

**Mali** The state of Ghana flourished for several hundred years, but by the twelfth century, weakened by ruinous wars with Berber tribesmen, it had begun to decline, and it collapsed at the end of the century. In its place rose a number of new trading societies, including large territorial states like Mali and Songhai in the west, Kanem-Bornu in the east, and small commercial city-states like the Hausa states, located in what is today northern Nigeria (see Map 8.4).

The greatest of the states that emerged after the destruction of Ghana was Mali. Extending from the Atlantic coast inland as far as the trading cities of Timbuktu and Gao on the Niger River, Mali built its wealth and power on the gold trade. But the heartland of Mali was situated south of the Sahara in the savanna region, where sufficient moisture enabled farmers to grow such crops as sorghum, millet, and rice. The farmers lived in villages ruled by a local chieftain (called a *mansa*), who served as both religious and administrative leader and was responsible for forwarding tax revenues from the village to higher levels of government.

The primary wealth of the country was accumulated in the cities. Here lived the merchants, who were primarily of local origin, although many were now practicing Muslims. Commercial activities were taxed but were apparently so lucrative that both the merchants and the kings prospered. One of the most powerful kings of Mali was Mansa Musa (1312–1337), whose primary contribution to his people was probably not economic prosperity but the Muslim faith. Mansa Musa strongly encouraged the

building of mosques and the study of the Qur'an in his kingdom and imported scholars and books to introduce his subjects to the message of Allah. One visitor from Europe, writing in the late fifteenth century, reported:

The rich king of Timbuktu has many plates and scepters of gold, some whereof weigh 1,300 pounds; and he keeps a magnificent and well-furnished court. When he travels anywhere, he rides upon a camel which is led by some of his noblemen: and so he does likewise when he goes to warfare, and all his soldiers ride upon horses. . . . They often have skirmishes with those that refuse to pay tribute and, so many as they may take, they sell unto the merchants of Timbuktu. . . . Here are a great store of doctors, judges, priests and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges. And hither are brought divers manuscripts of written books out of Barbary [North Africa] which are sold for more money than any other merchandise. The coin of Timbuktu is of gold without any stamp or superscription: but in matters of small value they use certain shells [cowrie shells] brought hither out of the kingdom of Persia.<sup>4</sup>

START

## The Empire of Mali and Sundiata, the "Lion Prince"

producing areas to the south. Malinke merchants, or **juula**, formed small partnerships and groups to carry out trade throughout the area. They spread beyond the borders of the empire and throughout much of west Africa.

The beginning of Malinke expansion is attributed to **Sundiata** (sometimes written Sunjata), a brilliant leader whose exploits were celebrated in a great oral tradition. The **griots**, professional oral historians who also served as keepers of traditions and advisors to kings, began their epic histories of Mali with Sundiata, the "Lion Prince."

Listen then sons of Mali, children of the black people, listen to my word, for I am going to tell you of Sundiata, the father of the Bright Country, of the savanna land, the ancestor of those who draw the bow, the master of a hundred vanquished kings. . . . He was great among kings, he was peerless among men; he was beloved of God because he was the last of the great conquerors.

After a difficult childhood, Sundiata emerged from a period of interfamily and regional fighting to create a unified state. Oral histories ascribed to him the creation of the basic rules and relationships of Malinke society and the outline of the government of the empire of Mali. He became the **mansa**, or emperor. It was said that Sundiata "divided up the world," which meant that he was considered the originator of social arrangements. Sixteen clans of free people were entitled to bear arms and carry the bow and quiver of arrows as the symbol of their status, five clans were devoted to religious duties, and four clans were specialists such as blacksmiths and griots. Division and grouping by clans apparently represented traditional patterns among the peoples of the savanna in ancient Ghana as well, but Sundiata as the hero of origins was credited with creating this social arrangement.

Although he created the political institutions of rule that allowed for great regional and ethnic differences in the federated provinces, he also stationed garrisons to maintain loyalty and security. Travel was secure and crime was severely punished, as **Ibn Batuta**, the Arab traveler, reported: "Of all peoples," he said, "the Blacks are those who most hate injustice, and their

The empire of Mali, centered between the Senegal and Niger rivers, was the creation of the Malinke peoples, who in the 13th century broke away from the control of Ghana, which was by then in steady decline. In Mali the old forms of kingship were reinforced by Islam. As in many of the Sudanic states, the rulers supported Islam by building mosques, attending public prayers, and supporting preachers. In return, sermons to the faithful emphasized obedience and support of the king. Mali became a model of these Islamicized Sudanic kingdoms. The economic basis of society in the Mali Empire was agriculture. This was combined with an active tradition of trade in many products, although like Ghana Mali also depended on its access to gold-



CASE STUDY  
Travel  
Accounts vs.  
Oral History

Some:  
stars

emperor pardons none who is guilty of it." The security of travelers and their goods was an essential element in a state where commerce played so important a role.

Sundiata died about 1260, but his successors expanded the borders of Mali until it controlled most of the Niger valley almost to the Atlantic coast. A sumptuous court was established and hosted a large number of traders. Mali grew wealthy from the trade. Perhaps the most famous of Sundiata's successors was **Mansa Kankan Musa** (c. 1312–1337), whose pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 brought the attention of the Muslim world to Mali, as was described in the beginning of this chapter. Mansa Musa's trip had other consequences as well. From Mecca he brought back poet and architect **Ishak al-Sahili**, who came from Muslim Spain. The architect directed the building of several important mosques, and eventually a distinctive form of Sudanic architecture developed that made use of beaten clay. This can still be seen in the great mosque of Jenne (Figure 13.3). Mali's contact with the outer world brought change and innovation.



IMAGE  
The Catalan  
Map

## City Dwellers and Villagers

The cities of the western Sudan began to resemble those of north Africa, but with a distinctive local architectural style. The towns were commercial and often included craft specialists and a resident foreign

merchant community. The military expansion of states such as Ghana, Mali, and later Songhay contributed to their commercial success because the power of the state protected traders. A cosmopolitan court life developed as merchants and scholars were attracted by the power and protection of Mali. Mandinka traders ranged across the Sudan and exploited their position as intermediaries. Cities of commercial exchange flourished, such as Jenne and **Timbuktu**, which lay just off the flood plain on the great bend in the Niger River. Timbuktu was reported to have a population of 50,000, and by the 14th century, its great Sankore mosque contained a library and an associated university where scholars, jurists, and Muslim theologians studied. The book was the symbol of civilization in the Islamic world, and it was said that the book trade in Timbuktu was the most lucrative business.



The Maghrib and West Africa

For most people in the empire of Mali and the other Sudanic states, life was not centered on the royal court, the great mosque, or long-distance trade but rather on the agricultural cycle and the village. Making a living from the land was the preoccupation of most people, and about 80 percent of the villagers lived by farming. This was a difficult life. The soils of the savanna were sandy and shallow. Plows were rarely used. The villagers were people of the hoe who looked to the skies in the spring for the first rains to start their planting. Rice in the river valleys, millet, sorghums, some wheat, fruits, and vegetables provided the basis of daily life in the village and supplied the caravan trade. Even a large farm rarely exceeded 10 acres, and most were much smaller. Clearing land often was done communally, accompanied by feasts and competition, but the farms belonged to families and were worked by them. A man with two wives and several unmarried sons could work more land than a man with one wife and a smaller family. Polygamy, the practice of having multiple wives, was common in the region, and it remains so today.

Given the difficulties of the soil, the periodic droughts, insect pests, storage problems, and the limitations of technology, the farmers of the Sudanic states—by the methods of careful cultivation, crop rotation, and in places such as Timbuktu, the use of irrigation—were able to provide for their people the basic foods that supported them and the imperial states on which they were based. The hoe and the bow became symbols of the common people of the savanna states.

### The Songhay Kingdom

As the power of Mali began to wane, a successor state from within the old empire was already beginning to emerge. The people of **Songhay** dominated the middle

areas of the Niger valley. Traditionally, the society of Songhay was made up of “masters of the soil,” that is, farmers, herders, and “masters of the waters,” or fishers. Songhay had begun to form in the 7th century as an independent kingdom, perhaps under a Berber dynasty. By 1010, a capital was established at Gao on the Niger River, and the rulers had become Muslims, although the majority of the population remained pagan. Dominated by Mali for a while, by the 1370s Songhay had established its independence again and began to thrive as new sources of gold from the west African forests began to pass through its territory. Gao became a large city with a resident foreign merchant community and several mosques. Under a dynamic leader, **Sunni Ali** (1464–1492), the empire of Songhay was forged.

Sunni Ali was a great tactical commander and a ruthless leader. His cavalry expanded the borders and seized the traditional trading cities of Timbuktu and Jenne. The middle Niger valley fell under his control, and he developed a system of provincial administration to mobilize recruits for the army and rule the far-flung conquests. Although apparently a Muslim, he met any challenge to his authority even when it came from the Muslim scholars of Timbuktu, whom he persecuted. A line of Muslim rulers who took the military title *askia* succeeded him. These rulers, especially **Muhammad the Great**, extended the boundaries of the empire so that by the mid-16th century Songhay dominated the central Sudan.

Life in the Songhay Empire followed many of the patterns established in the previous savanna states. The fusion of Islamic and pagan populations and traditions continued. Muslim clerics and jurists sometimes were upset by the pagan beliefs and practices that continued among the population, and even more by the local interpretation of Islamic law. They wanted to impose a strict interpretation of the law of Islam and were shocked that men and women mixed freely in the markets and streets, that women went unveiled.

Songhay remained the dominant power in the region until the end of the 16th century. In 1591, a Muslim army from Morocco, equipped with muskets, crossed the Sahara and defeated the vastly larger forces of Songhay. This sign of weakness stimulated internal revolts against the ruling family, and eventually the parts of the old empire broke away.

The demise of the Songhay imperial structure did not mean the end of the political and cultural tradition of the western Sudan. Other states that combined Muslim and pagan traditions rose among the **Hausa** peoples of northern Nigeria, based on cities such as Kano and Katsina. The earliest Muslim ruler of Kano took control in the late 14th century and turned the city



Leo Africanus's Description of West Africa

## The Kingdom of Mali (ca 1200–1450)

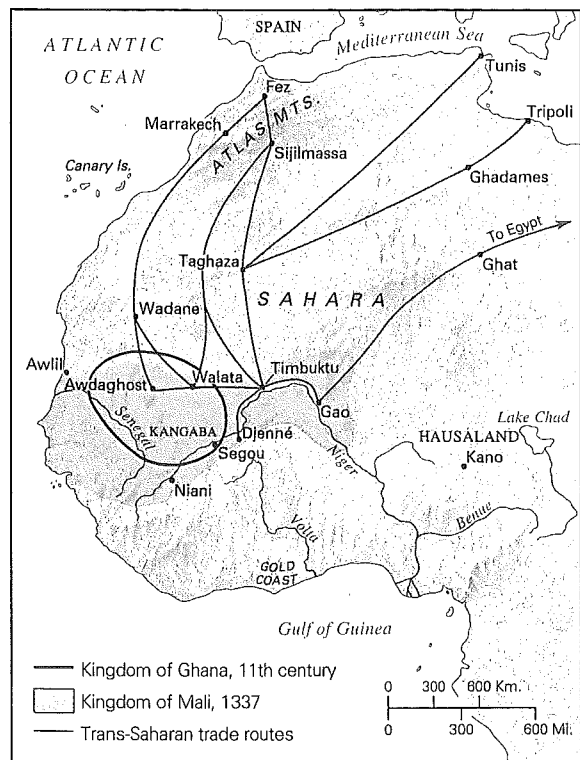
During the century after the collapse of Kumbi, a cloud of obscurity hung over the western Sudan. The kingdom of Ghana split into several small kingdoms that feuded among themselves. One people, the Mandinke, lived in the kingdom of Kangaba on the upper Niger River. The Mandinke had long been part of the Ghanaian empire, and the Mandinke and Soninke belonged to the same language group. Kangaba formed the core of the new empire of Mali. Building on Ghanaian foundations, Mali developed into a better-organized and more powerful state than Ghana.

The kingdom of Mali (Map 10.2) owed its greatness to two fundamental assets. First, its strong agricultural and commercial base provided for a large population and enormous wealth. Second, Mali had two rulers, Sundiata and Mansa Musa, who combined military success with exceptionally creative personalities. (See the feature “Listening to the Past: The Epic of Old Mali” on pages 302–303.)

The earliest surviving evidence about the Mandinke, dating from the early eleventh century, indicates that they were extremely successful at agriculture. Consistently large harvests throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries meant a plentiful supply of food, which encouraged steady population growth. The geographical location of Kangaba also placed the Mandinke in an ideal position in West African trade. Earlier, during the period of Ghanaian hegemony, the Mandinke had acted as middlemen in the gold and salt traffic flowing north and south. In the thirteenth century, Mandinke traders formed companies, traveled widely, and gradually became a major force in the entire West African trade.

Sundiata (r. ca 1230–1255) set up his capital at Niani, transforming the city into an important financial and trading center. He then embarked on a policy of imperial expansion. Through a series of military victories, Sundiata and his successors absorbed into Mali other territories of the former kingdom of Ghana and established hegemony over the trading cities of Gao, Djenné, and Walata.

These expansionist policies were continued in the fourteenth century by Sundiata’s descendant Mansa Musa (r. ca 1312–1337), early Africa’s most famous ruler. In the language of the Mandinke, *mansa* means “emperor.” Mansa Musa fought many campaigns and checked every attempt at rebellion. Ultimately his influence extended northward to several Berber cities in the Sahara, eastward to Timbuktu and Gao, and westward as far as the Atlantic Ocean. Throughout his territories,



**MAP 10.2 The Kingdom of Mali** The economic strength of the kingdom of Mali rested heavily on the trans-Saharan trade.

he maintained strict royal control over the rich trans-Saharan trade. Thus this empire, roughly twice the size of the Ghanaian kingdom and containing perhaps 8 million people, brought Mansa Musa fabulous wealth.

Mansa Musa built on the foundations of his predecessors. The stratified aristocratic structure of Malian society perpetuated the pattern set in Ghana, as did the system of provincial administration and annual tribute. The emperor took responsibility for the territories that formed the heart of the empire and appointed governors to rule the outlying provinces or dependent kingdoms. But Mansa Musa made a significant innovation: in a practice strikingly similar to a system used in both China and France at that time, he appointed members of the royal family as provincial governors. He could count on their loyalty, and they received valuable experience in the work of government.

In another aspect of administration, Mansa Musa also differed from his predecessors. He became a devout Muslim. Although most of the Mandinke clung to their ancestral animism, Islamic practices and influences in Mali multiplied.



**Mali Couple** The jewels on their necks, wrists, and ankles suggest people of wealth. Terra cotta (literally, baked earth) was a frequently used material in the region. (Werner Forman Archive/Art Resource, NY)

The most celebrated event of Mansa Musa's reign was his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324–1325, during which he paid a state visit to the sultan of Egypt. Mansa Musa's entrance into Cairo was magnificent. Preceded by five hundred slaves, each carrying a six-pound staff of gold, he followed with a huge host of retainers including one hundred elephants each bearing one hundred pounds of gold. The emperor lavished his wealth on the citizens of the Egyptian capital. Writing twelve years later, al-Omari, one of the sultan's officials, recounts:

*This man Mansa Musa spread upon Cairo the flood of his generosity: there was no person, officer of the court, or holder of any office of the Sultanate who did not receive a sum of gold from him. The people of Cairo earned incalculable sums from him, whether by buying and selling or by gifts. So much gold was current in Cairo that it ruined the value of money.<sup>17</sup>*

Mansa Musa's gold brought about terrible inflation throughout Egypt. For the first time, the Mediterranean world gained concrete knowledge of the wealth and power of the black kingdom of Mali, and it began to be known as one of the great empires of the world.

Mali retained this international reputation into the fifteenth century.

Musa's pilgrimage also had significant consequences within Mali. He gained some understanding of the Mediterranean countries and opened diplomatic relations with the Muslim rulers of Morocco and Egypt. His zeal for the Muslim faith and Islamic culture increased. Musa brought back from Arabia the distinguished architect al-Saheli, whom he commissioned to build new mosques at Timbuktu and other cities. These mosques served as centers for the conversion of Africans. Musa employed Muslim engineers to build in brick. He also encouraged Malian merchants and traders to wear the distinctive flowing robes and turbans of Muslim males.

Timbuktu began as a campsite for desert nomads. Under Mansa Musa, it grew into a thriving entrepôt, attracting merchants and traders from North Africa and all parts of the Mediterranean world. These people brought with them cosmopolitan attitudes and ideas. In the fifteenth century, Timbuktu developed into a great center for scholarship and learning. Architects, astronomers, poets, lawyers, mathematicians, and theologians flocked there. One hundred fifty schools were



devoted to the study of the Qur'an. The school of Islamic law enjoyed a distinction in Africa comparable to the prestige of the school at Cairo (see page 267). A vigorous trade in books flourished in Timbuktu. Leo Africanus, a sixteenth-century Muslim traveler and writer who later converted to Christianity, recounts that around 1500 Timbuktu had a

*great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men that are bountifully maintained at the king's cost and charges. And hitherto are brought diverse manuscripts or written books out of Barbarie the north African states, from Egypt to the Atlantic Ocean which are sold for more money than any other merchandise.*

It is easy to understand why the university at Timbuktu was called by a contemporary writer "the Queen of the Sudan." Timbuktu's tradition and reputation for African scholarship lasted until the eighteenth century.

Moreover, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, many Muslim intellectuals and Arab traders married native African women. These unions brought into being a group of racially mixed people. The necessity of living together harmoniously, the traditional awareness of diverse cultures, and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of

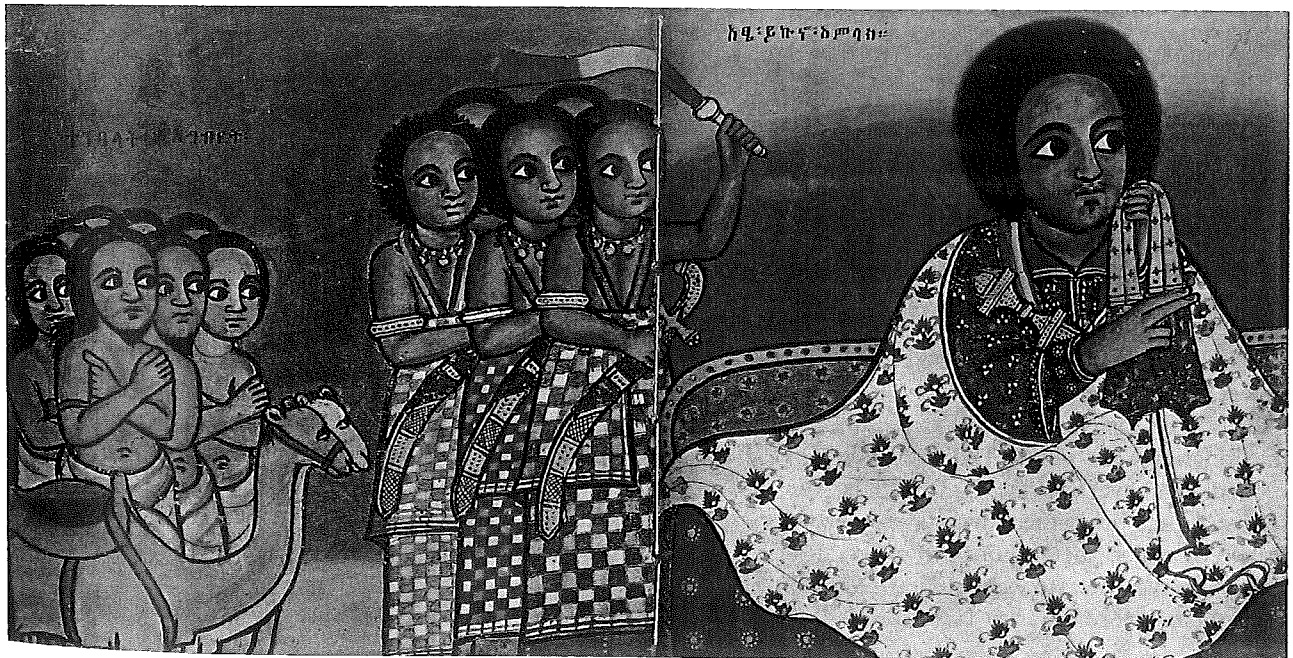
Timbuktu all contributed to a rare degree of racial toleration and understanding. After visiting the court of Mansa Musa's successor in 1352–1353, Ibn Battuta (see page 268) observed that:

*the Negroes possess some admirable qualities. They are seldom unjust, and have a greater abhorrence of injustice than any other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveler nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers. . . . They do not confiscate the property of any white man who dies in their country, even if it be uncounted wealth. On the contrary, they give it into the charge of some trustworthy person among the whites, until the rightful heir takes possession of it.<sup>18</sup>*

### Ethiopia: The Christian Kingdom of Axum

Egyptian culture exerted a profound influence on the sub-Saharan kingdom of Nubia in northeastern Africa (Map 10.3). Nubia's capital was at Meroe; thus the country is often referred to as the Nubian kingdom of Meroe. As part of the Roman Empire, Egypt was naturally subject to Hellenistic and Roman cultural forces,

**Emperor Yekuno Amlak** The Ethiopian emperor's claim of possessing Solomon's blood won him considerable popular support in his war against the decaying Zagwe dynasty, which he overthrew in 1270. Here he receives Muslim ambassadors while slaves attend him. (*British Library*)





## CHAPTER

# 13

# Armed African Civilizations and the Spread of Islam

African Societies: Diversity  
and Similarities

Kingdoms of the Grasslands

**DOCUMENT:** The Great  
Oral Tradition and the Epic of  
Sundiata

**VISUALIZING THE PAST:**  
The Architecture of Faith

The Swahili Coast of East  
Africa

Peoples of the Forest and  
Plains

**IN DEPTH:** Two Transitions  
in the History of World  
Population

**GLOBAL CONNECTIONS:**  
Internal Development and  
Global Contacts

In 1324, a great caravan of more than a hundred camels, many slaves, and a multitude of retainers crossed the arid Sahara desert and wended its way into Cairo, on the banks of the Nile. Mansa Musa, lord of the African empire of Mali, was making the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, distributing gold with an open hand. The wealth and prodigality of the young king dazzled all who witnessed it, his polished manners and command of Arabic impressed those who met him, and his fame spread throughout the Islamic world and beyond. The chronicler al-Omari, who visited Cairo a dozen years later, reported that people still spoke of the entourage of the young king that had spent so much gold in the markets and had given so much as gifts and alms that the price of gold actually declined due to its ample supply. Other great caravans had made the trek from Mali across the desert before and some came after but none had been so magnificent. Mansa Musa's caravan symbolized the wealthy potential of Africa, but even by the time he made his trip, west African gold was already well-known in the world economy and Africa was already involved in contacts of various kinds with other areas of the world.

Mali, the kingdom of this great lord, fascinated the Muslim observers in Cairo, Damascus, and Fez. Like the earlier kingdom of Ghana, Mali was another state of the savannah country, between the desert and the forests of west Africa. Formed by the Malinke peoples, its access to gold and control of the caravan routes had promoted its rise, and its powerful army had created an empire that extended over much of the savannah from the Niger to the Senegal River. Its ruling families had converted to Islam, but the famous and cosmopolitan Muslim traveler Abdallah Ibn Batuta, who visited Mali not long after Mansa Musa's pilgrimage, found the local customs and food less refined than those of the elegant courts to which he was accustomed and some of the practices shocking. Yet much was recognizable to him as well. Mali was an African kingdom that had become an extension of the Islamic world, and its success was tied to the trade routes that linked it to the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

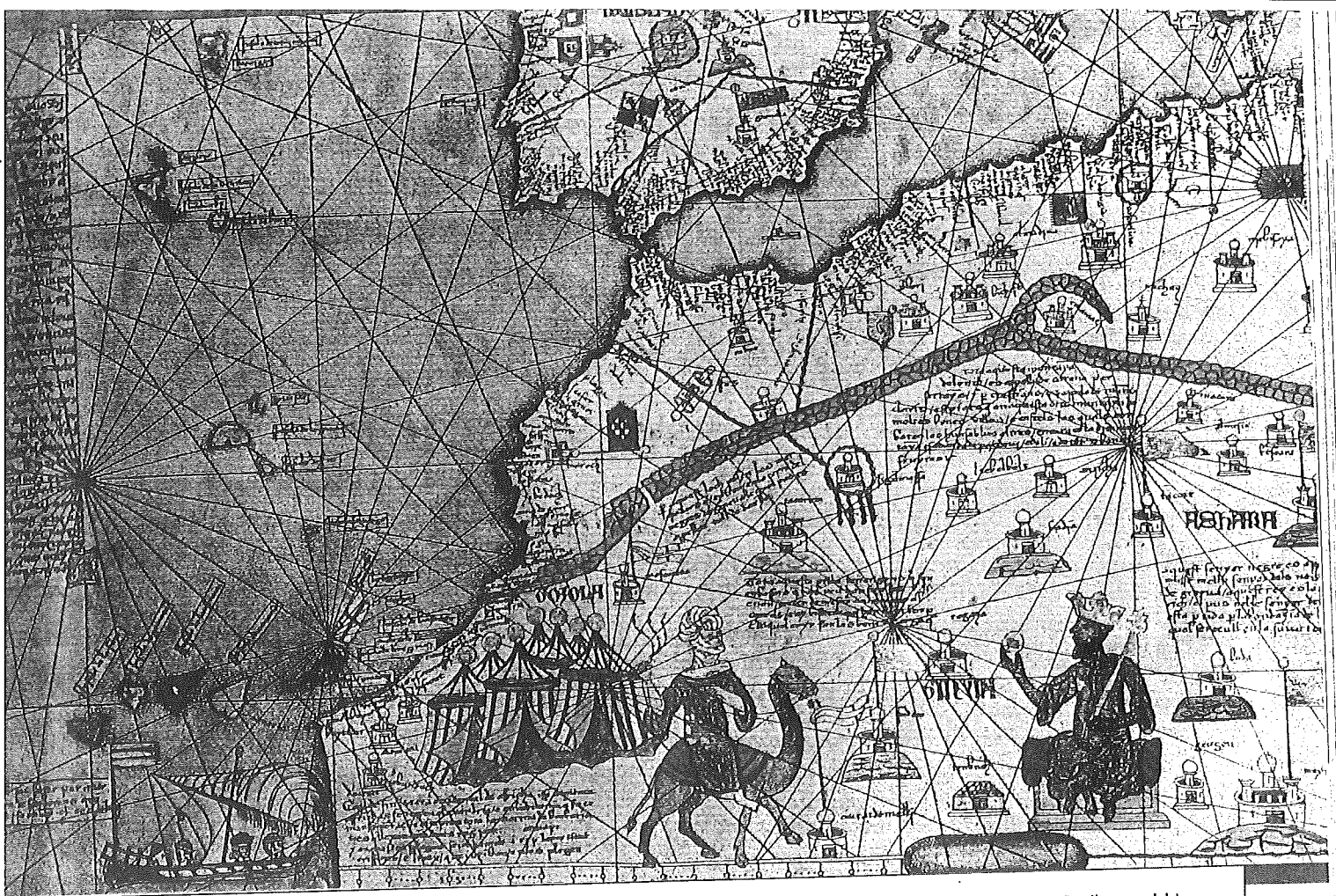


FIGURE 13.1 In 1324, Mansa Musa, King of Mali, made a pilgrimage to Mecca that brought the attention of the Muslim world to the wealth of his kingdom. A Jewish cartographer in Spain, Abraham Cresques, depicted the trip more than fifty years later in the map shown above. Mansa Musa is depicted at the bottom right with a golden sceptre and crown, symbolizing his royal power, and an enormous gold nugget, symbolizing his country's wealth.

The history of Mali underlines the fact that Africa below the Sahara was never totally isolated from the centers of civilization in Egypt, west Asia, or the Mediterranean, but for long periods the contacts were difficult and intermittent. At the time of the Roman Empire, sub-Saharan Africa, like northern Europe, was on the edge of the major centers of civilization. After the fall of Rome, the civilizations of Byzantium and the Islamic world provided a link between the civilizations of the Middle East and the Mediterranean as well as the areas on their frontiers, such as northern Europe and Africa. In Africa, between roughly 800 and 1500 C.E., contacts with the outside world increased as part of the growing international network. Social, religious, and technological changes took place. Chief among these changes was the arrival of the followers of the prophet Muhammad. The spread of Islam from its heartland in the Middle East and north Africa to India and southeast Asia revealed the power of the religion and its commercial and sometimes military attributes. Civilizations were changed by Islam but retained their individuality. A similar pattern developed in sub-Saharan Africa as Islam provided new influences and contacts without uniting African culture as a whole with the Middle Eastern core. New religious, economic, and political patterns developed in relation to the Islamic surge, but great diversity remained.