

The Great Empires

In his study of West African imperial-state formation from the seventh century to the fifteenth century C.E., historian Michael Gomez details the rise and fall of urban-based civilizations and kingdoms that were contemporaneous with the great civilizations of the non-Western world, such as the Han dynasty of China, the Vedic period in India, and the Mayan in Central America. Centuries-old African oral traditions, Arabic-written sources, ruler-lists, and twentieth- to twenty-first-century archaeological discoveries attest to the remains of early towns in the floodplains of the Middle Niger region of West Africa. In the ninth century C.E., such places as Gao, Mema, Dia/Diagha, and Jenne-jeno had trade networks across the Sahara, Savannah, and the Sahel.

Early Urban Civilization The earliest evidence of Gao (also called Kawkaw) dates back to 2000 B.C.E. Arabic sources from the late ninth century C.E. into the twelfth century described Gao in words meaning “kingdom,” “nation,” and “widely famed.” The ninth-century Page 14 historian al-Ya’qubi referred to Gao as the “greatest of the realms of the Sudan.” Gao, which was more like a cluster of urban sites, constituted an eminent commercial region, linking the surrounding hinterland and the trans-Saharan. It played a central role in facilitating and protecting the commerce that moved back and forth in caravans across the desert from points north and south of it as well as east and west. The region was composed of two settlements, according to Arab chroniclers in the tenth and twelfth century C.E.—the royal city of Old Gao, which was inhabited by the Sorko people and thus indigenous Africans, and the commercial city of Gao-Saney, with its more diverse population of indigenous Africans, probably the Sorko, and Arabs. Today the findings of archaeologist Timothy Insoll confirm that for centuries the entire Gao region remained a vibrant commercial entrepôt. Excavations have unearthed pottery, copper, beads, hippopotamus tusks, and funerary objects dating from the early twelfth century. The funerary remains indicate that Islam was practiced at both sites. Gao remained an influential political and economic presence, even as other West African groups forged empires that rose and declined.

Ghana's Rise While Gao represents the birthplace of West African polity, Ghana represents the first of the great imperial powers. Accurate recorded political and cultural history of the kingdom of Ghana, which lay about 500 miles northwest of its modern namesake, begins in the seventh century. Known by its capital, Kumbi Saleh, Ghana first appears in history as a confederacy of settlements extending along the grasslands of the Senegal and the upper Niger rivers. Most public offices were hereditary, and its social order was stratified. The people of Ghana enjoyed some prosperity as farmers until continuous droughts turned their land into desert. As long as they were able to carry on their farming, gardens and date groves dotted the countryside, and there was an abundance of sheep and cattle in the outlying areas.