

Great Mosque of Djenné

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book

Word Count: 1,269

LEVELED BOOK • W

Connections

Writing

Research the Five Pillars of Islam and write a paragraph explaining each one.

Social Studies

Make a timeline of events for the Great Mosque of Djenné, starting with the original mosque built in the thirteenth century and continuing to the mosque as it stands today.

Great Mosque of Djenné

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Focus Question

What is the Great Mosque of Djenné?
How does it unify the people of Djenné?

Words to Know

disrepair	mortar
insulate	mosque
Islam	Muslims
jut	preserving
Mecca	scaffolding
minarets	sculpted

Front cover: The Great Mosque of Djenné is located in Mali, in Africa.

Title page: One of the mosque's many archways looks out onto the open-air courtyard.

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Correlation

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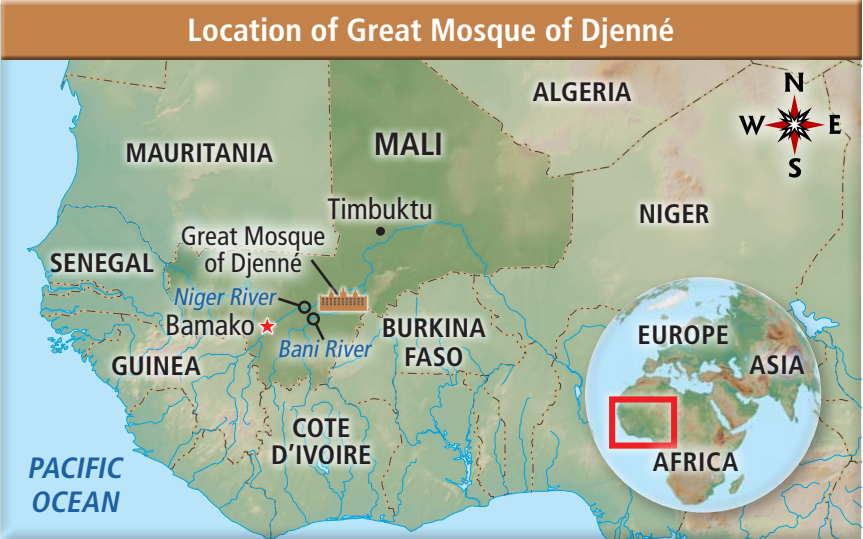


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Wonders of Africa

The town of Djenné (je-NAY) is one of sub-Saharan Africa’s oldest towns. It is home to a unique religious building: the Great **Mosque** of Djenné.

Mosques are places of worship for **Muslims**, who follow the religion of **Islam**. One of the largest religions in the world, Islam has more than one billion followers. The religion is based on five ideas. These include a declaration of faith, prayer, fasting, charity, and going to **Mecca**—the birthplace of Islam.

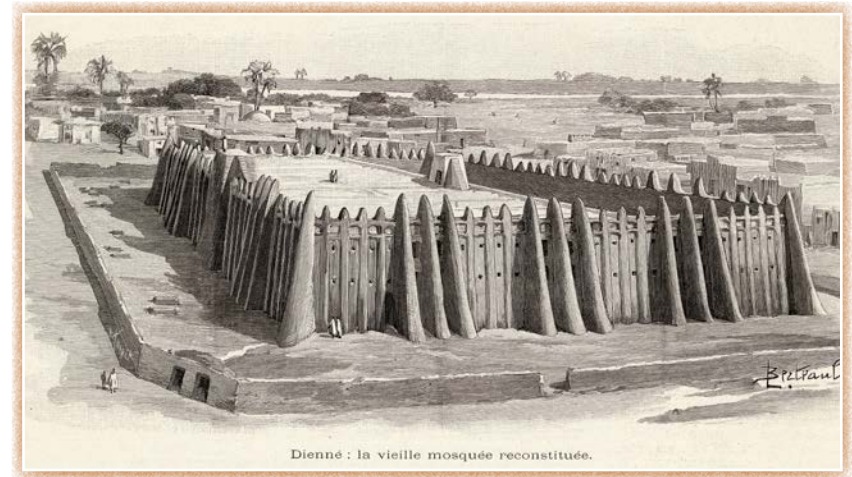
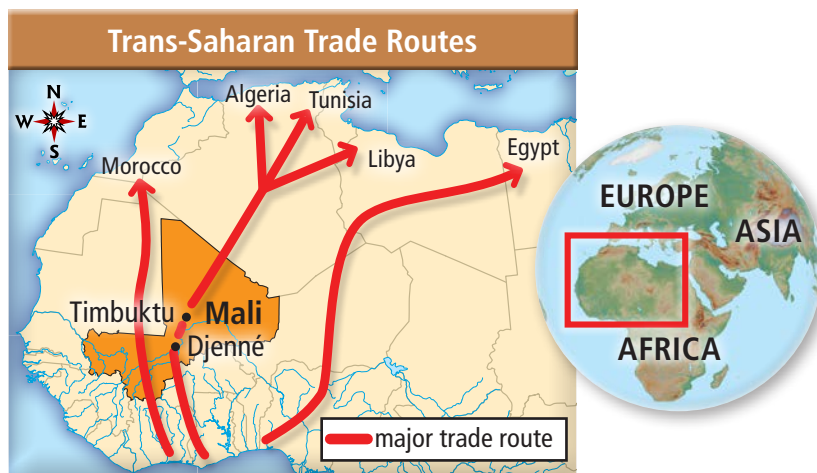
Muslim travelers visit the Great Mosque of Djenné to study Islam and worship at the world’s largest mud-built structure. It is one of the most important buildings in sub-Saharan Africa.

Trade Routes

Djenné is a small town in the West African country of Mali. The town lies on a floodplain between the Niger and Bani Rivers and can only be reached by boat.

During the thirteenth century, its location proved to be a perfect link to the city of Timbuktu, 483 km (300 mi.) to the north. Traders traveling from the coast north to Timbuktu, a major stop on the trans-Saharan trade routes, passed through Djenné, and the town grew.

Like the trade of goods, Islam also spread along the trans-Saharan trade routes. Islam had come to Mali in the ninth century. It began to have a greater influence under Mali's Muslim king Mansa Musa in the 1300s. In time, Djenné became a center for Islamic study.



A drawing from 1896 shows the mosque during reconstruction.

A Place of Worship

Followers of Islam needed a place to worship in Djenné. The construction of the Great Mosque began in the thirteenth century. However, the mosque that we see today is not the original mosque built on this site.

The Original Mosque

The original Great Mosque was built in the thirteenth century under Djenné's ruler, King Koi Konboro. He built the mosque on the site of his palace using local materials and traditional design. He added high towers and large surrounding walls. However, over time, the effects of rain took a toll on the mosque, causing the mud to wash away. By the 1800s, the Great Mosque of Djenné had fallen into major **disrepair**.



Seku Amadu

Amadu's Mosque

During the nineteenth century, a West African tribal leader named Seku Amadu conquered Djenné. He let the original mosque fall into even further disrepair. In 1834, Amadu began building a new, plainer mosque.

The new mosque was built on a nearby site over two years and was finished in 1836. However, French forces captured the city in 1893 and replaced the mosque, which had already fallen into ruin, with a school.

Today's Mosque

The mosque that we see today was completed in 1907 and was built on the site of the original Great Mosque. Although this was its last complete construction, the Great Mosque of Djenné changes from year to year due to repairs. As a result, today's mosque looks quite different from the original mosque.



The toron are not just decoration. Workers use them for climbing during the mosque's annual restoration.

Made of Mud

Unlike the mosques in places like Egypt, India, and Turkey, the Great Mosque of Djenné stands out because of its plainness. Its tall brown walls are made of mud that has been baked hard by the Sun. This gives the building its smooth, **sculpted** appearance. At regular intervals, bundles of palm wood sticks, called *toron*, **jut** outward from the walls. The toron help support the walls.

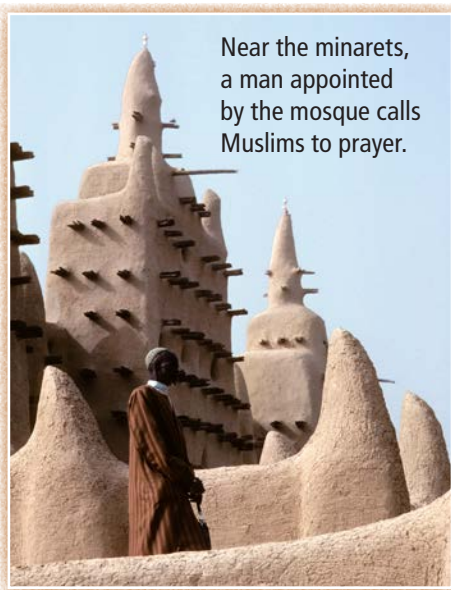
The prayer wall, or *qibla* (KIB-luh) wall, faces east, toward Mecca, and overlooks the city's marketplace. Mecca is a city in the Middle East and is considered the birthplace of Islam.

The mosque has three boxlike towers, or **minarets**. Each tower is topped with an ornate ostrich egg, a symbol of purity and fertility. Five times a day, religious leaders climb the staircases and call local Muslims to prayer.

Entering the mosque, visitors climb one of six sets of stairs. The large prayer hall can hold up to three thousand people. The roof, whose ninety wooden pillars span the enclosed space, covers half of the mosque. Vents topped with removable ceramic caps allow hot air to escape.



A sculpted golden ostrich egg decorates the top of each minaret.

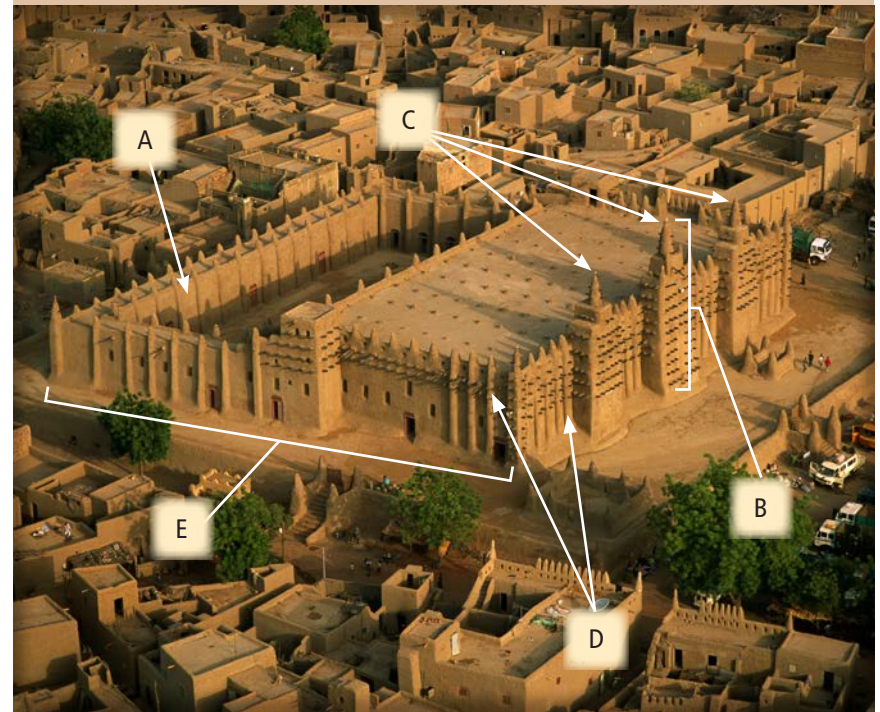


Near the minarets, a man appointed by the mosque calls Muslims to prayer.

The other half of the mosque contains an open-air prayer hall. This courtyard is surrounded by an arched passageway. From here, visitors can watch the activities inside.

Great Mosque of Djenné: Fast Facts

With a surface area of 5,625 square meters (60,547 sq. ft.), the Great Mosque of Djenné is the largest mud-brick building in the world. It is thought to be one of the greatest African architectural achievements. The mosque was named a World Heritage Site in 1988.



- A. Walls are 41 to 61 centimeters (16–24 in.) thick and made of smooth mud
- B. Height of tallest minaret is 16 meters (52 ft.)
- C. Three minarets
- D. Eighteen decorative projections on the main wall
- E. Built on a 3-meter (9 ft.) raised platform to avoid flooding

Building the Mosque

The Great Mosque of Djenné was constructed using traditional materials from the region, specifically mud. A useful building material, mud was used to create the bricks, **mortar**, and plaster. By baking the mud in the sun, locals made bricks, called *ferrey*. They used mud as mortar to bond the bricks together as they built the walls. They also used mud as a plaster to coat the walls, which gives the mosque its smooth, sculpted look.

The mud, which is a mix of butter and clay, is laid as thick as 61 centimeters (24 in.). A thick base helps support the weight above. The mud walls also **insulate** the building. They take in and hold the day's heat. This keeps the mosque at a cool temperature during the day. But after dark, when the outside temperature drops, the walls release the day's heat. People inside stay warm throughout the night.

A Djenné man spreads mud over the outer wall of the mosque to maintain the building.



Temperature and the amount of moisture in the air change dramatically in West Africa. These things can cause the walls to crack. To help prevent this, bundles of toron are placed in the walls. These bundles jut out at regular distances and help reduce cracking. Toron are also useful because they can be used as built-in **scaffolding** during the mosque's upkeep each year.

Because of the risk of water damage, the Great Mosque was constructed on a raised platform 3 meters (9 ft.) high to avoid flooding from the nearby Bani River. Additionally, ceramic gutters along the roof collect rain and direct it away from the walls to avoid water damage to the outside.



Workers climb on the outside of the mosque during repairs using toron as scaffolding.



Excited crowds run with mud plaster in baskets in front of the Great Mosque during a yearly festival.

An Important Place

Today, the Great Mosque is central to the town of Djenné. Citizens take an active role in its upkeep. Every year, the entire community participates in the Crépissage de la Grande Mosquée (k-ray-pee-SAZH DU LAH GRAHND MOSS-kay). During this festival, they put new plaster on the mosque's outside walls, which have cracked because of the changing weather.

In the days before the festival, citizens collect fine clay soil from the Niger and Bani Rivers that they use to form a mud plaster. The women of Djenné normally supply water for the mixture, while young boys take up the task of mixing the plaster in special pits.

At the start of the festival, a race is held to see who will be the first to deliver plaster from the pits to the mosque walls. Then the work can begin. The men climb ladders using the mosque's toron as ready-made scaffolding, and they apply the mixture to the cracking walls.

Along with work, the lively festival includes music and food. Musicians entertain the workers to keep their spirits up and make the labor go more quickly. The town's elders sit in a place of honor and watch the work progress, offering advice when needed. Young children sing, run, and play during the festival.

Do You Know?

Only Muslims are permitted inside the Great Mosque of Djenné. Non-Muslims may only view the mosque from the outside.





Today and Beyond

Today, many ancient mosques have been updated with modern features, such as electrical wiring and indoor plumbing. Although the Great Mosque of Djenné has been equipped with a loudspeaker system, locals have opposed additional updates in favor of **preserving** the building, which is an important part of their culture and religion.

When Djenné was made a World Heritage Site by the United Nations in 1988, it gained protections to help preserve the city's history. The Great Mosque, as well as other buildings in the historical zone, may not be updated with modern materials or technology. For the time being, Djenné's people will continue to hold onto their cultural heritage and their annual festival.

Glossary

disrepair (<i>n.</i>)	the state of being in a bad condition or needing repair (p. 6)
insulate (<i>v.</i>)	to prevent the transfer of heat (p. 11)
Islam (<i>n.</i>)	the monotheistic faith of Muslims, based on the teachings of the prophet Muhammad (p. 4)
jut (<i>v.</i>)	to extend beyond or stick out (p. 8)
Mecca (<i>n.</i>)	a city in Saudi Arabia that is a holy destination for people who practice Islam (p. 4)
minarets (<i>n.</i>)	narrow towers near a mosque from which worshippers are called to prayer (p. 9)
mortar (<i>n.</i>)	a liquid mixture of materials that hardens as it dries and is used to hold bricks or stones together (p. 11)
mosque (<i>n.</i>)	a place of worship in the Islamic faith (p. 4)
Muslims (<i>n.</i>)	people who follow the religion of Islam (p. 4)
preserving (<i>v.</i>)	taking care of and saving for the future (p. 15)
scaffolding (<i>n.</i>)	a system of temporary platforms used to support workers while building, repairing, or decorating a structure (p. 12)
sculpted (<i>adj.</i>)	carved or molded; having a clear, sharp outline as if carved (p. 8)