

Mansa Musa

This is the **latest accepted revision**, reviewed on 11 October 2024.

Mansa Musa^[a] (reigned c. 1312 – c. 1337^[b]) was the ninth^[4] *Mansa* of the *Mali Empire*, which reached its territorial peak during his reign. Musa's reign is often regarded as the zenith of Mali's power and prestige, however he features comparatively less in *Mandinka oral traditions* than his predecessors.

Often described as the richest person in history,^[5] he is known to have been enormously wealthy, described as being inconceivably rich by contemporaries; *Time* magazine reported: "There's really no way to put an accurate number on his wealth."^[6] It is known from local manuscripts and travellers' accounts that Mansa Musa's wealth came principally from the Mali Empire controlling and taxing the trade in salt from northern regions and especially from gold panned and mined in the gold-rich regions to the south: *Bambuk*, *Wangara*, *Bure*, *Galam*, *Taghaza* and other kingdoms over many centuries. Over a very long period Mali had created a large reserve of gold. Mali is also suspected to have been involved in the trade in many goods such as ivory, *slaves*, spices, silks, and ceramics. However presently little is known about the extent or mechanics of these trades.^{[7][8]} At the time of Musa's ascension to the throne, Mali in large part consisted of the territory of the former *Ghana Empire*, which Mali had conquered. The Mali Empire consisted of land that is now part of *Guinea*, *Senegal*, *Mauritania*, *the Gambia*, and the modern state of *Mali*.

Musa went on *Hajj* to *Mecca* in 1324, traveling with an enormous entourage and a vast supply of gold. En route, he spent time in *Cairo*, where his lavish gift-giving is said to have noticeably affected the value of gold in Egypt and garnered the attention of the wider Muslim world. Musa expanded the borders of the Mali Empire, in particular incorporating the cities of *Gao* and *Timbuktu* into its territory. He sought closer ties with the rest of the Muslim world, particularly the *Mamluk* and *Marinid Sultanates*. He recruited scholars from the wider Muslim world to travel to Mali, such as the Andalusian poet *Abu Ishaq al-Sahili*, and helped establish Timbuktu as a center of Islamic learning. His reign is associated with numerous construction projects, including a portion of *Djinguereber Mosque* in Timbuktu.

Name and titles

Mansa Musa's personal name was Musa (*Arabic*: موسى, *romanized*: *Mūsá*), the name of *Moses in Islam*.^[9] *Mansa*, 'ruler'^[10] or 'king'^[11] in *Mandé*, was the title of the ruler of the Mali Empire. In oral tradition and the *Timbuktu Chronicles*, Musa is further known as Kanku Musa.^{[12][c]} In Mandé tradition, it was common for one's name to be prefixed by their mother's name, so the name

Kanku Musa means "Musa, son of Kanku", although it is unclear if the genealogy implied is literal.^[14] He is also called [Hiji](#) Mansa Musa in oral tradition because he made [hajj](#).^[15]

Al-Yafii gave Musa's name as Musa ibn Abi Bakr ibn Abi al-Aswad ([Arabic](#): موسى بن أبي بكر بن أبي الأسود, [romanized](#): *Mūsā ibn Abī Bakr ibn Abī al-Aswad*),^[16] and ibn Hajar gave Musa's name as Musa ibn Abi Bakr Salim al-Takruri ([Arabic](#): موسى بن أبي بكر سالم التكروري, [romanized](#): *Mūsā ibn Abī Bakr Salim al-Takruri*).^[17]

In the Songhai language, rulers of Mali such as Musa were known as the Mali-koi, *koi* being a title that conveyed authority over a region: in other words, the "ruler of Mali".^[18]

Historical sources

Much of what is known about Musa comes from Arabic sources written after his hajj, especially the writings of [Al-Umari](#) and [Ibn Khaldun](#). While in Cairo during his [hajj](#), Musa befriended officials such as Ibn Amir Hajib, who learned about him and his country from him and later passed on that information to historians such as Al-Umari.^[19] Additional information comes from two 17th-century manuscripts written in [Timbuktu](#), the *Tarikh Ibn al-Mukhtar*^[d] and the *Tarikh al-Sudan*.^[21] Oral tradition, as performed by the *jeliw* (sg. *jeli*), also known as [griots](#), includes relatively little information about Musa compared to some other parts of the history of Mali, with his predecessor conquerors given more prominence.^[22]

Musa I	
	
Depiction of Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire in the 14th century, from the 1375 Catalan Atlas . The label reads: <i>This Black Lord is called Musse Melly and is the sovereign of the land of the black people of Gineva (Ghana). This king is the richest and noblest of all these lands due to the abundance of gold that is extracted from his lands.</i> ^[1]	
Mansa of Mali	
Reign	c. 1312 – c. 1337 (approx. 25 years)
Predecessor	Muhammad ^[2]
Successor	Magha
Born	Late 13th century Mali Empire
Died	c. 1337 Mali Empire
Spouse	Inari Kunate
House	Keita dynasty
Religion	Islam Maliki

Lineage and accession to the throne

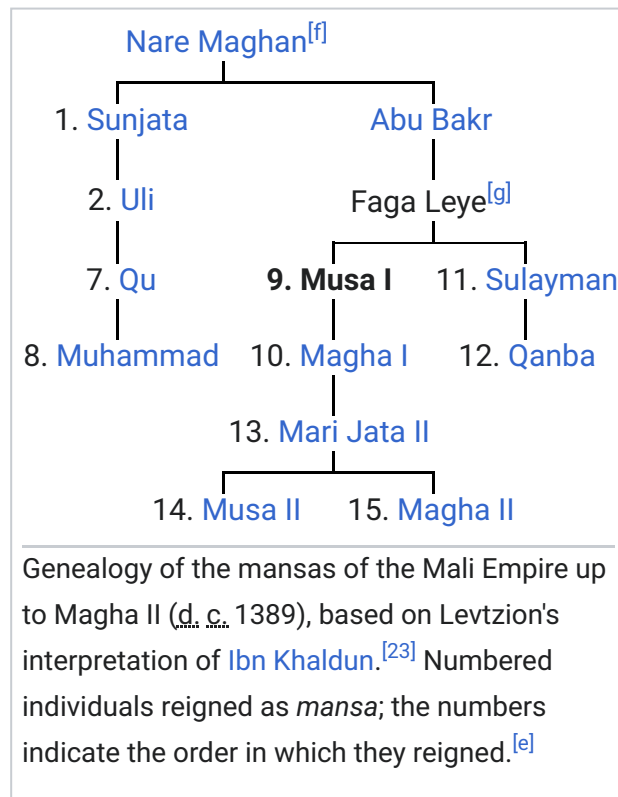
Musa's father was named Faga Leye^[15] and his mother may have been named Kanku.^[h] Faga Leye was the son of [Abu Bakr](#), a brother of [Sunjata](#), the first mansa of the Mali Empire.^{[15][i]} [Ibn Battuta](#), who visited Mali during the reign of Musa's brother Sulayman, said that Musa's grandfather was named Sariq Jata.^[26] Sariq Jata may be another name for Sunjata, who was actually Musa's great-uncle.^[27] The date of Musa's birth is unknown, but he still appeared to be a young man in 1324.^[28] The *Tarikh al-fattash* claims that Musa accidentally killed Kanku at some point prior to his hajj.^[14]

Musa ascended to power in the early 1300s^[j] under unclear circumstances. According to Musa's own account, his predecessor as Mansa of Mali, presumably [Muhammad ibn Qu](#),^[31] launched [two expeditions](#) to explore the [Atlantic Ocean](#) (200 ships for the first exploratory mission and 2,000 ships for the second). The Mansa led the second expedition himself, and appointed Musa as his deputy to rule the empire until he returned.^[32] When he did not return, Musa was crowned as mansa himself, marking a transfer of the line of succession from the descendants of Sunjata to the descendants of his brother Abu Bakr.^[33] Some modern historians have cast doubt on Musa's version of events, suggesting he may have deposed his predecessor and devised the story about the voyage to explain how he took power.^{[34][35]} Nonetheless, the possibility of such a voyage has been taken seriously by several historians.^{[36][37][38]}

According to the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, Musa had a wife named Inari Konte.^[39] Her *jamu* (clan name) Konte is shared with both Sunjata's mother Sogolon Konte and his arch-enemy [Sumanguru Konte](#).^[40]

Early reign

Musa was a young man when he became *Mansa*, possibly in his early twenties.^[41] Given the grandeur of his subsequent [hajj](#), it is likely that Musa spent much of his early reign preparing for it.^[42] Among these preparations would likely have been raids to capture and enslave people from neighboring lands, as Musa's entourage would include many thousands of slaves; the historian Michael Gomez estimates that Mali may have captured over 6,000 slaves per year for this



purpose.^[43] Perhaps because of this, Musa's early reign was spent in continuous military conflict with neighboring non-Muslim societies.^[43] In 1324, while in Cairo, Musa said that he had conquered 24 cities and their surrounding districts.^[44]

Pilgrimage to Mecca



Mansa Moussa (Rex Melly) on the map of [Angelino Dulcert](#) (1339)

Musa was a [Muslim](#), and his [hajj](#), or pilgrimage to [Mecca](#), made him well known across [North Africa](#) and the [Middle East](#). To Musa, Islam was "an entry into the cultured world of the Eastern Mediterranean".^[45] He would have spent much time fostering the growth of the religion within his empire. When Musa departed Mali for the Hajj, he left his son Muhammad to rule in his absence.^[46]

Musa made his pilgrimage between 1324 and 1325, spanning 2700 miles.^{[47][48][49]} His procession reportedly included 60,000 men, all wearing [brocade](#) and Persian silk, including 12,000 [slaves](#),^[50] who each carried 1.8 kg (4 lb) of gold bars, and heralds dressed in silks bearing gold staffs organized horses and handled bags.

Musa provided all necessities for the procession, feeding the entire company of men and animals.^[45] Those animals included 80 [camels](#), which each carried 23–136 kg (50–300 lb) of gold dust. Musa gave the gold to the poor he met along his route. Musa not only gave to the cities he passed on the way to Mecca, including [Cairo](#) and [Medina](#), but also traded gold for souvenirs. It was reported that he built a [mosque](#) every Friday.^[29] [Shihab al-Din al-'Umari](#), who visited Cairo shortly after Musa's pilgrimage to Mecca, noted that it was "a lavish display of power, wealth, and unprecedented by its size and pageantry".^[51] Musa made a major point of showing off his nation's wealth.

Musa and his entourage arrived at the outskirts of Cairo in July 1324. They camped for three days by the [Pyramids of Giza](#) before crossing the Nile into Cairo on 19 July.^{[k][52][53]} While in Cairo, Musa met with the Mamluk sultan [al-Nasir Muhammad](#), whose reign had already seen one [mansa](#), [Sakura](#), make the Hajj. Al-Nasir expected Musa to prostrate himself before him, which Musa initially refused to do. When he did finally bow, he said he was doing so for God alone.^[54]

Despite this initial awkwardness, the two rulers got along well and exchanged gifts. Musa and his entourage gave and spent freely while in Cairo. Musa stayed in the [Qarafa district](#) of Cairo and befriended its governor, ibn Amir Hajib, who learned much about Mali from him. Musa stayed in Cairo for three months, departing on 18 October^[1] with the official caravan to Mecca.^{[52][55]}

Musa's generosity continued as he traveled onward to Mecca, and he gave gifts to fellow pilgrims and the people of [Medina](#) and Mecca. While in Mecca, conflict broke out between a group of Malian pilgrims and a group of Turkic pilgrims in the [Masjid al-Haram](#). Swords were drawn, but before the situation escalated further, Musa persuaded his men to back down.^[56]

Musa and his entourage lingered in Mecca after the last day of the Hajj. Traveling separately from the main caravan, their return journey to Cairo was struck by catastrophe. By the time they reached [Suez](#), many of the Malian pilgrims had died of cold, starvation, or bandit raids, and they had lost many of their supplies.^{[57][58]} Having run out of money, Musa and his entourage were forced to borrow money and resell much of what they had purchased while in Cairo before the Hajj, and Musa went into debt to several merchants such as Siraj al-Din. However, Al-Nasir Muhammad returned Musa's earlier show of generosity with gifts of his own.^[59]

On his return journey, Musa met the [Andalusi](#) poet [Abu Ishaq al-Sahili](#), whose eloquence and knowledge of jurisprudence impressed him, and whom he convinced to travel with him to Mali.^[60] Other scholars Musa brought to Mali included [Maliki jurists](#).^[61]

According to the *[Tarikh al-Sudan](#)*, the cities of [Gao](#) and [Timbuktu](#) submitted to Musa's rule as he traveled through on his return to Mali.^[62] According to one account given by [ibn Khaldun](#), Musa's general Saghmanja conquered Gao. The other account claims that Gao had been conquered during the reign of [Mansa Sakura](#).^[63] Both of these accounts may be true, as Mali's control of Gao may have been weak, requiring powerful mansas to reassert their authority periodically.^[64]

Later reign

Construction in Mali

Musa embarked on a large building program, raising [mosques](#) and [madrasas](#) in Timbuktu and [Gao](#). Most notably, the ancient center of learning [Sankore Madrasah](#) (or University of Sankore) was constructed during his reign.^[65]

In Niani, Musa built the Hall of Audience, a building communicating by an interior door to the royal palace. It was "an admirable Monument", surmounted by a dome and adorned with [arabesques](#) of striking colours. The wooden window frames of an upper storey were plated with silver foil; those of a lower storey with gold. Like the Great Mosque, a contemporaneous and grandiose structure in Timbuktu, the Hall was built of cut stone.

During this period, there was an advanced level of urban living in the major centers of Mali. Sergio Domian, an Italian scholar of art and architecture, wrote of this period: "Thus was laid the foundation of an urban civilization. At the height of its power, Mali had at least 400 cities, and the interior of the [Niger Delta](#) was very densely populated."^[66]

Economy and education



The [Djinguereber Mosque](#), commissioned by Mansa Musa in 1327

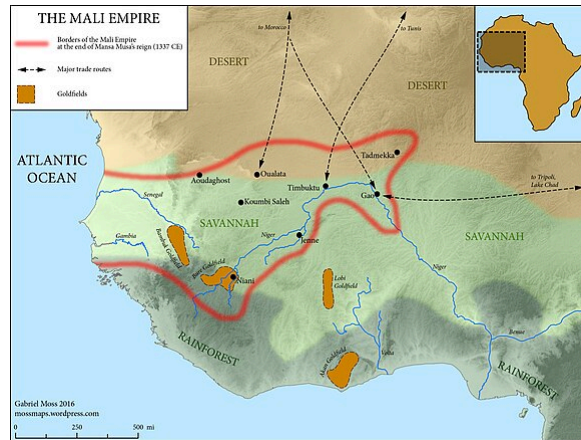
It is recorded that Mansa Musa traveled through the cities of [Timbuktu](#) and [Gao](#) on his way to [Mecca](#), and made them a part of his empire when he returned around 1325. He brought architects from [Andalusia](#), a region in Spain, and Cairo to build his grand palace in Timbuktu and the great [Djinguereber Mosque](#) that still stands.^[67]

Timbuktu soon became the center of trade, culture, and Islam; markets brought in merchants from [Hausaland](#), Egypt, and other African kingdoms, a university was founded in the city (as well as in the Malian cities of [Djenné](#) and [Ségou](#)), and Islam was spread through the markets and university, making Timbuktu a new area for Islamic scholarship.^[68] News of the Malian empire's city of wealth even traveled across the Mediterranean to southern Europe, where traders from [Venice](#), [Granada](#), and [Genoa](#) soon added Timbuktu to their maps to trade manufactured goods for gold.^[69]

The [University of Sankore](#) in Timbuktu was restaffed under Musa's reign with jurists, astronomers, and mathematicians.^[70] The university became a center of learning and culture, drawing Muslim scholars from around Africa and the Middle East to Timbuktu.

In 1330, the kingdom of [Mossi](#) invaded and conquered the city of Timbuktu. Gao had already been captured by Musa's general, and Musa quickly regained Timbuktu, built a rampart and stone fort, and placed a standing army to protect the city from future invaders.^[71] While Musa's palace has since vanished, the university and mosque still stand in Timbuktu.

Death



The Mali Empire at the time of Musa's death

The date of Mansa Musa's death is uncertain. Using the reign lengths reported by [Ibn Khaldun](#) to calculate back from the death of Mansa Suleyman in 1360, Musa would have died in 1332.^[72] However, Ibn Khaldun also reports that Musa sent an envoy to congratulate [Abu al-Hasan Ali](#) for his conquest of [Tlemcen](#), which took place in May 1337, but by the time Abu al-Hasan sent an envoy in response, Musa had died and Suleyman was on the throne, suggesting Musa died in 1337.^[73] In contrast, al-Umari, writing twelve years after Musa's hajj, in approximately 1337,^[74] claimed that Musa returned to Mali intending to abdicate and return to live in Mecca but died before he could do so,^[75] suggesting he died even earlier than 1332.^[76] It is possible that it was actually Musa's son Maghan who congratulated Abu al-Hasan, or Maghan who received Abu al-Hasan's envoy after Musa's death.^[77] The latter possibility is corroborated by Ibn Khaldun calling Suleyman Musa's son in that passage, suggesting he may have confused Musa's brother Suleyman with Musa's son Maghan.^[78] Alternatively, it is possible that the four-year reign Ibn Khaldun credits Maghan with actually referred to his ruling Mali while Musa was away on the hajj, and he only reigned briefly in his own right.^[79] [Nehemia Levtzion](#) regarded 1337 as the most likely date,^[73] which has been accepted by other scholars.^{[80][81]}

Legacy

Musa's reign is commonly regarded as Mali's golden age, but this perception may be the result of his reign being the best recorded by Arabic sources, rather than him necessarily being the wealthiest and most powerful mansa of Mali.^[82] The territory of the Mali Empire was at its height during the reigns of Musa and his brother Sulayman, and covered the Sudan-Sahel region of West Africa.^[83]

Musa is less renowned in Mandé oral tradition as performed by the *jeliw*.^[84] He is criticized for being unfaithful to tradition, and some of the *jeliw* regard Musa as having wasted Mali's wealth.^{[85][86]} However, some aspects of Musa appear to have been incorporated into a figure in

Mandé oral tradition known as Fajigi, which translates as "father of hope".^[87] Fajigi is remembered as having traveled to Mecca to retrieve ceremonial objects known as *boliw*, which feature in Mandé traditional religion.^[87] As Fajigi, Musa is sometimes conflated with a figure in oral tradition named Fakoli, who is best known as Sunjata's top general.^[88] The figure of Fajigi combines both Islam and traditional beliefs.^[87]

The name "Musa" has become virtually synonymous with pilgrimage in Mandé tradition, such that other figures who are remembered as going on a pilgrimage, such as Fakoli, are also called Musa.^[89]

Wealth

Mansa Musa is renowned for his wealth and generosity. Online articles in the 21st century have claimed that Mansa Musa was the richest person of all time.^[90] Historians such as Hadrien Collet have argued that Musa's wealth is impossible to accurately calculate.^{[90][86]} Contemporary Arabic sources may have been trying to express that Musa had more gold than they thought possible, rather than trying to give an exact number.^[91] Furthermore, it is difficult to meaningfully compare the wealth of historical figures such as Mansa Musa, due to the difficulty of separating the personal wealth of a monarch from the wealth of the state and the difficulty of comparing wealth in highly different societies.^[92] Musa may have brought as much as 18 tons of gold on his hajj,^[93] equal in value to over US\$1.397 billion in 2024.^[94] Musa himself further promoted the appearance of having vast, inexhaustible wealth by spreading rumors that gold grew like a plant in his kingdom.^[95]

According to some Arabic writers, Musa's gift-giving caused a depreciation in the value of gold in Egypt. Al-Umari said that before Musa's arrival, a *mithqal* of gold was worth 25 silver *dirhams*, but that it dropped to less than 22 *dirhams* afterward and did not go above that number for at least twelve years.^[96] Though this has been described as having "wrecked" Egypt's economy,^[86] the historian Warren Schultz has argued that this was well within normal fluctuations in the value of gold in Mamluk Egypt.^[97]

The wealth of the Mali Empire did not come from direct control of gold-producing regions, but rather trade and tribute.^[98] The gold Musa brought on his pilgrimage probably represented years of accumulated tribute that Musa would have spent much of his early reign gathering.^[42] Another source of income for Mali during Musa's reign was taxation of the copper trade.^[99]

According to several contemporary authors, such as Ibn Battuta, *Ibn al-Dawadari* and *al-Umari*, Mansa Musa ran out of money during his journey to Mecca and had to borrow from Egyptian merchants at a high rate of interest on his return journey. Al-Umari and *Ibn Khaldun* state that the

moneylenders were either never repaid or only partly repaid. Other sources disagree as to whether they were eventually and fully compensated.^{[100][101][102]}

Character

Arabic writers, such as Ibn Battuta and Abdallah ibn Asad al-Yafii, praised Musa's generosity, virtue, and intelligence.^{[26][16]} Ibn Khaldun said that he "was an upright man and a great king, and tales of his justice are still told."^[103]

Footnotes

- a. **Arabic:** منسا موسى, **romanized:** *Mansā Mūsā*
- b. The dates of Musa's reign are uncertain. Musa is reported to have reigned for 25 years, and different lines of evidence suggest he died either c. 1332 or c. 1337, with the 1337 date being considered more likely.^[3]
- c. The name is transcribed in the *Tarikh al-Sudan* as Kankan (**Arabic:** ككنن, **romanized:** *Kankan*), which Cissoko concluded was a representation of the Mandinka woman's name Kanku^[13]
- d. The *Tarikh Ibn al-Mukhtar* is a historiographical name for an untitled manuscript by Ibn al-Mukhtar. This document is also known as the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, which Nobili and Mathee have argued is properly the title of a 19th-century document that used Ibn al-Mukhtar's text as a source.^[20]
- e. The sixth mansa, **Sakura**, is omitted from this chart as he was not related to the others. The third and fourth mansas (Wati and Khalifa), brothers of Uli, and fifth (Abu Bakr), a nephew of Uli, Wati, and Khalifa, are omitted to save space.
- f. Name from oral tradition
- g. Name from oral tradition
- h. Musa's name Kanku Musa means "Musa son of Kanku", but the genealogy may not be literal.^[24]
- i. Arabic sources omit Faga Leye, referring to Musa as Musa ibn Abi Bakr. This can be interpreted as either "Musa son of Abu Bakr" or "Musa descendant of Abu Bakr." It is implausible that Abu Bakr was Musa's father, due to the amount of time between Sunjata's reign and Musa's.^[25]

j. The exact date of Musa's accession is debated. Ibn Khaldun claims Musa reigned for 25 years, so his accession is dated to 25 years before his death. Musa's death may have occurred in 1337, 1332, or possibly even earlier, giving 1307 or 1312 as plausible approximate years of accession. 1312 is the most widely accepted by modern historians.^{[29][30]}

k. 26 Rajab 724

l. 28 Shawwal

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98. Gomez 2018, pp. 107–108.
99. Levtzion & Hopkins 2000, p. 272.
100. Gomez 2018, pp. 119–120

101. Abbou, Tahar (2020). "Mansa Musa's Journey to Mecca and Its Impact on Western Sudan (Conference: 'Routes of Hajj in Africa', at International University of Africa, Khartoum)" (<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343431925>) .
"With his lavish spending and generosity in Cairo, (Mansa Musa) ran out of money and had to borrow at high rates of interest for the return journey. Ibn Battuta says that Mansa Musa borrowed 50,000 dinars from Siraj al-Din ibn al-Kuwayk, a rich merchant from Alexandria, after he had spent all his wealth."
102. Whalen, Brett Edward, ed. (2011). *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: A Reader* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=RwCHDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA308>) . University of Toronto Press. p. 308.
ISBN 9781442603844. "[Mansa Musa] could not meet his expenses. He therefore borrowed money from the principal merchants. Among those merchants who were in his company were the Banu I-Kuwayk, who gave him a loan of 50,000 dinars. He sold to them the palace which the sultan had bestowed on him as a gift. He [the sultan] approved it. Siraj al-Din b. al-Kuwayk sent his vizier along with him to collect what he had loaned to him but the vizier died there. Siraj al-Din sent another [emissary] with his son. He [the emissary] died but the son, Fakhr al-Din Abu Jafar, got back some of it. Mansa Musa died before he [Siraj al-Din] died, so they obtained nothing more from him."
103. [Levtzion & Hopkins 2000](#), p. 334.

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External links

- Mansa Musa I (https://www.worldhistory.org/Mansa_Musa_I/) at World History Encyclopedia
- Mansa Moussa: Pilgrimage of Gold (<https://web.archive.org/web/20100210111328/http://www.history.com/classroom/unesco/timbuktu/mansamoussa.html>) (archived) at History Channel's History.com
- Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa (<https://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/exhibitions/2019/caravans-of-gold-frag>)

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