

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

# HISTORY A

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in History A**

**H505**

For first teaching in 2015

**Y209/01 Summer 2025 series**

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## Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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## Paper Y209 series overview

Y209 is one of twenty-four units in Paper 2 for the A Level examination for GCE History. This unit tests a coherent period of non-British History through a short answer essay question and a traditional essay question. The paper contains two questions, each having two parts, a short answer essay and a traditional essay. Candidates have to answer both parts of one question.

To do well on the short-answer essay question, candidates need to consider the significance or importance of both issues, factors, individuals or events mentioned in relation to the question. Having analysed or explained both they must reach a supported judgement as to which is the most important or significant.

To do well on the traditional essay, candidates need to address the issue in the question, using detailed supporting knowledge. To reach the higher levels candidates need to assess the issues they discuss and reach a supported judgement, at least in the conclusion.

Question 2 was slightly more popular than Question 1.

| Candidates who did well on this paper generally:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>gave equal consideration to the two issues in the short answer essay</li> <li>reached a developed and supported judgement as to which issue was more significant or important</li> <li>linked their knowledge of the issues to the focus of the question</li> <li>in answering the essay question candidates discussed at least two issues in depth</li> <li>the supporting detail was both accurate and relevant to the question set, not just the topic</li> <li>reach a supported judgement about the issue in the question</li> <li>make a series of interim judgements about the issues discussed in relation to the question.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>considered only one of the issues or discussed one in a superficial way</li> <li>produced a judgement that was not supported and was therefore assertion or a judgement that did not follow logically from the response</li> <li>were unable to use their knowledge to address the issue in the question</li> <li>showed a poor understanding of the major issues relevant to the essay</li> <li>were unable to support their answer with relevant or accurate material</li> <li>did not focus on the precise wording of the question</li> <li>made unsupported comments about issues which were no more than assertions.</li> </ul> |

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## Question 1 (a) (i) and (ii)

**1**

**(a)** Which of the following was of greater importance in the rise of the Songhay Empire?

**(i)** The collapse of the Mali Empire

**(ii)** Military factors

Explain your answer with reference to both **(i)** and **(ii)**.

**[10]**

Candidates knew of some of the more well-known features of the Mali Empire when at the peak of its prosperity and influence, such as its wealth, and the story of Mansa Musa's Hajj to Mecca on which he freely distributed gold as he went. The Empire's military failings were also often cited as aspects of its collapse, such as its vulnerability to the Tuareg. Some candidates were able to link these failures more directly to Songhay's rise, as in Exemplar 1, where it was noted that they provided opportunities for the rulers of Songhay to expand. In relation to military factors, candidates tended to focus upon Sonni Ali and his achievements, notably his capture of Djenne and Timbuktu. Others highlighted the development of cavalry and battle canoes which helped to facilitate its expansion. More effective answers evaluated the relative importance of each factor, while less effective ones lacked detailed knowledge of one or both factors.

## Exemplar 1

|   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | a | <p>The rise of the Songhay Empire can be attributed to the collapse of the former great Mali Empire and military skills of the Sonni dynasty in varying degrees. However, ultimately it was the collapse of Mali that was of greater importance as it influenced the level of impact Sonni military was able to have. Thus, collapse of the Mali Empire was more important.</p> <p>The collapse of the Mali Empire was significant as Songhay was once a tributary to the Empire. Mali was extremely wealthy, containing what would soon be central Songhay: Gao, Djenné and Timbuktu. Their wealth was shown through Mansa Musa's hajj to Mecca with numerous slaves and, in passing Cairo Egypt, gifted 20,000 tonnes of gold. This presents how powerful Mali once was and thus, the power Songhay gained when taking over. Songhay was able to capitalise on Gao being a key node point of the Trans-Saharan trade in the early 10<sup>th</sup> C. which allowed Askia Mohammed to expand on the trading systems, causing the second rise of the Songhay Empire under the Askias. The Mali Empire declined due to invasions from the Tuareg in the desert who seized Mema, a city near</p> |
|---|---|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Timbuktu. This invasion (1433) continued until the ultimate fall of the empire and their looting of resources. This provided ~~as~~ a gateway for the Sonnis to grow in power as, although being tributaries for Mali, they were also known as the rules & Gao. This decline allowed them to expand their rule more effectively, claiming already established cities such as Djenné. Therefore, the Mali Empire's collapse was ~~the~~ of greater importance in the rise of the Songhay Empire as it granted a degree of autonomy for Songhay and allowed for ~~the~~ military expansion to be more effective along with economic ideas.

However, some may argue that it is rather the military factors that ~~as~~ were of greater importance to the rise of Songhay. This may be due to the various successful conquests of the Sonni Dynasty. Sonni Mohammed Da'oud set on attack on Mali, effectively gaining their spoils. Although, this success was only due to the waning influence and collapse of the Mali Empire. These conquests continued through Sonni Souleyman who conquered the Bariba, Fula and Niger river peoples and made them pay tribute. These actions established the ~~the~~ growing power and

expansion of the Songhai Empire, characterising its <sup>power is</sup> rise. This is consolidated by Sonni Ali, also known as Sonni Ali 'Ber' (The Great), who laid 7-year siege on Djenné that required the craft of 400 wooden boats. This ability to lay such a long siege and build boats for the sole purpose of warfare implies prominence of power and strength. Sonni Dynasty expanded the Songhai Empire <sup>and</sup> grew its economy through the tributaries. ~~not~~ However, military factors ~~also~~ victories and successes were only able to occur due to the fall of the Mali Empire as it allowed for the Sonnis the autonomy to enact conquest. ~~that did not~~

Therefore, although military factors do play an important role in the rise of Songhai due to the grand expansion it brought to the Empire, it was not the greatest. The ~~greater~~ collapse of the Mali Empire was of greater importance as it gave a foundation for Songhai to build on economically and politically, while granting Songhai and the Sonnis the autonomy to ~~lay~~ enact on conquest.

An example of a Level 5 response with generally accurate and detailed knowledge and understanding, which is explained, an attempt at evaluating the relative importance of each factor, and a reasonably substantiated judgement.

## Question 1 (b)\*

**(b)\*** Assess the impact of religion on the politics and society of Oyo in the period from 1608 to c.1800. **[20]**

Candidates were, in general, aware of the centrality of religion in the politics and society of Oyo in this period. In particular, candidates referred to the Sango cult, which highlighted the importance of religion and its role in supporting the power of the Alaafin. Candidates often referred to the way religious festivals were used to enhance the Alaafin's power, such as the Orun celebrations. In addition, it was often recalled how the Alaafin's public appearances were limited to certain festivals as a way of upholding his power. Some candidates pointed to the status of the royal Ilari as priests in the Sango cult as further evidence of the social importance of religion. In some answers, the role of Alaafin Abipa as the founder of cults was also referred to. Other factors considered included the role of tribute and the overall organisation of the provinces, Oyo's military strength, and the importance of trade. Religion was usually seen as having a greater impact on politics and society than any of these factors. Some answers only considered religion, an approach that made it more difficult to evaluate the extent of its impact.

## Question 2 (a) (i) and (ii)

**2**

**(a)** Which of the following was of greater importance in the decline of Benin?

- (i)** Changing patterns of trade
- (ii)** Succession crises

Explain your answer with reference to both **(i)** and **(ii)**.

**[10]**

Knowledge of changing patterns of trade was often more developed than knowledge of succession crises. When addressing succession crises, some candidates talked rather generally about the customs, practices and governmental structures that worked against the stability of the succession, such as the role of the Iyase, while others provided more detailed knowledge about succession crises linked to individual rulers, such as Oba Ohuan. In terms of patterns of trade, many candidates knew of the reasons behind the declining trade of staple items like cloth, for which alternatives were found in Asia. Candidates could also explain Benin's more complex relationship with the slave trade which in many ways provided a clear example of the changing patterns noted in the question. Stronger answers were evaluative in their approach, arguing that one factor was more important than the other. Weaker answers usually lacked the detailed knowledge and understanding – often on succession crises – required to create an effective comparison.

## Question 2 (b)\*

(b)\* How important was the economy in the development of the Songhay Empire?

[20]

Many candidates were able to draw on fairly detailed knowledge of the economy of the Songhay Empire, notably its beneficial geographical position and its ability to tap into lucrative trade routes. A number of profitable trading commodities were identified, with salt featuring prominently, and gold. The role of Sonni Ali in expanding the Empire and thereby boosting its economy in the process was also noted. Candidates offset the importance of the economy against several other factors. Military developments, particularly under Sonni Ali, were noted, as was the capture of Timbuktu, which, as many candidates pointed out, had a galvanising effect on Songhay's development. The reputation of Timbuktu as a centre of learning was also identified by some candidates as a factor in the Empire's development. Askia Mohammed's cultivation of scholarship at Timbuktu and within the Empire more broadly, reflected in the administrative changes he oversaw, was highlighted by some as a key factor in Songhay's development, as was his commitment to Islam, which brought further economic benefits as well. Candidates found assessing the relative importance of each factor challenging. Answers which largely explained each factor, using relevant knowledge, but without providing any significant judgement were usually placed in Level 4. Where judgement was provided, answers moved up into Level 5. Where judgement was sustained, as in Exemplar 2 below, answers were placed in Level 6.

## Exemplar 2

|   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2 | b | How important was the economy in the development of Songhay? <del>2</del>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|   |   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|   |   | Overall, whilst the economy was fairly important in the rise of the Songhay Empire in that it contributed to Songhay's - made Songhay a key player in the Saharan Trade Route, it is largely overshadowed by the key role of Songhay's location. Songhay's geography brought it immediate allies after the fall of Mali, and key resources and expertise. The development of religion and learning was also key in enriching the kingdom's international position, but since this came later, after Sonni Ali, it cannot be dubbed the most important to Songhay's Rise. Thus geography was the most important in the development of the Songhay Empire. |

The economy played a considerable role in the development of Songhay, but it was <sup>certainly</sup> not the most important. Sonni Ali had some key initial victories, such as the capture of Djenné in 1473, after a four year siege, which gave him access to their trade routes for gold and kola nuts. Since this made Songhay economically relevant, both as a rich state, and as a link between the Trans-Saharan Trade Route and Portuguese merchants, <sup>growing the economy</sup> it was quite significant ~~the extent to which the growth of Songhay's economy as it brought it further trade opportunities.~~ This was further fortified by the capture of Tagnaza in the North, whereby Songhay acquired salt, another key resource to trade. However, since this was ultimately lost to the Moroccan's in ~~1547~~ 1557, and to very little consequence for the kingdom's remaining ~~60 years~~ 60 years, it seems unlikely that an economic monopoly was the backbone of the Empire. Indeed, when Songhay was eventually invaded <sup>in 1591</sup>, it was ~~for~~ in response to its weakening through succession crises, not explicitly wealth, although this was appreciated, again reducing the importance of the economy in the development of Songhay, seeing as it could survive perfectly well losing resources, and was not a major point of resentment for other states. Thus,

~~the development of~~ Songhay's economy was not the most important in the development of the Empire.

Songhay's Geographical location was ~~far~~ by far the most important factor of Songhay's development. The collapse of the kingdom of Mali in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century ultimately opened up a power vacuum in the Sahel. Since the other minor states reverted Mali's tyranny - harsh tribute collection systems - its vassal states and neighbours were keen to help Songhay. This was significant as it meant Songhay could exploit Mali's weakness, and take advantage of new allies, such as the Sonko River people, who helped Songhay develop a new military position called the Ki-koi, master of the water, and to exploit the 1000 miles of the Niger River. Furthermore, Songhay was further strengthened by the expertise of the Gwari, expert hunters, and the Do, expert farmers, who all contributed to its development through combining wisdom. This was hugely significant in turning Songhay into a regional powerhouse as an amalgamation of all the wisdom available in the Sahel. The geographical location of Songhay further contributed to its rise in that the land around the Niger was fertile and prosperous, thus giving the kingdom <sup>not only</sup> a monopoly over

food, protecting it from starvation sieges, ~~and~~ such as it did to Djenné 1469-1473, but also helped it to grow the size of its population rapidly, as it attracted peoples from across the Sahel. Thus, Songhay's ~~de~~ geographical location was incredibly important to its rise as it provided a strong buttress of strength, as well as a seat of allies and wisdom ready to be used. Therefore, since these characteristics would see Songhay very well protected for the majority of its existence, it was the most important factor in the development of the Empire.

Whilst not the most important, ...  
 Finally, the promotion of religion and learning helped to increase Songhay's international recognition and ~~to~~ to impose its imperial structure. ~~For~~ This can be seen through Ashia Mohammed's rebuilding of Sankore University, inviting over 25000 scholars, and building 180 Koranic schools. This was important as Islamic scholars brought judicial help in the form of the Ulema and the qadis, who were ultimately sent to reform the role of judges across 35 territories in the kingdom. Furthermore, the acquisition of this wisdom made Songhay competitive regionally, as previously Walata had been the seat of Islamic power after the siege of Timbuktu in 1469. Thus, religion and learning were important as they ~~not~~ helped

Songhay centralise its government and compete with neighbouring states. Ashia Mohammed's pilgrimage to Mecca in 1497 also brought international recognition, as ~~the~~ he was proclaimed the 'Caliph of Western Sudan' for his extraordinary display of dedication in bringing ~~5000~~ 1000 men and 500 cavalry with him, as well as 30000 ducats of gold. This was hugely significant and key to development as, by designating him the regional authority on Islam, the respect of other Muslim states ~~was~~ was immediately secured. However, since religion and learning were arguably later developments, given that Sonni Ali had essentially rejected religion in the sacking of Timbuktu in 1469, and prioritised other territorial gain using local expertise, such as Azawad in 1470, it seems that ~~the~~ religion ~~was~~ was not important later on. Thus, whilst it clearly brought prestige and security, it was a secondary development, and thus not the most important to Songhay's ~~rise~~ development.

~~Therefore, given that~~

Therefore, given that the economy was clearly not key to Songhay's stability or grandeur, it was not the most important to

|  |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  | <p>Songhay's development. Religion was ultimately a secondary factor to Songhay's development, being essential in bringing security and respect later on, but not the driving force of the Empire's initial development. Therefore, the most important factor in the development of the Songhay Empire was its geographical location and the vacuum left by the fall of Mali, seeing as there strengthened it with allies and wisdom, ultimately establishing it as a powerful kingdom incredibly quickly. Therefore, the most important factor was not economic growth, but regional geographical advantages in the development of the Songhay Empire.</p> |
|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

This response is an example of a Level 6 response. Detailed knowledge and understanding is demonstrated throughout and there are clear attempts at evaluation where the relative importance of each factor is considered and explained. There are substantiated judgements throughout the answer with an effective one, which is clearly focused on the issue in the question, in the final paragraph.

### Assessment for learning



Candidates should provide a judgement on the key issue in the question which is substantiated through a convincing explanation.

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