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The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Mali

Students' worksheets



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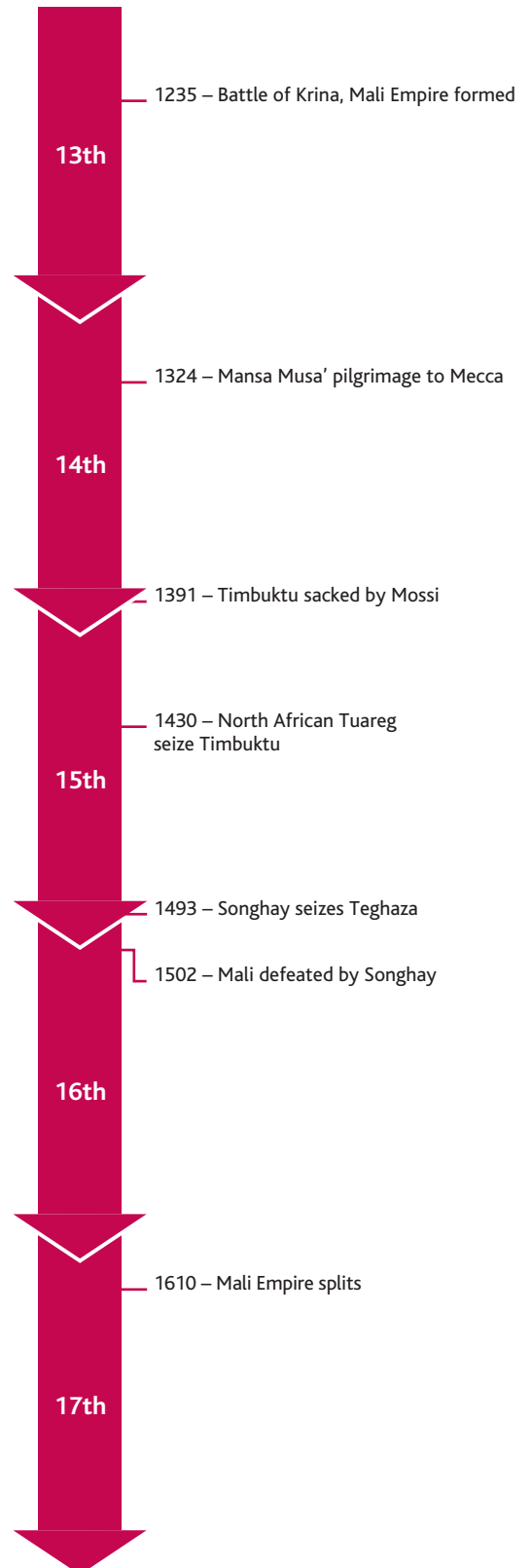
The CarAf Centre

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THE KINGDOM OF MALI



Century AD



SHEET 1: HOW IMPORTANT WAS TRADE TO MALI?

The geographic location of Mali was an important clue as to its wealth and power. It occupied a strategic position on the trade routes which linked the countries north of the Sahara with those to the south.

Source 1

The Black men come up from their country and take away the salt from [Taghaza]. In the town of Malli [Mali] it sells for twenty to thirty mithqals, and sometimes as much as forty. The negroes use salt as a medium of exchange, just as gold and silver is used [elsewhere]; they cut it up into pieces and buy and sell with it.

Ibn Battuta describing the salt trade (1352), in Hamdun & King 1998: 30

Source 2

Most historians of Africa agree that an economy of buying and selling was the driving force in the development of Sahel states from as early as 500 AD onward. Trade led to the rise of the cities of the Sahel. It gave traders a crucial role to play in the exercise of influence and power in these states.

Rotondo-McCord 1998

Source 4

Between the 11th and the 17th centuries West Africa was the leading supplier of gold to the international economy. African gold contributed to the functioning of the domestic economy in Europe... And it contributed to the wealth of the great states of the Western Sudan.

Hopkins 1973: 82

Source 6

A traveller in this country carries nothing but pieces of salt and glass ornaments, which the people call beads, and some sweet-smelling goods. When he comes to a village the womenfolk of the blacks bring out millet, milk, chickens, pulped lotus fruit, rice, and pounded haricot beans. The traveller buys what he wants of these.

Ibn Battuta on trade within Mali (1352), in Hamdun & King 1998: 40–41

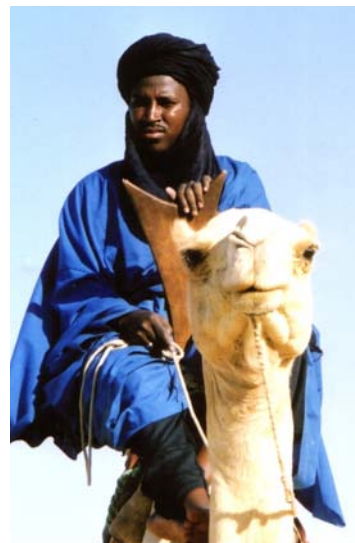
Source 7

Copper mined in Mali came to be a crucial element in trade patterns. It could be exchanged with the peoples to the south who controlled the sources of gold. Kola nuts, animal skins, slaves, grain, meat, and even dairy products were also transported by trading networks.

Rotondo-McCord 1998



Source 3: West African gold, made into coins and jewellery in Morocco, shipwrecked off the coast of England British Museum



Source 5: Tuareg man on camel © Patrick Smith

Questions

1. In what goods did the kingdom of Mali trade?
2. Which were the most valuable goods?
3. How did the kingdom's geographical position help?
4. How important was trade to the kingdom of Mali?

SHEET 2: HOW POWERFUL WERE THE KINGS OF MALI?

Little is known about most of the kings of Mali, but thanks to Arab historians we have a few details about the ones described here. As you read the extracts, try to decide whether each one might have been a strong or weak ruler. First you will have to decide what makes a strong ruler.

Source 1

He [Sunjata] was a lad full of strength; his arms had the strength of ten men and his biceps inspired fear in his companions. He had already that authoritative way of speaking which belongs to those who are destined to command.

Niane, 1994

Source 2

This king is the greatest of the Muslim kings of the Sahel. He rules the most extensive territory, has the most numerous army, is the bravest, the richest, the most fortunate, the most victorious over his enemies, and the best able to distribute benefits.

Mansa Suleiman described by al-Umari (c. 1350) in Levtzion & Hopkins 1981: 261

Source 3

This man flooded Cairo with his gifts. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. The people of Cairo made incalculable profits out of him and his men in buying and selling and giving and taking. They exchanged gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall.

Mansa Musa described by al-Umari (c. 1350) in Levtzion & Hopkins 1981: 270–271

Source 4

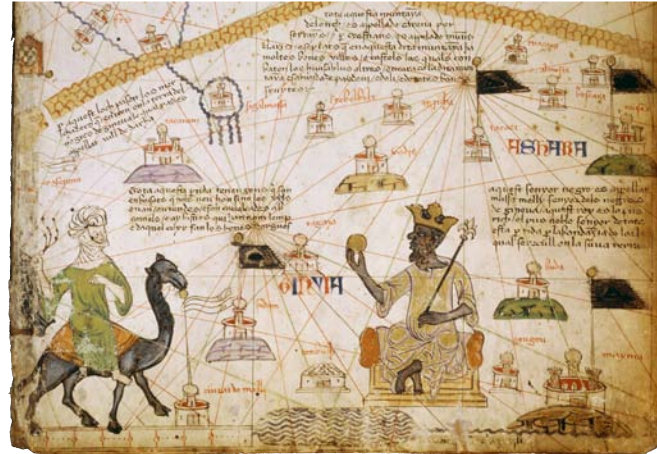
[Mansa] Khalifa was weak-minded and used to shoot arrows at his people and kill them for sport. So they rose against him and killed him.

Mansa Khalifa described by Ibn Khaldun (c. 1380) in Levtzion 1973: 64

Source 5

Thanks to [Sakura's] powerful government the territory of the people of Mali was expanded and they overpowered the neighbouring nations... Their authority became mighty. All the nations of the Sahel stood in awe of them, and the merchants from North Africa travelled to their country.

Mansa Sakura, a freed slave who took over the throne in a rebellion around 1300, described in Levtzion 1963: 345



Source 6: Mansa Musa holding a gold ingot from the Catalan Atlas, 1375

© Bibliothèque National de France

Translation of the text: This Black lord is called Musa Mali, Lord of the Black people of Guinea. So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land.

Task

Make a table, with columns for good and bad points of each of these kings, and fill in some details from the sources. Decide, and explain, who the most effective king was.

Questions

1. What impression of Mansa Musa is given in the atlas (source 6)?
2. What does the atlas reveal about the importance of Mali to Europeans?

SHEET 3: HOW RELIGIOUS WERE PEOPLE IN THE KINGDOM OF MALI?

Mansa Musa was famed for his devotion to Islam, and some later rulers were also very devout. Muslims had a high status in Mali but outside the court many still practised their old religion.

Source 1

On Fridays, if a man does not go early to the mosque, he cannot find a corner to pray in, on account of the crowd. It is a custom of theirs for each man to send his boy [to the mosque] with his prayer-mat; the boy spreads it out for his master in a place befitting him [and remains on it] until he comes to the mosque.

Ibn Battuta (1352), in Hamdun & King 1998: 58

Source 3

The king is a declared enemy of the Jews. He will not allow any to live in the city. If he hears it said that a Berber merchant does business with them, he confiscates his goods.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

Source 4

One day I came upon the judge after he had given permission for me to enter. I found him with a woman –young in age and very beautiful. When I saw her I was taken aback and wanted to retrace my steps. She laughed at me and was not overcome by modesty. The judge said to me, 'Why are you retreating? She is only my companion.' I was astonished at their conduct for he had performed the pilgrimage.

Ibn Battuta (1352), in Hamdun & King 1998: 38

Source 6

The [Malian] court observed Islam, and literate Muslims were secretaries and accountants. Beyond the capital, however, local priests continued to give offerings to the ancestors and look after their gods.

Collins 2007: 84

Source 7

Another of their good qualities is their habit of wearing clean white garments on Fridays. Even if a man has nothing but an old worn shirt, he washes it and cleans it, and wears it to the Friday service. Yet another is their zeal for learning the Qur'an by heart. They put their children in chains if they show any backwardness in memorizing it, and they are not set free until they have learnt it by heart.

Ibn Battuta (1352), in Hamdun & King 1998: 58–59



Source 2: Great Mosque at Djenné
© Jurgen Stroo



Source 5: Mosque of Djingereyber, Timbuktu
© Heinz Ruther, University of Cape Town, African Cultural Heritage Site and Landscapes Project

Task

Decide which sources show that religion was taken seriously, and which don't. Write a short speech either praising or criticising the people for their religious behaviour.

SHEET 4: WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN TIMBUKTU?

Timbuktu was one of the major trading centres of West Africa at the time of Mali. It was famous also for its learning and its wealth. These sources give a flavour of what life was like in Timbuktu.

Source 1

There are many wells containing sweet water in Timbuktu; and in addition, when the Niger is in flood canals deliver the water to the city. Grain and animals are abundant, so that much milk and butter is consumed. But salt is in very short supply because it is carried here from Taghaza, some 500 miles from Timbuktu.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

Source 3

The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered sticks with thatched roofs. In the centre of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, and in addition there is a large palace, where the king lives. The shops of the craftsmen, the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported from Europe to Timbuktu, carried by Berber [North African] merchants.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

Source 4

The people of Timbuktu have a peaceful nature. They have a custom of almost continuously walking about the city in the evening (except for those that sell gold), between 10pm and 1am, playing musical instruments and dancing. The citizens have at their service many slaves, both men and women.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

Source 6

The city is very much at risk from fire. At the time when I was there on my second voyage, half the city burned in the space of five hours. But the wind was violent and the inhabitants of the other half of the city began to move their belongings for fear that the other half would burn.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

Source 7

Well placed for the caravan trade, Timbuktu was badly situated to defend itself from the Tuareg raiders of the Sahara. These Tuareg were repeatedly hammering at the gates of Timbuktu, and often enough they burst them open, with sad results for the inhabitants.

Davidson 1998: 56



Source 2: Great Mosque, Timbuktu
© Emilio Labrador



Source 5: Sankore Mosque, Timbuktu
© Jeremy Meyer

Task

Use these headings to write a short description of Timbuktu: buildings, safety, trade, customs, food.

SHEET 5: HOW IMPORTANT WAS LEARNING IN THE KINGDOM OF MALI?

Timbuktu was renowned throughout the Muslim world as a centre of learning. There was an intellectual Muslim elite in the city, and many people had private libraries and were prepared to pay highly for the books the Tuareg traders brought from the north.

Source 1

During the 16th century, Timbuktu housed as many as 150 to 180 Qur’anic schools, where basic reading and recitation of the Qur’an were taught. The schools had an estimated peak of 4,000 to 5,000 students.

Singleton 2004: 3

Source 3

As a centre of intellectual achievement, Timbuktu earned a place next to Cairo and other leading North African cities.

Dubois 1897: 285

Source 4

At that time Timbuktu came to the level of some of the great Muslim cities in the intensity of its intellectual life. In one [Qur’anic school] 123 writing boards were counted.

Levtzion 1977: 417

Source 6

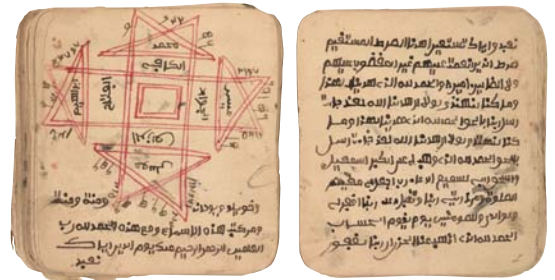
There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers and priests, all appointed by the king. He greatly respects learning. Many hand-written books imported from North Africa are also sold. There is more profit made from them than from all other goods.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

Source 7

Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white men, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu.

Sudanese proverb, quoted in Singleton 2004: 1



Source 2: Arabic manuscript (20th century)
British Museum



Source 5: Wooden writing board (20th century)
British Museum

Questions

1. Sources 2 and 5 are from the 20th century. Does this mean they are of no use for finding out about learning in Timbuktu in medieval times?
2. What impression of learning in Timbuktu do you get from this page?

SHEET 6: WHY DID THE KINGDOM OF MALI DECLINE?

Empires do not last forever, and Mali was unable to keep its extensive territory intact for long. A combination of internal weakness, external aggression from North Africans and Songhai, and the sheer difficulty of keeping rebellious tribes such as the Mossi in line proved too much.

Source 1

The people of Mali were very powerful and their strength passed all limits... Their oppression, arrogance and excess at the end of the dynasty caused Allah to destroy them by his punishment... They became weaker from that moment.

Tarikhal-Sudan (1655) in Levtzion 1973: 83

Source 2

Raids sapped the strength of the empire on its frontiers, but the decline and fall of Mali was more from internal decay than external enemies. The court was frequently torn by fighting among rivals seeking to influence the Mansa [king] while manoeuvring to succeed him.

Collins 2007: 85

Source 4

The truth was that Mali had outgrown its political and military strength. Only supremely skilful leadership at the centre could hold this wide empire together. Mansa Musa had that skill; his successors, generally, did not.

Davidson 1998: 44

Source 5

The Songhai were descended from the Sorko fishermen of the Middle Niger whose canoes gave them mastery of the river and control of its trade. As the camel was the mobile military vehicle of the desert, so the war canoe became the swift means to dominate the farmers and trading villages.

Collins 2007: 87

Source 6

For nearly three decades, Sunni Ali [king of Songhai] waged continuous war upon the peoples of the Middle Niger until he brought the area under his control.

Gomez 1990: 7



Source 3: Mossi cavalry
They were a problem for Mali
Binger 1892: 445

Questions

1. What reasons are given in source 1 for why the kingdom of Mali declined?
2. Do any of the other sources agree with these reasons?
3. What other causes can you find in the other sources?
4. Which cause(s) do you think was the most important in explaining why Mali declined?

SHEET 7: COMPARING SOURCES

Source 1

He is a miserly king, not a man from whom one might hope for a rich present. I went forward and saluted Mansa Suleiman. After I left the [sultan's] hospitality gift was sent to me. I stood up thinking that it might be robes of honour and money, and lo!, it was three cakes of bread, and a piece of beef fried in native oil, and a calabash of sour curds. When I saw this I burst out laughing, and thought it a most amazing thing that they could be so foolish and make so much of such a feeble gift.

Ibn Battuta describes Mansa Suleiman in 1352, in Hamdun & King 1998: 44–45

Source 2

This king is the greatest of the Muslim kings of the Sahel. He rules the most extensive territory, has the most numerous army, is the bravest, the richest, the most fortunate, the most victorious over his enemies, and the best able to distribute benefits.

Al-Umari describes Mansa Suleiman in c. 1350, in Levtzion & Hopkins 1981: 261

Questions

1. What impression of Mansa Suleiman is given in source 1?
2. How is the impression given in source 2 different?
3. Why might these two sources give different impressions?

SHEET 8: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY – THE SAHARAN SALT TRADE

Source 1

'It's getting more difficult because the rains aren't coming, the oases are drying up and the camels get tired and thirsty and can't continue,' he said. Camel caravans have been plying their trade between Taoudenni and Timbuktu for centuries. Mr Bekay used to do the same journey in a caravan of more than 200 camels. It took 45 days to make the round-trip; by truck he can do it in 10 days -provided his gearbox does not fail again.

Harding 2010

Source 2

After twenty-five days [from Sijilmasa] we reached Taghaza, an unattractive village, with the curious feature that its houses and mosques are built of blocks of salt, roofed with camel skins. There are no trees there, nothing but sand. In the sand is a salt mine; they dig for the salt, and find it in thick slabs, lying one on top of the other, as though they had been tool-squared and laid under the surface of the earth. A camel will carry two of these slabs.

Ibn Battuta (1352). in Hamdun & King 1998: 30

Source 3

The miners spend the milder six months of the year scratching the surface of an ancient sea-bed with homemade axes. They live in salt huts, drink salt water, and die young.

Harding 2009

Source 4

For Tuareg, the salt caravan is not something just for money, it is tradition.

'If in your life you do not do it once or twice you are not considered Tuareg. So for me [the trucks mean] the end of Tuareg culture. I am not saying the camels will disappear, but I'm very worried that in three to five years all the salt caravans will be by truck.'

Harding 2010

Questions

1. What things have changed between 1352 and 2009?
2. What things have stayed the same?
3. Why are things changing now?
4. Why do you think they haven't changed before?

**SHEET 9: TUAREG TRADERS AT THE MARKET
IN TIMBUKTU**



Source 8: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla

Questions

1. Describe what is happening in the picture
2. What items can you see for sale?
3. Why were markets like these so important for Mali?

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The CarAf Centre

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