

Why is it important to learn about early African civilizations?

In 2018, millions of moviegoers flocked to theaters to see Marvel's *Black Panther*. Set in the mythical utopia of Wakanda, the film depicts an African country left untouched by colonization and allowed to thrive in isolation. Although Wakanda is fictional, it raises real questions about the continent: What would have been Africa's trajectory if European colonization had not exploited its people and resources? Might African countries have prospered and become industrial and cultural leaders of the modern world?

Before European conquest in the 15th century, African societies were complex, benefitting from continental and global trade that drove robust economies. Similar to the emergence of other civilizations, African kingdoms used their natural resources to maximize commerce and industry, leading to centralized government, social stratification, job specialization and the creation of notable cities and architectural wonders. These societies were also characterized by systems of education, organized religion and rich artistic and cultural expression. Examples of powerful empires, profiled in this unit, include the following:

- **Aksum (c. 1st–8th century CE):** Considered as great a power as Rome, Persia and China in its time, Aksum's position on the Red Sea made it an international trading hub. Aksum was the first African society to issue its own currency and to adopt Christianity as its official religion. Aksum's power is exhibited in its stelae, 100 monuments that were the tallest buildings in the ancient world. Each weighed 700 tons and was intricately carved from a single slab of stone.
- **Ghana (c. 6th–13th century CE):** Known as the "land of gold," Ghana invented gold-mining technology and controlled major gold fields in the region. Its kings, or "lords of the gold," controlled this precious metal, taxing it heavily and bestowing luxurious gifts of it upon allies. The trans-Saharan trade in gold, salt and other goods enriched Ghana and allowed it to centralize power. Arab visitors wrote of a force of 200,000 soldiers, including 40,000 archers.
- **Mali (c. 1240–1645 CE):** Three-quarters of the gold traded to North Africa and Europe during medieval times came from Mali, making it a global superpower. Mali's most famous king, Mansa Musa, capitalized upon this trade, enriching his kingdom and himself—his wealth has been estimated at \$400 billion in today's currency. Mansa Musa invested in universities and libraries throughout Mali that were among the greatest in the medieval world.
- **Kush (c. 1069 BCE–350 CE):** Made rich from the mining of minerals and the development of iron metallurgy, the Kushites had a massive gold-processing operation and a written language based on Egyptian hieroglyphics. Notable art and architecture from the major cities of Meroe, Kerma and Napata include stone temple complexes, pyramids, narrative tomb wall paintings and granite and bronze statues of gods and kings.

→ **Great Zimbabwe (c. 1300–1450 CE):**

Enriched by trade in gold and ivory, the city of Great Zimbabwe was home to as many as 18,000 people, including 2,000 goldsmiths, stonemasons and other skilled craftsmen. Among the 300 structures uncovered there by archaeologists are a hill complex surrounded by a 37-foot-high granite wall, a “Great Enclosure” surrounded by a wall of a million blocks and massive stone towers with sculpted stairways.

Many students will be surprised to learn about the geographic, linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity of Africa, and its rich cultural history. Too often the continent is presented as a monolith, shaped by 19th and 20th century popular culture. Investigating Africa’s vibrant pre-colonial civilizations can help debunk misconceptions about its power and place in the world, and spark curiosity about the 54 nations that make up Africa today.