

POWERFUL AFRICAN KINGDOMS



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Why is it important to learn about the history of early African civilizations?
How can learning about early African civilizations counteract stereotypes and biases about Africa today?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Consider how stereotypes about Africa have led to knowledge gaps about its people and history.
- Analyze primary sources from an early African civilization and make inferences about its culture.
- Annotate a text about an early African civilization.
- Discuss the disparities between perception and reality when it comes to African people and history.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

80 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment for projecting a map image
- *Map of Early African Civilizations* handout (one to project)
- *African Civilizations* handout (one per student)
- *Historian Kits: Kush, Aksum, Mali and Great Zimbabwe* (copies of one kit for each small group)



VOCABULARY

Aksum (also Axum)
civilization
empire

Ghana
Great Zimbabwe
kingdom

Kush
Mali
stereotype

Procedures

PART 1

Africa's Hidden Past (20 mins.)

1 Engage students in the brief game “Can You Name Three?” Have them work in pairs or small groups. Direct each team to fold a sheet of paper into four sections and write the numbers one to three in each quadrant. Pose the first question below and allow teams about a minute to propose answers and list them in the first quadrant. Tell them the only rule is that none of their responses can be related to the United States. Continue in the same way with the remainder of the questions, providing examples as needed so that students understand the categories.

- Can you name three powerful civilizations in history, not including the U.S.?
- Can you name three important leaders in history or today outside the U.S.?
- Can you name three major geographical features outside of the U.S.?
- Can you name three major human-made innovations outside of the U.S.?

2 Ask teams if they were able to come up with three examples for each category and allow them to share some of their responses. Note the parts of the world that most of their responses come from. Ask students how many of their examples come from Africa (presumably there will be few or none.) Discuss why Africa might be underrepresented on their lists and, more generally, when we think of important people, places and contributions to the world. Highlight that stereotypes of Africa as less developed, powerful and important have led to gaps in our knowledge about this diverse continent.

NOTE

Africa may not be the only underrepresented part of the world on students' lists. Many other non-Western regions will likely be missing. As a follow-up to this lesson, which focuses on Africa, students may want to investigate other areas of the world that represent knowledge gaps for them, or inquire into the idea of Eurocentrism and why white and European culture is often focused on in ways that exclude a wider view of the world.

NOTE

Students may be surprised to learn that Africa is a continent (not a country) and just how vast it is. Visual Capitalist's "Mapped: Visualizing the True Size of Africa" includes useful graphics that demonstrate Africa's magnitude. See <http://bit.ly/3ibm9sL>.

3

As a class, brainstorm answers to the "Can You Name Three?" categories related to Africa and list them on the board or a sheet of chart paper. Alternatively, have teams conduct brief research and report back on one important person, place or contribution related to Africa. Point out that Africa has more countries (54) than any other continent and is the second largest in both area and population, making it the site of much rich and important history. Tell students that they will investigate some of this history by learning about one important early African civilization.

PART 2

Africa's Powerful Past (at least 60 mins.)

4

Project the handout *Map of Early African Civilizations*. Identify the following four kingdoms on the map and tell students that they will be investigating one of them in small groups: Kush, Aksum (also Axum), Mali and Great Zimbabwe. Ask students what they already know about these civilizations and list facts on chart paper or have students record prior knowledge in their notebooks.

5

Divide students into small "historian roundtable" groups and assign each a kingdom. (Depending on class size, there may be more than one group assigned to each kingdom.) Distribute the handout *African Civilizations* to each student and review it with the class. Tell students they will take notes in each category as they learn about their assigned kingdom.

6

Distribute copies of the appropriate *Historian Kit* handout to each group. Instruct groups to begin with Part 1, which asks them to closely observe and discuss a map, quote, artifacts and remains from their assigned kingdom. After completing this section, direct groups to continue to Part 2, which asks them to read a text and record notes on the *African Civilizations* graphic organizer.

NOTE

The texts in the *Historian Kits* draw mainly from PBS's *Africa's Great Civilizations* (<http://to.pbs.org/3sgX-ise>). Over the course of six episodes, historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. interviews academics and archeologists and visits key sites to offer a reconstruction of Africa's civilizations. Clips from the series can be used in addition or as an alternative to the texts in the *Historian Kits*.

7

Choose one of the following options depending on available time:

- (less time) Have each group select one artifact or remain from their investigation that they think best reflects the achievements of their assigned civilization. Form new small groups that have a mix of students who studied different civilizations. Direct students to take turns sharing their artifact or remain and using it as a means to provide a summary of what they learned about the civilization.
- (more time) Have each group select one artifact or remain from their investigation that they think best reflects the achievements of their assigned civilization. Instruct them to create a three-dimensional model of the artifact and write a label to accompany it, with key information (i.e., title, dates, materials, names of relevant people, etc.) and a few sentences of descriptive text. Assemble the models into a class museum of African civilizations and allow students time to take a “gallery walk” and record what they have learned.

8

Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the next page.



Discussion Questions

1

Before this lesson, were you aware of any early African civilizations besides Egypt? If so, which ones and what were your sources of information?

2

Why is knowledge about early African civilizations so limited in our society?

3

Why is it important to learn about the history of early African civilizations?

4

As you investigated an African civilization, what new information or ideas most stood out or surprised you?

5

How did your ideas or understandings of African people and nations change as a result of this lesson?

6

Many people hold stereotypes of Africa as poor, weak and remote. What are examples of wealth, power and global connectedness related to African civilizations?

7

Why do so many people think of Africa as a country instead of a continent? What can be done—in schools or the wider society—to challenge incorrect ideas about Africa and its people?

Lesson Extensions

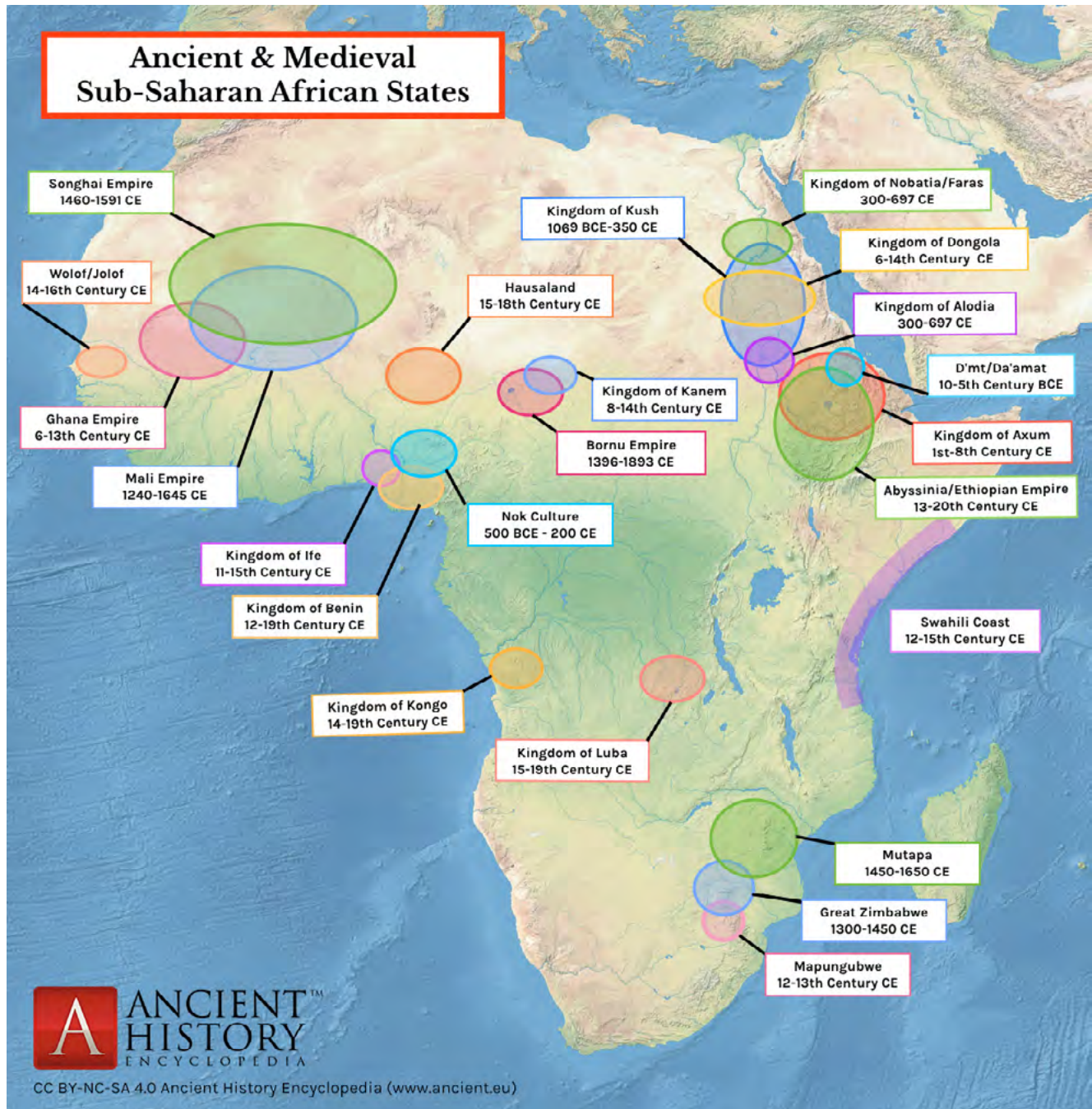
- Assign students to continue their learning about early African civilizations by researching a kingdom they have not yet investigated from the *Map of Early African Civilizations* handout. Have students create a poster or multimedia presentation summarizing their key findings.
- Assign students to research what life is like in an African country today that corresponds with one of the early civilizations they studied (e.g., Mali, Ghana, Sudan, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe). Have them focus on urban as well as rural life, and present on what African cities are like in order to dispel the myth that all Africans live in small villages.
- Share the campaign to challenge misconceptions about Africa launched by the Ithaca College African Students Association: “The Real Africa: Fight the Stereotype,” <http://cnn.it/39rnZC8>. Have students create a brief survey that they can administer with peers to learn what stereotypes people in their school hold about Africa (e.g., Africa is a country, all Africans are poor, etc.) Based on the results, students can design posters to display at school that challenge stereotypes or write an article about it for the school website or newspaper.
- Plan field trips to area museums to further explore African artifacts and history (see sample list below). Invite African studies scholars from nearby colleges and universities to provide a presentation to your school.
 - ➔ Newark Museum: Arts of Global Africa
 - ➔ Princeton University Art Museum: Women and the Arts of Africa
 - ➔ New Jersey Department State Museum (Trenton): Archaeology & Ethnography Department
 - ➔ African American Heritage Museum of Southern New Jersey (Atlantic City)
 - ➔ African Art Museum (Tenafly)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Exploring Africa, “Curriculum,” <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/curriculum>.
- + Mr. Donn’s Site for Kids and Teachers, “Lesson Plans: African Kingdoms,” <https://africa.mrdonn.org/kingdomlessons.html>.
- + PBS, “Africa’s Great Civilizations,” <https://www.pbs.org/weta/africas-great-civilizations/home>.
- + We Love Africa. “10 African Civilizations More Amazing Than Ancient Egypt.” September 8, 2019. YouTube video, 3:39. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rojJLRjNYxk>.



Map of Early African Civilizations



SOURCE: Cartwright, Mark. *Map of Ancient & Medieval Sub-Saharan African States*. Ancient History Encyclopedia. April 12, 2019. Accessed January 12, 2021. <https://www.ancient.eu/image/10453/map-of-ancient-medieval-sub-saharan-african-state>.



Map of Early African Civilizations

As you observe and read, record key ideas on the chart below.

NAME AND APPROXIMATE DATES OF CIVILIZATION: _____

Geography

(What were the advantages of the kingdom's location?)

Trade

(What resources and goods powered its economy?)

Innovation

(What were major achievements in technology, culture, education, etc.?)

Contact

(What interactions were there with other nations?)

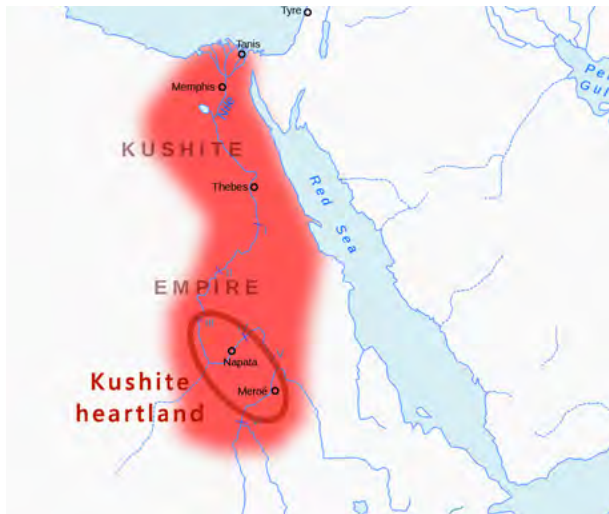


Historian Kit: Kush

PART 1

→ **Examine:** Closely observe the map, quote, architectural remains and artifacts.

→ **Discuss:** What might you conclude about this kingdom based on its remains and geography?



Kush was a kingdom in northern Africa in the region corresponding to modern-day Sudan.

See: <http://bit.ly/2KbAl8G>

“Then the ships were laden with silver, gold, copper, clothing, and everything of the Northland, every product of Syria and all the sweet woods of God’s-Land. His majesty sailed upstream [south], with glad heart, the shores on his either side were jubilating. West and east were jubilating in the presence of his majesty.”

—Piankhi, ancient Kushite king who ruled Egypt from 744–714 BCE



This large mud brick temple, known as the Western Deffufa, was part of the ancient city of Kerma (in today’s Sudan). These remains from the Kush Empire are from about 2500 BCE.

See: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/waltercallens/3486244425>



Kush pyramids and royal tombs were used for the burial of kings and queens in the wealthy city of Meroe, on the Nile River. They date as far back as 500 BCE.

See: <http://bit.ly/3qhZDBI>



Historian Kit: Kush (continued)



This stone carving (1st century BCE) is from the temple of Amun in the ancient city of Naqa. It depicts a *kandake* (female leader) from Meroe. Named *Amanishakheto*, she stands between a god and goddess.

See: <http://bit.ly/3oGqWFi>



This piece of gold jewelry was found in the tomb of Nubian King Amaninatakilebte (538–519 BC).

See: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/menesje/47758289472>

IMAGE SOURCES

Lommes and National Geographic. *Kushite heartland and Kushite Empire of the 25th dynasty circa 700 BCE*. August 31, 2020. Accessed January 6, 2021. <http://bit.ly/2KbAl8G>.

Callens, Walter, Retlaw Snellac Photography. *Western Deffufa—Kerma.jpg*. March 26, 2009. Accessed January 6, 2021. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Western_Deuffufa_-_Kerma.jpg, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/waltercallens/3486244425>.

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Khruner. *Relief Amanishakheto Munich.JPG*. October 3, 2015. Khartoum National Museum. Accessed January 6, 2021. <http://bit.ly/3oGqWFi>.

Ollermann, Hans. *Jewelry found on the Mummy of Nubian King AMANINATAKILEBTE (538–519 BC)*. May 9, 2019. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Accessed January 6, 2021. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/menesje/47758289472>, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jewelry_found_on_the_Mummy_of_Nubian_King_AMANINATAKILEBTE_\(538-519_BC\).Museum_of_Fine_Arts_Boston.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jewelry_found_on_the_Mummy_of_Nubian_King_AMANINATAKILEBTE_(538-519_BC).Museum_of_Fine_Arts_Boston.jpg).



Historian Kit: Kush

PART 2

Investigate Further: Read the text below to learn more about the Kush civilization. Record notes on your graphic organizer related to geography, trade, innovation and contact with other nations.

The **Kingdom of Kush** thrived for about 1,000 years. Architectural excavations teach us about its history. The planned and complex city of Kerma was built on the southern end of the Nile River. More than 10,000 people lived there and the kingdom enjoyed wealth from its gold. Kush's northern neighbor, Egypt, was a primary customer, buying gold for the pharaohs' elaborate burial chambers. Gold is a metal that does not corrode and was a perfect material for making ornaments to send with the pharaohs into their after-life. Of course, Egypt desired direct control of the gold and, in 1500 BCE, an invasion ended 15 centuries of Kush independence.

For 400 years, Kush existed under Egyptian rule, but still kept its own kings and queens. The Kush city of Meroe became an ironworking center after the technology to process this metal was discovered in central Africa. With new powerful weapons and a strong following, Kush leader Piankhi fought back the Egyptians all the way to the Nile delta in 750 BCE. Kush went on to rule a larger territory than Egypt ever did. Historians refer to this period as "Black Pharaohs of the Nile."

Kush eventually lost its control over Egypt. However, the kingdom enjoyed a golden age in the 5th century BCE as a strong, independent nation with fertile agriculture, vibrant trade up the Nile, wealth in the form of iron and gold deposits and a system of writing.

When Rome conquered Egypt, the Kush kandake (queen), Aminerenas, mounted a five-year attack on Roman Egypt to prevent them from invading Kush.



Pyramid at El-Kurru, used as a burial site by the Nubian royal family of Kush

Having lost an eye in battle, the Roman governor, Petronius, referred to the powerful queen as "One Eye Kandace." Historians know about this campaign from Roman records since no scholar is able to translate the Kush records, carved in Kushite script on stone.

In a PBS documentary on African civilizations, the Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. asks: "Are you telling me a one-eyed Black woman was able to defeat the most powerful army on the face of the Earth in 23 BC, here in the kingdom of Kush?!" Aminerenas was indeed successful in forcing the Roman Empire to negotiate with her and helped secure Kush independence for centuries to come.

SOURCES:

PBS, *Africa's Great Civilizations: Origins—Hour One*, <https://www.pbs.org/show/africas-great-civilizations>.

Bertramz. *Al-Kurru, main pyramid.jpg*. November 2008. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Al-Kurru,main_pyramid.jpg.



Historian Kit: Aksum (or Axum)

PART 1

→ **Examine:** Closely observe the map, quote, architectural remains and artifacts.

→ **Discuss:** What might you conclude about this kingdom based on its remains and geography?



The kingdom of Aksum covered modern-day Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, parts of Libya, parts of Chad and parts of Central African Republic.

See: <http://bit.ly/2KcIVs1>

“There are four great kingdoms on earth: the first is the Kingdom of Babylon and Persia; the second is the Kingdom of Rome; the third is the Kingdom of the Aksumites; the fourth is the kingdom of the Chinese.”

—Mani, Persian prophet, 3rd century CE



These ruins are from the ancient port city of Adulis, located on the Red Sea in what is today Eritrea. Adulis was a busy Aksumite seaport from 80 BCE to 825 CE.

See: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Adulis.jpg>



This stela, or monument, was built to honor an Aksum king or other important figure after their death. Stelae were carved from solid blocks of stone in the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, some reaching a height of almost 100 feet.

See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stela_aksum.jpg



Historian Kit: Aksum (or Axum) (continued)



These gold coins are from the time of Ebana, an Aksum king from 440–470 CE.

See: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ebana3.png>



This painting, from 1314 CE, shows the negus (king) of Abyssinia (in today's Ethiopia) granting a safe haven to early Muslims.

See: <http://bit.ly/35AZEbW>

IMAGE SOURCES

Salehahmbaro. *The Kingdom of Aksum.jpg*. July 5, 2018. Accessed January 6, 2021. <http://bit.ly/2KcJVs1>.

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Rashid ad-Din. *Hijra Abyssinia (Rashid ad-Din).jpg*. In Charles Melville (2001): "Persian Painting. From the Mongols to the Qajars." Accessed January 6, 2021. <http://bit.ly/35AZEbW>.



Historian Kit: Aksum

PART 2

Investigate Further: Read the text below to learn more about the Aksum civilization. Record notes on your graphic organizer related to geography, trade, innovation and contact with other nations.

Africans and Asians traded on the eastern coast of Africa for 2,000 years. For many centuries, the **Kingdom of Aksum** dominated this trade and was considered as great a power as Rome, Persia and China. Aksum was one of only two ancient African societies to have a written language (Kush was the other). This advanced kingdom dominated the flow of goods around the Horn of Africa, across the Red Sea and into the Arabian peninsula.

Aksum imported copper and bronze goods, silver, gold, olive oil and lime. Its exports included ivory, rhinoceros horns and turtle shells, which were in demand in Asia. The kingdom grew wealthy by controlling the port city of Adulis on the Red Sea. Tariffs or taxes were charged on goods coming into the port from around the Indian Ocean and from interior trade routes. The region also profited from trade in agricultural products and two annual rainy seasons brought an abundance of crops. Traders from all over the Mediterranean world mingled in Adulis.

The sophistication and wealth of the Aksum kingdom is evident in the *stelae*, 100 monuments that were the tallest buildings in the ancient world. The stelae were an engineering challenge. They weighed about 700 tons and were carved from single slabs of stone. Dragging the slabs to the port city Adulis took about three years (it was possible to move the massive slabs only a few yards at a time). Artisans carved intricate patterns and reliefs (raised surfaces) on the stelae over a period of 10 years.



Northern Stelae Park

Aksum's strength was the Kingdom of Kush's downfall when King Ezana invaded Kush in the 4th century CE and took over its gold and iron resources. King Ezana established contact with many different cultures, and converted to Christianity as a result of influence by the nations of Europe.

By the 5th century CE, Aksum was a global empire. Its vibrant trade increased in response to the Roman Empire's demand for frankincense for use in religious ceremonies. Frankincense came from the bark of trees that grew in Aksum territory. It was difficult to reach these trees in the highlands and strip their bark for the gum resin to make frankincense. Used in perfumes and incense, frankincense was valued as much as gold, and increased Aksum's wealth.

Beginning in the 7th century CE, competition from Arab Muslims for the Red Sea trade networks weakened Aksum. By the late 8th century CE, the mighty Aksum Empire had ceased to exist.

SOURCES:

PBS, *Africa's Great Civilizations: The Cross and the Crescent—Hour Two*, <https://www.pbs.org/show/africas-great-civilizations>.

Beck, Roger B. et al. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. St. Charles, IL: McDougal Littell, 2009.

Allamiro. Obelisk of Aksum Remains4.jpg. June 15, 2015. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obelisk_of_Aksum_Remains4.jpg.



Historian Kit: Mali

PART 1

→ **Examine:** Closely observe the map, quote, architectural remains and artifacts.

→ **Discuss:** What might you conclude about this kingdom based on its remains and geography?



The kingdom of Mali covered modern-day Morocco, Western Sahara, Algeria, Tunisia, and parts of Libya, Niger, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin and Burkina Faso.

See: <http://bit.ly/2LNyD9m>

“During [Mansa Musa’s] reign, which began in 1307 and lasted twenty-five years, he doubled the land area of Mali. Known as the khan [ruler] of Africa, Musa governed an empire as large as all of Europe, second in size only to the territory at the time ruled by Genghis Khan in Asia.”

—Patricia C. McKissack, author of *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay: Life in Medieval Africa*



Sankore University and Mosque, in Timbuktu (a city in Mali), was an ancient center of learning built in the 1100s.

See: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/anneda-vid2012/1299279844>



This image depicts Mansa Musa, emperor of the Mali Empire (c. 1280–c. 1337). It shows major trade routes and goods. An inscription reads, “So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land.”

See: <http://bit.ly/38H4BSw>



Historian Kit: Mali (continued)



This terracotta (clay) figure from the 13th–15th century CE depicts an archer. The warrior is dressed in military gear and equipped with a quiver (case to hold arrows) and a knife strapped to his arm.

See: <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resources/mali/works.htm>



Salt was an important trade item in ancient Mali, used for nutrition, medicine and food preservation. This photo shows salt products in a market in Mopti, in today's Mali. Just like medieval times, salt traveled by camel from the Sahara Desert into Timbuktu, and then to other areas of Mali.

See: <http://bit.ly/2XDHlys>

IMAGE SOURCES

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Taylor, Robin. *Salt selling Mopti Mali.jpg*. May 2003. Accessed January 6, 2021. <http://bit.ly/2XDHlys>, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Salt_selling_Mopti_Mali.jpg.



Historian Kit: Mali

PART 2

Investigate Further: Read the text below to learn more about the Mali civilization. Record notes on your graphic organizer related to geography, trade, innovation and contact with other nations.

To understand the influence of the Mali Empire, one must begin in Ghana. The Ghana civilization grew along the Niger and Senegal rivers beginning in about the 6th century CE. It was rich in gold and became an important trade location for merchants from around the region and the northern Sahara Desert. Ghana grew rich by taxing the gold, salt and other goods that passed through its territory. By 800 CE, Ghana and its powerful army dominated the region, a reign that would last for centuries. However, in the 11th century CE, the kingdom began to weaken due to attacks, competition over trade and a drier climate that damaged crops.

In 1235, the powerful leader Sundiata Keita defeated rivals in the region and established the **Kingdom of Mali**. Under King Sundiata, Mali extended the territory that was once Ghana, taking control of the land west to the Atlantic Ocean, east beyond the Niger River and south into the rain forests, including the Wangara gold fields. Mali expanded the gold trade, positioning itself as the “superpower of the medieval world” and growing the trans-Saharan trade of goods, including salt, ivory, textiles, horses, weapons and spices. Trade in captive people was also common, and their enslaved labor was used in salt and gold mines and on farms in the Sahara.

During the Mali Empire, the gold trade reached great heights. Three-quarters of the gold traded to North Africa and Europe during medieval times came from the Mali Empire. European currency (money) was valued by its weight in gold. The nations of Europe melted old Roman coins to increase their gold assets, and depended greatly on Mali for new supplies of this resource.

Successful trade grew under the leadership of Mansa Musa, Mali’s most famous king, and possibly the richest person who ever lived. (His wealth has



Great Mosque of Djenné, 13th century

been estimated at \$400 billion in today’s currency.) Mansa Musa invested in West African cities like Timbuktu, and built mosques and schools around the empire. As a religious Muslim, he traveled to the holy city of Mecca (in Saudi Arabia) in 1324. As his caravan of 100 camels and thousands of subjects traveled from Mali to Mecca, Mansa Musa gave away gifts of gold and increased the reputation of his kingdom. He returned to Mali with architects and scholars, who built universities and libraries that housed hundreds of thousands of scholarly texts. The commitment in Mali to education and development surpassed most of the world’s nations at the time.

In the documentary *Africa’s Great Civilizations*, Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. reflects: “[The] first time I visited Timbuktu and saw those astonishing libraries with their wealth of scholarly texts, I wanted to cry. I grew up being told that Africans never wrote books, yet here was this astonishing treasure trove of extraordinary, hand-written manuscripts. Many of them were religious, but there were also books about math, astronomy and philosophy. I felt incredible pride and vindication [proof of being right].”

The Mali Empire began to decline after the death of Mansa Musa in the 14th century CE. It was weakened by civil wars, competition over trade and attacks by rivals. By the mid-1600s, Mali was no longer a major power.

SOURCES:

PBS, *Africa’s Great Civilizations: Empires of Gold—Hour Three*, <https://www.pbs.org/show/africas-great-civilizations>.

Beck, Roger B. et al. *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. St. Charles, IL: McDougal Littell, 2009. <https://bit.ly/3reEvgi>.

Garcia, Juan Manuel. *Grand Mosque, Djenne.jpg*. October 10, 2008. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/phase3/2988964373>.



Historian Kit: Great Zimbabwe

PART 1

→ **Examine:** Closely observe the map, quote, architectural remains and artifacts.

→ **Discuss:** What might you conclude about this kingdom based on its remains and geography?



The Great Zimbabwe Kingdom covered modern-day South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zaire, Malawi and parts of Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania.

See: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LocationZimbabwe.svg>

“Among the gold mines of the inland plains between the Limpopo and Zambezi rivers there is a fortress built of stones of marvelous size... and one of them is a tower more than 12 fathoms [72 feet] high.”

—Vicente Pegado, captain of the Portuguese fort of Sofala, in southern Africa, 1531



The “Great Enclosure” of Great Zimbabwe (occupied during the 13th–15th centuries) has walls as high as 36 feet and is the largest ancient structure south of the Sahara Desert.

See: <http://bit.ly/3oJCQ0S>



Birds carved from soapstone, found in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, combine human and avian features. They may have symbolized royal authority or the ancestors of the kingdom’s rulers. A similar bird icon appears on the modern flag of Zimbabwe.

See: <http://bit.ly/3ibljmb>



Historian Kit: Great Zimbabwe (continued)



Complex architecture can be found in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe, such as this wooden lintel above a doorway. (A lintel is a beam placed across the openings of doors and windows to support the weight of the structure above.)

See: <http://bit.ly/3nIVDYS>



This coin from Byblos (an ancient city in today's Lebanon) shows the conical tower of Great Zimbabwe, which stood 30 feet high. It may have been a storehouse for grain. Shona rulers often distributed grain to their subjects as a symbol of generosity and protection.

See: <http://bit.ly/38llbKA>

IMAGE SOURCES

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Historian Kit: Great Zimbabwe

PART 2

Investigate Further: Read the text below to learn more about the Great Zimbabwe civilization. Record notes on your graphic organizer related to geography, trade, innovation and contact with other nations.

The Shona people of southern Africa built great stone cities more than a thousand years ago. One of those cities was **Great Zimbabwe**, which existed from the 11th to the mid-16th centuries CE and had a peak population of about 18,000 people. Great Zimbabwe grew from a farming community into a wealthy center of trade and power due to its nearness to gold fields.

Between the 11th and 17th centuries, African civilizations enjoyed a “Golden Age,” according to Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. During this period, more than 500 tons of gold were exported from the East African coast, which would be valued at approximately \$30 billion today. The Zimbabwe Kingdom controlled the flow of gold as well as ivory, harvested from elephant tusks, which was traded on the Swahili (east) coast and from there to the rest of the world. Half of the gold and ivory collected was made available for trade. The other half was kept by the king, making the rulers of Great Zimbabwe exceptionally wealthy and powerful.

There is much that is unknown about the Great Zimbabwe civilization, but there are clues in the 300 structures archaeologists have uncovered in the region.

→ A hill complex surrounded

by a 36-foot-high granite wall suggests that the city was important as both a political and military center. Inside the complex, the king presided over the empire from atop a large boulder shaped like a bird. From there, he ruled on matters of crime, oversaw sacrifices to the gods and participated in other rituals.

- A “Great Enclosure,” known as “the house of the great women,” was surrounded by a wall of a million blocks, held together without mortar. About the size of 1,400 football fields, the enclosure is believed to have been the site of important ceremonies and the place where the wives of rulers lived. Inner walls were built that forced people to walk single-file so the different social classes would be kept from mixing.
- The city contained massive stone towers with detailed decorations and sculpted stairways. It is believed that 200 to 300 members of the highest class in that society stayed in these buildings and were watched over at night by guards standing on walls.
- Ordinary people lived outside the towers and walled enclosures in a “Valley Complex” of huts made from mud and gravel. Skilled workers lived throughout the valley, including potters, weavers, blacksmiths, stonemasons and about 2,000 goldsmiths.
- Among the ruins, archaeologists have found artifacts



Tower of Great Zimbabwe

showing that Great Zimbabwe had contact with many cultures. These items include Chinese pottery, Persian ceramics and glass beads from India.

Great Zimbabwe declined in power beginning in the 15th century, after gold sources began drying up and new trade routes weakened the empire’s control over business. Eventually the city of Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. When European explorers found the lost city in the 19th century, they refused to believe that Africans could have created such a complex network of buildings and monuments. Later, archaeologists challenged these prejudices by showing that early Africans had advanced architecture and technology, and their civilizations were as sophisticated as those of Europe and other parts of the world.

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