

# Ghana

The first large empire in West Africa was Ghana, which may have begun as early as 300 CE and most likely became a powerful kingdom by about 800 CE. The Soninke people, who built the Ghana empire, were quick to take advantage of their position astride a major trans-Saharan trade route and spread their control through parts of what are today Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal. A ruler taxed all the goods coming into the kingdom from the north and all the gold flowing up from the south. Initially, the Soninke did not mine the gold but bought it from people to the south until they later gained control of some gold mines. The king limited the amount of gold that could leave the kingdom, thus driving up its value. Soon Ghana was known as the “land of gold.”

Islam followed the trade routes south. Muslim North African merchants came to Ghana to trade, and many stayed. The name *Ghana* is actually an Arabic word meaning “ruler.” Along with their religion, these merchant Muslims introduced Islamic artistic and architectural styles to Ghana. Over time, the kings of Ghana employed Muslims as advisors and government officials.

In the mid-1000s CE, Almoravids, Muslim Berbers from the desert, overran the kingdom but were unable to hold it. Beset by ecological problems and internal revolts by conquered peoples, Ghana’s trading network collapsed and its capital was destroyed in the mid-1200s.

The modern nation of Ghana is named in honor of the famous empire of Ghana, but its boundaries are not the same. The modern nation is farther south and slightly east of the old empire. The empire was landlocked, but the modern nation has the benefit of a coastline on the Atlantic Ocean.