Born around 1280AD, the man known as Musa was the tenth "Mansa" ("King of Kings") of the Mali Empire. At the time of Musa's rise to the throne, the Mali Empire consisted of lands formerly belonging to the Ghana Empire. Musa was the wealthiest ruler of his day and one of the wealthiest people of all time.

Mansa Musa came to the throne of Mali through the practice of appointing a deputy when a king went on pilgrimage to Mecca; that deputy would later be named as heir. According to scholars of the time, Musa was appointed to serve as deputy when the king embarked on an expedition to explore the limits of the Atlantic Ocean. When that king failed to return, Musa was proclaimed leader of the Mali Empire.

Musa was a devout Muslim and his pilgrimage to Mecca, required under the core teachings of Islam, made him well-known across both northern Africa and the Middle East. Making his pilgrimage in 1324, Musa's caravan was said to have included 60 thousand men, 12 thousand slaves (each of whom carried 4-pound gold bars), and assistants dressed in silks who carried gold staffs. Also in the caravan were 80 camels, reportedly carrying between 50 and 300 pounds of gold dust each. Musa himself provided all of the necessities for the caravan, feeding the entire company of men and animals. During the journey to Mecca, Musa gave gold to the poor he met along the road and is said to have built a mosque each and every Friday.

During his long return journey from Mecca in 1325, Musa heard news that his army had recaptured the city of Gao, which had long been an important - although rebellious - trading center. Musa made a detour and visited the city where he received, as hostages, the two song of the Gao king. Musa later educated them at his court.

Having returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca, Musa started a large building program, constructing mosques in Timbuktu and Gao. Most famously, the ancient center of learning known as Sankore Madrasah was built during his reign. Under the guidance of architects from Andalusia, Spain, Musa also build his grand palace in Timbuktu, as well as the Djinguereber Mosque that still stands today.
Under the reign of Mansa Musa, Timbuktu became a center of trade, culture, and Islamic scholarship. Markets brought in merchants from Nigeria, Egypt, and other African kingdoms and a university was founded in the city, allowing Islam to spread rapidly throughout the region. News of Timbuktu’s wealth traveled across the Mediterranean to southern Europe, where traders from Venice, Granada, and Genoa soon added Timbuktu to their list of places to trade manufactured goods in exchange for gold.

Although Mansa Musa died around 1337, his rule started an intellectual and economic expansion that would continue in Mali until the later middle ages. Under Musa, Mali was established as an economic "global power" and one of the academic capitals of the world. Musa’s military campaigns allowed Mali to become the most powerful kingdom in Africa, rivaled only by Morocco and Egypt.

1. How did Mansa Musa come to the throne of Mali?

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2. Why did Musa make a pilgrimage to Mecca?

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3. What is Musa said to have done while making his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324?

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4. How did the city of Timbuktu become a center of trade and culture during Musa’s reign?

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5. Explain ways in which the empire of Mali benefitted from the reign of Mansa Musa.

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