

The Islamic legacy of Timbuktu

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The Caravan of Sultan Mansa Musa, ruler of the Mali Empire, snaked its way through the scorching heat of the central Sahara on its long return from the 1324 pilgrimage to Makkah. Eight thousand soldiers, courtiers and servants - some say as many as 60,000 - drove 15,000 camels laden with gold, perfume, salt and stores of food in a procession of unrivaled size.

Their destination was, first, the newly conquered city of Gao, on the Niger River. From there, they turned toward another metropolis just added to the Mali Empire, one surrounded by unrelenting dunes, a fabled oasis city on which Mansa Musa had longed to make his mark: Timbuktu. Thirsty and flagging under the searing sun, the caravan entered Timbuktu's ochre walls in the year 1325.

No word in English connotes remoteness more than Timbuktu. Thanks to the astonishing wealth that Mansa Musa had displayed on his visits to Cairo and Makkah, it also connoted riches. For eight centuries, Timbuktu captured the imaginations of both East and West, albeit for very different reasons. In 1620, the English explorer Richard Jobson wrote:

The most flattering reports had reached Europe of the gold trade carried on at Timbuktu. The roofs of its houses were represented to be covered with plates of gold, the bottoms of the rivers to glisten with the precious metals, and the mountains had only to be excavated to yield a profusion of the metallic treasure.

Other reports said that rosewater flowed in the city's fountains and that the sultan showered each visitor with priceless gifts. Europe's greatest explorers set out to risk their lives in search of the riches of Timbuktu. Exploration and travel societies sponsored competitions, with prize for the man who reached there by the most difficult route.

In fact, most European travelers perished before they ever saw the city rise above the desert horizon, and those who did get there found that the tales they had heard had missed the point.

Muslim travelers - Most notably Ibn Battuta and Hasan al-Wazan, also called *Leo Africanus* - were no less eager to visit the city, but for them and a host of rulers, dignitaries and scholars from Morocco to Persia, the remote city held riches of another sort: Timbuktu was the starting point for African pilgrims going on the Hajj, and a center of some of the finest - and most generously available - Islamic scholarship of the Middle Ages.

Located in today's Mali, Some 12 kilometers (eight miles) north of the Niger flood-plain along the southern edge of the Sahara, Timbuktu today is little more than a sleepy, sweltering stop on the adventure-tourism trail. Most visitors fly in and out in a single afternoon; the city's days as a caravanserai and desert entrepot are long past.

