

The Empire of Mali

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Summary and Keywords

The Mali Empire is one of the largest and most widely known precolonial African states. It has featured in films, video games, works of fiction, and its memory is still a profound force in the articulation of social and political identities across Mande West Africa. Founded in the 13th century in the south of modern Mali, it quickly grew from a small kingdom to a vast empire stretching from the Senegambia in the west to Ivory Coast in the south. Before its disintegration in the late 16th century, its connections to distant trade networks stretched from Europe to China and its rulers became famous across the Old World for their wealth. In the absence of indigenous written histories, knowledge of the Mali Empire has been based on a complex combination of oral traditions, medieval Arabic chronicles, European accounts, oral histories, and archaeology. Through a critical analysis of these sources, it has been possible to learn much about Mali's history, including aspects its social organization, political structure, belief systems, and historical evolution. However, there is much we still do not know, including the location and nature of its capital(s).

Keywords: Mali Empire, archaeology, history, West Africa, Kaabu, Mansa Musa, Sundiata

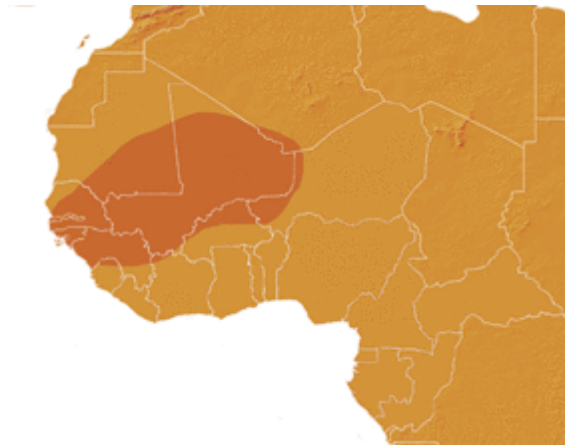
Origins of the Mali Empire

Both oral traditions and references in medieval Arabic accounts suggest the demise of Ghana/Wagadu in the late 11th century was followed by a period of political fragmentation in which a constellation of competing polities strove for regional control. Two among them, the kingdoms of Sosso and Mali, would eventually come to dominate the political landscape, and war between them ensued. The main source on this conflict is the Sunjata epic. Set in the 13th century, it narrates the life of the Manding prince Sunjata Keita and his exploits leading to the foundation of the Mali Empire. The epic begins with Sunjata's ancestry and describes how, after a troubled childhood and a prolonged exile, Sunjata returned to his homeland to unite all the Mande clans against the powerful Sumanguru Kante, king of Sosso. A long war followed until Sumanguru's final defeat at the battle of Krina.¹ Following this victory, Sunjata reputedly set up the legal, political, and ideological framework of Mali's imperial structure. In some versions of the epic this framework was then consolidated in a "charter of rights" signed at the plain of Karakun Fuga, but upon scrutiny this appears to have been a relatively modern addition, absent in earlier performances.²

Although as with any epic, the Sunjata story contains many elements of mythical or symbolic nature, we also know that Sunjata Keita was indeed a historical figure, as confirmed by his appearance in 14th-century texts by Ibn Khaldun and Ibn Battuta.³ Whether the accomplishments described in the epic were indeed undertaken by a single man in such a short time span or whether oral accounts conflate in a single figure and period, the results of a longer and more complex process is difficult to ascertain.

Mali's Expansion and Apogee

The 13th and 14th centuries were times of expansion for the newly created empire, reaching its greatest territorial extent in the early 14th century, after the annexation of the regions of Walata, Gao, Timbuktu, the Gambia, and the Senegal Valley. These new territories and vassal kingdoms were added to the zones already controlled by Mali from the end of the Sosso war (i.e. the Middle and Upper Niger) and most of the western Sahel, thus establishing one of the most extensive polities in the history of West Africa (see Figure 1).



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Figure 1. The Empire of Mali at its greatest territorial extent (Map drawn by the author).

According to the 14th-century Arabic historian Ibn Khaldun, following Sunjata's death, three of his sons—Wali, Wati, and Khalifa—successively rose to power. Khalifa was eventually deposed and replaced by Abu-Bakr, who in turn was killed and succeeded by a freed slave named Sakura.⁴ After the killing of Sakura upon his return from Mecca, kingship returned to Sunjata's line with the coronation of Mansa Qu and later his son Mansa Muhammad. The fate of the latter has been the subject of some debate, as according to his successor, Muhammad wanted to discover what laid at the end of the ocean and so he sailed into the Atlantic at the head of a large fleet, never to be seen again.⁵ While this episode has sometimes been used to argue for a pre-Columbian African arrival in the Americas, a successful Atlantic crossing would have been unlikely given the riverine and coastal nature of their naval technology, the lack of prior experience in long-distance oceanic expeditions, and the fact that nobody returned.⁶

Despite Muhammad's grand plans, it was his successor Mansa Musa who put Mali firmly on the international stage with his famous pilgrimage to Mecca and visit to Cairo in 1324–1325. Mansa Musa may not have been the first emperor of Mali to undertake the hajj but his pilgrimage was the first one to be recorded with such a profusion of detail and diversity of sources.⁷ This was partly due to the grandiosity of his delegation, but it was

also the result of the flourishing of Mamluk historiography in Cairo at the time.⁸ Despite the diversity of the accounts, one element is common to all: Mansa Musa's opulence. His delegation is said to have included hundreds or even possibly thousands of people and to have brought so much gold that it devalued the price of gold in Cairo for over a decade.⁹ It is thus no wonder that Mansa Musa's 25-year reign is often described as Mali's "golden age," but it is important to remember that while it did take place during Mali's apogee, it probably was not the wealthiest or most powerful, just the best recorded.¹⁰



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Figure 2. Detail of a 14th-century Catalan atlas by Abraham Cresques showing the emperor of Mali holding a large gold nugget in front of an Arab trader.

(Photo courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

If Mansa Musa's pilgrimage firmly placed Mali's wealth on the map (sometimes quite literally; see Figure 2), it was during the reign of his brother Suleyman that we have the first direct account of Mali's royal court, thanks to the visit of the traveler Ibn Battuta in 1352–1353.¹¹ Ibn Battuta spent seven months in Mali, during which he witnessed the court's operation, protocol, and rituals. He reported, for instance, how the *mansa's* pavilion was decorated with golden and silver arches, and drums and trumpets announced when he was ready to hold council. He described how before every council 300 slaves carrying bows, short lances, and shields; horses, rams, lancers, and bowmen entered the room and stood around the *mansa* in formation. Then singers and musicians performed while the cavalry commanders entered on horse carrying bows and quivers, preceded by their followers armed with lances, while the rest of the population sat outside.¹²

Political and Territorial Organization

Although traditionally referred to as an empire, Mali's structure and organization does not appear to abide by the traditional definition of the territorial state, with its implications of territorial sovereignty, centralized government, specialized administration, and monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Instead, it was composed of different "lands" or "vassal kingdoms" that retained considerable autonomy, with control becoming more nominal and less real as the distance from the core increased, and no assumption of ethnic, cultural, or political homogeneity.

At the center of the structure was the emperor or *mansa* and his court. The operation of the court is one of the elements we have the most information about, thanks to Ibn Battuta's account. The most important official in court was the *griot* or *jeli*: spokesman, master of ceremonies, counselor, princes' tutor, and director of court musicians. The *farariya* (commanders of the cavalry) and the *mansa's* personal guard represented the military in court. Also

important were the *qasa* (the *mansa*'s first wife); the *santigi*, or finance minister, master of the treasury and guardian of royal granaries and valuable deposits; and the *kangoro-sigi* or viceroy. Finally, slaves and Muslim officials were also valued and influential, often becoming royal confidants and advisers. Although the writing skills and northern connections of the latter were highly valued, administrative procedures remained mainly verbal.¹³

According to the Arab historian Al Umari, at its maximum extension Mali comprised fourteen districts and their towns, villages, and countryside, and its provinces were kingdoms in themselves.¹⁴ Ibn Khatir, on the other hand, claims twenty-four kings were under the control of Mali's emperor, and in any case the number of vassal territories would have changed over time. As for the nature of the empire, although certainly more than an alliance of independent chiefdoms, the degree of centralized control would have varied for each province.¹⁵ Three types of government existed: autonomous provinces supervised by a local representative of the *mansa*, with local dynasties largely retaining their autonomy (applied to allies and kingdoms that had not offered resistance to conquest); provinces directly administered by a *faren* or *farba* (centrally appointed governor in charge of justice, security, and taxes), for initially hostile regions (e.g., Sosso) or regions of key economic importance (e.g., Walata); and the Malinké heartland, directly controlled by the *mansa* or a kinsman/ally of his.¹⁶ Where a centrally controlled provincial government existed, it reproduced the central court on a smaller scale, as shown by Ibn Battuta's description of Walata's *farba* audience.¹⁷

According to oral traditions, the representatives of the *mansa* met once a year at the royal court. All problems and projects were put forward and debated, and the *mansa* indicated the measures to be taken. After the council, the governors were not summoned until the following year, unless they disobeyed the *mansa*'s guidelines.¹⁸ An example of one such summoning was observed by Ibn Battuta during his stay in Mali, when the *mansa*'s representative in Walata was accused of not repaying a debt.¹⁹

Although unprecedented in scale, the imperial structure was rooted in, and integrated with, traditional forms and spheres of authority. Beyond the court, pre-imperial power structures appear to have remained in place. The basic unit in precolonial Mande society—as preserved by oral traditions and documented in early colonial accounts—is the *lu* (extended family), controlled by the *fa* (family head), who represents the link with the ancestors and administers property and the relations with other *lu*. Several *lu* form a *dugu* (village), governed by the notables of the village (the *fa* of the most important *lu*) assisted by the *dugu-tigi* (village head), who is the *fa* of the first *lu* believed to have settled the place, whose ancestors first established the relation with the spirits of the land. A series of *dugu* can form a confederation or *kafu*, controlled by a particular lineage and ruled by a council with a *kafu-tigi* at its head.²⁰ Although it is difficult to establish exactly how far back in time these structures go, the appearance of some of the terms in medieval Arab accounts suggests that at least some were indeed present by the early empire, and others may even predate it.

The strong links between traditional kinship notions and the imperial structure were an important aspect of Mali's imperial ideology. As the primary authority system, the family and clan system provided the basis for the buildup of power networks, from the local to the regional and up to the imperial level. Thus, the *mansa*'s office grew out of the family headman and the village head and, in the case of Mali, from a *kafu* controlled by the Keita clan to an extensive centralized empire. Initially supervised by elders' councils, the *mansa* gradually escaped such control, expanding his territorial dominion and becoming the hereditary office found immediately before the rise of Mali and the framework of hierarchical structures on which the future empire would be based.²¹

Furthermore, the office of *mansa* was not just based on kinship principles but also depended on them for the deployment and maintenance of authority. In the “provinces” the state did not relate to individuals but to kinship groups—lineages and clans—and other traditional authorities.²² Besides, the local *dugu-tigi* (master of earth) and *wula-tigi* (master of the bush), who controlled the spirit of the place, had to be respected so the soil would keep producing. For example, al-Dawadari reports how during his stay in Cairo, Mansa Musa was asked why he sent tribute collectors to the gold-producing lands instead of ruling them directly. He replied that for the land to produce gold, it had to be controlled by its inhabitants, as conquest and direct rule would destroy the land’s productivity.²³

The Quest for Mali’s Capital

Of all the issues concerning the empire of Mali, the location and nature of its capital has been by far the most debated. Arabic sources commonly describe the capital—Ibn Battuta even visited it in person—but they do not provide any definitive clues regarding its name or location. The capital is referred to as BYTY by Al-Dukkali, as BNY by Ibn-Khaldun, as Mali by Ibn Battuta, and as Malal by Ibn Saïd and al-Idrisi.²⁴ Other names present in the literature include “Songo,” suggested in 1492 by the Portuguese de Barros, while the 17th-century *Tarikh-el-Fattash* claims the two successive capitals of the empire were Diâriba (sometimes interpreted as Kangaba) and Yan’ (also read as Niani, Nyang, and Dyang, depending on translation).²⁵

Regarding its location, Al-Dukkali’s description—a first-hand account of a city encircled on all sides by a river south of a great lake, with seasonal floods and in hilly and verdant country—could refer to somewhere in the vicinity of the Inland Niger Delta. Al-Idrisi located it twelve stages south of Ghana.²⁶ The city visited by Ibn-Battuta, on the other hand, was ten miles from the river, and although different interpretations have been made of his itinerary from Walata to Mali, a west bank location north of Bamako seems likely, given the trip’s duration and the fact that he does not mention crossing the Niger.²⁷

Oral traditions are not much clearer. When taken globally, the Sunjata corpus weighs heavily in favor of Mali’s 13th-century administrative center being located somewhere southwest of Bamako and northeast of Kela, but it is inconsistent regarding which bank of the Niger was involved. Narena and Farakoro are the towns most commonly associated to Sunjata’s father, whereas Dakajalan, Kangaba, and Niani are the most frequently identified with Sunjata.²⁸

Bearing in mind the diversity of the sources, it is hardly surprising that the academic debate on the matter has been complex (see Figure 3). Already in 1841, Cooley argued that the capital of ancient Mali was located near Niamina on the northern bank on the Niger, in current Mali.²⁹ This opinion was seconded thirty years later by Binger, who further specified the site of Niani Madougou, between Tougouni and Kondou, west of Niamina as the location. Delafosse, on the other hand, favored Kangaba as the ancient capital but, influenced by Binger, accepted Niani as Sunjata’s town.³⁰



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Figure 3. Locations of the suggested capitals/power centers of the Mali Empire (Map drawn by the author).

Having visited the site of Niani Madogou in 1922 and not having found the large city he expected, Vidal proposed that Mali had had four capitals in succession: Diériba (nowadays Dieliba-Koto, in the Milo), Niani-on-Sankarani, Manikoura near Figuira, and Kangaba.³¹ Soon after, Gaillard's initial 1923 excavations at Niani uncovered a site sizable enough to convince Delafosse to accept Vidal's hypothesis.³² Monteil, on the other hand, argued that Mali had two capitals: Tabou (near Sigui) for the early period under the Konate dynasty and an unspecified town in the area between Kangaba and Sigui from Sunjata onward.³³

Following the 1960 publication of D. T. Niane's version of the Sunjata epic, in which Niani-on-Sankarani (in current Guinea) appeared as the only and permanent capital, the second set of excavations were undertaken by Filipowiak.³⁴ These uncovered several structures supposedly corresponding to the royal palace and audience hall in Ibn Battuta's account. Nevertheless, the structures' association with smoking pipes (not introduced until two centuries later) and a clustering of radiocarbon dates between the 6th and the 10th centuries, with a reoccupation in the 16th century, leave a 600-year gap coinciding precisely with the Mali Empire. Consequently, all available evidence indicates that Niani-on-Sankarani was *not* the city visited by Ibn Battuta or Mali's capital at its apogee, although it may have been a power center during its decline.

Another possibility, suggested by the historian David Conrad, is the site of Dakajalan near the village of Kirina, in current Mali, which is the town oral traditions most frequently associate with Sunjata.³⁵ A brief archaeological reconnaissance in the site in 2014 found the site to be of great sacred importance to the current populations but yielded very limited archaeological material.³⁶ More recently, a magnetometry survey uncovered some possible evidence for walls as well as some arrowheads, but archaeological evidence for an important power center in the area still remains limited.³⁷ Further north, in the Segou region, survey and excavations at the site of Sorotomo have documented an unusually large, nucleated settlement mound (72 ha) whose foundation and abandonment coincide well with the Mali Empire's chronology, but research at the site is still in its early stages.³⁸

Beyond the issue of the capital's name and location, there is a parallel—and perhaps more interesting—debate regarding whether in fact “capital” is a relevant term altogether. On the one hand, it is possible that archaeologists just have not found the capital yet; after all, archaeological work in the heartland of ancient Mali has been limited and focused largely on the great commercial centers of Arabic texts. On the other hand, it is possible that the notion of a permanent seat of power and administration may be altogether inappropriate, resulting exclusively

from our own assumptions and the cultural preconceptions of Arab authors on the nature of government and urbanism.

The notion, first suggested by Monteil, that Mali might have had not of a single permanent capital but several seats of power in succession has gradually gained popularity.³⁹ Whether peripatetic, as suggested by Haour, or sedentary but changing location several times during history, as argued by Monteil, Hunwick, and Conrad, several factors suggest that the power center might have been more mobile than traditionally thought.⁴⁰ In fact, except for versions adapted to Western audiences, the notion of capital is largely absent from the Sunjata epic. Instead, we find references to *mansaduguw* or “king’s towns,” conveying the idea that the center of authority was wherever the *mansa* happened to be. The same sources also clearly distinguish between the royal lineage’s ancestral residence and the king’s court, and only in relation to the first is a clear sense of place conveyed.⁴¹ On the other hand, the number of places described as *mansadugu* is limited, suggesting a certain length of occupation for each site. This perception is reinforced by Ibn Battuta’s description of large, permanent royal structures, not consistent with a pattern of continuously moving capitals.⁴²

Social Structure

Colonial sources often describe precolonial Mande society as characterized by a tripartite division into *horonw*, *nyamakalaw*, and slaves. While not as rigid as some of these sources might imply, Arab/European sources and linguistic evidence confirm a version of this structure does indeed go back to imperial times.⁴³ *Horonw* (sing. *horon*)—sometimes confusingly translated as “nobles”—comprised the majority of the population, including farmers, warriors, traders, and clerics, as well as the ruling elites. *Nyamakalaw* (sing. *nyamakala*), on the other hand, were endogamic specialists such as blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and griots (oral historians/musicians). The status of *nyamakalaw* was ambiguous: as people with special capacities to perform activities considered dangerous, polluting, and connected to mystical forces, they were feared and respected but also despised and banned from political power.

The precise origin of *nyamakalaw* is unclear: most oral traditions attribute their formal establishment to Sunjata, but some *nyamakalaw* trace their ancestry back to Wagadu.⁴⁴ Griots certainly existed by the 14th century when Ibn Battuta visited the court of Mali, as corroborated by the Portuguese Valentim Fernandes a century later.⁴⁵ Linguistic evidence indicates some of the words used to refer to these specialists appeared among the Malinké no later than the 13th century.⁴⁶ The current regional variability in a clan’s status, however, with cases in which the same clan is considered *horon* in one zone and *nyamakala* in another, suggests that the process by which these classifications were established may have been longer and more diverse than implied by oral sources.⁴⁷ In any case, the creation of a social category of endogamic specialists by Mali’s elites would have been a fundamental tool in the articulation and control of traditional spheres of power. Through the control of groups especially suited to harness mystical energy, elites benefited from occult-sanctioned persuasion without being polluted by it.⁴⁸

As for slaves, their status and process of enslavement greatly varied, from prisoners of war to members of other groups seized during raids, youngsters pawned by their families, and condemned criminals. Except for chattel slaves sold into the trans-Saharan, Indian Ocean, and later the transatlantic trade, slaves were always attached to a family and very often adopted the family name. They could also rise to positions of significant military and political importance, and the head of slaves was one of the most powerful figures in court.⁴⁹ We even know of cases of freed slaves who became emperors, like Sakura in the 14th century, as described by Ibn Khaldun.⁵⁰

The View from the Periphery: Kaabu

Although our knowledge of Mali's provincial organization is generally limited, there is one exception: Kaabu. Located in the Senegambia, Kaabu was Mali's westernmost province and main link with the Atlantic world. It is also the part of the empire where Mali's structures survived the longest, for after Mali's collapse, Kaabu continued to flourish as an independent kingdom until its demise in the 19th century. Consequently, for both geographical and chronological reasons, European literature on Kaabu is far more abundant and richer than for any other part of the empire, giving us a unique glimpse into the diversity of Mali's provincial structures.

According to the Sunjata epic, Kaabu was conquered and annexed to the Empire by Tiramakan Traoré, one of Sunjata's generals. Tiramakan was then given control of the region and, together with his descendants, created a political and administrative structure combining Mali's principles with local idiosyncrasies. While we have no proof of Tiramakan's existence or deeds, European travelers' descriptions of Kaabu's political traditions are consistent with this hybrid political structure.

In some aspects, Kaabu reproduced Mali's organization and protocols to the detail. For instance, in 1623, the British traveler Richard Jobson described how in an audience with a Gambian king, the guest kneeled and sprinkled dust upon his head two or three times, a protocol that had been described in almost the same exact terms for the imperial court of Mali two centuries earlier by Al-Umari and later by Ibn Battuta.⁵¹

In terms of social structure, Kaabu followed Mali's tripartite division into *horonw*, *nyamakalaw*, and slaves, but it also had its own peculiarities—most notably, the existence of two aristocratic classes, *nyanthio* and *koring*, unknown in the rest of the Manding world. The *nyanthio* were at the top of the social hierarchy and the group to which all of Kaabu's rulers belonged. Identified by the patronyms Sane and Mane, *nyanthio* status was transmitted only through the maternal line. The *nyanthio* looked down on both agriculture and trade, as war and hunting were the only occupation worth their status.⁵² Below the *nyanthio* were the *koring*. *Koring* status could be inherited patrilineally, or from a *nyanthio* father and a non-*nyanthio* mother. They had a greater variety of patronyms than the *nyanthio* and could not become rulers of Kaabu but were allowed to rule over certain territories. Like the *nyanthio*, they did not farm and reveled in military exploits and hunting.⁵³

Kaabu's territorial organization—both as part of Mali and later as an independent kingdom—was that of a confederation of diverse territories, linked by fluctuating ties of subordination and collaboration. Three of these territories (Jimara, Pathiana, and Sama) were considered *nyanthio* provinces, with the right to provide rulers for the whole Kaabu, which they did following a system of rotation. Another important difference of Mali's rulership was the existence of female rulers, which, although not frequent, were far from rare. For instance, a ruler list from Kankelefa—one of Kaabu's territories—includes three female rulers out of a list of ten, and a similar account from another province, Niumi, features twelve queens.⁵⁴

While Kaabu is not necessarily representative of other territories within the Mali Empire, it does illustrate the richness and diversity of political organizations within a common tradition that characterized Mali's imperial organization.

Economy and Trade

Agriculture and Taxation

The base of Mali's economy was undoubtedly agrarian, with the majority of the population involved in agriculture, cattle-rearing, fishing, hunting and/or gathering, as described in Arabic sources and confirmed by archaeology.⁵⁵ Arab writers often report the abundance of food and provisions in its villages, and the *mansa* is said to have regularly offered public feasts, derived from the annual contributions of the provinces.⁵⁶ Levied in kind by local rulers, then given as tribute to the central government, taxes were a more viable option than direct control over production, given the extensive nature of most agriculture and the prevailing notions of ancestral property of the land. Tribute funded the central government and its institutions, maintained its non-food-producing specialists, and would have supplied its reputed standing cavalry army with food, fodder, mounts, and equipment.

Long-Distance Trade and Prestige Goods

Long-distance trade was certainly of great significance to Mali's rulers, although its economic importance has sometimes been exaggerated due to an overreliance on Arabic sources. The southward flow of salt, copper, cloth, brass, horses, and Mediterranean manufactures entered the Sudan to be exchanged for southern exports including slaves, kola, spices, gold, wood, and hides coming from the forest and savannah trade networks.⁵⁷ As with local production and regional exchanges, royal involvement in trade was not based on direct participation or control over production but on authority over commerce via entrepôts. State revenues from trade thus derived from taxes and customs, with actual trade left in the hands of private traders, both local and foreign.⁵⁸ It is remarkable, however, that despite the abundance of gold and other metals, Mali never minted its own coins or used any other sort of currency they could control. Salt, metal, and cowries became successively the most employed currencies, as shown by Arabic references and archaeological finds.⁵⁹

Access to certain prestige goods, on the other hand, was strictly controlled. Some items were exclusive to the *mansa*, while others were limited to people in court or other positions of power. These status-defining goods not only identified a particular social class but also enabled the *mansa* to control it. Through redistribution of prestige goods, the *mansa* could gain and maintain the loyalty of vassal chiefs and army commanders both in the royal court and the periphery, who depended on him for the supply of wealth and ritual power. For instance, in the 14th century Al Umari's described regional chiefs "whose wealth derived from the king reaches 20,000 mithqāls of gold every year, besides which he keeps them in horses and clothes."⁶⁰

The role of textiles and clothing as prestige markers was of particular importance. For instance, Al-Umari reports that whenever a soldier added to his list of exploits, the *mansa* would give him a pair of wide trousers, the size of which increased with the number of exploits. The *mansa* himself wore trousers made of twenty pieces, which nobody else could wear. He was also recognizable by the turban end let hanging in front of him instead of tied under the chin like the rest.⁶¹ The *mansa*'s griot was also highly visually recognizable at council; with his fine garments of silk brocade, a large turban, and the only boots and spurs in the pavilion, he was not just the *mansa*'s spokesperson but also a material symbol of his power.⁶²

In addition to materializing social differences in court, cloth was also an important mechanism for control of the provincial elites. As part of the ceremony of access to any important office, the bestowing of special garments reflected a transfer not just of actual wealth but also of symbolic power and its link to the central court. For instance, while in Timbuktu, Ibn Battuta witnessed how to appoint an emir for a group, the *farba* (governor) bestowed on him a garment, turban, and trousers.⁶³

Military Power and the Army

Military power, and more specifically horsemanship and iron weaponry, are recurrent themes in the material culture and oral traditions of Mali. Whether this reflects their physical importance in the maintenance and expansion of the territory or its symbolic significance as prestige markers is difficult to ascertain. In Mali a permanent army was institutionalized, with large garrisons stationed in sensitive frontiers and important cities, including Walata, Gao, and Timbuktu.⁶⁴ Al Umari describes a contingent of 100,000 soldiers, both infantry and cavalry, with the latter constituting a tenth of the total number.⁶⁵ While the reliability of such figures is doubtful, Mali's military force was undoubtedly substantial, as shown by the fact that north African princes approached Mansa Musa during his trip to Cairo to request his assistance in their campaigns.⁶⁶ Mansa Musa himself claimed during his trip that he had conquered "by his sword and armies" twenty-four cities with their surrounding estates.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Ibn Battuta describes Mali as an exceptionally safe territory, where "neither traveller there nor dweller has nothing to fear from thief or usurper."⁶⁸

Religion and Belief

Islam

The arrival of the first Arab travelers to West Africa during the 8th century and the establishment of stable trans-Saharan trade networks deeply influenced West African polities, and Mali was no exception. Attracted by trade opportunities, Muslim merchants brought with them not only goods for exchange but also new ideas and beliefs, including their religion. Islam thus gradually penetrated West African belief systems, adapting to and changing existing beliefs and practices.

According to Ibn Khaldun, the first Malian ruler to convert to Islam was Barmandar, one of Sunjata's predecessors.⁶⁹ While we have no independent confirmation of Barmandar's conversion or existence, evidence for Islamic practices in the early empire is clear, especially in Mali's northern trading centers like Gao or Timbuktu. Archaeologically, it takes the form of mosques, like the Sankoré, Djinguereber, and Sidi Yahya mosques in Timbuktu, built between the 13th and 15th centuries, and Muslim cemeteries with inscribed tombstones, like the 11th- to 14th-century stelae found at Gao and Saney.⁷⁰ These tombstones are particularly important as they confirm many of the Islamic burials were converts, as opposed to Muslim migrants.⁷¹ Diet can also sometimes be an indicator of conversion through the presence/absence of species forbidden under Islamic dietary rules, such as dog and pig. At Gao, for instance, dog was part of the diet in the Gadei quarter but not in the more Islamized Gao Ancien.⁷² The presence of dog bones should not, however, be taken by itself as a conclusive proof of non-Muslim practices, as excavations in the northern entrepôt of Essouk have yielded evidence of dog-eating in Muslim communities during this period.⁷³

Further south, the absence of large-scale archaeological projects (which have tended to concentrate on the large trading centers mentioned by Arab texts) makes any such assessment impossible at present. We do, however, have the evidence provided by Arab authors. As already discussed, Mansa Musa's 14th-century pilgrimage impressed Cairene scholars with not just the emperor's wealth but also his piety. A few decades later, during his stay in Mali, Ibn Battuta witnessed the celebration of Ramadan and the breaking of the fast festival and praised the people of Mali their assiduity in prayer and eagerness to memorize the Koran.⁷⁴

It is thus clear that Islam became woven into the fabric of Mande political traditions, as shown by the inclusion of Islamic forebears into myths, legends, and ancestor lists. Ideologically, Islam provided new tools for government, strengthening the state's capacity to bring together the highly heterogeneous populations under its rule as well as reinforcing trade relations and the prestige derived from them.⁷⁵

Pre-Islamic Practices and Beliefs

Islam, however, never replaced pre-Islamic beliefs and practices entirely. The Sunjata epic, and oral traditions more widely, contain plenty of evidence of non-Islamic practices for acquiring power, encouraging fertility, and defeating enemies. Arab and European authors noticed them too: Al Dukkali, for instance, described how in the 14th century the people in Mali made "much use of magic and poison," while the Portuguese Valentim Fernandes described the worship of idols and faith in charms of its inhabitants in the 16th century.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent the authority of the emperor relied on such elements. There are some indications of potential divine kingship: for instance, both Arabic and European accounts noted how the *mansa* would refuse to eat in anybody's presence.⁷⁷ This is highly redolent of 10th-century Kanem, where according to Al Muhallabi "they exalt their king and worship him instead of God. They imagine he does not eat."⁷⁸ However, oral traditions and in particular the Sunjata epic clearly state that "kings are only men."⁷⁹ In any case, it seems clear that the arrival of Islam had a deep impact on Mali's state ideology but that, rather than replacing already existing beliefs and practices, it became interwoven with them, producing a flexible and syncretic system well suited to the empire's own diversity.

Mali's Decline

By the time of Ibn Battuta's visit to the court of Mali in 1352 in the times of Mansa Sulayman, increasing instability was already undermining the central power, resulting in the successive independence of the vassal states of Gao and Méma in the early 15th century.⁸⁰ This process of internal division was further encouraged by the rise of the Songhay Empire in the northeast and its gradual conquest of most of Mali's eastern territories during the 16th century. Subsequent defeats at the hands of Moroccan troops in the north and the loss of the Bambuk goldfields in the southeast further reduced Mali's territory and power. Although no longer an empire, Mali did survive as a much smaller polity into the 17th century, possibly even longer.⁸¹ So did its legacy: Kaabu, its Atlantic province, survived as an independent kingdom until the late 19th century, and Mali's structures and political traditions deeply shaped its successors, including the Songhay Empire itself.

Discussion of the Literature

For its historical importance, the available literature on the Mali Empire is limited. The main and most comprehensive syntheses remain Nehemia Levtzion's 1973 *Ancient Ghana and Mali* and Monteil's 1929 "Les Empires du Mali," both of which present important problems in terms of source identification and criticism.⁸² Two separate syntheses exist for Kaabu, Mali's westernmost province: D. T. Niane's *Histoire des Mandingues de l'Ouest* and Carlos Lopes's *Kaabunké: espaço, território e poder na Guiné-Bissau*.⁸³ In recent decades, historians have devoted substantial energy to the recording, publication, and analysis of oral traditions and medieval Arabic

accounts and epigraphic evidence, as discussed in the Primary Sources section. As a result, a parallel discussion has emerged critically evaluating the role of different sources, particularly with regard to the historical value of oral traditions and the limitations and biases of Arab sources.⁸⁴

Walking the line between the ethnographic and the historical, anthropologists have exponentially expanded our understanding of Mali's past and present social structures. These have mostly focused on *nyamakala* or endogamic specialists, and in particular on blacksmiths and griots.⁸⁵ Archaeological debates, on the other hand, have tended to focus on two topics: trade and its role in the emergence and operation of West African states and the location and nature of Mali's capitals/political centers.⁸⁶

Primary Sources

Arab Chronicles

From the first reference to Mali in 1068 by the geographer Al-Bakri to much more detailed accounts such as Al-Umari's description of Mansa Musa's visit to Cairo in 1324, or Ibn Battuta's chronicle of his stay in Mali's royal court, medieval Arabic sources provide highly relevant information about the Mali Empire as a whole. At present there are two main compilations of translated Arab texts on the Mali Empire: J. Cuoq's *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du VIIIe au XVe siècle* and Levzion and Hopkins's *Corpus of Early Arabic sources for West African History*.⁸⁷ They also provide a good index of relevant documents for those wishing to consult the original Arabic texts.

European Accounts

In 1446, a Portuguese expedition under the command of Nuno Tristao reached the Gambia and Geba rivers for the first time. Their journey, described by Zurara, Gomes, and De Barros, was the first of many by Portuguese and later Dutch, British, and French traders, explorers, soldiers, and missionaries.⁸⁸ Although most of the information in these texts refers specifically to Kaabu and the Senegambian kingdoms post-Mali's collapse, some of the early sources include references to Mali. Most prominently among these are the accounts by Valentim Fernandes, Duarte Pacheco Pereira, and André Alvares de Almada.⁸⁹

Indigenous Sources: Oral Traditions, Tarikhs, and Epigraphic Evidence

There are more than seventy published versions of the Sunjata epic, ranging from the highly novelized to annotated translations of griotic performances.⁹⁰ Some of these focus on regional variants, including additional elements like Tiramakhan's conquest of the Senegambia.⁹¹ Although indigenous written historical records in the Western Sahel are rare, there are two notable exceptions: the Timbuktu *tarikhs* and funerary inscriptions.

The *Tarikhs* are 17th-century royal chronicles, written in Arabic, that narrate the story of the Songhay Empire and of its predecessor, Mali. They include two main texts, traditionally known as the *Tarikh al-Fattash* and the *Tarikh al-Sudan*.⁹² The former, first translated in 1913, has been shown since to be a combination of two texts, a 17th-century chronicle called *Tarik Ibn al-Mukhtar* and a 19th-century text, the *Tarik el-Fattash* proper.⁹³

Funerary inscriptions, on the other hand, date from the 11th century to the 15th century CE and have been found in several of Mali's northern trading centers (Gao, Saney, Essuk, Junhan, Benthia). A detailed analysis and transcription of these inscriptions can be found in Paulo de Moraes Farias's *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali*.⁹⁴

Archaeology

Initially by colonial officials, journalists, and military personnel, later by scholars and more recently by archaeologists, excavations on and research about the Mali Empire have gradually become more systematic and better recorded. Raymond Mauny's *Tableau Géographique* is a good summary of the archaeology conducted during the colonial period, while the *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, the *Bulletin du Comité des Études Scientifiques et Historiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française*, and *Notes Africaines* provide more in-depth reports about some of the projects.⁹⁵ More recently, research projects have focused on potential capitals/political power centers like Niani, Dakajalan, and Sorotomo as well as large trading towns like Dia, Timbuktu, and Gao and trans-Saharan entrepôts such as Essouk/Tadmekka and Tegdaoust/Awdaghust.⁹⁶

Links to Digital Materials

Gallica, digital repository of the Bibliothèque National de France. Contains many useful resources, including the complete texts of journals like the *Bulletin du Comité des Études Scientifiques et Historiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* and *Notes Africaines*, as well as many of the texts by European travelers/soldiers and maps.

Reading list on the Sunjata epic by the University of Birmingham.

Indices to the *Bulletin de l'IFAN* (1916–1996).

Further Reading

Collet, Hadrien. "L'introuvable capitale du Mali. La question de la capitale dans l'historiographie du royaume médiéval du Mali." *Afriques* 4 (2013).

Find this resource:

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Niane, Djibril Tamsir. *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*. London: Longmans, 1965.

Find this resource:

Notes:

(1.) The French scholar Maurice Delafosse claims this battle took place in 1235 ce, but it is unclear the basis of that claim; Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger II* (Paris: Emile Larose, 1912), 180.

(2.) For a critical discussion of the Karankun Fuga chart, see Jean-Loup Amselle, "L'Afrique a-t-elle 'inventé' les droits de l'homme?" *Syllabus Review* 2, no. 3 (2011): 446–463.

- (3.) Nehemia Levtzion and John Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 2000), 333; and Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 295.
- (4.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 333–334.
- (5.) This story was told by Mansa Musa during his visit in Cairo as reported by Al-Umari; Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 268–269.
- (6.) See, for example, Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus* (New York, NY: Random House, 1976).
- (7.) According to the 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun, the first king of Mali to convert to Islam and perform the pilgrimage was Barmandār or Barmandāna, one of Sunjata’s predecessors: Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 322.
- (8.) Hadrien Collet, “Le Sultanat du Mali (XIV^e-XV^e siècles)” (PhD diss., Université Paris I, 2017), 218.
- (9.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 271.
- (10.) It is estimated that Mansa Musa reigned between 1312 and 1337 on the basis of Ibn Khaldun’s account. More extensive discussions on this matter can be found in Charles Monteil, “Les Empires du Mali,” *Bulletin du Comité d’Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l’Afrique Occidentale Française* 6 (1929): 321–322; Nehemia Levtzion, “The Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Kings of Mali,” *The Journal of African History* 4, no. 3 (1963): 349–350; and Nawal Morcos Bell, “The Age of Mansa Musa of Mali: Problems in Succession and Chronology,” in *Papers Presented to the International Conference of Manding Studies, SOAS* (London, U.K.: SOAS, 1972).
- (11.) While the veracity of Ibn Battuta’s account is generally accepted, it has sometimes been argued that he may not have been a direct witness of the events and places he described in Mali. For a critical review of this debate, see François Fauvelle-Aymar and Bertrand Hirsch, “Voyage aux frontières du monde,” *Afrique et Histoire* 1 (2003): 75–122.
- (12.) A translation can be found in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 289–297.
- (13.) As reported by Al-Umari, in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 267.
- (14.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 261–262, 346.
- (15.) Ibn Katir, for instance, says that twenty-four kings were under the control of Mali’s emperor: Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 305.
- (16.) Abdourhamane Ba, *Le Takrur: Des origines à la conquête par le Mali (VI–XIII siècles)* (Dakar, Senegal: CRIAA, 2002).
- (17.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 284.
- (18.) Youssouf Tata Cissé and Wa Kamissoko, *La grande geste du Mali: Des origines à la fondation de l’empire* (Paris: Karthala, 1998), 299.
- (19.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 294.
- (20.) For a longer discussion on the nature of *kafu*, see Kevin MacDonald [in press] “A Farewell to Typologies: Archaeologies of African Political Tradition,” in *Connections, Contributions & Complexity: Africa’s Later*

Holocene Archaeology in Global Perspective, ed. Matthew Davies and Kevin MacDonald (Cambridge, U.K.: MacDonald Institute Monographs).

(21.) Charles Monteil, *Les empires du Mali: Etude d'histoire et de sociologie soudanaises* (Paris: G.-P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1968); and Nehemia Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London: Methuen, 1973).

(22.) Aidan Southall, *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination* (Cambridge, U.K.: W. Heffer, 1956).

(23.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 250.

(24.) See Al-Umari in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 262; and Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 322, 288, 185, and 109.

(25.) Joao de Barros, *Da Asia III* (Lisbon, Portugal: Na Regia Officina Typografica, 1778), 259; and Mahmud Kati, *Tarikh el-Fettach*, trans. Octave Houdas and Maurice Delafosse, (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913), 66.

(26.) As reproduced by Al-Umari in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 262; and Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 109.

(27.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 288; John Hunwick, "The Mid-Fourteenth Century Capital of Mali," *Journal of African History* 14 (1973): 195–208; and Claude Meillassoux, "L'itinéraire d'Ibn Battuta de Walata à Malli," *Journal of African History* 13, no. 3 (1972): 389–395.

(28.) Sirio Canós-Donnay, "Mythical Geographies and Archaeological Landscapes: Sites, Locations and Spatial Patterns in the Sunjata Epic" (master's thesis, UCLA, 2010).

(29.) William D. Cooley, *The Negroland of the Arabs* (London, U.K.: J. Arrowsmith, 1841): 79–82.

(30.) Louis Gustave Binger, *Du Niger au golfe de Guinée* (Paris: Hachette, 1892) ; and Delafosse, *Haut-Sénégal-Niger*, 179–182.

(31.) Jules Vidal, "Au sujet de l'emplacement de Mali (ou Melli), capitale de l'ancien empire mandingue," *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 2 (1923): 251–268.

(32.) Maurice Gaillard, "Niani ancienne capitale de l'Empire mandingue," *Bulletin du comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 8 (1923) : 620–636; and Maurice Delafosse, "Le Ghana et le Mali et l'emplacement de leurs capitales," *Bulletin du Comité d'Études Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 7 (1924): 479–542.

(33.) Charles Monteil, "L'œuvre des étrangers dans l'empire soudanais du Mali," *Revue des Études Islamiques* 2 (1929): 227–235.

(34.) Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1960); Władysław Filipowiak, "L'expédition archéologique Polono-Guinéenne à Niani (Guinée)," *Africana Bulletin* 4 (1966): 116–127; Filipowiak, "L'expédition," 107–117; and Władysław Filipowiak, *Études archéologiques sur la capitale médiévale du Mali* (Warsaw, Poland: Muzeum Narodowe, 1979).

(35.) David Conrad, "A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali's Capital," *The Journal of African History* 35, no. 3 (1994): 355–377.

- (36.) David Conrad, Cameron Gokee, Kassim Koné, Sekou Berté, Daouda Koné, and Sidy Lamine Koné, *Report on an Archaeological Reconnaissance Undertaken Around Sogondiala, Mali (June 12–13, 2014)* (unpublished report, 2014).
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- (38.) Kevin C. MacDonald, Seydou Camara, Sirio Canós-Donnay, Nick Gestrich, and Daouda Keita, “Sorotomo: A Forgotten Malian Capital?” *Archaeology International* 13/14 (2009–2011): 53–65.
- (39.) Monteil, *Les Empires du Mali*, 298.
- (40.) Anne Haour, “Power and Permanence in Precolonial Africa: A Case Study from the Central Sahel,” *World Archaeology* 37 (2005): 552–565; Monteil, *Les Empires du Mali*, 298; Hunwick, “The Mid-Fourteenth Century Capital”; and Conrad, “Dakajalan,” 357.
- (41.) Conrad, “Dakajalan,” 366.
- (42.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 289–297.
- (43.) For a full discussion, see David Conrad and Barbara Frank, “‘Nyamakala’: Contradiction and Ambiguity in Mande Society,” in *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nyamakalaw of Mande*, ed. David Conrad and Barbara Frank (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 7–8.
- (44.) Éric Pollet and Grace Winter, *La société Soninké (Dyahumu, Mali)* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1972).
- (45.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 289–297; and Valentim Fernandes, *Description de la côte d’Afrique (Sénégal au cap de Montes, Archipels)*, trans. Pierre de Cenival and Théodore Monod (Bissau, Guinea-Bissau: Centro de Estudos da Guiné Portuguesa, 1951), 8.
- (46.) Tal Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 32 (1991): 221–250.
- (47.) Pollet and Winter, *La société Soninké*.
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- (49.) Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana & Mali*, 112.
- (50.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 323.
- (51.) Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade or a Discovery of the River Gambia and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians* (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968 [1623]), 48–49; Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 266 and 291.

- (52.) Mamadú Mané, “O Kaabu: uma das grandes entidades do Património Histórico Senegambiano,” *Soronda* 17 (1989): 23; and Djibril Tamsir Niane, *Histoire des Mandingues de l'Ouest* (Paris: Khartala, 1989), 90.
- (53.) Ralphina Phillott Almeida, “An Outline History of Pachesi Drawn from Oral Traditions,” unpublished paper presented at *The First International Kaabu Colloquium*, Dakar, 1980, 5.
- (54.) Phillot-Almeida, “An Outline History,” 3; and Sékéné Mody Cissoko, “La Royauté chez les Mandingues Occidentaux,” *Bulletin de l'IFAN* 31 series B, 2 (1969): 330.
- (55.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus* 68, 262–265; and Rogier Bédau, Jean Polet, Klena Sanogo, and Annet Schmidt, *Recherches archéologiques a Dia dans le Delta intérieur du Niger (Mali): Bilan des saisons de fouilles 1998–2003* (Leiden, The Netherlands: CNWS, 2000).
- (56.) Djibril Tamsir Niane, “Mali and the Second Mandingo Expansion,” in *Unesco General History of Africa IV: Africa from the 12th to the 16th C* (Paris: UNESCO, 1984), 117–171; and Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 287.
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- (58.) Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 123.
- (59.) Tereba Togola, “Iron Age Occupation in the Méma Region, Mali,” *African Archaeological Review* 13 (1996): 91–110; Timothy Insoll, “Iron Age Gao: An Archaeological Contribution,” *Journal of African History* 38 (1997): 1–30; and Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 269, 281.
- (60.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 266.
- (61.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 265.
- (62.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 290–291.
- (63.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 299.
- (64.) Niane, “Mali and the Second Mandingo Expansion.”
- (65.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 266.
- (66.) As reported by Ibn-Khaldun in Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 334.
- (67.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 267, 305.
- (68.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 296.
- (69.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 322.
- (70.) Raymond Mauny, “Notes d’archéologie sur Tombouctou,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Afrique Noire (B)* (1952): 901–911; Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 239–24; and Raymond Mauny, “Notes d’archéologie au sujet de Gao,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Français d’Afrique Noire (B)* 13 (1951): 837–852.

- (71.) Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*, 235.
- (72.) Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*, 239–240.
- (73.) Kevin MacDonald, “Faunal Remains,” in *Essouk-Tadmekka: An Early Trans-Saharan Market Town*, ed. Sam Nixon (London: Brill, 2017), 234–240.
- (74.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 292–297.
- (75.) Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam*.
- (76.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 272; and Valentim Fernandes, *Códice Valentim Fernandes* (Lisbon: Academia Portuguesa da História, 1997 [1506–1507]), 182–183.
- (77.) Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus*, 268; and Fernandes, *Description*, 36.
- (78.) Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*, 107.
- (79.) Niane, *Sundiata*, 40.
- (80.) For a more detailed discussion of the end of Mali’s political control over its northern territories, see Paulo Fernando De Moraes Farias, *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), cvi–cxii.
- (81.) See Jan Jansen, “In Defense of Mali’s Gold: The Political and Military Organization of the Northern Upper Niger, c.1650–c.1850,” *Journal of West African History* 1 (2015): 1–35.
- (82.) Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali*; and Monteil, “Les empires du Mali,” 291–447.
- (83.) Niane, *Histoire des Mandingues*; Carlos Lopes, *Kaabunké: espaço, território e poder na Guiné-Bissau* (Lisbon, Portugal: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1990).
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