

## Was there really a 'golden age' in medieval Africa?

**TASK:** Read the story of the unit, to find out more about what we're going to study in the next seven lessons. Then, answer the questions at the bottom of the page (use a separate piece of paper).

During the medieval period (around 1000-1500), there were a number of important African **empires**. These were powerful, well-connected and advanced when it came to their organisation and culture.



In 1932, an **excavation** took place at a place called Mapungubwe, in what is now South Africa. **Archaeologists** found graves, as well as items like jewellery, beads, pottery, and - perhaps most famously - a golden rhinoceros (a small, wooden object that was covered in layers of gold). These findings helped archaeologists to work out that the people who lived at Mapungubwe in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries were part of a **class-based society** (wealthy leaders ruled over the other people in the area). The findings also revealed how well-connected Mapungubwe was, as some of the items had originally come from much further away - even as far as India.



Historians know that people in Africa **traded** in three key items: salt, gold and cowrie shells (which come from sea snails). These items were transported around Africa, the Middle East and parts of Europe in large quantities, helping to make some African kingdoms very rich.



One of the wealthiest and most important empires in medieval Africa was **Mali**. The Mali Empire was located in West Africa, and we can use the stories shared with us by **griots** (African storytellers

who pass information down from generation to generation) to find out more about life in the empire. Griots tell us, for example, that the empire was founded by **Sundiata Keita**, who fulfilled a **prophecy** (prediction) when he became 'mansa' (king) of Mali.



Sundiata Keita's grandson, **Mansa Musa**, is thought to have been the richest man ever to have lived. This wealth came from his control over the salt and gold trade in the region. During his reign, Musa went on a **pilgrimage** to **Mecca**, the most important holy site for **Muslims**. Musa himself was a Muslim, and he wanted to learn more about the **Islamic** faith. His journey was also a chance for him to show off his wealth and importance.



In the late 1400s, the **Portuguese** arrived in West Africa, and they began **trading** with the African empires. Initially, this trade benefitted West Africa, however the Portuguese began to remove Africans to serve as **slaves** - and this contributed to the decline of many African kingdoms.



**TASK:** Answer the questions below:



- 1: What did archaeologists discover at Mapungubwe?
- 2: What three items/products did the African kingdoms trade in?
- 3: How can we find out about life in medieval Mali?
- 4: Who founded the Mali Empire?
- 5: Why is Mansa Musa so well-known?
- 6: What happened when the Portuguese arrived in Africa?