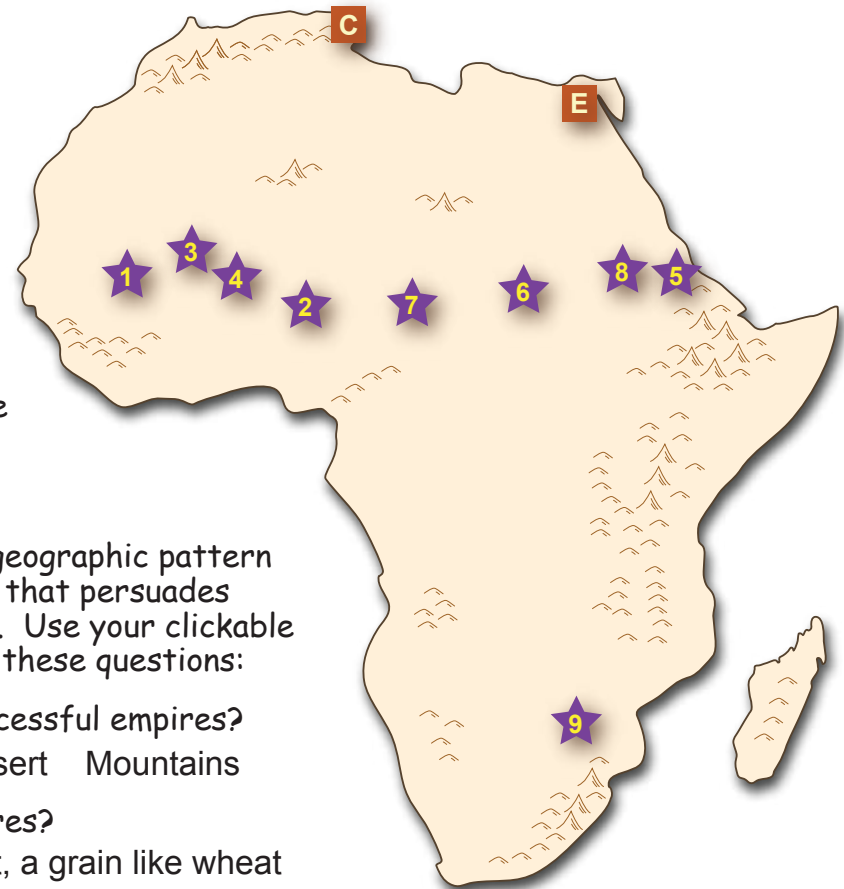


African Empires

Africa was home to some very rich and powerful empires. One African Emperor, Mansa Musa of Mali, may have been the wealthiest individual in human history. This map shows the core areas of some important empires.



1. Are the imperial centers scattered throughout Africa, or are they in a geographic pattern, like a line or a bunch in a fairly small part of the map? How would you describe their geographic arrangement?
2. OK, that was easy. The important point is that an obvious geographic pattern usually has a cause - in this case, some force or condition that persuades people to build their empires in particular kinds of places. Use your clickable mini-Atlas or other sources to get information to answer these questions:
 - a. In what kind of environment did people establish successful empires?
Circle: Rainforest Savanna Grassland Desert Mountains
 - b. What food source was most important in these empires?
Circle: Cassava, a root crop like potatoes Millet, a grain like wheat
Explain why this is important:
 - c. What kind of animal was used to carry things on the trade routes?
Circle: Antelope Camel Elephant Gorilla
Explain how you made this decision:
 - d. What hazard made life difficult in areas close to the equator?
Circle: Drought Fires Malaria Tornadoes
Explain why this is important:

Centers of Ancient African Empires

C Carthage	E Egypt
1 Ghana	5 Aksum
2 Hausa	6 Darfur
3 Mali	7 Kanem
4 Songhai	8 Kush
9 Great Zimbabwe	

Teacher's Guide: African Empires

Overview: Africa was home to some rich and powerful empires.

Students use maps to explore an important feature of many African empires – they were located in a very narrow latitudinal band across the continent, just south of the Sahara and north of the rainforest. This location offered enough rain for food production but not enough to support large populations of disease-carrying insects.

Grade: 7, 10

Related Discipline: History

GLCEs: 7W315, 3111, 413

Time: 10-30 minutes

Background: Most of the large west and south African empires developed relatively late in the history timeline, many centuries after the river civilizations of north Africa and Eurasia. As a result, the West African empires often get less attention in history curricula.

Setup: Hand out or project the map showing the core areas of African empires. Allow students to answer the questions on their own, or conduct a Socratic discussion based on the questions.

Procedure: The worksheet is self-explanatory. Encourage students to use the MGA clickable Atlas of Africa (or a good collection of maps from an atlas or online source). All of these questions can be answered by exploring the different layers in the MGA clickable atlas.

Answers: 1. The numbered empires all have their cores in grassland or shrubland areas. These ecoregions occur in areas that have enough rain for continuous plant cover but not enough to support large trees. The difference between grassland and shrubland often depends on the frequency of fire – the two kinds of vegetation are often mixed together in a complex mosaic that depends partly on the slope of the land and the position of stream valleys, cliffs, or other fire breaks.

2. Millet was the major food base for most of these empires – it is a grass, and they were, after all, located in grassland environment! Grains have several advantages over root crops like potatoes, yams, or cassava, or tree crops like bananas and mangoes. For one thing, they have more nutrition per pound. Root crops and fruits have a significant amount of water in them, which takes effort to harvest and transport. People often add water to grains to help prepare them for eating, in the form of soup, porridge, or bread. Moreover, grain crops can be safely stored much longer. Finally, they thrive in a drier environment and therefore face less weed competition. The bottom line is that grain production and consumption can leave people with more time to do other things.

3. Camels were the major pack animals in north Africa. This had many consequences. One of the most important is often overlooked – Muhammad's uncle was a trader in Mecca, which was a hub on camel caravans from southern Arabia (the source of key commodities like frankincense and myrrh) to the lands around the Mediterranean. In short, Islam was spread by camel traders – the map of Islam in Africa closely resembles the map that shows the natural range of camels and their use in commerce.

4. Malaria and other diseases were a severe constraint on human population in all parts of Africa that had rainy seasons longer than about 4 months. MGA also produces a clickable Atlas of Tropical Diseases that has maps of schistosomiasis, leishmaniasis, and other insect- and tick-borne diseases.

Debrief: Students could compare African trading empires with ports in Europe – where an ocean port sits at the edge of an ocean, the African empire cities were at the edge of the desert (often described as a “sea of sand and rock”). In a port, goods are transferred from land transport to ships; in an African trading hub, goods were transferred from river boats or wagons to camels for the trip across the desert.

This interior focus had consequences later, when European slave traders arrived by ship and encountered a relatively empty shoreline, with no large population concentrations to offer resistance.

Vocabulary: desert grassland rainforest cassava millet camel disease vector malaria

Extension: Compare and contrast the early African trading hubs – Aksum, Kush, Meroe – with the late West African empires – Ghana, Mali, Songhai. Explore Great Zimbabwe.