TIMBUKTU:
FROM MYTH TO REALITY OF MALI'S FABLED CITY

Mary Beth Roe

INTRODUCTION

Timbuktu was a city in Mali that Europeans wrongly believed to be a wealthy city built and lined with gold. Since they had never actually traveled there, it was only through rumors that they learned of its existence and many wanted to find it to benefit from its supposed wealth. This rumor is thought to have spread through many sources. Over time, the drive to find and explore Timbuktu rose among many Europeans and resulted in numerous failed attempts to reach the mystical city. It was not until the late 1800's that European contact was made and the disappointment was endless, as the city was a typical trading post in Africa with no gold or great wealth anywhere to be found.

Timbuktu also experienced a great deal of change with the introduction of Islam. In order to grasp the magnitude of these changes, pre-Islamic Timbuktu needs to be investigated. Little is known about the pre-Islamic society because the city was so quickly introduced to Islam. Timbuktu developed originally as a trading center even before Arab merchants began trading with the city. With the introduction of Islam, almost everything changed. Besides the obvious religious convergence of the black Africans to a new religion, the architecture and social hierarchies were altered, along with the city becoming known as a major Islamic learning center.

BACKGROUND: EARLY HISTORY AND THE ORIGIN OF THE MYTH

For centuries, Timbuktu was a mystical, immensely fantasized about city by the Europeans. Timbuktu, located in Western Africa in Mali, was idealized for its supposed wealth in gold. In reality, Timbuktu was not a city of gold, but instead it was a major port city that traded goods that originated in other areas. While the Europeans had incredible difficulty locating the city, Arabs from the Middle East and North Africa had been involved and influencing the city for centuries before Europeans made contact with it. The Muslim city of Timbuktu went on to thrive through trade and was a leader in education, yet it was full of disappointment for the Europeans.

Mansa Musa, the emperor of Mali during the early fourteenth century, traveled to Cairo on a pilgrimage in 1324. When he arrived there, the Egyptians were astonished by the amount of wealth and gold that Mansa Musa had in his possession. Through European contacts with Egyptian merchants, word spread of Mansa Musa's gold and wealth that came from Timbuktu. Thus according to Brian Gardner "By the time this astonishment had spread to Europe it had gained in wonderment rather than lost."[1]Almost thirty years later, an Arab traveler by the name of IbnBatuta visited Timbuktu and returned with lavish (and thought to be extremely exaggerated) stories of the gold and wealth of the city. Thus the legend associating gold with Timbuktu was born. This myth would go on living in the minds of Europeans for more than five hundred years and cost hundreds of lives until the idea that gold came from Timbuktu was put to rest.

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[1] Brian Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 5.

Timbuktu's location in Africa on the southern outskirts of the Sahara desert made it really difficult for Europeans to reach the city. Gardner emphasizes the limitations presented by this geographical region by stating, "The Sahara was the most inhospitable area in the world… Few men who entered it ever returned to Europe; those who did so told almost incoherent stories of madness of thirst, unspeakable cruelties of mirages, a fierce and terrible sun, and a vast, limitless ocean of sand."[2]The temperature at midday could reach up to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. This meant that men would require up to two gallons of water a day in order to stay hydrated in the immensely dry heat. Frank Kryza further adds to our understanding of the challenges posed by the Sahara desert on attempts to explore its southern reaches by emphasizing how "A supply was carried on the backs of camels in goatskin bags… The water was muddy, tinged red from the leather, and full of foreign matter (including goat hairs). It was tepid, even hot, and tasted of sulfur and magnesium."[3] In addition water in general was extremely difficult to acquire. Since the Europeans had no knowledge or information on how to treat, cure or even manage the "mysterious and seemingly incurable diseases"[4]that plagued the desert, crossing the Sahara "meant the inevitable contraction of disease and almost certain early death…"

To cross the desert knowing that the journey was more than likely fatal required great bravery, but yet the promise of the great wealth and fame from being the first to make it to and from the mystical city outweighed the risks to those who attempted the trip. No matter what the risk, explorers could not stop obsessing over the fact that "Whoever got there first was guaranteed worldwide renown, but the journey would be bitter and hard—and could be fatal."[5]

EUROPEAN QUEST FOR "THE CITY OF GOLD"

As early as 1530, the Portuguese kings were sponsoring missions to find and establish a commercial treaty with Timbuktu. King John III was the first king to send men on this journey. That year, he sent out a ten-man mission, but only Pero Reinel survived the trip, yet he did not make it to Timbuktu. The Portuguese crown was persistent and did not give up there. Thirty-five years later another attempt at finding the city was made, but again the mission did not prevail. By the late 18th century, encouraged by the desire to discover the great source of gold, the long existing rivalry between the French and British extended beyond the physical mapping of Central Africa.[6] Sir Joseph Banks of London founded the Association for the Promotion of the Discovery of the Interior of Africa in 1788.[7] It sponsored the exhibitions of many British men on their journeys to Timbuktu, including John Ledyard, Simon Lucas, Daniel Houghton, and Frederick Hornemann. By 1796, there was no doubt that the "Timbuktu Rush" had begun. The minds of Europeans had been running wild for hundreds of years and they would rest at nothing to find this city. With attempts to find the city still failing, in 1824 the Geographical Society of Paris established a prize of 10,000 francs for anyone who could travel to Timbuktu and successfully return with a detailed account of the city. Four years later, a Frenchman by the name of René Cailié, was the first to successfully enter the city and returned home with its description.[8] Fighting the elements and diseases, however, were not the only things standing in the way of men making it to and from Timbuktu.

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[2] Ibid., 4.
[3] Frank Kryza, *The Race for Timbuktu: In Search for Africa's City of Gold* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 144.
[4] Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo*, 5.
[5] Kryza, *The Race for Timbuktu*, XI.
[6] Barnaby Rogerson, "Timbuktu: City in the Sands," in *The Great Cities in History,* ed. John Norwich. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2009), 140.
[7] Kryza, *The Race for Timbuktu*, 11.
[8] Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo*, 198-199.

Local Africans and Arabs frequently intervened in the various crossings from Europe to Timbuktu. According to Gardner, "To discover this city while in the throes of unchecked and untended disease was not all, for suspicious people had to be placated."[9] Gardner particularly details how one British explorer by the name of Gordon Laing recalled an encounter he had with locals involving slavery. Laing was horrified to be offered child slaves for thirty shillings each on two occasions. When he refused to purchase the children, he was "abused as being one of those white men who prevented the slave-trade and injured the prosperity of their country."[10] In one of his personal letters that successfully made its way to England, he states in regards to the slavery, "… that detestable trade… destroys the bonds of social order, and even extinguishes the most powerful natural feelings."[11] He also described how, because of their want for money and European goods, "The chiefs of villages hinted that if more was not forthcoming, robbery or death might lie in wait on the road ahead."[12]

Laing had anticipated that the trip across the desert would take no more than a few weeks, but it had actually taken him 399 days full "of loneliness, suffering, privation, and bloodshed… of solitude, without the companionship of a native of his own land, without the woman he loved."[13] On August 13, 1826, Laing saw the city in the distance. He entered it with great disappointment due to its lack of a plethora of gold. Shortly after his arrival, he was warned that if he did not leave the city, he would be killed based on his religious beliefs. With this threat, he left the city to make his way back home, but a group of Tuaregs attacked and killed him before he could make it safely back to Europe.[14]

René Cailié, the first to successfully make to trip to and from Timbuktu, used a very interesting and risky technique in order to survive the long and treacherous journey to the city. Although he was not the first to try this, he was the only one to succeed. In April of 1827, while the controversy of Laing's unsuccessful trip back was still a major topic of conversation around Europe, Cailié departed from the coast of West Africa.[15] He told whomever he met along the way that "he had been born in Egypt, of Arabian parents; that he had been carried away to France, in his infancy, by French soldiers who had invaded Egypt… His ambition was to return to Egypt to seek his family."[16] Although his story was hard to believe, he continued to insist on its truth and eventually won the trust of many. He dressed in Arab clothing and traded his Francs for gold and merchandise that could be used for trade along the way. To successfully survive the long trip, he travelled with Muslim caravans, who had experience making this voyage.[17] As he maintained great records of his trip, many of his writings have survived. He explains in one of his writings how he passed the graves of men on their unsuccessful Niger trip from 1816: "I was seized with an involuntary shudder at the thought that the same fate perhaps awaited me…The heat was beginning to be painful…"[18] He, too, was not immune to the diseases of the desert, for he came down with scurvy and was forced to temporarily halt his trip for more than six weeks before he was healthy enough to continue on his way.

Another explorer, Félix Dubois, also wrote down an extremely detailed account of his trip to Timbuktu. In describing the desert landscape on his way to the city, he stated that "Her sandy approaches

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[9] Ibid., 43.
[10]Ibid., 53.
[11]Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo*, 53.
[12]Ibid., 69.
[13]Kryza, *The Race for Timbuktu*, 229.
[14]Ibid., 229-238.
[15]Ibid., 256.
[16] Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo*, 109.
[17]Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo*, 109.
[18]Ibid., 110.

are strewn with bones and carcasses that have been disinterred by wild beasts, the remains of camels, horses, and donkeys that have fallen down and died in the last stages of the journey… the roads across the desert are lined by their bodies."[19] In the end, Cailié, and later Dubois, made it to Timbuktu and were both more than a little disappointed with what they saw.

Timbuktu was not what the Europeans had imagined it to be, not by a long shot. Cailié entered the city on April 20, 1828 and described his first impression:"I looked around and found that the sight before me did not answer my expectations. I had formed a totally different idea of the grandeur and wealth of Timbuktu… The city presented, at first view, nothing but a mass of ill-looking houses built of earth. Nothing was seen in all directions but immense plains of quicksand of a yellowish-white colour."[20]As Dubois was getting closer to the destination, and the city was in the far distance, he explains that no matter what direction you approach the city from, "the town presents the same outlines: fine, long and deep, and evoking the impression of grandeur in immensity."[21]This "grandeur" was quickly put to rest as soon as he actually entered the city. He continues thus:

> We have entered the town, and, as behind the scenes of a theatre, behold ! all the grandeur has suddenly disappeared… Instead of finding the compact and well-ordered city which was promised us by the exterior, we enter a town that seems to have recently passed through the successive dramas of siege, capture, and destruction… I had not expected to find an Athens, Rome, or Cairo here; but straw huts![22]

TIMBUKTU'S BEGINNINGS

While the Europeans were obsessed with a city made of gold, the real Timbuktu was growing and developing very differently than the Europeans imagined it to be. Starting around 1000 CE, Timbuktu was the site of the nomadic group, the Tuaregs, summer residence. By 1100CE, the area had become a permanent residence for the Songhai Empire. Its location between the Niger and the desert led the town to become a meeting place of travelers, both by water and land. It continued to grow in size and around 1300 CE, the city was officially recognized as a trading center for its exportation of goods from farther south, like gold, that were transported by caravans all the way to the Mediterranean. Since many of the merchants were Arabs from the East, Islam was quite likely to start influencing the area. In 1324, the first mosque was built and in 1336 the inhabitants of the city of Timbuktu began converting to Islam.[23]

ISLAM AND THE HEY DAYS OF TIMBUKTU

Since the town became Muslim so early in its existence, little is actually known about Timbuktu's pre-Islamic societies opposed to the post-Islamic era. The environment and resources available to the area dictated the construction of the city. Buildings in Timbuktu were constructed using square stones layered on top of one another. This kind of architecture was made possible by the "locally available, stratified sandstone which, easily split, left even, flat surfaces for regular ashlar coursework."[24]Another early technique for buildings was a wet-mud process called *banco*. In terms of early, indigenous construction

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[19]Felix Debois, *Timbuctoo the Mysterious*, trans. Diana White (London: William Heinemann, 1897), 209.
[20] Gardner, *The Questfor Timbuctoo,* 120.
[21] Dubois, *Timbuctoo the Mysterious*, 211.
[22]Ibid., 211, 214.
[23] Gardner, *The Quest for Timbuctoo*, 197.
[24]Labelle Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 33, 3 (1974): 189.

methods, mud was used almost exclusively as the building material by sedentary peoples.[25] These buildings did not have windows and the doors were carved out after the building was constructed in order to prevent a collapse during construction.[26] Construction of buildings using the wet-mud technique was traditionally a communal project, as it was never a specialized craft. Even women were involved, as they would gather the water for the mud so that the molding of the mud balls could occur.[27]The city was established initially for its convenient location as a major trading port. Its location between the Niger River and the desert allowed Timbuktu to prosper as a major trading center. The hierarchical establishment was set up so that "The rulers of the empire of Mali were black Africans of the Mandingo tribe."[28] This tribe was very successful in agriculture, thanks to the availability of the Niger River water. They were able to grow rice and other important crops, which led to a population increase. During the time of Mansa Musa, commerce in general increased on a massive scale, and Timbuktu, being a leading trading port, was prospering and benefitting greatly.[29]

The introduction of Islam to the city can be partially credited to Mansa Musa: Thus according to Windsor, "The king of Mali built a palace and several mosques in the celebrated city of Timbuktu… Mansa Musa was, indeed, a champion of Islamic religion and learning."[30]Mansa Musa built the DijinguereBer Mosque between 1324 and 1327.[31]The architecture of the buildings changed with the introduction of mosques and the techniques of building them from the East. Timber, which was used for structural horizontal bracing, was first used in the mosques and later in other buildings.[32] The use of timber as structural support allowed for easier repairs to the mud and bricks after rainy seasons.[33]

The people of Timbuktu were never completely unified and they remained heterogeneous. Their ability to work and exist together and in peace was key to their survival. Islam existed "side by side with a mosaic of indigenous African religions."[34] There was no major influx of Arabs from the East, instead the religion and practices of Islam made its way into the city, converting the indigenous black Africans. Even though the city was not completely unified under Islam, the people who held an elite status in the city shifted from the Mandingo tribe to Muslim scholars.

The availability of the University of Sankore, located within the city, led to the development of an elite class of Muslim scholars. Whereas before the introduction of Islam the social hierarchy was led by local Black tribesmen, thenceforth, "The role of Muslim scholars in Timbuktu… exerted a continuous influence upon the organization and character of the city throughout its history."[35] These scholars took on the role as leaders in the city. They dealt with public affairs, internal affairs, the administration, regulated the urban community, and were the spokesmen of the city as a whole. The role of the scholars and their taking initiative to rule and control the city enabled the city to develop and establish a unique personality. According to Elias Saad, "The ethnic diversity of the population, and especially that of the

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[25]Labelle Prussin,"The Architecture of Islam in West Africa", *African Arts* 1,2 (1968): 35.
[26]Prussin, "An Introduction",192.
[27]Labelle Prussin,"Sudanese Architecture and the Manding", *African Arts* 3,4 (1970): 18.
[28]Rudolph Windsor, *From Babylon to Timbuktu* (Smithtown: Exposition Press, 1969), 95.
[29]Ibid.,95-97.
[30] Windsor, *From Babylon to Timbuktu,* 97.
[31]ArchNet Digital Library. "Dictionary of Islamic Architecture." Accessed December 3, 2010. http://archnet.org/library/dictionary/entry.jsp?entry_id=DIA0871&mode=full
[32]Prussin, "The Architecture of Islam",72.
[33]Hullsgrove. "Timbuktu." Accessed December 3, 2010. http://www.hullsgrove.com/Timbuktu.html
[34]Prussin, "The Architecture of Islam",71.
[35]Elias Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables 1400-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983),22.

mercantile and learned elite, prevented the emergence of a strong kinship tradition."[36] The hierarchical system was not simply made up of Muslim scholars and non-Muslim scholars. Within the Muslim scholars, there was a wide variety of levels that a learned elite could be at. Saad explains this elitist diversity by explaining how "Among the scholars themselves it is nearly impossible to reconstruct fully the hierarchy of prestige, even in the most richly documented periods because of the selectivity of the sources."[37] Various levels within the hierarchy would perform different administrative jobs throughout the city.

Even with the influx of scholarly elites and its fame as a great Muslim educational center, the importance of the city as a major trading port on the southern edges of the Sahara desert was never abandoned. From 1468 onward, in addition to gold being a major export from Timbuktu, the city also exchanged slaves, kolanuts, hides, cotton goods and grains in return for importing goods like salt, horses, weapons and cowries, mostly from North Africa and probably Europe.[38] The population of the city fluctuated greatly over time, between 15,000 and 80,000.[39] The large variety in population was dependent on the trading seasons. Merchants came and went from the city seasonally.

CONCLUSION

Although Timbuktu was an amazingly complex and interesting society, it demonstrated nothing but pure disappointment for the Europeans. The hundreds upon hundreds of men that lost their lives looking for this city were lost because of an over-active imagination that swept the minds of Europeans for centuries. Although it was long imagined as a city of wealth and gold, it was in reality "a typical Sahelian trading town built of mud bricks that was swept by sand and dry desert winds, [and] could never live up to the expectations of a mysterious city of gold hidden among the vast wastes of sand dunes of the Sahara."[40] The European imagination over time had managed to construct an amazingly extravagant city, in the middle to the Sahara Desert, that paralleled with that of a Western city. The true reality of the city was that of a traditional African port city from its very beginning. It rose and prospered because of its ideal location. At its start, it was built from indigenous materials of the earth, followed local practices, and designed as typical desert cities were. The city changed with the introduction of Islam and became a city that combined local and Islamic traditions into a complex and prosperous society. Even though Timbuktu could not live up to the unrealistic expectations imposed upon it by the Europeans, the truth behind the mystical city still showed a very successful and prosperous urban settlement for many centuries.

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[36]Saad, *Social History of Timbuktu,* 23.
[37]Ibid.,82.
[38]Michael Gomez, "Timbuktu under Imperial Songhay: A Reconsideration of Autonomy", *The Journal of African History* 31,1 (1990): 7.
[39]David Anderson and Richard Rathbone, *Africa's Urban Past* (United Kingdom: James Currey Ltd., 2000), 3.
[40]Barnaby Rogerson, "Timbuktu: City in the Sands," in *The Great Cities in History,* ed. John Norwich. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2009),140.