



3.3.5 The decline and fall of the Songhai Empire

Key vocabulary

Successor	The next person to rule.
Exiled	To be banned from your country.
Tondibi	A place in present-day Mali where the Battle of Tondibi took place in 1591.
Tura	A term for a high-ranking officer or noble in certain empires.
Askia	Ruler of the Songhai Empire.
Sultan	Ruler of an Islamic country or region.
Infantry	Fighters on foot.
Cavalry	Fighters on horseback.
Tuaregs	A group of people who lived in the Sahara Desert, a nomadic people who controlled northern trade routes and were expert camel drivers along the trans-Saharan trade.

The destruction of Timbuktu

- Timbuktu was an important trading centre and home to one of the most significant collections of Islamic and African scholarship in the world.
- When advancing into the city, the Moroccan invaders destroyed some of these important manuscripts.
- These manuscripts were handwritten, some were centuries old and irreplaceable.
- Some people hid manuscripts rather than allow the Moroccans to take them.
- Library buildings were also destroyed, with some being burned to the ground.
- The Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu disrupted trade in the area, which weakened the city.

The Battle of Tondibi, 1591

- The Sultan of Morocco, Ahmad al-Mansur, attacked as the Songhai Empire was weak and he wanted to control the trans-Saharan gold trade.
- The battle took place in 1591 between the Songhai and Moroccan forces.
- The Songhai were disadvantaged from the start as they relied on traditional weapons, whereas the Moroccans had superior weapons, including firearms and cannons.
- The battle took place at Tondibi, near Gao.
- The Songhai cavalry was ineffective when fighting against the cannons and guns, which the Moroccans constantly used throughout the battle.
- The Songhai were easily defeated. Askia Ishaq II fled the battlefield, and the Moroccans advanced further into the Songhai Empire.

Regional rivalries and military commanders

- As there was a lack of strong leadership, some local governors took control of their areas, making decisions for themselves.
- Cities such as Timbuktu and Djenné began to ignore instructions from the capital, Gao.
- Groups such as the Tuaregs took greater control over the northern trade routes.
- Regional rivalries meant that the empire was not running smoothly and became vulnerable to attack.
- Some military commanders had their own private armies and did not follow the orders of the Askia.

Succession problems after Askia Daoud

- When Askia Daoud died in 1582, he did not name a successor, which led to several people, including his sons, vying for power.
- Each leader was more concerned with maintaining their position than strengthening the empire, which caused the empire to weaken gradually and become more vulnerable to attack.
- Askia Ibrahim (1582) was immediately challenged and lost power.
- Askia Al-Hajj (1582–1586) was opposed by members of the royal family, removed from power and exiled to Tondibi, where he soon died.
- Askia Muhammad Bani (1586–1588), despite being a military leader, could not retain power.
- Askia Ishaq II (1588–1591) took over a weak empire; he ruled until its collapse.

The decline of trade routes

- Due to many leadership problems, control over the trade routes was lost.
- Regional rulers focused on local issues and did not collaborate with others to maintain the trade routes.
- The empire's gold reserves were being depleted, meaning there was less gold traded.
- Moroccan trade routes were becoming more popular.
- Other countries, such as Portugal, were trading along the West African coast, so trans-Saharan trade was no longer necessary.
- The decline of the trade routes weakened the Songhai Empire.
- Cities such as Timbuktu were making less money from trade and, as a result, paid fewer taxes to the Askia.
- Less tax revenue meant less money to fund the armies, making it difficult for the Askia to maintain control over such a large empire.

The impact of drought and famine

- As there was not enough rain, crops failed, which meant that there was less food available, leading to famine and starvation.
- Food prices went up, especially in cities such as Timbuktu and Gao.
- People who had lived in the countryside often moved to the cities, but life there was just as bad.
- As people were malnourished, many became ill or contracted diseases.
- The Songhai Empire could not trade surplus food with neighbouring areas, which caused the Songhai government to lose income from taxes on trade.

The division of Songhai territory

- After the Moroccan victory at Tondibi, some Songhai territories began to break away and become independent.
- Some of these smaller kingdoms included the Kassena and Mossi Kingdoms.
- As they were no longer part of the Songhai Empire, they could make their own decisions, trade with whomever they wanted and follow their own rules.
- The Songhai Empire never regained control of these lands.

