



West Africa

HISTORY

Leo Africanus: Description of Timbuktu (1526)

About one thousand years ago, the Ghanaian city of Timbuktu was a major trade center in West Africa. Leo Africanus, a Spanish Muslim, visited the city as a teenager around 1500. Later, he was asked by Pope Leo X to write a geography of Africa based on his travels. This book, The Description of Africa was published in 1526. For the next several centuries, it provided most of what Europeans knew about the continent. At the time Leo Africanus visited Timbuktu, it was somewhat past its peak. But it was still a thriving Islamic city famous for its commerce and learning.

The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered wattles [sticks] with thatched roofs. In the center of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, . . . and in addition there is a large palace . . . where the king lives. The shops of the artisans [skilled craftspeople], the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported from Europe to Timbuktu, borne by Berber merchants.

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 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 [plentiful], 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.

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 [unlimited number] of foot-soldiers armed with bows . . . 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 [gentlemen] to move about the city. But the good horses come from Barbary [northern Africa]. 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.

. . . There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many handwritten 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, and of which 400 equal a ducat. Six and two-thirds of their ducats equal one Roman gold ounce.

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. . . .

The city is very much endangered by fire. At the time when I was there on my second voyage, 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.

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Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. What evidence does the reading contain that learning and education were important to the people of Timbuktu?

2. What evidence does Africanus provide that the people of Timbuktu enjoyed a high standard of living?

Activity

Search library and other resources for a description of present-day Timbuktu. Write a short report comparing modern Timbuktu to the description provided in this reading.