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THE GHANA EMPIRE

West Africa's First Major State

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



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

THE START OF WEST AFRICAN STATES

Agriculture arose independently in West Africa, as it had in the Fertile Crescent before. Around 3000 BCE, West Africans had begun the “energy bonanza” — a food system that supports many more people in a given land area than foraging. While 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 began to develop 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. West Africa independently blazed a trail of rising human complexity for centuries before it was swept up in the clashes and tragedies that resulted from the unification of the world zones.

Complex societies emerged in West Africa around 1500 BCE. 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. Some 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 clay, terracotta statues portray people in a variety of societal roles. This indicates 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. There was a lot of grass for pasture that animals could graze on. 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. It was 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 region to the south would become the power center of West Africa’s first major empire: Ghana. The ancient 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 may 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. At that time, agriculture was getting its independent start in West Africa. Farming in the Fertile Crescent, meanwhile, began to appear in approximately 10,000 to 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

For centuries, there were many city-states and small kingdoms in West Africa, but the Ghana Empire was the first major agrarian empire to arise in the region. Its history is shrouded in mystery. The Ghana Empire had a complex society, division of labor, wealth, and trade. Still, like the Inca in the Americas, it did not have a form of writing as we know it. Much of what we know 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 power in West Africa around 300 CE. His sons and grandsons then extended their rule over several other kingdoms, absorbing them into the empire. Many of the names of the Ghana rulers are unknown. Only a few of their deeds have passed into recorded history. We do know that around 300 CE, West Africans domesticated the camel. Camels have a distinct advantage in the desert, and this innovation



Range of the Ghana Empire in West Africa

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 grew rich from the trans-Saharan trade, helped by its control over the three major gold fields to the south. Traders called Ghana “the Land of Gold,” and the kings of Ghana were sometimes called “the Lords of the Gold.” This gold helped the Ghana Empire to flourish.

The king of Ghana had a monopoly on all the gold nuggets found in the mines. People could keep and trade gold dust, but they had to hand over all gold nuggets to the government. This helped the state to become very powerful, adding complexity to Ghana’s agrarian civilization.

When the Arabs moved into Egypt and Northwest Africa in the 600s and 700s CE, trade increased 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. It is at this time that the large-scale exportation of slave labor from West Africa to the Islamic world began. Centuries later, the Portuguese would again enslave West Africans, this time sending them to the Americas. That slave trade caused the deaths of millions in appalling conditions crossing the Atlantic, and subjected millions more to a life of cruel labor when they arrived. Slavery is a negative characteristic that is found in many early agrarian civilizations — from Mesopotamia, to Egypt, to the Greco-Romans. In the long run, it proved 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. Ghana’s rule extended as far as the Niger valley. At the time, Europe was undergoing decline after the fall of the Roman Empire.

The city of Koumbi Saleh is thought by many archaeologists to be the empire’s capital. It 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 population and 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 with a number of ornately decorated buildings to house the many nobles, officials, and the king.

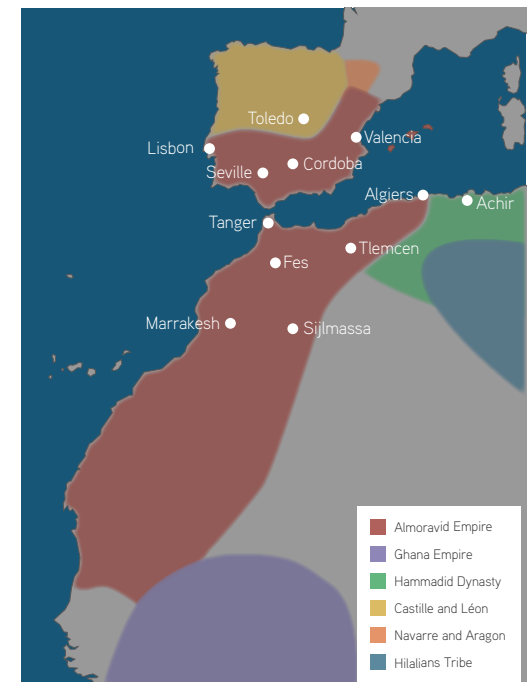
The ruler of the Ghana Empire supposedly sent many opulent and luxurious gifts to his

neighbors. This makes sense, considering the immense amount of gold he controlled. Also, Arab sources tell us that in the 1000s, the Ghana Empire could field 200,000 soldiers, of whom 40,000 were archers. The number is probably exaggerated, as medieval writers are known to do. Still, the empire’s military force was considerable — enough to give Arab visitors cause for amazement. All this indicates that thanks to agriculture, mining, and trade, Ghana was a wealthy and powerful civilization in Africa. Its society dominated the region for centuries. It was West Africa’s first major power, but it was not the last.

COMPETITION OF AGRARIAN STATES

When agrarian states arise, they tend to compete with each other. It is universally seen at this stage of human complexity. Through agriculture, humans get better and better at harnessing the food and resources (the energy) of their environment. Different civilizations then begin competing for that energy. In a way, they are similar to organisms competing for access to energy in nature. Both civilizations and organisms seek energy to either sustain or increase their complexity.

Ghana’s power was first challenged by the Almoravids in the eleventh century. The Almoravids were a powerful force that arose in the Atlas mountain region in Northwest Africa. The Almoravid civilization became masters of the Western Sahara and soon came into conflict with Ghana. The details of the conflict are sketchy. Some Arab sources claim that Koumbi Saleh, Ghana’s capital, was sacked, though archaeological evidence makes this seem doubtful. In any case, the Ghana Empire managed to fend off the Almoravids, who went into decline in the next century.



Range of the Almoravids, in Northern Africa

In the twelfth century, Ghana began incorporating more Muslims into its government. These included the master of the treasury, diplomats, and, some sources say, even the majority of officials. By the end of the 1100s, Ghana had converted entirely to Islam. Previously, Ghana had followed an animist religion, which involved spirits of the forests and sacred groves of trees 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 spread 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 argue that climate change played a role. The wet climate that had once made farming successful in the Sahel continued to deteriorate. The Ghana Empire saw its resources and power dwindling. Political fighting between officials caused the government to break apart. Ghana's decline meant there was room for another power to take over.

A rival civilization called the Sosso briefly occupied territories of Ghana 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 from the north, who had early muskets — a product of imported collective learning. From that point forward, world zones became increasingly unified, and West Africa was increasingly caught up in the global story.

THE WEST AFRICAN “EXPERIMENT”

West Africa split into smaller kingdoms, while powerful Islamic states gained more and more influence to the north. Then, the European slave trade began. The Europeans took millions of West Africans to the Americas as slaves. This forced exodus devastated West Africa. It hurt both the region's population numbers and its collective learning. It took thousands upon thousands of potential innovators and forced them into lives of manual labor overseas.

West African agricultural experts, engineers, soldiers, bureaucrats, and common people all found themselves suddenly ripped from their positions and their homes. The huge scale of the slave trade severely damaged West African society and collective learning. Because the slave trade was a way for some to grow wealthy, it also caused West African groups to turn against each other. For a while, tropical diseases kept European colonialists from getting a real foothold in West Africa. But by the nineteenth

century, European powers were increasing their direct control over the region.

West Africa was not the only region to undergo painful transformations at this time. Many world zones saw negative effects as they became more unified after about 1500. West Africa and the Americas both started to develop agriculture at roughly the same time. They began to build agrarian civilizations at roughly the same time.

As the agrarian civilizations in the Americas were being devastated by the Europeans, through disease and colonialism, West Africa was beginning to suffer the tragedies of world unification as well. More connections between the world zones can ultimately bring people together in a close-knit web of collective learning. This can potentially be used for everyone's benefit.

However, the early phases of global unification were often full of suffering. World zones that had a head start on collective learning and global connectivity still retained the uglier aspects of agrarian civilizations: slavery, religious and ethnic intolerance, and an all-consuming drive to control more resources. The more advanced civilizations often preyed on civilizations that were smaller or still developing, with traumatic results. 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.

After 1500, West Africa's story gets increasingly swept up in the global story. Still, its agrarian civilizations were an important milestone in the tale of rising human complexity. West Africa between 3000 BCE and 1500 CE represents another instance of the “human experiment” that appeared independently all over the world. If you think of early world zones as self-contained “petri dishes” — each one its own experiment — you can observe the differences and similarities the experiments reveal.

After its dawn of agriculture around 3000 BCE, West Africa quickly developed large agrarian states that were very similar to others around the world. Pinpointing those similarities is essential to figuring out the core characteristics of all agrarian civilizations.

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