

Mansa Musa: History's Richest Man and the Unintended Consequences of Unimaginable Wealth

Mansa Musa (1280-1337) was the wealthiest man in history. He left people like Bill Gates and Elon Musk in the dust. Gold dust. Musa was the ruler (Mansa) of the Mali Empire in West Africa during its golden age. The Mali Empire was one of three great Western African medieval empires, trading gold, salt, and ivory. Musa was also a devout Muslim. Musa spread his faith by promoting learning and building mosques. Also extremely generous if reckless, he spread so much wealth during his pilgrimage to Mecca that it caused an economic fallout of billions of dollars. A warning Elon Musk should take to heart?

Growth of the Mali Empire

Africa has a diverse range of communities. In medieval times, three kingdoms in West Africa stood out. While Western Europe rose from the Dark Ages, great empires arose in Africa.

Ghana had its heyday between the 9th and 12th Centuries. The empire's wealth came from its natural resources. A large army arose with weapons forged with iron. If Europe tried to scramble for Africa in those times, the Africans might have won out.

Traders used gold, salt, and ivory to buy goods from North Africa and the Middle East. Rivers provided means for trade and transportation. The empire went into decline.

The Mali Empire arose in the thirteenth century when Sundiata Keita united the Malinke people. They took over surrounding kingdoms, including the Ghana Empire. The empire was in Western Africa. The Sahara Desert was on its northern border. The capital city was Niani.

The Emperor's Wealth

The emperor was known as "the Mansa," a Mali word for "king."

Trade of goods such as gold, salt, and ivory brought the Mali Empire great wealth. The government also taxed all trade entering its territory. Mali surpassed the wealth of Ghana.

The Mansa controlled all of this wealth. Mansa Musa would have almost unlimited access to an almost inconceivable amount of gold, the most highly valued source of wealth in the medieval world. His wealth would translate to approximately 400 billion dollars in modern terms.

He could have been the wealthiest man in history.

Mansa Musa Expands the Empire

He was a young man with brown skin, a pleasant face, and a good figure.

- Arab historian Al-Makrizi

Mansa Kanku Musa was born in 1280. He was the grandnephew of the founder of the Mali Empire. Musa's reign began in 1312 when his predecessor disappeared during an exploration trip. Some people argue the lost navigators reached the New World. Historians doubt it.

Musa was already wealthy and a leader of a grand empire. His army numbered 100,000 men with a cavalry of ten thousand horses. His armies doubled the size of the empire, its high point.

His empire had many tribes and ethnic groups. Musa divided his lands into provinces, each with a governor (*farba*) he selected. Fine recordkeeping also assured good government.

Musa's Pilgrimage To Mecca

Islam played a central role in Mali's culture and government. A Muslim must make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Mecca is in Saudi Arabia and is the holiest city in Islam.

Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim. He began his pilgrimage in 1324. It was no ordinary journey. First of all, the trip was four thousand miles long.

Second, he was the wealthiest man in the world. He had an entourage, tens of thousands of people, and dozens of camels, each carrying 136 kilograms (300 pounds) of gold. The gold might have been worth more than US\$957 million in 2022. It was like a traveling city.

Musa's Financial Recklessness

Musa was generous about spreading the wealth. Maybe he was too generous. He flooded the Middle Eastern gold market. It would not recover for over a decade. One estimate is that he caused about \$1.5 Billion (!) in economic losses across the Middle East.

The sultan of Egypt himself was amazed at Musa's wealth. The obscure West African kingdom had arrived. A Spanish mapmaker later made the first detailed map of West Africa. Mansa Musa sits in all his splendor on his throne. He held a piece of gold (what else?!) in his hand.

After The Pilgrimage

Musa continued to show his devotion when he returned from his pilgrimage.

He built mosques and universities to teach the faith. Timbuktu, now a nickname for the "most distant place imaginable," and Gao became wealthy centers of Muslim life.

Mansa Musa sent religious scholars to Fez in Morocco to learn what they could and then return to Mali as teachers. Musa's wealth and reign over the Mali Golden Age is remarkable. One estimate was that it took four months to travel the length of his realm.

Nonetheless, Musa's devout spreading of his Muslim faith is particularly notable.

Musa's Final Years

In 1330, invaders from the kingdom of Mossi conquered the city of Timbuktu. Musa quickly regained control. He built fortifications and left an army to protect the city.

We do not know when Musa died. The records of a 14th-century historian suggest he died between 1332 and 1337. His son and brother followed as rulers.

Mali would continue to thrive for about a hundred years. Then, the Songhai Empire, the third great medieval Western African empire, had its time in the sun.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the Mali Empire's wealth and trade in gold, salt, and ivory contribute to its rise as a major power in medieval West Africa?
2. What were the key factors that led to Mansa Musa's unprecedented wealth, and how did it impact the Mali Empire's influence in the region?
3. In what ways did Mansa Musa's expansion of the Mali Empire reflect his leadership style and strategies for governance?
4. What were the religious and cultural implications of Mansa Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca, and how did it shape the spread of Islam in the Mali Empire and beyond?
5. What were the unintended economic consequences of Mansa Musa's lavish distribution of wealth during his pilgrimage, and how did it impact the economies of the Middle East?
6. How did Mansa Musa's patronage of mosques, universities, and religious scholars contribute to the development of Muslim centers of learning and influence in the Mali Empire?
7. What were the significant achievements and contributions of Mansa Musa during the Mali Golden Age, and how did his reign shape the cultural and political landscape of West Africa?
8. How did the legacy of Mansa Musa and the Mali Empire influence subsequent developments in the region, including the rise of the Songhai Empire and the broader historical narrative of medieval Western African empires?