

2 African Empires and Trading States

Between 3000 B.C. and 1600 A.D., powerful empires and trading states flourished in widely separated areas of Africa. They reflected the diversity of African geography, peoples, and cultures.

The Kingdoms of Kush and Axum

At a bend in the upper Nile, the Kingdom of Kush developed at the same time as ancient Egypt. An active trade grew up between the two kingdoms. The merchants of Kush traded ivory, gold, ebony wood, and perfumes for products of Egypt and the Mediterranean world. They also traded extensively across the Indian Ocean. Kings and queens of Kush used riches from trade to build large walled palaces, a huge temple to the sun, and burial pyramids.

In 750 B.C., King Kasha led his armies north and conquered Egypt. For about 80 years, Kasha's successors ruled an empire stretching from the Mediterranean to what is today Ethiopia. They eventually retreated back to the south when the Assyrians, who were armed with weapons made of iron, invaded Egypt.

The value of iron was not lost on the people of Kush, and they soon learned how to make it. The plentiful supply of iron ore in Kush supported a large iron industry in the capital of Meroë (MEHR oh EE). Huge mounds of glittering black slag, the waste product of iron making, still lie in the ruins of Meroë.*

Kush declined about 200 A.D. At the same time, its southern neighbor Axum grew in power. Like Kush, Axum carried on a thriving trade with the Mediterranean world and with Asia. Traders brought gold, ivory, and animal hides from the interior of Africa to ports on the Red Sea. Arabs who took part in this trade settled alongside farmers and

merchants of Axum. As a result, the civilization of Axum blended Arab and African cultures.

In 324 A.D., King Ezana of Axum converted to Christianity, as did many of his people. In the seventh century, the spread of Islam across North Africa broke the connection between the Christian world and Axum. But Christianity survived in Axum. Today, the people of Ethiopia trace their Christian culture back to the civilization of Axum.

Growth of Trade in West Africa

During the Middle Ages in Europe, a complex system of trade developed in West Africa. The key to this trade was the exchange of gold and salt.

Parts of West Africa had large supplies of gold but little salt. Yet people living in the warm climate of this region needed salt in their diet. Several hundred miles to the north, there were large natural salt deposits in the Sahara. At Taghaza, salt was so plentiful that people built their houses out of it. Camel caravans loaded up with salt at Taghaza and made the long desert trip to the West African savanna, where salt was said to be worth its weight in gold.

In the gold mining district of Wangara near the Senegal River, gold and salt were exchanged in a silent trade. The gold miners of Wangara refused to meet openly with outsiders who might want to seize their gold fields. Therefore, traders left salt and other goods and then withdrew to a safe distance. The miners examined the offerings and set out payment in gold. When the traders returned, they either accepted the price, taking the gold back north, or they withdrew to wait for a larger payment.

As the gold-salt trade grew, powerful rulers emerged in West Africa. They sought to control the caravan routes and established strong states to protect local and regional trade markets.

*The use of iron began to spread across Africa about 500 B.C. Iron plows enabled farmers to increase food production. People who had iron weapons had an advantage over those who did not.

The Kingdom of Ghana

Ghana was the first major trading state of West Africa. The gold-salt trade route passed through Ghana, which was located in the Niger Valley.* (See the map below.) About 400 A.D., the rulers of Ghana began to acquire a large empire. They extended their power over neighboring peoples and demanded tribute from them.

Although most people were farmers, the power and prosperity of Ghana depended on gold. In fact, the word "ghana" came to mean gold. The king of Ghana controlled all the gold in his empire. The Arab writer al-Bakri (ahl bahk REE) reported that if the king did not regulate the gold trade, gold would be so plentiful that it would lose its value.

In the seventh century, Muslim merchants from North Africa traveled south along the caravan routes. The king of Ghana did not convert to Islam, but he employed Muslims as interpreters and advisors. Soon, Arab geographers and scholars learned of the wealthy West African kingdom.

Ghana reached the height of its power in the tenth century. Tribute and taxes from trade filled the royal treasury. Whenever the king appeared in public, he wore splendid clothes and a rich gold headdress. His pages carried gold-mounted swords. The royal court was guarded by dogs with gold and silver collars.

The kingdom of Ghana suffered a severe blow in the eleventh century. The Almoravids (ahl MOH rah vihdz), devout Muslims from North Africa, launched a holy war against the non-Muslims of Ghana. When the Almoravids occupied Ghana, states that had been paying tribute broke away. Although Ghana soon ousted the invaders, it never recovered its former strength.

The Empire of Mali

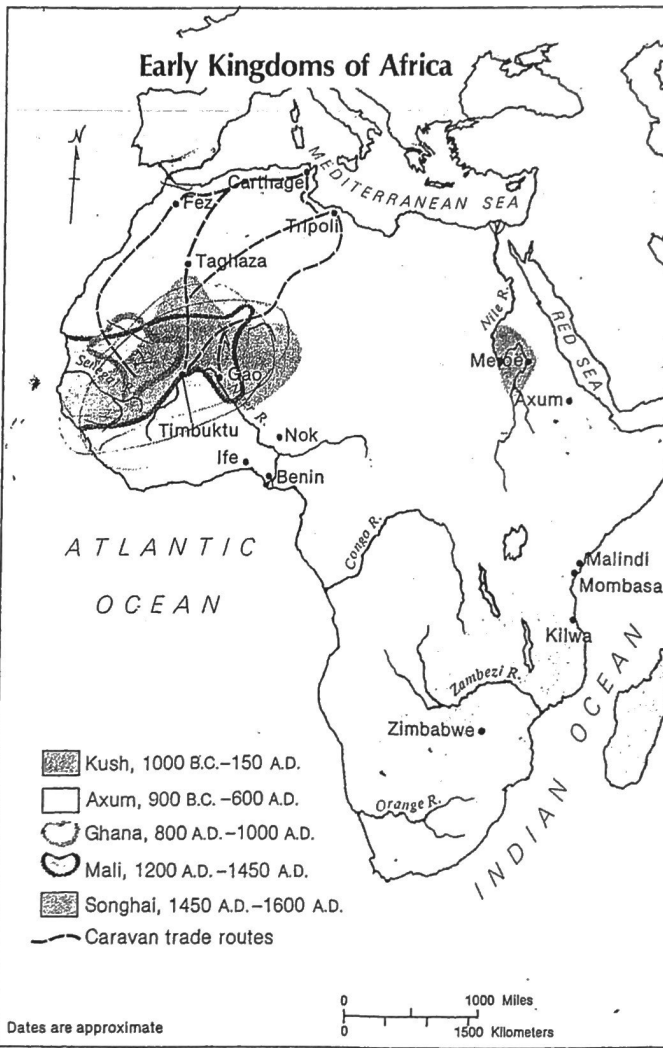
After Ghana's decline, the Mandingo people to the southeast formed the powerful empire of Mali. A resourceful young leader named

Present-day Ghana is about 500 miles (800 kilometers) to the southeast of the ancient kingdom of Ghana.

Sundiata Keita (suhn dee AH tuh KĪ tuh) defeated his rivals and absorbed the remains of the kingdom of Ghana. By 1240, Mali had won control of the profitable gold-salt trade. During the next century, Mali controlled both the gold mining regions of West Africa and the salt deposits of Fagha. (See the map below.) Although Mali thrived on commerce, most Mandingo were cattle herders and farmers.

The rulers of Mali converted to Islam in the eleventh century. In 1324, Mali's ruler,

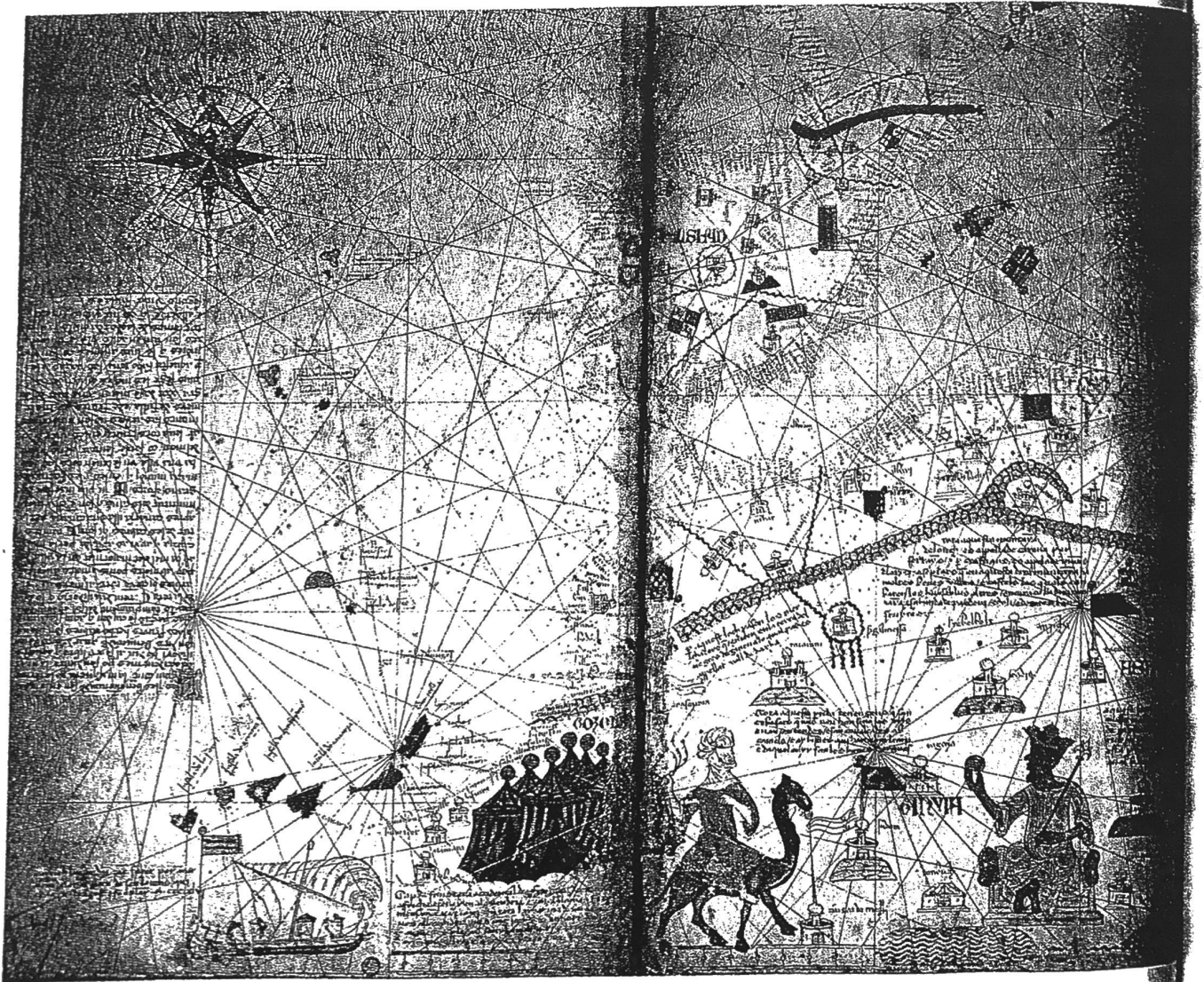
■ Advanced civilizations emerged in several different regions of Africa, as this map shows. Where did the earliest African civilizations develop? Why do you think they grew up there?



Mansa Musa, left his capital at Timbuktu to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. He passed through Cairo with hundreds of servants and camels loaded with gold. His wealth created a vivid impression in the busy Egyptian city. "This man," observed one Egyptian, "spread upon Cairo the flood of his generosity. There was no person or holder of any office who did not receive a sum of gold from him."

Mansa Musa and his successors respected local traditions within the empire and established a peaceful, orderly government. Ibn Battuta (IHB uhn bah TOO tah), an Arab visitor to Mali, noted the peace and safety of Mali. Battuta described the Mandingo as faithful Muslims, careful in prayer and in their study of the Koran. Yet he observed how the Mandingo blended Islam

News of the wealth of Mali reached Europe after Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca. This Spanish map of West Africa was drawn about 1375. It shows Mansa Musa in the lower right, holding a scepter and a gold nugget. The mapmaker noted: "So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land."



with their own traditions. For example, women enjoyed greater freedom than in other Muslim countries. They were not secluded at home, and they could talk to whomever they chose.

In the late 1300s, civil war weakened Mali. Over the next century, the kingdom of Sónghai (SAWNG hī) replaced Mali as the most powerful state in West Africa.

The Rise of Songhai

From their capital at Gao, the rulers of Songhai controlled the gold-salt trade. About 1464, Sonni Ali, an able but ruthless leader, came to the throne. Before his death in 1492, Sonni Ali had conquered the largest empire yet seen in West Africa. (See the map on page 243.)

Ali created an efficient government. He divided the empire into provinces and appointed trusted officials to regulate commerce, agriculture, and justice. Inspectors toured local markets to see that merchants used only official weights and measures.

Under Askia Mohammed, Ali's successor, Timbuktu became a great center of learning. Askia Mohammed welcomed Muslim scholars, doctors, and judges to Songhai. The university at Timbuktu produced many scholars, including Ahmad Baba, who gained fame throughout the Muslim world for his works on Islamic law.

In 1590, the ruler of Morocco in northern Africa sent an army across the Sahara to seize the gold mining regions of Songhai. Only about 2,000 soldiers survived the long desert march. But armed with cannon and muskets, which were unknown in Songhai, the invaders defeated the Songhai forces. The Songhai Empire then broke up into small, independent states. Trade continued, but the political unity of the West Africa trading empires had ended.

City-States of East Africa

Along the coast of East Africa, scattered farming villages grew into independent city-states during the Middle Ages. Trade became

as important in East Africa as it was in West Africa. However, East African commerce centered on the sea, not on desert caravans.

The coastal cities made large profits by taxing all goods passing through their markets. Traders brought gold, ivory, and iron from inland states to such cities as Mombasa and Malindi. The goods were then shipped across the Indian Ocean to India and China, where they were sold at high prices. Merchants brought back Indian and Chinese goods to exchange for more gold from the interior.

As in Axum to the northeast, many Arab traders settled in the East African coastal cities. The newcomers brought their own culture, which blended with African traditions. For example, Arabs introduced Islam to East Africa.

As trade across the Indian Ocean increased, Indian civilization also influenced the cities of East Africa. Swahili (swah HEE lee), the language of the coastal people, included Arab and Indian words. Today, Swahili is the most important language of East Africa.

In the 1100s and 1200s, the growth of a money economy in medieval Europe increased the demand for gold. Arab merchants bought gold in Africa and sold it in Europe for use in coins. The cities of East Africa flourished until the early 1500s. By that time, Portuguese sailors had reached East Africa. Not long after their arrival, the Portuguese destroyed the coastal cities.

Zimbabwe: A Powerful Inland State

Zimbabwe (zihm BAH bweh) was the most powerful inland state to export gold to the coastal cities of East Africa. (See the map on page 243.) Around 1000 A.D., migrating farmers and herders settled in the lands between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers. These pioneers discovered gold in their new homeland. With the wealth from gold, they established a large trading empire. In the ruins of Zimbabwe, archaeologists have found Chinese and Indian goods, which the rulers of

Zimbabwe had bought with profits from the gold trade.

About the time that Europeans embarked on the Crusades, the rulers of Zimbabwe built a large walled capital. Highly skilled masons constructed a vast complex of palaces, stone houses, and temples.

Zimbabwe reached its height in the fifteenth century. In the 1500s, Portuguese traders in East Africa heard rumors of Zimbabwe's great wealth. They looked for Zimbabwe but did not find it. However, when the Portuguese destroyed the coastal cities, Zimbabwe declined because trade was cut off. About the same time, weak rulers, shortages of salt, and soil exhaustion left the land open to invaders.

SECTION REVIEW

1. Locate: Kush, Axum, Taghaza, Ghana, Mali, Timbuktu, Songhai, Mombasa, Malindi, Zimbabwe.
2. Identify: Kasha, Ezana, Mansa Musa, Sonni Ali.
3. What event showed the people of Kush the value of iron?
4. What were the two main trading items of the West African kingdoms?
5. What steps did the Songhai ruler Sonni Ali take to make his government efficient?
6. What factors helped make the East African city-states prosperous?
7. What role did Zimbabwe play in African trade?

3 Patterns of Daily Life in Africa

People in Africa organized their lives in a variety of ways, and different political and social institutions emerged. However, in Africa, as elsewhere, respect for the family, law, and religion, helped ensure stable societies.

Importance of Family

Family organization in Africa varied according to the needs of individual cultures. People in hunting and food-gathering societies lived in small nuclear families. A *nuclear family* consists of parents, children, and occasionally grandparents. Several nuclear families made up a hunting band.

In farming and herding societies, the extended family was the basic unit of society. In farming areas, the family used the land that its ancestors had cleared and settled. The labor of each family member was essential. Generally family members cultivated different portions of the land, but they worked together on large projects such as building houses and clearing new land. In herding societies, family members shared the duties of tending the family's cattle.

Members of extended families lived in separate houses that surrounded a common living area. In some African societies, men had more than one wife. Each wife had her own house where she lived with her children.

In addition to the family, an individual's place in society depended on a system of age grades. An *age grade* included all boys or girls born in the same year. Children of each age grade had privileges and responsibilities that were particular to that age grade. Children in older age grades were expected to take part in certain village activities. In this way, the age grade system helped create ties beyond the family.

The Status of Women

The status of women varied in different African societies. Women were respected because marriage and children were basic to family life. However, as in many other cultures, a girl's marriage was arranged by her family when she was in her early teens. If a woman had a child, she won a place in her husband's family. If she had no children, she might be sent back to her family.