Ghana: A West African Trading Empire

The kingdom of Ghana lasted from 500 C.E. to the 11th century C.E. The kingdom arose from the Sahel of Africa and spread to the valley between the Senegal and Niger Rivers. To the south of Ghana was the forest and to the north lay the vast Sahara Desert. Today the ancient kingdom of Ghana is part of the modern African nations of Mauritania and Mali. There is a modern African nation called Ghana but it is located in a different part of Africa as the old kingdom. The earliest writings of about the kingdom come from Arab scholars. They described Ghana as a fabled land of gold. Their accounts tell of a rich kingdom with a strong government and a large and powerful army.

The theory about how Ghana developed into an empire was that a group of warriors used iron weapons to defeat the neighboring tribes. The word Ghana means “war chief”. After Ghana’s dominance was established in the region, they became wealthy from their control of trade, particularly gold. Gold was especially plentiful in the areas south of Ghana. Ghana collected taxes on the gold and other goods that passed through their kingdom. To preserve (keep) his wealth the King required that all gold nuggets, or chunks, were given to him. Other people could only have gold dust. One of the king’s nuggets was said to weigh almost 40 pounds.

Ghana achieved its wealth from trade between North Africa and the southern forests of West Africa. Traders from the north crossed the Sahara Desert with salt, copper, and cowry shells (the shells were used as money). They traded these items and other goods for kola nuts, hides, leather goods, ivory, slaves, and gold from the south. Ghana’s location allowed it to control this trans-Saharan trade. Traders going to and from the south had to pass through Ghana. Each time someone entered and left Ghana with trade goods they had to pay taxes. These taxes help make Ghana rich.

Archeologists have proven that North Africans brought back gold the southern forest as far back as 500 B.C.E. However, trade at this early period was very difficult. One thing that made trade between the north and south easier was the introduction of the camel to the Sahara desert. Camels were first brought to the Sahara Desert around 300C.E. The introduction of camels allowed traders to establish trade routes across the Sahara Desert. By 400 C.E., gold from the southern forest was in North Africa.

Trade expanded even more because of the spread of Islam into North Africa. In the seventh century, Muslims invaded Ghana’s empire. The Muslims wanted to convert (change religions) West Africans to Islam and control trade in the region. Ghana eventually turned back the Muslim invaders. However, many Muslims settled in West African towns and became merchants (people who sell things).

North Africans and people of the southern forests traded many items, but the two that were in the most demand were gold and salt. The North Africans wanted gold and the people in the forest wanted salt. Ghana made most of its money from the taxes that it charged on the trade that resulted from these two items. Ghana charged one-sixth of an ounce of gold for each load of salt that came into the kingdom. The trade taxes enriched Ghana’s treasury and paid for the army that protected the kingdom. The taxes also benefited the traders because Ghana’s army protected the trade routes from...
bandits.

The gold came from a region south of the Sahara Desert known as Wangara. In Wangara, gold was plentiful. However, the Wangarans did not think gold was valuable, except as an item of trade. Their culture had little use for gold. Gold was too soft to make into tools or weapons so it was not practical (useful).

The Wangarans thought salt was more practical than gold. Salt is important to a person’s diet. When people and animals perspire (sweat), they lose salt from their body. People who live in areas with hot climates sweat a lot, so they must replace the salt that their body loses from perspiration or else they will die. Salt was also used to flavor food and keep it from spoiling. Wangarans did not have a reliable source of salt in their region so they had to trade for it.

Salt was produced in two ways. Water was poured into holes in the salty earth and then the water would draw the salt out of the soil. Eventually that water would evaporate (dry up) and you would be left with salt. The salt that remained was scooped out of the holes and packed into blocks. The second way to get salt was through mining. At Taghaza, a mine in the Sahara desert, salt deposits were found about three feet below the earth. Miners dug trenches and tunnels so they could reach the salt and then they would dig it out of the ground.

When North African trade caravans entered Ghana, they took their goods to the great marketplace in the city of Kumbi. From there they headed to the southern forest to trade with the Wangarans. Trade with the Wangarans took place along a river in the southern forests. The traders carried out their business using a silent system of barter. The North Africans usually spread out their goods on the river and then they beat a drum to announce that they were making an offer of trade. Then they walked several miles away from the site.

When the Wangarans heard the drums, they would travel to the site by boat. They put some gold dust next to the goods, beat a drum and then left. Later the North African traders returned, if the amount of gold was acceptable, they took it and left. If the trade was not acceptable, they went away again and waited for the Wangarans to return and leave more gold dust. The groups bargained back and forth like this without ever meeting in person until the trade was complete. The warriors of Ghana protected the trading site so no one would steal anything.

This silent system of barter had two advantages. First, it allowed people who people who spoke different languages to conduct business. Second, it allowed the Wangarans to keep the location of their mines secret. The Wangarans realized that if the North Africans knew of the location of the mines then they could be invaded and their gold would be stolen. To this day, no one knows the exact location of the ancient Wangaran gold mines.

Ghana’s empire reached its height of power around 1000 C.E. However, war and the loss of natural resources led to its downfall. In the second half of the 11th century, Muslims called Almoravids began attacking Ghana’s empire. In 1076 C.E., they captured the capital city of Kumbi. Ghana’s king regained power but the old empire had broken apart. The downfall of Ghana opened the way for the rise of a new African power, Mali. Around 1204 C.E., a group of West African tribe known as Mande, (people of Mali) conquered Kumbi. The Mande built an empire that was larger than Ghana’s. Like Ghana, Mali gained much of its wealth from the gold and salt trade. The leaders of Mali accepted the religion of Islam, and under their rule, the Muslim faith became more influential in West Africa.
Ghana: A West African Trading Empire Worksheet

(Activity in full and complete sentences)

1. When was the kingdom of Ghana in power?

2. The Kingdom of Ghana is located between which two rivers?

3. The ancient kingdom of Ghana was located in what two modern African nations?

4. Who were the first people to write about the kingdom of Ghana?

5. What sort of weapons helped Ghana come to power?

6. What does the word Ghana mean?

7. What did the king do to preserve his wealth?

8. What were cowry shells used for in ancient Africa?

9. What animal caused the development (start) of trade routes across the Sahara Desert?

10. What two items were in the most demand between North Africans and the people from the southern forests?

11. How much did Ghana charge for each load of salt that came into its kingdom?
12. Why were taxes good for Ghana?

13. Why were taxes good for the traders?

14. What was the name of the region that the gold came from?

15. Why didn’t the people from the southern forests think gold was valuable?

16. What did those people think was more valuable than gold?

17. What was salt used for? (Name 3 things)

18. What is Taghaza?

19. What system was used to trade gold for salt?

20. What were the drums used for during trading?

21. What were the two advantages of the particular system of trade used between North Africans and Wangarans?

22. Where were the gold mines of Wangara located?

23. What caused Ghana to lose power? (Name two things)

24. Which African tribe controlled trade in West Africa after Ghana fell?
25. What religion did the new power in West Africa convert to?