Name: _____

Date: _____

# Timbuktu

No name brings ancient Africa to mind more than Timbuktu, a great city that flourished near a bend in the Niger River for more than four hundred years. Merchants crossed the Sahara to trade there, scholars came to study, and rulers competed to control it. By the 1500s, the Islamic world knew Timbuktu as a city of gold, trade, and learning.

## The Desert and the River

Timbuktu is about twelve miles north of the Niger River, beyond the river's seasonal floods but close enough to benefit from river trade. Boats carried goods along the Niger to the nearby port of Kabara. Timbuktu is a natural transfer point for camel caravans crossing the Sahara. Merchants could unload goods, trade them in Timbuktu, and carry them to the Niger for shipment farther south.

## The Caravans

Camel caravans crossed the Sahara to Timbuktu carrying slabs of salt from mines deep in the desert. They also brought cloth, horses, metal goods, and other products from North Africa. In Timbuktu, merchants could trade their cargo for West African goods.

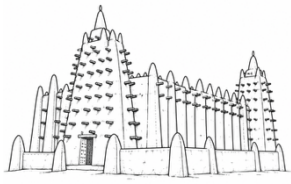
## Gold from the South

Gold came to Timbuktu from goldfields hundreds of miles to the south and west. Erosion washed flakes and nuggets from veins in ancient rocks into streams, where miners collected them. Traders also brought elephant ivory, prized for carving, and kola nuts, which people chewed for their natural stimulant.

## Trade on the Niger

Hauling bulky goods long distances by camel cost too much, so the river moved fish, grain, and other foodstuffs. The Niger also connected Timbuktu with communities and markets upstream and downstream. Although Timbuktu was near the desert, it could become a major city because the Niger linked it to more productive agricultural regions. Those regions fed a bustling city of merchants, scholars, students and craftsmen.

## Islam and Learning



By 1324, when Mansa Musa made his famous pilgrimage to Mecca, Timbuktu was a part of Mali. Muslim merchants and scholars had traveled to the city along the same trade routes that carried gold and salt. When Musa returned, he ordered a large mosque built in Timbuktu. The mosque and the established trade routes now drew scholars and students, and Timbuktu grew into a center of Islamic learning.

## Songhai

East of Timbuktu, the Songhai people had built a kingdom around the trading city of Gao. During the 1400s, Songhai expanded westward, captured Timbuktu in 1468, and later took Djenné, which gave it control of the three great trading cities along the Niger. Under Songhai, Timbuktu reached its height. By the 1500s, the city may have had about 100,000 people, making it larger than London or Rome at the time. As many as 25,000 students studied at 180 schools.

## Decline

In 1591, a Moroccan army crossed the Sahara and defeated Songhai. Timbuktu never regained its former power. Ocean trade drew more commerce toward West Africa's coast. Without the powerful Songhai Empire protecting the ancient trade routes, fewer merchants and scholars came to Timbuktu. The city survived, but over the following centuries it lost population, wealth, and influence.

## Legacy

Timbuktu never disappeared. Its great mud-brick mosques still rise above the city, and families have preserved thousands of manuscripts passed down through generations. In 1988, UNESCO named Timbuktu a World Heritage Site, recognizing its three great mosques and historic cemeteries. Though smaller today, Timbuktu still whispers the stories of scholars, traders, and travelers who once made it the pride of West Africa.

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## Fill in the Blanks

Timbuktu grew into a great t__a__i__g city near the N__g__r River and the S__ha__a Desert. Camel c__r__v__ns brought salt, c__o__h, horses, and m__t__l goods across the d__s__rt, while t__a__e__s brought gold, i__o__y, and k_____ nuts from the s__u__h. Merchants and s__h__l__rs also traveled along the trade routes. By the time M__n__a Musa ruled the Mali E__p__re, Timbuktu was under his control. After his p_l__r__m__ge to M__c__a in 13____, Musa ordered a large m__sq__e built in T__m__uk__u. As Mali weakened, the S__n__h__i Empire c__p__u__ed Timbuktu in 1468. The city reached its heights under the S__n__h__i. Timbuktu's great age ended after a M__r__c__an army defeated S__n__h__i in 15____. Trade gradually shifted toward the ★A__l__n__ic coast, so Timbuktu lost p__p__l__ti__n and w__al__h. The city survived, and in 1988, UNESCO named Timbuktu a World H__r__ta__e Site.

## Answer in Complete Sentences

1. Why was Timbuktu's location a factor in it becoming a major trading city?

_____

_____

_____

★2. Why was river transport important for trade before modern transportation?

_____

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★3. Why did Timbuktu become a center of Islamic learning?

_____

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★4. Give two reasons why Timbuktu declined as a major city.

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_____

_____

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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