

# Lesson 3

## MAIN IDEAS

- 1 Economics** Mali expanded and built upon Ghana's trading network to establish its empire.
- 2 Government** Problems such as weak rulers and rebellious subjects led to Mali's decline.
- 3 Government** Songhai was a powerful African empire that promoted Islam and learning.

## TAKING NOTES

### Reading Skill: Comparing and Contrasting

Comparing and contrasting means finding the similarities and differences between things that share some common elements. In Lesson 3, compare and contrast the empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai using a chart like the one below.

	Ghana	Mali	Songhai
Trade			
Religion			
Decline			

 Skillbuilder Handbook, page R4



▲ Terracotta sculpture Terracotta is the type of clay used to make this sculpture. This sculpture was made around the 14th century in Mali, West Africa.

## Words to Know

Understanding the following words will help you read this lesson:

**theology** the study of religion (page 166)  
*He taught **theology** at the large mosque in Timbuktu.*

**original** existing at the beginning; initial (page 167)  
*Several invasions reduced the empire to its **original** size before it had expanded.*

**reputation** a specific ability or characteristic of a person (page 167)  
*The king's **reputation** for cruelty made many fear him.*

**seize** to forcefully take possession of something (page 168)  
*During the 1400s, Muslims were able to **seize** control of Africa's Songhai empire.*

# The Empire of Mali

## TERMS & NAMES

Mali

Sundiata

Timbuktu

Mansa Musa

Songhai

Askia Muhammad

**Build on What You Know** As you read in Lesson 2, Ghana used trade to develop into a powerful empire. After Ghana's decline, the empires of Mali and Songhai followed the same pattern of using trade to gain power and grow.

## Mali Builds on Ghana's Foundation

**1 ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How could Mali build on Ghana's empire?

In about 1240, the empire of **Mali** formed in the southern area of what had been Ghana's empire (see the map on page 147). It was founded by the Malinke (muh•LIHNG•kee) people. The Malinke were led by a great chief named **Sundiata** (sun•JAH•tah).

**Sundiata Comes to Power** Sundiata organized a powerful army and captured the former capital of Ghana. He expanded his empire beyond Ghana's old borders, reestablished the gold-salt trade, and expanded trade routes.

Sundiata developed the city of **Timbuktu** as a center of trade and culture. Timbuktu was on the Niger River where the desert and savannah vegetation zones met. Later, Timbuktu became a famous center of Islamic scholarship. Sundiata also supported the development of food crops, cotton farming, and cotton weaving. He balanced his Islamic beliefs with his traditional religious beliefs—much like the kings of Ghana had. Sundiata was very popular with his people and is still considered a hero by the Malinke people of West Africa.

**Savannah** This modern village in the West African savannah is similar to what a village in Mali might have looked like. ▼



**Mansa Musa Expands the Empire** After Sundiata's death, the rulers of Mali continued to expand the empire. In 1307, Mali's most famous king, **Mansa Musa**, came to power. Mansa Musa was a devoted Muslim. However, he allowed his subjects to practice other religions.

*Mansa* means "king" in the Malinke language, and *Musa* is Arabic for *Moses*. So Mansa Musa could also be called King Moses.

In 1324, Mansa Musa began a pilgrimage to Mecca, fulfilling one of the Five Pillars of Islam. On his pilgrimage, Mansa Musa brought 12,000 slaves, 80 camels, and 300 pounds of gold. Mansa Musa rode on horseback. In front of him were 500 slaves, each dressed in silk and carrying a gold staff.

Mansa Musa's pilgrimage greatly impressed those who saw the caravan. More merchants wanted to travel to the empire of Mali and trade increased. West African gold also enriched Europe and provided financial support for the European Renaissance, which you will read about in Chapter 13.

Mansa Musa returned to Mali with an architect and Arab scholars from Egypt. The architect designed the Sankore mosque in Timbuktu. Religious scholars taught history, theology, and law in Timbuktu. The city also attracted some of the best poets and artists in Africa and Southwest Asia.

Mansa Musa continued to expand the empire's borders until his death around 1332.

**REVIEW** What were the effects of Mansa Musa's pilgrimage?

## Decline of Mali

**2 ESSENTIAL QUESTION** How did weak rulers lead to Mali's decline?

After Mansa Musa's death, his descendants argued about who should be the next ruler of Mali. This internal fighting greatly weakened the empire. Eventually, Timbuktu was raided and burned.

**Internal Problems** Newly conquered regions of Mali's empire began to rebel. In the east, the **Songhai** people gradually gained strength around their homeland near the great bend of the Niger River. The main Songhai city in the region, Gao, was captured by Mali in 1325. About 40 years later, the Songhai were powerful enough to lead the city of Gao to independence from Mali.



▲ Mansa Musa  
Mansa Musa became emperor of Mali in 1307. He made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca.

## Primary Source

**Background:** Ibn Battuta (below) was a famous Muslim traveler. In this passage from his travels, he recalls his impression of the justice system in Mali.



### from *Travels in Asia and Africa*

By Ibn Battuta

Translated by H. A. R. Gibb

They [the people of Mali] are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence<sup>1</sup> of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence. . . . They are careful to observe the hours of prayer, and assiduous<sup>2</sup> in attending them in congregations, and in bringing up their children to them.

1. **abhorrence:** looking upon with a feeling of disgust.
2. **assiduous:** work hard at.

#### DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

What might a traveler like Ibn Battuta have learned by traveling through Mali?

**External Problems** In the north, Berber nomads seized much of Mali's territory and captured Timbuktu in 1433. Berbers are descendants of the pre-Arab inhabitants of North Africa. In the south, bandits began to raid trading caravans and military outposts.

By 1500, rebels and invaders had reduced Mali's territory to the original area occupied by the Malinke people. Mali was no longer a strong empire.

**REVIEW** What internal problems led to the decline of Mali's empire?

## The Empire of Songhai

**3 ESSENTIAL QUESTION** What benefits did a strong leader bring to Songhai?

As you just read, the Songhai city of Gao declared its independence from Mali around 1365. Over the next several decades, the Songhai tried unsuccessfully to form a kingdom.

**Songhai Expands** Since 1433, the Berbers had controlled Timbuktu. In 1468, Muslim leaders of the city asked the Songhai king, Sunni Ali, to help overthrow the Berbers. Sunni Ali captured Timbuktu, drove out the Berbers, and killed many people who lived in the city. Soon Sunni Ali established a reputation as a powerful, harsh leader. He went on to conquer neighboring lands. After a seven-year siege, he captured the trading city of Djenné.

**Askia Muhammad** The Songhai empire expanded greatly under Sunni Ali's rule. When he died in 1492, his son was declared the ruler. However, a leader named **Askia Muhammad** wanted to seize the throne. He and his followers felt that Sunni Ali did not practice Islam correctly. In 1493, Askia Muhammad defeated Sunni Ali's son and became the ruler of the Songhai empire.

Askia Muhammad took control of the salt mines to the north and expanded Mali's other borders. Soon the Songhai empire covered an area larger than the empire of Mali had.

**Askia's Organization** Askia Muhammad's greatest achievement was organizing the government of this vast empire. He began by dividing Songhai into provinces. He then put a governor in charge of each province. He also appointed people as directors of finance, agriculture, army, and navy. In addition, Askia Muhammad set up an organized tax system.

Under Askia Muhammad's rule, Islam spread throughout the empire. He sent Muslim scholars into areas that had little contact with the Islamic religion. These scholars converted many people in the cities to Islam. But in rural areas, Islamic beliefs continued to blend with traditional religious practices. For example, West Africans believed in mischievous spirits who played tricks on people. This was mixed with the Muslim belief in *djinn*, or "genies," such as the one who appeared in Aladdin's lamp in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

## History Makers

### Askia Muhammad: King of Songhai

Under Askia Muhammad's leadership, Songhai became a well-run empire and a center of trade and learning. But by 1519, Askia Muhammad was a half-blind old man.

In 1528, his son removed him from the throne and declared himself king. The son sent Askia Muhammad to an island that was "infested with mosquitoes and toads." While on this island, Askia Muhammad heard about his children fighting each other for control of the Songhai empire. In 1537, one of his sons brought Askia Muhammad back to Gao. The following year, Askia Muhammad died. His tomb still stands and is one of the most respected shrines in West Africa.

An artist's portrayal of what Askia Muhammad might have looked like ►



**Songhai Falls** Askia Muhammad's son removed his father from the throne. (See History Makers on page 168.) The rulers of Songhai after Askia were weak. During the 1580s, the army of Morocco raided the Songhai salt mines. Then, in 1591, Moroccan forces captured Timbuktu and Gao. Soon after that, the Songhai empire collapsed. Even so, most West Africans, living in kinship groups in agricultural villages, continued their lives much as before.

**REVIEW** What was Askia Muhammad's greatest achievement?

### Lesson Summary

- Mali expanded and developed into a powerful empire.
- Internal and external problems caused the empire of Mali to collapse.
- Songhai developed into a powerful, well-organized African empire that promoted Islam and learning.

### Why It Matters Now . . .

West Africans later suffered greatly from the slave trade to the Americas and the colonization of their continent by Europeans. Today Africans look back with pride to the great achievements of the empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

## 3 Lesson Review

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### Terms & Names

1. Explain the importance of

Mali	Timbuktu	Songhai
Sundiata	Mansa Musa	Askia Muhammad

### Using Your Notes

**Comparing and Contrasting** Use your completed chart to answer the following question:

2. What did Ghana, Mali, and Songhai have in common?

	Ghana	Mali	Songhai
Trade			
Religion			
Decline			

### Main Ideas

3. Why did Mansa Musa's pilgrimage impress people?
4. What external factors weakened the Mali empire?
5. How did Askia Muhammad spread Islam?

### Critical Thinking

6. **Forming and Supporting Opinions** Do you think Askia Muhammad was a successful ruler? Explain your answer.
7. **Making Inferences** What might have been another reason for Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, other than religion?

### Activity

**Making a Time Line** Make a time line that shows the main events during the decline of the Mali empire. List a date for each event. Start with Mansa Musa's death.