

# ASANTE GOLD

## AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION

### This resource is for Key Stage 3-5 History teachers

It provides information about a group of objects at the Wallace Collection that were made in the West African state of Asante, in present-day Ghana, and formed part of the treasure of King Kofi Karikari of Asante. Through these objects, we can learn more about the history of the powerful Asante state, the importance of gold, trade, and the growth of British imperial power in the 19th century. This can support KS3-4 world history elements, and the A-Level option 'African Kingdoms'.

This resource was created by historian Tony Yeboah with the Wallace Collection Learning team.

### A regional superpower emerges

The Asante built one of Africa's most powerful states, famous for military might and vast wealth.

### A passion for gold

The objects are evidence of the extensive gold resources the Asante controlled and the beauty and importance of the items made from this precious metal.

### Europeans and the struggle for control

These objects were taken from the capital Kumase by British forces during the Anglo-Asante war of 1873-4. They were sold to Garrard & Co. Ltd, the Crown Jeweller in London, from whom Richard Wallace bought them.

### Where we are now

Delve into a wider international conversation about what objects mean and where they belong.

### KEY WORKS



Trophy head



Knife



Knife handle



Terminals



Rings



Swords



Neck chains



## This head is among the most important and famous works of Asante art.

The trophy head probably depicts a decapitated high-status enemy. Such heads would have been attached to ceremonial swords. State swords belonged to Asante regalia - objects owned by the state and intended for public display.

The Asante employed different sword ornaments, including gold heads, often called 'heads of Worosa'. Worosa was a chief of the northern Banda state who, reputedly, was assassinated by Asantehene (king of Asante) Osei Kwadwo for killing Asante traders, possibly around 1765. The first casting of Worosa's head was probably made soon after, and more representations followed. Given its wear and damage, the head in the Wallace Collection might have been an early cast.

**DATE** 18th or 19th century

**SIZE** Height: 20 cm

Width: 14.5 cm

Depth: 14 cm

Weight: 1.36 kg

**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown

**PLACE** Asante (present-day Ghana)

# TROPHY HEAD

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION

IN DETAIL



# TROPHY HEAD

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## IN DETAIL





In 1874, the collector Richard Wallace bought a group of Asante objects from Garrard & Co Ltd, the Crown Jeweller in London.

The trophy head was the most expensive piece at £500. The second most expensive purchase was this pair of bird finials at £350.

**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Height: 16.3 cm  
Length: 18.5 cm  
Width: 3.8 cm

**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante  
(present-day Ghana)

# TERMINALS

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION

IN DETAIL





Individuals displayed their wealth and status through wearing gold jewellery.

Gold jewellery was worn by royalty and high-ranking members of the nobility. It was used to enhance a wearer's prestige and provide magical protection. Asante ornaments were highly symbolic; the design of rings could also determine who wore them and on which finger. Floral designs and more abstract patterns, as seen here, were used by both men and women. There are various interpretations of the symbolism of these rings, but none are conclusive.

**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Diameter: 2.9 cm  
Height: 3.2 cm

**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante (present-day Ghana)

# FINGER RING

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



## IN DETAIL



# FINGER RING

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Height: 4.5 cm  
Width: 3 cm  
Length: 1.1 cm  
**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante  
(present-day Ghana)

# FINGER RING

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



## IN DETAIL



# FINGER RING

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Height: 4.5 cm  
Width: 3 cm  
Length: 1.1 cm  
**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante  
(present-day Ghana)

# FINGER RING

ASANTE GOLD  
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IN DETAIL



# NECK CHAIN

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Length: 110 cm  
Height: 0.7 cm  
Width: 0.7 cm

**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante  
(present-day Ghana)

# NECK CHAIN

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Length: 54.5 cm  
Height: 0.7 cm  
Width: 0.7 cm

**MATERIAL** Gold

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante  
(present-day Ghana)



Different models of curved swords with gold-covered hilts and pommels were worn by high-ranking individuals.

**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Length: 118 cm  
**MATERIAL** Gold and wood

**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante (present-day Ghana)

**IN DETAIL**





**DATE** 19th Century

**SIZE** Length: 81.2 cm, blade

**MATERIAL** Gold, russet iron and wood, incised

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**MAKER** Unknown

**PLACE** Asante (present-day Ghana)

## KNIFE WITH SCABBARD

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



**DATE** 19th century  
**SIZE** Length: 32 cm  
Width: 3.7 cm  
**MATERIAL** Gold and iron, incised

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**MAKER** Unknown  
**PLACE** Asante  
(present-day Ghana)

# KNIFE WITH SCABBARD

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



IN DETAIL



## KNIFE HANDLE

ASANTE GOLD  
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Two large Asante gold beads incorporated into a paper knife with an ivory blade by Garrard & Co. for Sir Richard Wallace.

<b>DATE</b>	19th century
<b>SIZE</b>	Length: 31 cm Width: 7.6 cm Handle length: 8.7 cm
<b>MATERIAL</b>	Gold, silver and ivory
<b>MAKER</b>	Unknown
<b>PLACE</b>	Asante (present-day Ghana)

# KNIFE

ASANTE GOLD  
AT THE WALLACE COLLECTION



## IN DETAIL



## A regional superpower emerges

In the 17th century, the great kingdom of Denkyira ruled many of the communities of the Akan people in West Africa. One of the Denkyira kings, Ntim Gyakari, was notorious for being cruel and oppressive. A group of smaller Akan communities united under the leadership of a young prince, Osei Tutu, to overthrow Gyakari. Successful in battle, these communities crystallised into what became the formidable and powerful Asante kingdom. Ironically, having established the kingdom, the leaders of Asante reproduced some of the same political and social practices of Denkyira. This included the demand for the payment of tribute and other forms of taxes from surrounding territories.

In the early 18th century, Asante embarked on wars of conquest, defeating and subjugating both small and large states across a region that covers most of modern Ghana and parts of Togo and Ivory Coast. To govern this huge territory the Asantehenfo (kings of Asante) built sophisticated bureaucratic systems of governance with democratic elements. Ruling many different peoples, they were able to build a cohesive nation. Their authority was supported by powerful military units in Ghana, a reverence

for rituals, and artistic representations. As global communications and trade improved in the 19th century, Asante quickly attained a global significance to be reckoned with for both local and international powers.

The capital of Asante, Kumase, was a cosmopolitan city of wealth and power. Strategically located along major international trade routes that connected modern Ghana with the Saharan region, it was an active site of global commercial connectivity. The Saharan trade routes were extremely valuable to traders, who came from both below and above the desert. The sub-Saharan African traders exchanged Asante gold, which was distinguished by its pure quality, for top-quality fine-tasting salt, sourced from the rocks in the desert. Asante producers exported kola across the desert for such Mediterranean articles as cotton, silk, guns, and metalwork. Pure gold from Asante goldfields also crossed the desert, attracting Europeans who resented the high prices charged by Berber intermediaries in North Africa.

## A passion for gold

Asante society has always dealt with gold. The precious metal plays a significant role in the symbolic representation of the unity of the kingdom. From its inception, Asante is believed to have been united through the power of the Golden Stool – a royal throne that is both the essence of the kingdom and the mark of the Asantehene (the king). It was considered so powerful that not even the Asantehene himself could sit on it. Together, the Golden Stool and the Gold Elephant Tail, *sika mena*, form the twin-symbol of the authority of the Asantehene. In state ceremonies, the Asantehene's procession was always preceded by *apem nnaka*, chests of wealth, which were carried by his topmost attendants. This close association demonstrated that the Asantehene always had access to *sika* (gold), and could handle emergencies, even those that arose during state events.

As the kingdom expanded in the 19th century, gold remained the most significant symbol of its wealth. The wearing of royal regalia, all made with gold, by the Asantehene in both state ceremonies and private events was the

embodiment of this. Beyond the Asantehene, senior chiefs and private individuals all displayed their wealth through the wearing of royal regalia and gold jewellery respectively.

Gold was also used as the currency that mediated the exchange of goods and services following the gradual decline of barter trade. Gold dust was the main currency but nuggets were also used. The fact that gold was used both as a medium of exchange and for the display of wealth explains why in Asante, the Twi word, *sika*, means both 'gold' and 'money'.

Gold mining in Asante was initially in the hands of individuals and families but subject to the regulation of the Asantehene and his council of elders. Miners employed quite simple but effective methods that could meet the growing needs of merchants across trans-Saharan and later trans-Atlantic commercial routes. There were three methods traditionally used. The first was the washing, otherwise known as the 'panning' method, which was the most accessible and did not require a huge labour force. It involved washing earth deposits along the banks of rivers and streams

for alluvial gold. The second was shallow-pit surface mining, which was mostly conducted along sedimented valleys or hills in riverine areas. The third and the last was the deep shaft method which, like the shallow-pit surface approach, was organised during the dry season on elevated surfaces. All these methods employed relatively simple tools until the late 19th century when mechanised mining was developed following the introduction of concession mining and multinational co-operations.

The next stage in the life of gold that remained and circulated in Asante was the addition of value through the artistic prowess of Asante goldsmiths, who could become significant members of society. The gold ornaments and brass weights they melted and shaped/reshaped determined the value attached to a goldsmith. In particular, those who were able to reproduce an object in miniature dimensions as closely as possible were recognised as the best. For many of the goldsmiths, their motivation was to stimulate the aesthetic sensibilities of the Asantehene and the Asante aristocrats through their

skills and artistic products. The objects they made included: war regalia, like weapons and shields; models of animals that might have been hunted; and figures of warriors and wealthy leaders among others. Many ornaments referred to popular proverbs.

## Europeans and the struggle for control

It was partly in the hopes of gaining direct access to gold-producing territories that Europeans sailed the West African coast. Over time, trans-Atlantic trade reduced the volume of trade exchanges between West Africans and the Saharan region. The trans-Saharan trade gradually receded, as it could not compete with the quickly expanding European maritime trade across the Atlantic and along the African coast.

The Portuguese were the first to arrive in modern Ghana in 1471, but were not the last European power to do so. Just a little over a decade later, in 1482, they succeeded in building a fort along the coast. It was named São Jorge da Mina (Saint George of Mina) in celebration of gold mining, and can still be seen today in the city of Elmina. Over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, the number of European nations present along the Gold Coast increased. These later arrivals included the Dutch, Danes, British, and Germans among others. In initial 15th-century economic encounters, Europeans were interested in exchanging guns, cloth, and iron for gold and ivory from

the local people. However, by the 1780s, the export of commodities from West Africa reduced following the shift in demand to enslaved labour for European plantations in the Americas. Existing forts were converted into slave dungeons and several new ones were specifically built to serve as warehouses for commodified human beings before their embarkation to the Americas, across the Atlantic. African communities were raided and forcibly captured by Europeans. Slaves were also acquired through inter-ethnic wars among African states, and here, Asante, the most powerful kingdom in Ghana, is said to have been among the top states in West Africa to have contributed to the supply and export of enslaved Africans.

The growing interest of Europeans coincided with the rise and imperial ambitions of Asante. As they competed for local patronage, Europeans battled bitterly among themselves with the hope of controlling the movement of goods. In the process, they each developed a strategy for dealing with the Asante superpower. In the 17th century, European tensions produced a war between the Dutch

and the Portuguese in which the latter were defeated, losing the Elmina fort to their rivals. The victorious Dutch saw Asante as their ally, and agreed to pay annual rent on the Elmina fort. These acts of respect and recognition of Asante supremacy in the region were successful in cultivating the friendship of Asante, which prioritised selling gold and trading with the Dutch. The British, on the other hand, generally saw Asante's military strength as a threat to their own imperial ambition to control the commerce of gold. They sought to limit Asante power by allying with coastal communities who resented the Asante threat to their independence. These included many of the Fante states.

The British strategy towards Asante created tension between the two powers culminating in repeated battles in the 19th century, most notably in the 1820s, 1850s, 1860s and 1870s. Asante proved more powerful than the British had imagined and won many of the battles fought. Eventually, however, the 1874 Tota War, otherwise known as the Garnet Wolseley War, proved disastrous for the Asante kingdom. A British invading force under

the command of Field Marshal Sir Garnet Wolseley penetrated Asante and ransacked the capital, Kumase. The treasures of the Asante palace, the wealth of Asantehene Kofi Karikari, and the entire city were looted. Gold artefacts were seized, for auction or as part of the war indemnity the Asante were forced to pay. Others were taken by the troops. Many objects, described later as booties of the war, were shipped to the United Kingdom and some appeared on the London art market shortly thereafter.

Richard Wallace, a wealthy individual living in Britain who was fascinated by artwork from around the world, bought 16 Asante gold objects including the trophy head, swords, a dagger with scabbard, finger rings, and other pieces from Garrard & Co. Ltd, the Crown Jeweller in London.

For the love of the Asante kingdom and for its continuity, each Asante generation carefully guarded the Golden Stool. It was even safeguarded from the looting of the palace in 1874. However, in 1900 a British Governor, Sir Frederick Hodgson, disrespected the Asante

kingdom through a contemptuous demand to sit on the Golden Stool. He hoped that the continued exile of important military and state leaders would force Asante to recognise his authority. Instead, Hodgson's demand compelled the Asante to mobilise forces under the leadership of a self-appointed female commander, Nana Yaa Asantewaa. In the absence of their normal leadership, these temporary forces lost against a ruthless British army. This was the first major war to be fought in the 20th century, but it was also the last of the Asante-British battles for supremacy in the region. Defeated, Asante became a British protectorate – really a colony. Yet although not successful in war, the Asante refusal to hand over the Golden Stool registered a clear message to the British about their attachment to ancient traditions, something the British occupying forces recognised – and arguably respected – during their years of rule over the Asante people.

### Where we are now

In the last few decades, there have been calls by African governments and kings, including the current Asantehene, for the return of African artworks looted and shipped to the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe during the 19th century.

Today, many museums around the world house objects and works of art which have difficult histories. Some have been taken by force from their original communities, some use precious materials such as ivory that today are banned due to the animal poaching used to obtain it, and some were removed from their original context by other means. The issues around ownership and care for these objects are complex. The narratives and meanings ascribed to these objects by their original communities may be changed in a museum context or setting. Many of these objects are displaced and dispossessed, divorced now from their power and context as symbolic representations, and distanced from the religious transactions that existed between them and the people who revered them as spiritual and powerful elements.