



Timbuktu: The History of a Mythical City

As a boy, growing up in London, England, Timbuktu was analogous with the ends of the earth, almost like going to the moon. Just like anything which we feel is difficult to attain, I was fascinated by this mysterious city. Poring over an atlas I located it, just on the southern edge of the Sahara desert with, seemingly, nothing to promote it topographically. Why was it there? I am used to ports and river cities, New York, London, Paris, Calcutta and Cairo, but Timbuktu was almost as if someone had stuck a pin a map while blindfolded. Its origins explain a lot.

The Tuaregs are a nomadic people still occupying a vast swathe of the Sahara. Adopting the camel, after its introduction from Arabia some 2000 years ago, they were the traders traveling the five main routes between the Empires of what is today West Africa and the North African coast. Crossing the desert meant that a source of water was, quite literally, a matter of life or death. Legend has it that, around 1000 A.D. An old woman named Buktu, renowned for her honesty, lived by a well (in Tuareg a well is *tin*) thus articles could be left with her at Timbuktu, a variant is that it means 'the lady with a big navel', for a town to be named after her it must have been pretty memorable.. A pretty story but it is more likely that the name is derived from the Berber for 'a far away place' - even they thought it was the end of the earth!

Whatever the origins of the name, Timbuktu became a stopping place for the Tuaregs. Traders soon set up markets there as this was the last viable settlement before the desert. The Ghanaian Empire lasted for 300 years until 1076. By this time Timbuktu was an established trading post on the periphery of the Empire, position it was to occupy twice more. The principle commodities were gold, slaves, ivory and salt, the last being of great value up until modern times; the word salary comes from the Roman practice of paying with salt and the phrase 'worth your salt' is further proof. In some ways the town grew like a port, with the Sahara as the ocean and the caravans of camels being the merchant fleets, indeed camels are sometimes termed ships of the desert. In 1324 a new Empire rose, the Mali, based upon the gold wealth from the mines to the south, near what the Europeans later called the Gold Coast. In exchange for the salt and spices of the north goods were shipped as far as Cairo and Arabia.

During the 12th century Timbuktu became a center of learning, there were three universities and 180 Koranic schools, this at a time when there were only four in Europe (Oxford, Bologna, Modena and Paris). Many scholars accumulated great libraries, books became another important trading item, and students traveled from afar to study here. Trade prospered as the Tuaregs had captured an important salt mine, some 1800 km. to the north. The city attracted the attention of the Mali Emperor, Mansa Musa (Mansa is a title, equivalent to Emperor). He annexed Timbuktu in 1324, an operation that was welcomed as it gave the city protection. He was a benevolent monarch who left the city to pretty much govern itself.

Much of our knowledge of the city at this time comes from al-Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Wazzan, who was the ambassador of the Sultan of Fez (in Morocco). In 1518 he was captured by Christian pirates and sent to the Pope in Rome. There he converted to Christianity, changed his name to Leo Africanus and wrote extensively about this 'unknown' city of Timbuktu, then controlled by the Songhai Empire.

"The rich king of Tombuto hath many plates and sceptres of gold, some whereof weigh 1300 pounds. ... He hath always 3000 horsemen ... (and) a great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the king's expense."

By this time Portuguese traders had already reached the 'Gold Coast' and slaves were being shipped to the Americas in exchange for guns. This ate into the trade of Timbuktu, especially after the city was invaded in 1591 by Moroccans wielding these same weapons. Still, as a city of fabled wealth, a sort of African El-dorado, Europeans were desperate to discover its secrets. The African Association was formed, in 1788, to try and find the city and to map the River Niger. Mungo Park, the Scottish explorer was thought to have reached Timbuktu, but died in Nigeria with out spilling it's secrets. In 1824 the French Geographical Society offered a 10,000 franc reward to any non-Muslim who got to Timbuktu and back. The Scot, Gordon Laing, was the first to arrive but was killed by locals so he could not reveal it's location, so afraid were they of the influences of the West! Two years later, in 1828. Rene Callie made it in and out, disguised as a Muslim.

Today the desert has encroached upon a city in much reduced circumstances. The forest teeming with elephants, described by Leo Africanus, has gone but the Museums, universities and libraries with over 100,000 precious manuscripts live on. Timbuktu is a fascinating and evocative city, well worth a visit to see first hand the deprivations wrought by [global warming](#) and an irrelevance to Western culture as well as to imagine the glories of the past. Interestingly, Henry Louis Gates Jr., the subject of some current controversy, was instrumental in securing an Andrew Mellon grant for the preservation of these priceless artefacts. Still the city is a place of mystery to many, a survey in 2006 found that 34% of Britons did not believe it exists!

Sources : [History of Timbuktu, Mali](#)

[Leo Africanus: Description of Timbuktu in Reading About the World, Volume 2, edited by Paul Brians, Michael Blair, Douglas Hughes, Michael Neville, Roger Schlesinger, Alice Spitzer, and Susan Swan and published by HarperCollinsCustomBooks](#)
[Timbuktu - World Heritage \(Unesco.org\)](#)

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At its height, book-trading was second only to gold in value, so prevalent that the trade route was called the African Ink Road'