

West African Rulers Fact Sheet

Ghana:

The kings of Ghana were active rulers that oversaw day-to-day activities in their lands. They were responsible for negotiating trade agreements and maintaining good relationships with Islamic traders from North Africa and the Middle East. They controlled the flow of goods both in and out of the lands of Ghana. Most importantly was the management of exporting gold and importing salt from the northern Sahara region. The kings of Ghana were both feared and respected by their subjects. They also served as a diplomat, religious leader, and the representative on Earth of the founding ancestors of their people. Ghana's ruler was referred to as a "king of kings" because he oversaw and commanded the lesser kings in his territory and had absolute authority. They relied on a large group of counselors to help make decisions. These might include settling disputes between farmers or making trade agreements that benefitted the entire kingdom. The kings of Ghana were also responsible for the protection of the kingdom as the commander-in-chief of the military.

Mali:

Two of Mali's most recognized kings are Sundiata Keita and Mansa Musa. Sundiata is remembered as the founder of the Kingdom of Mali after he united the various tribes and clans that populated his lands. He ruled from AD 1235-AD 1255. He was a warrior-king that stabilized the region, sometimes through force, and he reestablished trade routes with the Islamic world after the fall of Ghana. He was a beloved, charismatic king that was adored by his subjects. He was praised for his fairness when dealing with members of various classes and showed no favoritism. He established a system of cultural exchange between villages and clans in Mali based on the belief that children that grow up together are less likely to attack one another as adult leaders.

Mali's other famous king was Mansa Musa, who ruled from AD 1312-AD 1337. Mali reached its golden-age under his rule. He converted to Islam and famously made the Hajj to Mecca in AD 1324, establishing himself as supporter of Islam and also building relationships with the Islamic world. Under his rule, the territory controlled by Mali more than doubled and he was referred to as the Khan of Africa, because of the vastness of his kingdom. Trade exploded under his rule and he appointed trade inspectors in every major city and tax collectors in every marketplace. New goods, visitors, and information flooded the markets of Mali. He oversaw the construction of mosques throughout his kingdom.

Songhai:

The most well-known king of Songhai was Sunni Ali, who came to power in AD 1464. While he was respected by his own people and referred to as Ali the Great, he was not as well received by Islamic scholars and historians. They viewed him as a ruthless, power-hungry tyrant and a Muslim in name only. Mainly because of his attacks on Muslim controlled cities in the region, particularly Timbuktu in 1468 because of its importance to the gold and salt trade. He spent much of his rule conquering new lands and expanding his kingdom, but he had to use diplomacy as well because he could not conquer everyone in his path.

Another important ruler of the Songhai Kingdom was Askia Muhammad. He was a military officer and a devout Muslim. He led a revolt to overthrow Ali's son, who had continued his father's practice of persecuting Muslims in the kingdom. The coup was successful and Askia became king of Songhai. "First he welcomed the Muslims back to Timbuktu, Jenne, and Gao, which stimulated trade. Then he made a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina in 1495. Although his hajj was not as spectacular as Mansa Musa's, it was nevertheless impressive."¹

¹ McKissack, Patricia, and Fredrick McKissack. *The Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai: Life in Medieval Africa*. Henry Holt and Company, 1994.