

EMPIRE OF GHANA

KEY CONCEPT FOCUS: This close reading will address the geography, economy, religions, government and achievements of the African Empire of Ghana.



The Ghana Empire was an ancient kingdom located in west Africa. It sat between the Senegal and Niger Rivers and encompassed the area now called southeastern Mauritania and western Mali. It covered more than 100,000 miles and was bordered on the east by Lake Chad.

HISTORY

The empire of Ghana was established around 300 CE by the Soninke people. These farmers banded together to form a civilization for protection from nomadic traders who wanted to steal their land and water. Their civilization would last until the 13th century. With the discovery of iron, the people of Ghana were able to make strong farming tools and weapons such as spearheads and blades. Other armies in the region had tools and weapons made of wood and bone, which proved less effective in battle.

TRADERS

The traders who came to Ghana were **Berbers**, or Muslim traders from North Africa who used camels to carry their goods across the desert. These caravans traveled the **Trans-Saharan trade route**, which consisted of many trails that connected the sub-Sahara region of West Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. Since Ghana was located between the salt deposit-rich Sahara and gold-rich forests in the south, these two resources were traded heavily. In fact, salt and gold were traded as equal in value! Replenished through diet, salt is needed to survive in order to replace lost salt from sweating. Salt was also used to preserve food, and it made food taste better. It was in such high demand that salt slabs were sometimes even cut up to be used as money. Likewise, gold was a

major commodity traded all over the world. Gold coins were used in Europe, and the Chinese only traded precious silk for gold.

GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY

The capital of Ghana was *Koumbi Saleh*. Not only was it a major city but it was also a large trading center. Because the area of Ghana was so large, the king divided the kingdom into individual provinces. These provinces were led by leaders who reported directly to the king. To maintain order and protect his people from outside invaders, the king had a large army of 200,000 warriors. However, though the king kept a tight control of his empire, the laws that he passed were fair, and the people of Ghana were peace loving. The Empire grew to its peak under Tunka Manin, who was known for his lavish court, decorated with gold. As Muslim trader, al-Bakri wrote, "Behind the king stand pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold" (*The Book of Routes and Kingdoms*).

Ghana grew wealthy from trade through taxation. Along with gold and salt, traders carried copper, silver, cloth, and spices. As Ghana was in a prime location in between salt and gold mines, rulers taxed traders passing through Ghana. Traders had to pay taxes on the goods they carried to Ghana and took away with them. The king supplied a safely guarded passage in return. Ghana also taxed neighboring tribes with a promise that they would not attack. This tax is called paying **tribute**. Taxes would in turn help pay for a growing army needed for conquering and protection.

RELIGION

Initially, the people of Ghana believed that plants, natural objects, and natural phenomena could have a soul. This spiritual belief is known as **animism**. This reflects their dependence on the natural environment for survival. Also, ancestor worship was, and in many parts of Africa still is a typical religious practice. In **ancestor worship** people seek guidance from revered relatives that have passed. Ancestors are often honored with sacred places, where a family can visit. However, in time much of the empire of Ghana and greater North Africa would convert to Islam due to traders that shared their religion with the region.