# Eastern City-States and Empires of Africa

Overview

As early as the Third Century C.E. the kingdom of Aksum was part of an extensive trade network. Aksum was an inland city so it had to build a port on the coast of the Red Sea. From this vantage point Aksum freely traded with Arabia, Persia, India and Rome. In the 600's C.E. the area was taken over by Muslim forces. In a short period of time, the Muslims gained full control of Arabia, the Red Sea and North Africa. Under their rule any access from the city to the port was stopped. This forced the Aksumites to move their capital city south to Roha, (later called Lalibela) in 1100 C.E. In the meantime other cities on the eat coast of Africa were thriving because of the Indian Ocean trade routes.

East Coast Trading Cities

Villages along the east coast of Africa began to develop into important trade cities. By 110 C.E. waves of **Bantu** speaking people had migrated across central Africa to the east coast. Once there they established farming and fishing villages. Slowly, the existing coastal villages grew into bustling seaports, built on the trade between East African merchants and traders from Arabia, Persia and India. As trade increased, cultural diffusion led to many Muslim Arab and Persian traders settling in these ports. Arabic blended with the Bantu language to create the **Swahili** language. The word comes from an Arabic term meaning "people of the coast."
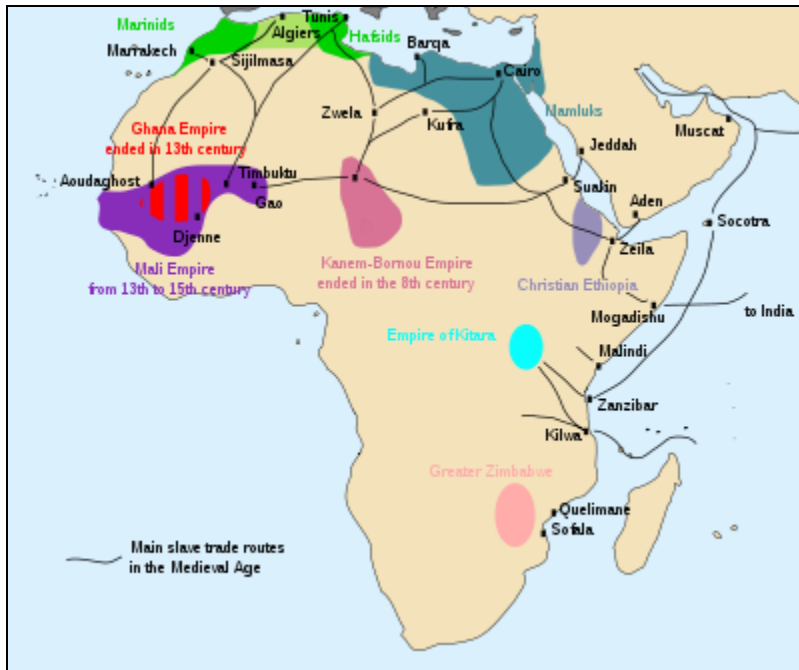
When the Persian traders moved south from the Horn of Africa (a triangular peninsular near Arabia) they brought Asian manufactured goods to Africa and in return, sent African raw materials to Asia.

Arab Traders sold:
Porcelain bowls from China
Jewels and Cotton from India

Arab Trader bought:
African ivory, gold, tortoiseshell, ambergris, leopard skins and rhinoceros horns

By 1300 C.E. more than 35 trading cities developed along the coast from Mogadishu in the north to Kilwa and Sofala in the south.

Some of the East African cities also began to make their own products to sell. Weavers in Mogadishu and Sofala made cloth and workers in Mombassa and Malindi made iron tools.
The port of Kilwa grew rich because it was as far south on the coast as a ship from India could sail in one monsoon season. Therefore, trade goods from southerly regions had to funnel into Kilwa, so Asian merchants could by them.

In addition, in the late 1200s Kilwa had seized the port of Sofala, which was a trading center for the gold mined inland. By controlling Sofala, Kilwa became the wealthiest, most powerful coastal city-state.

Trade Goods

Origin	Raw Materials	Products Made
Savanna region	Leopard skins	Saddles
Coastal region	Tortoiseshells	Hair combs for women
Southern Africa	Gold from mines	Coins, jewelry
Savanna region	Ivory from elephants	Chess pieces, sword hilts

Islamic Influences

The religion of Islam was introduced to this area by Muslim traders. It grew similar to the growth of trade and commerce. Even the smallest towns had a mosque for the faithful. Most cities were governed by a Muslim sultan, or ruler. In addition, most government officials and wealthy merchants were Muslims. However, the vast majority of the populations along the east coast, the African natives, held on to their traditional religious beliefs. Not everyone was converted to the Islamic faith. This was also true of the people who lived in the inland villages.

Slavery became a major trade from this area. Arab Muslim traders exported enslaved persons from the East Africa coast. The slaves were acquired through kidnapping, mostly done by certain tribes who raided other tribal villages. These captured Africans were then shipped to slave markets in Arabia, Persia and Iraq. Wealthy people in these countries often bought slaves to do domestic tasks.

Muslim traders also shipped enslaved Africans across the Indian Ocean to India, where Indian rulers trained and employed them as soldiers in their armies. Enslaved Africans also worked on the docks and ships as manual labor in the Muslim-controlled ports and as household servants in China.

Although Muslim traders had been enslaving East Africans and selling them overseas since the 9th century, the numbers were small, only about 1,000 persons a year. The trade in slaves did not increase dramatically until the 1700s. At that time, Europeans started to buy captured Africans from this region and send them to their colonial plantations in the New World.

Western European invaders

In 1488, the first **Portuguese** ships rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the southern tip of Africa and sailed north, looking for a sea route to India. They believed that a sea route would be considerably quicker than the Silk Road and the faster the route the more profit was to be gained. The Portuguese particularly wanted spices, perfumes and silks from India and Asia as they were the most profitable yet lightweight to carry by ship.
When the Portuguese saw the wealth of the East African city-states, they decided to conquer those cities and take over the trade for themselves.

Using their cannons from their ships, the Portuguese easily captured the cities of Sofala, Kilwa and Mombasa. They burned parts of Kilwa and built forts on the sites of Kilwa and Mombasa, solely to protect their own interests. The Portuguese kept their ports and cities on the East African coast for the next two centuries.

Southern Africa and the Great Zimbabwe

The gold and ivory that helped the coastal city-states grow rich came from the interior sections of southern Africa. In southeastern Africa the **Shona** people established a city called **Great Zimbabwe** which grew into an empire built on the gold trade.

By the year 1000 C.E. the Shona people had settled in the fertile, well-watered plateau between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers in the area today we call Zimbabwe. The area was well suited to crop farming and cattle raising.

Its location had economic advantages. The city of Great Zimbabwe stood near an important trade route linking the goldfields with the coastal city of Sofala. Sometime after 1000 C.E., Great Zimbabwe gained full control of the entire trade routes. From the 1200s through to the 1400s, it became the capital of a thriving state. Its leaders taxed the traders who traveled along these routes. They also demanded payments from the less powerful chiefs. Because of this wealth, Great Zimbabwe became the economic, political, and religious center of its empire.

A strange event then took place. By 1450 Great Zimbabwe was abandoned. No one knows for sure why it happened. According to one theory, cattle grazing had worn out the grasslands. In addition, over-farming had worn out the soil, and the people had used up all of the salt reserves and timber. The area could no longer support a large population.

Almost everything we know about Great Zimbabwe comes from its impressive ruins. Portuguese explorers knew about this site in the 1500s. Karl Mauch, a German explorer, was one of the first Europeans to discover the remains of these stone dwellings in 1871.

- Zimbabwe is part of a Shona phrase meaning "stone houses"
- The ruins consist of two complexes of stone buildings
- There are great curving walls around the ruins with no way for soldiers to climb to the top to defend so they were built to impress and not as defense
- Archaeologists believe the city took about 400 years to be built
- The population of Great Zimbabwe was about 10,000
- The walls contain about 900,000 stone blocks and they are not held together by mortar
- Inside the walls stands a cone-shaped tower
- The Great Enclosure (curving wall) is 36 feet high in parts and is at least 15 feet thick
- Among the ruins were found tall figures of birds, carved from soapstone

The Great Zimbabwe
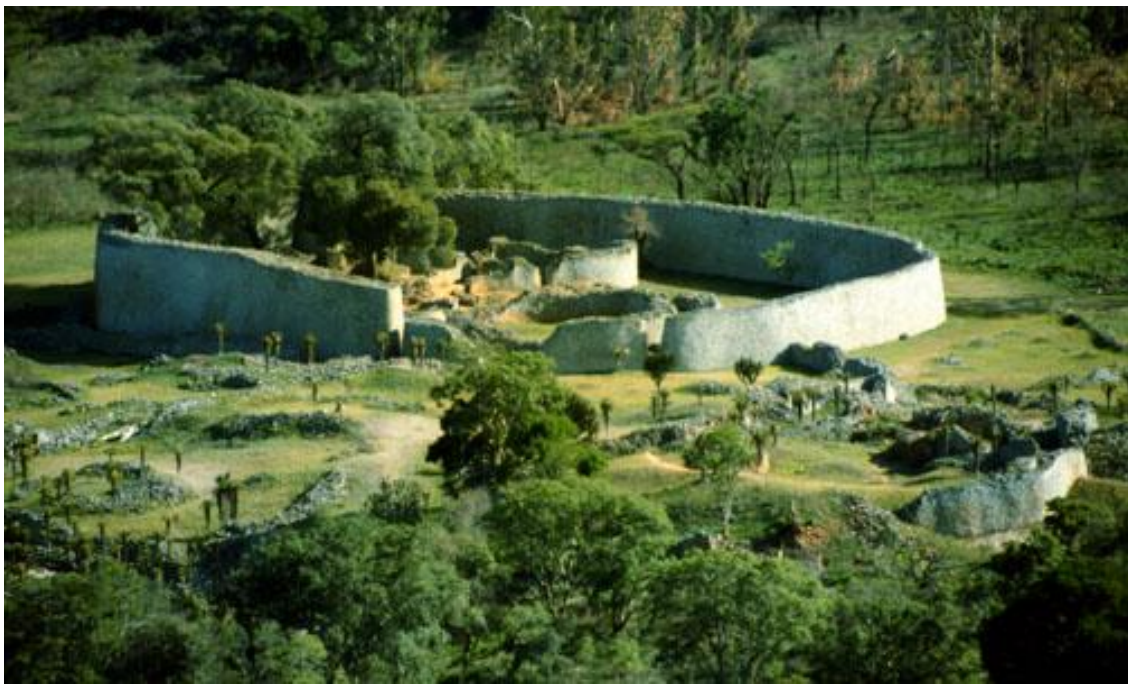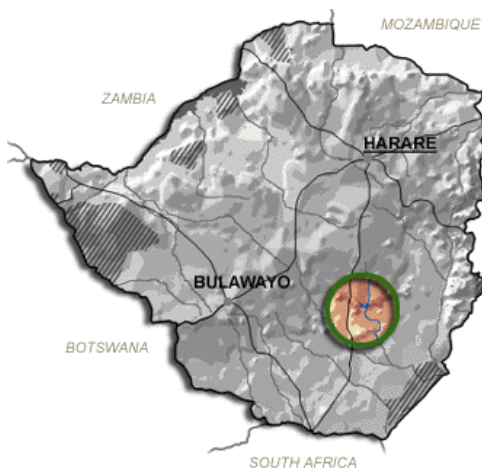
Islamic Law

In 1331, Ibn Battuta traveled by caravan to East Africa. He visited the African city of Mogadishu. In part of his diary he recorded how Muslim officials decided legal matters.

The Shaikh [sultan] takes his place in his hall of audience and sends for the Qadi [judge]. He takes his place on the Shaikh's left and then the lawyers come in and the chief of them sit in front of the Shaikh….

Then food is brought and ….. Those who are in the audience chamber eat in the presence of the Shaikh….

After this the Shaikh retires to his private apartments and the Qadi, the wazirs [government ministers] … and … chief amirs [military commanders] sit to hear causes and complaints.

Questions of religious law are decided by the Qadi, other cases are judges by the …wazirs and amirs.

If a case requires the views of the Shaikh, it is put in writing for him. He sends back and immediate reply.

IBN BATTUTA, *Travels of Ibn Battuta*

Questions regarding the above primary source document:

1. What rituals take place before the first case is heard?

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2. Who were the four types of people who decided legal matters?

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3. What types of cases did they judge?

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