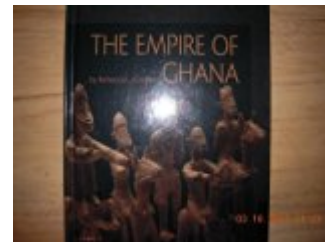


Rebecca L. Green. *The Empire of Ghana: A First Book*. New York: Franklin Watts, 1998. 64 pp. \$22.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-531-20276-0.



Reviewed by Jonathan Rotondo-McCord

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This book provides a relatively straightforward introduction to the history and culture of the west African kingdom of Ghana from the eighth through the eleventh century. Ghana was the first of three large Sudanic states of the African Middle Ages, the other two being Mali and Songhay (treated in other volumes in the same series). Patterns of west African history emerged in Ghana which would recur in other states as well: long-distance trade based on gold and salt; the king as focal point of political power; and the relationship between traditional religions and Islam.

Six short chapters make up the book. Chapter One, "The Soninke," presents the Ghanaian origin myth of Dinga (a legendary ancestor), the beginnings of the Wagadu state, the adoption of iron tools and weapons in early Ghana, and the role of the king. Chapter Two, "A Powerful Trade Network," discusses royal control of the gold-salt trade, a crucial element in west African history. Chapter Three, "Kumbi Saleh," recounts Arabic chroniclers' views of the ancient capital of Ghana, and points out the presence of Islam there. Veneration of ancestors, the sacred grove where kings were crowned and buried, and the legend of the guardian snake Bida are explained in Chapter

Four, "Religion." Market commodities are also mentioned, somewhat out of place. Chapter Five, "The Fall of the Empire," relates the legend of the killing of Bida and Ghana's subsequent misfortunes, historically made manifest in the presumed conquest of Ghana by Almoravids in the late eleventh century. Chapter Six, "A Lasting Legacy," briefly notes the importance of Ghana for the successor states of Mali and Songhay, and explains the choice of the name Ghana chosen for the Gold Coast upon its independence in 1957. A timeline, glossary, and suggestions for further reading (including Internet resources) follow.

The book is richly illustrated with full-color photographs throughout, which are better in quality than most found in standard academic histories of west Africa. The text, however, is marred at times by historical anachronisms or exaggerations. For example, the Almoravid conquest of Ghana is assumed without question. However, current scholarship on west Africa has sharply challenged this (cf. David C. Conrad and Humphrey J. Fisher, "The Conquest that Never Was: Ghana and the Almoravids, 1076," *History in Africa* 9 [1982], pp. 21-59 and 10 [1983], pp. 53-78). When writing of discoveries at Kumbi Saleh,

Green concludes that "during the Middle Ages--when most of the people of Europe suffered disease, fear, ignorance, and oppression--the Soninke people of the Empire of Ghana enjoyed a world that was rich in culture and famous as a center of learning" (pp. 48-49). This is surely an unjustified contrast. First, the European Middle Ages were not an era of unparalleled ignorance. Second, it is quite possible, in relative terms, that just as few Soninke as medieval Europeans enjoyed the cultural fruits of their respective civilizations. The map at the beginning of the book is clear enough, but could have easily illustrated more of the geographical features discussed in the text (e.g., gold and salt producing regions). There are frequent references to Islam, yet no single paragraph specifically explains how Islam as a religion functioned in west African history.

Despite these criticisms, books like this one fill a void in the standard social studies curriculum, and the effort is to be applauded. The high-quality photographs alone do much to give the reader an impression of Sudanic history and culture. While *The Empire of Ghana* seems intended for upper elementary school readers in general, I would hesitate to assign it to students before the sixth grade. In the context of an advanced social studies class, fifth-graders might profit from it if the teacher provided sufficient background explanation.

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