

11. Timbuktu the Less Mysterious?

Timothy Insoll

Abstract

Timbuktu is a name known to most, but surprisingly the archaeological investigation of the city has been largely neglected until recently. Archaeological excavations and survey within the city have provided evidence for trade and occupation in the late to post-medieval periods (sixteenth century onwards), but have failed to find any trace of earlier material. This is in part due to methodological problems associated with excavating on the edge of the Sahara, but might also indicate that the importance of the city has been exaggerated in (western) popular imagination. This idea will be briefly considered and the relevant results outlined.

Introduction

The title of this paper is a deliberate pun on that used by Felix Dubois (1897), "Timbuctoo the Mysterious". The reason for this is not wit, but rather the fact that this paper considers whether Timbuktu, thanks to recent archaeological research in the city, is any less "mysterious" than it was at the end of the nineteenth century and, indeed,

whether its aura of mystery is in fact a result of historical inflation, a myth rather than a mystery. Dubois's title is also synonymous with western popular conceptions of Timbuktu as a metaphor for the remote. Most people will have heard of it, but not everyone will know where it is (15 km north of River Niger in Mali; Figure 11.1).

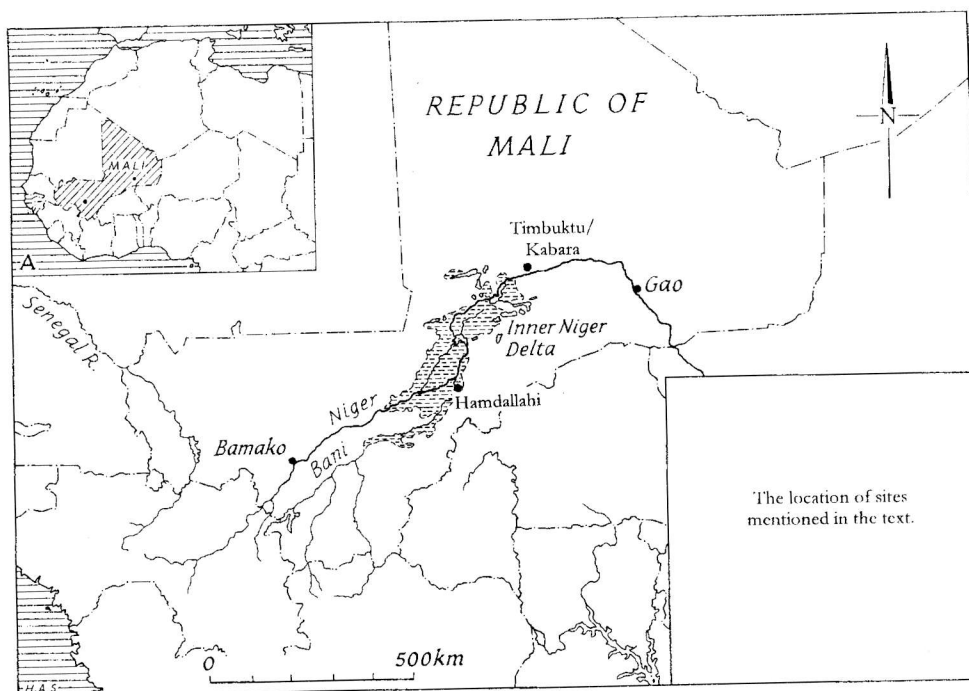


Figure 11.1 Location of Timbuktu.



Figure 11.2 View of the Sankore Mosque, Timbuktu, before restoration (photograph M.R. MacLean).

The Image of Timbuktu

This mystification of Timbuktu has a long history (Herbert 1980), and Elias Saad (1983, 3) has rightly described Timbuktu as becoming “famous for merely being famous”. An evaluation of the relevant sources indicates that the Arabic writers and geographers cannot be proclaimed the culprits for the embellishment of the role of Timbuktu (see Levtzion and Hopkins 1981; Hunwick 1999). On the contrary, Timbuktu is largely neglected in the medieval Arabic sources in favour of its wealthier and more important neighbours such as Gao and Walata (Insoll 1996). It is with the writings of Leo Africanus, following his claimed journey to Timbuktu c. 1510–20 AD, that the supposed wealth of the city was first reported in Europe (Africanus 1896; Herbert 1980, 434). Africanus provided the type of details about the city, as Gardner (1968, 7) notes, “exactly that Europe wanted to hear” – of plates and sceptres of gold belonging to its ruler and the use of gold coinage. More prosaic details of “cottages built of chalk, and covered with thatch”, went “unheeded” (Gardner 1968, 7).

This exaggeration of the importance and wealth of Timbuktu – along with its lure as a place of mystery, the paradigm for the inaccessible – served as the catalyst for the European race to be the first to reach the city (and to return from it) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Discounting the dubious claims of having visited it in 1811, albeit as a prisoner of the “Moors”, made by an American sailor, Robert Adams (1816), the first seemingly reputable claim is that of Alexander Gordon Laing in 1826 (Bovill 1964). However, Laing does not fully fit the criteria as he was murdered on his return journey, a short distance from Timbuktu (Gardner 1968, 100). Thus, the honour of visiting the city and surviving to tell the tale was taken by René Caillé (1968) in 1828.

The obverse of the opening up of Timbuktu to the western world in Caillé’s writings was that the city was shown to be lacking affluent trappings described *inter alia* by Leo Africanus. Caillé (1968, 49) is not complimentary in his description of “a mass of ill-looking houses built of earth”. Yet the mystery of the city persists today and has far from been debunked by the injections of reality



Figure 11.3 *Timbuktu: excavations in progress adjacent to the Sankore Mosque. Note the restored wall (photograph T. Insoll).*

of Caillé and subsequently of many others. Timbuktu has been the focus of all types of expeditions (Daniels 1989), helps sell records (Farka Toure and Cooder 1994) and has a series of children's books named after it (Hargreaves 1993, 1999). Timbuktu can also now, sadly, be reached by private jet for an afternoon's day trip as part of a round Africa charter tour.

Archaeological Research in Timbuktu

Considering all these factors, it might be assumed that Timbuktu has thus been the focus of a fair amount of archaeological research. In reality the reverse is true. Prior to the recent excavations, the sum total appears to consist of a largely conjectural map produced by Pefontan (1922) and a brief survey, predominantly of the standing monuments, concluded by Mauny (1952). More recently, a survey of parts of the surrounding region has also been completed by Susan Keech McIntosh and Rod McIntosh (1986). Some work has also focused upon restoring

monuments such as the Sankore and Djinguereber mosques (Wieczorek 1900; Insoll 1999), though the degree to which this has been successful is debatable (Figures 11.2 and 11.3). Bearing this absence of archaeological research within Timbuktu in mind, a project was started in the city in 1996, initially involving survey (Insoll 1998), and subsequently, in 1998, trial excavation (Insoll in press a). The aims of this project have been twofold: to investigate the origins of the city and to begin to sift myth from history.

The degree of success attained in approaching these aims has been varied for reasons considered later. All the material recovered from the excavations postdates AD 1590, the date of Morocco's invasion of the Songhai empire and its subsequent occupation of both its capital, Gao, and Timbuktu. Thus, nothing relevant to an assessment of the origins of the city was recovered. This stands in contrast to the results of the survey, which seemed to indicate from surface material found, including, for example, a sherd of Chinese celadon dated to the late eleventh/early twelfth centuries (R. Scott, pers. comm.),

that earlier occupation areas had been isolated within Timbuktu (Insoll 1998). This impression also appeared to be substantiated by the collections of the Timbuktu Museum, which include types of pottery present in the wider surrounding area (McIntosh and McIntosh 1986) and found in excavations at Gao (Insoll 1996, 2000a). These pottery types, such as black burnished, geometric decorated or red-slipped wares, would elsewhere be dated to the twelfth century, but could go back as early as the eighth century AD. It thus seemed that material was present that might enable an evaluation of the origin myth of Timbuktu – a myth which popularly ascribes the founding of the city to *c.* AD 1100, when a seasonal pastoral camp centred around a well under the charge of an old slave woman, Buktū (hence *Tin* or *Tim Buktū* – “The Place of Buktū”), began to grow into a permanent urban centre (Dubois 1897; Bovill 1958).

The Excavation Results

Yet the excavations indicated otherwise. Five 2 by 2 metre test excavations were completed in areas reflecting different occupation zones, for example Azalai as the terminus of the trade caravans, and Sankore as the former university area (Figure 11.3). These units were excavated to varying depths, but either had to be abandoned owing to the unsafe nature of the deposits (TIM 98 A–C), because of modern contamination (TIM 98 D), or because natural deposits were reached (TIM 98 E; Table 11.1).

However, results were far from negative for the post-medieval period which is, in a city already the subject of so much myth and embellishment, a confused phase in the history of Timbuktu. This is partly because it was a period

of near anarchy at times, a reflection of the chain of overlords – Moroccan, Fulani, Tuareg and, ultimately, French – and the accompanying vicissitudes which the city and its inhabitants endured (Gardner 1968). The excavation results have allowed the correlation of specific historical events, as well as indicating various facets of life, and of trade and other contacts, in this turbulent post-medieval period.

A good example of the correlation of specific historical events with the archaeological material is provided by the analysis completed by Dr Nicky Milner (in press) of the marine shells recovered. Besides a few examples of *Cypraea moneta* cowrie shells which were present within a couple of the excavation units (TIM 98 B and TIM 98 C), 178 *Marginella* shells were recorded in four layers in TIM 98 C. These layers were formed of water-lain sand and indicated a significant break with those preceding them. During the late eighteenth century there was inflation at Timbuktu and, possibly due to a disruption of cowrie supplies, substitute shells called *koroni* were used in the 1780s and 1790s. These were the *Marginella* shells of the West African coast. Rather than the typical cowrie rate of 2000 shells to one gold *mithqal*, the *koroni* were valued at about 100,000 shells to one *mithqal*. In 1795, however, the town chief ordered that all *Marginella* shells were to be buried and only cowries used thenceforth. The exchange rate normalised at the previous rate and the price of goods dropped (Jeffreys 1953; Mauny 1957). It is likely that the *Marginella* layers date to the 1780s and 1790s when the *koroni* were used and that the layers below this represent the cowrie currency of previous years.

The presence of tobacco pipes through all the sequences at Timbuktu has also proven informative, with 306 pipe fragments recorded in total. The pipes are what are

Site Code	Nature of Deposits	Date	Interpretation
TIM 98 A	Ash, sand, dung, building rubble	Last 100 years	Rubbish deposit
TIM 98 B	Sand, dung, banco, building rubble	AMS date 170±40 BP or 1780±40 AD (GX-24763-AMS)	20th century Rubbish deposits overlying 18th-19th century occupation deposits
TIM 98 C	Sand, water-lain gravel and sand, banco and stone floor	AMS date 240±40 BP or 1710±40 AD (GX-24764-AMS)	Late 20th – early 18th century sequence of rubbish, natural, and occupation deposits
TIM 98 D	Sand, rubbish	Last 100 years	Rubbish deposit
TIM 98 E	Sand	Late 16th – late 19th centuries	Area of intermittent occupation

Table 11.1 Summary of the excavation units at Timbuktu.

described as “elbow-bend pipes” (Philips 1983, 303) and would appear to have been locally produced with little influence from either Ottoman or North African products. The fragility of the pipes would have encouraged their local manufacture rather than importation via long distance trade (Clague 2000, 24–25). Parallels can be drawn with other pipes both from the Inland Niger Delta and from the Lakes region to the west of Timbuktu (Daget and Ligers 1962), and less directly with assemblages from further afield, such as those from New Buïpe in Ghana (York 1973).

The pipes from Timbuktu do not, however, illuminate the issue of the introduction of tobacco to West Africa. This is of interest for Timbuktu has been ascribed a pivotal role in such processes within historical sources. Raymond Mauny (1961, 59) mentions, for example, that the *Tarikh el-fettach* records that “l’usage de fumer cette plante fut introduit à Tombouctou en 1594–1596”. Ozanne (1969, 37) goes one stage further and argues that “Timbuktu, between 1594 and 1596... must be considered as a probable initial diffusion centre of the practice of smoking in West Africa”, with the initiatory role ascribed to the soldiers of Al-Mansur’s invading Moroccan army who carried their habit and equipment with them. The pivotal role of Timbuktu in this matter remains an issue of debate. However, it is of interest that the tobacco pipe assemblages also cover the period from the early to the mid-nineteenth century, when tobacco was strictly speaking prohibited by the Fulani rulers of Timbuktu, as recorded by Heinrich Barth (1890, 357) during his stay in the city.

Although the inhabitants of Timbuktu, or at least some of them, might have been ignoring edicts regarding smoking from their titular rulers in the Fulani *jihad* capital, Hamdallahi, other contacts between the two cities are seemingly indicated by further aspects of the archaeological material found. These are best illustrated by the similarities in some of the pottery types present at Timbuktu and those from Hamdallahi (Insoll in press a), notably the Fulani (Peul) ceramics and pottery described as having “décors de type Somono” (Gallay and Huysecom 1991, 103, fig. 26; 109, fig. 29). This is unsurprising for, besides the political links, Timbuktu functioned, in the words of Dubois (1897, 259) as “a temporary dépôt, situated between the borders of the desert and the copiously watered valleys of the south”, from which pots, foodstuffs and a host of other commodities were received (Insoll in press b).

Trade contacts are also attested by other material recovered. Glass bracelets and beads of various types, for instance, are relatively common, and some were imported via trans-Saharan trade from the north. Examples of these include monochrome glass bracelets matching products from Hebron in Palestine (Spaer 1992), multi-coloured glass bracelets possibly from Hebron or alternatively from Aden, a further major centre of production (Insoll 2001), and beads from Venice and what is now the Czech Republic. European products, missing in earlier trade assemblages from centres such as Gao (Insoll 2000a),

reflect the changing nature of trade patterns in the eighteenth, and certainly the nineteenth, centuries.

Although European merchants were not in Timbuktu in person until the French colonial conquests of the early twentieth century, their goods were increasingly dominant, replacing the “all-Islamic” patterns seen previously (Insoll 1996). Cloth provides a good example of this. Although itself absent from the excavations in Timbuktu for reasons of preservation, eight spindle whorls attest to some local production. However, it is known that cloth production fluctuated within Timbuktu, and even if it was never a major manufacturing centre, cloth production was not occurring there at all during Barth’s (1890, 355) stay in the mid-nineteenth century. Instead, it was being imported from Kano in Nigeria or from Manchester. Equally, some of the stone artefacts found, which appear to be gun-flints (although this needs confirmation by use-wear analysis), could also be European imports. Besides the smaller lithic artefacts, a stone pestle was recovered from TIM 98 B. This too can perhaps be linked to the insecure circumstances of the period, for Dubois (1897, 248–249) remarks that stone pestles and mortars were preferred over wooden mortars in Timbuktu because the latter were too noisy to use and would “inevitably attract some marauding Touareg in search of a meal”.

The final element of the excavation results which is of relevance here is a layer of horse manure that was recorded in TIM 98 B. This may be associated with dumping by the Spahi cavalry detachments based at the French fort, Fort Phillipe, later renamed Fort Hugueny, which was built in 1894–1897 (Mauny 1952, 907). Thus, the dung, innocuous as it might first seem, perhaps provides a link with the early years of French colonial occupation and pacification of the region, another episode in the chequered history of Timbuktu.

The Romanticisation of Timbuktu?

The archaeological evidence recovered can therefore be seen to be of significance in reconstructing the history and later occupation of Timbuktu, yet the question remains as to why there was a lack of earlier material, despite apparent surface indications to the contrary. Is this because of poor archaeological practice? This is unlikely, and can rather be attributed to a combination of physical and conceptual reasons. Physically, there are three main causes. Firstly, the climatic factors to which Timbuktu has been exposed, situated as it is at the interface between the Sahara and the River Niger. Sandstorms and sand encroachment, for example, have been a recurring problem in the city. Rene Caillé (1968, 75) describes how during his visit in 1828 he saw near the Sankore mosque “a small hillock of sand, and some buildings overwhelmed by the sand blown up by the east wind”. Similarly, Mauny (1952, 907) records that within the Sankore mosque itself the floor level was raised by one metre of sand during 1952. This is certainly



Figure 11.4 Map of Timbuktu and the location of excavation units within it.

a factor evident in the archaeological sequences and has helped create the depths of archaeological deposits present in the city, as attested by a verbal report received from a Belgian water engineer that he had found archaeological material at a depth of 16 m below the surface. Earlier archaeological material pertinent to the foundations of the city could thus be buried much deeper than anything excavated thus far.

Secondly, the related factor of flooding is also of significance. This might seem strange on the edge of the Sahara, but has been of importance within Timbuktu itself, and is in part a result of the deliberate situation of the city astride a seasonal channel, now dry, running from Korioume

on the River Niger to Kabara, the former port of Timbuktu, and onto the pool of Kabara to the west of Timbuktu itself (Figure 11.4). A further body of water appears to have also once been situated between the original component parts of Timbuktu, which were situated astride two parallel longitudinal dunes. This is the area represented by the Badjindé quarter, meaning “stream of the hippos” in Songhai (McIntosh and McIntosh 1986, 305), an obvious indicator of its former watery associations.

A third factor of significance in creating and altering the archaeological record in Timbuktu is the history of the city itself. Both historical sources and explorers’ accounts contain references to the periodic destruction of

parts of the city for various reasons. Barth (1890, 316, 325), for example, mentions that the groundwork and elevation of the Sankore area were composed of rubbish mounds due to “the repeated ruin which seems to have befallen this quarter”. Rubbish and building debris are amply attested, as already described, within the sequences excavated in this area. The net result of these physical processes is that what have been termed “islands of archaeology” (Insoll 2000b, 484) have been created sitting amidst the areas of modern occupation. These islands are areas where occupation sequences can be considerably deeper than can be safely investigated by conventional test excavation, and where occupation deposits are separated by substantial lenses of seemingly sterile water-lain and wind-blown deposits.

Yet to the physical reasons, conceptual factors may also have to be added. The mythologising of Timbuktu has already been described, and this too may be a factor of relevance. The fact remains that Timbuktu may just not have been as important as its created image has implied. The university role of the city is not in doubt (see Hunwick 1999), but its economic role could well have been overstated, even during the heyday of the Songhai empire in the sixteenth century. The myth, and indeed the mystery, of Timbuktu persist, though the city may still yield its earlier secrets to further archaeological exploration.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Drs Dembele, Sanogo and Togola for allowing the research to take place. Grateful thanks are also offered to all those who have assisted in the field. A debt of gratitude is also owed to Drs Elizabeth Healy, Nicky Milner and Dave Polya, as well as to Alison Clague and William Argyle, for assistance with post-excavation analysis. Funding for the research was kindly provided by the British Academy, St John’s College, Cambridge, and the University of Manchester.

References

- ADAMS, R. 1816: *A Narrative of Robert Adams, a Sailor, who was Wrecked on the Western Coast of Africa in the Year 1810*. London: John Murray.
- AFRICANUS, L. 1896: *The History and Description of Africa*. London: The Hakluyt Society.
- BARTH, H. 1890: *Travels and Discoveries in Northern and Central Africa*. London: Ward, Lock and Co.
- BOVILL, E.W. 1958: *The Golden Trade of the Moors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BOVILL, E.W. 1964: *Missions to the Niger. Volume 1. The Journal of Friedrich Hornemann’s Travels from Cairo to Murzuk in the Years 1797–98. The Letters of Major Alexander Gordon Laing, 1824–26*. London: The Hakluyt Society.
- CAILLÉ, R. 1968: *Travels through Central Africa to Timbuctoo*. London: Frank Cass.
- CLAGUE, A. 2000: An analysis of clay tobacco pipes from Timbuktu: origins and social use. Unpublished BA thesis, University of Manchester.
- DAGET, J. and LIGERS, Z. 1962: Une ancienne industrie malienne: les pipes en terre. *Bulletin de l’Institut Français de l’Afrique Noire (B)* 24, 12–53.
- DANIELS, A. 1989. *Zanzibar to Timbuktu*. London: Arrow.
- DUBOIS, F. 1897: *Timbuctoo the Mysterious*. London: Heinemann.
- FARKA TOURE, A. and COODER, R. 1994: *Talking Timbuktu*. World Circuit (CD).
- GALLAY, A. and HUYSECOM, E. 1991: *Enquêtes Ethno-archéologiques au Mali. Rapport des Deux Premières Missions, 1988–89, 1989–90*. Geneva: University of Geneva.
- GARDNER, B. 1968: *The Quest for Timbuctoo*. London: Cassell.
- HARGREAVES, R. 1993: *Timbuctoo: Trumpet*. London: Egmont Books.
- HARGREAVES, R. 1999: *Timbuctoo: Neigh*. London: Egmont Books.
- HERBERT, E. 1980: Timbuktu: a case study of the role of legend in history. In Swarz, B.K. and Dumett, R.E. (eds) *West African Culture Dynamics*. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 431–454.
- HUNWICK, J. 1999: *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire*. Leiden: Brill.
- INSOLL, T. 1996: *Islam, Archaeology and History: Gao Region (Mali) ca. AD 900–1250*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.
- INSOLL, T. 1998: Archaeological research in Timbuktu, Mali. *Antiquity* 72, 413–417.
- INSOLL, T. 1999: Mud mosques of Timbuktu. In Scarre, C. (ed.) *Great Builders of the Past*. London: Thames and Hudson, pp. 143–146.
- INSOLL, T. 2000a: *Urbanism, Archaeology and Trade: Further Observations on the Gao Region (Mali). The 1996 Field-season Results*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports.
- INSOLL, T. 2000b: The origins of Timbuktu. *Antiquity* 74, 483–484.
- INSOLL, T. 2001: Dahlak Kebir, Eritrea: from Aksumite to Ottoman. *Adumatu* 3.
- INSOLL, T. in press a: The archaeology of post-medieval Timbuktu. *Sahara*.
- INSOLL, T. in press b: *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- JEFFREYS, M.D.W. 1953: The *Marginella* currency of Timbuktu. *Bulletin de l’Institut Français de l’Afrique Noire (B)* 15, 143–151.
- LEVTZION, N. and HOPKINS, J.F.P. 1981: *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MAUNY, R. 1952: Notes d’archéologie sur Tombouctou. *Bulletin de l’Institut Français de l’Afrique Noire (B)* 14, 899–918.
- MAUNY, R. 1957: La monnaie marginelloide de l’Ouest Africain. *Bulletin de l’Institut Français de l’Afrique Noire (B)* 19, 659–669.
- MAUNY, R. 1961: *Tableau Géographique de l’Ouest Africain au Moyen Age*. Dakar: Institute Français de l’Afrique Noire.
- MCINTOSH, S.K. and MCINTOSH, R.J. 1986: Archaeological reconnaissance in the region of Timbuktu, Mali. *National Geographic Research* 2, 302–319.

- MILNER, N. in press: The shell. In Insoll, T. in press a: The archaeology of post-medieval Timbuktu. *Sahara*.
- OZANNE, P. 1969: The diffusion of smoking in West Africa. *Odu* 2, 29–42.
- PEFONTAN, Lt. 1922: Histoire de Tombouctou de sa fondation à l'occupation française (XII siècle-1893). *Bulletin du Comité d'Etudes Historiques et Scientifiques de l'Afrique Occidentale Française* 1922, 81–113.
- PHILIPS, J.E. 1983: African smoking and pipes. *Journal of African History* 24, 303–319.
- SAAD, E.N. 1983: *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables 1400–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SPAER, M. 1992: The Islamic glass bracelets of Palestine: preliminary findings. *Journal of Glass Studies* 34, 44–62.
- WIECZOREK, J.-P. 1990: *Sauvegarde des Trois Grandes Mosquées: Djinguereber, Sankore, Sidi Yahya, des Cimetières et Mausolées Principaux*. Paris: UNESCO.
- YORK, R.N. 1973: Excavations at new Buipe. *West African Journal of Archaeology* 3, 1–173.