



The Sahel: The Empire of Mali

By Trevor R. Getz

Just south of Africa's vast Sahara Desert, there is a great grassland between and around the bend of the Niger River. Called the Sahel, this region gave birth to many states, including three large kingdoms: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay. In this article, we'll focus on Mali.

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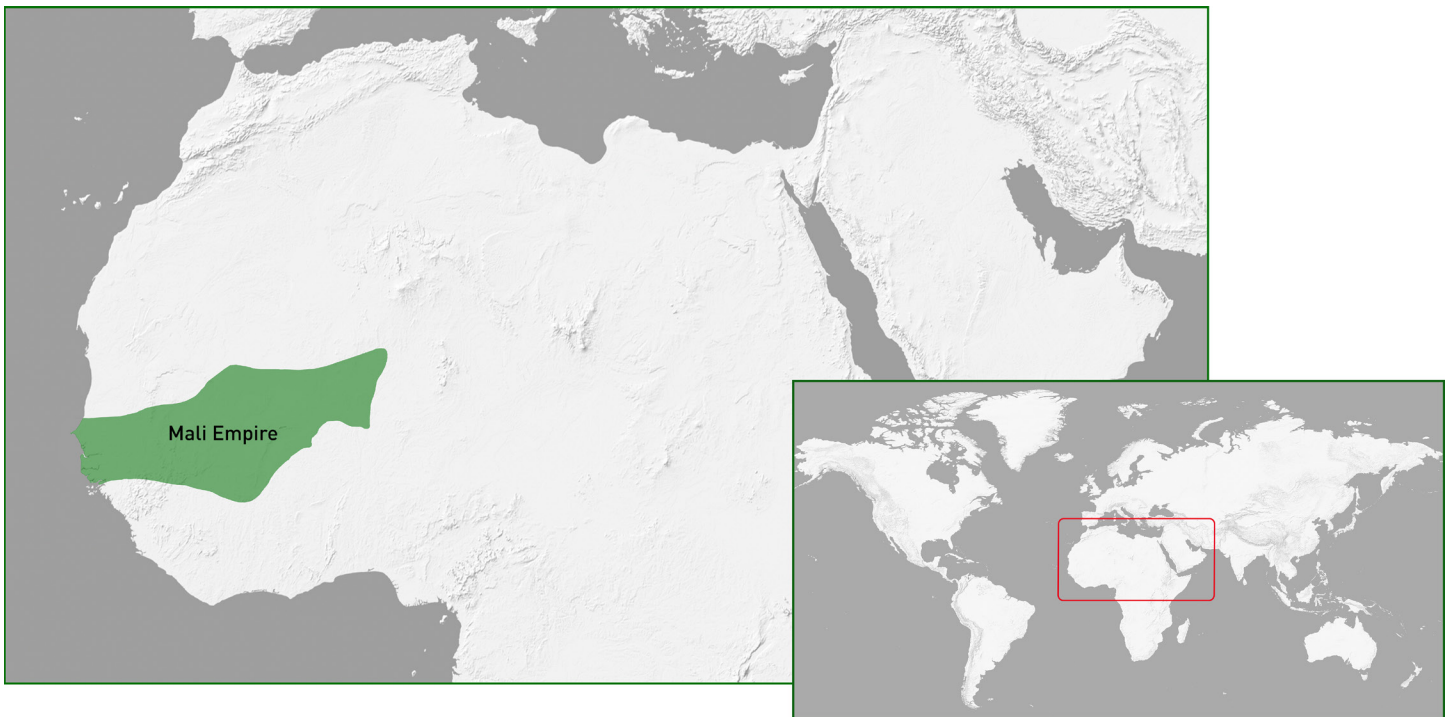
Geography and Environment

The land occupied by Mali was rich. It had many of the things people needed to develop large societies. Pearl millet, wild rice, and sorghum grew along the riversides. They became the region's staple crops. People domesticated cattle and goats, which, along with fish, provided plenty of protein.

Malian society included fishers, herders, and farmers. They all came together to trade in cities that were mainly along the Niger River. These cities were already quite large by the time Mali emerged.

The cities along the Niger River traded with many other parts of West and North Africa. These long-distance trade routes required large **caravans**, or traveling groups, of merchants. Caravans traveling north had to include camels because they were the only animals that could cross the Sahara Desert. Trade connected Mali to the world. It brought new ideas, such as **Islam**, new skills like reading and writing, and new goods.

Still, a lot of the Sahelian region was a wilderness in the twelfth century CE. Hunters were important members of society. They ventured out from farming villages, river communities, and herder camps into the plains and forests. They played a crucial role in the rise of Sunjata Keita, the first emperor of Mali.



The Mali Empire

1235 CE–1670 CE





A natural border

The map to the left is a part of the Catalan Atlas—a map created by a Jewish man living in fourteenth-century Spain. This panel of the map shows the cities of Mali and its greatest emperor, Mansa Musa. Mali's cities are shown south of a line that represents the Sahara Desert. North of that line is the coast of North Africa.

Detail from the Catalan Atlas, 1375.
© Getty Images.

Big Question #1:

How did geography and the environment shape the development of societies in the Sahel?

Political Structure

By the thirteenth century CE, Mali had been a small kingdom for centuries. However, it had long been overshadowed by nearby Ghana. Around 1235 CE, Mali defeated its local enemies and conquered the whole region. The leader responsible for this expansion was named...well, it's a bit complicated: His family name, Keita, came from his father and the royal household he was born into. His first name, Sunjata, combined his mother's name—Sogolon—and his own—Djata. This name let everyone know he was connected to two powerful families: His father's family were rulers, and his mother was known to have great spiritual power. She came from a neighboring land whose **alliance** was needed.



These are some of the many Islamic manuscripts found in Timbuktu, Mali. These manuscripts are written in Arabic, and some were written as early as the thirteenth century. © Getty images.

Sunjata had been forced out of Mali as a youth—resulting from a fight for power in his father’s kingdom. In the story told about his rise to power, a hunter predicted Sunjata’s return. This story probably reflects an important political fact of the time—hunters were an influential political force, a sort of military. According to the story, when he was banished from Mali, Sunjata gathered support by visiting all the neighboring communities. This part of the story gives us important information. It tells us that the empire Sunjata built was made of alliances with communities that neighbored his own.

Together, under Sunjata’s rule, the communities attacked and conquered the big cities along the Niger River, including Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenne. But as Mali’s borders grew, politics began to change. First, the Malian emperor now ruled over many people who spoke different languages. Some were treated as conquered people and forced to work in Malian households. Others were allowed to govern themselves mostly. Second, Mali now ruled over communities full of mosques and Islamic scholars. Some Islamic officials became quite politically powerful within the empire. By the time of Mansa Musa, who became emperor around 1312 CE, power was shared—and sometimes fought over—between the emperor, Islamic rulers, and governors of the many regions. Within cities such as Timbuktu, the imperial governor had limited power. It was the Islamic judge, the *qadi*, who applied the law and made most daily decisions.

■ **Big Question #2:**

What type of rulers did the Mali Empire have? How did they govern?

Culture

By the time of Mansa Musa, the society of Mali was at a new height. It was a largely Islamic society, with important schools and centers of learning in large cities. Islamic schools and scholars connected Mali with the world through a web of interactions. Those interactions included trade. Mali was perfectly positioned to control the flow of trade goods—especially gold—from West Africa to North Africa. Caravans headed north through the big cities of the Niger River carrying a lot of gold. They returned with goods that were needed, especially salt.

Islam was very important in Mali. However, the Islam practiced in the region was mixed with local beliefs. We know this partly because the stories told in this time featured ideas and practices of magic from the region. Muslim forms of worship were also mentioned.



An artist's depiction of Mansa Musa's journey to Egypt. © Getty images.

■ **Big Question #3:**

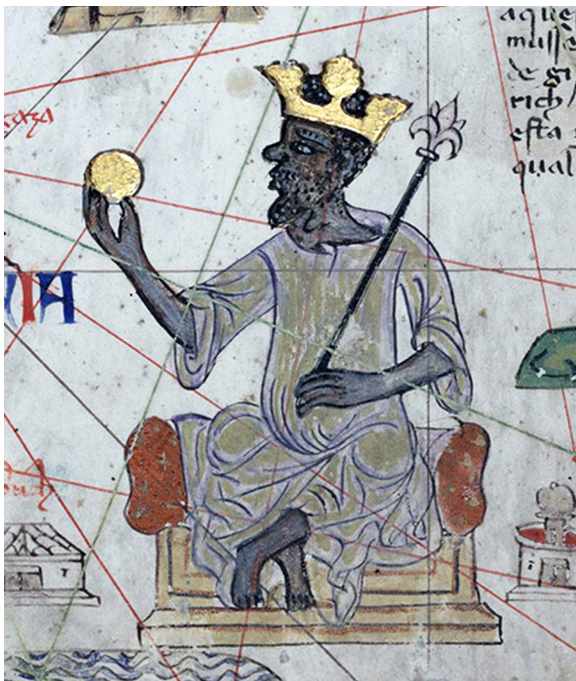
How was Mali's culture shaped by trade and geography?

Society

Even though Mali was mainly Muslim, women did not wear veils or confine themselves to the household. They could be friends with men who weren't members of their families. Women had a lot of freedom for this period and even held some political power. They could also inherit wealth from their parents and husbands.

The enslaved were at the bottom of society. Malian slavery was different from the slavery we know from the recent history of North America and Europe. Enslaved people could possess property and build wealth. Many worked in houses, although some raised crops or did other agricultural work. They had the protection of many laws and often achieved their freedom. Nevertheless, they did not own the results of their labor, nor could they leave or move if they wanted to, and they could not easily be full members of society.

Mansa Musa was at the other end of the **social hierarchy**, or social ranking, from the enslaved people. The emperor was at the very top of society. Islamic priests and judges also held positions of great power. By the early fourteenth century CE, Mansa Musa knew much about the world. He was interested in global politics and interacted with rulers of North Africa and Egypt. He played an important role in promoting long-distance trade. He was a devout Muslim. As a result, in 1324 CE, he made a **pilgrimage** to Mecca, Islam's holiest city. He traveled thousands of miles across North Africa and through Egypt. This was a **diplomatic** and trade venture and a personal religious pilgrimage.



An expensive journey

Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim, and in 1324 CE, he made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Islam's holiest site, with tens of thousands of servants. He spent so much gold buying souvenirs and giving gifts that he caused inflation in Egypt and even changed the price of gold in Europe. You can see a close-up of his portrait in the Catalan Atlas to the left. He is pictured with a golden crown and holding a golden coin.

■ **Big Question #4:**

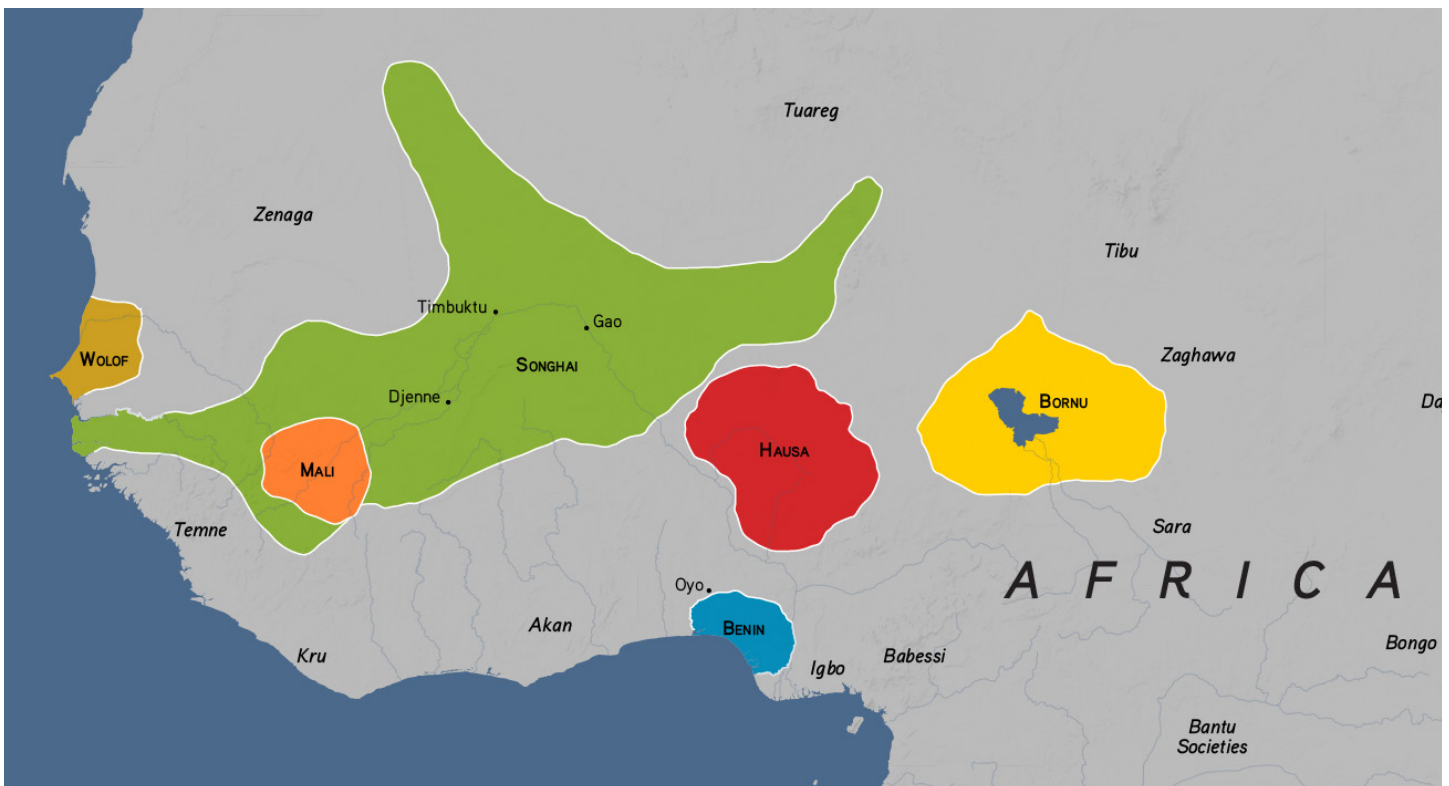
How was Mali's society organized? Who were at the top of the social hierarchy, and who was at the bottom?

Mansa Musa, King of Mali, holding a sceptre and a piece of gold as represented in the Catalan Atlas. © Getty Images.

Decline and Transformation

After the reign of Mansa Musa, Mali slowly declined. The center of trade shifted toward the coast of West Africa. Within the Mali government, different groups and families began to fight about who should become emperor. A series of weak rulers left the state unable to govern its many different inhabitants.

But as Mali declined, one of its conquered regions was on the rise. This was Songhay. The people of Songhay had a unified leadership in the fifteenth century CE. They also had good access to trade routes and the support of some important Islamic scholars. The Songhay rulers claimed to be descended from the emperors of Mali. So, there wasn't a "collapse" in this region but, instead, power shifted to a different part of the Sahel, which remained an important and organized set of societies.



A map showing the borders of the Songhai Empire, which followed the decline of the Mali Empire. By WHP, CC BY 4.0.
[Explore more here.](#)

■ Big Question #5:

What led to the decline and transformation of the Mali Empire? What empire replaced it?

Trevor R. Getz

Trevor Getz is professor of African history at San Francisco State University. He has written 11 books on African and world history, including *Abina and the Important Men*. He is also the author of *A Primer for Teaching African History*, which explores questions about how we should teach the history of Africa in high school and university classes.

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Cover image: The Great Mosque of Djenne. There was a mosque on this site under the rule of the Mali Empire, as well. © Wolfgang Kaehler/LightRocket via Getty Images.

Map showing the Empire of Mali. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

Detail from the Catalan Atlas, 1375. © Art Images / Hulton Fine Art Collection / Getty Images.

These are some of the many Islamic manuscripts found in Timbuktu, Mali. These manuscripts are written in Arabic, and some were written as early as the thirteenth century. © Getty images.

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A map showing the borders of the Songhai Empire, which followed the decline of the Mali Empire. Explore more here. <https://www.oerproject.com/OER-Materials/OER-Media/Images/WHP-Maps/1450-layer-2>



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