

TIMBUKTU AND THE SONGHAY EMPIRE

Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzan al-Zayyati was a Berber who was educated in Fez, Morocco. Sometime between 1506 and 1510, he accompanied his uncle on a diplomatic mission to the Songhay Empire. In 1518, while returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca, he was captured by Sicilian pirates and presented to Pope Leo X. The following year he was baptized and became known as Leo Africanus. His *Description of Africa*, written in 1526, was published in Italian in 1550 and subsequently translated into Latin, French, and English. In this excerpt, he describes Timbuktu.

The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of stakes daubed with clay, and with straw roofs. In the middle of the town there is a temple built with masoned stones and limestone mortar by an architect of the Béticos [a mountain range in southern Spain], a native of the town of al-Mana, and a large palace built by the same master builder, where the king stays. There are numerous artisans' workshops, merchants, and in particular, weavers of cotton cloths. The cloths of Europe reach Timbuktu, brought by Barbary merchants.

The women of the town still have the custom of veiling their faces, except for the slaves, who sell all the foodstuffs. The inhabitants are very rich, especially the resident strangers, to the extent that the present king has given two of his daughters in marriage to two merchant brothers, because of their wealth. There are several sweet water wells in Timbuktu. In addition, during the flood season of the Niger, water reaches the town by canals. There is great abundance of cereals and livestock, and hence the consumption of milk and butter is considerable. But salt is in short supply because it is brought from Taghaza, which is about five hundred miles distant from Timbuktu. . . . The king possesses great treasure in coin and gold ingots. One of these ingots weighs 1,300 pounds.

The royal court is very well organized and magnificent. When the king goes

from one town to another with his courtiers, he rides a camel, and the horses are led by grooms. . . . When anyone wants to address the king, he kneels before him, takes a handful of dust and sprinkles it over his head and shoulders. . . . The king has some three thousand cavalry, and a huge number of infantry armed with bows made of wild fennel. They fire poisoned arrows. This king only makes war on those neighbors of his who are enemies, and on those who refuse to pay him tribute. When victorious, he has those captured in combat sold in Timbuktu, even the children. . . .

In Timbuktu there are numerous judges, scholars and priests, all well paid by the king. Many manuscript books coming from Barbary are sold. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods.

Instead of coined money they use pieces of pure gold, and for small purchases cowries, that is to say shells brought from Persia, of which four hundred are worth one ducat. . . .

The people of Timbuktu have a light-hearted nature. It is their habit to wander in the town at night between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m., playing musical instruments and dancing. The citizens have many slaves to serve them, both male and female.

1. What were the main industries in Timbuktu?
2. Explain why Timbuktu became a major center for Islamic learning and scholarship.

Source: Giovan Leoni Africano, *Della discriptione dell'Africa*, in G. B. Ramusio, *Delle navigationi e viaggi* (Venice, 1550), reprinted in *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*, translated and edited by John O. Hunwick (Boston: Brill, 1999), pp. 279–282.