

# Timbuktu



Timbuktu (/ ˌtɪmbʊkˈtuː/ TIM-buk-TOO; French: Tombouctou; Koyra Chiini: Tumbutu; Tuareg: ⵜⴰⵎⴱⵓⴽⵜ, romanized: Tin Bukt) is an ancient city in Mali, situated 20 kilometres (12 miles) north of the Niger River. It is the capital of the Tombouctou Region, one of the eight administrative regions of Mali, having a population of 54,453 in the 2009 census.

Archaeological evidence suggests prehistoric settlements in the region, predating the city's Islamic scholarly and trade prominence in the medieval period. Timbuktu began as a seasonal settlement and became permanent early in the 12th century. After a shift in trading routes, particularly after the visit by Mansa Musa around 1325, Timbuktu flourished, due to its strategic location, from the trade in salt, gold, and ivory. It gradually expanded as an important Islamic city on the Saharan trade route and attracted many scholars and traders before it became part of the Mali Empire early in the 14th century. In the first half of the 15th century, the Tuareg people took control for a short period, until the expanding Songhai Empire absorbed it in 1468.

## PREHISTORY OF TIMBUKTU

# Prehistory

Like other important Medieval West African towns such as Djenné (Jenné-Jeno), Gao, and Dia, Iron Age settlements have been discovered near Timbuktu that predate the traditional foundation date of the town. Although the accumulation of thick layers of sand has thwarted archaeological excavations in the town itself,[11][10] some of the surrounding landscape is

deflating and exposing pottery shards on the surface. A survey of the area by Susan and Roderick McIntosh in 1984 identified several Iron Age sites along the el-Ahmar, an ancient wadi system that passes a few kilometers to the east of the modern town.[12]

An Iron Age tell complex located nine kilometres (5+1/2 mi) southeast of the Timbuktu near the Wadi el-Ahmar was excavated between 2008 and 2010 by archaeologists from Yale University and the Mission Culturelle de Tombouctou. The results suggest that the site was first occupied during the 5th century BC, thrived throughout the second half of the 1st millennium AD and eventually collapsed sometime during the late 10th or early 11th-century AD.[13][14]

## Toponymy

Over the centuries, the spelling of Timbuktu has varied a great deal: from Tenbuch on the Catalan Atlas (1375), to traveller Antonio Malfante's Thambet, used in a letter he wrote in 1447 and also adopted by Alvise Cadamosto in his Voyages of Cadamosto, to Heinrich Barth's Timbúktu and Timbu'ktu. French spelling often appears in international reference as 'Tombouctou'. The German spelling 'Timbuktu' and its variant 'Timbucktu' have passed into English and the former has become widely used in recent years. Major English-language works have employed the spelling 'Timbuctoo', and this is considered the correct English form by scholars; 'Timbuctou' and 'Timbuctu' are sometimes used as well.

The French continue to use the spelling 'Tombouctou', as they have for over a century; variants include 'Temboctou' (used by explorer René Caillié) and 'Tombouktou', but they are seldom seen. Variant spellings exist for other places as well, such as Jenne (Djenné) and Segou (Ségou).[2] As well as its spelling, Timbuktu's toponymy is still open to discussion.[a] At least four possible origins of the name of Timbuktu have been described:

Songhay origin: both Leo Africanus and Heinrich Barth believed the name was derived from two Songhay words:[3] Leo Africanus writes the Kingdom of Tombuto was named after a town of the same name, founded in 1213 or 1214 by Mansa Sulayman.[4] The word itself consisted of two parts: tin (wall) and butu (Wall of Butu). Africanus did not explain the meaning of this Butu.[3] Heinrich Barth wrote: "The town was probably so called, because it was built originally in a hollow or cavity in the sand-hills. Tùmbutu means hole or womb in the Songhay language: if it were a Temáshight (Tamashek) word, it would be written Timbuktu. The name is generally interpreted by Europeans as well of Buktu (also same word in Persian is bâkhtàr باختر = where the sun sets, West), but tin has nothing to do with well." [5]

### HISTORY OF TIMBUKTU

## History

Timbuktu has become a household reference as a faraway, mysterious place, but the city itself was once a world-renowned trade powerhouse, as well as an academic hotspot of the medieval world. Timbuktu is unique in the fact that it has seen many rulers, but the city reached its golden period under the Mali Empire in the 13th and 14th centuries. Distinguished Malian Mansa Mūsā brought great fame to the city of Timbuktu when he established a university of Islamic learning there. The university taught much more than Islamic studies, though, including topics of history, rhetoric, law, science, and, most notably, medicine. Mansa Mūsā also introduced Timbuktu, and the Mali Empire in general, to the rest of the Medieval world through his Hajj, as his time in Mecca would soon inspire Arab travelers to visit North Africa. Europeans, however, would not reach the city until much later, due to the difficult and lengthy journey, thus garnering the city an aura of mystery.

Timbuktu primarily gained its wealth from local gold and salt mining, in addition to the trans-Saharan slave trade. Gold was a highly valued commodity in the Mediterranean region and salt was most popular south of the city, though arguably the biggest asset Timbuktu had was its location. The city is situated nine miles from the Niger River, making for good agricultural land, and is near the Sahara Desert, providing easily accessible trade routes. Timbuktu also acts as a midpoint between the regions of North, West, and Central Africa. Because of this, Timbuktu has developed into a cultural melting pot.

## GEOGRAPHY OF TIMBUKTU

# Geography

Timbuktu is located on the southern edge of the Sahara 15 km (9+1/2 mi) north of the main channel of the River Niger. The town is surrounded by sand dunes and the streets are covered in sand. The port of Kabara is 8 km (5 mi) to the south of the town and is connected to an arm of the river by a 3 km (2 mi) canal. The canal had become heavily silted but in 2007 it was dredged as part of a Libyan financed project.[21]

The annual flood of the Niger River is a result of the heavy rainfall in the headwaters of the Niger and Bani rivers in Guinea and northern Ivory Coast. The rainfall in these areas peaks in August but the floodwater takes time to pass down the river system and through the Inner Niger Delta. At Koulikoro, 60 km (37 mi) downstream from Bamako, the flood peaks in September,[22] while in Timbuktu the flood lasts longer and usually reaches a maximum at the end of December.[23]