

**History of West Africa****Biography**

# Sundiata

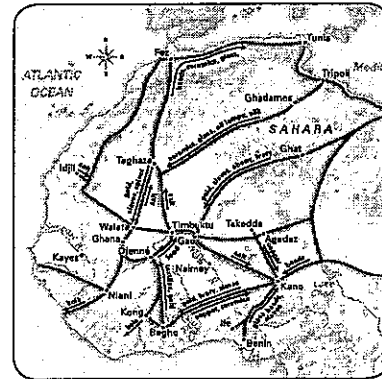
c. 1210-1260

**HOW HE AFFECTED THE REGION**

Sundiata was founder of the Mali Empire in West Africa. He united his people and turned a small kingdom into a powerful empire.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Sundiata's leadership allowed him to unite the different clans to form a powerful empire.*



Sundiata was, according to legend, the first emperor of Mali. Much of his story has been handed down through the oral accounts of the griots. Griots were West African poets, historians, and storytellers. It was their job to keep alive memories and accounts of the past.

According to these oral accounts, Sundiata and his 11 brothers were heirs to the throne of Kangaba. Kangaba was a small kingdom near today's Mali-Guinea border in Africa. In the early 1200s Kangaba was invaded by Sumanguru, the neighboring king. Sumanguru killed all of Sundiata's 11 brothers. Sundiata was spared because he was sickly and weak. Sumanguru thought that Sundiata would not live long anyway.

But Sundiata did survive. He became the leader of a village and put together an army of his own. Around 1235, he led his army against Sumanguru. In the battle of Kirina, Sundiata defeated Sumanguru. At that time, the area was populated by many different **clans**. These clans were mainly made up of farmers who had joined a clan to protect themselves against nomadic invaders. Sundiata united these various clans to form the Mali Empire.

**VOCABULARY**

**clan** group with common characteristics or interests

**imperial** relating to an empire

Once he established the empire, Sundiata dedicated himself to establishing an **imperial** system and administering the empire.

Sundiata's generals continued to conquer nearby lands, which greatly expanded the Mali Empire. They conquered important trade centers and gold fields throughout Africa. Under Sundiata's leadership, the region was peaceful and the gold trade was plentiful and profitable. It was not long before Mali became an important trade center. Sundiata's empire and the administrative system he established survived even after his death, despite internal warfare to determine who would succeed him.

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

**1. Recall** According to legend, what empire did Sundiata establish?

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**2. Analyze** Why did Mali become a trade center?

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**ACTIVITY**

Pretend that you are a griot during Sundiata's reign. You are going to tell the people a story about something important that Sundiata did and that is important to the history of the Mali Empire. Write down your description of the event.