

History of West Africa

Section 1



MAIN IDEAS

1. Ghana controlled trade and became wealthy.
2. Through its control of trade, Ghana built an empire.
3. Attacking invaders, overgrazing, and the loss of trade caused Ghana's decline.

Key Terms

silent barter a process in which people exchange goods without ever contacting each other directly

Section Summary

GHANA CONTROLS TRADE

The empire of Ghana (GAH-nuh) became powerful by controlling Saharan trade routes. Ghana lay between the Niger and Senegal rivers in sub-Saharan Africa, northwest of the nation now called Ghana.

Historians think the first people in Ghana were farmers. Starting around 300, these farmers were threatened by nomadic herders. The herders wanted the water and pastures. For protection, small groups began to band together. These groups grew stronger with the introduction of farming tools and weapons made of iron.

Ghana's territory lay between the desert and the forests. These were areas rich with salt and gold. The gold and salt trade sometimes followed a process called **silent barter**. In this process people exchange goods without contacting each other directly. This ensured peaceful business and kept the location of the gold mines secret.

As populations grew and trade increased, the rulers of Ghana grew stronger. Their armies used iron weapons. They took control of the trade routes that had been run by North African merchants.

What helped Ghana become a powerful empire?

Which was more valuable, salt or gold? Why?

Section 1, *continued*

GHANA BUILDS AN EMPIRE

By 800, Ghana was firmly in control of West Africa’s trade routes. As a result, trade became safer and Ghana’s influence increased. Traders were charged a tax to enter or leave Ghana. The kings made it illegal for anyone other than themselves to own gold. They also taxed the people of Ghana.

The kings increased the size of Ghana by conquering other tribes. However, Ghana’s kings allowed former rulers to keep much of their own power. These kings acted as governors of their territories. The empire of Ghana reached its peak under Tunka Manin (TOOHN-kah MAH-nin).

When the kings made it illegal for anyone else to own gold, what happened to the value of gold? Explain.

GHANA’S DECLINE

By the end of the 1200s, Ghana had collapsed. Three major factors contributed to its decline. A group of Muslim Berbers called the Almoravids invaded and weakened the empire. These Berbers were herders. Their animals overgrazed and ruined the farmland. Many farmers left. At the same time, internal rebellions led to loss of order in Ghana.

List two reasons for the decline of Ghana’s empire.

CHALLENGE ACTIVITY

Critical Thinking: Drawing Inferences Recreate the silent barter system in the classroom. Divide students into groups of gold and salt traders. Each group of “traders” should write a one-page paper detailing the advantages and disadvantages of silent barter.