

# Early African Kingdoms

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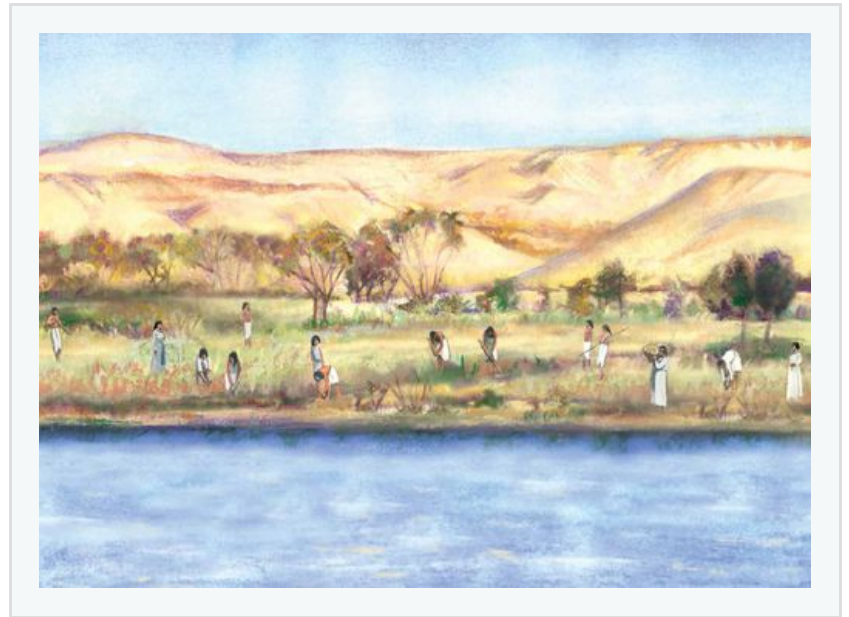
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# The Kush Kingdom

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

In ancient times, a number of different civilizations thrived in Africa. Two of these were the Egyptian civilization and the Kush civilization.

Kush was the ancient Egyptian name for the African land of Nubia. It is located in eastern Africa, south of Egypt. Nubia was the home of an advanced civilization. Historians believe that the Kingdom of Kush began in about 2000 BCE. The Kushites were good farmers, metalworkers, and traders. Because of trade, they had contact with areas throughout eastern Africa.



*Ancient Egyptians traded their extra grain with the Kushites for gold and other goods.*

Other than the Nile River, Egypt has few natural resources of its own. The Nile provided the water to help Egyptians grow food. For centuries, Egyptians traded the food they raised with the Kushites for other goods. The Kushites mined minerals and produced iron. They also traded with people from central Africa. Central Africans sold ebony wood, ivory, incense, and animal skins. Egyptians wore beautiful gold jewelry made by the Kushites. They decorated their homes with ivory and metalwork purchased in the marketplaces of Kush.

## Kush Declines, Egypt Expands

In 1500 BCE, the Egyptians were the strongest kingdom in the area as Kush foreign trade and influence declined. They began establishing an empire by conquering the land around them. Egyptian armies conquered lands along the Mediterranean coast to the north and east. They also conquered lands along the Nile, to the south. This included the area of Kush.

Over the next five centuries, 1500 BCE – 1000 BCE, the Kush people seemed to become Egyptian.

They wore Egyptian-style clothing and worshipped Egyptian gods. Yet underneath their borrowed robes, the Kush people kept their culture and identity. They adapted pieces of Egyptian culture to their own culture.

In about 730 BCE Egypt grew weak. The Kushites struck at the Egyptians with all their might and defeated them. For a few decades, Kushite rulers became the pharaohs of Egypt. This was a great period in the history of Kush. But it lasted only 150 years. In 591 BCE, the Egyptians struck back, defeating Kush and capturing its capital.

The Kush people moved their capital farther south along the Nile to the city of Meroë (/muhr\*oh\*ee/). Meroë was surrounded by fine grazing land for herds of cattle, goats, and sheep. It was a major trading center. It was also one of Africa's first iron-producing centers. Kush shipped its ironwork across Africa. Incredible rumors of Kush's wealth spread far beyond Africa. The region was called the "Land of Gods."

## Land of Wonders

The Greek historian Herodotus recorded some of the stories that had reached him about Meroë. Herodotus had heard about stone pyramids and a temple covered with sheets of gold shining like beacons in the bright African sun. Indeed, dozens of stone pyramids still stand outside Meroë. These pyramids are steeper than Egyptian pyramids and have flat tops. They were used as burial sites for the Kushite kings, just as the Egyptian pyramids were used as tombs for the pharaohs.



B N Chagny (CC BY-SA 1.0)

*Unlike the pyramids of Egypt, some of Kush's pyramids had flat tops.*

Archaeologists have found jewelry and other valuable artifacts in these burial sites. These findings tell us that Meroë was once a wealthy place.

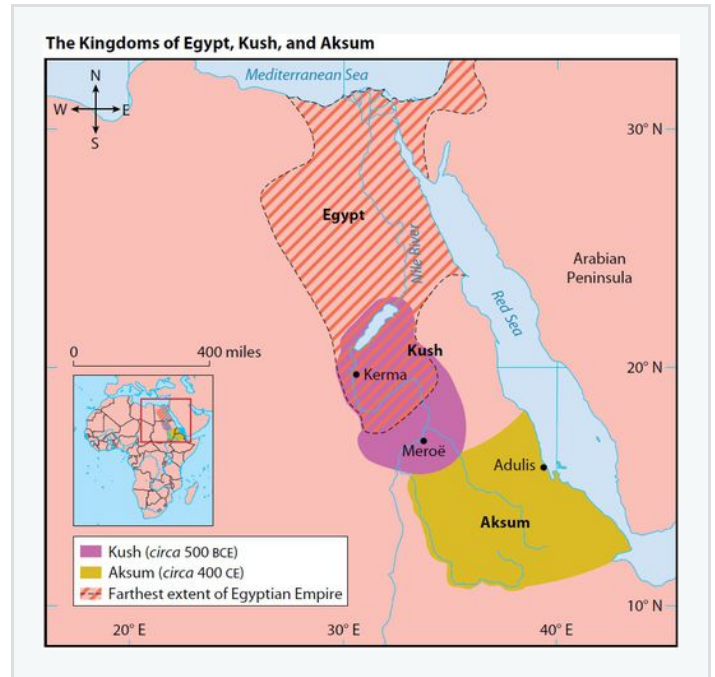
## A Bitter Fate



Sven-Steffen Arndt (CC BY-SA 2.0)

*The gold bracelet was worn by a Kushite queen of Meroë.*

The Kush kingdom ended when it was attacked by its southern neighbor, Aksum, (also spelled Axum). Aksum was a kingdom located in present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a result of war, Aksum destroyed the Kush kingdom. Early in the 300s CE, Aksum's great warrior-king Ezana conquered Kush.



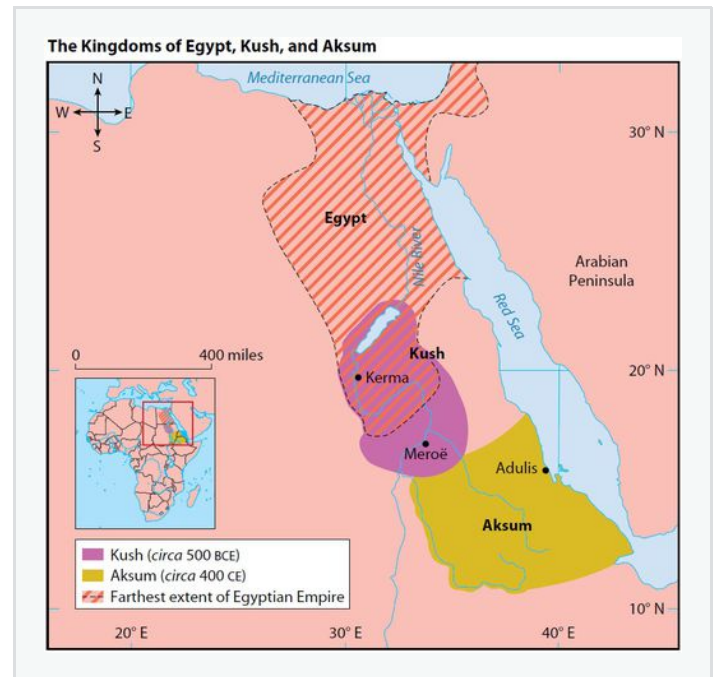
*The three great kingdoms, Kush, Aksum, and Egypt, were all located in northeastern Africa.*

# The Aksum Kingdom

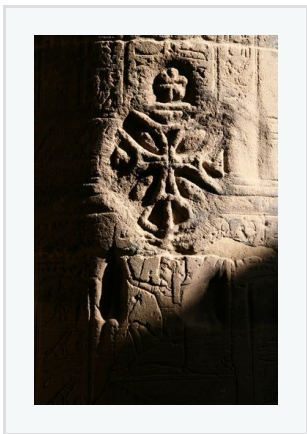
This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

Aksum was an ancient African kingdom located in present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. As a result of war, Aksum destroyed the nearby Kush kingdom. Early in the 300s CE, Aksum's great warrior-king Ezana conquered Kush.

After Aksum defeated Kush, the trade routes through Kush were ignored. Instead, traders traveled to Aksum by sea. Trade flourished at Aksum's bustling port of Adulis on the Red Sea. Traders exchanged goods from eastern Africa as well as Egypt, India, and Rome. Over time, Aksum became the strongest power in eastern Africa. Travelers to Aksum commented on the wealth of the kings, their gold-embroidered clothes, and their chariots drawn by elephants.



*The three great kingdoms, Kush, Aksum, and Egypt, were all located in northeastern Africa.*



Till Niermann (CC BY-SA 3.0)

*The Christians of Aksum created religious images and symbols.*

Aksum prospered for several centuries. King Ezana had converted to Christianity, and Aksum became a Christian outpost in eastern Africa. Its kings built many churches and monasteries. They had the Bible translated into the local language, Ge'ez. Aksum also conquered neighboring lands, including part of the Arabian Peninsula.

Over time, Aksum began to decline, especially as their major competitor, the Persians, pushed them out of Yemen across the Red Sea. At the same time, during the 700s CE, Muslims began to move from the Arabian Peninsula and into Africa. They took over many of the trade routes that had made Aksum a mighty kingdom. Eventually, the Muslims took over the seaport of Adulis. The Aksumite Christians converted to Islam or

retreated into the mountains. Today many residents of the area are still Christian.



# The Kingdom of Ghana

This text is excerpted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

King Tunka of Ghana sat on his throne in a huge, open building called a pavilion. Behind him stood servants holding shields and swords decorated with gold. To his right stood Ghana's noblemen and their sons. They wore beautiful robes and had gold threads braided into their hair.

The pavilion was in Ghana's royal capital of the twin city of Kumbi. Six miles away was the other city, Saleh. Officials of the kingdom stood near the king's throne. Even the animals wore gold. King Tunka's dogs wore gold and silver collars. Horses, covered with gold-embroidered cloth, pawed the ground outside the pavilion.

An early Arab explorer, al Bakri, talked to people who visited Kumbi. He claimed that the king of Ghana was the "wealthiest of all kings on the face of the earth." Muslim scholars called Ghana the "Land of Gold."

How did the kingdom of Ghana become so rich?

Ancient Ghana was located between the upper Niger and Senegal rivers. Ghana's kings took advantage of their location. Salt mines lay to the north in the Sahara. Gold mines lay farther to the south. Trade routes between the mines ran right through Ghana. Another trade route ran east to the Nile River Valley. Ghana's capital, Kumbi, was at the center of these trade routes.

Ghana's location helped it become a great West African trading kingdom. The kingdom is said to have begun about 300 CE and lasted until the 1200s. It was largest in about 1000 CE. The kingdom of Ghana spread over an area almost as big as the state of Texas.

## Ghana's Great Kings

The kings helped the kingdom of Ghana grow by collecting taxes from traders passing through the



Roger Culos (CC BY-SA 4.0)

*West African gold was the secret to Ghana's power.*

area. Traders paid taxes on the goods they brought to sell and on the goods they purchased. These taxes went into the king's treasury and helped support his wealthy court. In return, the king protected the trade routes. The traders could travel safely throughout Ghana.

The king claimed all gold nuggets found in Ghana. He let traders keep the gold dust they brought from the gold mines. Gold mines lay south of Ghana along the Senegal River. The miners kept their exact location a secret. The gold was sometimes stuffed into hollow quills for safe travel across the Sahara.



*The people of Ghana created beautiful gold jewelry.*

## Salt, Vital for Life

You know that gold is valuable because it is rare and beautiful. But do you know why ancient Africans valued salt so highly? Africans prized salt for many important reasons. Salt kept meat and vegetables from spoiling in the hot weather. It made bland food tastier. Salt was also used as a medicine to treat many different illnesses. In addition, people in hot climates such as the Sahara needed—and still need—salt to replace the salt the body loses from sweating.

Although salt was plentiful in the northern deserts, it was rarer in western Africa. By the time a trader had hauled his salt to western Africa, its value would have increased greatly. Salt was so valuable in this area that it was traded for an equal amount of gold.

## Ghana Flourishes

Ghana became very rich and powerful by controlling the gold and salt trade. Ghana's kings used the profits made from this trade to build beautiful cities. Ghana's citizens admired the king's beautiful palace built of stone.

Iron ore was plentiful in Ghana and easy to mine. Ancient Ghanaians developed ways of working iron into strong tools and weapons. They used iron farming tools to increase the amount of food they could grow. They used iron weapons to win battles and expand their kingdom.

As traders passed through Ghana, they brought many new goods with them. Some traders paid their taxes in gold or salt. Others paid in copper, cloth, dried fruit, or other goods. As a result, the people of Ghana's cities had many fine things to purchase and enjoy.

Many traders from northern Africa and the Middle East moved to Ghana's cities to participate in the rich trade. Most of these traders were Muslims. The traders told the people they met about Islam. Some people of Ghana adopted this new religion. Most people continued to follow their traditional religious beliefs.

They worshipped one central god, many lesser gods, and spirits in nature. The religion of ancient Ghana also taught people to respect their ancestors.



Robin Taylor (CC BY 2.0)

*Traders from the Sahara carried slabs of salt to the markets of Ghana.*

## Ghana's Downfall

Of course, neighbors envied a country as rich as Ghana.

Enemies often attacked, hoping to get their hands on Ghana's gold.

Beginning in the late 900s, Ghana was attacked by various groups from North Africa. The Ghanaians fought off the first few attacks. However, in 1076, Kumbi was conquered. Muslim conquerors seized control. This was the beginning of Ghana's decline.

Ghana regained control of Kumbi in the late 1000s, but the kingdom never recovered its former power. As it became weaker, Ghana's gold production dropped. Ghana was further weakened when important trade networks slipped from its control.

In the early 1200s, Kumbi came under attack yet again. This time the attacker was a West African king named Sundiata Keita, whose people had previously served Ghana as a conquered state. In 1240 Sundiata Keita and his army captured Kumbi. They added the defeated kingdom of Ghana to the new empire of Mali.



# Sumanguru and Sundiata of Mali

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

From 300 CE to about 1200 CE, the kingdom of Ghana was a powerful and flourishing one in Africa. But, around 1000, as its power decreased, many of the areas it had controlled became independent. One such area was Mali. Mali eventually became the most powerful empire in West Africa. But during its early years, Mali was dominated by other powerful kingdoms.



Collectie Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (CC BY-SA 3.0)

*Kirina was one of three towns that would form the foundation of Sundiata's empire of Mali. In this image, you can see grain stores used for keeping the grain dry.*

One of Mali's early rivals was the Soso kingdom. The Soso lived in the coastal regions south of Ghana. Sumanguru (/su\*man\*gu\*ru/), king of the Soso people, marched into Mali and conquered it. Cunning and cruel, Sumanguru taxed the people of Mali without mercy. He took their daughters and wives. To eliminate any rivals for his throne, Sumanguru decided to kill all of the former king's sons.

## A Moment of Mercy

Sumanguru decided to spare the life of a young Mandinka prince named Sundiata (/sun\*di\*ah\*ta/). Little Sundiata could not even stand up or walk. Even when he was seven, he crawled from place to place. Sumanguru decided that this child could not possibly be a threat to him.

Sumanguru was wrong about that. Sundiata eventually grew up to be a great leader, known as "the hungry lion." Sundiata had a strong will. He refused to submit to his sickness. After months and months of trying, Sundiata forced himself to walk. Leaning on an iron cane, he hobbled around his village. Sundiata pushed himself further and harder. Years later, he was able to walk without a cane. Sundiata even became a great horseman and hunter.

The Mandinka people admired Sundiata and his bravery. They looked to Sundiata to rescue them from Sumanguru's hard rule. Sundiata's people counted on him to get rid of Sumanguru.

## **Sundiata versus Sumanguru**

In 1230, the other leaders of Mali rallied around Sundiata. They proclaimed him the king of Mali. Sumanguru realized that Sundiata was a leader who could defeat him. But Sumanguru would not give up without a fight. He had a large, powerful army. His people believed that he had special powers that protected him from injuries during battle. Their belief in him made Sundiata's people strong, fearless warriors.

In 1235, Sumanguru's army met Sundiata's army in battle. During this battle Sundiata's Mali warriors crushed Sumanguru's army.

According to one Mandinka legend, Sumanguru disappeared when an arrow struck him. A giant tree sprung up where Sumanguru had stood. There are also legends that tell of Sundiata's bravery. Whichever legend you decide to believe, no one disagrees that Sundiata defeated Sumanguru. Sundiata had shown great bravery in battle. Even today, the Mandinka people celebrate Sundiata as a hero.

Sundiata went on to conquer other lands. In 1240, he and his generals captured Kumbi, the old capital of Ghana. The empire of Mali became the most powerful empire in West Africa.

# The Mali Empire

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

During its early years, the area of Mali in West Africa was dominated by other powerful kingdoms. But beginning in 1230, under the leadership of a man named Sundiata, Mali fought its way to power. Sundiata led Mali to conquer other lands, including the old capital of the once-powerful kingdom of Ghana. The empire of Mali became the most powerful empire in West Africa.

## Mali's Power Grows

Like Ghana once had, Mali controlled West African trade. The leaders of Mali set up their capital in Niani. Mali had fair leaders. They created a strong government. They used trade and farming to help Mali become rich.

Sundiata proved to be as powerful a leader in peace as he had been in war. He created a strong central government that brought peace and order to the entire empire of Mali. This helped him regain control of the trade routes. Mali was self-sufficient in food production because villages and slave communities were purposefully organized for agricultural production. The leaders of Mali also increased trade in the cities along the Niger River. The new leaders of Mali took the proud title *mansa*, which means emperor.

## A Muslim Empire

Islam had been a presence in West Africa since the kingdom of Ghana. However, most Mandinka, the people living in West Africa who ruled the Mali empire, did not convert to Islam until the end of the 1200s. Under a Muslim king, Islam became the most powerful religion in the Mali Empire. The Muslim holy book, the Koran, had become the basis of Mali culture. Mali had new laws, a tax system, and a dedication to education, all based on Islam.



Emilio Labrador Santiago de Chile (CC BY 2.0)

*The Great Mosque still stands in Timbuktu today.*

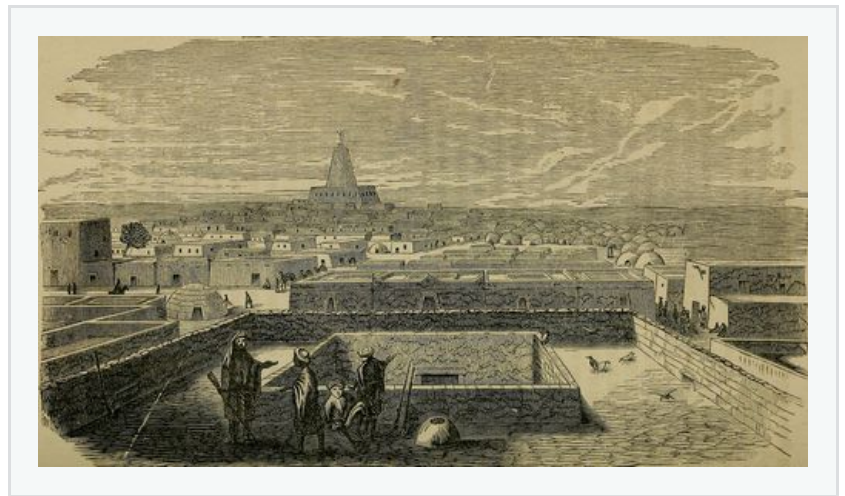
## Timbuktu, A Center of Learning

Many important cities developed and prospered in the Mali Empire. One of these was the capital city of Niani (/nee\*ah\*nee/). Others were the trading cities of Djenne, Gao, and Timbuktu.

Timbuktu is located at the bend of the Niger River. The people of the desert and the people of the river met at this spot to trade their goods. Over the years, Timbuktu grew from a group of tents into a great center for learning and trade. People throughout the Islamic world recognized its name.

Timbuktu had many mosques, libraries, and schools. The city also had a famous Muslim university. Muslim scholars throughout Africa traveled to Timbuktu to study at the university.

Mali grew in its trade, riches, and education for years. However, the empire eventually declined as a neighboring empire grew in power. By the late 1400s, Mali was no longer the richest and most powerful empire in West Africa.



*This illustration from the 1800s shows Timbuktu hundreds of years ago.*



# Mansa Musa of Mali

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

One of the most famous and influential rulers of the Mali empire in West Africa was Mansa, or Emperor, Musa. Mansa Musa ruled Mali for twenty-five years, from 1307 to 1332. In that time, Mali's fame spread across the Sahara to the Middle East. It even spread across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe.

Mansa Musa extended Mali's borders far and wide. A trader passing through Mali in the 1330s described Mali as "square in shape." He said it took over four months to go from corner to corner of the large empire.

Mansa Musa also increased trade three times over. As many as twelve thousand camels passed through Mali every year. Mali's cities supplied water, food, and rest for the thirsty and weary travelers. Mansa Musa promoted education and the arts. He was especially interested in collecting books and in constructing new buildings. But above all, Mansa Musa was very religious.

## A Golden Pilgrimage

In 1324, after converting to Islam, Mansa Musa decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, located in present-day Saudi Arabia. In Islam, Mecca is considered the holiest city in the Muslim world. Followers of Islam are required to travel to Mecca during their lifetime if they can afford to do so. Muslims call the pilgrimage to Mecca the hajj. Making the pilgrimage is one of the five pillars of Islam.



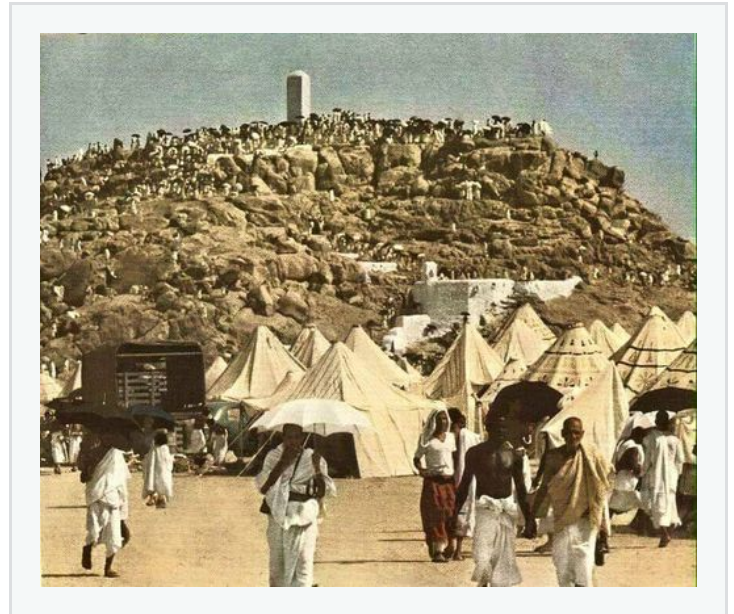
*This Spanish map of northwestern Africa from the 1300s shows Mansa Musa of Mali seated on a throne.*



The fact that Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca wasn't unusual. Other West African rulers of Mali had already made pilgrimages there. It was how Mansa Musa made his pilgrimage that was so amazing.

Mansa Musa traveled with a huge caravan. Family, friends, teachers, and doctors came along. Mansa Musa also brought along certain important chiefs. This was smart for two reasons. First, being part of Mansa Musa's pilgrimage brought honor to the chiefs. Second, getting the chiefs out of Mali reduced problems while Mansa Musa was away.

The caravan included thousands of people. It was very likely the biggest caravan ever to cross the Sahara. Mansa Musa also brought lots of gold. As a result, the caravan included as many as one hundred camels weighed down with sacks of gold.



*A pilgrimage to Mecca is an important religious undertaking for Muslims.*

## Sharing the Wealth



Maliqureshi96 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

*Mansa Musa supposedly gave away so much gold that the value of gold dropped.*

In 1324, Mansa Musa's extraordinary caravan entered Cairo, Egypt. Everyone in Cairo was impressed by Mansa Musa's wealth.

Mansa Musa's generosity was as impressive as his religious faith. Everywhere he stopped on his pilgrimage, Mansa Musa gave away gold. He gave lavish gifts of gold in the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. He gave gold to everyone who helped him on his journey, too. He gave away so much gold that the price of gold dropped in Cairo.

On his return journey from Mecca back to Mali, Mansa Musa once more passed through Cairo—and gave away more gold.

## “The Century of Musa”

Mansa Musa returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1325.

Mansa Musa’s son had done quite a good job ruling Mali during the time Mansa Musa had been on his pilgrimage. His son had even extended the empire to the east. He did this by conquering the city of Gao, the capital of the neighboring territory of Songhai. To make sure that Songhai would not revolt against Mali, Mansa Musa’s son took two Songhai princes as captives.

Mansa Musa continued to support education and building in Mali. He persuaded a North African architect to return to Mali with him to build mosques in Mali’s cities. He exchanged ambassadors with other Muslim countries such as Egypt and Morocco. He established religious schools to teach about Islam. However, he also allowed his people to choose which religion to follow. Some, including the people near the gold mines, continued to follow traditional religions.



*Learning flourished in Mali during Mansa Musa's reign.*

Mansa Musa died in 1332. He had ruled Mali for twenty-five years. His reign was so successful that some historians describe the history of western Africa in the 1300s as “the century of Musa.” Mansa Musa’s fame had spread beyond Africa’s borders to Europe. European mapmakers began to include Mali on their maps.

# The Songhai Empire

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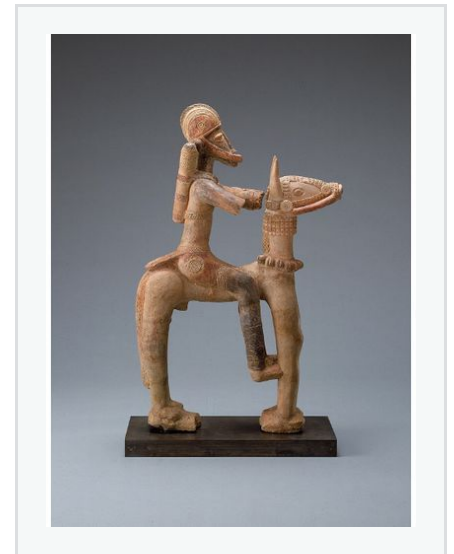
In the 1300s, the Mali empire was very powerful in West Africa. As the empire extended, it conquered the city of Gao, the capital of the neighboring territory of Songhai. Two princes from the Songhai territory were taken and held as captives in Mali to ensure that Songhai would not revolt.

The two Songhai princes were named Ali Kolon and Sulyaman Nar. Ali Kolon was a fierce warrior and a natural leader. Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali, had even had him lead military expeditions for Mali.

But Ali Kolon had some big plans of his own. According to legend, he cleverly used his military expeditions to plan his escape from Mali. 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.

Mansa Maghan, who had gained the throne in Mali after his father Musa's death, was a weak leader. This gave Ali Kolon the chance he had been waiting for during his seven years in Mali. Along with his brother and a few loyal supporters, Ali Kolon escaped from Niani, Mali's capital.

Ali Kolon became the new chief of Gao, the capital of the Songhai people. He started the Sonni (/soon\*nee/) Dynasty. For most of the 1300s and during the early part of the 1400s, Mali and Songhai tried to overpower each other. Neither side had much luck. However, in 1464, the fierce Songhai king Sonni Ali Ber (/soo\*nee/ahl\*ee/bar/) came to the throne.



*This terracotta horse and rider signify the wealth and power of the Mali Empire.*

## Hard Times for Timbuktu

In the early 1400s, nomads from the desert had invaded Timbuktu, an important center for learning and trade in Mali. Led by Chief Akil (/ah\*keel/), the nomads decided not to live in the city they had conquered. Instead, they lived in the desert. They appointed allied representatives to collect taxes



on behalf of Chief Akil. Also, Tuareg raids threatened the prosperous trade of the city. The residents of Timbuktu hoped that Sonni Ali Ber could bring back peace, stability, and prosperity to the city.

And so the leaders of Timbuktu sent a letter to Sonni Ali Ber. They offered to give Timbuktu to the Songhai chief if he would get rid of Chief Akil.

Sonni Ali Ber wanted to control this important trading town. In 1468, he sent an army into Timbuktu. His troops sacked Timbuktu and killed many people, including scholars, teachers, and students who lived there.



Guaka (CC BY-SA 3.0)

*The Songhai Empire revolved around the Niger River.*

## The Capture of Jenne

The powerful Songhai Empire grew stronger under Sonni Ali Ber. Then, about five years after he sacked Timbuktu, in 1473, Sonni Ali Ber conquered Jenne. Jenne was a city about three hundred miles southwest of Timbuktu. Like Timbuktu, Jenne was a great center of learning and trade on the Niger River.



PGskot (CC BY-SA 4.0)

*This image shows the markets of Jenne today.*

Jenne was a hard city to capture. It was surrounded by swamps. So, Sonni Ali Ber started a siege of Jenne. For seven years, Sonni Ali Ber and his men cut off supplies to Jenne. Finally, its citizens gave up. Sonni Ali Ber was impressed by the courage of the people of Jenne. Sonni Ali Ber decided to marry the queen mother of Jenne. The Songhai Empire became the main power in West Africa.

Sonni Ali Ber kept his huge empire firmly under his control by dividing his lands into smaller regions. He appointed a governor to rule each region.

## Life in the Songhai Empire

Songhai had a strict social system. At the top of the system were the descendants of the original

Songhai people. They had special rights and lived apart from others.

The next level in Songhai was made up of traders, merchants, and soldiers. Trade and a strong army kept Songhai powerful. Unlike other armies in West Africa, the Songhai army was made of professional soldiers. Songhai's professional army was much more efficient and effective.

Then there were farmers and craftspeople. People did the jobs their families had done before them. If your family were weavers, then you became a weaver.

At the bottom of the Songhai social system were enslaved workers. 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 right to buy their freedom and to marry.

Both Islam and traditional religions influenced life in Songhai. Throughout the 1400s, the Songhai kings somewhat followed the teachings of Islam. However, they were not very religious. Most people in Songhai shared their leader's attitude toward Islam. Some continued to worship their own traditional gods.



# Askia Muhammad and the Songhai Empire

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

## Askia Muhammad Takes Control of the Songhai Empire

In 1464, a fierce king named Sonni Ali Ber came to the throne of the Songhai Empire in West Africa. Under his leadership, the Songhai Empire became the main power in West Africa. But when he died in 1492, after twenty-eight years of rule, the Muslims in Songhai refused to accept his son, Sonni Baru, as king. Like his father, Sonni Baru did not follow Islam closely. Askia Muhammad Toure, one of the king's soldiers, was also unhappy. Unlike the previous rulers of Songhai, Askia Muhammad was a very devout Muslim. He led a revolt against the new king.

In 1493, Askia Muhammad's army defeated the king. He established the Askia dynasty, which was named after him.

The Muslims of Songhai celebrated their new leader and his deep faith in Islam. With Askia Muhammad in control of the government, Muslim scholars, teachers, and students once again settled in the city of Timbuktu. They knew they would be safe from the religious persecution they had experienced there in the past. Askia Muhammad respected their vast learning. He protected them and asked them for advice.

## The Songhai Empire Expands

As other rulers before him had done, Askia Muhammad began to expand his empire. In the west, he took land that had belonged to Mali. He also conquered lands to the south of Songhai. Askia Muhammad took many prisoners. Many of these prisoners were children who became soldiers in his army. Around 1513, Askia Muhammad's soldiers invaded the lands of the Hausa people east of the Niger River. Though he exercised little control over the Hausa, all of Askia Muhammad's conquests created a huge, tightly knit empire.

## Askia Muhammad's Pilgrimage

Askia Muhammad knew that, as a Muslim, it was his duty to make a trip to Mecca, the center of Islam. So in 1495, he set off to Mecca on a two-year pilgrimage. As you would expect, his caravan was huge.

About five hundred horsemen and one thousand soldiers accompanied the king. He also took a great deal of gold, reported to be 300,000 “pieces.” About a third of the gold went to charity. Another third paid his traveling expenses. The remaining third paid for wonderful souvenirs. He also bought buildings so that other West African Muslims who were making the pilgrimage could find places to stay.

But Askia Muhammad didn’t travel to Mecca just to give charity and buy beautiful things. Far from it. As a serious Muslim, he tried to set an example for all Muslims through his faith and worship. Askia Muhammad saw it as his sacred duty to spread Islam all through West Africa.

As his empire enlarged, Askia Muhammad appointed Muslim judges in every district. These judges used Muslim justice in place of traditional Songhai laws. His own court followed the same religious guidelines. As a result of these measures, Islam spread throughout West Africa.

Askia Muhammad’s final years were difficult. One of his own sons overthrew him. He exiled Askia Muhammad to a lonely, miserable island. Finally, in his last years, Askia Muhammad was allowed to return home. He died in 1538.

The Songhai Empire continued to thrive until the late 1500s. In that time North Africans began to invade the empire. The empire was also under attack from the south, as slave traders raided villages. Captured people were traded to Europeans and sent to the Americas. By the 1700s, the Songhai Empire had shrunk to the area around its capital city, Gao.



*Askia Muhammad's tomb is an important historical site in the country of Mali today.*