

## Timbuktu - Africa's end-of-world El Dorado

### Part 1



I first read about Timbuktu in the Legionnaires' novels of Jenő Rejtő. Although Rejtő never made it there, in his novels the city is always an unattainable, mystical, world-end settlement. And although the old town, which has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1988, competed in an international vote to determine the world's new seven wonders in 2007, the idea of the writer is sadly not too far from reality. Since the 2012 coup, Timbuktu has been under a steady stream of Tuareg rebels and Al-Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine- and since 2013 French and UN soldiers have been camped in its territory. The latter are trying to maintain a

delicate peace in the Northern Territory. Meanwhile, the destruction of the iconic city continues: the number of inhabitants has fallen by nearly 40,000 since 2009, with just under 15,000. Due to the drought that has plagued the city since the 1970s, its streets, once green, surrounded by mango trees, pastures and irrigated gardens, clay houses, have been destroyed by nature and partly due to human negligence, and slowly reclaimed territory by the desert. The river Niger's August-December floods often reached the outskirts of the city, causing severe damage to historic buildings in 2002. The 3 km long canal connecting the city with Niger, restored by Libya's then-leader Mohamed Gaddafi in was originally built in the 19th century. At

the end of the 19th century it was navigable - the last time it provided water all year round in 1955 - it was silted, drying out most of the year. Water that was needed to cultivate the gardens that once grew peanuts, potatoes, melons, tomatoes, millet, mint sediments remained only in the curds dug deeper and deeper by the inhabitants. There is almost no infrastructure: only a narrow, poor-quality, here and there covered 706 km long road from Bamako, which is



extremely dangerous due to Tuareg and Islamist attacks. There is no railway, and the river Niger, 15 km south, is only good for ships in the flooding periods. Although the UN has rebuilt the airport, which was built in 1961 - it cannot be used by civilians. Most of the houses have no electricity, no water, where there is, it also operates in a prepaid system, if it is in operation. The city is quiet, hot (the average temperature is above 30 °C all year round) and slow: car traffic is almost non-existent, man and loads travel mostly on donkeys. The once bright trading centre is now only important for the immediate area: salt boards (mined in Taoudenni that is 664 km away in the Sahara), vegetable, fruits, rice, fish and goats or sheep are sold on its markets. In 2011 the Festival of the Desert (*Festival au Désert*), was not organised anymore. It was first held in 2007, where the audience listened to world music. The legendary city of 333 sacred tombs, filled with poetry, knowledge, once cooling channels, birdsong, golden mango trees and astonishing riches, unless a miracle happens, in time becomes truly the end of the world legend.

But this was not always the case: in the Middle Ages and in the subsequent period, Timbuktu was the El Dorado of Africa - the mysterious golden city, the "pearl of the desert", where the longest caravan road across the Sahara ended in the South. While most of the historic caravan trips were around 40

days long – that is how long camels go without water and man without food - the journey across the Western part of the Sahara took 52 days to complete. Only the most persistent have made it here, if they have arrived at all and have not become victims of the nomadic Tuaregs, or thirst and hunger. The caravans, which were often made up of 1,000 camels, transported workers and food to remote salt mines and 120 to 150 kilos of salt tablets per camel on the way back.

Around the year 1100 Timbuktu was a seasonal camp for the Tuaregs. Legend has it that she is named after a "hunchback" woman who was left behind to look after their belongings. This woman is referred to as Tomboutou, Timbuktu or just Buktu, which means "mother with large navels," referring to the fact that the woman may have had a very large umbilical hernia or some other kind of bodily defect.



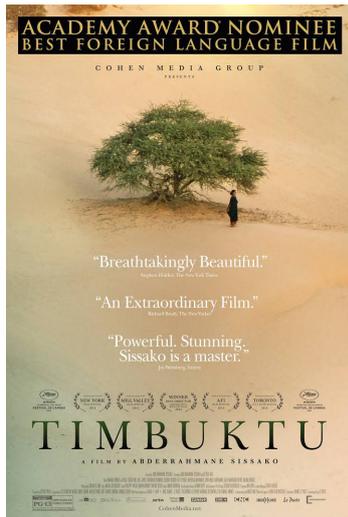
Timbuktu's location between the desert and the river Niger made it an ideal commercial hub, and in the 13th-14th century the Mali Empire annexed it. By the 14th century, it had become a thriving hub for the trans-Saharan gold and salt trade and one of the strongholds of Islamic culture – became the Athens of West Africa. The three oldest mosques in West Africa, Djinguereber, Sankore and Sidi Yahya were built in the city in the 13th-14th century, and the emperor of Mali, the extravagant Moussa Mansa, built the now untraceable royal residence, Magudu, alongside Djinguereber.

In 1433, the Tuaregs tore the city out of the weakened Mali Empire, but did not move in, instead they controlled it from the desert. Despite the sizable tributes and occasional looting, commercial and scientific life continued to flourish. In 1450 it had a population of nearly 100,000, including 25,000 students and scholars.

In 1468 it was occupied by Sonni Ali, legendary ruler of the Sontial Empire. He stood up to Islamic scholars, his successor, the first king of the Askia dynasty, Askia Muhammad I. (1493-1528) focused more on education. He himself followed Islam strongly, and established several Islamic schools across the empire, where students could learn religious practices. Nevertheless, he was very tolerant of other religions and did not want to impose Islam on his people. During the reign of the Askia Dynasty (1493-1591), Timbuktu reached the peak of its flowering. They gathered here from Ghadames in Libya and other cities in North Africa to exchange gold and slaves, clothing and horses for the salt of Thagaza, which was so valuable that they exchanged gold at the same price.

The city's decline began in 1591 after it was occupied by the Moroccans. Moroccan rule ended the city's autonomy – scientists were arrested in 1593 on charges of infidelity, many of whom were killed – including Ahmed Baba, the city's top scholar. The city's coup de grace was given by the opening of Trans-Atlantic trade routes and thus the decline in the importance of Saharan trade. Timbuktu has slowly become an isolated settlement, with its population greatly reduced. The small Moroccan unit left in the area was unable to protect the city from attacks by the surrounding Fulan, Tuareg and Bambara tribes.

Finally, in 1893, the French colonists arrived, who maintained the small canal connecting the city with the river Niger through slave labor. During World War II it served as a "detention centre" for the captured crew of an English ship. After Mali's independence, attempts were still made to build a new canal, but it was a process during the massive drought of 1973 and 1985 that decimated the Tuaregs and their livestock. Timbuktu only survived due to international aid.

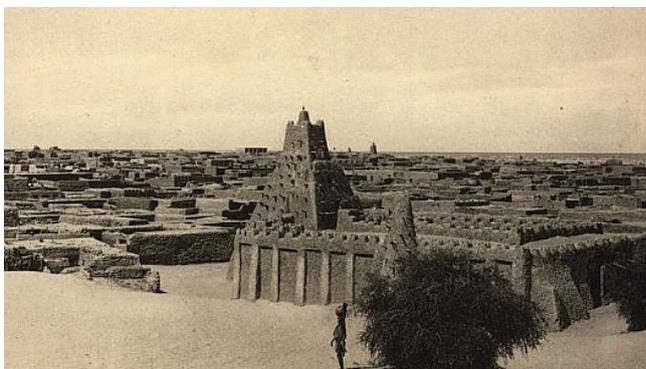


In 2012, the city was first seized by Tuareg rebels and then by radical Islamist rebels. They introduced Islamic law, *sharia*- they banned music, football, smoking, and they ordered women to cover themselves up. The film *Timbuktu* is about this period - though it wasn't filmed in the city – and in 2014 at the Cannes International Film Festival the film won several awards and was nominated for an Oscar in the Best Foreign Film category in 2015. The city's cultural heritage the mausoleum of the saints was attacked and pickaxed, because the Islamists considered it idolatry and the Islamic religion to be contrary to the teachings of the locals, who believe that the worship of the Saints is compatible with the Islamic religion. Twelve of the 16 tombs were vandalized. Due to this the three grand mosques, 16 cemeteries and 16 mausoleums, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, have been added to the List of Endangered Treasures of the World Heritage Site. Thousands of several hundred years old manuscripts were burned, and as a farewell in 2013 the library of the Ahmed Baba Institute was set on fire.

The last major event in the life of the city was the recapture of the city by French forces in 2013.

European explorers "discovered" Timbuktu in the 19th century through the writing of **Leo Africanus**, a Moorish born in Granada in 1485 and cast away by the Spanish, in "*Descrittione dell' Africa*". Leo Africanus's uncle was sent on a tour of North African diplomacy to reach Timbuktu. According to the description the inhabitants of the city, especially the traders are very rich, there is abundant locally produced corn, and beef stock, milk, butter change hands in the market. The king has plenty of gold, 3,000 horse soldiers, and a "vast court, for the good of doctors, judges, priests, and other scientists - who are impeccably manage costs and perform their duties." The next traveller who mentioned the city was **Shabeni** 250 years after Leo Africanus, who had already met a declining city, but mentioned that its territory was surrounded by forests.

In 1788, an English African Association was founded to help explorers reach Timbuktu. One such explorer was the **Scottish Mungo Park**, who visited the city in 1795 and 1805 - but lost his life before returning to Europe. In 1824 the French Société Géographie offered 10.000 francs to anyone reaching Timbuktu and return from there. The Scot **Gordon Laing** reached the city in 1826, but he was assassinated by the locals for fear of the European. **René Caillié** disguised as a Muslim in order to survive the visit reached the city in April 1828. He described it as a "mass of bad-looking clay houses"



and thus depriving it of the title of "golden city" and giving it the adjective "end of the world". He spent 13 days there, drawing, visiting mosques and searching for Laing's fate. After returning home, three more Europeans visited the city, the most famous of them being the German **Henrich Bart** . Barth's six-year journey was groundbreaking in the history of African exploration- and his success attracted a keen interest in Africa.

He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the geographical companies of London and Paris with their large gold medals. On September 7, 1853, he reached Timbuktu and found the city's much-debated geographical location. When they learned he was a Christian, his life was in danger; but on

18 January 1854 he was able to travel to Europe. The replica of the house where he lived during this time stands with a small museum east of the Sidy Yahija Mosque.

As hopeless as the situation may seem, many work to get Timbuktu back on the map of the world. The "Timbuktu Renaissance Initiative" aims to relocate the city to the focus of attention as "a torch of tolerance, wisdom and development" - in accordance with the golden age. We hope they succeed, because this city with a fantastic past and amazing cultural treasures deserves another chance. The European Development Fund is funding the construction of a 464 km long road between Goma Coura and Timbuktu, which can also help revive the legendary city.

pictures: Bouréma Dolo, tourguide, Mali; Wikipedia; beautiful mosque.com;