

# Mali: Land of Kings

Adapted from The Story of Africa – BBC World Service

## ORIGINS

Mali emerged against the back-drop of a declining of Ghana under the leadership of **Sundiata** of the Keita clan. But the region he took over had a past rich in trade and powerful rulers.

### SUNDIATA THE HERO

"He was a lad full of strength; his arms had the strength of ten and his biceps inspired fear in his companions. He had already that authoritative way of speaking which belongs to those who are destined to command."

### SOUMAORO THE VILLAIN

"Since his accession to the throne of Sosso, he had defeated nine kings whose heads served him as objects in his macabre chamber. Their skins served as seats and he cut his footwear from human skin."

*-The Epic of Old Mali, recited by the griot (oral historian) Mamadou Kouyate, edited by D. T. Niane.*



## CONSOLIDATION

Sundiata Keita rose to power by defeating the king of the Sosso - Soumaoro, known as the Sorcerer King, in 1235. He then brought all the Mandinke clan rulers (or **Mansas**) under his leadership, declaring himself Mansa over all. He took the city of Timbuktu from the Berbers (nomads of the Sahara), transforming it into a substantial city, a focus for trade and scholarship.

A significant portion of the wealth of the Empire derived from the Bure **goldfields** in the south. The first capital, Niani, was built close to this gold mining area. Mali also acquired control over the **salt mines** in the north. The people of the south needed salt for their diet, but it was extremely rare. For that reason, salt was as valuable, if not more valuable than gold in Sub-Saharan Africa.

1. Who was Sundiata? How did he become the Mansa of Mali? \_\_\_\_\_

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2. Over which two natural resources did Mali gain control? Where were they found?

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3. Why was salt so valuable in Sub-Saharan Africa? \_\_\_\_\_

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## ZENITH

Mali reached its peak in the 14th century. One ruler, Abubakar II, goes down in history as the king who wanted to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

### MALI DISCOVERS AMERICA?

"So Abubakar equipped 200 ships filled with men and the same number equipped with gold, water, and provisions, enough to last them for years...they departed and a long time passed before anyone came back. Then one ship returned and we asked the captain what news they brought.

He said, 'Yes, Oh Sultan, we travelled for a long time until there appeared in the open sea a river with a powerful current...the other ships went on ahead, but when they reached that place, they did not return and no more was seen of them...As for me, I went about at once and did not enter the river.'

The Sultan got ready 2,000 ships, 1,000 for himself and the men whom he took with him, and 1,000 for water and provisions. He left me [in charge] and embarked on the Atlantic Ocean with his men. That was the last we saw of him and all those who were with him.

And so, I became king in my own right."

*-Mansa Musa, talking to Syrian scholar Al-Umari.*



4. Based on the primary source, do you think Malians traveled to the Americas? Explain.

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## MANSA MUSA'S PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA

Abubakar II's successor, Mansa Musa (1312-1337) was made famous by the descriptions of his magnificent **Hajj**, or pilgrimage to Mecca, in 1324.

"He brought with him an entourage of over a thousand people... and most importantly, one hundred camel-loads of gold. Along the way, Mansa Musa spent freely and gave away lots of his riches... When he reached Alexandria (in Egypt), he spent so much gold that he caused runaway inflation throughout the city that took years to recover from."

*-John Green, Mansa Musa and Islam in Africa*

**"It is said that he brought with him 14,000 slave girls for his personal service. The members of his entourage proceeded to buy Turkish and Ethiopia slave girls, singing girls and garments, so that the rate of the gold dinar fell by six dirhams. Having presented his gift he set off with the caravan."**

**-Egyptian historian al-Maqrizi.**

5. What impact did Mansa Musa's hajj have on the Egyptian economy? Why?

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## **TIMBUKTU**

Mansa Musa also spent his wealth to more permanent effect. He commissioned the design and construction of a number of stunning buildings, for example, the building of the mosques at Gao and Jenne. At Niani he was responsible for the construction of a fantastic cupola for holding an audience in. The great trading city of Timbuktu became a leading center of learning. The city drew some of the best scholars from all over the Muslim world

**"Here [in Timbuktu] are great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges. And [here] are brought diverse manuscript or written books out of Barbarie [North Africa], which are sold for more money than any other merchandise."**

**-Hassan ibn Muhammad, History and Description of Africa, 1526**

6. How does the description reflect the value of knowledge in Timbuktu?

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