

SECTION 2

Early African Civilizations

Guide to Reading

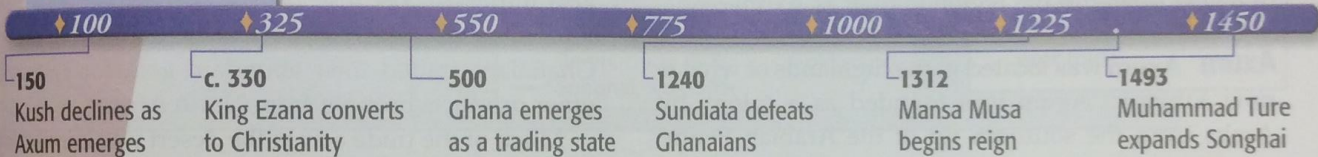
Main Ideas

- The mastery of farming gave rise to the first civilizations in Africa: Egypt, Kush, and Axum.
- The expansion of trade led to migration and the growth of new kingdoms.
- Extended family units formed the basis of African villages.

Key Terms

savanna, Bantu, lineage group

Preview of Events



People to Identify

King Ezana, Sundiata Keita, Mansa Musa, Sunni Ali, Muhammad Ture

Places to Locate

Sahara, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Benin

Preview Questions

1. What are the four distinct climate zones of Africa and where are they located?
2. What factors led to the spread of Islam in Africa?

Reading Strategy

Using a chart like the one below, list the African kingdoms discussed in this chapter and whether they were in north, south, east, or west Africa.

Kingdom	Location

Voices from the Past

The Arab traveler Ibn Battuta once described an audience between an African king and his subjects:

“When [the king] calls one of [his subjects] while he is in session the man invited takes off his clothes and wears patched clothes, takes off his turban, puts on a dirty cap, and goes in raising his clothes and trousers up his legs half-way to his knees. He advances with humility looking like a beggar. He hits the ground with his elbows, he hits it hard. He stands bowed, listening to what the king says. When one of them speaks to the king and he gives him an answer, he removes his clothes from his back and throws dust on his head and back, as a person does when bathing with water. I used to wonder how they do not blind their eyes.”

—*Ibn Battuta in Black Africa*, Said Hamdun and Noel King, eds., 1975

Because most African societies did not have written languages, much of what we know about these societies comes from descriptions recorded by foreign visitors, like Ibn Battuta.

The Emergence of Civilization

After Asia, Africa is the largest of the continents. It stretches nearly five thousand miles (around eight thousand km) and is almost completely surrounded by two oceans and two seas.



Benin brass casting honoring the king (top, center)

Africa includes four distinct climate zones: a mild zone across the northern coast and southern tip; deserts in the north (the Sahara) and south (the Kalahari); the rain forest along the Equator; and savannas (broad grasslands) that stretch across Africa both north and south of the rain forest. These four climate zones have affected the way the peoples of Africa live.

The mastery of farming gave rise to the first civilizations in Africa: Egypt (discussed in Chapter 1), Kush, and Axum. Much later, Islam became an important factor in the development of African empires.

Kush By 2000 B.C., a busy trade had grown between Egypt and the area to the south known as Nubia. Although subject to Egyptian control for many centuries, Nubia freed itself around 1000 B.C. and became the independent state of Kush.

Kush soon emerged as one of the major trading states in the region. Kush flourished from about 250 B.C. to about A.D. 150 but declined because of the rise of a new power in the region known as Axum.

Axum Axum was located in the highlands of what is now Ethiopia. Axum was founded as a colony by Arabs from the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula. Eventually, Axum emerged as an independent state that combined Arab and African cultures.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Axumite civilization was its religion. About A.D. 330, King Ezana converted to Christianity and made it the official religion of Axum.

The rise of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula also had an impact on Africa. In 641, Arab forces took control of Egypt. By the early eighth century, the entire coastal region of North Africa as far west as the Strait of Gibraltar was under Arab rule. Several Muslim trading states were established on the African coast of the Red Sea.

Until the twelfth century, relations between Christian Axum and its Muslim neighbors were relatively peaceful. Then conflict arose when the Muslim states along the coast moved inland to gain control over the trade that Axum had dominated for hundreds of years.

Reading Check **Identifying** What were the first three civilizations in Africa?

The Royal Kingdoms of West Africa

During the eighth century, a number of major trading states emerged in the area south of the Sahara in West Africa. Eventually, these states—Ghana, Mali,

and Songhai—made the Sahara into one of the leading avenues of world trade.

The Kingdom of Ghana Ghana, the first great trading state in West Africa, emerged as early as A.D. 500 in the upper Niger River valley. (The modern state of Ghana takes its name from this early state but is located in the forest region to the south.)

The kings of Ghana were strong rulers who governed without any laws. Their wealth was vast. To protect their kingdom and enforce their wishes, Ghanaian kings relied on a well-trained regular army of thousands of men.

Ghana had an abundance of gold. The heartland of the state was located near one of the richest gold-producing areas in all of Africa. Ghana's gold made it the center of an enormous trade empire.

Muslim merchants from North Africa brought to Ghana metal goods, textiles, horses, and salt. Salt was especially desirable. Used to preserve food, salt was also important because people needed extra salt to replace what their bodies lost in the hot climate. Ghanaians traded their abundant gold for salt and other products brought from North Africa.

Much of the trade across the desert was carried by the Berbers, nomadic peoples whose camel caravans became known as the "fleets of the desert." Camels became a crucial factor in trade across the Sahara.

People In History

Sundiata Keita

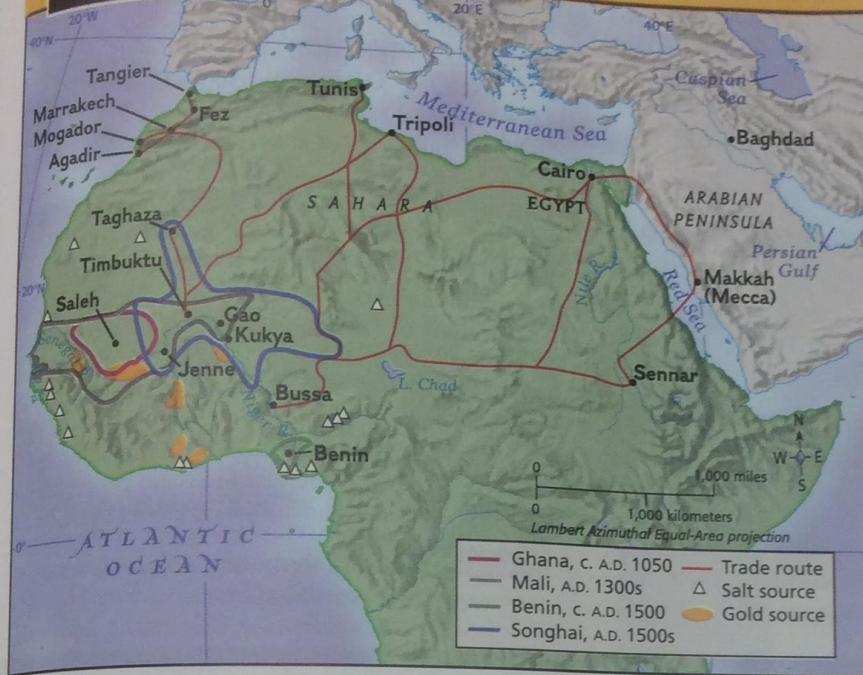
c. 1210–1260—Malian ruler

The name *Sundiata* means the "lion prince." The lion was the symbol of the Keita clan, of which Sundiata was a member.

Sundiata belonged to a family that had ruled Mali for about two centuries. Born with a disability, he still could not walk when he was seven years old. With the aid of a blacksmith who made braces for his legs, however, Sundiata gradually and painfully learned to walk.

Although he became a Muslim, Sundiata kept his traditional African religion as well. This enabled him to maintain the support of the common people, who believed that the king had magical powers. As a powerful warrior-king and the creator of the kingdom of Mali, Sundiata Keita became revered as the father of his country.





Geography Skills

Trade in gold and salt was the major force in creating several trading empires, beginning with Ghana, in West Africa.

- 1. Interpreting Maps**
How far was the center of Ghana from the nearest salt source?
- 2. Applying Geography Skills**
Explain how this map reveals that Ghana, Mali, and Songhai would not have come into competition with each other over trade.

They were well adapted to conditions in the desert, since they could drink enormous quantities of water at one time and needed little food for days.

The Kingdom of Mali The state of Ghana flourished for several hundred years. Eventually, it was weakened by wars, and it collapsed during the 1100s. In its place rose a number of new trading societies in West Africa. The greatest of these states was Mali, established in the mid-thirteenth century by **Sundiata Keita**.

Like George Washington in the United States, Sundiata is considered the founder of his nation. Sundiata defeated the Ghanaians and captured their capital in 1240. He united the people of Mali and created a strong government. Mali built its wealth and power on the gold and salt trade. Most of its people, however, were farmers who grew grains such as sorghum, millet, and rice.

One of the richest and most powerful kings was **Mansa Musa**, who ruled from 1312 to 1337 (*mansa* means “king”). Mansa Musa doubled the size of the kingdom of Mali. He created a strong central government and divided the kingdom into provinces. Once he felt secure, Mansa Musa decided—as a devout Muslim—to make a pilgrimage to Makkah.

A king, of course, was no ordinary pilgrim. Mansa Musa was joined by thousands of servants and soldiers. Accompanying the people were hundreds of camels carrying gold, as well as food, clothing, and other supplies.

Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage caused people to view the king as a great ruler of a powerful and prosperous kingdom. Mansa Musa left another legacy. Earlier rulers of Mali had already converted to Islam, but Mansa Musa strongly encouraged the building of mosques, such as the famous Sankore mosque in Timbuktu, as well as the study of the Quran in his kingdom.

The Kingdom of Songhai By the fifteenth century, a new kingdom—**Songhai**—was beginning to surpass Mali. Under the leadership of **Sunni Ali**, who created the Sunni dynasty in 1464, Songhai began to expand. Sunni Ali spent much of his reign on horseback and on the march as he led his army in one military campaign after another. His conquests gave Songhai control of the trading empire—especially trade in salt and gold—that had made Ghana and Mali so prosperous.

The Songhai Empire reached the height of its power during the reign of **Muhammad Ture**. He

continued Sunni Ali's policy of expansion, creating an empire that stretched a thousand miles along the Niger River. The chief cities of the empire prospered as never before from the salt and gold trade until the end of the sixteenth century.

✓ Reading Check Summarizing What were Mansa Musa's accomplishments?

Societies in East and South Africa

In eastern Africa, a variety of states and small societies took root. Islam strongly influenced many of them. Some became extremely wealthy as a result of trade.

Beginning in the first millennium B.C., farming peoples who spoke dialects of the **Bantu** (BAN•TOO) family of languages began to move from the region of the Niger River into East Africa and the Congo River basin. They moved slowly, not as invading hordes but as small communities.

On the eastern fringe of the continent, the Bantu-speaking peoples gradually began to take part in the

regional trade that moved by sea up and down the East African coast. Beginning in the eighth century, Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf began to settle at ports along the coast. The result was the formation of a string of trading ports that included Mogadishu (MAH•guh•DIH•shoo), Mombasa, and Kilwa in the south.

In the southern half of the African continent, states formed more slowly than in the north. From about 1300 to about 1450, Zimbabwe (zihm•BAH•bwee) was the wealthiest and most powerful state in the region. It prospered from the gold trade with the trading communities on the eastern coast of the continent.

The ruins of Zimbabwe's capital, known as Great Zimbabwe, illustrate the kingdom's power and influence. The town sits on a hill overlooking the Zambezi River and is surrounded by stone walls. The local people stacked granite blocks together without mortar to build the massive walls. Ten thousand people would have been able to live in the area enclosed by the walls.

✓ Reading Check Evaluating What do the walled enclosures tell us about Great Zimbabwe?



CONNECTIONS Past To Present

From African Rhythms to Rock and Roll

Beginning in the 1500s, Africans were brought as slaves to the Western Hemisphere. Their music came with them and became an important ingredient in the development of musical styles in the Americas.

A strong rhythmic pattern was an important feature of African music, an effect achieved through a wide variety of instruments, including drums, bells, harps, gourds, pots, sticks beaten together, and hand clapping. Another important feature of African music was the coming

▼ Burundi drummers



▲ Jazz saxophonist

together of voice and instrument. A call and response pattern was common: a leader would sing a short piece and people would repeat it back to the beat of a drum.

As slaves in North America, Africans would use work songs, sung to rhythmic patterns, to make their long work days less burdensome. At rest, others sang folk songs known as spirituals to lament the loss of their homeland and their freedom. Over the years, these African musical forms developed into new forms known as blues, gospel, jazz, and ragtime. In the twentieth century, African American artists inspired new forms of music known as rock and roll and rap.

In Latin America, the beat of African drums was combined with European instruments, such as the Spanish guitar, and Native American instruments, such as the maraca and wooden rhythm sticks. From the combination of these elements came such styles as reggae, calypso, and salsa music.

Comparing Past and Present

Listen to blues, gospel, jazz, and ragtime music. Describe the similarities and the differences between these types of music. Compare these musical types to contemporary, popular music.

African Society and Culture

The relationship between king and subjects was often less rigid in African society than in other civilizations. Frequently, the ruler would allow people to voice their complaints to him. Still, the king was held in a position high above all others.

Few Africans, of course, ever met with their kings. Most people lived in small villages. Their sense of identity was determined by their membership in an extended family and a lineage group. **Lineage groups**, which were communities of extended family units, were the basis of African society.

Early African religious beliefs varied from place to place. Most African societies shared some common religious ideas. These ideas included belief in various gods, the power of diviners (people who believe they can foretell events), and the importance of ancestors.

In early Africa, as in much of the rest of the world at the time, the arts—whether painting, literature, or music—were a means of serving religion. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, metalworkers at Ife (EE•feh), in what is now southern Nigeria, produced handsome bronze and iron statues. The Ife sculptures may have influenced artists in **Benin** in West Africa, who produced equally impressive works in bronze during the same period. The Benin sculptures include bronze heads, many of kings, and figures of various types of animals.

Reading Check **Summarizing** Describe the role of lineage groups on African society.



▲ Ife king, bronze

▲ Benin bronze figures



▲ Delicately carved bronze head of Benin, queen mother, from 1500s

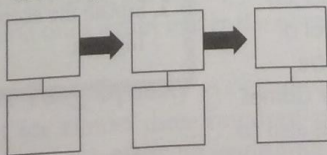
SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Checking for Understanding

- Define** savanna, Bantu, lineage group.
- Identify** King Ezana, Berbers, Sundiata Keita, Mansa Musa, Sunni Ali, Muhammad Ture.
- Locate** Sahara, Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Benin.
- Describe** the most distinctive feature of Axumite civilization. How did this affect Axum's relations with its neighbors?
- List** the trading commodities that made the African kingdoms wealthy. How were camels a crucial factor in African trade?

Critical Thinking

- Analyze** How did the indigenous religious beliefs of Africans differ from Islam and Christianity?
- Sequencing Information** Using a diagram like the one below, put the royal kingdoms of West Africa in chronological order (include dates) along the top row of boxes. In the second row, add details about the accomplishments of each kingdom.



Analyzing Visuals

- Examine** the art works shown on this page and on page 97. Approaching the task as if you were an anthropologist, what can you learn about African art, culture, society, and technology from these figures?

Writing About History

- Expository Writing** Music, dance, and storytelling do not leave a physical archaeological record in the same way as buildings or roads. Describe how historians have been able to determine the significance of the performing arts in African society.

