

Trading Salt for Gold: The Ancient Kingdom of Ghana

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A trade caravan traveling in Africa. Ghana played an important role in early trans-Saharan trade. Photo from Wikimedia

A long time ago, the kingdom of Ghana was very rich. Today, there is a country called Ghana in western Africa. It is named after the ancient kingdom of Ghana. But the ancient kingdom of Ghana was in a different place. It is where Mauritania, Mali and Senegal now are.

Ancient Ghana was so rich that dogs there wore gold collars. And, the horses slept on carpets.

Many people thought Ghana's kings were the richest men in the world. How did the kingdom become so wealthy? Gold.

Ghana was full of gold mines. Rulers traded it to other countries. This allowed Ghana to be very rich for many years.

Gold in Wagadugu

Ancient Ghana was called Wagadugu, Wagadou or Awkar. "Ghana" was the title given to Wagadugu kings. It was also used for the rich land they ruled.

A tribe known as the Soninke started Ghana. The Soninke leaders helped Wagadugu grow and become more powerful.

Ghana's rulers had taken control of an important area by 1000 B.C. It was land between the upper Niger and Senegal Rivers. This area was rich in gold.

Having control of this land made Ghana the most powerful trader in the area.

The king was in charge

The leader with the most power was the king. Whatever he said became the law. Other leaders assisted him, but at all times the king was in charge.

Each day, the king allowed people to tell him their complaints. Drums were beaten and that let people know it was time for them to gather to speak their minds. The king listened to the complaints and gave his judgment.

But, if a crime was committed, it was tried by ordeal. This means the person would be tested in a painful way to determine if he was guilty.

Drink decided guilt or innocence

For example, the person accused of the crime was given a gross drink. If he vomited after drinking it, he was innocent. If he did not vomit, he was guilty and punished by the king.

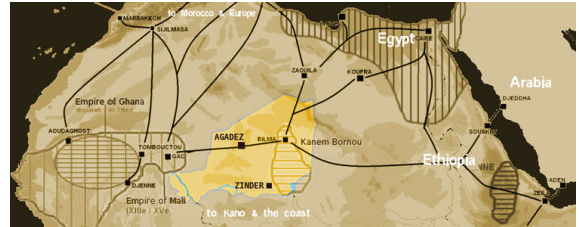
The people of Ghana were not the only ones put to the king's test. In other areas, powerful Ghanaians watched over the people. They reported almost everything that happened to the king.



Trade with other countries

The king of Ghana also used his power to help trade grow with other countries. Ghana mostly traded gold, ivory and slaves. In exchange, Ghana received salt, horses, cloth, swords and books.

Because there was so much gold in Ghana, the kingdom became very rich. Some people traveled over two months through the desert to reach Ghana to trade. They had to pay taxes for what they brought in and what they took out.



But soon, other countries were jealous of Ghana. They were also fearful and angry of its power. So, they decided to stand up to the kingdom.

Ghana lost its strength

At first, Ghana did not weaken. But later a Muslim empire ruled by a dynasty known as the Almoravids invaded Ghana. The Almoravids controlled North Africa and the area now called Morocco. They took some of Ghana's land and the government had to pay the Almoravids. It took awhile, but Ghana was able to make the Almoravids leave.

About 200 years later, however, Ghana was not so lucky. The kingdom was weakened by attacks and couldn't trade with other people.

It was unable to stay strong and was defeated. In A.D. 1240, the growing nation of Mali took over Ghana. Mali became the next great empire.

Quiz

- 1 Read the section "Gold in Wagadugu."
Select the paragraph that BEST explains WHO originally created Ghana.

- 2 Read the section "The king was in charge."
Select the sentence that explains HOW people were told when to assemble before the king.
 - (A) Other leaders assisted him, but at all times the king was in charge.
 - (B) Each day, the king allowed people to tell him their complaints.
 - (C) Drums were beaten and that let people know it was time for them to gather to speak their minds.
 - (D) The king listened to the complaints and gave his judgment.

- 3 Examine the image in the section "The king was in charge."
What does this image help you understand about WHY many groups wanted to take control of Ghana?
 - (A) Kings were able to test people who committed crimes.
 - (B) Kings wanted to rule the land for its gold and power.
 - (C) Kings were helped by other powerful leaders.
 - (D) Kings wanted to help trade grow with other countries.

- 4 Look at the map in the section "Trade with other countries."
Based on the map and information in that section, what do we know about trade with Ghana?
 - (A) People from Egypt and Ethiopia traveled across the desert to trade with Ghana.
 - (B) Ghana's nearest neighbor and most valuable trading partner was Ethiopia.
 - (C) People from Arabia and Morocco bought swords and books from Ghana.
 - (D) Ghana grew so large from trading that it also took over large parts of Arabia.