

Ghana Empire



Figure 1: Location of the Ghana Empire.

The Ghana Empire was the best known and most powerful of the medieval trading empires in West Africa. Led by Mande-speaking peoples of Soninke clans, the empire took its name from the Mande word for “warrior king.” Although the modern country of Ghana was named after the empire, ancient Ghana was located hundreds of miles north and west of modern Ghana, in an area that is now part of Mali and Mauritania. Over the centuries the empire’s capital was moved from one place to another; archaeologists have tentatively identified Kumbi, 200 miles (322 kilometers) north of modern Bamako, Mali, as the final capital.

According to unconfirmed Soninke tradition, the empire of Ghana originated in the 4th century A.D. It grew as the Soninkes annexed neighboring kingdoms and flourished from the 7th through the 13th century. Ghana capitalized on its location, serving as an intermediary between the Arab and Berber salt traders of the Sahara to the north and the gold and ivory dealers to the south. The vast wealth of the empire was founded on taxes on trade, primarily of salt and gold but also of a wide variety of goods, including the crafts of local artisans.

The decline of the Ghana Empire began with the rise of the Almoravids, a Muslim people from the western Sahara, in the 11th century. Ghana was officially a pagan state, and the Almoravids invaded in an effort to convert their neighbors. Following a prolonged siege, the Almoravids captured Kumbi in 1076 and forced local residents to submit to Islam. During the period of Almoravid control over Ghana, which lasted for only about a decade, the empire began to lose its domination over the gold trade—and therefore much of its power. Kingdoms that had been subject to the empire began to declare their independence. In 1203 one of them, the Susu kingdom, took control of most of Ghana, including Kumbi. With the defeat of the Susu army in 1235 and the fall of Kumbi five years later at the

hands of the Malinke chief Sundiata, the Ghana Empire came to an end. Sundiata incorporated what was left of Ghana into his new empire of Mali.

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