Name: _____

Date: _____

Ancient Ghana

Ancient Ghana became rich from gold it did not mine, and salt it did not produce. The kingdom stood between the goldfields to the south and the salt deposits of the Sahara to the north. Traders carrying those valuable goods passed through Ghana's territory, where its rulers controlled important trade routes and collected taxes on the goods.

Between Gold and Salt

By about 500 CE, Soninke-speaking people had established farming villages in the Sahel, the broad grassland south of the Sahara Desert. Their settlements stretched across parts of present-day Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal, between the Senegal River in the west and the Niger River to the east. The Soninke called their homeland Wagadu. They raised crops and livestock. To the south lay some of West Africa's richest goldfields, but in the Sahara to the north lay deposits of a commodity traders often valued even more.

Salt is mainly used as a flavoring, but in ancient West Africa, it had great value. Long before refrigeration, salt kept meat, fish, and other foods from spoiling by drawing out moisture and slowing bacterial growth. This made it possible to store food for times when little was available and to carry food on long journeys. Salt was especially valuable south of the Sahara. Traders carried salt across the desert, and its value increased the farther it traveled from its source.

Trade Builds an Empire

Beginning around 500 CE, camel caravans crossed Wagadu. In addition to salt, southbound caravans carried textiles, copper, glassware and beads, ceramics and other manufactured goods. Northbound traders carried gold and ivory. Soninke rulers collected taxes on goods entering and leaving their territory, making Wagadu wealthy and powerful. The ruler of Wagadu held the title ghana, meaning "warrior king." In time, North African traders began calling the kingdom by the title of its ruler: Ghana.

Iron also helped Ghana become powerful. Iron tools helped farmers produce more food and support a growing population. Blacksmiths also made iron spearheads and other weapons for Ghana's warriors. As Ghana grew wealthier, its rulers could support a larger army and extend their control over the surrounding region. By about 1000 CE, Ghana had reached the height of its power, controlling a vast region that stretched hundreds of miles across West Africa.

Al-Bakri

Al-Bakri was a Muslim scholar who wrote about Ghana at the height of its power in 1068. He never visited the kingdom but gathered information from merchants and travelers who knew the region. He portrayed a powerful king surrounded by ministers, interpreters, soldiers, and other officials. Gold proclaimed the king's wealth throughout his court. He wore gold jewelry, his horses were decorated with gold, and warriors carried swords and shields decorated with gold.

Decline

Shortly after the period al-Bakri described, the Almoravids built a powerful empire to the north of Ghana and began expanding into the western Sahara. The Muslim warriors launched a jihad ("holy struggle") that disrupted trade and weakened Ghana's power. Most Ghanaian people kept their traditional beliefs and did not convert to Islam. The empire endured for more than a century afterward. As Ghana grew weaker, local rulers fought for power, and trade increasingly shifted away from the kingdom.

Sumanguru, the powerful king of the neighboring Sosso kingdom, conquered Ghana in the 13th century and added its remaining territory to his growing empire. Oral traditions remember Sumanguru as a cruel ruler who used fear to control the lands he ruled. But Sumanguru's rule would not last. In 1235, Sundiata defeated him and founded Mali, perhaps the wealthiest kingdom in West African history.

©Mike Dowling, mrdowling.com. All Rights Reserved.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Fill in the Blanks

The Soninke people of West Africa called their homeland W__ga__u., though many outsiders called it G__a__a. The kingdom stood between the g__l__f__e__ds to the s__u__h and the s__lt deposits of the S__h__ra to the n__r__h. Beginning around _____ CE, c__m__l caravans crossed Wagadu. ★S__n__n__e-speaking rulers collected t__x__s on the goods that passed through Wagadu, making the kingdom w__a__t__y and p__w__r__ul. I__on tools helped f__r__e__s produce more food, while b__a__k__m__t__s made weapons for Ghana's w__r__i__rs. As Ghana grew w__a__t__i__r, its rulers supported a larger a__my and extended their control over the surrounding region. By about _____ CE, Ghana had reached the height of its power.

In the 11th c__n__u__y, the A__m__r__vi__s expanded into the western ★S__h__ra. Their warriors disrupted t__a__e and w__a__e__ed Ghana's power. Ghana endured for more than a c__n__u__y, but local rulers fought for power as t__a__e shifted away from the k__n__d__m. In the 13th century, S__m__n__u__u conquered Ghana. In 1235, S__n__i__ta defeated S__m__n__u__u and founded M__li.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. Why was salt a valuable commodity in ancient Africa?

_____

_____

_____

★2. How did iron make Ghana more wealthy?

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. Who was Al-Bakri?

_____

_____

_____

★4. What caused Ghana to fall?

_____

_____

_____

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

©Mike Dowling, mrdowling.com. All Rights Reserved.