

What did visitors see in Mali?

I had a wretched journey across the Sahara desert. Only the thought of the famous kingdom of Mali kept me going. I had heard great stories about the land of gold and I knew I had to see it with my own eyes.

Just then as I arrived in the kingdom of Mali, I very nearly died! I ate some rotten yams that made me so sick I had to take to my bed. It was two whole months before I had the strength to visit the royal palace.

As I reached the palace gates I saw around 300 slaves, some armed with bows and some with lances - all of them devoted to the service of their king, Mansa Suleyman. Then I was led to the vast council hall where the king received his visitors.

No one was allowed to approach the king directly. Instead I sat with chiefs and warriors and visitors of all kinds. We waited in a broad avenue lined with trees, for our turn to send a message.

When I finally took my turn, I had to speak through an Interpreter. He was a splendid figure in silken robes wearing a turban with elaborate fringes. Then the Interpreter spoke to a man who stood near the king and that man finally gave my message to the king.

On another day, I attended a festival in honour of the king. I saw a parade of chiefs all riding on horseback, with their followers carrying weapons and playing drums and bugles. There were other musicians with instruments made from reeds and gourds, which they beat with sticks to make a wonderful sound.

The Interpreter sat on a special chair and sang loudly in praise of his king. He was joined by a choir of women and pages, and then came the acrobats and jugglers with swords.

Audio transcript

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When I finally got to see Mansa Suleyman, he gave me a strange gift - a small dish of bread, meat and yogurt. Later I complained to him, telling him of all the generous rulers I had met on my travels. After that, he offered me a house where I could stay and when I left his country he gave me gifts of gold.

I shall never forget my visit to Mali however long I live.

