**Mali**

By 1235 the kingdom of **Mali** had emerged. Its founders were **Mande**-speaking people, who lived south of Ghana. Mali’s wealth, like Ghana’s, was built on gold. As Ghana remained weak, people who had been under its control began to act independently. In addition, miners found new gold deposits farther east. This caused the most important trade routes to shift eastward, which made a new group of people—the people of Mali— wealthy. It also enabled them to seize power.

**Sundiata Conquers an Empire**

Mali’s first great leader, **Sundiata**, came to power by crushing a cruel, unpopular leader. Then, in the words of a Mande oral tradition, “the world knew no other master but Sundiata.” Sundiata became Mali’s ***mansa****,* or emperor. Through a series of military victories, he took over the kingdom of Ghana and the trading cities of **Kumbi** and **Walata**. A period of peace and prosperity followed.

Sundiata proved to be as great a leader in peace as he had been in war. He put able administrators in charge of Mali’s finances, defense, and foreign affairs. From his new capital at Niani, he promoted agriculture and reestablished the gold-salt trade. Niani became an important center of commerce and trade. People began to call Sundiata’s empire **Mali,** meaning “where the king lives.”

**Mansa Musa Expands Mali**

Sundiata died in 1255. Some of Mali’s next rulers became Muslims. These African Muslim rulers built mosques, attended public prayers, and supported the preaching of Muslim holy men. The most famous of them was **Mansa Musa**, who may have been Sundiata’s grandnephew. Mansa Musa ruled from about 1312 to 1332.

Between the reigns of Sundiata and Mansa Musa, Mali experienced turmoil. There had been seven different rulers in approximately 50 years. Like Sundiata, Mansa Musa was a skilled military leader who exercised royal control over the gold for salt trade and put down every rebellion. His 100,000-man army kept order and protected Mali from attack. Under Mansa Musa, the empire expanded to roughly twice the size of the empire of Ghana. To govern his far-reaching empire, Mansa Musa divided it into provinces and appointed governors, who ruled fairly and efficiently.

A devout Muslim, Mansa Musa went on a **hajj** to Mecca from 1324 to 1325. He travelled with a large entourage that included 5,000 ladies-in-waiting, 60,000 porters and numerous slaves. 500 slaves walked in front of the procession carrying golden staffs. For purchases and gifts, he carried a great deal of gold with him. He gave so much of it away while in Egypt that the price of gold in Egypt dropped dramatically.

When he returned, he ordered the building of new mosques at the trading cities of **Timbuktu** and **Gao**. Timbuktu became one of the most important cities of the empire. It attracted Muslim judges, doctors, religious leaders, and scholars from far and wide. They attended Timbuktu’s outstanding mosques and universities.

**Travels of Ibn Battuta**

In 1352, one of Mansa Musa’s successors named **Mansa Suleiman** prepared to receive a traveler and historian named **Ibn Battuta**. A native of Tangier in North Africa (now in the modern country of Morocco), Ibn Battuta had traveled for 27 years, visiting most of the countries in the Islamic world. As a young man, he had pledged to visit all the countries of **Dar al-Islam**. Dar al-Islam means “House of Islam” and refers to all countries in which a Muslim government rules and the Holy Law of Islam prevails.

After leaving the royal palace, Ibn Battuta visited Timbuktu and other cities in Mali. He found he could travel without fear of crime. As a devout Muslim, he praised the people for their study of the Qur’an. However, he also criticized them for not strictly practicing Islam’s moral code. Even so, Mali’s justice system greatly impressed him.

**Collapse of Mali**

Ibn Battuta left Mali in 1353. Within 50 years, the once-powerful empire began to weaken. Most of Mansa Musa’s successors lacked his ability to govern well. In addition, the gold trade that had been the basis of Mali’s wealth shifted eastward as new goldfields were developed elsewhere. In 1468, rebels captured Timbuktu. They set up a new kingdom called **Songhai**.