
ANCIENT AFRICA



Introduction

When most people hear the words “ancient civilization”, they think of Greece or The Roman Empire. They do not think of Ancient Africa. Why is this? According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a Harvard University Professor and Director of Hutchins Center for African & African American Research there are two reasons. (1) The first reason is slavery. When Europeans started the slave trade they had to justify it. They did this by **portraying**, or describing Africa as an empty land with people who lacked knowledge and culture. The second reason was colonialism.

Colonialism is when a country takes over the land of another country. When this happens the land becomes a colony. As a result of colonialism, Africa was divided into colonies which were governed by European countries. The culture and history of Africa was ignored.

Thankfully, artifacts have been found by **archaeologists**, researchers who study the past. They dig up **artifacts**, or objects that people from previous generations made and used. Because of their hard work, we now know that Africa was an ancient civilization that made more discoveries than the ancient Greeks or the Roman Empire.

Ancient Kingdoms of Africa

From 1000 BCE to 1600 CE, Africa had six major kingdoms. They were Kush, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, and Benin. Each of these kingdoms had their own cultures, customs, and achievements. Other important African societies were the Axum, Bantu, and Zimbabwe.

Kush

The kingdom of Kush is sometimes referred to as Nubia and it was located south of ancient Egypt. Today this area is known as Sudan. Kush was located on the banks of the Nile River. The people of Kush, or the Kushites were farmers, metalworkers, and traders. Farmers raised cattle and sheep. They grew wheat, barley, and **sorghum**, a grain similar to rice. Kushites also grew cotton and dates. Archaeologists also believe that the Kushites grew oranges and grapefruits because these crops are found in Sudan today.

Egypt took over Kush around 1550 BCE. In the early 700s BCE, Kush gained their independence. At one point, Kush ruled over Egypt.

The Kushites created their own language. For a while they wrote using hieroglyphics that were similar to Egyptian hieroglyphics. But eventually, the Kushites created their own script.

The Kushites adopted some of the Egyptian culture. They mummified the dead and buried them in tombs. Many of the dead were buried in pyramids similar to the Egyptian ones.

When the Assyrians invaded Egypt, during the 600s BCE, they sent the Kushites back to their land. While they had lost the land of Egypt, they gained a skill from the Assyrians. They learned how to make iron.

The Kushites were the first Africans to make iron tools and weapons. Using iron tools allowed the farmers to grow larger crops. The weapons increased their military power. By 100 BCE, the kingdom of Kush became known as the iron center of Africa.

Trading also increased during this time period. Kushite traders exchanged iron products, gold, ivory, and leopard skins for **textiles**, or fabric and other goods that they could not produce.

The Kush kingdom declined when they could not make iron. Trees were needed to fuel the fires for making iron. Unfortunately, the people of Kush did not replant or replace enough of the trees that were used for fires. Soon this resource was **depleted**, or used up.

The Kushites began trading incense and ivory. They also looked for new trade routes and eventually started trading with people in Western Africa. This route would become the Trans-Saharan Route.

Today, most scholars believe that the kingdom of Kush ended around 350 CE. They also believe that Kush was an urban area. Looking at the Kushite tombs it appears that the majority of Kush citizens were well off.

Axum

As the Kush kingdom declined, the Axum kingdom began to grow. Axum was located in the area of modern day Ethiopia. Axum was created by Arabs. But it combined both Arab and African cultures.

Axum was located on the Red Sea. It was on a trade route. Axum exported ivory, slaves, and oils like myrrh and frankincense. It imported textiles, metals, and wine. The land was also good for growing crops. There was enough water and the soil was **fertile**, or healthy.

Bantu

South of Axum were a group of people known as the Bantu. These people survived in many different ways. Some hunted or gathered food. Others raised animals for food.

Archaeologists have discovered how the Bantu lived. They raised food for their community. They grew grains, yams, melons, and beans. Bantu women took care of the crops. The men hunted and traded.

Later generations of the Bantu built the city of Great Zimbabwe. This city was important to trade. The town was located on a hill near the Zambezi River. A stone wall surrounded the city. 18,000 people lived in this city.

By the middle of the 1400s Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. Archaeologists think that this may have happened due to a natural disaster, overcrowding, or crop failure.

Ghana

Ancient Ghana was a large kingdom that was the size of present day western Europe. It was one of the most powerful kingdoms in West Africa. It came into existence 300 CE. It was ruled by a king who had an army of 200,000 men.

Ghana became a trading empire. This was because it was located between gold and salt mines. Ghana was the trade route for these items. The king of Ghana insured that traders would have safe passage through his country in exchange for a price. Horses, donkeys, and camels were used to transport goods for trading.

From 800-150 CE, Koumbi was a busy city in Ghana. It was a busy market place. Gold and salt were traded. Cattle, honey, textiles, ivory, and ebony were sold. Local food and crafts were also sold.

In the 900s, many Arabs who were traders decided to live in Ghana. These people introduced their number and writing system. Ghana adopted the Arabian writing systems. The Arabs also brought their religion of Islam to the country. Many people in Ghana converted to Islam.

The people of Ghana were creative. They wove fabric and painted designs on it using mud. They were also storytellers. The stories of Anansi the spider were created by the people of ancient Ghana.

The Empire of Ghana collapsed by the end of the 1200s. This happened for three reasons. First, Ghana was invaded by the Almoravids. The Almoravids cut off many of the trade routes. Second, Ghana was overgrazed. When the Almoravids took over Ghana they brought many herd animals with them. The animals ate all the grass leaving the soil to blow away in the wind. Crops could not grow in these conditions. Third, rebels took over Ghana.

Mali

Mali began to grow as a kingdom when Ghana collapsed around 1300 CE. It was located on the river, Niger. The river provided transportation for goods that were being traded. Mali controlled the gold and salt trading route across the Sahara desert for 300 years, beginning in the thirteenth century. By 1500 Mali had lost control of the trading route.

Mali also grew food. Their main crops were beans, onions, and rice. They also grew cotton and turned it into cloth. This cloth was light weight and kept people cool in hot weather. The people of Mali also began selling to other countries.

Due to the trade route, the religion of Islam was introduced to the people of Mali. The ruler, Mansa Musa converted to Islam and also established religious freedom. He turned the city of Timbuktu into a center of learning. It had one of the largest libraries of the time period with over 7,000 manuscripts.

The kingdom of Mali failed for three reasons. First, some of the leaders were weak and did not rule well. Second, Mali was so large it was hard for the government to run it. Parts of the empire began breaking away. Third, invaders and raiders attacked Mali. Timbuktu burned and many buildings were destroyed. By 1500 only a small part of Mali remained.

Songhai

Songhai was part of the Mali Empire. But as Mali's strength weakened, Songhai was able to gain independence. As the Mali kingdom declined, Songhai began to grow. Songhai became the most powerful nation in Western Africa. Under the first king, Sunni Ali the nation grew to become larger than Ghana or Mali. Later rulers would expand the military of Songhai by creating a full-time army and navy.

Words To Know

Decline: To go down, decrease

Export: Send goods to another country

Import: Bring goods from another country

At one point, Songhai extended 2,000 miles down the West African Coast. The empire controlled all the salt mines in the north and all the gold mines in the south.

Askia the Great, was another leader of Songhai. He was interested in **astronomy**, the study of stars and planets, and so he built observatories in the capital city, Timbuktu. He started the University of Sankore. People from West Africa came to study law, math, and the sciences. He also built canals to improve agriculture and introduced weights and measurements for trading.

The slave trade was also important to Songhai. Slaves were usually people that had been captured during wars with nearby regions. They were used to transport goods across the desert. Some were sold to Europeans.

The Songhai Empire declined when they were invaded by the Moors. The Moors fought with cannons and guns while the Songhai fought with swords, spears, bows, and arrows.

Kanem-Bornu

The Kanem-Bornu Empire began in the ninth century and ended at the end of the nineteenth century. It included the area where the modern countries of Niger, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria are located.

This empire was in charge of trade between North Africa and lands to the south. Kanem-Bornu sold salt, ivory, and livestock. They also traded slaves for horses. The Kanem-Bornu also were farmers. They raised food for themselves.

Benin

The Benin Kingdom was located at the point where the Niger River flowed into the Atlantic Ocean. It was a smaller kingdom in a rainforest.

Explorers from Portugal came to Benin to get spices such as pepper. But they became more interested in ivory and the slave trade. Benin began trading ivory, spices, and slaves along with gold and silver in exchange for firearms.

The Benin did not have a written language. Events were recorded by metal makers who created plaques or sculptures out of bronze. They also created masks out of wood. Benin began to lose power in the 1800s. By 1987, the British ruled this kingdom.



What Was The Deal With Salt?

It may seem strange to us, but salt was very important to ancient Western Africa. In fact, it was sometimes traded pound for pound for gold!

Salt was not found in Western Africa. But it was a need for the people who lived there. They needed it for three reasons. Salt was needed as a preservative. Dried meat could be preserved using salt. (Think bacon or corned beef!) Salt was also used as a spice to flavor food. Finally, salt was needed because the climate of Africa was so hot. People lost salt when they perspired. They need to replenish this salt loss.

Salt was transported on camels across the desert. Each camel would have two large slabs of salt to carry. Each slab could weigh up to 200 pounds.

African Trading Empires

1000 BCE

To

1600 CE



- 1000 BCE-150 CE

- East Africa, south of Egypt

- Traded:
 - iron
 - ivory
 - gold
 - ebony
 - slaves

- Lost power to Axum

- 100 CE-1400 CE

- East Africa, present day Ethiopia

- Traded:
 - ivory
 - frankincense
 - myrrh
 - slaves

- Founded by Arab traders

- 400 CE-1200 CE

- West Africa

- Traded:
 - iron
 - animal products
 - gold

- Traded products for salt

- 1250-1450 CE

- West Africa

- Traded:
 - gold
 - salt

- Muslim center for learning

- 1000-1600 CE

- West Africa

- Traded:
 - gold
 - salt
 - slaves

- Full-time army