

Leo Africanus: Description of Timbuktu

from *The Description of Africa*(1526)

El Hasan ben Muhammed el-Wazzan-ez-Zayyati was born in the Moorish city of Granada in 1485, but was expelled along with his parents and thousands of other Muslims by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492. Settling in Morocco, he studied in Fez, and as a teenager accompanied his uncle on diplomatic missions throughout North Africa and and to the Sub-Saharan kingdom of Ghana. Still a young man, he was captured by Christian pirates and presented as an exceptionally learned slave to the great Renaissance pope, Leo X. Leo freed him, baptised him under the name "Johannis Leo de Medici," and commissioned him to write in Italian the detailed survey of Africa which provided most of what Europeans knew about the continent for the next several centuries. At the time he visited the Ghanaian city of Timbuktu, it was somewhat past its peak, but still a thriving Islamic city famous for its learning. "Timbuktu" was to become a byword in Europe as the most inaccessible of cities, but at the time Leo visited, it was the center of a busy trade in African products and in books. Leo is said to have died in 1554 in Tunis, having reconverted to Islam.

What evidence does he provide that suggests the importance of learning in Timbuktu?

The name of this kingdom is a modern one, after a city which was built by a king named Mansa Suleyman in the year 610 of the hegira [1232 CE] around twelve miles from a branch of the [Niger River](#). (1)

The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered wattles with thatched roofs. In the center of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, built by [an architect named Granata](#), (2) and in addition there is a large palace, constructed by the same architect, where the king lives. The shops of the artisans, the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported [from Europe to Timbuktu, borne by Berber merchants](#). (3)

The women of the city maintain the custom of veiling their faces, except for the slaves who sell all the foodstuffs. The inhabitants are very rich, especially the strangers who have settled in the country; so much so that [the current king](#) (4) has given two of his daughters in marriage to two brothers, both

businessmen, on account of their wealth. There are many wells containing sweet water in Timbuktu; and in addition, when the Niger is in flood canals deliver the water to the city. Grain and animals are abundant, so that the consumption of milk and butter is considerable. But salt is in very short supply because it is carried here from Tegaza, some 500 miles from Timbuktu. I happened to be in this city at a time when a load of salt sold for eighty ducats. The king has a rich treasure of coins and gold ingots. One of these ingots weighs [970 pounds. \(5\)](#)

The royal court is magnificent and very well organized. When the king goes from one city to another with the people of his court, he rides a camel and the horses are led by hand by servants. If fighting becomes necessary, the servants mount the camels and all the soldiers mount on horseback. When someone wishes to speak to the king, he must kneel before him and bow down; but this is only required of those who have never before spoken to the king, or of ambassadors. The king has about 3,000 horsemen and infinity of foot-soldiers armed with bows made of wild fennel [?] which they use to shoot poisoned arrows. This king makes war only upon neighboring enemies and upon those who do not want to pay him tribute. When he has gained a victory, he has all of them--even the children--sold in the market at Timbuktu.

Only small, poor horses are born in this country. The merchants use them for their voyages and the courtiers to move about the city. But the good horses come from Barbary. They arrive in a caravan and, ten or twelve days later, they are led to the ruler, who takes as many as he likes and pays appropriately for them.

The king is a declared enemy of the Jews. He will not allow any to live in the city. If he hears it said that a Berber merchant frequents them or does business with them, he confiscates his goods. There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many hand-written books imported from Barbary are also sold. There is more profit made from this commerce than from all other merchandise.

Instead of coined money, pure gold nuggets are used; and for small purchases, [cowrie shells which have been carried from Persia, \(6\)](#) and of which 400 equal a ducat. Six and two-thirds of their ducats equal [one Roman gold ounce. \(7\)](#)

The people of Timbuktu are of a peaceful nature. They have a custom of almost continuously walking about the city in the evening (except for those that sell

gold), between 10 PM and 1 AM, playing musical instruments and dancing. The citizens have at their service many slaves, both men and women.

The city is very much endangered by fire. At the time when I was there on [my second voyage](#), (8) half the city burned in the space of five hours. But the wind was violent and the inhabitants of the other half of the city began to move their belongings for fear that the other half would burn.

There are no gardens or orchards in the area surrounding Timbuktu.

Translated by Paul Brians

(1) Mansa Suleyman reigned 1336-1359. The city was in fact probably founded in the 11th century by Tuaregs, but became the chief city of the king of Mali in 1324.

(2) Ishak es Sahili el-Gharnati, brought to Tinbuktu by Mansa Suleyman.

(3) By camel caravan across the Sahara Desert from NorthAfrica.

(4) 'Omar ben Mohammed Naddi, not in fact the king, but representative of the ruler of the kingdom of Songhai.

(5) Such fabulous nuggets are commonly mentioned by Arab writers about Africa, but their size is probably grossly exaggerated.

(6) Cowrie shells, widely used for money in West Africa, sometimes came in fact from even farther away, from the Maladive Islands of Southeast Asia.

(7) A Sudanese gold ducat would weigh .15 oz.

(8) Probably in 1512.

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