



### 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 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 (Anfao), which ended the Sonni dynasty.
- Muhammad Ture then took the name Askia Muhammad and started the Askia dynasty of the Songhai Empire.