The Mali Empire

The Mali Empire began when a small Malinke kingdom within the Ghana Empire grew ever more powerful.

Mali began as a small Malinke kingdom around the upper areas of the Niger River. It became an important empire after 1235 when Sundjata organized Malinke resistance against a branch of the southern Soninke, who made up the center of the older kingdom of Ghana. The empire developed around its capital of Niani, the city of Sundjata's birth in the southern savannah country of the upper Niger valley near the gold fields of Bure. Unlike the people of the older kingdom of Ghana, who had only camels, horses, and donkeys for transport, the people of Mali also used the river Niger. By river, they could transport bulk goods and larger loads much more easily than by land. Living on the fertile lands near the Niger, people suffered less from drought than those living in the drier regions further north. Food crops were grown on the level areas by the river, not only for local people but for those living in cities farther north on the Niger River and in oasis towns along the trade routes across the desert. Thus the Niger River enabled the kingdom of Mali to develop a far more stable economy than Ghana had enjoyed and contributed to the rise of the Mali empire.

Sundjata built up a vast empire that stretched eventually from the Atlantic coast south of the Senegal River to Gao on the east of the middle Niger bend (see the map of Mali). It extended from the fringes of the forest in the southwest through the savannah (grassland) country of the Malinke to the Sahel and southern Saharan "ports" of Walata and Tadmekka. It included the gold fields of Bumbuk and Bure and the great cities of Timbuktu, Djenne, and Gao on the Niger River and extended to the salt mines of Taghaza. Many different peoples were thus brought in to what became a federation of states, dominated by Sundjata and the Malinke people. Under Sundjata's leadership, Mali became a relatively rich farming area.

The Mali empire was based on outlying areas--even small kingdoms--pledging allegiance to Mali and giving annual tribute in the form of rice, millet, lances, and arrows. Slaves were used to clear new farmlands where beans, rice, sorghum, millet, papaya, gourds, cotton, and peanuts were planted. Cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry were bred.

The Mali Empire grew and prospered by monopolizing the gold trade and developing the agricultural resources along the Niger River.

Like Ghana, Mali prospered from the taxes it collected on trade in the empire. All goods passing in, out of, and through the empire were heavily taxed. All gold nuggets belonged to the king, but gold dust could be traded. Gold was even used at times as a form of currency, as also were salt and cotton cloth. Later, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean were introduced and used widely as currency in the internal trade of the western Sudan.

The Mali Empire's most famous king was Mansa Musa.

Mali prospered only as long as there was strong leadership. Sundjata established himself as a great religious and secular leader, claiming the greatest and most direct link with the
spirits of the land and thus the guardian of the ancestors. After Sundjata, most of the rulers of Mali were Muslim, some of whom made the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). The most famous haji (pilgrimage to Mecca) was Mansa Musa, king of Mali and grandson of one of Sundjata’s sisters. In 1324, accompanied by some 60,000 people and carrying large quantities of gold, Mansa Musa traveled from Niani along the Niger to Timbuktu and then across the Sahara via the salt mines of Taghaza from oasis to oasis, to reach Cairo. From there he went on to Mecca and Medina.

Mansa Musa was an exceptionally wise and efficient ruler. He divided the empire into provinces, each with its own governor, and towns that were administered by a mochrif or mayor. A huge army kept the peace, putting down rebellions in the smaller kingdoms bordering the central part of the empire, and policing the many trade routes. Timbuktu became a center of learning, luxury, and trade, where river people met with the desert nomads, and where scholars and merchants from other parts of Africa, the Middle East, and even Europe came to its universities and bustling markets.

The Mali Empire collapsed when several states, including Songhai, proclaimed and defended their independence.

The empire of Mali reached in zenith in the fourteenth century but its power and fame depended greatly on the personal power of the ruler. After the death of Mansa Musa and his brother Mansa Sulayman, Timbuktu was raided and burned. Several states revolted and seized their independence, including the Tuareg, Tukulor, and Wolof. The Mossi attacked trading caravans and military garrisons in the south. In the east, the Songhai gathered strength. Mali lasted another 200 years, but its glory days were over. By 1500, it had been reduced to little more than its Malinke heartland. By the seventeenth century, Mali had broken up into a number of small independent chiefdoms.

ANOTHER SOURCE….

The Mali Empire was the second of three West African empires to emerge in the vast savanna grasslands located between the Sahara Desert to the north and the coastal rain forest in the south. Beginning as a series of small successor trading states, Ancient Ghana, the empire grew to encompass the territory between the Atlantic Ocean and Lake Chad, a distance of nearly 1,800 miles. At its height in 1300, Mali was one of the largest empires in the world.

The Mali Empire was strategically located between the West African gold mines and the agriculturally rich Niger River floodplain. Mali’s rise begins when the political leaders of Ghana could not reestablish that empire’s former glory following its conquest and occupation by the Almoravids in 1076. Consequently a number of small states vied to control the salt and gold trade that accounted for Ghana’s wealth and power.

In 1235 Sundiata Keita, the leader of one of these states, Kangaba, defeated its principal rival, the neighboring kingdom of Susu, and began consolidating power in the region. Sundiata’s conquest in 1235 is considered the founding of the Malian Empire. Under
Sundiata’s successors Mali extended its control west to the Atlantic, south into the rain forest region, including the Wangara gold fields, and east beyond the great bend of the Niger River.

At its height in 1350 Mali was a confederation of 3 states, Mali, Memo and Wagadou and twelve garrisoned provinces. The emperor or mansa ruled over 400 cities, towns and villages of various ethnicities and controlled a population of approximately 20 million people from the capital at Niani. The Malian Army numbered 100,000 men including 10,000 cavalry. During this time only the Mongol Empire exceed Mali in size. The mansa reserved the exclusive right to dispense justice and to tax both local and international trade. That trade was centered in three major cities, Timbuktu, Djenne and Gao.

Between 1324 and 1325 Mansa Musa, the most famous of the Malian Emperors, made an elaborate pilgrimage to Mecca, bringing thousands of followers and hundreds of camels carrying gold. Through the highly publicized pilgrimage and indirectly through an elaborate trade that sent gold to the capitals of Europe and Asia, Mali and its ruler became famous throughout the known world.

Mali’s power however was eventually weakened by palace intrigue that prevented an orderly succession of imperial power and by the desire of smaller states to break free of its rule to reap the benefits of the salt and gold trade. The first people to achieve independence from Mali were the Wolof who resided in what is now Senegal. They established the Jolof Empire around 1350. In 1430 the nomadic Tuareg seized Timbuktu; This conquest had enormous commercial and psychological consequents: a relatively small but united group had occupied the richest city in the Empire and one of the major sources of imperial wealth.

The greatest challenge, however, came from a rebellion in Gao that led to rise of Songhai. The once vassal state to Mali conquered Mema, one of the Empire’s oldest possessions in 1465. Three years later they took Timbuktu from the Tuareg.

Beginning in 1502, Songhai forces under Askia Muhammad took control of virtually all of Mali’s eastern possession including the sites for commercial exchange as well as the gold and copper mines at the southern and northern borders. Even the desperate effort by Mansa Mahmud III to craft an alliance with the Portuguese failed to stop Songhai’s advances. In 1545 a Songhai army routed the Malians and their emperor from their capital, Niani. Although Songhai never conquered what remained of the Empire of Mali, its victories effectively ended Malian power in the savanna.