CSI: TIMBUKTU

Salt comes from the north, gold from the south, and silver from the country of the white men, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu.

-An old West African proverb

In today’s popular imagination, Timbuktu is the most remote and isolated part of the world. But 500 years ago, Timbuktu was the legendary city of gold. It was a transit point and a financial and trading center for trade across the Sahara. It dominated the gold trade. It was a place of mystery and faraway riches.

Timbuktu was founded in 1080 and within 300 years had become one of the era’s most important trading points. Timbuktu was an influential Islamic intellectual center, a cosmopolitan multicultural city of commerce and learning and the second-largest imperial court in the world. When much of Europe was struggling out of the Dark Ages, the emperor of Timbuktu was having stunning mosques built, and thousands of scholars from as far as Islamic India and Moorish Spain were studying in the city.

Then it was a city of 100,000 and so rich that even the slaves were decorated with gold. In 1324, a king of Mali, Mansa Musa, traveled with a caravan of a hundred camels bearing 300 pounds of gold each (equal to perhaps $135 million today).

The legend of his wealth was recorded in maps, particularly the Catalan Atlas of 1375, which showed an African ruler enthroned like a European monarch with a crown on his head and an orb and scepter in his hand.

Timbuktu was once a center of religion, culture, and learning, as well as a commercial crossroads on the trans-Saharan caravan route. Situated at the strategic point where the Sahara touches on the River Niger, it was the gateway for African goods bound for the merchants of the Mediterranean, the courts of Europe and the larger Islamic world. It was involved in a thriving commerce in gold, salt, and slaves. When the Renaissance was barely stirring in Europe, wandering scholars were drawn to Timbuktu’s manuscripts all the way from North Africa, Arabia and even Persia.

By the time Timbuktu was discovered by Europeans, the palaces of its kings and other fine buildings had crumbled to dust.

1526: Leo Africanus visited Timbuktu and described it as one of the richest cities he has seen in his travels.

1830: Rene Caille noted that Timbuktu was “nothing but a mass of ill-looking houses, built of earth.”

What happened to Timbuktu???
How did it go from a thriving medieval city to a city of dust?
(What were the immediate and long-term causes of its decline?)
Evidence A: Leo Africanus: Description of Timbuktu from The Description of Africa (1526)
This is an excerpt from Reading About the World, Volume 2, edited by Paul Brians, Michael Blair, Douglas Hughes, Michael Neville, Roger Schlesinger, Alice Spitzer, and Susan Swan and published by HarperCollinsCustomBooks.

Leo Africanus was commissioned to write in Italian the detailed survey of Africa which provided most of what Europeans knew about the continent for the next several centuries. At the time he visited the Ghanaian city of Timbuktu, it was somewhat past its peak, but still a thriving Islamic city famous for its learning. "Timbuktu" was to become a byword in Europe as the most inaccessible of cities, but at the time Leo visited, it was the center of a busy trade in African products and in books.

The name of this kingdom is a modern one, after a city which was built by a king named Mansa Suleyman in the year 610 of the hegira [1232 CE] around twelve miles from a branch of the Niger River. (1)
The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered wattles with thatched roofs. In the center of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, built by an architect named Granata, (2) and in addition there is a large palace, constructed by the same architect, where the king lives. The shops of the artisans, the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported from Europe to Timbuktu, borne by Berber merchants. (3)
The women of the city maintain the custom of veiling their faces, except for the slaves who sell all the foodstuffs. The inhabitants are very rich, especially the strangers who have settled in the country; so much so that the current king (4) has given two of his daughters in marriage to two brothers, both businessmen, on account of their wealth. 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 the consumption of milk and butter is considerable. But salt is in very short supply because it is carried here from Tegaza, some 500 miles from Timbuktu. I happened to be in this city at a time when a load of salt sold for eighty ducats. The king has a rich treasure of coins and gold ingots. One of these ingots weighs 970 pounds. (5)
The royal court is magnificent and very well organized. When the king goes from one city to another with the people of his court, he rides a camel and the horses are led by hand by servants. If fighting becomes necessary, the servants mount the camels and all the soldiers mount on horseback. When someone wishes to speak to the king, he must kneel before him and bow down; but this is only required of those who have never before spoken to the king, or of ambassadors. The king has about 3,000 horsemen and infinity of foot-soldiers armed with bows made of wild fennel (?) which they use to shoot poisoned arrows. This king makes war only upon neighboring enemies and upon those who do not want to pay him tribute. When he has gained a victory, he has all of them--even the children--sold in the market at Timbuktu.
There are in Timbuktu numerous judges, teachers and priests, all properly appointed by the king. He greatly honors learning. Many hand-written books imported from Barbary are also sold. There is more profit made from this commerce than from all other merchandise. Instead of coined money, pure gold nuggets are used; and for small purchases, cowrie shells which have been carried from Persia, (6) and of which 400 equal a ducat. Six and two-thirds of their ducats equal one Roman gold ounce. (7)
The people of Timbuktu are of a peaceful nature. They have a custom of almost continuously walking about the city in the evening (except for those that sell gold), between 10 PM and 1 AM, playing musical instruments and dancing.

(1) Mansa Suleyman reigned 1336-1359. The city was in fact probably founded in the 11th century by Tuaregs, but became the chief city of the king of Mali in 1324.
(2) Ishak es Sahili el-Gharnati, brought to Timbuktu by Mansa Suleyman.
(3) By camel caravan across the Sahara Desert from NorthAfrica.
(4) 'Omar ben Mohammed Naddi, not in fact the king, but representative of the ruler of the kingdom of Songhai.
(5) Such fabulous nuggets are commonly mentioned by Arab writers about Africa, but their size is probably grossly exaggerated.
(6) Cowrie shells, widely used for money in West Africa, sometimes came in fact from even farther away, from the Maldives Islands of Southeast Asia.
(7) A Sudanese gold ducat would weigh .15 oz.
Evidence B:

City of Scholars

Ibn Battuta left the Mali capital early in 1353, heading down the Niger River for Timbuktu. This city of about 10,000 people was never a military stronghold or seat of a king. Instead, its fame rested on its reputation as a city of scholars.

Timbuktu was founded around 1100 as a market town bordering the Sahara. Almost from the beginning, it seems to have been a Muslim town. It was self-governing until Mansa Musa annexed it without bloodshed to the Mali Empire in 1325. Even after that, the city continued running its own affairs with little control from the Mali kings.

Black African farmers and river people as well as white Arab and Berber merchants populated the city, making it an ethnically mixed settlement. It became known as a place open to newcomers and a city of refuge.

When Ibn Battuta came to Timbuktu in 1353, it was becoming the major center of Islamic learning in black Africa. Because it had a large Muslim population and was also on the pilgrimage route to Mecca, the city drew many Muslim scholars. The sons of wealthy Timbuktu merchant families studied under them to become Islamic scholars, too. They studied Islamic religion, law, literature, science, and medicine. Islamic books became expensive import items.

Elementary schools, sometimes supported by rich merchants, taught boys to read and memorize the Koran. Most Muslim males, both black and white, learned to read. (Muslim countries at this time normally excluded females from formal schooling.)

Timbuktu reached the height of its influence in the 1500s as part of the Muslim Songhai Empire, which replaced Mali. Many colleges, elementary schools, and libraries flourished in Timbuktu, whose population had grown to about 50,000. All of this became possible because of the leadership and financial contributions of wealthy black and white Muslim merchant families...
Evidence C:

Medieval Trade Routes Across the Sahara

*Between the 11th and 15th centuries, West Africa exported goods across the Sahara Desert to Europe and beyond.*

Evidence D:

Major World Trade Routes around 1300
Evidence E:

Depictions of Mansa Musa

Evidence F:

Areas of Songhai Control at Golden Ages
Evidence G:

Map of Morocco

Maps of Morocco’s areas of control—1500 & 1600
Evidence H:

Changes in population/trade patterns
Pelizzo, Riccardo. *Timbuktu: A Lesson in Underdevelopment*

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Evidence I:

Map of European Voyages of Discovery
Evidence J:

Map of European Trade Routes

(See PowerPoint for color image)

Evidence K:

European Map of West Africa 1743

(See PowerPoint for color image)
Evidence L:

Morocco and the Songhai Dynasty
http://www.ruperthopkins.com/pdf/The_Kingdom_of_Songhai..pdf

During the 16th century civil war broke out in Songhai. This was partly caused by the kingdom’s rapid expansion which caused the state authorities difficulties in maintaining control over the vast kingdom, leading to a series of internal revolts. The structures of the state apparatus were weakened, leading to its complete collapse with the invasion by Moroccan and foreign insurgents. Climate change was another factor leading to the decline of the Songhai as a major regional power coupled with drought and disease. But the most decisive factor was the loss of control of the lucrative gold trade and the revenue that this generated for the state’s exchequer. A wish to control this trade was a major factor in Morocco’s decision to invade Songhai...

Evidence M:

The Conquest of Songhai by Morocco
Empires and Kingdoms of Sub-Saharan Africa, Teacher's Curriculum Institute

Morocco had long profited from the trans-Saharan gold-salt trade. Al-Mansur, the sultan of Morocco, believed that his profits might be even greater if he controlled the sources of both salt and gold in West Africa. Furthermore, the sultan needed additional revenue to pay for Morocco’s large mercenary army. This army of highly trained hired soldiers was armed with expensive muskets imported from England. Al-Mansur viewed a military expedition into the Sudan as an opportunity to offset the expense of maintaining his army and its costly weapons...

This expedition left Marrakesh in October 1590 and reached the Niger River at the end of February 1591. About half of the troops did not survive the grueling trans-Saharan journey. When the remaining 2,000 soldiers reached the edge of the Songhai Empire, their superior firepower allowed them to easily repulse sporadic attacks by Songhai archers...In response, Askiya Ishaq [the leader of Songhai] met them at Tondibi, where the decisive battle took place. The battle was over within a short time, as most of the Songhai were routed by the heavy gunfire... Many people, including civilians, lost their lives while crossing the [Niger] river in panic and confusion

After the clash at Tondibi the Moroccans spent another 150 years in the Sudan, but never accomplished their goal of monopolizing the trans-Saharan gold-salt trade. Though the cities of Gao and Timbuktu fell to the Moroccans in 1593, they did not yield the riches the Moroccans had hoped for. Furthermore, rebellions throughout the region formerly controlled by Songhai prevented the Moroccans from establishing their authority in the Sudan. Small, independent states were established throughout the region in the early seventeenth century, and al-Mansur’s successors decided that gaining control of the Sudan was more trouble than it was worth. Thus, in 1618, Morocco abandoned its attempts to extract profits from West Africa. The leaders of the Moroccan army who remained in the Sudan were left to fend for themselves and acted as petty tyrants.

Life in the Sudan following the period of Moroccan conquest was characterized by the disintegration of the political and military cohesion of the Songhai empire. The political unity of the West African empires fell apart as the economic and administrative centers of the empire fell into Moroccan hands. Once-thriving schools were abandoned by teachers and students, and much of the cultivated land around Timbuktu and Gao fell waste as Songhai peasants fled from Moroccan control. The busy salt-gold trade continued, but traffic was disrupted by a series of revolts that swept through the Sudan as the people of the former West African empires developed new polities and consolidated smaller states.