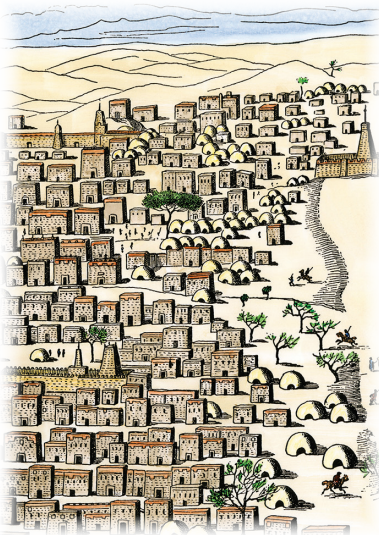




West African Kingdoms



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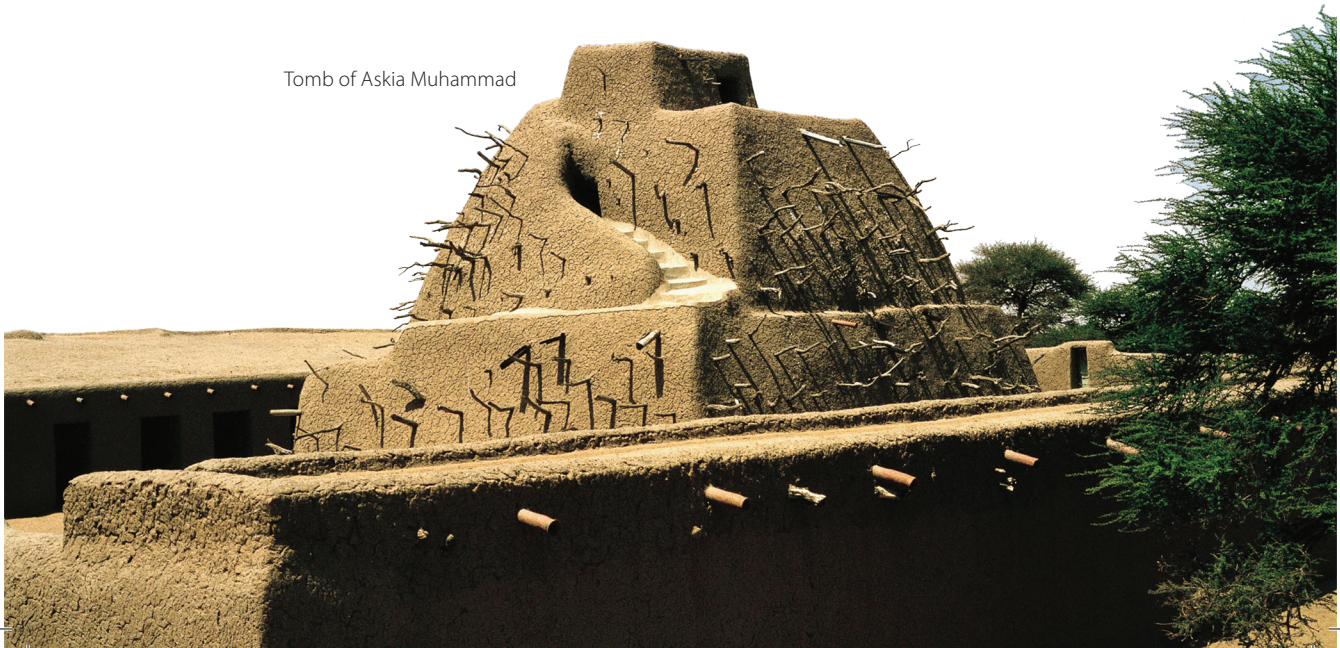


Timbuktu



Mansa Musa

Tomb of Askia Muhammad



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West African Kingdoms

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West African Kingdoms

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Chapter 1

The Ghana Empire

Traders of Past African Empires

“I hope we’re near the oasis,” Yusef the trader sighed. Sweat dripped into his eyes. The sun stood at its highest point, and the air shimmered with heat. Yusef’s throat was dry with thirst. Like the other traders in this caravan, Yusef was transporting salt mined from the salt regions in the middle of the Sahara.

The Framing Question

What characterized the African empire of Ghana?

At the mines, Yusef had watched the enslaved workers dig out two-hundred-pound cakes of salt. They tied two cakes on each camel. “There is so much salt here that we build houses and mosques from it,” the salt quarry owner had said. Yusef had actually seen a couple of these salt houses. They glittered in the sunlight. Now, Yusef’s camels swayed under the four-hundred-pound loads of salt they were hauling south.

Yusef’s camels were smelly, and they often spat at him. But Yusef was glad to have them. He knew that camels were made for the desert. Broad, splayed feet let them walk over hot sand without sinking. Camels could also go without water for days.



Camels were often called “ships of the desert” because they carried goods and people across vast deserts.

Yusef's last trip had gone smoothly, with nothing more than stinging bites from sand fleas. But Yusef knew that many traders ran into big problems on their journeys. The trip was long and dangerous. There was always the risk of a terrible sandstorm. Traders sometimes set off into the desert and were never seen again.

These caravans helped build three important centers of trade and culture in West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. This happened because the empires controlled large gold mines. They also controlled the trade routes that linked gold and other valuable resources to the rest of the world.

Early African Civilizations

The very first humans lived in eastern and southern Africa hundreds of thousands of years ago. Over time, early prehistoric peoples formed settlements and began making tools and art. Civilizations and cultures eventually took shape. Gradually, civilizations in different regions of the continent became linked through sea routes. These links allowed different groups of people to interact and influence each other. The empires of West Africa enjoyed great economic wealth and a rich mix of cultural influences. This happened because of their connections to multiple other regions through trade. Muslim people from North Africa, like Yusef, began traveling to West Africa to trade salt for gold and other goods. This resulted in some West Africans converting to Islam and adopting Arab practices.

Africa During Europe's Medieval Period

The term *medieval* originally referred to a period of European history. African civilizations during this time were very different from European medieval societies. In medieval Europe, power and trade shrank now and then. In Africa, however, trade routes led to incredible **prosperity** for several civilizations. Greater contact between Africans and the empires that ruled surrounding regions created cultural connections. The spread of Christianity and Islam brought religious ideas as well as new goods and wealth to African regions.

The empires of West Africa benefited from their deposits of gold. Gold was valued because of its rarity, durability, and beauty as well as its **malleability**. This is the ability to be shaped into many forms, including jewelry. It was also used for making coins and illuminated manuscripts. Gold was traded for salt, which was valuable because it provided an essential nutrient. It could also be used to preserve food. This was important before the invention of refrigeration in the early twentieth century. Salt was even more valuable in hot climates such as West Africa's, as heat causes people to lose salt from their bodies. Those who controlled the gold and salt mines amassed great wealth and controlled the trading routes that developed around them. In addition to gold and salt, these routes were used to transport many other goods and resources, including iron, ivory, spices, and textiles.

Vocabulary

prosperity, n. a condition of being successful, especially financially

malleability, n. the ability to be shaped into many forms

The Trade Routes of Ghana



The Ghana Empire traded with groups of people such as the Tekrur, Berbers, and Songhai.

Origins of the Ghana Empire

The origins of the first powerful West African empire are unclear. Most of what is known about the Ghana Empire has been passed down through either oral tradition or texts written by Arab merchants. The stories and texts described a kingdom of great wealth. This wealth was amassed from the large amount of gold found underground, which was controlled by the Ghana Empire's rulers.

Traders from North Africa, Europe, and Southwest Asia came to exchange goods for gold. Around the world, gold beads and other decorative objects became highly desired.

The king of the Ghana Empire also helped the kingdom's economy grow by collecting taxes from traders passing through the area.

These taxes helped support his wealthy **court**. In return, the king protected the trade routes, which allowed traders to travel safely throughout Ghana. The king claimed all gold nuggets found in Ghana but let traders keep the gold dust.

Vocabulary

court, n. the residence of a royal family and supporting staff

Another key to Ghana's success was the domesticated camel, like the one that carried Yusef's salt. West Africans domesticated dromedary camels around 300 CE. This means that these camels were tamed and adapted over time so that they could be used as work animals. Camels store fat in their humps. A camel can live off this fat when there is no food available. This gave West Africans an advantage in developing trade routes across the dry Sahara desert. Trade networks continued to expand as Arab merchants and others began to use camels.



Dromedary camels are still used today to transport goods from place to place.

The Growth of Trade in the Ghana Empire

Ghana's kings took advantage of their empire's location. Salt mines lay to the north in the Sahara, while gold mines lay to the south. Trade routes between these mines ran through Ghana, and another route ran east to the Nile River valley. By the eighth century CE, trans-Saharan trade routes had helped fuel the rise of the Ghana Empire. During this time, Muslim traders to the north wanted the gold that was mined in the southern part of the Ghana Empire. These traders from North Africa began trading salt for West African gold by way of caravans across the Sahara. In addition to gold, West Africans also supplied the trans-Saharan traders with ivory, kola nuts, shea butter, and cloth. Traders transported these items north and east. There, they could trade them for more salt.

The merchants' profits funded more caravans between North Africa and Ghana. The sight of large caravans of camels transporting gold, salt, and other valuable items across desert lands became a regular event. These regular interactions between West Africans and the Muslim traders led to the conversion of many people to Islam. The Muslim traders built mosques in



Gold was prized throughout the world and was one of the resources that helped the Ghana Empire rise in power. This gold jewelry was made in present-day Ghana.

West African trading cities and talked about Islam with people they met. By 1000 CE, many people in West Africa knew about the Islamic faith. In addition to their faith, traders carried ideas, art, and culture to West Africa. Sometimes teachers, clerics, poets, musicians, and artists traveled with the traders. The teachers, clerics, and poets in the caravan taught fellow travelers. The musicians sang their songs, and the artists sold their work.

In addition to gold and salt, enslaved people were treated as a **commodity** on the trans-Saharan trade route. Often, people were captured and enslaved during wars in sub-Saharan Africa. Traders and Muslim merchants transported enslaved people great distances from sub-Saharan

Vocabulary

commodity, n. a good, commonly a raw material, that can be interchanged with another good of the same type



Traders from the Sahara carried slabs of salt just like these to the markets of Ghana.

Africa to slave markets in North Africa, Europe, and Asia. As a result of the slave trade, many enslaved Africans ended up in the Islamic world, and Islam spread into new areas of Africa.

Iron was another important resource in the Ghana Empire. As people improved their ironworking skills, they learned how to make weapons. These weapons helped Ghana claim more territories through war. Not only did the empire grow through these wars, but it also gained total control over trade.

The Political and Social Structures of the Ghana Empire

The king who ruled the Ghana Empire controlled the vast trade network that made the empire wealthy. The king also oversaw all the important business of the empire and made all important decisions regarding the army, justice, and religion. He chose people to fill roles such as mayors, advisors, and ministers.

The Ghana Empire's control of trading routes and its **monopoly** on the region's gold mines helped it become strong. It was home to thousands of people. Ghana's kings used the profits from trade to build beautiful cities. Ghana's citizens admired the king's palace built of stone. The capital city of Kumbi Saleh was large and complex. Engineers and city planners created an urban center with many wells. These provided water for daily and agricultural use. Beyond Kumbi Saleh, the empire controlled a collection of provinces that were technically independent, although the people had little say over how they were governed.

Vocabulary

monopoly, n. the complete control of the supply of a good or service by one person, country, or company

The social structure throughout the Ghana Empire included a large class of workers. This working class constructed an expansive palace and public buildings. The Ghana Empire also built a large and effective army.

Changes and the Decline of the Ghana Empire

The people of the Ghana Empire originally practiced **animism**. Animism is characterized by the belief that plants and other parts of the natural world are sacred. They are seen as spirits or as inhabited by spirits. In the Ghana Empire, religious beliefs centered on forest spirits and sacred groves that only priests were allowed to enter.

Vocabulary

animism, n. the belief that objects, places, and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence

As Islamic civilization began to spread in the 700s CE, more and more Muslim merchants and **diplomats** made their way to Ghana. They brought with them Arab cultural practices. By the end of the twelfth century CE, the Ghana Empire was an Islamic society. Twelve mosques had been built in Kumbi Saleh. They were centers of religious life, used for the work and intellectual exchanges of Muslim scholars and scribes.

Vocabulary

diplomat, n. someone who represents the government of one country in another country

It was around this time that other groups throughout North and West Africa began to challenge the Ghana Empire. Conflict with other groups weakened the empire. Changes in climate and weather patterns also caused difficulties. The Sahel region, where



This page from a North African illuminated Quran dates from the twelfth century CE. The Quran is the holy, or sacred, book of Islam.

the empire was located, became even drier in the 1200s CE. This was a hardship that may have worsened the conflicts the Ghana Empire faced. Eventually, the Susu people defeated Ghana's rulers, but their success was short-lived. They were soon overtaken by West Africa's next great power: the Mali Empire.

PRIMARY SOURCE: EXCERPT FROM IBN BATTUTA'S TRAVELS IN ASIA AND AFRICA

In 1325 CE, legal scholar Ibn Battuta began traveling through the Islamic world at twenty years of age. He started the journey as a pilgrimage to Mecca but traveled for over twenty years. In this excerpt, he describes his visit to Toghata, a city on the trans-Saharan trade route in the Ghana Empire.

After a journey of five and twenty days, [we] arrived at Toghata, a village in which there is nothing good, for its houses and mosque are built with stones of salt, and covered with the hides of camels. There is no tree in the place; it has nothing but sand for soil; and in this are mines of salt. For this, they dig in the earth, and find thick tables of it, so laid together as if they had been cut and placed under ground. No one, however, resides in these [houses] except the servants of the merchants, who dig for the salt. . . . To them come the people of Sudan from their different districts, and load themselves with the salt, which among them passes for money, just as gold and silver does among other nations; and for this purpose, they cut it into pieces of a certain weight, and then make their purchases with it.

Adapted from Lee, Rev. Samuel. *The Travels of Ibn Batuta*. London: The Oriental Translation Committee, 1829. 231–232.

Chapter 2

The Mali Empire

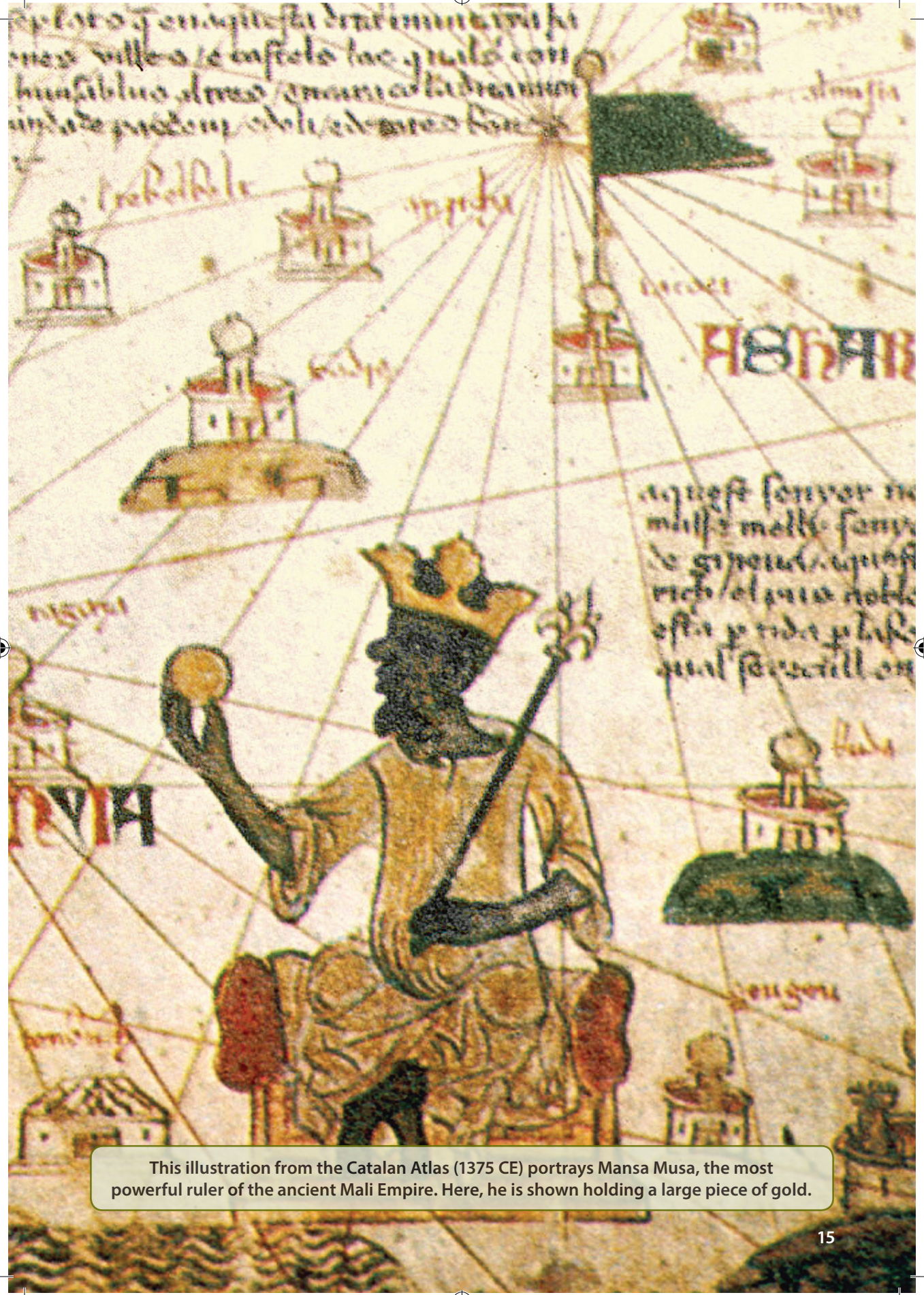
A Powerful New Empire As the Ghana Empire's power decreased, many of the areas it had controlled became independent. One such area was the Mali Empire. The Mali Empire eventually became the most powerful empire in West Africa. At its height, the empire enjoyed unrivaled wealth. Under the rule of Mansa Musa in particular, the Mali Empire became famous. As many as twelve thousand camels passed through the Mali Empire every year. Mali's cities supplied water, food, and rest for the thirsty and weary travelers. Like the Ghana Empire, the Mali Empire became wealthy because of the gold and salt trade routes of West Africa. Mali expanded its territory and influenced West African culture and economy for centuries.

The Framing Question

How did strong leaders change West Africa?

Sundiata

The West African kingdom of Mali began in 1235 CE when Sundiata Keita, which means Lion Prince or Hungering Lion, defeated the Susu king. The Susu kingdom was one of the Mali Empire's early rivals. Sundiata Keita became the *mansa*, or emperor, and used his



This illustration from the Catalan Atlas (1375 CE) portrays Mansa Musa, the most powerful ruler of the ancient Mali Empire. Here, he is shown holding a large piece of gold.

strong army to conquer an extensive territory. He proved to be a powerful leader, and he fortified trade routes and took control of the gold mines that had belonged to the Ghana Empire. Sundiata put in place a central government of local tribal leaders and some wealthy Arab merchants to rule the Mali Empire. He created an assembly of representatives to discuss matters of the empire. The thirty-two members of the assembly, who came from various **clans**, advised him. This strong central government brought peace and order to the empire.

Vocabulary

clan, n. a group of families claiming a common ancestor

The city of Niani became the empire's capital, which soon became an important trading city. The king was advised by elders and chiefs from the empire, but Sundiata was named the supreme ruler. Just as in the Ghana Empire, the king was the only person allowed to have gold nuggets. Only gold dust was traded. He was also believed to have spiritual qualities and was the final judge in legal matters. It was decided that future kings of the empire would be chosen from the Keita clan.

Sundiata assigned occupations to specific families. In this way, he developed a new social organization. If a person was part of a family of warriors, then that person would grow up to be a warrior. If born into a family of farmers, then a person would follow that path as well. Many historians think that the social structure of the Mali Empire was a hierarchy divided into three distinct parts. At the top of the hierarchy were the ruling class, warriors, traders, and the clergy. The next level of the structure was reserved for those who had the ability to perform specific activities. This included the working class, such as blacksmiths, and also griots, or storytellers. Then there were

enslaved people who worked for families of the Mali Empire. They often took the last name of these families. One freed slave, Sakura, even became an emperor. This unexpected reign in the 1300s CE marked a short disruption in the rule of Sundiata Kieta's clan. It also led to the rule of Sundiata's nephew Mansa Musa.

The Rise of Timbuktu and Trade in the Mali Empire

The city of Timbuktu became an important **cosmopolitan** center of trade in the Mali Empire. The city was located on the Niger River. It bordered the Sahara, so it was well-positioned to benefit

Vocabulary

cosmopolitan, adj.
composed of people from many parts of the world

from the trans-Saharan trade networks. Its location meant that traders from many regions passed through. They either brought or looked to buy a wide array of goods. These goods included ivory, horses, weapons, and sugar. Like the Ghana Empire before it, the Mali Empire engaged in the slave trade. Goods and slaves were purchased or bartered for other goods as payment. The Mali Empire taxed the goods that came through Timbuktu and other cities in the empire. During its reign, the Mali Empire sold great quantities of its own valuable resources and was able to buy imported goods and sell them for a healthy profit.

Because the Mali Empire included the territory of the former Ghana Empire, gold was among its most profitable goods. The Niger River made it easy to access Africa's inland areas, and caravans continued to bring valuable goods from northern Africa. The growing demand for coins made gold even more valuable in Europe. The willingness of the Mali Empire to accept Islam encouraged trade

The Mali Empire



with North Africa. The exposure of West African people to this religion happened as a result of the trans-Saharan trade routes. As in the Ghana Empire, Islam in the Mali Empire influenced the development of universities and elite military forces.

Mansa Musa

The most powerful ruler of the Mali Empire was Mansa Musa, who reigned from 1312 to 1337 CE. He led conquests of new territory

and doubled the size of the empire. The Mali Empire's wealth reached its greatest height during this period. Mansa Musa was one of the richest people in the entire world.

Around 1324 CE, Mansa Musa undertook a pilgrimage to the city of Mecca after converting to Islam. This is an important journey for any Muslim, but Mansa Musa's trip across North Africa and into Arabia was a spectacular affair. He traveled with an **entourage** of thousands of people, including slaves, some of whom reportedly carried adorned staffs. Dozens of camels were loaded with gold. He spent freely in the cities he passed through and made gifts of his own gold. Word of his fantastic wealth spread throughout many regions of Africa, Southwest Asia, and Europe. This may have contributed to increased European interest in the resources of Africa. This interest continued to grow over the following centuries.

Mansa Musa left his mark in several cities. He built grand houses in Cairo and Mecca. These houses not only accommodated all the people who lived and traveled with him but also created a lasting impression of the grandeur of West Africa. Islam was strengthened across the Mali Empire when Mansa Musa returned from Mecca with a group of Muslim scholars and architects. He was determined to bring the Islamic golden age to the Mali Empire. He supported



This twentieth-century painting depicts Mansa Musa being carried on a litter, a type of vehicle, by some of his chiefs.

Vocabulary

entourage, n. people who surround an important person

the construction of mosques throughout the empire and built schools, libraries, and universities.

Timbuktu was at the center of this cultural and economic growth. The city's Sankore mosque and university housed a library full of cultural and religious texts. These texts were largely about Islam but also covered astronomy, logic, and history. It is estimated that the library held between four hundred thousand and seven hundred thousand manuscripts. Students learned from an **imam** (Muslim worship leader) or from other learned Islamic scholars. Instruction usually took place in a courtyard or small room. The program of study included learning to read and write Arabic, which was used throughout the Islamic world. The Quran itself was written in Arabic, and Muslims were expected to learn the verses in that language regardless of their native tongues.

Vocabulary

imam, n. a Muslim worship leader

Decline of the Mali Empire

A combination of factors led to the eventual decline of the Mali Empire's power. Internal power struggles weakened the empire's rulers. Rival kingdoms began to expand and gained control of crucial trade routes. Portuguese merchant ships, which had recently started traveling up and down Africa's west coast, posed stiff competition to the trading caravans that had long transported goods across the Sahara to the Mediterranean. Combined, these internal and external events weakened the Mali Empire. It was ripe for conquest by the Songhai Empire around 1468 CE.

PRIMARY SOURCE: LEO AFRICANUS'S DESCRIPTION OF TIMBUKTU

Leo Africanus was a Moroccan scholar who traveled a great deal. For centuries, his writings provided Europeans with information about Islam and the continent of Africa.

Timbuktu is about twelve miles from the Niger River. The houses in the city are now all built of limestone and covered with thatch [a roof covering of straw or similar material]. There is a temple, made of stone and lime. A palace is in the city too, which was built by the skilled workers of Granada. There are shops, craftsmen, and merchants, especially those who sell linen and cotton textiles. Here you can find merchants who bring cloth from Europe. All the women except the young female servants keep their faces covered, and they sell food that people need. The people who live in Timbuktu are wealthy. There are wells that bring up clean water. Whenever the Niger River overflows, they bring water into the town by way of a small gate that controls the water. Corn, cattle, milk and butter [are] found in abundance here. But, there is not much salt. Salt is brought there by land routes from Toghata, five hundred miles away from the city.

*Adapted from Africanus, Leo. *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*. Translated by John Pory. Edited by Robert Brown. Vol. 3. London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1896. 824.*

Chapter 3

The Songhai Empire

A New Empire Takes Hold

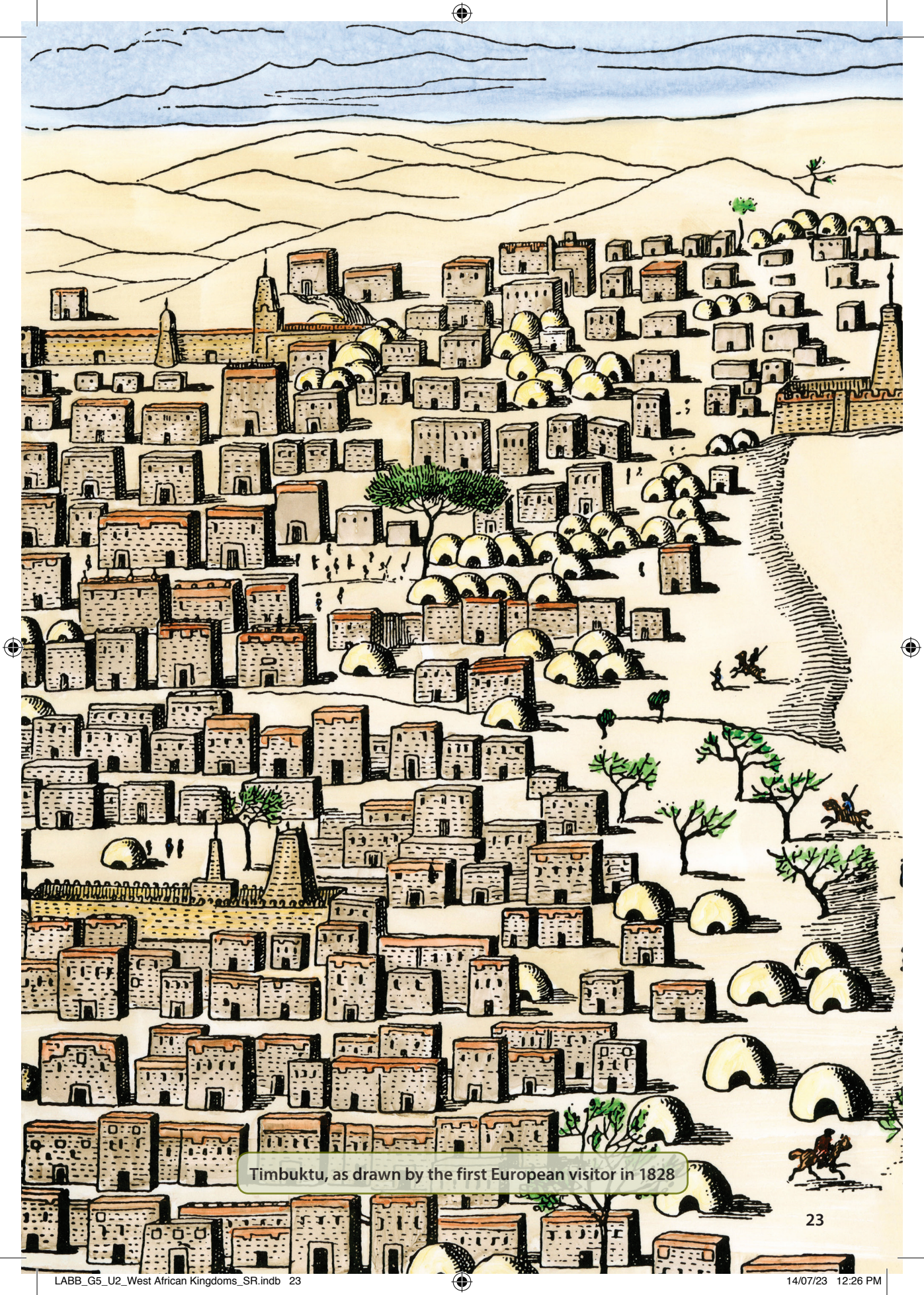
A key event that contributed to the downfall of the Mali Empire occurred during Mansa Musa's pilgrimage.

While he was away, the people that he left in charge of the empire extended it east to include the city of Gao. To make sure that the Songhai people who lived in the conquered area would not revolt against the Mali Empire, two Songhai princes were taken as captives. The princes' names were Ali Kolon and Sulayman Nar. Ali Kolon was a fierce warrior and a natural leader. Mansa Musa even had him lead military expeditions for the Mali Empire.

But Ali Kolon had some big plans of his own. According to legend, he cleverly used his military expeditions to plan his escape from the Mali Empire. On each military expedition for Mansa Musa, Ali Kolon got a little closer to his home in Gao. At every stop, he hid weapons and food in secret places that only he knew.

The Framing Question

How was the Songhai Empire similar to and different from previous West African empires?



Timbuktu, as drawn by the first European visitor in 1828

The Songhai people had lived in the region around the city of Gao for several hundred years. Gao became a rich city because it was on a key stretch of the Niger River. This part of the river was used by many traders and travelers. The wealth of Gao grew so much that it became a target of, and was then conquered by, the Mali Empire during Mansa Musa's pilgrimage. However, the empire's control of the city was never particularly strong. The Mali Empire had allowed some conquered lands to remain independent. In the case of Songhai, the importance of Gao as a trading post meant the rulers there maintained some of their wealth and power even when it was under the control of the Mali Empire.

Mansa Maghan, who gained the throne after his father Mansa Musa's death, was a weak leader. This weakness combined with the Mali Empire's loose control of Gao gave Ali Kolon the chance he had been waiting for during his seven years of captivity in the Mali Empire. Along with his brother and a few loyal supporters, Ali Kolon escaped from Niani, the Mali Empire's capital. Ali Kolon became the new chief of Gao, the capital of the Songhai people. For most of the 1300s and during the early part of the 1400s CE, both the Mali and Songhai Empires tried to overpower each other. Neither side had much luck. However, in 1464 CE, the fierce Songhai king Sunni Ali came to the throne.

Strong Leaders and Trade in the Songhai Empire

Sunni Ali quickly began conquering land that would become the Songhai Empire. He **deployed** his strong army and navy to control travel on the Niger. By 1468 CE,

Vocabulary

deploy, v. to move troops into position for a military action

Sunni Ali had conquered most of the territory once held by the Mali Empire. Gao became the capital city of the new Songhai Empire. The empire took control of the trans-Saharan trade through Timbuktu and Djenné. The wealth that was made through trade was used to expand the empire. Strong armies were developed for defense. Eventually, the Songhai Empire encompassed much of the old Ghana and Mali Empires. Its geographical **proximity** to the Niger River made it a prime location for trade. It also had fertile land for agriculture. By 1500 CE, the Songhai Empire stretched even farther to the north and east of Africa than the Mali Empire had. The two great cities of the Songhai, Timbuktu and Gao, remained centers of trade and learning.

Askia Muhammad, the first Songhai emperor, developed more trade with Asia and Europe. He also introduced weights and measures for regulating trade as well as a system of currency. As other rulers before him had done, Askia Muhammad expanded his empire. He also took many prisoners in the process. Many of these prisoners were



Songhai king Sunni Ali (top image) wrested regional power away from the fading Mali Empire. Askia Muhammad (bottom image) pushed the Songhai Empire to become a strict Islamic state.

Vocabulary

proximity, n.
nearness in space

children who became soldiers in his army. Around 1513 CE, Askia Muhammad's soldiers invaded the lands of the Hausa people east of the Niger River. Askia Muhammad's conquests created a huge, tightly knit empire.

Askia Muhammad went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1495 CE. When he returned, he sought to increase the influence of Islam in the empire. He supported the building of mosques and brought many Arab scholars to the university in Timbuktu. Essentially, Askia Muhammad finished the work of Mansa Musa. He did this by completing Sankore University in Timbuktu. This institution drew people from Arab nations and all over sub-Saharan Africa. Doctors, judges, and priests received education at this university. All these actions began a golden age of learning in the region.

Askia Muhammad also replaced ethnic Songhai officials with Arab Muslims in order to spread Islam. As his empire enlarged, Askia Muhammad appointed Muslim judges in every district. These judges used Islamic justice in place of traditional Songhai laws. Askia Muhammad's own court followed the same religious guidelines. As a result of these measures, Islam spread throughout West Africa. The Tomb of Askia, a grand structure that is part of the Great Mosque of Gao, is said to be his place of burial. It is the largest historical monument in West Africa. It reflects Askia Muhammad's status as a figure of major cultural significance.

The Portuguese in West Africa

Although the Songhai Empire's control over trade expanded, it did not gain access to the gold fields in the southern part of

West Africa. These were the resources that had made the two previous empires so wealthy. The Songhai Empire's expansion had been **thwarted** by a Portuguese fleet that had sailed around the coast of Africa. The Portuguese had established a presence near the West African gold fields.

Vocabulary

thwart, v. to prevent something

Trade Routes of the Songhai Empire



These new trade routes across the sea posed competition for the trans-Saharan caravans. Sea routes were a much faster way of getting to North Africa than crossing the desert. But the Songhai Empire still controlled the trade of salt and luxury items. Muslim traders in towns along the route continued to trade these items. Timbuktu remained an important trade city and cultural center. Many mosques and Islamic schools were built there.



Manuscripts from Timbuktu, such as this one, were written in Arabic and often discussed art, medicine, and science.

The Political Structure of the Songhai Empire

The nine kings who ruled the Songhai Empire were **absolute monarchs**. However, none of these rulers were ever completely secure in their reign. Six of the nine kings were overthrown during rebellions or were killed by family members. Although the first Songhai ruler, Sunni Ali, conquered the Mali Empire to

Vocabulary

absolute monarch,
n. a king or queen who has the unchecked authority to do whatever they want without any restrictions

create the new Songhai Empire, it was not until Askia Muhammad took the throne that the empire was run efficiently. Under Askia Muhammad, Songhai created a centralized government and self-governing provinces. Each province had a local governor. The empire's government featured an **imperial** council of senior officials. This type of structure was a first for West African empires. The council included a finance minister, a general, an admiral, and a minister of agriculture. A large army was assembled. The empire also had a fleet of war canoes.

Vocabulary

imperial, adj. related to an emperor, empress, or empire

People were appointed to take responsibility for areas of society such as property and wages. Officials at the local level oversaw policing, weighing of goods at trading posts, and tax collection. Most of these positions were filled by relatives of Askia Muhammad and other nobles. The empire grew swiftly through military conquests. This added new territories to the empire. Once an area was taken over, military leaders were appointed to each new territory.

The Social Structure of the Songhai Empire

The social structure of the Songhai Empire was similar to that of the Ghana and Mali Empires. Songhai had a strict hierarchy that put the king and the nobility at the top of the structure. This elite class included the people and families with direct ties to the king and his family. These people were treated as part of the noble class even if they were not actually part of the government. People who worked for the government, artisans, and the clergy were also part of the noble class. The people in this political and intellectual

class had a good deal of influence on the government. They had special rights and lived apart from others.

The next level of the social structure consisted of soldiers, traders, and merchants. These positions were important because trade and a strong army were what kept the Songhai Empire powerful. Unlike other armies in West Africa, the Songhai army was made up of professional soldiers. The empire's professional army was efficient and effective.

Then there were farmers and craftspeople. This was the biggest part of society in the Songhai Empire. Finally, enslaved people were at the bottom of the social structure. Like many other societies, West Africans had been enslaving prisoners of war and criminals for years. Enslaved workers were often sold to other African kingdoms. Local enslaved workers kept some rights, including the rights to buy their freedom and to marry. Sometimes, people moved from a lower class into the elite class. This was achieved by completing an apprenticeship for a specific skill or becoming a leader in the Islamic faith. When freed, enslaved people sometimes moved into a higher class.

In the late 1500s CE, internal conflict, drought, and disease began to weaken the Songhai Empire. As a powerful and wealthy state, it had also attracted the attention of rivals who sought control of the empire's trade and resources. Ahmad al-Mansur was the leader of Morocco, in North Africa, at the end of the sixteenth century. He was a powerful and ambitious man. Al-Mansur set his sights on conquering the territory controlled by the Songhai Empire. He sent an army south across the desert, armed with guns, to attack and

conquer the Songhai Empire. Al-Mansur's forces conquered Gao and Timbuktu in 1591 CE. The conquest of these rich trade routes and the gold mines of the region led to al-Mansur becoming known as al-Dhahabi, the Golden. However, Morocco could not control all the territory that had been part of the Songhai Empire. While it commanded the major cities, the rural regions in the countryside turned into a series of smaller, independent kingdoms.



Ahmad al-Mansur ruled Morocco for twenty-five years.

PRIMARY SOURCE: THE TOMB OF ASKIA MUHAMMAD



Askia Muhammad's tomb is in the city of Gao.

Glossary

A

absolute monarch, n. a king or queen who has the unchecked authority to do whatever they want without any restrictions (28)

animism, n. the belief that objects, places, and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence (11)

C

clan, n. a group of families claiming a common ancestor (16)

commodity, n. a good, commonly a raw material, that can be interchanged with another good of the same type (9)

cosmopolitan, adj. composed of people from many parts of the world (17)

court, n. the residence of a royal family and supporting staff (7)

D

deploy, v. to move troops into position for a military action (24)

diplomat, n. someone who represents the government of one country in another country (11)

E

entourage, n. people who surround an important person (19)

I

imam, n. a Muslim worship leader (20)

imperial, adj. related to an emperor, empress, or empire (29)

M

malleability, n. the ability to be shaped into many forms (5)

monopoly, n. the complete control of the supply of a good or service by one person, country, or company (10)

P

prosperity, n. a condition of being successful, especially financially (5)

proximity, n. nearness in space (25)

T

thwart, v. to prevent something (27)





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Editorial Directors

Rosie McCormick

Ilene Goldman

in partnership with



Subject Matter Expert

Salmon A. Shomade, JD, PhD

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Mali: Mansa Musa, King of Mali, holding a sceptre and a piece of gold. Detail from the Catalan Atlas, 1375 / Pictures from History / Bridgeman Images: 14–15

Mansa Kankan Musa I, 14th century king of the Mali empire (gouache on paper)/McBride, Angus (1931–2007) / British/Private Collection/© Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images: Cover C, 19

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