

Mali Empire



Figure 1: Location of the Mali Empire.

The Mali trading empire of West Africa began its rise upon the collapse of the empire of Ghana. It developed from the kingdom of Kangaba, which was established along the upper Niger River by the Malinke people possibly as early as 1000. Kangaba was originally part of ancient Ghana. Following a brief occupation by the Muslim Almoravids in the late 11th century, the vulnerable Ghana Empire saw its kingdoms assert their independence. In the early 1200s a kingdom led by the Susu people laid claim to the remnants of the empire, and the tyrannical rule of Sumanguru, the Susu chief, incited the Malinke of Kangaba to revolt. By 1240 the Malinke, under the leadership of Sundiata, had captured Kumbi, the capital of Ghana.

The kingdom, now known as Mali, began to grow into an empire under Sundiata. The king sent his armies to subdue neighboring peoples while laying the economic foundations for the empire by taking control of the region's lucrative gold and salt trade and encouraging agricultural development. In the early 14th century, under the rule of the emperor (*mansa*) Musa, the Mali Empire reached its height, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the city of Gao in the east. It encompassed the city of Timbuktu, which grew famous both as a trading center and as a showcase of Islamic culture. The renown of the lavish empire—the first great Muslim state in the Sudan region—spread throughout the Muslim world and in Europe when Mansa Musa made a spectacular royal pilgrimage to Mecca, via Egypt, in 1324. Leading a caravan of 60,000 subjects and 80 camels loaded with gold, Mansa Musa touched off a grand celebration upon his arrival in Cairo.



Figure 2: A sculptor from the Mali Empire created a male terra-cotta figure during the 12th–15th century.



Figure 3: The Great Mosque (Djinguereber) in Timbuktu, Mali, was built in the 1300s, under the Mali emperor Mansa Musa.

After Mansa Musa's death in 1332, the Mali Empire began a steady decline. A string of weak rulers in the late 14th century was unable to stop outlying provinces from declaring their independence. Military incursions into the eastern part of the empire by the Mossi and Tuareg peoples took their toll as well. The fall of Timbuktu to the Tuareg in the 1430s signaled the final decline of the empire. In the late 15th century Mali gave way to the rising Songhai Empire, which had its capital at

Gao.

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