

About The Mali Empire

THE MALI EMPIRE

The remains of the Ghana Empire were replaced by the empire of Mali, which at its peak controlled the area of West Africa from the Atlantic Ocean east to what is now Nigeria. *Mali* is an Arabic word. It means “where the king lives.” From 1235 to the 1450s CE, Mali’s successive rulers grew immensely wealthy and powerful by expanding upon the Ghana Empire’s gold and salt trade routes.

The origins of Mali are relayed in the story of Sundiata, the Lion King, which is the heart of the oral tradition of this part of West Africa. According to the epic, Mali was founded by Sundiata Keita of the Mandinka people. Sundiata was the only surviving son of a royal family that had been slain by the ruler of the Susu, a rival group. The chief of the Susu had invaded Sundiata’s homeland when he was a child. The Susu had killed Sundiata’s eleven brothers but let Sundiata live because he was only a sickly child. When Sundiata grew to manhood, he sought revenge, and by 1235 CE, he had vanquished the Susu and founded Mali.

Sundiata’s rule was a mix of continuity and change. He maintained the traditional policy that limited the ownership of gold nuggets to the king, and he relied on the advice of chiefs and elders across his empire. The city of Niani became the capital of the empire and grew into an important center of trade. Sundiata introduced a new social organization by assigning occupations to specific families, resulting in a three-tiered hierarchy.

Mansa Musa

Mali’s most powerful emperor was Mansa Musa, who reigned from 1312 to 1332 CE. *Mansa* means emperor. Mansa Musa was a nephew of Sundiata and a devout Muslim convert. In addition to controlling gold mines, Mansa Musa expanded the empire to control the salt mines in the desert to the north. He established an efficient system of government for his huge empire.

In 1324 CE, Mansa Musa undertook a 4,800-mile (7,725 km) pilgrimage to Mecca. Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage was noteworthy for the wealth that he displayed on his journey. His party is said to have included sixty thousand people. Of these, twelve thousand were his personal enslaved servants. Five hundred of them carried gold staffs weighing six pounds (2.7 kg) each. Eighty of the hundreds of camels carried three hundred pounds (136 kg) of gold dust each. Mansa Musa was so generous in giving away his gold that he caused a devaluation of gold in Egypt, where he stopped on his way to Mecca. In addition to fulfilling his religious duty, Mansa Musa used the pilgrimage for diplomatic and economic purposes. He created bonds with other Muslim rulers and publicized the riches and splendor of Mali.

Word of Mansa Musa’s trip even reached across the Mediterranean. A map of Africa drawn in Spain in 1375 CE, long after Mansa Musa’s death, for the first time showed Mali—represented by an emperor on a throne with a golden scepter.

Timbuktu

One of the beneficiaries of Mansa Musa's efforts to advertise Mali was the trading city of Timbuktu. Its location on the Niger River made it an ideal access point for Africa's inland areas and for caravans bringing valuable goods from the north. Mansa Musa brought back the Muslim architect es-Saheli from Granada, in Spain, to design mosques and palaces in Timbuktu. Es-Saheli's most lasting accomplishment, however, was the use of burnt brick in construction. This became the standard building material in West Africa.

Muslim scholars followed the trade routes to Timbuktu, and the city became a leading center of Islamic intellectual development, attracting students and scholars of law and Islam from across North Africa and Southwest Asia. A great university grew up in the Sankore district of the city, training scholars, doctors, judges, and clerics, who took their knowledge to other cities. By the 1500s CE, when the writer Leo Africanus (Hassan ibn Muhammad) visited Timbuktu, the city had 150 schools teaching the Quran. Although the empire of Mali disappeared, Timbuktu continued to thrive as part of the empire of Songhai.