

## Module 9: Empires of Africa and the Americas

### Topic 1 Content: Civilizations of West Africa

#### Introduction



Civilizations of West Africa.

Take a moment to examine this satellite image of West Africa. Then, click NEXT to learn about the civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai.

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#### Geography of Ghana



The kingdom of Ghana emerged in West Africa as early as 500 A.D. (C.E.) in the Niger River valley, a grassland area between the Sahara Desert and the West African coast. Although located in a different area, the modern country of Ghana takes its name from this kingdom. Most of Ghana's people were farmers who lived in villages ruled by a local leader. Archaeology has revealed that Ghana was much more heavily populated than originally believed. For example historians thought Ghana had two capital cities between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, but the kingdom was actually a megapolis called Koumbi Saleh. The kings who ruled Ghana were powerful and played active roles in running the kingdom and its trade economy. Furthermore, kings became wealthy from the taxes collected on trade.

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#### Trade and the People of Ghana



Ghana was located near one of the richest gold-producing areas of Africa, making it an important trade center with North Africa and Arabia. The product most coveted by the Ghanaians was salt, which they used to flavor and preserve food. In addition, salt was used to replace what their bodies lost in the hot climate. Other products desired by the Ghanaians included metal goods, textiles, and horses. In exchange, Ghana offered other civilizations gold, ivory, hides, and ostrich feathers, as well as iron, an abundant metal blacksmiths made into tools and weapons. Much of this trade was conducted through nomadic peoples called Berbers, who traveled across the vast deserts via caravans.

The trading merchants of Ghana often became wealthy. Most of them were Muslim, likely due to their contact with the trading caravans. Although most of Ghana's people practiced a form of animism, a religious system that attributes a soul to plants and inanimate objects, Muslims gradually rose in prominence within Ghanaian society, and made up a significant portion of the population. Eventually, Muslims were given various government positions, such as treasurer.

Although the kingdom of Ghana flourished for several hundred years, it was eventually weakened by war, and collapsed around 1100 A.D. (C.E.).

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#### Mali

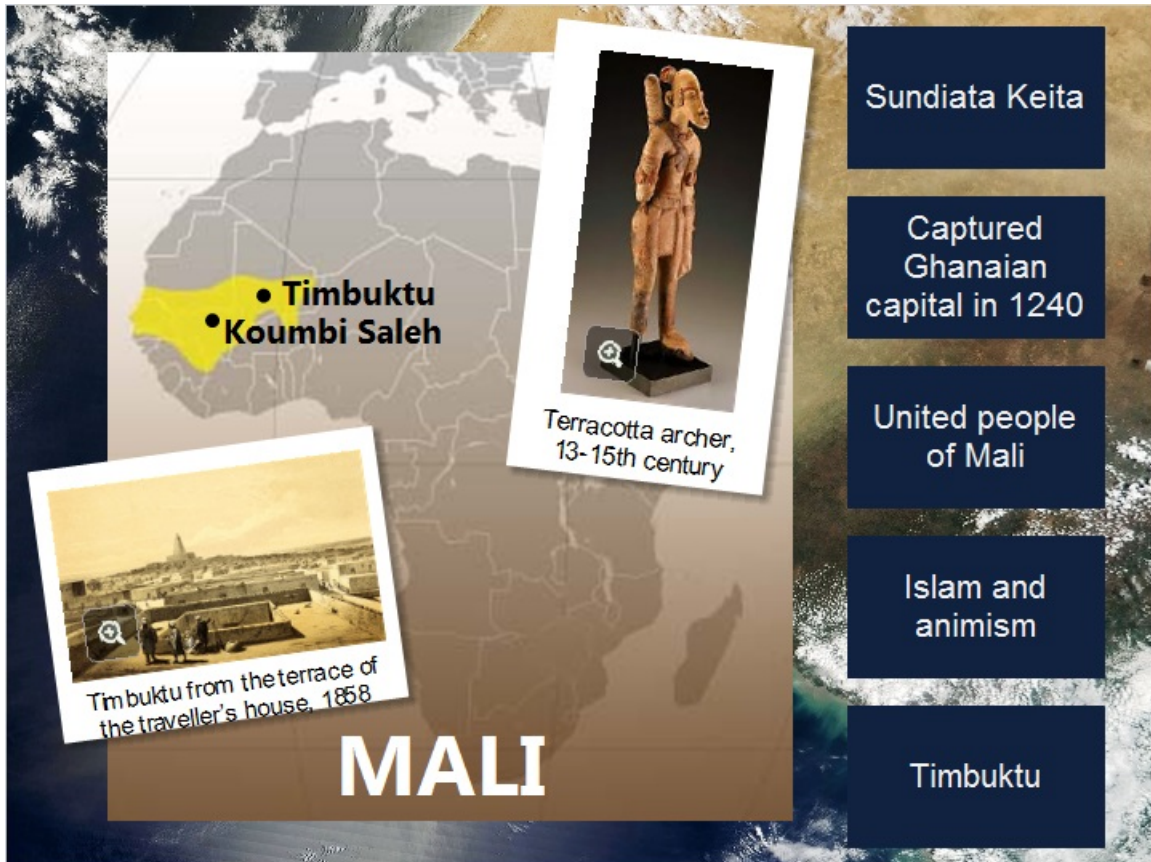


Mali was the next prominent kingdom to arise in western Africa. This kingdom shared many similarities to its predecessor, Ghana. The Niger River provided fertile soils needed for agriculture, and many of its people were farmers who lived in villages governed by local leaders. Like Ghana, Mali's economy and power were based on trading gold and salt. At its height, the boundaries of Mali extended from the western African coast to modern-day Niger. It encompassed the modern countries of Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and northern Ghana.

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#### Sundiata Keita



Mali was founded in the middle of the thirteenth century by Sundiata Keita, the son of a family that had ruled for two centuries. In spite of being born with a disability, Sundiata grew up to become a fierce warrior. He captured the Ghanaian capital in 1240, and united the people of Mali under a strong government.

At this time, most of the people in western Africa were animists. However, Islam was quickly gaining adherents in the region as more and more caravans passed through. Although he later converted to Islam, Sundiata did not completely abandon his traditional African religion. This level of tolerance allowed Sundiata to maintain support from his subjects. Sundiata founded the famous city of Timbuktu, a predominantly Muslim center of trade and learning that attracted both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars from as far away as Europe.

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#### Mansa Musa



In the early fourteenth century, Mali's last powerful ruler, Mansa Musa, came to the throne. Mansa Musa doubled the size of the empire, created a strong central government, and divided the territory into provinces ruled by his own appointed governors. A devout Muslim, Mansa Musa made a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, accompanied by more than sixty thousand servants and soldiers, and hundreds of camels loaded with gold and other supplies. Mansa Musa made a great impression on the many people who witnessed his journey as he traveled east through the Sahara, and passed through cities like Cairo and Medina. He generously lavished gold on those who hosted him, and even gave gold to the poor. In fact, Mansa Musa added so much gold to the market that the value plummeted, and did not recover for a decade.

Like Sundiata, Mansa Musa did a lot to encourage his people to embrace Islam and study the Quran. He brought scholars and texts from abroad to teach his people about the religion, and architects from Cairo and Arabia returned with him to Mali to build mosques. Unfortunately, Mansa Musa was the last powerful ruler of Mali. By 1359, Mali was divided by civil war. Its era of greatness ended, and the empire collapsed entirely in the seventeenth century.

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#### Songhai



The Kingdom of Songhai was another powerful trade kingdom that arose in West Africa along the Niger River. Its capital and trade center was the city of Gao. Songhai's control of the gold and salt trade expanded under the rule of Sunni Ali, who led an army that captured important cities of Mali, like Timbuktu. Similar to many other western African leaders of the time, Sunni Ali professed Islam while also practicing traditional animistic beliefs. Sunni Ali had a reputation of ruling fairly over both Muslims and non-Muslims. The circumstances of his death are questionable: some accounts say he drowned in the Niger River, whereas others suspect he was killed by his nephew Muhammad Ture.

Regardless of how Sunni Ali died, his son inherited his rule, but was overthrown in 1493 by Muhammad Ture, who further expanded the empire until it stretched a thousand miles along the Niger River. Muhammad Ture was a devout Muslim who unified the empire under Islam. He was also a skilled administrator, and established a central government. Under his rule, Songhai enjoyed a period of peace and security, protected by a navy and horseback soldiers. Songhai profited like never before from the gold and salt trade.

After Muhammad Ture died, the empire experienced a gradual decline, and suffered from drought and disease. The army of Morocco's sultan occupied much of Songhai near the sixteenth century, which quickened the collapse of the kingdom.

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#### Decline of Western African Civilizations



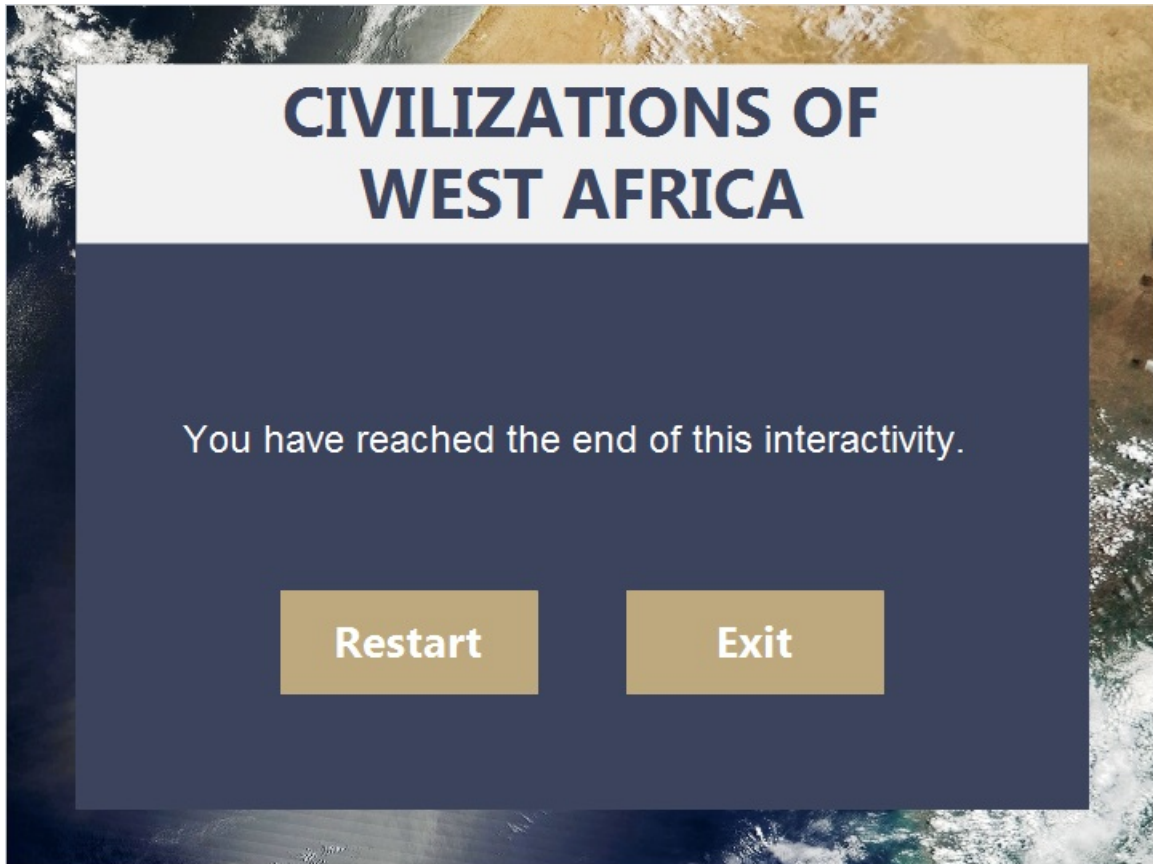
While war, disease, and natural disasters were the main causes of the decline of the western African kingdoms, the medieval period was not a “dark age” for those who lived in this area. The people had fruitful and healthy lives compared to their European contemporaries.



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#### Conclusion



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