The Shona & Great Zimbabwe (1000-1450 A.D.)

In Southeastern Africa a group of people called the Shona established a city called Great Zimbabwe, which grew into an empire built on the gold trade.

Rise to Power:
Around the year 1000, the Shona people had claimed fertile and well-watered land in modern day Zimbabwe. The rulers of this community originally derived their wealth and power from herds of cattle. Soon afterwards, peoples to the north and west discovered and began mining the rich gold vein on the plateau of what is now central Zimbabwe. Its location also had economic advantages. The advantageous location between the gold-bearing plateau and numerous African and Arab trading posts on the Indian Ocean coast allowed for a major gold trading center to form. The Great Zimbabwe was able to gain control of these trading posts. Its leaders taxed the traders who traveled these routes. They also demanded payments from less powerful nearby chiefs. This income would allow the Shona to undertake massive building projects.

The Great Enclosure & Architecture:
The city of Great Zimbabwe was an architectural marvel. The word zimbabwe itself comes from the Shona phrase meaning “stone enclosure.” The Shona built two complexes of stone building that once housed the royal palace of Great Zimbabwe’s rulers. The Great Enclosure is a massive curving wall up to 4-stories high and 15 feet thick. The Great Enclosure was clearly built for defensive purposes as there is no way for soldiers to climb to the top of the walls. The walls also symbolized the strength and power of the Great Zimbabwe and its rulers.

Inside the walls stands one cone-shaped tower. Tall figures of birds, carved from soapstone and plastered altars were also inside the Great Enclosure, providing evidence that religious ceremonies also took place there. Some archaeologists believe the construction of Great Zimbabwe may have taken 400 years. What impresses many historians about the construction is that the stonework of Great Zimbabwe is remarkable for its precision. Most structures were built with granite blocks so carefully carved that no mortar was required to hold them together.

Not everyone lived in such an architectural wonder as the Shona king. The city consisted of two parts: the residences of the general population and those of the elite. The general population lived in closely packed mud-and-thatch houses and little is known about the way they lived. A small number of elite people lived inside smaller stone enclosures at the center of the city. The sheltered residential areas were hidden by high stone walls. These living quarters testify to the high status and authority of the Great Zimbabwe ruling class.

We have learned how Africa’s geography isolated most of the people from other cultures, but Great Zimbabwe is an exception. In the ruins of the Great Enclosure archaeologists have found china, glass beads, and porcelain dating from 14th-century China, Persia, and Syria. The presence of such luxury items from so far away demonstrates Great Zimbabwe’s valuable connections with traders on the east coast of Africa. Likewise, Shona culture made its way to other parts of Africa. Many other smaller ruins built in the style of Great Zimbabwe are scattered throughout eastern Botswana, and northern Mozambique, demonstrating the scope of Great Zimbabwe’s influence.

Disappearance:
No one knows what happened to Great Zimbabwe. For some reason unbeknownst to historians the city was abandoned in 1450. Some theories include overgrazing by the vast amounts of cattle or a lack of resources to sustain a growing population forced the Shona to find new land to live on.
Axum/Ethiopia

The Kingdom of Axum (Aksum) is located on a rugged plateau on the Red Sea, in what is now Eritrea and Ethiopia. Axum owed much of its prosperity to its location on the Red Sea, which was on the trade route between India and the Mediterranean Sea. Axum exported ivory, frankincense, myrrh, and slaves. It imported textiles, metal goods, wine, and olive oil. This trade allowed the kingdom to flourish and prosper.

Religion:
Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Axumite civilization was its religion. In A.D. 324, King Ezana converted to Christianity, which was first brought by Syrians who were shipwrecked. The king made Christianity the official religion of Axum. However, the Christian church of Axum, along with Egypt, had a disagreement with Rome about the nature of Jesus. Both Rome and Constantinople believed Jesus was both human and divine. Axum & Egypt believed he was fully divine and started their own branch of Christianity called the Coptic Church. After King Ezana death, a new religious force - Islam - brought profound challenges to the kingdom of Axum.

Islam's expansion in Africa soon led to conflict within the state of Axum. By the eighth-century, a number of Muslim trading states had been established on the coast of the Red Sea. At first, relations between Christian Axum and its Muslim neighbors were relatively peaceful. Beginning in the twelfth-century, however, problems arose as the Muslim states on the Red Sea began to move inland to gain control of the ivory and slave trade. Axum, which had control of this trade for centuries, reacted with force. These battles would eventually wear down Axum and force them into geographic isolation.

In order to ensure that Muslims did not spread their faith, the government was reorganized to extend the Christian faith to outlying areas. The ruler gave military leaders and government officials vast amounts of land to keep order and collect taxes in the outer areas. They sent Christian monks to set up monasteries and churches to spread the faith. At this time the kingdom of Axum became known as Ethiopia. Today, Ethiopia has more churches per square mile than another country in the world. More than half the country has remained Christian despite the Islamic conquests.

Architecture:
The establishment of Christianity was just one lasting achievement of the Axumites. They also developed a unique architecture. They used stone instead of mud bricks to construct royal palaces and public buildings. Axum's kings also built huge stone pillars called stelae. These presumably were meant to celebrate the kings' conquests and to demonstrate Axum's greatness. Some are 60 feet tall and were among the largest structures in the ancient world (think a smaller version of the Washington Memorial).

Agriculture:
While Axum's location was ideal for trade, its geography provided some difficulties. The terrain was rugged and hilly. Like other cultures, such as Japan, the Axumites adapted to their environment by using the agricultural method of terrace farming. Terraces or steplike ridges constructed on mountain slopes, helped the soil retain water and prevented it from being washed downhill in heavy rains. The Axumites dug canals to channel water from mountain streams into the fields. They also built dams and cisterns, or holding tanks, to store water.
**Songhai** (c.600s to 1500s)

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As the empire of Mali declined the people of Songhai, who had been under Malian control, built up their own army, extended their territory, gained control of trade routes, and established their own kingdom.

**Government:**
The kingdom of Songhai was fortunate to have two extraordinary leaders. The first was Sunni Ali. Under the leadership of Sunni Ali a dynasty was established and Songhai began to expand. Sunni Ali spent much of his reign on horseback and on the march as he led his army in one military campaign after another. His army had cavalry, on both horses and on camels, armed with swords and spears. This army was able to create the largest empire that West Africa ever had. The empire stretched from the Atlantic Ocean eastward some 1,800 miles. Two of Sunni Ali's conquests were especially important. The conquests of Timbuktu and Jenne gave Songhai control of the trading empire that had made both Ghana and Mali wealthy and prosperous empires. However, Sunni Ali did destroy the learning center at Timbuktu and drove out scholars.

After Sunni Ali's death in 1492, his son succeeded him as ruler. Almost immediately he was overthrown by Muslims who were angry that Sunni Ali's son did not practice Islam. Muhammad Ture seized power in 1493. Muhammad garnered the name Askia, which means usurper. During his 35-year reign, Askia Muhammad continued to expand Songhai's territory. Askia Muhammad also was an excellent administrator. He divided the kingdom into provinces and appointed a governor to each province. He created a bureaucracy similar to those in China. He set up an efficient tax system and chose officials based on merit. Perhaps most importantly Askia Muhammad, a devout Muslim, restored the learning center at Timbuktu. He brought the Islamic scholars back to Timbuktu where they taught math, science, astronomy, medicine, and logic at Sankore University.

**Decline:**
Despite its wealth and learning, the Songhai Empire lacked modern weapons. In 1591, a Moroccan fighting force of several thousand men equipped with gunpowder and cannons crossed the Sahara and invaded Songhai. The Moroccan troops quickly defeated the Songhai warriors, who were only armed with swords and spears. The collapse of the Songhai Empire ended a 1,000 year period in which powerful kingdoms and empires ruled the central region of West Africa.
Mali (1235-1400)
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By 1235 the kingdom of Mali had emerged. Like Ghana, Mali's wealth was built on gold. No longer under Ghanaian control, Malian people began to mine gold independently and found new gold deposits in the east. The new gold deposits forced the trade routes that had gone through Ghana to reroute through Mali.

Sundiata, Mansa Musa, & The Government:

The founder of Mali is believed to be Sundiata Keita. Sundiata was born with a disability and was still not able to walk at age 7. With the aid of a blacksmith, however, who made braces for his legs, Sundiata gradually and painfully learned to walk. He worked his way up to become the headman of his village.

In 1240 he captured the Ghanaian capital and united the people of Mali and created a strong government. To appease all people in his empire, Sundiata, which means "lion prince," practiced both Islam and traditional animistic religions. His name was befitting since he was tough like a lion. Under Sundiata's form of justice thieves had their hand cut off and liars had their tongues cut out.

Despite this ruthlessness, Sundiata established a bureaucracy and promoted agriculture. It was during the reign of Sundiata in which Mali derived its name. Mali means "where the king lives."

Sundiata's achievements would be surpassed by his relative Mansa Musa. Under his reign the wealth of the empire would reach unimaginable heights. Perhaps the richest aspect of the empire was the learning center Mansa Musa established in the city of Timbuktu. The city attracted Muslim judges, doctors, religious leaders, and scholars. Soon great mosques and universities were built. They empire became a devout Islamic society. One visitor commented that Malian parents wanted their children to learn the Qur'an by heart. If the children did not, they were put in chains until they memorized the holy book. This is probably exaggeration by the writer, but the point is understood.

Most of Mali's people were farmers who grew grain and rice. The farmers lived in villages ruled by a local chieftain, who served as both a religious and administrative leaders. The chieftain was responsible for sending tax revenues from the village to the higher levels of government.

Trade:
Extending from the Atlantic coast inland as far as the famous trading city of Timbuktu, Mali built its wealth and power on the gold and salt trade it took over from Ghana. Much of the wealth of the country was accumulated in the cities where merchants lived. The mansa, or king, of Mali levied taxes on trading activities, but was never able to completely control and profit off the gold and salt trade. Gold traders had to pay a direct tax to the mansa in order to sell gold in Mali.

Ibn Battuta:
Ibn Battuta, the Marco Polo of Africa, was an Arab traveler and historian. He traveled 27 years throughout the Muslim world. He was most impressed with Mali. He found he could travel throughout the empire without fear of crime. Ibn Battuta wrote in his travel journal, "They [Malians] are seldom unjust...Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone guilty of the last act of injustice. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers.

Decline:
Within 50 years of Mansa Musa's death, the empire began to crumble. Civil war erupted, which prevented future mansas from governing effectively. Also newer gold deposits found even further east of Mali shifted trade routes out of Mali.
Ghana (C. 300-1235)

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The first of the great trading states south of the Sahara was Ghana. The state emerged in the fifth century A.D. in the upper Niger River valley. Most of the people in the area were farmers living in villages under the authority of a local chieftain. Gradually, these communities were brought together to form the kingdom of Ghana.

Government:
The kings of Ghana were absolute rulers (free to govern without any laws) who played active roles in running their kingdom. Their wealth was vast. Supposedly, the king Kanissa’ai owned ten thousand horses, each of which was housed in its own stable with three servants to meet its needs. For their public appearances, the kings of Ghana dressed in resplendent robes, wore gold necklaces and rings, and were crowned with turbans trimmed in gold.

This wealth allowed the king to maintain a large army to protect him. According to historical evidence, the king could summon 200,000 well-trained soldiers and 40,000 soldiers. At the same time the largest number of soldiers raised in Europe was 150,000 under William the Conqueror.

Trade:
Where did the king get such wealth from? Ghana had an abundance of gold, as tenth-century Muslim geographer made clear in his travel writings: “There is the kingdom of Ghana, whose king is also very powerful. In his country are the gold mines...Gold is found in the whole of this country.” The heartland of the state was located near one of the richest gold-producing areas in all of Africa. In fact two-thirds of the world’s gold supply came from Ghana during the kingdom’s existence. Ghana’s gold was an important element in making it the center of an enormous trade empire.

The region also had an abundant supply of iron ore, and the Ghanaians were skilled in making tools and weapons. The blacksmiths of Ghana were highly valued as people who could “magically” use fire to turn ore into tools and weapons.

Muslim merchants from North Africa brought to Ghana metal goods, textiles, horses, and salt obtained from mines in the Sahara. Salt was an especially valuable trade item for the Ghanaians. It was used to preserve food, as well as to make food tastier. Salt was also important because the people needed extra salt to replace what their bodies lost in sweat in the hot climate in which they lived. Ghanaians trade their abundant gold for salt. The exchange of goods in Ghana was done by a method of silent trade. The merchants never met. The sellers would leave their products on a determined boundary. The buyer would come and leave gold. The seller would return and if satisfied by the offer take the money.

The empire further gained income through taxes. Each transaction was taxed by the king. The king often demanded gifts and tributes from chiefs in surrounding lands and visitors to his kingdom.

Islamic Influence and Decline:
As Islam spread through North Africa, Muslim merchants and teachers settled in states south of the Sahara and introduced their faith there. Eventually Ghana’s rulers converted to Islam. Muslims were hired as advisors to the king. While the government took on Muslim characteristics, the Ghanaians continued to practice their animistic beliefs. In 1276 A.D. Arabs from North Africa called the Almoravids invaded Ghana and declared a jihad (holy war) against Ghana. During this time people stopped paying tribute to the king. While the Ghanaians were able to win against the Almoravids, but never again was the empire as powerful as it had once been.