

Africa Documents

Between 700 and 1067, the Kingdom of ancient Ghana rose in power and gained control of the trans-Saharan gold and salt trade. This description of the King's court in ancient Ghana was written by the Arab scholar, Al-Bakri in 1067. (through *African Eyes*, ed. By Leon E. Clark, Praeger Press, Inc., New York, 1970.)

Description of the king of Ghana by Al-Bakri

"The king adorns himself...wearing necklaces and bracelets... The court of appeal is held in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses with gold embroidered trappings. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold, and on his right are the sons of the subordinate kings of his country, all wearing splendid garments and with their hair mixed with gold. The governor of the city sits on the ground before the king, and around him are ministers seated likewise. At the door of the pavilion are dogs...[wearing] collars of gold and silver, studded with a number of balls of the same metals."

1. What is the purpose of this paragraph?
 - a. To show what the king of Ghana did with gold
 - b. To show the wealth and glory of the king of Ghana
 - c. To give instruction on the correct use of gold
 - d. To show the structure of Ghana's government
2. Based on the context of this paragraph, what is a "page"?
 - a. Part of a book
 - b. A servant
 - c. A sheet of gold
 - d. An important official
3. When Al-Bakri describes this scene as taking place in a "court of appeal", we can infer that
 - a. Ghana had a complex system of government
 - b. Ghana had a lot of poverty
 - c. Ghana was a democracy
 - d. Ghana was an attractive place to live
4. How did Ghana become wealthy?
 - a. By mining gold
 - b. By taxing trade
 - c. By become a center of education
 - d. By becoming an Islamic civilization
5. Ghana was eventually replaced in West Africa by
 - a. The Almohads
 - b. Songhai
 - c. Aksum
 - d. Mali

What evidence of wealth is described?

What evidence of an advanced political structure is described?

(over)

The following description of the visit to Cairo in 1324 by the king of Mali, Mansa Musa, was written by Al-Umari, who visited Cairo several years after Musa's visit.

From the beginning of my coming to stay in Egypt I heard talk of the arrival of this sultan Musa on his Pilgrimage and found the Cairenes [people of Cairo] eager to recount what they had seen of the African's prodigal spending....This man [Mansa Musa] flooded Cairo with his benefactions....The Cairenes made incalculable profits out of him and his suite in buying and selling and giving and taking....Gold was at a high price until they came in that year....[F]rom that time its value fell and it cheapened in price and has remained cheap till now.

What can you tell about the extent of Mansa Musa's wealth?

This explanation for the wealth of the kingdom of Ghana is taken from *Through African Eyes*, ed. by Leon E. Clark, Praeger Press, New York, 1970.

The Arab traders of this region wanted gold as much as the Wangara wanted salt, but both had to pass through Ghana to trade...Ghana controlled the land...it had the military forces...to maintain peace in the area, thereby assuring safe trade for the Arabs and the Wangara.

Ancient Ghana was an extremely complex empire. It possessed many of the characteristics of powerful nations today: wealth based on trade, sufficient food to feed its people, income derived from taxes, social organization that ensured justice and efficient political control, a strong army equipped with advanced weapons, and a foreign policy that led to a peace and cooperation with other people.

Explain ancient Ghana's role in the gold-salt trade: