



Key words

Empire: A group of countries ruled by another country.

Sonni dynasty: The first ruling dynasty (family) of the Songhai Empire.

Pagan: Local religious traditions, often nature-based.

Besiege: To surround a place with an army to force it to surrender.

Trans-Saharan trade routes: Trade routes across the Sahara desert, primarily using camels.

Who was Sonni Ali?

- The 15th ruler of the Songhai Empire, reigning from 1464–1492.
- He was the son of Sonni Muhammad Da'o, a previous Sonni ruler.
- His mother came from Fara, a pagan area.
- Although he received a Muslim education, he followed pagan practices.
- Little is known about his early life as a member of the ruling class.

Sonni Ali's inclusivity

- To avoid religious conflict, he allowed newly incorporated peoples to maintain their own religions.
- The military included soldiers from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.
- Captured men were encouraged to join the Songhai forces.

The seizure of Timbuktu (1468)

- Timbuktu, an important centre for trade, culture, and learning, was located 20 km north of the Niger River.
- Some African historians claim that Sonni Ali was invited by Muslim leaders to defend the city from the Tuareg people, while Muslim historians argue that he seized it by force.
- Sonni Ali sent a messenger to Timbuktu to warn its citizens of his arrival and to encourage them to flee.
- When his forces entered the city, many had heeded his warning and left.
- According to one chronicle, the *Tarikh al-Fattash*, he executed the Muslim scholars who remained and ordered books to be burned.
- The capture of Timbuktu gave Sonni Ali control of the Trans-Saharan trade routes and greatly strengthened the Songhai Empire.

The Songhai Empire

- The Songhai Empire developed along the Niger River in West Africa after the fall of the Mali Empire.
- It became one of the most powerful states in West African history during the 15th and 16th centuries.
- In 1464, Sonni Ali became its ruler and began expanding and strengthening the empire.

Sonni Ali's leadership style

- Some say he was a great leader, others say he was power-hungry and violent.
- He was ruthless and his enemies were afraid of him, which he used this to his advantage in battle.
- He centralised control of the empire, allowing trusted officials to help him maintain control.
- He dealt with revolts and opposition harshly.
- He encouraged trading to help the wealth of the empire grow further.

Sonni Ali's strategies and tactics

- Sonni Ali aimed to strengthen the Songhai Empire through territorial expansion.
- He developed a versatile military capable of employing various battle strategies.
- He developed the Songhai navy, using battle canoes to navigate the Niger River.
- His military became professional, with soldiers being trained and paid to ensure battle readiness.
- His cavalry used lances and wore iron breastplates for protection.
- He employed a range of tactics in battle, including surprise attacks, besieging cities, and cutting off supplies.
- To maintain control over conquered peoples, he combined tolerance with threats.

The seizure of Djenné (1472)

- Djenné was a significant trading centre, rich in culture and vital to the gold trade.
- The city was well defended, with high walls and surrounded by a deep river.
- Sonni Ali arrived at Djenné with 400 canoes of soldiers.
- Unable to breach the city's defences, he ordered a siege, cutting off supplies.
- The siege is said to have lasted for 7 years, 7 months and 7 days.
- The Songhai eventually succeeded, further solidifying their control over the Niger River and key trading routes.

The end of the Sonni Dynasty under Sonni Baru at the Battle of Angao (1493)

- There are no reliable accounts of how Sonni Ali died.
- Theory 1: He was struck down by God as a punishment.
- Theory 2: He drowned in a flash flood of the Niger River.
- Theory 3: He was murdered by his general, Muhammad Ture, and was hastily buried before people could see his wounds.
- Sonni Ali's son, Sonni Baru, inherited the throne in 1492 but was quickly challenged by Muhammad Ture.
- Muhammad Ture, an experienced general in the Songhai army, had the support of Muslim scholars.
- Sonni Baru lost the Battle of Angao (Anfaao), which ended the Sonni dynasty.
- Muhammad Ture then took the name Askia Muhammad and started the Askia dynasty of the Songhai Empire.