



The Ghana Kingdom (about 700–1200 CE)



Ghana was West Africa's first powerful empire. It was located further north than today's nation of Ghana. Modern Ghana took its name in honor of ancient Ghana.

Ghana was known as the "land of gold." Ghanaians (the people of Ghana) invented ways to mine gold. They controlled three major gold fields. The kingdom became wealthy by trading gold throughout Africa. The kings of Ghana controlled the gold that was unearthed, and were called "lords of the gold." Visitors from Arab countries wrote about expensive gifts given by these kings to their neighbors and trading partners.

Ghanaians traded gold for salt from the Sahara Desert region. They needed salt for its nutrients and to preserve food. Other goods that were traded included copper, ivory, textiles and leather, herbs and spices and foods such as fish, rice, honey and kola nuts. These societies also traded enslaved people. The use of horses and camels at this time helped trade to grow.

The success of Ghana allowed its rulers to build power. They used iron to make weapons and commanded a large army. Arab visitors wrote of a force of 200,000 soldiers, including 40,000 archers. This may have been an exaggeration, but it shows that Ghana's military was impressive. Even though Ghana was powerful, the kingdom began to weaken in the 11th century CE. This happened after attacks by enemies, many wars and competition over trade routes. The climate also became drier over time and this damaged crops.

The Ghanaians did not have a writing system, so there is much we don't know about this great empire. However, archaeologists are still learning from a site they uncovered, called *Koumbi Saleh*. This ancient town may have been the capital of Ghana and home to more than 40,000 people. It contained stone houses, mosques and a palace complex. It also had a network of wells that provided water for drinking and irrigating crops. The remains at Koumbi Saleh prove that Ghana was one of the most complex and powerful civilizations of its time.

SOURCES:

Exploring Africa, "History of Africa During the Time of the Great West African Kingdoms," <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/activity-3-history-of-africa-during-the-time-of-the-great-west-african-kingdoms-expand>.

Khan Academy, "The Ghana Empire," <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/big-history-project/agriculture-civilization/first-cities-states/a/the-ghana-empire-1>.

National Museum of African Art, "Mali Empire and Djenne Figures," <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resources/mali/index.htm>.