

Overview

The early history of Africa and the development of ancient African civilizations is tied closely to three major factors: geography, the spread of Islam and contact with Middle Eastern societies, and the development of trade routes across East and West Africa. Beginning in the 6th century CE and continuing through the 16th century, Africa underwent a dramatic series of changes as empires rose and fell, contact with other civilizations increased, and trade routes multiplied. The Africa of antiquity was quite cosmopolitan as its close contact with the Middle East made for a rich intermingling of cultures and religions.

The Nile and the Sahara

The geography in Africa, a land of extremes, had a significant effect on the development of ancient civilizations there. In the east, along the [Swahili](#) coast, the Nile River was the major determining factor that dictated how and where societies emerged. The Nile allowed for the cultivation of such life-sustaining crops as wheat and papyrus and the raising of farm animals like sheep and goats. Farmland developed in the Nile Valley, where subsequently, several sacral chiefdoms—areas ruled by leaders with religious or divine authority—appeared. Chiefdoms seem to have emerged because of the need to regulate farming, as competition for farmland increased as populations in this region of Africa grew. The ancient Egyptian pyramids stand as records of the massive growth that emerged along the Nile during this time, as pharaohs came into power and built such infrastructure as irrigation systems and canals to support the expansion of civilizations.

While water was key for the development of East Africa, the Sahara Desert was the major determining factor for civilizations in West Africa. The largest hot desert in the world, the Sahara stretches over an area comparable to the entire continental United States. The Sahara covers most of North Africa, and so sub-Saharan Africa, the region directly below the Sahara, became the location of many civilizations in West Africa. Crossing the Sahara was and still is extremely treacherous, but nevertheless many trade routes developed across the desert during antiquity. It was in this region just south of the Sahara that many ancient city-states developed and flourished.

Trade Routes in West Africa

In sub-Saharan Africa, Berber tribes from the north who crossed the desert met the routes of Sudanese traders from the south. In these cities, including Ghana, Mali, and [Songhai](#), wealth grew immensely as trade increased throughout antiquity. This wealth was primarily generated through the mining of salt and gold, which were highly valuable commodities in ancient and medieval times. Salt mines in places like Taghaza, a rare city-state located within the Sahara, and gold mines primarily in Ghana accounted for the accumulation of large amounts of wealth in West Africa. As wealth in West African cities grew, leaders gained control of more and more territories, eventually forming empires.

Ghana especially flourished as an empire during this time, as it seized a monopoly on the gold trade and came to control the most important trading cities. By the 11th century, however, opposing forces conquered many of Ghana's key cities, weakening the empire and leading to a decline in trade from which the empire never recovered. Following the fall of Ghana, the [Mali Empire](#) emerged in Ghana's central territory, which also gained massive amounts of wealth by utilizing the same trade routes as Ghana. Expanding Ghana's trade practices while increasing its land holdings at the same time, Mali became one of the largest and most powerful empires of medieval Africa, peaking in the early 14th century.

The Spread of Islam

Because of its geographical nearness to the Middle East, African populations mingled frequently with Middle Eastern ones. Throughout antiquity and into the medieval period, Arab Muslims began to settle permanently along the Swahili coast in East Africa. This Arab and African cultural blending led to an Islamization of the coast, with Islam expanding

inwards from coastal villages into towns and cities in central Africa. This continued throughout the development of African civilizations, culminating during the Mali Empire when most of Mali's kings were Muslim.

While many ancient Africans kept their pagan beliefs and rituals, the spread of Islam nevertheless affected African culture and society. Especially in East Africa, the intermingling of Arab Muslims with native Africans created entirely new African civilizations, primarily the Swahili, a cultural group inhabiting the area on the eastern coast of Africa. Beginning in the 9th century, Islam became more and more prevalent in this area, finally emerging as a unifying force between foreign Arab traders and local African populations and contributing to the formation of a unique Swahili identity. This intermingling of cultures with Islam as the connecting factor also occurred in other regions of Africa throughout the ancient and medieval periods, leading to the emergence of a richly diverse and cosmopolitan African culture.

East Africa: Swahili States

From southern Somalia to the northern parts of Mozambique, the coast of East Africa is dotted with the ruins of abandoned cities, towns, and cemeteries. Some of these, such as the ruined town of Gedi in Kenya, cover many acres and are littered with the remains of stone-built monumental buildings such as mosques, palaces, and mansions. Others, such as Ras Mkumbuu on the island of Pemba, cover a large area, but most of the remains, except for a few tombs, are visible only to the trained eye of an archaeologist.

From the 10th to the 14th century CE, various city-states emerged and flourished along the coast of East Africa. Given their location, the [Swahili](#) city-states became a major hub between the African interior and transoceanic Indian Ocean trade networks. These cities developed into centers of international trade that attracted merchants from East Asia, Southeast Asia, Persia, India, Arabia, and the Ottoman Empire. Over time, Arab Muslims began to settle permanently along the coast and intermarried with the local African populations, thus bringing an influx of culture and religion from their own homelands and creating an entirely new African civilization centered in East Africa.

Swahili Coast: Arab and African Cultural Blending

The people who built these East African city-states are known as the Swahili. The word "Swahili" derives from the Arabic word for "coast"; it is not clear when the people of the coast began to use this term to describe themselves or even when, if ever, they began to think of themselves as a coherent group of people. That the standard name for the people who built the cities and towns of the East African coast derives from Arabic indicates that although the Swahili are African and speak an essentially [Bantu](#) language, they also participated in the larger cosmopolitan world of the Indian Ocean, and these oceanic connections are as much a part of their story as are their local African origins.

Emergence of the Swahili City-States

The towns that formed the core of the Swahili world at its peak—between 1000 and 1500—had their roots in smaller fishing and trading towns, some of which date back to the middle of the first millennium. But around 1000 the coast seems to have become more firmly embedded in Indian Ocean trade networks and culture. The result was the Islamization of the coast and the expansion of the coastal villages into towns and cities. Initially these towns were built mostly out of perishable materials (most often mud and wood) with a few public buildings made of stone. Thus, the congregational mosque and the ruler's palace might be made of stone, while the rest of the city would be constructed from sun-dried mud reinforced with termite-resistant mangrove wood.

Like many maritime trading cities, the cities of the Swahili coast were city-states. That is to say, there was no Swahili empire or any other overarching political structure on the coast. Each city was self-governing and controlled its own hinterland, but the political reach of the city leaders rarely extended far beyond the gates of the city. Occasionally one town would conquer another, but immediately the leaders of the conquered city would begin plotting a return to

independence, and few defeated cities remained politically subordinated for long. City-states, such as [Kilwa](#), [Mogadishu](#), [Mombasa](#), [Zanzibar](#), and Malindi, became prominent as flourishing centers of commerce and culture along the Swahili coast.

The cities were usually ruled by kings, but the powers of the kings seem to have been rather limited and in many instances symbolic. Some towns would go for long periods of time without a king, suggesting that kingship was not central to government. Rather, the real power lay with elite merchants, who are usually described as *waungwana* in Swahili. Parts of each city were reserved exclusively for patricians, and it was they who chose one of their number to be king or leader. Many of these Swahili patricians had the leisure to participate in Muslim scholarship and because of their commercial contacts with Arab merchants often intermarried with visiting or immigrant Arab families. Over time, many of these families began to claim ancestral origins in either Persia or the Arabian Peninsula, which added greatly to the confusion of scholars in the 19th century trying to determine the origins of the Swahili world.

Material Wealth and International Trade

The growing wealth of the patrician merchants resulted in a major transformation of Swahili cities in the middle of the 14th century. They began to build their homes of stone rather than mud. The houses they built were large and were meant to demonstrate their creditworthiness to potential business partners. They included guest apartments where visiting merchants could live and storage areas where their guests could keep their trade goods. Inside the houses were carved plaster niches, called *zidaka*, where imported Chinese porcelain and other signs of wealth could be displayed. Thus, by 1500 the Swahili cities were thriving commercial centers, with both public buildings and elite residences built in stone as well as many commoners' houses built from mud and wood.

Decline of Swahili Civilization

By the late 16th century, Portuguese expansion into the region led to the eventual decline of Swahili civilization. Once they became aware of the wealth of the region, the Portuguese seized Indian Ocean trade as well as coerced the Swahili city-states to pay annual tribute to the Portuguese Crown. Those who refused to pay were attacked and conquered by Portuguese forces. By the mid-17th century, the Portuguese were well established in the cities of Kilwa, Sofala, Mozambique, and Mombasa to better control the Indian Ocean trade that had once enriched the Swahili coast.

Measuring at least 800 miles from north to south and about 3,000 miles from west to east, the Sahara Desert stretches across most of northern Africa. Crossing it is an arduous task, but for several hundred years, it was the site of a set of flourishing trade routes controlled by rich empires along the western periphery of Africa.

West African Society: Ghana (Overview)

The traders who crossed the desert were known as Berbers. They consisted of several groups of nomads who traveled across the Sahara in camel caravans. There were several different camel routes, and each had planned stops at specific oases—places with permanent access to water, generally with a settlement nearby. The Berber tribes controlled (by force of arms) the oases on particular routes, as well as key territories both to the north and to the south of the desert. One important route included the salt mine at Taghaza, in the middle of the Sahara. At that mine, salt blocks were quarried from the ground in 200-pound blocks and transported, two per camel, to the African nations to the south. Salt was such an important import in the region south of the Sahara that some sources said it was exchanged for an equal weight of gold.

Just to the south of the Sahara were cities where the Berber caravans from the north met the routes of Sudanese traders from the south. There, salt, horses, copper, and dates from the north were exchanged for gold, ivory, kola nuts, and slaves from the rain forests and other regions to the south. Over time, those rich cities became richer and more powerful, and they gained control of larger territories to form empires. Those trading empires patrolled the trading routes in their territory to keep them safe from bandits and robbers. The source of their wealth came from tariffs levied on goods traded in their cities and from their monopoly of much of the gold trade.

Medieval Ghana

Ghana was located at the western end of Africa, just south of the Sahara in modern [Mali](#) and Mauritania (medieval Ghana did not actually include any of the modern nation of Ghana). It controlled the most important trading cities at the time. While the first historical reference dates from about 800 CE, it is unknown when the medieval kingdom of Ghana was first established. It is certain that by 1000, Ghana was a wealthy and powerful empire.

Ghana's main item for trading was gold. The area near Ghana included many rich gold mines. (Historians are uncertain whether the gold mines were within Ghana or if Ghana simply controlled the trade routes that led from the mines.) The [Soninke](#) kings of Ghana strictly controlled the sale of gold: any gold nuggets transported through or mined in Ghana became the property of the king. The miners and merchants directly traded only gold dust.

Beginning in about 1054, the Almoravids, a group of Muslim Berbers, conquered many of Ghana's key trading cities, including the capital itself. The Berber coalition did not remain united, and Ghana regained independence within several years. However, Ghana was left weakened, both militarily and economically. Several vassal states took advantage of Ghana's weak position to try to gain independence, and a struggle for power resulted. The volume of trade in Ghana's principal cities declined. Furthermore, the central area surrounding the capital had been so damaged by overgrazing by the invaders that it was no longer capable of producing crops to support the cities.

Medieval Mali

In about 1203, the Susu, who had been part of Ghana's empire, captured Ghana's central territory and became the dominant power. They followed by invading the territory of the Malinke, south of Ghana. About 30 years after the Susu conquest of Ghana, the southern Malinke, led by their legendary general and king [Sundiata](#), repelled the Susu and invaded their territories. Ultimately, they conquered the Susu and established the empire of Mali from their capital at Niani.