

THE EMPIRE OF MALI

KEY CONCEPT FOCUS: This close reading will address the geography, economy, religions, government and achievements of the Empire of Mali.

In 1235 CE a young man nicknamed Sundiata, which means "hero," overthrew the weakened emperor of Ghana. Known as a **Mansa**, or ruler, he would increase the territory of his empire to include more savanna, or grassland. Similar to Ghana, Mali grew along the Niger River which allowed it to have a successful farming empire while controlling trade. At its height, the Empire of Mali would be almost twice the size of Texas and be the second largest empire in the world at the time.



put his large army to work in the fields, allowing his people to be fed. He improved agriculture, clearing crops for beans, onions, and rice. Later, he introduced cotton, which proved to be a valuable crop for comfortable lightweight clothing in a hot climate. Cotton also fetched a great price in a global market. Under his control, the city of *Niani* became a center for trade with a flourishing economy.

[The people of Mali] possess admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth." The Diaries of Ibn Battuta

Trans-Saharan Trade Routes



The Mali king divided his empire into different provinces, or regions, in order to organize and effectively rule his growing nation. A governor would control each province and a mayor, referred to as a *Mansa*, was appointed the leader of each city.

Ibn Battuta was a Muslim traveler who wrote a great deal about what he saw as on his travels. He wrote that the Mali people hated, injustice creating a safe, peaceful people.

GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY UNDER SUNDIATA

As the success of the empire grew, Sundiata became known as the "Lion King." After conquering Ghana, he took control of all of the gold and salt mines in the area and expanded the empire. Legend relays that he defeated threatening neighboring tribes and

RELIGION UNDER SUNDIATA

As local leaders, Mansas had both political and religious power. According to legend, the Mansas communicated with the people's ancestors, which ensured that the spirits would provide food. In this form of ancestor worship, the spirits provided



Primary Source Drawing of Mansu Musa

guidance and ensured peace in the empire. **Animism**, the worship of objects of nature which are given a spiritual nature, was also commonly practiced.

MANSA MUSU'S PILGRIMAGE MAKES A LONG LASTING IMPACT

As the kingdom progressed, it would have a number of rulers. The grandson of Sundiata was Mansa Musa. This king was very intelligent and loved learning. He encouraged learning for all of his people and provided it for free. He sent scholars to learn Morocco that returned to set up schools throughout Mali. In *Timbuktu*, he would establish a university where great scholars would gather.

Mansa Musa was Muslim, and he encouraged all of his people to believe as he did. However, for those who did not have the same belief, he would establish religious freedom.

In 1324, Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca. As part of the Muslim faith, all believers are expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at

least once during their lifetime. On his journey, Mansa Musa took 50,000 men. On his first stop in Cairo, Egypt, he reportedly had nearly one hundred camels, each camel carrying three



Timbuktu Library

hundred pounds of gold. It was reported that he would give gold to everyone he met along the way. As news of the king's

generosity spread, people began to greet him along his route. In Mecca and in Egypt, Mansa Musa invited scholars and architects to join him back to Mali, promising substantial payments for their service. Thus, *Timbuktu* grew to become a learning center of universities and libraries. In time, curiosity about this wealthy

Great Mosque Of Djenne



nation attracted traders from Asia and all over Africa. Furthermore, as more Muslims from Mali journeyed to Mecca, the influence of Mali spread, inspiring Muslims from all over the world to trade with Mali.

THE DECLINE OF MALI

Mansa Musa expanded Mali for over twenty-five years capturing important trading cities such as Gao and Djenne. However, after his death, poor leadership and attacks from Saharan nomads broke apart the empire. By the 1500s Mali was a splinter of its once glory.