

Fact Sheet 2: The Mali Empire

Time Period: c. 1235 – 1600 CE

Location: West Africa – centred in modern-day Mali, Senegal, and Guinea

Introduction: A Golden Age in West Africa

The **Mali Empire** was one of the greatest and wealthiest empires in the medieval world. It rose to power in West Africa in the 13th century and became famous across Africa, the Middle East, and Europe for its riches, scholars, and thriving cities. At its height, Mali was larger than Western Europe and home to a diverse population united by trade, religion, learning, and culture.

The empire's story shows that medieval Africa was not isolated or underdeveloped — it was **rich, advanced, and deeply connected to the wider world.**

The Rise of Mali

The Mali Empire was founded around **1235 CE** by a legendary leader named **Sundiata Keita**, often called the “*Lion King of Mali*.” According to oral traditions, Sundiata united several smaller kingdoms and defeated a rival empire, creating a powerful new state. He established a stable government, strengthened trade routes, and laid the foundations for centuries of prosperity.

Mali's success was built on its control of the **trans-Saharan trade routes**, which linked West Africa with North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Traders carried gold, salt, ivory, and enslaved people northward, and brought back horses, textiles, spices, and books. Because of its location and natural resources, Mali quickly became one of the richest empires in the world.

Mansa Musa: The World's Richest Ruler

The most famous ruler of Mali was **Mansa Musa**, who reigned from **1312 to 1337 CE**. Under his leadership, the empire reached its peak of wealth, power, and cultural influence. Mansa Musa controlled vast gold mines — so much so that he is often described as **the richest person in history.**

In **1324**, he made a famous *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca, travelling with a caravan said to include thousands of people, camels loaded with gold, and supplies for the journey. As he passed through cities such as Cairo, he spent and gifted so much gold that he caused local economies to change for years. His journey captured the world's imagination and put Mali firmly on the map — literally — appearing in European and Arab maps of the time.

Mansa Musa wasn't just wealthy; he was also a builder and patron of learning. He sponsored mosques, libraries, and universities across his empire, and welcomed scholars and architects from across Africa and the Islamic world.

Centres of Learning: Timbuktu and Beyond

One of Mansa Musa's greatest achievements was transforming **Timbuktu** into a world-famous centre of education and culture. The city was home to the **Sankore University** and other schools where students studied mathematics, astronomy, law, medicine, history, and literature.

Scholars from Africa, the Middle East, and even parts of Europe travelled to Timbuktu to learn and teach. Thousands of manuscripts were written and preserved there — many still survive today, offering a glimpse into Africa's rich intellectual traditions.

Other cities, such as **Gao** and **Djenné**, also became important centres of trade and scholarship, showcasing the empire's wealth, diversity, and global connections.

Trade, Economy, and Society

Mali's economy was built on **gold and salt**, two of the most valuable commodities of the medieval world. West Africa supplied much of the gold used in European and Middle Eastern coins. Salt, mined from the Sahara Desert, was vital for preserving food and maintaining health.

The empire's wealth allowed for strong governance, large armies, and impressive infrastructure. It was a multicultural and multi-ethnic empire, home to different peoples and faiths. While Islam was the religion of the rulers and cities, many rural communities maintained traditional African beliefs, creating a rich cultural blend.

Decline and Legacy

After Mansa Musa's death, internal conflicts, weak leadership, and pressure from rival powers — especially the **Songhai Empire** — gradually weakened Mali. By the late 1500s, it had lost much of its territory and influence.

However, Mali's legacy lived on. It shaped the development of West African culture, politics, and trade for centuries. Its cities remained centres of learning long after the empire itself had declined.

Why Mali Matters

The story of the Mali Empire challenges common misconceptions about Africa's past. It shows that African societies were:

- **Economically powerful** — controlling global trade in gold and salt.
- **Culturally influential** — shaping education, religion, and art across continents.
- **Intellectually advanced** — producing scholars, manuscripts, and ideas that influenced the Islamic world and beyond.

Mali was not a hidden or isolated empire — it was a *global powerhouse* that connected Africa to the rest of the world and left a legacy of wealth, wisdom, and creativity.

Key Takeaways

- Founded by **Sundiata Keita**, Mali grew into one of the most powerful empires in the medieval world.
- **Mansa Musa**, often called the richest man in history, expanded the empire and transformed Timbuktu into a global centre of learning.
- Trade in gold and salt connected Mali to Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.
- Mali's cities, scholars, and culture prove that Africa's history is one of achievement, innovation, and global influence.