

Ghana

Medieval Trading Empire of West Africa

A Unit of Study for Grades 5–8

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TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS

I. Unit Overview

Western historians have traditionally neglected the African past, placing too little importance on its pre-colonial societies. Indeed, teachers of primary through high school students have only recently begun to find substantive discussion of pre-colonial Africa in their curricular guides or textbooks.

There are two reasons for this: first, Western civilization has historically thought of Africans as inferior and unworthy of cultural consideration, often denying Africa an indigenous history and assuming its history began with the coming of Europeans. Secondly, most ancient African societies did not develop systems of writing. Western scholars have traditionally relied on written records as evidence of civilized societies, belittling the historical validity of archeological findings and oral traditions. Yet these findings and oral histories expose a rich and complex African heritage.

The fact remains that, as historian Basil Davidson has noted, “To understand the African present it is necessary to understand the African past;” to appreciate the African past it is necessary to examine African civilization before colonization and expose students to the richness of this past. This unit provides students with a taste of that past, as it explores the medieval kingdom of Ghana, a thriving center of trade in the Western Sudan that boasted advanced technology and a sophisticated social and political organization.

II. Unit Context

The unit is written for middle school students but can be adapted for older or younger students. The time frame covers the first millennium CE. and could follow the study of ancient civilizations or be integrated with a study of the Middle Ages, the rise of Islam, or the development of long-distance trade.

Further, it forms a foundation for the study of European imperialism in Africa by providing students with an understanding of the dynamics of an African Kingdom before the intrusion of European imperialism and colonialism. It also informs us about the regional trade in gold and other commodities which later became a major European attraction about them.

III. Correlation to National History Standards

Ghana: *Medieval Trading Empire of West Africa* provides teaching materials that address history standards in *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 4**, “Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter.” Lessons specifically address **Standard 5A** on state-building in West Africa, regional commerce, and trans-Saharan trade, as well as **Standard 7** on patterns of international trade and the spread of Islam.

This unit likewise integrates a number of specific Historical Thinking Standards including: *Draw upon data in historical maps* (**Standard 2**, “Historical Comprehension”); *Analyze multiple causation* (**Standard 3**, “Historical Analysis and Interpretation”); and *Interrogate historical data* (**Standard 4**, “Historical Research”).

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To appreciate the relationship between African geography and historical change during the era of the Ghana empire.
2. To understand the dynamics of long-distance trade in Africa during the first millennium CE.
3. To appreciate the technological and organizational and material conditions of the medieval kingdom of Ghana.

V. Lessons

Lesson One: The Geography of Africa

Lesson Two: The Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Ghana

Lesson Three: Wealth Through Trade

LESSON ONE

THE GEOGRAPHY OF AFRICA

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To locate Africa on a world map, identify bordering continents, Middle Eastern countries, major bordering water formations, and the equator.
- ◆ To identify three main climatic and vegetation regions in Africa.
- ◆ To locate major rivers, lakes, and mountain ranges in Africa.
- ◆ To appreciate the size of Africa, relative to other large land masses.

B. LESSON ACTIVITIES (One day)

1. Have students locate Africa, surrounding continents and waterways, neighboring Middle Eastern countries, and the equator on the classroom wall map.
2. Discuss the climate as you might expect it to be in those areas.
3. On a blank regional map (**Map One**), have students fill in and label the geographical locations identified in Activity 1.
4. Distribute the African Climate map (**Map Two**) and the Africa Physical map (**Map Three**). Discuss the three main types of climate and plant life: desert, tropical forests, and savannah (grasslands). Note main rivers, mountain ranges, plateaus, and deserts. Note that the equator runs through changing altitudes, affecting climate and plant life.
5. Discuss geographical dynamics of the area. Be sure students understand climate and plant life, especially as they relate to agriculture, natural resources, and transportation.

C. EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. On a blank map of Africa (**Map Four**), have students label and color code the three types of climate and plant life, label all water areas and mountains, and label the equator. Creating a series of overlapping acetate maps is particularly effective (e.g., one map outlining the shape of the continent, the next map noting the climate and plant areas and the equator, the next showing the rivers and mountains. Such maps reinforce the relationship of the geographical parts of the world).
2. Create three dimensional relief maps of Africa using water, salt, and flour mixtures. Maps should be color-coded (with water color or tempera paint) to identify land types, formations, and main water ways.

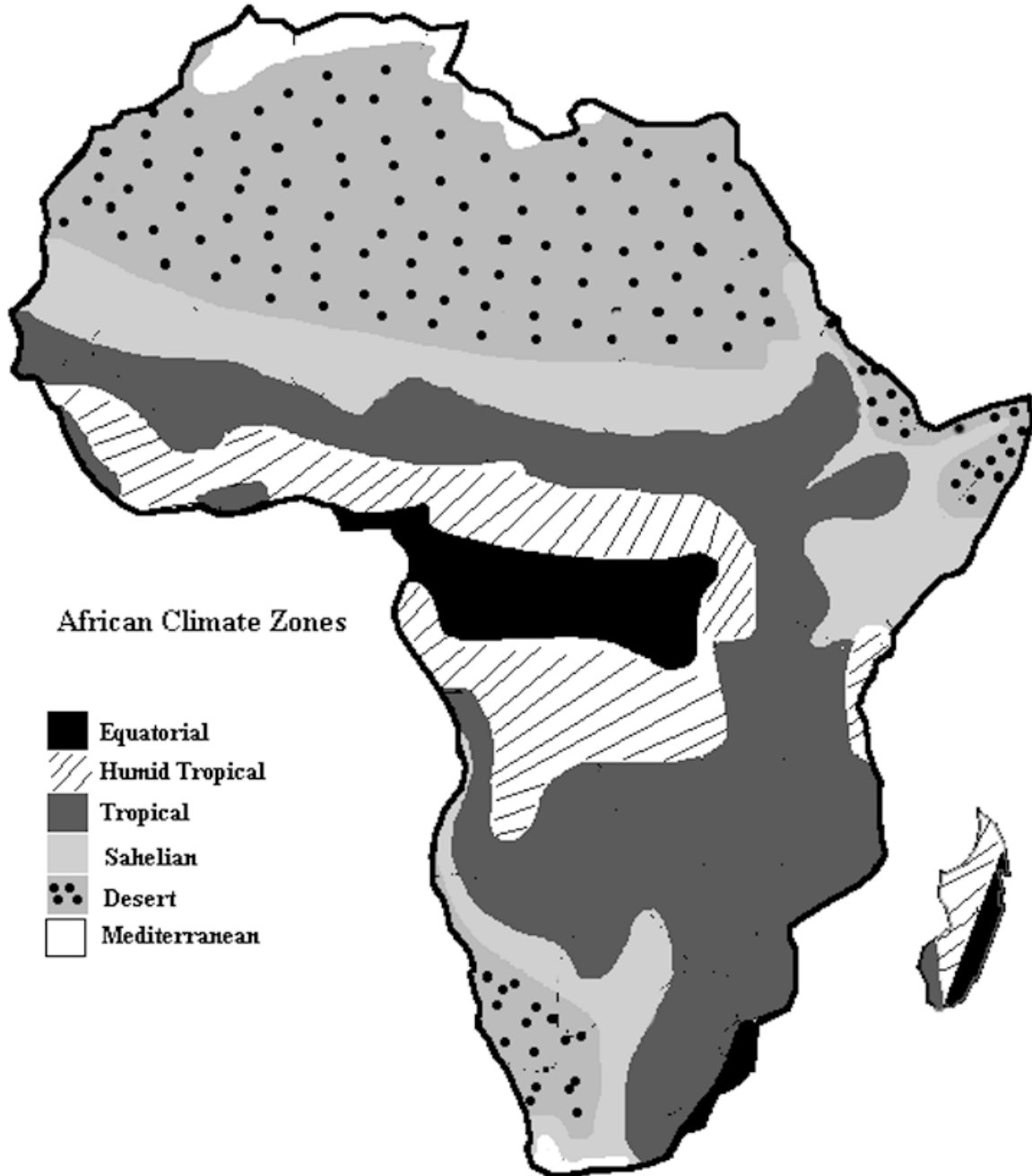
D. EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Have individual students or students groups share orally about one aspect of African geography – for example, climate diversity, land formations, or major rivers. They should refer to individual or group maps as they report to the rest of the class.

Outline Map of Europe, Asia, and Africa



Africa: Climate



Africa: Physical Features



Outline Map of Africa

