

# The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Mali

## 4: WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN TIMBUKTU?

Timbuktu was one of the major trading centers of West Africa at the time of Mali. It was famous also for its learning and its wealth. These sources give a flavor of what life was like in Timbuktu.

### Source 1

There are many wells containing sweet water in Timbuktu; and in addition, when the Niger is in flood canals deliver the water to the city. Grain and animals are abundant, so that much milk and butter is consumed. But salt is in very short supply because it is carried here from Taghaza, some 500 miles from Timbuktu.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

### Source 3

The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered sticks with thatched roofs. In the center of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, and in addition there is a large palace, where the king lives. The shops of the craftsmen, the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported from Europe to Timbuktu, carried by Berber [North African] merchants.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

### Source 4

The people of Timbuktu have a peaceful nature. They have a custom of almost continuously walking about the city in the evening (except for those that sell gold), between 10pm and 1am, playing musical instruments and dancing. The citizens have at their service many slaves, both men and women.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

### Source 6

The city is very much at risk from fire. At the time when I was there on my second voyage, half the city burned in the space of five hours. But the wind was violent and the inhabitants of the other half of the city began to move their belongings for fear that the other half would burn.

Leo Africanus c. 1526

### Source 7

Well placed for the caravan trade, Timbuktu was badly situated to defend itself from the Tuareg raiders of the Sahara. These Tuareg were repeatedly hammering at the gates of Timbuktu, and often enough they burst them open, with sad results for the inhabitants.

Davidson 1998: 56



Source 2: Great Mosque, Timbuktu  
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Source 5: Sankore Mosque, Timbuktu  
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