The Empire of Mali

by Al Omari, 1336

In the 1300s the western African empire of Mali controlled much of the world's gold supply. This gave the empire great wealth, and the wealthiest person of all was the king, or sultan. In 1324 the Mali king, Mansa Musa, made a pilgrimage to Mecca. All along his journey Mansa Musa gave gifts of gold to both rich and poor people. Twelve years later author Al Omari wrote down the remembrances of people who knew Mansa Musa. Al Omari wrote that Mansa Musa is the king who is "the most feared by his enemies and the most able to do good to those around him." What do you think the author meant by that comment?

The king of this country [Mansa Musa]... is the most important of the Muslim [black] kings; his land is the largest, his army the most numerous; he is the king who is the most powerful, the richest, the most fortunate, the most feared by his enemies and the most able to do good to those around him... The sultan of this country has sway over the land of the "desert of native gold," whence they bring him gold every year...

The sultan of this kingdom presides in his palace on a great balcony called bembe where he has a great seat of ebony that is like a throne fit for a large and tall person: on either side it is flanked by elephant tusks turned towards each other. His arms stand near him, being all of gold, saber, lance, quiver, bow and arrows. He wears wide trousers made of about twenty pieces [of stuff] of a kind which he alone may wear. Behind him there stand about a score of Turkish or other pages which are bought for him in Cairo: one of them, at his left, holds a silk umbrella surmounted by a dome and a bird of gold: the bird has the figure of a falcon. His officers are seated in a circle about him, in two rows, one to the right and one to the left; beyond them sit the chief commanders of his cavalry. In front of him there is a person who never leaves him and who is his executioner; also another who serves as intermediary [that is, official spokesman] between the sovereign and his subjects, and who is named the herald. In front of them again, there are drummers. Others dance before their sovereign, who enjoys this, and make him laugh. Two banners are spread behind him. Before him they keep two saddled and bridled horses in case he should wish to ride.

By 1490 Mali's place as the most powerful kingdom in western Africa had been taken over by the kingdom of Songhai.