

By the time Mansa Musa's camels approached Mecca, their burden had become considerably lighter than it had been when they departed for the East. It was said that he gave away such large amounts of gold that he caused its devaluation in Egypt. He returned by way of Ghadames, in Tripoli, where he received many honors and from which point he was accompanied to his kingdom by El-Momar, a descendant of the founder of the dynasty of the Almohads. Another famous visitor to return with Mansa Musa was Abu-Ishak Ibrahim-es-Saheli, a distinguished poet and architect from a Granada family, whom Mansa Musa engaged to supervise the building of elaborate mosques at Timbuktu, Jenne, Gao, and elsewhere.

Mansa Musa's fame spread from North Africa to Europe. At the time of his death in 1337, Mali could boast of a powerful and well-organized political state. Traveling in the area a few years later, Ibn Battuta reported being greatly impressed by "the discipline of its officials and provincial governors, the excellent condition of public finance, and the luxury and the rigorous and complicated ceremonial of the royal receptions, and the respect accorded to the decisions of justice and to the authority of the sovereign."

In the middle of the fourteenth century, Europe was just beginning to feel the effects of its commercial revolution, and European states had not yet achieved anything resembling national unity, but Mali under Mansa Musa and his successor Suleiman enjoyed a flourishing economy with good international trade relations and a government that extended several hundred miles from the Atlantic to Lake Chad. With Suleiman's death, however, a civil war followed, and by the beginning of the fifteenth century, Mali began to lose most of its important provinces and showed signs of disintegration in the face of attacks from the Songhay and the Mossi states. Bereft of its former glory, Mali continued to exist for many years as a small, semi-independent state.

Imperial Songhay The kingdom of Songhay emerged triumphant after the decline of Mali in the fifteenth century. Its roots go back to the Sorko people (a proto-Songhay group) living in the late seventh-century Gao region. When Sunni Ali began his rule of the Songhay, he found much of West Africa ripe for conquest. Mali was declining, and the lesser states, though ambitious, could boast neither the leadership nor the resources necessary to achieve dominance. The hour of the Songhay had arrived. Sunni Ali had used the riverine system to his advantage, deploying his military forces on the Niger itself. They navigated the great river's waters in the conquest of the lands on both sides. Also with a cavalry comprised of slaves and free persons, horses and camels, Sunni Ali conquered an expansive territory. Waging successful campaigns for political control and for taxation of eminent cultural and commercial cities, Sunni Ali captured Timbuktu in 1469, Jenna in 1473, and afterward moved to other towns. Under his leadership, Songhay claimed mastery over the entire middle Niger valley.