade supported the rise of three major empires over 1,300 years. These empires protected traders and profited by taxing them in return. The Empire of Ghana, not to be confused with the country that exists today, ruled from 300 to 1000 CE. It taxed the traders for both importing goods and exporting them. Later, the Kingdom of Mali, also not to be confused with the modern country, rose up around the trade city of Timbuktu. It ruled a large area of West Africa and traded from 1200 to 1450 CE. Finally, the largest trading empire, Songhai, reigned from about 1450 to 1600 CE. Its borders reached far north into the Sahara.

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Answer the following questions about "The Gold and Salt Trade."

1. Which of the following statements is a central idea of the text, rather than a detail?
 - a. The Sahara can be dangerous to cross on foot.
 - b. Salt was highly valued in West Africa.
 - c. Humans require salt to stay healthy.
 - d. Camels are ideal for hauling goods across deserts.

2. List at least two reasons why salt was important in West Africa.
 - I. _____
 - II. _____

3. Reread the following sentence from the text: **Gold and salt were so closely linked that some West Africans even used salt as currency.**

Part A: What idea in the text does this sentence emphasize?

Part B: Cite two other sentences from the text that support the idea in Part A.

4. Which of the following sentences belongs in a neutral, or not opinionated, summary of the text?
 - a. The Sahara has harsh conditions, so people should not travel there.
 - b. West Africa valued salt because it lacked a reliable source for the mineral.
 - c. It is surprising that something as common as salt was so valuable.

5. Based on the context in the **Trade Makes Empires** section, what does the word **commodities** mean?
 - a. pack animals
 - b. caravans
 - c. preserved foods
 - d. trade goods

6. In your own words, describe the relationship West African empires had with the salt trade.
