

## Agriculture and Commerce in West Africa, 300–1000 CE

The Niger River Delta was crucial to the development of agriculture in West Africa. As the Sahara region began to dry thousands of years ago, many northern Africans flocked to this temperate region, where rainy seasons were long and frequent. When the rains ended and the floods receded, rich soil was left behind. It was along the banks of the Niger River in the temperate Sahel region south of the Sahara that West African sorghum and millet domestication developed. These crops became the staple foods throughout this region of West Africa.

Two developments helped to further agricultural production in this region. First, the development of irrigation practices allowed West African farmers to plant and settle farms further from the shores of the Niger River. Second, the region had developed ironworking technology by about the first century CE. The use of iron tools allowed farmers to plow and more efficiently cultivate the hard soils of West Africa. Eventually, the region produced a wide variety of crops such as beans, peas, lemons, rice, squash, melons, and yams.

Also by this time, trade routes had been established throughout West Africa connecting the towns and markets of the Niger region with the Ghanaian capital, Kumbi Saleh. From here powerful leaders attempted to control the trade in agricultural products, salt, and gold. By the fifth century CE, these connections in trade and agriculture, combined with the desire to benefit from taxing this production, created the need for a political organization, contributing to the founding of the empire of Ghana.

The gold trade especially was very lucrative and controlling and protecting this trade was a major reason for the establishment of the empire. Ghana, however, did not have any gold mines of its own. Rather, it held a strategic place between the mines of in the south along the Gold Coast and the trans-Saharan trade that reached the Mediterranean and beyond. The people of



the Niger region, therefore, acted as middle men who oversaw the exchange of gold north and salt south. By controlling and taxing this trade, the West African merchants became rich.

The continuing growth of agriculture within Ghana led to larger and more settled communities and cities within its borders. This increase in population and influence allowed Ghana to invade and conquer its neighbors' lands, further increasing the farmland available. While gold, salt, and imported agricultural goods such as kola nuts and dried fruits remained the chief commodities in the trans-Saharan trade, surplus rice and millet crops were traded as well.

## Instructions

In this activity, you will use what you have learned about commerce and agriculture in early West Africa to complete a graphic organizer and to answer an essay question about the relationship between agriculture and commerce in ancient West Africa.

## Reading Analysis

Use the graphic organizer below to take notes on the reading above.

<b>Significance of Agriculture in West Africa</b>
<b>Significance of Trade in West Africa</b>
<b>The Relationship between Trade and Agriculture in West Africa</b>



## Essay: The Relationship Between Agriculture and Commerce

Based on what you have read in the text and your prior knowledge agriculture and commerce, do you believe Ghana could have developed as major trading center without the influence of agriculture in the region? Why or why not? Use elements from the reading to support your answer.

[illegible]