**Empire of Ancient Mali**

**Where was the Empire of Mali located?**   
The Empire of Mali was located in Western Africa. It grew up along the Niger River and eventually spread across 1,200 miles from the city of Gao to the Atlantic Ocean. It's northern border was just south of the Sahara Desert. It covered regions of the modern day African countries of [Mali](http://www.ducksters.com/geography/country.php?country=Mali), Niger, Senegal, Mauritania, Guinea, and The Gambia. 

**When did the Empire of Mali rule?**   
The Empire of Mali was established around 1235 CE. It began to lose power in the 1400s and fully collapsed in 1600 CE. 

**How did the Empire first begin?**   
The Empire of Mali was formed when a ruler named [Sundiata Keita](http://www.ducksters.com/history/africa/sundiata_keita.php) united the tribes of the Malinke peoples. He then led them to overthrow the rule of the Soso. Over time, the Mali Empire became stronger and took over surrounding kingdoms including the Empire of Ghana. 

**Government**   
The government of the Mali Empire was led by the emperor who was called the Mansa. The empire was then divided up into provinces that were each led by a governor called a ferba. The religion of Islam played an important part in the government and many of the government administrators were Muslim scribes. 

**The Mali Culture**   
Although there were many small tribes and cultural groups within the Mali Empire, most of these groups were considered part of the Mande peoples. The Mande peoples spoke similar languages and had similar cultures. People were divided into castes. One of the most respected castes were the farmers. Farmers were highly regarded because they provided food. Just below the farmers were the artisans. Other groups included fishermen, scribes, civil servants, soldiers, and slaves.

The religion of Islam was an important part of the Mali Empire. However, even though the kings, or Mansas, had converted to Islam, they did not force their subjects to convert. Many people practiced a version of Islam that combined Islamic beliefs with the local traditions.

**Mansa Musa**   
Perhaps the most famous of the Mali Emperors was Mansa Musa. Mansa Musa became famous because of his lavish trip to Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Mecca is the holy city of the Muslims and Mansa Musa decided to make a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324.

It is said that Mansa Musa was extremely rich and that he brought as many as 60,000 people along with him on his pilgrimage. He also brought camels loaded with [gold](http://www.ducksters.com/science/chemistry/gold.php). Mansa Musa must have made quite the impression during his trip with his large entourage and massive display of wealth. During his travels, Mansa Musa gave away and spent a significant amount of gold, but he also brought back a lot of new ideas to Mali. This included a number of scholars such as architects, poets, and teachers who helped to improve his empire. 

**Fall of the Empire of Mali**   
Not long after the rule of Mansa Musa ended, the Mali Empire began to grow weak. In the 1400s, the empire began to lose control along the edges of its borders. Then, in the 1500s, the Songhay Empire rose to power. The Mali Empire came to an end in 1610 with the death of the last Mansa, Mahmud IV.   
  
**Interesting Facts about the Empire of Ancient Mali**

* Some historians estimate that Mansa Musa may have been the wealthiest person in history.
* The great wealth of Mali came from gold and salt mines.
* The capital city of the empire was Niani. Other important cities included Timbuktu, Gao, Djenne, and Walata.
* The Mali Empire controlled important trade routes across the Sahara Desert to Europe and the Middle East.
* The city of Timbuktu was considered a center of education and learning and included the famous Sankore University.