

Module 9: Empires of Africa and the Americas

Topic 1 Content: Civilizations of East Africa

Introduction



Civilizations of East Africa

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The Silk Road



The Silk Road is a term that refers to a network of trade routes linking Asia, India, the Mediterranean, Europe, and Africa. The Silk Road gets its name from the silk trade coming out of China. Trade along the Silk Road was a huge factor in the development of two African kingdoms known as Axum and Zimbabwe. Looking at the map, you can see that the blue ocean route of the Silk Road travels directly to the rivers near Zimbabwe and to the Red Sea near the Kingdom of Axum. Their proximity to the Silk Road allowed these two locations to become significant trade centers in Africa. The red trade routes on the map show how additional areas within the Silk Road were connected to Axum and Zimbabwe.

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Axum



The Kingdom of Axum was located in the highlands of modern-day Ethiopia and east of the Nile River. Axum was originally founded as a colony of Arabs from the southern region of the Arabian Peninsula, but it eventually became an independent state that mixed Arab culture with African. Its location along the Red Sea placed it within the trade route between India and the Mediterranean, making it a prosperous center of commerce that connected Europe and Asia with other African kingdoms. Some of its exports included gold, ivory, iron, spices, an aromatic tree resin called myrrh, and even enslaved people. Axum imported products such as textiles, metal goods, wine, and olive oil.

The exchange of ideas among different cultures was just as important as the trade in goods. One of the biggest ideas brought into Axum was the religious beliefs of Christianity. In the fourth century, King Ezana converted to Christianity and made it the official religion of Axum. He marked many important buildings with decorated stone towers called stelae, which were so large that they weighed hundreds of tons. Axum also adopted a new language called Ge'ez.

The Christian people of Axum enjoyed relative peace with their Muslim neighbors for hundreds of years, but Arab forces gradually took control of the entire coastal region of North Africa. In the early twelfth century, Muslim states began to move inland and took control over the trade of slaves and ivory that belonged to Axum.

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Zimbabwe



Zimbabwe was the most powerful kingdom in southern Africa from 1300 to around 1450. Located between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers near the coast of the Indian Ocean, its close proximity to water made it a prime location for trade. Gold was its most coveted export, which was traded with Swahili communities on the eastern coast. Zimbabwe's gold reached as far as China. Ivory was another popular commodity of Zimbabwe.

The capital of Zimbabwe was known as Great Zimbabwe, and was surrounded by stone walls that could have enclosed a population as large as ten thousand residents. The Great Enclosure, whose purpose is still uncertain, is part of the capital that was surrounded by a stone wall seventeen feet thick and thirty-two feet high. The people of Great Zimbabwe built the walls by tightly stacking granite blocks together without the need for mortar. Archeologists believe this center was reserved for the elite class of society while everyone else lived outside of the enclosure.

The entire city was abandoned by the fifteenth century. Possibilities for its decline include political instability, damage to land due to overgrazing, and natural disasters such as drought.