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# THE GHANA EMPIRE

West Africa's First Major State

1280L



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West Africa independently developed agriculture, and the “human experiment” proceeded for many centuries as West Africa developed large and complex states, before getting caught up in the “unification of the world zones.”



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

## THE START OF WEST AFRICAN STATES

West Africa was one of those regions of the world that, like the Fertile Crescent, independently invented agriculture. Around 3000 BCE, West Africans had begun the “energy bonanza” that supports many more people in a given land area than foraging. Although the rest of sub-Saharan Africa did not begin adopting agriculture until 1000 BCE or later, West Africa began the process around the same time as the Americas. It launched into the development of agrarian civilizations around the same time as well. This contradicts the myth that Africa was always “disadvantaged” or “primitive” in comparison to some other world zones. For centuries, West Africa independently blazed the trail of rising complexity in human culture, before it was swept up in the unification of the world zones and the clashes and tragedies that resulted.

Complex societies emerged in West Africa around 1500 BCE, and the archaeology of the region reveals a number of settlements. By 600 BCE, there were some large towns and villages in West Africa where there was enough of an agricultural surplus that not everybody needed to farm, but could perform the duties of rulers, artisans, engineers, and bureaucrats. By this time, many cultures were also making thorough use of iron technology, which further increased farming productivity. One of the earliest complex societies of this time was the Nok culture in northern Nigeria. Their terracotta statues portray people in a variety of societal roles and indicate an immense amount of hierarchy, division of labor, and cultural complexity.

Further to the west, there were many farmers on the Sahel, a strip of land running across Africa just below the Sahara. Around 1000 BCE, the climate of the Sahel was wetter than it is today and there was a lot of grass for pasture. The inhabitants of the western Sahel herded cattle and farmed millet and sorghum. By 1 CE, there were many large urban centers. Dhar Tichitt was one such place, and formed a hub for the many herders and farmers of the region. However, as the climate got hotter, the town was abandoned and the inhabitants migrated farther south in the Sahel, where the grasses still grew in abundance. This more southerly region was to become the power center of West Africa’s first major empire: Ghana. One thing to note is the Ghana Empire was not where the modern country is today. Instead, the modern country was named in honor of this powerful, ancient, and independent West African civilization.

You will notice that the dates for rising agrarian states in West Africa “lag behind” those of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. At the beginning of the Common Era, West Africa had formed large urban centers and small kingdoms. But to the north and east, the Romans had already established a sprawling empire, as had the Greeks and

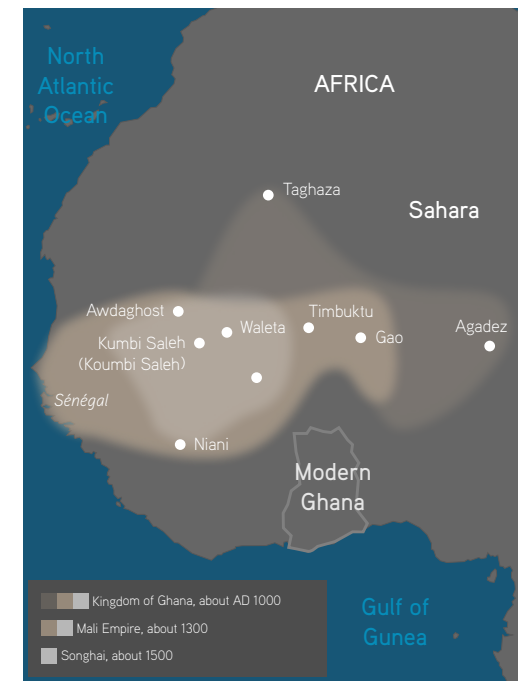
Egyptians before them. The same goes for the mighty Persian Empire in the Middle East and the Akkadians, Assyrians, and Sumerians before them. The earliest states in the world arose around 3500 BCE, in Mesopotamia, just as agriculture was getting its independent start in West Africa. Farming in the Fertile Crescent, meanwhile, had begun to appear approximately 10,000-8000 BCE. The Fertile Crescent and its descendant powers thus had a head start on West Africa by many thousands of years. Yet within just 3,000 years, West Africa had developed complex agrarian states of its own.

## THE GHANA EMPIRE

While there were many city-states and small kingdoms in West Africa for centuries, the Ghana Empire was the first major agrarian empire to arise in the region. Its history is shrouded in mystery. While they had a complex society, a division of labor, wealth, and trade, the Ghana Empire (like the Inca in the Americas) did not have a form of writing as we know it. As such, much of the information we have of the civilization depends on oral histories and the medieval writings of Arab traders. The story goes that a man named Kaya Magar Cissé, king of a realm called Wagadou, rose to prominence in West Africa around 300 CE. The sons and grandsons of his house then extended their rule over several other kingdoms, turning them into vassal states. Many of the names of the Ghana rulers are unknown and only a few of their deeds have passed into recorded history.

What we do know is, around 300 CE, West Africans domesticated the camel. That species has a distinct advantage in the desert, and this revolutionized trade across the Sahara. Rapidly growing trade brought a lot of wealth and power to West Africa, just as the Ghana Empire was getting its start.

The Ghana Empire, in particular, grew rich from the trans-Saharan



Range of the Ghana Empire in West Africa

trade. It certainly helped that the empire had control over the three major gold fields to the south of them. As such, Ghana was referred to by traders as “the Land of Gold,” and the kings of Ghana were sometimes called “the Lords of the Gold.” As a result, the empire flourished. The king of Ghana had a monopoly on all gold nuggets that were found in the mines. The people were allowed to trade in gold dust, but had to turn over any gold nuggets to the government. As such, the state became very powerful as well, adding to the complexity of Ghana’s agrarian civilization.

Once the Arabs moved into Egypt and Northwest Africa in the 600s and 700s CE, trade intensified and Ghana grew even richer. The West Africans became major traders in the Old World. They sold ivory, salt, iron tools and weapons, furniture, textiles, sandals, herbs, spices, fish, rice, honey, and kola nuts. This is also the point in history when the large exportation of slave labor from West Africa to the Islamic world began. Centuries later, with the arrival of the Portuguese, a similar exportation of African people as slave labor would kick off the massive coerced exodus of Africans to the Americas, in which millions died in the appalling conditions of the crossing, and millions more led a life of subjugation and cruelty once they arrived. Slavery is a negative characteristic of many early agrarian civilizations, from Mesopotamia, to Egypt, to the Greco-Romans, but in the long run it was to prove particularly devastating to the populations of West Africa, after about 1500 CE.

It was the monopoly on West African gold, however, that allowed the Ghana Empire to reach the height of its power, at a time when Europe was undergoing decline after the fall of the Roman Empire. Ghana’s rule extended as far as the Niger valley. The city of Koumbi Saleh, thought by many archaeologists to be the empire’s capital, is estimated to have supported 15,000 to 20,000 people. This may not seem like much compared to other ancient cities. However, this was an astounding feat for a city in the Sahel, where the climate was dry and drinking water was scarce. The town had many wells to support its populace, and also to irrigate plants that were grown within the city. The fact that 15,000 to 20,000 people were able to live in a city so close to the harsh Sahara is an astounding feat of architecture and engineering. Koumbi Saleh also boasted an impressive palace complex with a number of ornate buildings to house the many nobles, officials, and the king.

The ruler of the Ghana Empire is also said to have sent many opulent gifts to his neighbors. This was easily done, considering the immense amounts of gold he possessed. Also, Arab sources tell us that in the 1000s, the Ghana Empire could field 200,000 soldiers in the field, of whom 40,000 were archers. The number is almost certainly exaggerated, as medieval writers are known to do, but the point is that the

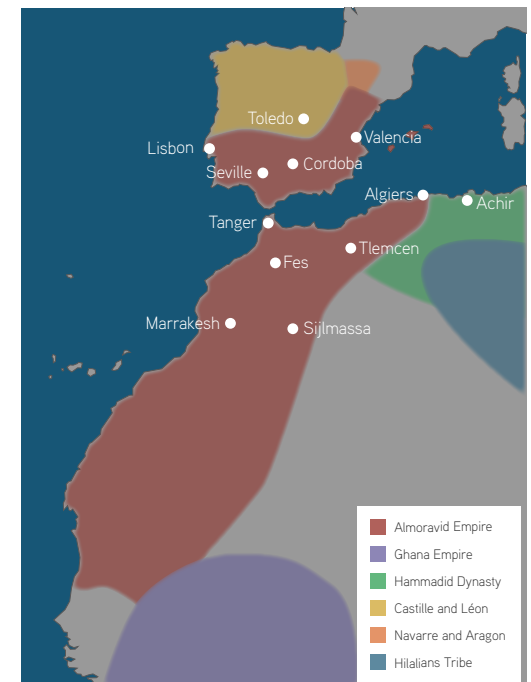
empire’s military force was considerable and enough to give Arab visitors cause for amazement. All seems to indicate that thanks to agriculture, mining, and trade, Ghana was a wealthy and powerful civilization in Africa. Its society was to dominate the region for centuries. It was West Africa’s first major power, and was not the last.

## COMPETITION OF AGRARIAN STATES

The competition between agrarian states is a universal characteristic of this stage of human complexity. Once the process of agrarian civilization begins, and humans start to get better and better at harnessing the food and resources (or put more simply, energy) of their environment, different civilizations begin competing for that energy. In that sense, they are similar to organisms competing for access to energy in nature. All of them seek energy to either sustain or increase their complexity.

In the eleventh century, Ghana’s power was first challenged by the Almoravids, a powerful force that arose in the Atlas region and became masters of the Western Sahara. We know that there was conflict of some kind between Ghana and the Almoravids, perhaps even with the capital, Koumbi Saleh, being sacked, as Arab sources claim, though the archaeological evidence makes this seem doubtful. At any rate, the Ghana Empire managed to fend off the Almoravids, who in the next century went into decline.

In the twelfth century, Ghana began incorporating more Muslims into its government, including the master of the treasury, diplomats, and, some sources say, even the majority of officials. By then end of the 1100s, Ghana had converted entirely to Islam. Previously, Ghana had subscribed to an animist religion, which involved spirits of the forests and sacred groves



Range of the Almoravids, in Northern Africa

that only priests could enter. By 1200, however, Ghana was becoming more and more culturally incorporated into the Afro-Eurasian world zone as trade continued to share collective learning. West Africa sat at the very end of a long network forming the Silk Roads that stretched across the Afro-Eurasian supercontinent.

Ghana's long period as the dominant agrarian civilization of West Africa came to an end in the 1200s. Scholars have argued that climate change played a role. The wet climate that had once made farming prosperous in the Sahel continued to deteriorate. With dwindling resources and power, along with some political infighting, Ghana left a power vacuum that was soon filled. Rivals called the Sosso briefly occupied territories of Ghana, including its capital, and built their own short-lived empire. They, in turn, were conquered by the Mali Empire, who forged an even larger and wealthier empire in West Africa. They, in turn, were overthrown by the Songhai Empire in the 1400s. In the 1590s, however, the Songhai Empire fell to the Moroccans who overpowered them with the use of early muskets, which were the product of collective learning imported from elsewhere in the world. From that point forward, West Africa got increasingly caught up in the global story, as the world zones became increasingly unified.

### **THE WEST AFRICAN "EXPERIMENT"**

West Africa became characterized by smaller kingdoms. Powerful Islamic states exerted an increasing amount of influence from the north. Then, the European slave trade began. The Europeans took West African slaves in their millions to the Americas. This had a disastrous effect on the population numbers and collective learning of West Africa, removing thousands upon thousands of potential innovators to lives of bondage and manual labor overseas. Along with commoners, West African agricultural experts, engineers, soldiers, and bureaucrats found themselves suddenly ripped from their positions and their homes. The sheer scale of the slave trade did severe damage to West African societal structures and collective learning. The lucrative nature of the slave trade also did much to turn one West African group against another. For a time, tropical diseases kept European colonialism from gaining too much of a foothold, but by the nineteenth century, West Africa began to fall increasingly under direct colonial rule.

All of this is a symptom of the painful transformations that struck many world zones, as they became increasingly unified after about 1500. West Africa and the Americas, for instance, both started to develop agriculture at roughly the same time; they began to build agrarian civilizations at roughly the same time. And while the agrarian civilizations of the Americas were being devastated by European diseases and culturally devastated by the encroachments of the Spanish and Portuguese, around the same time

West Africa was beginning to suffer the tragedies of world unification as well. The unification of the world zones ultimately brings people together into a close-knit web of collective learning, which can potentially be used to the benefit of all. However, the early phases of global unification were often full of suffering. World zones that enjoyed a head start on collective learning and a great deal of global connectivity had not yet shed the uglier aspects of agrarian civilizations: slavery, religious and ethnic intolerance, and an all-consuming drive to control more resources. This often had traumatic and predatory effects on other agrarian civilizations that were smaller or still developing. As Big History teaches us, collective learning can bring us greater connectivity and technological advancement, but it is not always fast enough to bring us the wisdom to handle it.

While West Africa's story gets increasingly swept up in the global one after 1500 CE, its agrarian civilizations were an important milestone in the tale of rising complexity. Between 3000 BCE and 1500 CE, West Africa represents another version of the "human experiment" that independently appeared all over the world. If you compare the early world zones to separate "petri dishes," you can observe the differences and similarities that each "experiment" reveals. In a very short time after the dawn of agriculture around 3000 BCE, West Africa quickly developed large agrarian states, very similar in many respects to the complex agrarian civilizations we see elsewhere in the world. Figuring out what those similarities are is essential to figuring out the core characteristics of all agrarian civilizations.

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