



The Mali Kingdom (about 1235–670 CE)

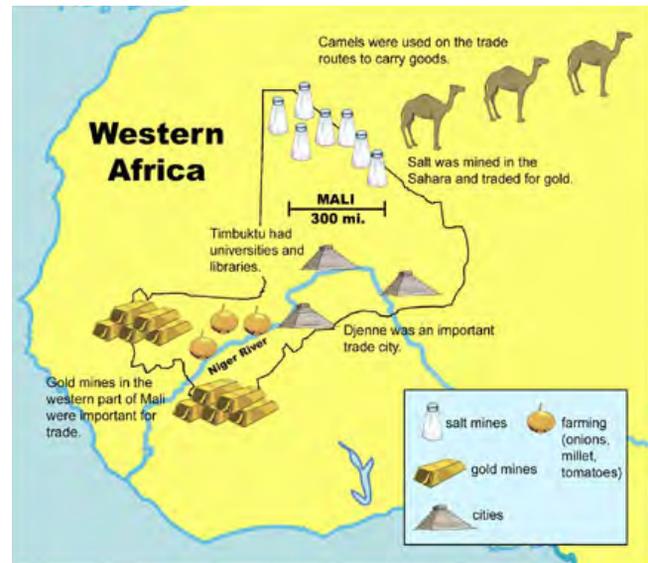
Mali means “place where the king lives.” Its first ruler was Sundiata Keita, or “lion prince.” He led a well-trained army to expand Ghana’s territory and power. Mali grew to include all of the land of Ghana plus gold fields to the south and additional land. It stretched more than 1,000 miles from east to west. It was the largest empire Africa had ever seen and the second largest in the world, after Mongolia.

Niani was Mali’s capital. It was protected by mountains and close to forests and a river. This made it a good place for trade. Mali continued to control the gold and salt trade started by Ghana. It also expanded trade to copper mines. Mali dominated caravans and trade routes—as many as 25,000 camels connected Mali to North Africa. Items that changed hands included ivory, horses, weapons, brass bowls and books. The capture of people to sell as enslaved labor also continued during this time.

Mali’s most famous king was Mansa Musa. He extended the power of Mali and doubled its territory. Mansa Musa taxed all goods that passed through his kingdom. He also bought goods at low prices and sold them at great profits. This helped to make him and the kingdom very rich.

During this time, the religion of Islam was spreading. Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage (journey) to Mecca, an important Islamic city in Saudi Arabia. He brought tens of thousands of people with him and as many as 100 camels, each carrying 300 pounds of gold. Mansa Musa gave away great gifts and impressed the people he met. This increased Mali’s power.

Mansa Musa invited teachers and architects to return with him to Mali. They built mosques and schools in important cities, such as Timbuktu. Great libraries were constructed to hold thousands of



books. The people of Mali were educated in many subjects, such as math, music, law, literature, history, geography and astronomy.

In Mali, cultural life was important. Artists produced pottery and sculpture. Dancers and musicians performed at religious festivals. Songs were written to honor important people, including warriors and hunters. The king even kept a royal orchestra.

Visitors to Mali commented on its justice system, safety and great amounts of food. Like most great empires, however, the Kingdom of Mali eventually began to collapse in the 1400s CE. It was weakened by civil wars, competition over trade and attacks by rivals, such as the Songhai Kingdom. By the mid-1600s CE, Mali was no longer an important power in Africa.

SOURCES:

Ancient History Encyclopedia, “Mali Empire,” https://www.ancient.eu/Mali_Empire.

Exploring Africa, “History of Africa During the Time of the Great West African Kingdoms,” <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/activity-3-history-of-africa-during-the-time-of-the-great-west-african-kingdoms-expand>.

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