

The Ancient Kingdom of Mali, ruled by the Lion King

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TOP: The Great Mosque in Djenne, Mali, in the morning. Photographed in 1972 by Gilles Mairet, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

BOTTOM: Image of a king of West Africa, believed to be Emperor Mansa Musa of Mali, in the "Catalan Atlas of 1375" composed by cartographer Abraham Cresques of Majorca, Spain. Wikimedia Commons.

What would life be like if a magician ruled the land? The history of ancient Mali gives us some ideas. Mali is a country in Western Africa. In the 1200s and 1300s, it was a huge and wealthy kingdom. Mali's first leader was known by his people as a man with magic powers.

Before the kingdom of Mali was born, years of fighting took place. Fierce battles raged. Finally, in the early 1200s, a group known as the Soso became victors. The Soso's new lands were overflowing with gold.

However, the Soso never got the chance to settle in and enjoy the land's riches. The "sorcerer-king" Sundiata moved in and took over.

Spirits and magic powers

Sundiata claimed that Mali was his. In 1230 he defeated the Soso and took back the land. Legend says that Sundiata's challenger, King Sumanguru, was also magic. It was said that Sumanguru gathered spirits to help him, but Sundiata had stronger magic. He won against the spirits. He shot an arrow, which hit Sumanguru's shoulder and drained the Soso king of his magic. Sundiata then declared himself ruler, or mansa, of Mali.

Sundiata was also known as the "Lion King." He made big changes in Mali. He set a rule that people had to follow the same jobs as their family members. For example, anyone born into a family of warriors would have to be a warrior. Anyone born into a family of storytellers had to be a storyteller, too. Choosing a different job was not allowed.

This plan had an advantage for Sundiata. It meant that anyone born into a family of mansa was part of the line of rulers. The ruling family was called the Keita. This was one of Sundiata's "tricks" to keep power in his family.

For a brief time, the Keita lost power. An ex-slave named Sakura took the kingdom from them. However, Sakura's rule was very troublesome to the people of Mali. Soon, Sundiata's nephew, Mansa Kankan Musa, was able to retake the throne.

Mansa Musa took the kingdom to new heights. He was known for his riches, generosity and dedication to Islam. Islam is one of the world's main religions. Its followers are called Muslims. There are many different kinds of Islam, just like there are different kinds of Christianity.

Giving gold to strangers

Mansa Musa led Mali to great riches. The kingdom was involved in the gold trade, which reached from Africa to Europe. Mali had always been wealthy, thanks to its natural reserves of gold. However, ancient records show that Mansa Musa displayed the kingdom's riches in a new way.

In 1324, Mansa Musa took a trip to Mecca. This city in Saudi Arabia is a holy place for Muslims. Wearing his finest clothes, he passed through Cairo, Egypt, with 500 slaves. Each slave carried a 6-pound cane of gold. With them were 100 camels, carrying even more gold.

Some said that Mansa Musa gave gold to strangers as he passed by. He thrilled the crowds and made a few lucky people rich.

Mali kingdom part of African history

Mansa Musa made an important mark by introducing the kingdom to Islam. He made it one of the first Muslim states in northern African. A strong relationship between religion and politics quickly grew.



Mansa Musa based the laws of Mali on the Quran, Islam's holy book. Under his rule, cities such as Timbuktu and Gao grew into world centers of Islamic learning. Libraries and mosques, or Muslim churches, were built. A university built in Timbuktu may have been the world's first. The cities became centers for writers and artists.

Mansa Musa died in the mid-1300s. Mali was never the same after his death. Ruling families fought and Mali's government was weakened. Then, in 1430, much of Mali's land was taken by the Berbers, a group that invaded from the North.

The riches and power of Mali were soon overtaken. Still, its history stands. The successes of Mali's kingdom make its rise and fall an important part of African history.