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THE GHANA EMPIRE

West Africa's First Major State

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West Africa was another region where the “human experiment” went on independently for many centuries. West Africans developed agriculture and large, complex states before the unification of world zones disrupted their progress.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

THE START OF WEST AFRICAN STATES

Like the Fertile Crescent, West Africa developed agriculture independently. Around 3000 BCE, West Africans began to produce extra food. They had begun the “energy bonanza.” Now they had access to more energy than was possible by foraging.

The rest of sub-Saharan Africa didn’t start to adopt agriculture until 1000 BCE or later. West Africa began the process around the same time as the Americas. It also began to develop agrarian civilizations around the same time. This contradicts the myth that Africa was always “disadvantaged” or “primitive” compared to some other world zones. West Africa followed the path of rising human complexity for centuries. When world zones became more unified, West Africa was one region that suffered from the clashes that resulted.

Complex societies emerged in West Africa around 1500 BCE. Archaeology in the region has revealed a number of settlements. By 600 BCE, there were some large towns and villages in West Africa that were farming efficiently. In these settlements, not everybody needed to farm to survive. Some people could become rulers, artisans, engineers, and bureaucrats. Iron technology being adopted at this time also led to increased farming efficiency.

The Nok culture in northern Nigeria was one of the earliest complex societies of this time. The Nok made clay statues showing people in different social roles. This tells us that their society was complex. It had levels of power among people and a division of labor.

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 animals to graze on. The inhabitants of the western Sahel herded cattle. They farmed millet and sorghum, types of grains. By 1 CE, there were many large urban centers. Dhar Tichitt was one of them. It became a hub for the many herders and farmers of the region. However, the climate got hotter and the town was abandoned. The inhabitants migrated farther south in the Sahel, where the grasses still grew abundantly.

This region to the south became 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 after this powerful, ancient, and independent West African civilization.

You may notice that the dates for developing agrarian states in West Africa “lag be-

hind” 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 the Greeks and Egyptians had done 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 appeared around 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia. At that time, agriculture was getting its start in West Africa. Farming in the Fertile Crescent, meanwhile, had appeared in approximately 10,000 to 8000 BCE. The Fertile Crescent 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. The Ghana Empire was the first major agrarian empire to arise in the region. Its history is cloaked in mystery. The Ghana Empire had a complex society with 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 writings of medieval Arab traders.

According to the story, a man named Kaya Magar Cissé was king of an area called Wagadou in West Africa around 300 CE. His sons and grandsons then expanded the empire by taking over several other kingdoms. The names of many of Ghana’s rulers are unknown. Only a few of their deeds have been documented in recorded history.

We do know that around 300 CE, West Africans domesticated the camel. Camels have a distinct advantage in the desert. This inno-



Range of the Ghana Empire in West Africa

vation revolutionized trade across the Sahara. Rapidly growing trade brought a lot of wealth and power to West Africa just as the Ghana Empire was developing.

The Ghana Empire grew rich from the trans-Saharan trade. It helped that the empire controlled three major gold fields to the south. Traders called Ghana “the Land of Gold.” The kings of Ghana were sometimes called “the Lords of the Gold.” Gold helped the Ghana Empire to thrive.

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 give all gold nuggets to the government. This helped the state become very powerful, which added complexity to Ghana’s civilization.

When the Arabs moved into Egypt and Northwest Africa in the 600s and 700s CE, trade increased. Ghana became even richer. The West Africans became major traders in the Old World. They sold ivory, salt, iron tools and weapons, furniture, cloth, sandals, herbs, spices, fish, rice, honey, and kola nuts.

At this time, a slave trade began in West Africa. Many West Africans were sent to the Islamic world as slaves. Centuries later, the Portuguese would again enslave West Africans. This time they were sent to the Americas. The trans-Atlantic slave trade caused the deaths of millions in terrible conditions crossing the Atlantic. Millions more were punished with a life of cruel forced labor when they survived the journey to the Americas.

Slavery is a negative feature that is found in many early agrarian civilizations: from Mesopotamia, to Egypt, to the Greco-Romans. It was devastating for the populations of West Africa after about 1500 CE.

Still, the monopoly on West African gold allowed the Ghana Empire to reach the height of its power. Ghana’s rule extended as far as the Niger valley while Europe was declining after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Many archaeologists believe the city of Koumbi Saleh was the empire’s capital. They estimate that it supported 15,000 to 20,000 people. This may not seem like much compared to other ancient cities. However, this was an amazing accomplishment 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 water plants that were grown within the city. Through clever architecture and engineering, 15,000 to 20,000 people were able to live on the edge of the harsh Sahara. Koumbi Saleh also had an impressive palace with many complex buildings to house nobles, officials, and the king.

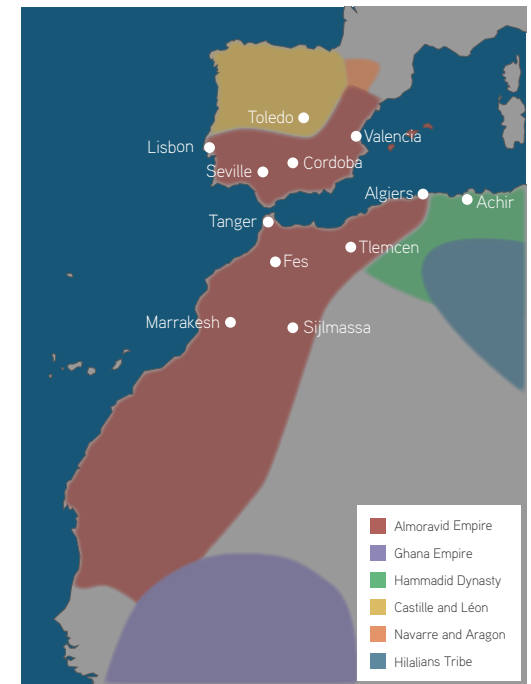
The ruler of the Ghana Empire supposedly sent many luxurious gifts to his neighbors. This makes sense, considering the huge amount of gold he controlled. Also, Arab sources tell us that in the 1000s, the Ghana Empire had 200,000 soldiers, including 40,000 archers. The number is probably exaggerated, as medieval writers are known to do. Still, the empire’s military force was impressive — enough to amaze Arab visitors. This shows that thanks to agriculture, mining, and trade, Ghana became a wealthy and powerful civilization in Africa that dominated the region for centuries. It was West Africa’s first major power, but it was not the last.

COMPETITION OF AGRARIAN STATES

Once agrarian states develop, they often compete with each other. Using agriculture, humans can get more and more energy from the environment (in the form of food and resources). Then, civilizations may begin to compete for that energy. In a way, they are similar to organisms in nature. Both civilizations and organisms need energy to either maintain or increase their complexity.

The first challenge to Ghana’s power came in the eleventh century from the Almoravids, a rival power from the Atlas mountain region in Northwest Africa. The Almoravids took control of the Western Sahara. They soon came into conflict with Ghana. The details of the conflict are hazy. Some Arab sources claim that Koumbi Saleh, Ghana’s capital, was attacked, though archaeological evidence doesn’t support this. In any case, the Ghana Empire managed to fight off the Almoravids, who went into decline in the next century.

In the twelfth century, Ghana began including more Muslims in its government. These included the master of the treasury, diplo-



Range of the Almoravids, in Northern Africa

mats, 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 holy groves of trees that only priests could enter. By 1200, Ghana was absorbing more and more Afro-Eurasian influences as trade spread collective learning. West Africa sat at the very end of the Silk Road trading network that stretched across Afro-Eurasia.

Ghana's long period as the most powerful agrarian civilization of West Africa came to an end in the 1200s. Scholars argue that climate change played a role. A drier climate in the Sahel made farming more difficult. The Ghana Empire had fewer resources and less power. There was infighting among its leaders. Ghana no longer had the power to control its territory. Other powers would soon step in.

The Sosso were another civilization that briefly took over parts of Ghana and built their own short-lived empire. The Sosso were conquered by the Mali Empire, who built an even larger and wealthier empire in West Africa. The Mali Empire was overthrown by the Songhai Empire in the 1400s.

In the 1590s, however, the Songhai Empire fell to the Moroccans from the north. The Moroccans had early muskets thanks to imported collective learning. From that point forward, world zones became increasingly unified. West Africa was 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. Their forced departure crippled West Africa. It hurt both the region's population and its collective learning. Thousands upon thousands of people were sent to work overseas, never getting a chance to contribute to West African society.

West African farming experts, engineers, soldiers, bureaucrats, and common people all found themselves ripped from their jobs and their homes. The huge scale of the slave trade severely damaged West African society and collective learning. Because there was lots of money to be made trading slaves, some West African groups turned against each other.

For a while, tropical diseases kept European colonialists from settling 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 that was suffering at this time. Many world zones saw negative effects as they became more connected 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. Finally, they were both devastated by Europeans at roughly the same time. A more unified world meant tragedy for the Americas and West Africa. A connected world can bring people together in a web of collective learning, but it can also cause suffering.

Some world zones had a head start on collective learning and global connectivity. These regions still had the uglier parts of agrarian civilizations: slavery, intolerance, and an uncontrollable drive to control more resources. The more advanced civilizations often preyed on civilizations that were smaller or still developing. The results were disturbing. As Big History teaches us, collective learning can bring us greater connectivity and new technology, 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 example of the "human experiment" that appeared independently all over the world.

If you think of early world zones as isolated "experiments" — you can observe the differences and similarities between them.

After agriculture appeared around 3000 BCE, West Africa quickly developed large agrarian states. These states were very similar to others around the world. Finding the similarities is essential to figuring out what really defines agrarian civilizations.

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