

History

African Rock Art, by David Coulson and Alec Campbell, is definitive and beautifully illustrated. It's one to keep on your coffee table, not carry in your backpack.

Opinion among historians is divided as to whether knowledge of iron-working was introduced to the region from Egypt or actually originated in West Africa.

Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, by David Conrad, covers the sweep of West Africa's three greatest historical empires in one accessible tome.

West Africa's story is one of history's grand epics. This is a place where the great issues and contradictions of Africa's past resonate through the present: from ancient empires of unrivalled extravagance to the ravages of slavery, from the region's fabulous natural resources to the destruction wrought by climate change, from proud independence and the colonial yolk to the more complicated sovereignty of the present. This is a tale that encompasses the stirring emptiness of the Sahara, the fluid interaction of trade and cultures along the Niger River and the clamour of the region's humid, tropical coasts. Above all, history West African-style is about an astonishing patchwork of peoples (see p71) trying to write their own history against all the odds.

For the colonial and postcolonial history of the 17 countries covered in this book, see the History sections of each individual country chapter.

FIRST FOOTPRINTS ON THE SAHEL

West Africa's earliest history is shrouded in mystery, its archaeological evidence either residing in the belly of a termite or consumed by tropical climates and the shifting sands of the Sahara.

The first meaningful signposts to West Africa's past appeared around 10,000 years ago in the Sahara, especially the Aïr Mountains of northern Niger (p603) and the Adrar des Ifôghas in Mali (p529), where nomads roamed across a very different West Africa from what you see today. Rivers, forests, vast lakes and savannah occupied much of what is now the Sahara, the human population was small and widely dispersed, and animals such as elephants, giraffes and the great cats were plentiful.

Around 5000 BC, domesticated cattle replaced elephants and giraffes in the carvings and finely rendered rock paintings left by hunter-gatherer peoples. This rock art, which serves as the Sahara's history books of the time, marks the moment when West Africans began to tame their natural environment as water became scarcer.

The earliest signs of organised society in West Africa date from around 1500 BC, in present-day Mauritania and northern Nigeria, where the remains of stone villages and domestic animals have been found. As settlements spread, two dominant groups emerged, the first along the Niger River, and the second around Lake Chad – both areas where soils were fertile and well-suited to agriculture. These groups built large stone villages and even towns. The first urban settlement of note was Jenné-Jeno, in present-day Mali (p500), which was established around 300 BC and is often considered the father of West African cities. By AD 500, towns and villages were dotted across the region.

TIMELINE

200,000 BC

Homo erectus, the predecessor of *Homo sapiens* (modern humans), occupies much of West Africa, as suggested by the region's archaeological evidence: tools and other artefacts found in Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania and elsewhere.

From 5000 BC

Rains become infrequent and the Sahara begins to become a desert. Most of West Africa's peoples forsake transient life and settle in communities around water-holes, begin to rely on agriculture, and begin to move south.

450 BC

The appearance of iron-working in central Nigeria enables the clearing of forests which expands agricultural land and commences the process of denuding West Africa's landscape that has never really abated in the centuries since.

WEST AFRICA'S GOLDEN EMPIRES

Hard as it is to believe now, two thirds of the world's gold once came from West Africa and the indigenous empires that controlled the West African interior, and hence the lucrative trans-Saharan trade routes were among the richest in the world.

Empire of Ghana

The Empire of Ghana was the first major state of its kind established in West Africa. It was founded in AD 300 with its capital at Koumbi Saleh, in present-day Mauritania, about 200km north of modern Bamako (Mali). By Ghana's 8th-century heyday, the empire covered much of present-day Mali and parts of eastern Senegal. Although smaller than the empires that followed it, Ghana was extremely wealthy and powerful, controlling not just trans-Saharan trade, but also massive gold deposits; rumour had it that the streets were paved with gold and that the emperor of Ghana routinely tied his horse to a nugget of pure gold.

Islam was introduced by traders from the north, but it couldn't save Ghana – the empire was destroyed in the late 11th century by the better-armed Muslim Berbers of the Almoravid Empire from Mauritania and Morocco. The Almoravids justified their invasion by pointing to Ghana's half-hearted adoption of Islam, but many historians believe that it had more to do with the Almoravid desire for Ghana's gold and control of trade routes.

Empire of Mali

The Empire of Mali, founded in the middle of the 13th century by Sundiata Keita, leader of the Malinké people, was perhaps the most legendary of West African empires. Such was its wealth and prestige that it, more than any other African empire, was to spark the outside world's interest in the continent.

Mali's heyday was the 14th century. Mali's kings controlled not only Saharan trade and the gold mines that had fuelled the prosperity of the Empire of Ghana, but also a swath of territory that stretched from modern-day Senegal in the west to Niger in the east. Their ambition was matched only by the extravagance of their rule.

One such monarch, King Abubakari II, sent an expedition across the Atlantic in an attempt to discover the Americas almost two centuries before Christopher Columbus. Only one ship returned, with stories of a great river running through the ocean's heart. Abubakari II himself led a second expedition of 200 ships. Not a single ship returned.

King Abubakari's anointed successor, King Kankan Musa (the grand-nephew of Sundiata Keita), would prove to be one of the most extraordinary of all African kings. Like all of Mali's rulers, Musa was a devout Muslim and, in 1324, he made his pilgrimage to Mecca, accompanied by an entourage of more than 60,000 people and needing 500 slaves to carry all the gold. Along

Into Africa: A Journey through the Ancient Empires, by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, looks at Africa's past through the prism of modern journeys through the region.

Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali, by DT Niane, is the most accessible English-language version of Mali's founding epic; it's like listening to the *griots* (praise singers attached to the royal court), during West Africa's glory days.

Timbuktu: The Sahara's Fabled City of Gold, by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle, provides a detailed look at Timbuktu, and the Songhai capital Gao, during the Mali and Songhai empires.

300 BC

Jenné-Jeno is founded in what is now Mali and is recognised as West Africa's first-known urban settlement. It proves remarkably enduring – by AD 800, Jenné-Jeno is home to an estimated 27,000 people.

AD 300

The Empire of Ghana is founded in what is now the barren badlands of the western Sahel. The first of the great West African empires, it holds sway over the region for 800 years.

900

Islam first reaches the Sahel, almost 250 years after it swept across the Sahara. It arrives as part of the trans-Saharan caravan trade and later becomes the predominant religion throughout much of West Africa.