

History Topic of the Month

Mansa Musa (c.1280–c.1337) and the Mali Empire

In the fourteenth century, if you wanted to find one of the richest empires in the world, you wouldn't have looked in Europe. Instead, you would have travelled to West Africa and the Mali Empire. This empire, covering hundreds of thousands of miles, owned huge amounts of gold. Its land is now part of several modern countries, including Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Mauritania, Gambia, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast among others. The empire became known outside Africa after the travels of one of its greatest leaders, Mansa Musa, who later became one of the inspirations for Marvel's Black Panther and Wakanda.



The line on this modern map of West Africa shows the location of the Mali Empire.

Contributer: © Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

This map shows the size of the Mali Empire, over a modern map of Africa.

How did the Mali Empire begin?

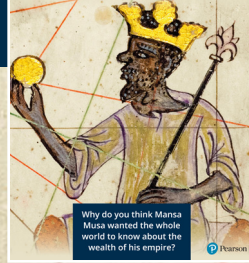
Like many empires before and since, the Mali Empire began with conquest. The story is told by the poem, the Epic of Sundiata. Sundiata Kieta was the founder of the Mali Empire. Sundiata was the son of the King of the Mandinka people. A prophecy said he would become a great emperor. But, when his father died, the throne was taken by Sundiata's brother. He went into exile at the court of the King of Mema, who made him one of his key advisors.

Meanwhile, the Sosso Empire conquered the Mandinka people. The Mandinka people asked Sundiata to help them. Still only 18 years old, Sundiata raised an army from Mema and, around 1235, won a great victory at the Battle of Kiriana. Sundiata Kieta was named Mansa ("Emperor") of a new Mali Empire. Nicknamed "the Lion King" because of his success in battle, Sundiata conquered many other lands, turning his kingdom into a mighty new empire.

How did the Mali Empire work?

Sundiata Kieta called a Great Assembly, the Gbara. Every clan sent a representative. At the Gbara, laws were agreed that would govern the empire for centuries. They included laws preventing the mistreatment of slaves and prisoners, clear laws stating which clans owned which land and prices were fixed for goods throughout the empire. Laws affecting the whole empire continued to be debated in the Gbara.

History Topic of the Month: Mansa Musa



Why do you think Mansa Musa wanted the whole world to know about the wealth of his empire?



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A section of The Catalan Atlas (1375) made by the Jewish mapmaker Abraham and Jehuda Cresques for the future French King Charles VI. It shows the trade routes to the Mali Empire and Mansa Musa (bottom right) who the map describes as “the richest and noblest king in the world”.

Why was the Mali Empire so rich?

The land of the Mali Empire was rich in resources. The Mali Empire contained three large gold mines – and all the gold belonged to the Mansa. At its peak, the Empire had almost half the known world’s gold. Mali also had large copper mines. Many of these mines were worked by large numbers of slaves. This all helped turn the Mali Empire into a trading hub.

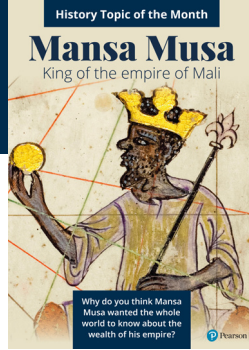
Mali also had large supplies of salt. Salt was very valuable in Africa, especially in desert countries. This is because it could be used to preserve food in hot temperatures and over long distances. It was very rare in some parts of Africa. Merchants in Mali made a fortune from the trade of salt.

History Topic of the Month: Mansa Musa

The Mali Empire between Sundiata and Musa

Sundiata died around 1255. His son, Ali Keita built trading links with the Middle East. After he died, his adopted brothers began a civil war that ended in 1275 after their deaths. The Gbara chose the men they felt best suited to be Mansa for the next 35 years. They chose very well, and these Mansas helped the empire grow and become richer and more powerful.

In 1310 Mansa Abubakari Keita II was crowned. He was fascinated by exploration and dreamed of finding new lands across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1311 he abdicated the throne to lead an expedition of 2,000 ships across the sea. He never returned – although some reported he found the ‘New World’ and chose to remain there (if he did, it was over 165 years before Christopher Columbus’ voyage).



Contributer: © Incamerastock / Alamy Stock Photo

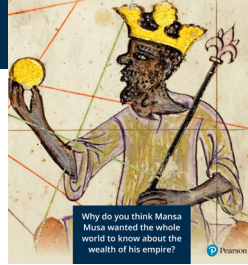
Mansa Musa, as he appears on The Catalan Atlas. Mansa’s journey to Mecca helped to make the Mali Empire more widely known in Europe. This led to much more trade between the empire and Europe.

Who Was Mansa Musa?

Mansa Musa I was chosen as his successor. Musa conquered 24 new cities and their territories and added them to the empire. During his reign the gold mines were at their most productive. As all the gold belonged to the Mansa Musa I might be the richest man in history. Some experts have suggested that in today’s money he would have had nearly \$400 billion. This is more money than Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates put together.

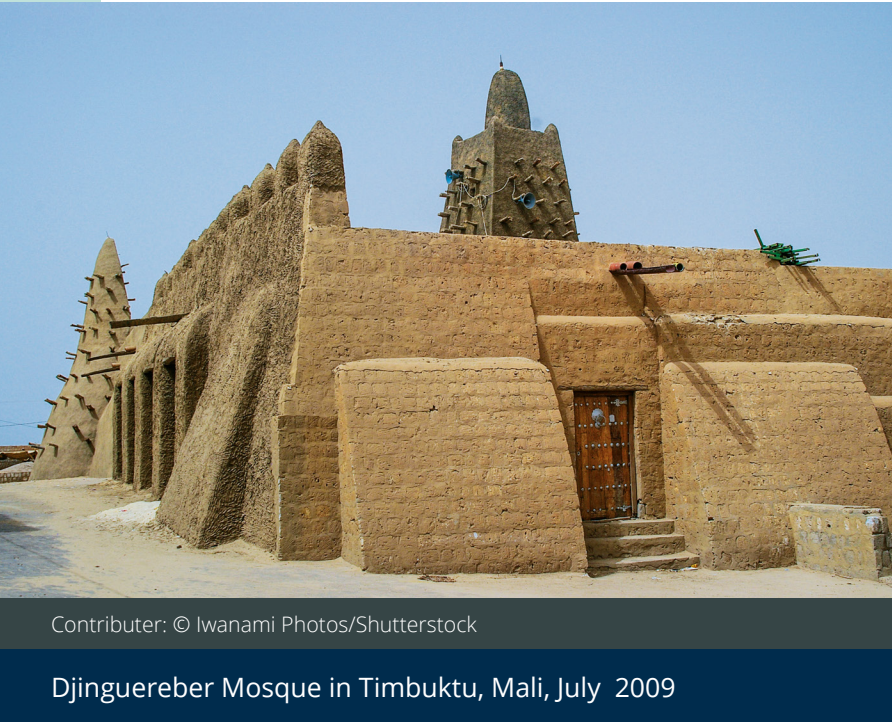
Musa wasn’t a great ruler though because he was rich. He was wise and generous. He made the empire wealthier and more powerful than it had been before. He promoted trade, education and building. He was a patron of the arts. A devout Muslim, he believed it was his duty to make his empire powerful, peaceful and prosperous. He also believed it was his duty to convert the empire to Islam – which in some cases he did by force. However, Musa also continued to allow slavery in his empire and owned thousands of slaves himself, many of them in the mines that produced his wealth.

History Topic of the Month: Mansa Musa



Mansa Musa improves the empire

Musa built mosques and madrasas (an Arabic word for an educational building, like a school) across his realm. He improved the living conditions of his cities, building a grand Hall of Audience in his palace – the window frames were plated with gold. Musa hired architects from Spain to plan some of his buildings – money was no problem.



Contributer: © Iwanami Photos/Shutterstock

Djinguereber Mosque in Timbuktu, Mali, July 2009

In Timbuktu, which Musa added to the empire in 1325, he completely changed the city. He built the world famous Djinguereber Mosque (which still stands today). He also founded the University of Sankore. This became one of the greatest centres of Islamic learning in the world. Experts in law, astronomy and medicine taught there. By the end of Musa's reign, it had 25,000 students and one of the largest libraries in the world, with over a million manuscripts.

Musa turned the Mali Empire – and Timbuktu in particular – into a major trading site. Traders from across Africa, the Islamic world and many European cities, like Venice, traded there.

Mansa Musa comes to the attention of the whole world

Mansa Musa was one of the first African rulers to travel to the Middle East. In 1324, Musa travelled on a pilgrimage to Mecca, the most holy city in Islam. This journey was over 4000 miles. Musa didn't travel light: he took 60,000 men (including 12,000 slaves), thousands of caravans, horses and camels and an almost unimaginably huge amount of gold.

Musa wanted the journey to make his empire known to the whole world. As he travelled, Musa made gifts of gold to the poor. In Egypt he gave away so much gold, its value actually went down. Eyewitnesses he met along the way were dumbstruck by his wealth and power. Suddenly the whole world became aware of the Mali Empire. It started to appear on international maps and traders from across the Mediterranean made their way there.

This pilgrimage turned the Mali Empire into a major power – and also helped bring new architects and influences into the empire to help support Musa's building plans.



History Topic of the Month: Mansa Musa

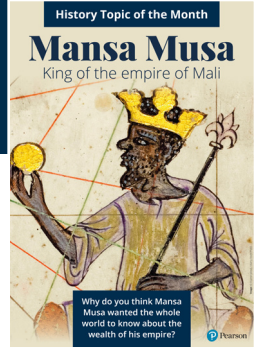
The Mali Empire after Musa

Musa died at some point around 1337. He was followed by his son (who wasted much of the wealth Musa had created) and then by his brother Sulieman in 1341. Sulieman had to rebuild the treasury – he was called a miser compared to his brother! – but helped the empire to flourish. The Islamic writer Abu Abdallah Ibn Battuta travelled through the empire during his reign, and the book he wrote of his experiences was widely read.

However, later Mansas were less successful. From 1389 tyrants, bad Mansas and civil wars led to the Mali Empire growing weaker. It lost control of much of its land and resources and its trade shrank. The Mali Empire didn't last, but at its height it was one of the richest, most powerful empires the world has ever seen.

Discussion points

- Why do you think the Mali Empire became so strong?
- The empire started in conquest, but why do you think it lasted as long as it did?
- The Gbala and the local governors had a lot of responsibility in the Mali Empire. Why do you think this helped the empire to grow?
- Abubakari Keita II sailed to the New World – do you think he might have found it? What would it mean for World History if he did?
- Why do you think salt was so valuable across Africa and the world?
- Why do you think Mansa Musa wanted the whole world to know about the wealth of his empire?
- Mansa Musa made a huge number of changes to buildings and cities in his empire. Why do you think he did this? Why was it important?
- Mansa Musa owned thousands of slaves, and his mines were worked by slaves. This makes him a controversial figure to many. What do you think?



Reading list



Books

Mansa Musa and the Empire of Mali by P. James Oliver (2013)

The State of Africa by Martin Meredith (2013)

Mansa Musa: Emperor of The Wealthy Mali Empire by History Titans (March 2020)

Mansa Musa and Timbuktu: A Fascinating History from Beginning to End: 1 (Black History Book 1) by World Changing History (July 2020)



Articles

[Meet the richest person who ever lived: Mansa Musa](#)

[Mansa Musa \(Musa I of Mali\)](#)

[This 14th-Century African Emperor Remains the Richest Person in History](#)

[Mansa Musa – The Emperor of Mali Empire](#)

[Black History Makers: Mansa Musa](#)

[Slavery before the Trans-Atlantic Trade](#)



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