

World History
Objective 2.07
Lesson

Objective 2.07: Describe the rise and achievements of African civilizations, including but not limited to Axum, Ghana, Kush, Mali, Nubia, and Songhai.

The landforms and climates of Africa presented both challenges and opportunities to its early civilizations. From the fertile coastal areas of North Africa to the Sahara desert, the largest in the world, traders made contact with people to the south, each having something that the others wanted to trade for. Many of the earliest civilizations developed along the Nile and Niger rivers and the extensive coastline on the Atlantic and Indian Oceans plus the Mediterranean and Red Seas brought people both to and from the many centers of population.

Two early centers of trade developed in East Africa. Just south of Egypt, the kingdom of Kush developed in Nubia. This kingdom traded iron products, gold, ivory and slaves from central Africa to the Roman Empire. In return, Kush received luxury goods from India and Arabia. Kush flourished for about 400 years, but declined with the rise of Axum. Axum owed its prosperity to its location on the Red Sea and dominated trade in this area. In the fourth century, the king of Axum converted to Christianity which was then made Axum's official religion. With the spread of Islam, Muslim states began a rivalry with Axum for control of the area's trade.

In Western Africa, three major kingdoms arose and fell. Ghana, located in the upper Niger River valley, was a center for trade between North Africa and the lands south of the Sahara. Ghana provided the gold, ivory and slaves to the Muslim merchants of the north in exchange for salt, which was much needed and in short supply in this area. When Ghana weakened after several hundred years, its place was taken by Mali. From the trading city of Timbuktu in the north, to the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, Mali prospered. Its ruler, Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca brought knowledge of this kingdom as a center of wealth and learning with Timbuktu becoming recognized as one of the intellectual capitals of the Muslim world.

Weakened by a series of civil wars, Mali was eventually replaced by Songhai as the prominent kingdom of West Africa. Songhai's decline was hastened by military occupation by the forces of the Sultan of Morocco in the late 15th century.

In Southern Africa, the city of Zimbabwe, overlooking the Zambezi River, was the capital of the most powerful state in this region. Archaeologists examining the ruins of this city have estimated that ten thousand residents would have been able to live within its walls. Artifacts found at the site include household implements, ornaments made of gold and copper, and porcelain imported from China.

Lesson:

Research one kingdom from West Africa (Ghana, Mali, or Songhai), one kingdom from East Africa (Kush or Axum) and Zimbabwe from South Africa. In your research, focus on the following questions:

Why did this kingdom rise when it did (and where it did)?

What was this kingdom famous for?

Why did this kingdom decline and eventually fall?