SONGHAY WAS THE THIRD OF THE GREAT EMPIRES IN THE medieval Western Sudan. The people who came to dominate the eastern side of the Niger Bend and eventually develop an empire that covered a vast portion of the Western Sudan were collectively known as Songhay. In ancient times several different groups of people combined to form the Songhay identity. Among the first people in the region of Gao were the Sorko, who established small settlements on the banks of the Niger. They were specialists in everything that had to do with the river. They built boats and canoes from the wood of the caïlcédrat tree, an evergreen with fine-grain wood that can grow to 90 feet tall. The Sorko fished and hunted from their boats, and provided water-borne transportation for goods and people. A second occupational group that moved into the area to exploit the Niger’s resources were hunters known as Gow. They specialized in killing river animals such as the crocodile and hippopotamus. The other known occupational group of the time was called Do (pronounced “Doh”), and they were farmers who raised crops in the fertile lands that bordered the river.

Sometime before the 10th century, these early settlers were joined by more powerful horse-riding Songhay speakers who established control over them. All these people together gradually began to speak the same language, and they and their country eventually came to be known as Songhay.

The dominant Songhay horsemen became recognized as masters of the eastern arc of the Niger Bend. The history of how this happened is obscure, and we would not even know about the earliest dynasty of kings were it not for an ancient cemetery near a village called Saney, near Gao. Inscriptions on a few of the tombstones indicate that the dynasty
ruled in the late 11th and early 12th centuries and that its kings bore the title *malik*. Other tombstones mention a second dynasty whose rulers bore the title *zuwa*, but we have only myth and legend to describe *zuwa* origins. The Arabic chroniclers describe a mythical figure named Zuwa Alayman who is variously described as an Arab from Yemen, a giant from the bush who could run as fast as giraffes and ostriches, or the killer of a monster fish-god with a ring in its nose.

The Kingdom of Gao

Among the early people of the Niger Bend region were the camel-riding Sanhaja of the Sahara Desert. Locally known as Tuareg, they rode out of the great desert to establish trading camps near the Niger River. As time went on, North African traders crossed the Sahara Desert and joined the Tuareg in their Niger Bend settlements. They all conducted business with the people living near the river. As time went on the trade increased, and the Songhay chiefs took control of the profitable commerce. They settled on the left bank of the Niger at a place that came to be known as Gao (which Arab geographers called Gawgaw).

Between 750 and 950, while Ancient Ghana was prospering as “the land of gold” far to the west, the trading center at Gao became an increasingly important southern terminus for trade across the Sahara Desert. The trade goods included gold, salt, slaves, kola nuts, leather, dates, and ivory. By the 10th century the Songhay chiefs had established Gao as a small kingdom, taking control of the peoples that lived along the trade routes.

By around 1300, Gao had become so prosperous that it attracted the attention of Mali’s rulers and was conquered by them. Mali profited from Gao’s trade and collected taxes from its kings until about the 1430s. But then troubles in the Mali homelands made it impossible to

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**Kola Nut**

The kola nut is not really a nut, but the edible seed of several species of tropical trees of the cola genus, which is native to Africa. It is either pink or yellow and is roughly the size of an unshelled walnut or a golf ball. Kola nuts contain caffeine, and are chewed to ward off fatigue and hunger. They first have a bitter taste, then turn sweet.

In West Africa the kola is considered a symbol of hospitality. It divides easily into several segments to be shared between host and guests, and is used in marriage, birth, funeral, and other ceremonies. Originally, the “secret” ingredient flavoring all cola drinks (including Coca-Cola and Pepsi) was extracted from kola nuts, although many manufacturers now use synthetic chemicals that resemble the flavor of kola nuts.
During the 16th century when the Songhay Empire was at the height of its power, Timbuktu was a great center of learning with many schools teaching the Quran and authors writing books in Arabic. After Songhay was conquered in 1591, Timbuktu and other cities were administered by Moroccan officials called arma. In Timbuktu there were Muslim scholars of Soninke descent who wanted to defy their conquerors by recalling the glories of the Songhay Empire. Their writings are still among the most important sources for the history of Songhay, so they are essential sources for our two chapters on Songhay.

Two 17th-century Timbuktu historians who traced their own ancestors to the Ghana Empire—Abd al-Rahman al-Sadi (b. 1594), who wrote Tarikh al-sudan (Chronicle of the Sudan) in about 1656, and Ag Mohammed Ibn al-Mukhtar, who wrote Ta’rikh al-fattash (Chronicle of the Searcher) around 1665—described the various government offices in the Songhay Empire, named some of the important men who held them, and described some of their deeds. For details on the social system in medieval times, we can draw on John Hunwick’s translation of Chronicle of the Sudan in his 1999 book Timbuktu & the Songhay Empire.

Another important source of Muslim ruling dynasties and other Muslims of Songhay is a large collection of inscriptions, mostly in Arabic, written on tombstones. The cemetery of an ancient city is called a necropolis, and several of these have been found in the old Songhay territories. The earliest of the tombstones dates from about 1013 and is from a site called Essuk, which was in the medieval commercial town of Tadmakka, north of Gao in the Sahara Desert. The necropolis near the village of Saney, which is about five miles from Gao, contained royal tombstones from around the beginning of the 12th century. Some of the Saney tombstones are made of Spanish marble, and one of them marked the grave of Abu Abdullah Muhammad, who died in 1100. In Arabic, the name Abdullah literally means “slave of God,” signifying someone who is a devout Muslim. Thus, from the tombstones we know that by this time the kings and dignitaries of the land were firmly Muslim, that their trade network extended all the way to Spain, and that they were wealthy enough to import expensive Spanish marble.

We can now take full advantage of the historical information on the tombstone inscriptions from Essuk, Junhan, Saney, and Bentyia because they have been studied and interpreted by Professor P.F. de Moraes Farias and published in his 2003 book, Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali.

Farias has also convincingly called into question the historical accuracy of the Arab Timbuktu chronicles. He points out that the authors relied on oral tradition for a lot of their information, and that they were reconstructing Songhay history in defiance of Moroccan rule.
maintain control of the distant territories of the Niger Bend. As Mali was becoming weaker, powerful new leadership was rising in Gao, and it was about this time that the Zuwa Dynasty was replaced by a new line of rulers who carried the title of sii (short for sonyi).

In the 1430s, Mali withdrew from Timbuktu and Gao, and the Sii were able to take complete control of their own kingdom. Around 1460, Sii Sulayman Dama conquered Mema, a territory west of the Inland Delta that had been part of the Mali Empire for centuries. This demonstrated that some of the former outlying territories of Mali were now vulnerable to Songhay expansion.

**Sii Ali Beeri**

When Sii Sulayman Dama died in 1464, Ali Beeri (r. 1464–1492) became the next sii of Gao and its surrounding lands. He was a very ambitious ruler, a military leader of boundless energy who was constantly on the move, leading his troops to hold off invaders and conquer new territory. Sii Ali Beeri (“Beeri” = “the great” in Songhay) had a large, well-disciplined army that included cavalry. The mounted troops used sturdy, locally raised horses that were crossbred with Barbary horses brought by merchants across the Sahara from the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Whenever possible, Sii Ali also used a fleet of riverboats to transport his troops, with Sorko crewmen under a naval commander known as the Hi-koi. A river navy was very useful because many of Sii Ali’s campaigns were in territories bordering the Niger River. Once Sii Ali had cleared the Gao kingdom of its most immediate dangers, he turned his attention to gaining control of the entire Middle Niger, which included the rich gold and salt trade that passed through Timbuktu and Jenne.

**Taking Timbuktu and Jenne**

At the end of 1468 Sii Ali Beeri arrived with his Songhay army across the river from Timbuktu’s port of Kabara. The Muslim elite of Timbuktu (religious clerics, scholars, and wealthy merchants) had been cooperating with the Tuareg, who wanted to keep control of the city out of Sii Ali’s hands. The Muslims anticipated that Sii Ali would take revenge on those who had collaborated with his enemies, so a caravan of hundreds of camels was assembled for their escape. They fled to Walata, an important commercial city in the Sahara Desert. In January 1469 Sii Ali entered Timbuktu, and, as had been feared, he allowed his troops to sack and burn the city and kill many people.
Salt (sodium chloride, NaCl) is essential to human metabolism. In hot climates such as West Africa’s, the body particularly needs salt to replace what is lost through evaporation (sweat) and excretion (urine). People such as the nomadic herders of the savanna, whose diet is based on meat and milk, which naturally contain salt, can survive without additional salt intake. But those who rely mostly on grains and vegetables, such as the farmers, must supplement their diet with added salt. Traditional West African societies still live without refrigeration, as they have for thousands of years, so salt is also essential for drying and preserving fish and meat.

Salt production has been a major industry in the Sahara Desert at least since the 12th century. At Taghaza in modern Mali, about half way between the Algerian and Mauritanian borders, salt is made by evaporation in shallow pools called salt pans. At Taoudenni, 500 miles north of Timbuktu, salt is mined from about 26 feet underground, where several hundred men hack solid blocks out of deposits in an ancient seabed. Once removed from the mine, the salt is cut into large slabs and loaded onto camels. The camel caravans are guided across the barren, empty desert by a single tracker who has a special ability to read the desert and locate the wells along the route. To miss his route by even a few miles can bring death in a land where water is measured in drops, and nothing grows for thousands of miles.

Salt caravans have been known to include thousands of camels. The journey south across the desert to Timbuktu takes nearly two weeks. In Timbuktu the salt is purchased by local merchants, who transport it down river to the large market town of Mopti. There the slabs are cut into smaller chunks and distributed to markets throughout West Africa.
Sii Ali’s victory over Timbuktu was a milestone in his career as a successful military leader. With that conquest he took a major step in turning the small state of Gao into the Songhay Empire. After conquering Timbuktu, Ali continued to wage campaigns along the Niger River, relying heavily on both his cavalry and his river fleet.

The third most important city of the Niger bend was Jenne, which was roughly 200 miles southwest (upriver) of Timbuktu. For several centuries, during the golden age of the Mali Empire and into the period of Songhay expansion, Jenne was the key city in the Inland Niger Delta. It is said to have been more famous than Timbuktu in medieval times, because of the great amounts of gold shipped from there to North Africa. Located in the floodplains between the Bani and Niger Rivers, Jenne enjoyed extended periods of political independence.

The entire city, along with some of its farms and cattle herds, was encircled by a high wall. Adding to Jenne’s security was the fact that for much of the year, when the Niger River was high, it was surrounded by water. Taking advantage of a high water season, Sii Ali approached Jenne with his fleet of some 400 boats full of soldiers. But the city’s defenders were courageous in their resistance and Ali’s troops found it impossible to penetrate the city.

**Mighty Mosque**
The original great mosque of Jenne in Mali probably dated from the 15th Century. By the late 19th Century it had fallen into ruin, and the present mosque was rebuilt on those ruins in 1906–07.
THE SONGHAY EMPIRE

walls. Instead, they encircled the city and settled in for a siege—a tactic in which a city is sealed off so that people, goods, and supplies cannot enter or leave. The aim is to starve the city’s inhabitants into surrender.

The exact dates of Ali’s attack on Jenne are not known, nor is it certain how long the siege lasted. According to legend it was more than seven years, but this is probably an exaggeration. One of the Timbuktu chronicles says Sii Ali besieged Jenne for four years, which is probably closer to the truth. Eventually, the people of Jenne grew weak from famine and agreed to surrender to Sii Ali. When they rode out to meet their conqueror, Ali was astonished to see how young the chief of Jenne was. Sii Ali asked if he had been fighting a boy all those years, and was told the young man’s father had died during the siege, and the son had succeeded him as ruler. Sii Ali married the boy’s mother and sent her to Gao with rich gifts.

Sii Ali’s Last Campaigns
Sii Ali then set his sights on Walata, the city to which the people fled when he attacked Timbuktu. Sii Ali depended on his riverboats so much that he wanted to use them for the campaign against Walata, even though it was far out in the sahel where there were no natural waterways. So Sii Ali’s laborers began digging a canal from the town of Ras-el-Ma at the western end of Lake Faguibiné. From there it was 120 miles overland to Walata. After Sii Ali’s laborers began digging the canal, he heard that the Mossi ruler of the Kingdom of Yatenga (in today’s Burkina Faso) was on the way to attack him. Sii Ali abandoned the canal project, marched his army against the Mossi, and defeated them. He never did return to the canal project and the conquest of Walata.

Sii Ali won every battle he fought, and conquered every territory he invaded. It is believed he was the only ruler ever to defeat the people of Jenne. The more territory he captured, the more he had to keep on the move defending and administering his increasingly large empire. The newly subjugated peoples frequently rebelled, and hostile neighbors constantly raided the territory now controlled by Songhay. In 1492, after holding power for 28 years, Sii Ali died while returning home from another military campaign. He was succeeded by his son Sii Baru, who only ruled for five months before he was deposed by a stronger leader.

Askiya Muhammad the Great
One of Sii Ali’s army commanders and provincial governors was Muham- mad Turé, a devout Muslim who had objected to Sii Ali’s brutal treatment
of the Muslims in Timbuktu. After Sii Ali died, Muhammad Turé challenged Sii Baru for the leadership of Songhay. In 1493 Muhammad Turé emerged victorious after two fierce and bloody battles. Askia was a rank in the Songhay army with origins dating from at least the first half of the 13th century, and Muhammad Turé appropriated it as the title of his new dynasty. From that time on, all the kings of Songhay were known as askiya.

As one of the greatest of the Songhay rulers, Askia Muhammad (r. 1493–1529) strengthened and extended the empire that had begun to take shape under Sii Ali. Askia Muhammad, who came to be known as Muhammad the Great, created a professional full-time army and built up the Songhay cavalry. He expanded Songhay control far beyond the territories of the Middle Niger and the Inland Delta waterways that had been conquered by Sii Ali.

Under Askia Muhammad, the Songhay Empire established tributary lands northward to the salt pans of Taghaza in the Sahara Desert, westward to many of the former territories of the Mali Empire, and eastward to the Tuareg sultanate of Agadez. The empire had become so large that its army was divided into two parts: one for the western provinces based in Timbuktu, and one for the eastern provinces based in Gao.

The Timbuktu chronicles name 37 of Askia Muhammad’s sons by various wives and concubines, though he might have had more. The total number of his male and female children is said to have been 471. The sons were mostly half-brothers, related only through their father. These “rival brothers,” as they were called, did not have the kind of close attachment to one another that might be felt by brothers who had the same mother (known as “milk brothers”). As these sons grew up, they became involved in bloody power struggles.
When Askiya Muhammad got to be about 70 years old, he found it very difficult to control his sons because he was physically weak and they wanted him to retire so one of them could become Askiya. Even though the rebellious men were his own sons, the royal court became a dangerous place for the old man.

The eldest of the sons living in Gao was Musa, and he was leader of the brothers agitating for change. At this time, Ali Fulan, master of the Royal Household, would not allow anyone to see the Askiya in person—further angering Musa. What the sons did not know was that Ali Fulan was concealing from them the fact that Askiya Muhammad was blind. Finally, in 1529 Musa publicly demanded that the power be given to him. Old, blind Askiya Muhammad had no powerful supporters, so he gave in to his son and abdicated. Musa became the next askiya of Songhay, although his father lived another 10 years.

Once Musa seized power from his father, he began killing his rival brothers. Those who remained in Gao began disappearing one after the other, and the rest fled to Walata, Timbuktu, and other towns. The killing continued until 1531, when some of the surviving brothers joined together and killed Askiya Musa in a bloody battle. The reign of Askiya Musa lasted only two years and eight months. After killing Askiya Musa, the brothers returned to Gao expecting their leader to be the next askiya. But when they got there, they found their cousin Muhammad Bonkana already sitting on the throne.

**Askiya Muhammad Bonkana**

Askiya Muhammad Bonkana (r. 1531–1537) is remembered for adorning the Songhay court with splendid furnishings, introducing new kinds of musical instruments, and providing his courtiers with imported clothing. He humiliated the daughters of the old, blind Askiya Muhammad by forcing them to appear at court with their faces uncovered. According to their Muslim beliefs, this signified that the sisters were impure. Bonkana further insulted Askiya Muhammad and all his sons by having the court bard continually repeat, “A single ostrich chick is better than a hundred hen chicks.” Everyone knew this meant, “The son of Umar Komadiakha [Bonkana’s father] is worth more than a hundred sons of Askiya Muhammad” (quoted by John Hunwick in *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*).

When Muhammad Bonkana seized power, Askiya Muhammad was still living in the royal palace, but Askiya Bonkana sent him to be imprisoned on a mosquito-infested island near the city. Askiya Bonkana
had been close friends from childhood with Ismail, one of Askiya Muhammad's sons who had fled when Musa was killing all his brothers. Now Askiya Bonkana wanted his cousin to join him in Gao. Because Askiya Bonkana had usurped the throne, however, Ismail actually had a more legitimate claim to be the ruler. Askiya Bonkana was therefore concerned for his own safety, and when Ismail arrived, the king had him swear on the Quran that Ismail would never betray him. As an extra precaution, he arranged for Ismail to marry his daughter Fati, so his cousin was now also his son-in-law.

One night Ismail went to visit his father where he was imprisoned on the island in the Niger River. The blind old man took hold of his son's arm and asked him why, with such strong arms, he was leaving his father to be eaten by mosquitoes and croaked at by frogs. Ismail replied that he had no power to do anything, but his father told him how to contact powerful allies who would help. In 1537, while Askiya Bonkana was away on a military campaign, Ismail deposed him.

Askiya Ismail released his father from the island and brought him back to the palace. In gratitude, Askiya Muhammad presented Askiya Ismail with the ceremonial attire that went with the high Muslim office of caliph (religious leader): a green robe, green cap, white turban, and the Arabian sword that Askiya Muhammad had been given on pilgrimage to Mecca. Askiya Muhammad lived into his 90s and died in 1538, during Askiya Ismail's reign. Askiya Ismail reigned for two years and nine months, and died a natural death in November 1539.

**From Anxiety to Prosperity**

When the leading men of Songhay heard about Askiya Ismail's death, they peacefully agreed that the next *askiya* would be Ishaq (r. 1539–1549), another son of Muhammad the Great. Of all the *askiyas*, it was Askiya Ishaq who inspired the most fear and anxiety among the Songhay people. Despite being a devout Muslim, Askiya Ishaq regularly sent agents to Timbuktu to extort large sums of money from the merchants. (Islam prohibits extortion and bribery.) Fearing for their lives, nobody dared complain. The amount of extortion was so great that it undermined the economic prosperity of the Songhay Empire and gained Askiya Ishaq many enemies. He began to fear that he would be overthrown, and anyone who was suspected of opposing him was quickly dismissed or killed.

In 1549, when it became known that Askiya Ishaq was dying, his brother Dawud went to visit a Songhay sorcerer (*sohanci*). Some people
think the sohanci worked a magic spell that eliminated Dawud’s chief rival for succession. Whether or not this is true, Dawud became the next askiya.

Together with Sii Ali Beeri and Askiya Muhammad, Askiya Dawud (1549–1582) is regarded as the third of the Songhay Empire’s greatest rulers. The empire remained stable and prosperous under his rule. Up to this time, all of the askiyas had been sons of Muhammad, with the exception of the usurper Muhammad Bonkana, a nephew. Many other sons of Askiya Muhammad had held high offices and titles. During the 34 year reign of Askiya Dawud, as these important offices became vacant, he usually appointed his own sons to the positions. Thus, Askiya Dawud gradually eliminated from high office the offspring of other sons of Askiya Muhammad. From Askiya Dawud’s time forward, all the askiyas were his descendants.

Nevertheless, after his death in 1582, warfare broke out among the brothers competing for power. The winner was Askiya Muhammad al-Hajj (r. 1582–1586). He stands out from all the other Songhay rulers because he never went on a military campaign. Soon after he took power, he became afflicted with a painful ailment on the lower part of his body that kept him from leading his troops. He also never killed any of his brothers, but after nearly four and a half years they became impatient with his sickliness. In 1586, Askiya al-Hajj was replaced by his brother Muhammad Bani and died soon after.

**Askiya Dawud’s Accomplishments**

Askiya Dawud reigned for more than 30 years. During that time, he reorganized the Songhay army and won victories over Tuareg raiders of the Sahara and many neighboring non-Muslim peoples to the south. Dawud also fought off invaders from all directions who tried to capture the coveted resources of the Inland Niger Delta. He succeeded in most of his military campaigns, although a struggle with the Moroccan sultan Muhammad al-Shaykh caused the temporary loss of the salt mines at Taghaza in 1557.

Askiya Dawud was widely praised for memorizing the Quran and for supporting learning and religion. As part of this support, he is said to have established public libraries in his kingdom.

**Askiya Muhammad Bani**

When Muhammad Bani (r. 1586–1588) became askiya, one of his brothers complained that the most foolish of their father’s sons had become ruler. That brother, and several others, were killed by Muhammad Bani as soon as he was in power.
During Askiya Muhammad Bani’s reign, the town of Kabara was the scene of events that lead to a civil war that would cause disaster for the Songhay Empire. Kabara is Timbuktu’s port on the Niger River. Two of the most powerful men in Songhay lived there: One was Alu, the chief of the port, and the other was Muhammad Sadiq, the military commander. Muhammad Sadiq was a son of Askiya Dawud and was popular with the leading men of Timbuktu. Alu was an officer in the service of Askiya Muhammad Bani. The Timbuktu historian Ibn al-Mukhtar describes Alu as “an oppressor, a despot, an iniquitous eunuch, overbearing, uncouth, and a stubborn tyrant” (quoted in John Hunwick’s *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*). In 1588, Alu flogged and jailed one of Muhammad Sadiq’s men, and Sadiq retaliated by killing Alu. The historian al-Sadi commented, “And thus did God spare the Muslims his wickedness” (quoted in Hunwick).
Muhammad Sadiq confiscated all of Alu’s property and declared a revolt against Askiya Muhammad Bani. Accompanied by other Songhay commanders, he began to march the army toward Gao to depose Askiya Muhammad Bani. According to al-Sadi, when the askiya heard they were coming, he said, “May God curse kingship, for it is a source of humiliation and degradation” (quoted in Hunwick). Askiya Muhammad Bani set out from Gao with his army to battle with Sadiq, and stopped at midday to take a nap. The askiya was a very fat man, and was wearing his chain mail cloak during the hottest part of the day. When his eunuchs came to wake him to get ready for the midday prayer, they found him dead of a heart attack.

Askiya Ishaq II
The next descendant of Askiya Dawud to take the throne was Ishaq, who became known as Askiya Ishaq II (r. 1588–1591). His immediate problem was that the people of Timbuktu were still loyal to Muhammad Sadiq, and with Muhammad Bani now dead, Sadiq wanted to overthrow the new askiya and seize power for himself. Sadiq’s army swore allegiance to him, and were therefore in revolt against Askiya Ishaq II.

Muhammad Sadiq was so popular with the people of Timbuktu that they held a celebration in his honor that included beating drums on the rooftops. When Askiya Ishaq II learned what was happening, the armies of Timbuktu and Gao met in battle. Muhammad Sadiq was defeated, and he and all of the Songhay officers who had conspired in his rebellion were captured and put to death. There were so many executions that Songhay lost many of its finest military commanders, in addition to hundreds of soldiers on both sides who had been killed in the battle. Askiya Ishaq II appointed new commanders, but he could not replace the dead troops. Muhammad Sadiq’s rebellion had caused the loss of a large portion of the Songhay army.

At the end of 1590, Askiya Ishaq II received news that an expedition from Morocco was on its way to attack Songhay. He assembled his newly appointed commanders to discuss plans for their defense against the Moroccan threat, but they could not agree on a strategy and Songhay was not prepared to meet the approaching invaders.

The Moroccan Invasion
The Timbuktu chroniclers tell a story that may or may not be true about an incident leading to the Moroccan invasion of Songhay. It is claimed that

Eunuchs
A eunuch is a castrated man. In Songhay, the sale of young males to be eunuchs was an important part of the trans-Saharan slave trade. The ancient custom of employing eunuchs as servants in wealthy or royal households reached its highest point at the Byzantine court of Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey). Around 1300, when that region became part of the Ottoman Empire, the custom was continued by the Ottoman sultans.
some time in 1589, a slave born in the Songhay royal house named Wuld Kirinfil was imprisoned at Taghaza, in the Sahara. The slave escaped and fled to Marrakesh (in Morocco), where he claimed to be a brother of Askiya Ishaq II. Wuld Kirinfil supposedly wrote a letter to the Moroccan sultan, Mulay Ahmad al-Mansur (r. 1578–1603), encouraging him to invade Songhay. Al-Mansur wrote to Askiya Ishaq II demanding, among other things, payment of one mithqal of tax on every camel load of salt to leave the mines of Taghaza, which was in disputed territory halfway between Songhay and Morocco. Askiya Ishaq II sent an insulting reply accompanied by a spear and a pair of iron sandals. The sandals meant that until such time as al-Mansur could wear out those sandals, Askiya Ishaq II would never agree to his demands.

Before the escaped slave ever contacted al-Mansur, the sultan was aware that Songhay could be a source of gold, slaves, and other riches for his treasury, because he had a spy who had been living in Gao for several years. Al-Mansur used Askiya Ishaq II’s challenge as an excuse to send an expedition to attack Songhay. He chose as his commander Jawdar Pasha (“pasha” is a word that denotes high rank or office), an Islamic convert of Spanish origin who was a eunuch. The Moroccan army set out at the end of 1590 with about 4,000 fighting men, including some 2,000 foot soldiers with muskets, 500 mounted musketeers, 1,500 Arab spearmen, and 70 Christian slaves armed with the arquebus. Some of the Moroccan troops probably wore chain mail armor, which was introduced to the Western Sudan about the same time as firearms.

It took about 10,000 camels to carry all the invading army’s supplies, which included four small canons and 10 mortars for lobbing stone balls into towns. They also had to carry large quantities of gunpowder, tents, and other supplies for the troops, as well as enough food and water to last them for a journey of at least 40 days across the Sahara Desert.

When the Songhay heard the Moroccans were coming, one of the askiya’s commanders suggested they send soldiers to fill in the desert wells to deprive the invaders of water. Instead, Askiya Ishaq II sent messengers to ask Tuareg chiefs to fill in the wells. The Tuareg felt no loyalty to Songhay, and the messengers never got through because they were attacked by bandits. Jawdar Pasha’s troops found the wounded messengers in the desert still carrying the askiya’s message about blocking up the wells.

The Songhay leadership failed to act quickly, and the Moroccans had two weeks to recover from their exhausting desert journey. The decisive battle took place on March 12, 1591, near Tondibi, 30 miles north of Gao.
Moroccan Firearms

The arquebus was invented in the mid-15th century using a serpent- 
tine or S-shaped piece of metal with a central pivot attached to the 
side of the gun. The upper part of the serpentine held a burning 
piece of hemp or cotton rope soaked in saltpeter. By pulling on the 
bottom half of the serpentine, the upper part holding the “match” 
was lowered into a pan containing a priming charge of powder 
that fired the gun.

More advanced matchlock muskets that were also carried by the 
Moroccan army began to appear in Spain during the early part of 
the 16th century. The musket was considered the largest and most 
powerful gun an individual soldier could use. Most were 5 to 6 feet 
long, weighed around 20 pounds, and required a forked rest to 
support the gun during firing. The simple serpentine of the arque-
bus was replaced with the more advanced sear lock, which used a 
spring-operated trigger or lever to lower the slow match into the 
priming pan.

Before the Moroccan invasion of Songhay, there were very few, 
if any firearms in this part of Africa south of the Sahara. In 1591 the 
soldiers of Songhay had never seen the arquebus or musket, and 
just the noise they made gave the Moroccans a big advantage.
on the Niger River. The Songhay suffered heavy losses and retreated across the Niger, shielded by a courageous rearguard that fought to the death.

Askiya Ishaq II tried to buy off the Moroccan invaders. He offered Jawdar Pasha a tribute of 100,000 gold pieces and 1,000 slaves, hoping this would satisfy the Moroccans and that they would leave Songhay. By this time the Moroccan troops were exhausted and ill. Jawdar Pasha was prepared to accept the tribute and retreat back across the desert. But back in Marrakesh, al-Mansur decided he wanted to retain control of the newly conquered land below the desert. He rejected Askiya Ishaq II’s offer and replaced Jawdar with Mahmud Pasha, who was sent with instructions to complete the conquest of Songhay. The Moroccans occupied and looted Timbuktu, Gao, and Jenne, sending the wealth back to their capital of Marrakesh, where it was used to build fine palaces.

When the remains of the Songhay army retreated into the countryside, they deposed Askiya Ishaq II in favor of Muhammad Gao. But Askiya Muhammad Gao unwisely accepted an invitation to visit Mahmud Pasha and was assassinated. Under Nuh, a brother of Muhammad Gao, the Songhay continued their guerrilla resistance to the Moroccan occupation. For two years they fought successful skirmishes against Mahmud Pasha and his troops, until Mahmud finally gave up and returned to Timbuktu. Nuh fought on until 1599, but the Moroccans continued to occupy Timbuktu and the other urban centers. The Songhay leaders were never able to recover their empire.

With the great cities of the former Songhay Empire under Moroccan control, it did not take long for the formerly subjugated peoples to assert their independence and begin raiding one another. In the early 17th century, Tuareg nomads of the Sahara began making incursions into the great bend of the Niger River. The cattle-herding Fula of the Inland Delta formed their own state, called Masina, and began attacking their neighbors. Bamana warriors from up river (southwest of Songhay) laid siege to Jenne and fought with the Fula. Armies from kingdoms in present-day northern Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso also began advancing into southern regions of the former empire. By the 18th century the former heartland of the Songhay Empire was occupied by several small states.