

**Text 19** Which part of Africa was known as the Land of Gold?

## Kingdoms of Gold: The Empires of West Africa

The kingdoms of West Africa are not nearly as well known as those of ancient Egypt and Nubia. Yet there was a time when rulers of this region were thought to be the richest kings in all the world. From about A.D. 300 to 1700, three great empires flourished in the lands just to the south of the Sahara Desert. These were the empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay.

### The Empire of Ghana

Today, *Ghana* is the name of a West African country on the Atlantic coast. It was not part of the ancient empire of Ghana, though. The country of Ghana adopted the name in 1957 in honor of the ancient empire of Ghana.

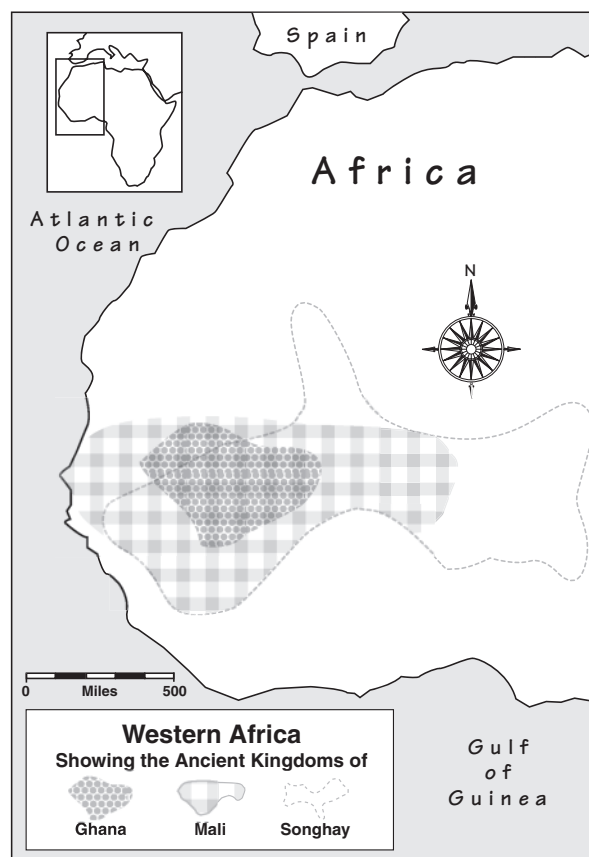
The word *Ghana* actually means “warrior-king.” It was a title given to the rulers of the Soninke people who called their homeland *Wagadu*. *Wagadu* was located at the edge of the Sahara Desert, far from the ocean.

The Soninke people were highly skilled in metal working. For many years they were the only people in the region who knew how to forge iron. This skill helped them become powerful. Metal tools made their farms more productive. One farmer could grow enough food for many people. This left more people free to follow other occupations. Many men became soldiers. Using metal swords and spears, they easily conquered rivals whose weapons were made of wood or stone.

As *Wagadu* grew in size and power, it became an important center of trade. The regions around it had a variety of

resources. The most important of these were gold and salt. Gold came from secret locations in the south. There was so much gold that the Ghana king had to control the supply carefully. Otherwise, it might become too common and lose its value.

Salt, on the other hand, was very scarce. Because people need salt to live, it was literally worth its weight in gold. Most of the salt came from the Taghaza mines in the Sahara Desert. Traders bringing salt through *Wagadu* had to pay a large tax in gold. The gold went to the king, who used it to keep the army and the government strong. *Wagadu* had so much gold that the first Arabic writer to write about it called it the *Land of Gold*.



## Influence of the Arabs

By the year 680, powerful Arab armies had conquered most of North Africa. When they reached Morocco, they heard about a land of gold across the desert. They sent an army south to conquer it. The Arabs were surprised by the power of the Wagadu army. They decided it would be wiser to trade with these people than to fight them.

The people of Wagadu had no written language until the Arabs came. The earliest accounts of life in Wagadu were written by Arabs. They called the kingdom *Biland Ghana*, “the land of the warrior-king.” This was shortened to *Ghana*. That is why the first great West African kingdom is called Ghana rather than Wagadu.

1. In a social studies textbook, this article would most likely be included in a unit called —

(A) “The Age of Exploration.”  
(B) “Ancient African Kingdoms.”  
(C) “The Arab World.”  
(D) “The History of Songhay.”

2. What did the word *Ghana* originally mean?

(F) a country on the Atlantic coast of Africa  
(G) a country south of the Sahara Desert  
(H) the people of Wagadu  
(J) a ruler of the Soninke people

3. How did skill in forging iron help make the Soninke people powerful?

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4. Why was salt so expensive? Give two reasons.

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