In 1235, the Battle of Kirina marked the fall of Ghana and the end of King Sumangurur’s reign. But it also meant the rise of the kingdom of Mali and the beginning of King Sundiata’s reign. The battle is rich in legends that are retold today. According to legend, Sumanguru and Sundiata were magicians. Their magic would decide the battle’s victor. In the heat of the match, King Sundiata furiously roared at the warriors of King Sumanguru, and they scurried for cover. When Sumanguru bellowed in return, the heads of eight spirits magically appeared above his head. However, Sundiata’s magic was more powerful, and he defeated the spirits. Then Sundiata fixed Sumanguru with his gaze and aimed an arrow at him. The arrow only grazed Sumanguru’s shoulder, but it drained him of all his magical powers. Sumanguru then turned and ran, giving Sundiata the victory and the throne.

Sundiata became king of the new empire of Mali, which had once been a part of Ghana. He established its capital at Niani, on the upper Niger River. Sundiata never fought again after Kirina. He relied on his army to extend Mali’s boundaries. The king focused on restoring prosperity to his kingdom. Sundiata first concentrated on improving agriculture. His soldiers cleared land for farming, and they planted rice, yams, onions, beans, grains, and cotton. In a few years, Mali became a productive farming region. However, as in Ghana, Mali’s economy was based on trade. The many years of fighting in Ghana had interrupted trans-Saharan trade – trade that crossed the Sahara. So, once Mali controlled Ghana’s gold mines, Sundiata set about restoring the salt and gold exchange with Niani as the kingdom’s new trade center.

Sundiata and his successors expanded Mali’s trade routes north and east across the Sahara to Cairo, Egypt, and to Tunis in Tunisia. Mali controlled salt mines in the north at Taghaza and copper mines in the east at Takedda. In addition to the gold mines at Wangara, the people of Mali had discovered a new source of gold at Bure, not far from the new capital on the Niger River. From Bure they easily shipped gold along the Niger to interested traders. The Niger became a busy highway for
trading gold and other goods. Less than 100 years after the victory at Kirina, Mali had become the most powerful kingdom in Africa. By the late 1300s, Mali was three times as large as Ghana had ever been.

Mali’s greatest ruler, Mansa Musa, succeeded to the throne in 1307. Mansa Musa was a devout Muslim, but he respected all his subjects’ beliefs. He allowed those who desired it to worship their traditional gods. However, many of the people who lived in trade centers had been influenced by the Arab traders and had already converted to Islam. Under Musa’s rule, conversions greatly increased mainly due to Mali’s expanding trade. The North African writer, Ibn Battuta, praised the newly converted Muslims for faithfully “observing the hours of prayers, studying the books of law, and memorizing the Qur’an”. However, as a traditional Muslim, Ibn Battuta was shocked by some West African customs that survived despite Islamic influence. For example, West African women were quite independent. He also found that people still scarred their faces to show their clan affiliations. Nevertheless, in accordance with Islamic teachings, some of Mali’s rulers made pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca in the Middle East. Mansa Musa made the 3,500 mile journey in 1324. According to some accounts, which may have become exaggerated over time, Mansa Musa was accompanied on this journey by as many as 50,000 people – friends, family members, doctors, advisers, and 500 slaves carrying golden staffs. In addition, 80 to 100 camels, each loaded with 100 pounds of gold dust, are said to have traveled with him to Mecca. Hundreds of other camels carried the other supplies.

Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage drew the attention of Mediterranean merchants to Mali’s economic importance. European mapmakers began to include Mali on maps because of its role in international trade. Under Mansa Musa, culture and learning flourished in Niani and other trade centers such as Timbuktu. When Musa returned from Mecca, he brought Arab scholars back with him. Mansa Musa invited these scholars to teach in Mali’s learning centers. As Muslims, they welcomed the opportunity to instruct their brothers in scholarship and religion. Likewise, Muslim traders welcomed the opportunity to trade with fellow Muslims in different states. Thus, they helped to increase Mali’s trade empire as well as their own profits. Even Mali’s borders expanded under Mansa Musa’s rule. New land was acquired both peacefully and as the result of war. Most of Mali was divided into states, which were under Musa’s control. Some regions were allowed to remain independent as long as their rulers pledged their loyalty and a portion of their wealth to Mali.

In 1332, Mansa Musa died, and the Empire of Mali began to decline. Mali was ruled by a series of kings who were unable to protect its vast territory. Berber nomads attacked caravan routes in the desert and threatened to take Timbuktu. People from the southern rain forests raided Mali’s southern border. And in the west, the Songhai on the middle Niger River began a revolt that would change West Africa forever.

1.) How did the Empire of Ghana come to an end?

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2.) How did Sundiata work to restore the prosperity of Mali?

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3.) How did Mali differ from the Empire of Ghana?

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4.) Who was Mansa Musa and what did he do?

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5.) Describe Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage to Mecca.

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6.) How did Mansa Musa’s pilgrimage affect Mali?

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7.) What happened after Mansa Musa died?

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