

## The Empire of Ghana

Imagine a big kingdom, full of magnificent buildings for extravagant kings, lots of mosques for busy scholars and scribes. This land of riches was the Kingdom of Ancient Ghana in western Africa.

The Empire of Ghana was a huge trading empire in western Africa through the 7<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century. It started



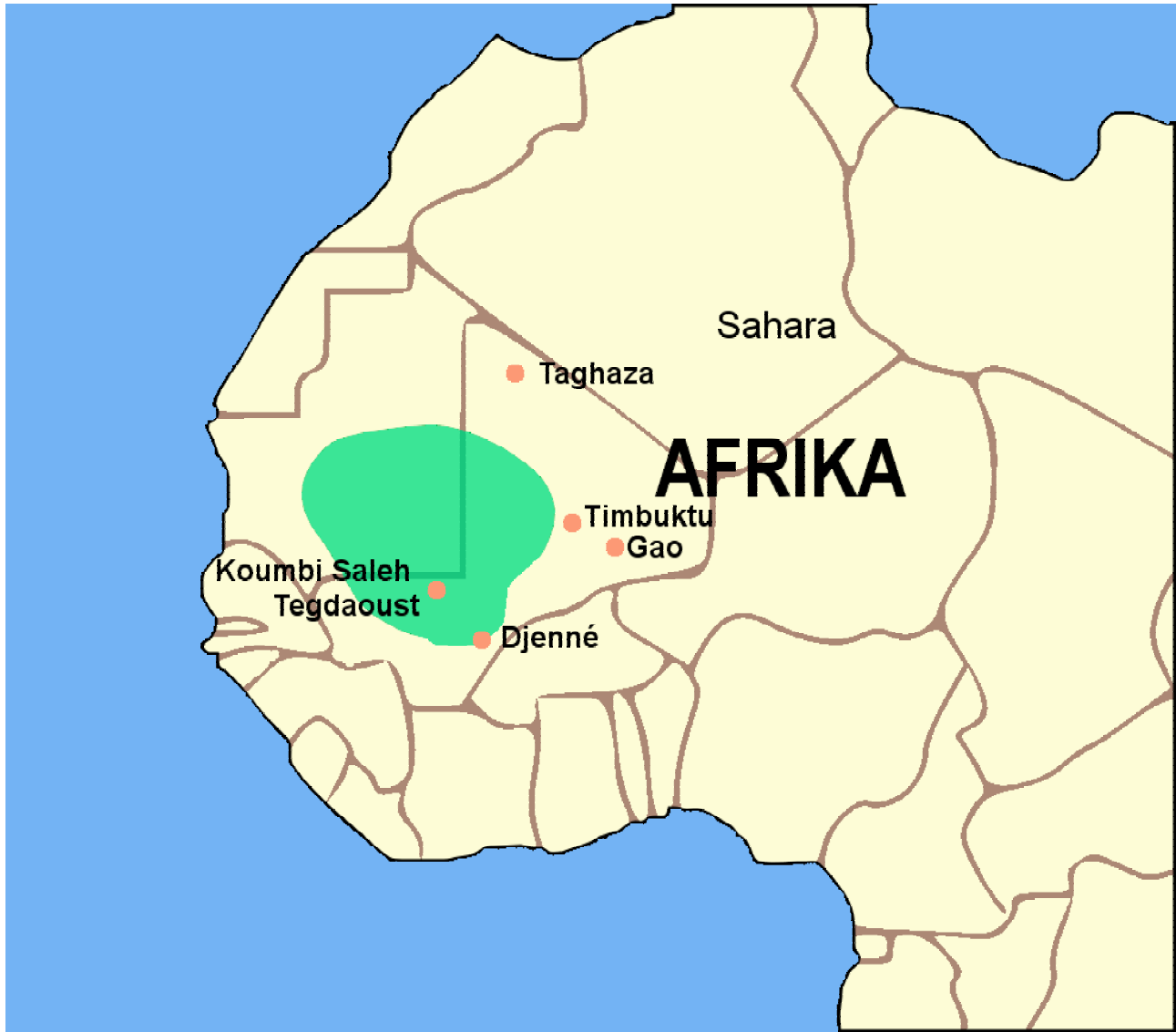
around the same time as the Vikings invaded England.

The Kingdom of Ancient Ghana may have even been around since the 4<sup>th</sup> century but historians cannot be sure because there are no records from then.

### Where was it?

The Empire of Ghana was not where Ghana is now at all! It was actually 400 miles away, to the north.





If you look on a modern-day map for Mauritania, Mali and Senegal, this is where the Kingdom of Ghana was. It was in western Africa, underneath the Sahara desert.

### Who lived there?

Apart from very rich Kings and scholars, there were lots of people living in this scattering of busy trading cities

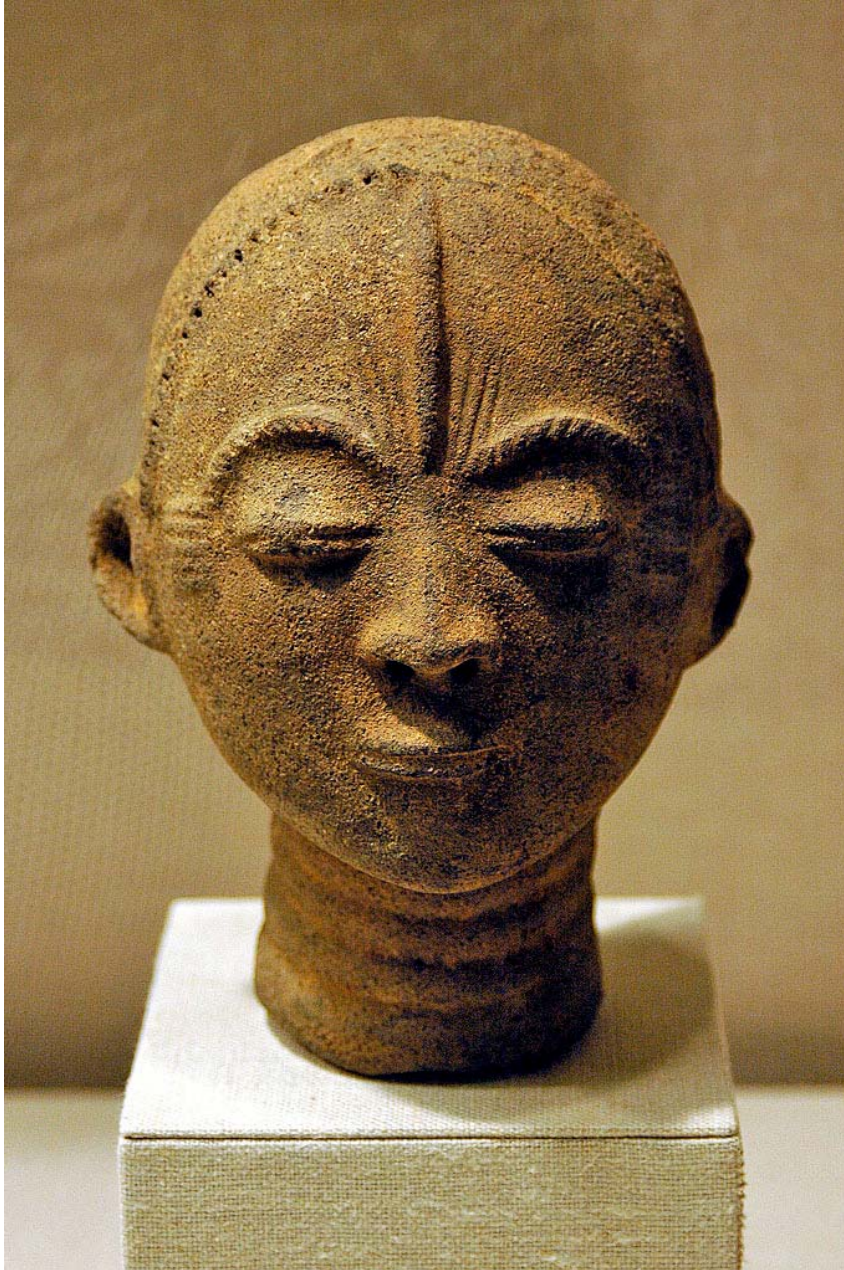
underneath the Sahara [desert](#). There were traders and farmers too.



The people there spoke Soninke, which is part of the Mande group of languages.

Even today, the Soninke language is one of around 75 languages spoken in the African countries of Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, The Gambia, Mauritania, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea and Ghana.

There are 2,100,000 speakers of Soninke today. You can see it is quite an ancient language.



## A Kingdom full of gold...

This rich Kingdom full of gold, groves of trees and “sweet water from the wells” caught the attention of foreign travellers from Arab Kingdoms as far as Spain.



The Sahara desert was full of people crossing, carrying goods from Morocco, Algeria and Egypt (and other countries in North Africa), and carrying gold back up.

The Empire of Ghana was rich because they traded in gold and ivory from the south, and salt from the north.



## Kings of Kings

A man called Al-Ya'quibi wrote "under the King's authority are a number of kings." There was one main king and he was in charge of other kings and smaller kingdoms.

The main king controlled the kings and their people by collecting taxes from them. The other kings ruled over their smaller areas and the main king ruled over them.



### A secret city for kings and priests

The main king lived in a part of a city called El-Ghalau, which was protected by a stone wall to keep out ordinary people.

This special part of the city was just for the King and for priests: it was the spiritual and royal capital. In this stone-walled part of the city was the King's palace and special religious buildings.

### A second city for trade





The second city was beautiful too, according to the foreign writers. Al Bakri, who lived in Spain, wrote that the second city was surrounded by wells of water where vegetables grew.

Al-Bakri wrote a book called “Routes and Realms” in 1068. The Empire of Ghana was so famous around the world that al-Bakri included it in his book which is now kept in [Spain](#).

Ghana was most famous for its mosques and buildings and all its riches and trade.



## Mecca in Africa?

Mecca is the spiritual capital of the religion of Islam and it is in modern-day Saudi-Arabia. Al-Bakri wrote that “of all the towns in the world, Tademekka [in Ancient Ghana] is the one that resembles (looks like) Mecca the most.”

Al-Bakri would probably know, he was Muslim himself. We must remember that he was relying on reports from other people because he never actually visited Ancient Ghana.

Al-Bakri said that Ancient Ghana had 12 mosques. In one of these mosques, Friday prayers were practiced, just like they are for Muslims around the world today.



## Ancient writing

There were lots of scholars and scribes in those mosques. These people were always busy learning, reading and writing.

They used an ancient system of writing, a bit like the hieroglyphics that were used by the [Ancient Egyptians](#). Instead of the images used in hieroglyphics, the scholars of Ancient Ghana used different shapes to represent words. Their writing system was called Cuneiform.





## Trading across the desert

Many of the Muslims that lived there were traders.

A bit like the Silk Road stretching from [Ancient China](#), India and North Africa, the trans-Saharan network connected kingdoms from the north and west of Africa.

Beautiful hand-crafted leather goods were found in old Morocco that were made in Ancient Ghana.

### Old gold coins

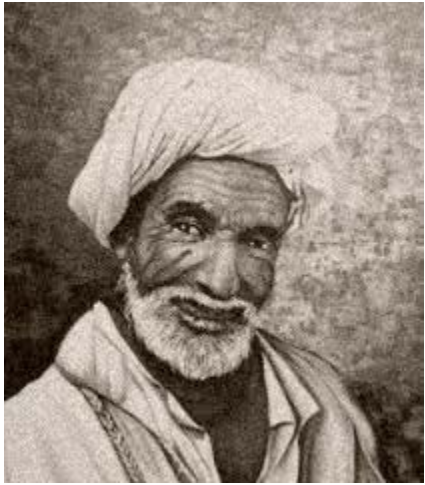
Al-Bakri said that merchants had to pay one gold dinar (an old coin) to bring in salt, and they also had to pay the King two gold dinars to take salt out of the country.



With all the salt and [gold](#) passing to and from Ancient Ghana, we can see how the King became very rich. We now know al-Bakri was telling the truth about these old gold coins. In 2005, archaeologists found moulds for coins with tiny droplets of gold in them. These were found very near to a city in Ancient Ghana.

This proved they had been used to make gold dinars without any stamp on them, just like al-Bakri said. Before this discovery, many of us thought that gold coins were made in North Africa.

If a country or a kingdom makes their own coins, it shows how important they were at the time.

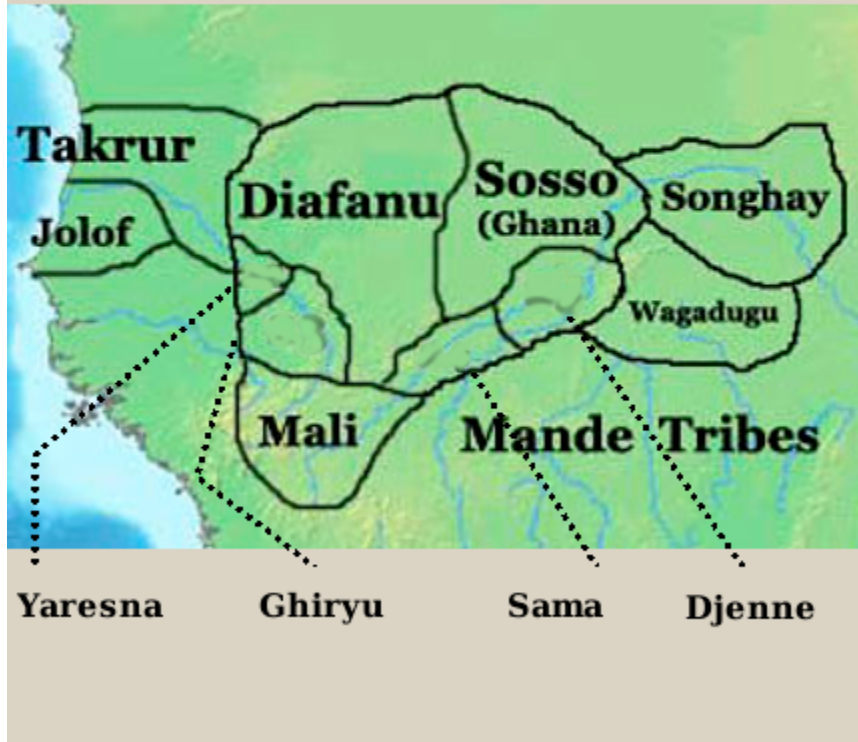


## Big battles and the collapse of the Empire

After a few hundred years of great riches and trade, the Ghana Empire ended. The Almoravids (from the North of Africa), ransacked Ghana in 1054.

# Successor States to the Ghana Empire

c. 1200 ce



In 1076, after many battles, the Almoravids seized the city of Kumbi Saleh. The people that were under the control of the King gradually changed their loyalties and stopped paying taxes to the King of Ghana.

Another kin, called Susu took over the capital. In 1240, a Mande emperor called Sundiata incorporated the Kingdom into the **Empire of Mali**.

All our information for these great Almoravid victories comes from the Almoravids themselves. In history, it is often quite likely that people tell the story that suits them and makes them look like winners.



It doesn't mean these stories are untrue, it just means we have to remember that they might exaggerate their strength or their victories a little bit.

There has been lots of archaeology done in the region which could tell us that the fall of the Empire happened a little more slowly.



In any case, the **Empire of Mali** which followed was to be just as great and just as successful and rich as the Ancient Empire of Ghana.





## Questions

When did the Empire of Ghana begin?

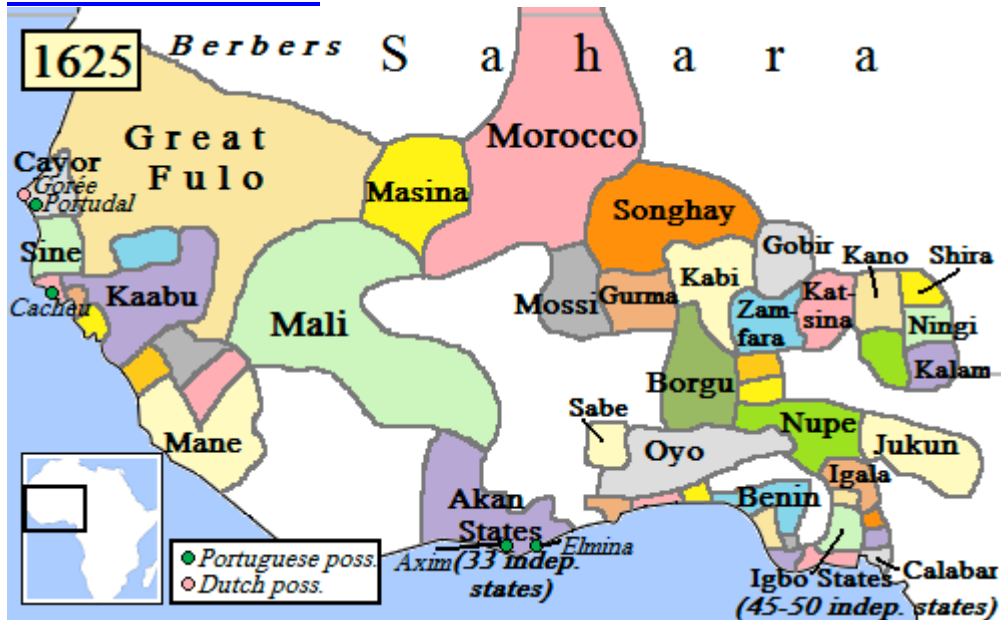
How many mosques were there?

What was the ancient system of writing called?

What was found in old Morocco from Ancient Ghana?

Who ransacked the city in the eleventh century?

## Ancient Africa



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