

Timbuktu

The Library That Predated Oxford

The Sankore Madrasah was founded in 989 CE — older than Oxford by at least 107 years. At its peak, the University of Timbuktu held between 400,000 and 700,000 manuscripts. Twenty-five thousand students in a city of one hundred thousand. Manuscripts trading at higher value than gold. Its greatest scholar was deported in chains in 1591 — and wrote against African enslavement from exile.

The oldest universities in the world are African. This is not in dispute. It is simply not taught.

Prologue Contribution Entry · 989 CE – 1591 CE · Sacred & Political (Dual Lens)
Pairs with P-3 The Burning of the Scholar Class · C-4 Mansa Musa · C-6 Songhai

I.

THE CITY

The Crossroads of the Medieval World

Timbuktu sits at the point where the Niger River bends northward toward the Sahara — a geographic position that made it, for roughly four centuries, the most important commercial and intellectual crossroads in the medieval world. To the south and west, the gold and agricultural wealth of the Mali and Songhai empires. To the north, the trans-Saharan caravan routes connecting West Africa to North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. To the east, the Niger corridor reaching toward Central and East Africa. Timbuktu was not an accident of geography. It was a deliberate construction on a site chosen because everything passed through it.

By the fourteenth century, under the patronage of Mansa Musa, it had become a city of approximately 100,000 people and one of the wealthiest urban centers in the medieval world. Its markets traded in gold dust, salt, kola nuts, leather goods, textiles — and books. The book trade was not a luxury appendage to the commercial economy. It was a core economic sector. At certain periods in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, manuscripts traded at higher value per unit weight than gold.

In Timbuktu, the book was literally more valuable than gold.

II.

THE THREE MOSQUES AND THE UNIVERSITY

Sankore • Djinguereber • Sidi Yahya • 989 CE

The intellectual life of Timbuktu was organized around three mosque complexes — Sankore, Djinguereber, and Sidi Yahya — each functioning simultaneously as a house of worship, a school, and a center of manuscript production and commerce. Together they constituted the University of Timbuktu — not organized on the European university model, but with an extraordinary density of scholars, students, manuscripts, and the infrastructure to support all three.

The Oldest Universities — The Comparison

Institution	Founded	Location	Still Operating?
Al-Qarawiyyin	859 CE	Fez, Morocco — North Africa	Yes — UNESCO / Guinness: oldest in world
Sankore Madrasah	989 CE	Timbuktu, West Africa	Disrupted 1591; Ahmed Baba Institute continues
University of Bologna	1088 CE	Bologna, Italy	Yes — often cited as oldest European

Institution	Founded	Location	Still Operating?
University of Oxford	c. 1096–1167 CE	Oxford, England	Yes
University of Paris (Sorbonne)	1150–1257 CE	Paris, France	Yes
University of Cambridge	1209 CE	Cambridge, England	Yes

The two oldest universities in the world — Al-Qarawiyyin (859 CE) and Sankore (989 CE) — are both African. The oldest was founded by a North African woman. Oxford is younger than Sankore by at least 107 years. This is not contested in the scholarly literature. It is simply not present in the American curriculum.

III.

THE MANUSCRIPTS

400,000 – 700,000 Volumes · The Subject Range of a Research University

The manuscripts of Timbuktu are the most concrete, most physically surviving evidence of the scale of the city's intellectual life — and the most persistently ignored in popular Western accounts of African civilization. Estimates of total manuscript holdings range from 400,000 to 700,000 volumes, held across the three mosque libraries and in private family collections.¹

The Manuscripts — Subject Range

Subject	Content
Astronomy	Detailed star charts, ephemerides, calculations of planetary motion, eclipse prediction.
Mathematics	Algebraic and geometric treatises, arithmetic, commercial mathematics, surveying.
Medicine & Pharmacology	Clinical case descriptions, pharmaceutical recipes, surgical procedures, epidemic disease.
Jurisprudence	Islamic law and commentary, legal cases and precedents, fatwas, slave law — including arguments against enslavement of free persons.
Theology & Quran	Quranic commentary, theological disputation, Sufi traditions, religious biography.
History	Local histories of West African kingdoms — primary sources for modern historians unavailable elsewhere.
Geography	Trade route documentation, river and Saharan geography, city descriptions.
Music Theory	Musical notation, theory of rhythm, instrument construction.
Ethics & Governance	Treatises on just rule, the rights of the governed, the obligations of scholars.
Linguistics	Arabic grammar, Ajami scripts (Arabic script adapted for West African languages including Songhay, Fulfulde, Soninke, Bambara).

Many manuscripts are bilingual — written in Arabic and one or more West African languages using the Arabic script adapted for those languages. The adaptation of the Arabic script for West African languages — called Ajami — is itself a linguistic and cultural achievement of the first order. The manuscript tradition of Timbuktu was not a foreign import. It was an African intellectual creation built on the foundations of Islamic scholarship and shaped by the specific knowledge traditions of West Africa.

IV.

AHMAD BABA — THE SCHOLAR THE INVASION TRIED TO ERASE

1556–1627 · More Than Sixty Works · Deported in Chains · Wrote Against Slavery from Exile

Ahmad Baba al-Timbuktu was the most celebrated scholar in the history of the University of Timbuktu and one of the most significant African intellectuals of the early modern period. He was born into a family of scholars in Araouane in 1556 and educated at Timbuktu, where he eventually became the last chancellor of the University of Sankore. He was the author of more than sixty documented works — on jurisprudence, biography, grammar, theology, and history — and his contemporary reputation placed him among the foremost scholars of the Islamic world.⁴

When the Moroccan invasion force entered Timbuktu in 1591, Ahmad Baba refused to collaborate with the occupying force. He was arrested, his personal library of approximately 1,600 volumes was confiscated, and he was deported in chains to Marrakesh, where he remained for fourteen years. During those fourteen years, in chains and in exile, he continued to write, to teach, and to correspond with scholars across the Islamic world.

In 1615, from exile, Ahmad Baba wrote *Mi'raj al-su'ud* — a legal treatise arguing against the enslavement of free Black Africans on Islamic legal grounds. It is one of the earliest documented African arguments against African enslavement. It was written by a man who had himself been deported in chains. He was allowed to return to Timbuktu in 1608. He died there in 1627, still writing.³

Ahmad Baba was deported in chains for refusing to collaborate with an occupying force — and from chains, he wrote against the enslavement of free people. The doctrine that called Africans intellectually inferior was constructed while this man was writing sixty books.

V.

THE 1591 INVASION AND THE DESTRUCTION

Judar Pasha · The Battle of Tondibi · The Dispersal of the Libraries

In 1591, the Sa'di dynasty of Morocco sent approximately 4,000 men — equipped with firearms and including Spanish mercenaries — across the Sahara to conquer the Songhai Empire. The army was commanded by a Spaniard named Judar Pasha. The Songhai army, which was larger but armed with traditional weapons, was routed at the Battle of Tondibi. The Moroccan force entered Gao and then Timbuktu.²

What followed was not a change of governance. It was an extraction. Scholars were arrested or killed, libraries were confiscated or dispersed, the manuscript production economy was disrupted. The Moroccan occupation lasted for decades and did not end cleanly — the force eventually lost contact with Marrakesh and became a semi-autonomous power known as the Arma, who ruled Timbuktu in increasing instability for two centuries. The city never fully recovered the intellectual density it had held before 1591.

The destruction was compounded in 2012, when the jihadist group Ansar Dine occupied Timbuktu and deliberately burned a portion of the manuscript collection before being driven out. UNESCO oversaw restoration. The

Tombouctou Manuscripts Project and the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library — in partnership with SAVAMA-DCI — have photographed more than 150,000 manuscripts to date as part of an ongoing digitization effort.^{5, 6}

The manuscripts that survive are primary sources. They are evidence. In their surviving form, they are one of the most significant collections of pre-modern African scholarship in existence. In their damaged and dispersed form, they represent one of the most significant acts of cultural destruction in world history.

Fayetteville · Omar ibn Said · The Manuscript Tradition Sold at Auction

Omar ibn Said (c. 1770–1864) Omar ibn Said was born in the Futa Toro region of present-day Senegal — the heartland of the West African Islamic scholarly tradition documented in this entry. He was educated for approximately twenty-five years in the Quranic and Arabic manuscript tradition: the same tradition that produced the libraries of Timbuktu, the scholars of Sankore, the works of Ahmad Baba. He was enslaved around 1807, transported across the Atlantic, and sold at auction in Fayetteville, North Carolina. He was purchased by James Owen, later governor of North Carolina, and spent the remainder of his life in Bladen and Cumberland counties. In 1831, Omar wrote his autobiography in Arabic — the only known Arabic-language autobiography written by an enslaved person on American soil. The document is held by the Library of Congress. He also wrote portions of the Quran from memory on paper he was given, and copied Quranic verses on the walls of his room. He continued to write in Arabic until his death at approximately 94 years of age. The manuscript tradition of West Africa and the slave auction of Fayetteville are the same story told from two ends. A man educated in the tradition of Timbuktu was sold in a market in Cumberland County. The civilization documented in this entry was present on Hay Street.

Connection	Documentation
Omar ibn Said · Fayetteville	West African Muslim scholar, educated in the Quranic/manuscript tradition. Enslaved and sold at auction in Fayetteville, NC, c. 1807. Wrote his Arabic autobiography in 1831 — held at the Library of Congress. Died in Bladen/Cumberland County, 1864.
Library of Congress · Omar Collection	The Omar ibn Said Collection at the Library of Congress holds his 1831 autobiography, Quranic transcriptions, and related documents. LOC item: loc.gov/item/2021667037 .
Fayetteville State University	FSU's African American Studies curriculum documents the connection between the West African Islamic scholarly tradition and the enslaved population of Cumberland County. The Chesnutt Library holds regional church records and local history materials.
West African Muslim enslaved persons · NC	Historians Sylviane Diouf (Servants of Allah, 1998) and Michael Gomez (Black Crescent, 2005) document the significant presence of literate, Arabic-educated enslaved Africans throughout the American South, including NC. Their education was in the tradition documented in this entry.
Ahmed Baba Institute · Timbuktu · NC connection	The Ahmed Baba Institute — the successor institution to the University of Sankore — is a UNESCO-supported manuscript center in Timbuktu. FSU and NC HBCUs have participated in African intellectual history programs connecting to this tradition.

CITATIONS

Chicago Manual of Style · Primary and Peer-Reviewed Sources

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Peer-Reviewed Secondary · Foundational
2. Hunwick, John O. *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'di's Tarikh al-Sudan down to 1613*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
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3. Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti. *Mi'raj al-su'ud ila nayl hukm mujlab al-sud*. Marrakesh, 1615. Translated in Hunwick, John O., and Fatima Harrak, eds. *Mi'raj al-Su'ud: Ahmad Baba's Replies on Slavery*. Rabat: Institute of African Studies, 2000.
Primary Source · Ahmad Baba's anti-enslavement treatise
4. Hunwick, John O. *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Vol. IV: *The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
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5. SAVAMA-DCI and Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. Ongoing digitization project, 2013–present. hmml.org/research.
Primary · Ongoing Digitization Project
6. Tombouctou Manuscripts Project, University of Cape Town. soaz.uct.ac.za/projects/tombouctou-manuscripts-project.
Primary · Digitized Manuscript Archive
7. Dubois, Félix. *Timbuktoo the Mysterious*. Translated by Diana White. New York: Longmans, Green, 1897.
archive.org/details/timbuktoomysteri00dubo.
Secondary · Historical Account
8. UNESCO. "Timbuktu." World Heritage List inscription. whc.unesco.org/en/list/119.
Government Document
9. Singleton, Brent D. "African Bibliophiles: Books and Libraries in Medieval Timbuktu." *Libraries & Culture* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1–12.
Peer-Reviewed Secondary
10. Omar ibn Said. *The Life of Omar ibn Said* (autobiography, 1831, in Arabic). Omar ibn Said Collection, Library of Congress. loc.gov/item/2021667037.
Primary Source · Fayetteville NC Direct Authority
11. Diouf, Sylviane A. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
Peer-Reviewed Secondary · Omar ibn Said Context

PAIRED ENTRY REFERENCE

entry_related / entry_see_also

P-3	Persecution · The Burning of the Scholar Class: Timbuktu 1591 · Prologue · Direct Pair
C-4	Contribution · Mansa Musa & the Mali Empire · Prologue · See Also
C-6	Contribution · Songhai: Africa's Largest Empire · Prologue · See Also
P-2	Persecution · The Hamitic Hypothesis — How European Scholarship Erased Africa · Prologue

C-5 is the intellectual anchor of the Prologue. The Omar ibn Said connection to Fayetteville is the most direct and documented link between the West African manuscript tradition and Cumberland County, North Carolina. A man educated in the tradition of Sankore was sold at auction on Hay Street. That is not a metaphor. It is a documented historical fact, with a primary source in Arabic at the Library of Congress. It belongs at the center of the Two Americas Prologue NC Local Lens.

