

The Burning of the Scholar Class

Timbuktu, 1591

In 1591, a Moroccan army crossed the Sahara and destroyed the Songhai Empire in less than one hour. The scholars of Timbuktu were arrested. Libraries were looted and dispersed. Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti — author of more than sixty works, the greatest scholar his university had ever produced — was arrested in his home, his library of 1,600 volumes confiscated, and deported in chains to Marrakesh.

He continued to write for thirty-three more years. From exile, he wrote against the enslavement of free Black Africans. His words survived. The people he was writing about survived in chains.

Prologue Persecution Entry · 1591–1594 CE · Secular & Political
Pairs with C-5 Timbuktu · See Also: C-6 Songhai · P-2 The Hamitic Hypothesis

I.

WHAT WAS THERE BEFORE IT WAS DESTROYED

The University That Predated Oxford by More Than a Century

Before 1591, Timbuktu was one of the wealthiest and most intellectually sophisticated cities on Earth. The Sankore Madrasah — founded in 989 CE, older than Oxford by more than a century — housed between 400,000 and 700,000 manuscripts. Twenty-five thousand students in a city of 100,000. A manuscript economy in which books traded at higher value than gold. A scholarly community recognized as peers by the learned institutions of Cairo, Tunis, Fez, and Mecca.

This entry documents what happened to that when an armed force arrived with firearms and a sultan who wanted gold.

The invasion did not find a civilization that was weak. It found a civilization that did not have guns.

II.

THE ARMY THAT CROSSED THE SAHARA

Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur · Judar Pasha · 1,500 Miles of Desert

The Sa'di dynasty of Morocco dispatched an army across the Sahara in late 1590. The force was commanded by Judar Pasha — a man born in Spain, the son of enslaved parents, himself enslaved and castrated as a child and raised in the Moroccan court, who had risen to military command. The army numbered approximately 4,000 men: Moroccan infantry, Andalusian renegades, and Spanish mercenaries, equipped with arquebuses and cannon. They crossed approximately 1,500 miles of Saharan desert, losing a significant portion of their number to the crossing itself before they reached the Niger bend.¹

Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur's motivation was gold. The Songhai Empire controlled the trans-Saharan trade routes and the goldfields. The sultan had sent diplomatic demands to Askia Ishaq II, the Songhai emperor, demanding tribute and control of the Taghaza salt mines. Askia Ishaq II refused. The army was the response.

At Tondibi on March 13, 1591, the Songhai army — numerically much larger but armed with traditional weapons — faced the Moroccan arquebuses and artillery. The battle lasted less than an hour. Askia Ishaq II fled. The Songhai Empire ceased to function as a state.

III.

THE OCCUPATION OF TIMBUKTU

April 1591 · Arrest · Confiscation · Deportation

Judar Pasha entered Gao in April 1591, then Timbuktu. The city did not resist militarily — its scholars were not soldiers. What followed was not the governance of a conquered city. It was an extraction.

The scholars of Timbuktu were not neutral in the eyes of the occupying force. They were the ideological infrastructure of the Songhai state — the judges who administered Islamic law, the advisors who counseled the Askia dynasty, the teachers who trained the administrative class, the writers who recorded the history of the empire. They were also, in some cases, critics of the occupation on Islamic legal grounds: scholars had disputed the Sa'di dynasty's authorization of the invasion on the grounds that the Songhai were a Muslim state and could not be legitimately attacked by another Muslim ruler. Ahmad Baba had been among those who held this view.

The Moroccan administration's response was arrest, confiscation, and deportation. Ahmad Baba was arrested at his home in late 1593 or early 1594. His personal library of approximately 1,600 volumes was confiscated — a collection assembled over decades, described by contemporary accounts as among the finest private libraries in Timbuktu. He was deported in chains to Marrakesh along with other scholars and their families.

The Sequence of Events — 1591 to 1608

Date	Event	Source
Late 1590	Moroccan army departs for the Niger bend. ~4,000 men, arquebuses, cannon, Judar Pasha commanding.	Tarikh al-Sudan (al-Sa'di)
March 13, 1591	Battle of Tondibi. Songhai army routed in less than one hour. Askia Ishaq II flees.	Tarikh al-Sudan; Tarikh al-Fattash
April 1591	Judar Pasha enters Gao. Moroccan occupation begins. Shortly after, Timbuktu occupied.	Tarikh al-Sudan
1591–1593	Moroccan administration installed. Scholars monitored. Library confiscations begin. Some scholars flee.	Hunwick, Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire (1999)
Late 1593 / early 1594	Ahmad Baba arrested at his home. Library of ~1,600 volumes confiscated. Deported in chains to Marrakesh.	Ahmad Baba; Hunwick Arabic Literature of Africa (2003)
1594–1607	Ahmad Baba in exile in Marrakesh. Continues to write and teach. Petitions for return of library. Some books returned.	Ahmad Baba's own writings from exile
1603	Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur dies. Political instability in Morocco opens path for deportees' return.	Tarikh al-Sudan
1607–1608	Ahmad Baba permitted to return to Timbuktu. Has been in exile for thirteen years.	Ahmad Baba; Hunwick (1999)
1615	Ahmad Baba writes Mi'raj al-su'ud — arguing on Islamic legal grounds against the enslavement of free Black Africans.	Ahmad Baba, Mi'raj al-su'ud (primary)

Date	Event	Source
1627	Ahmad Baba dies in Timbuktu. Has authored more than sixty works. The university his generation led never fully recovers.	Hunwick, Arabic Literature of Africa

IV.

AHMAD BABA IN EXILE — HE DID NOT STOP WRITING

Marrakesh · 1594–1607 · The Mi'raj al-su'ud · Written Against Slavery in Chains

Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti in Marrakesh Ahmad Baba arrived in Marrakesh in chains in 1594. He was thirty-eight years old. He had been the chancellor of the University of Sankore, the author of more than sixty works, and one of the most respected scholars in the Islamic world. He was now a deportee in a foreign city under the authority of the dynasty that had destroyed his civilization. He did not stop working. In Marrakesh, the Moroccan scholarly community eventually recognized his stature and invited him to teach publicly — an acknowledgment that the political situation could not entirely suppress. He taught for approximately fourteen years. He continued to write: legal responsa, biographical dictionaries of West African scholars, theological treatises. He argued in writing that the scholars deported from Timbuktu were being held unjustly. He petitioned Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur, by name, for the return of his library. Some books were returned. Not all. In 1615 — eight years after his return to Timbuktu — he wrote the Mi'raj al-su'ud: a legal treatise arguing on Islamic grounds against the enslavement of free Black Africans. 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 died in Timbuktu in 1627, still writing.

The doctrine that called Africans intellectually inferior was being built in European universities while Ahmad Baba was writing sixty books — the last of them against the enslavement of the people that doctrine was being constructed to justify.

V.

WHAT WAS LOST

The Disruption of an Institutional Culture

The damage from the 1591 invasion was not the clean destruction of a fire. It was the slower damage of disruption, dispersal, and the breaking of an institutional culture. The manuscript production economy — which required scribes, paper merchants, binders, and a commercial market — was disrupted when the scholars who sustained it were arrested or fled. Family libraries were dispersed through the chaos of the occupation and the decades of instability that followed.

The Arma — the semi-autonomous successor force that governed Timbuktu after losing contact with Marrakesh — were neither equipped nor motivated to maintain the intellectual infrastructure of the university. The enrollment of 25,000 students contracted. The manuscript production rate declined. The scholarly network that had connected Timbuktu to Cairo, Fez, and Mecca was broken. Timbuktu continued to have scholars and manuscripts after 1591. It was never again the University of Timbuktu.

The primary Arabic chronicles of Timbuktu's history — the *Tarikh al-Sudan* and the *Tarikh al-Fattash* — were both written in the aftermath of 1591. They are elegies as much as histories. Al-Sa'di, who completed the *Tarikh al-Sudan* around 1655, wrote as a man documenting the destruction of the world his parents had known.

VI.

THE THREE DESTRUCTIONS

1591 • The Hamitic Hypothesis • 2012

The 1591 invasion was the first of three distinct events that reduced Timbuktu's manuscript tradition from an estimated 400,000–700,000 volumes to the approximately 150,000–300,000 that survive in various states of preservation today.

Destruction	Date	Agent	What It Did
FIRST	1591–c. 1800	Moroccan invasion (Judar Pasha) / Arma occupation	Scholar class arrested and deported. Institutional infrastructure broken. Manuscript production disrupted. Enrollment collapses.
SECOND	c. 1800–1960	The Hamitic Hypothesis (Seligman, Morton, et al.) / Western scholarly neglect	Manuscript tradition denied or ignored by Western scholarship. No conservation funding. No digitization. Denial of existence = effective destruction.
THIRD	January 2012	Ansar Dine jihadist group (occupation of Timbuktu)	Approximately 4,203 manuscripts deliberately burned before French military intervention. Ahmed Baba Institute holdings hidden in private homes — tens of thousands saved by local action.
RECOVERY	2013–present	SAVAMA-DCI, Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, Tombouctou Manuscripts Project (UCT), UNESCO	More than 150,000 manuscripts digitized to date. Recovery ongoing. The record is being reversed.

Three destructions over four centuries. The first was an army with guns. The second was a theory with textbooks. The third was fire. What survives is evidence. What is documented here is the fact that it survived at all.

Fayetteville · Omar ibn Said · The Chain from Timbuktu to Hay Street

Omar ibn Said — The Human Link Between P-3 and Cumberland County Omar ibn Said was born in the Futa Toro region of present-day Senegal around 1770 — 179 years after the Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu. He was educated for approximately twenty-five years in the Quranic and Arabic manuscript tradition: the same tradition that Ahmad Baba's university had produced, diminished by the 1591 disruption but unbroken in the Senegambian scholarly networks that continued through family and community transmission. He was enslaved around 1807, transported across the Atlantic, and sold at auction in Fayetteville, North Carolina — on Hay Street, in the market of a city that did not know it was selling a man who carried the intellectual tradition of Sankore in his memory. In 1831, from captivity in Bladen County, Omar wrote his autobiography in Arabic — the only known Arabic-language autobiography written by an enslaved person on American soil. It is held by the Library of Congress. He also transcribed Quranic verses from memory on paper he was given. He continued to write in Arabic until his death at approximately 94 years of age in 1864. The chain of events that connects Ahmad Baba's deportation in chains from Timbuktu in 1594 to Omar ibn Said's sale in chains in Fayetteville in 1807 is not metaphorical. It is historical. Ahmad Baba's tradition trained the scholarly networks that produced Omar ibn Said. The invasion that destroyed Ahmad Baba's university created the political conditions that the Atlantic slave trade filled. Omar ibn Said is the documented human link between this entry and Cumberland County, North Carolina.

Connection	Documentation
Omar ibn Said · Fayetteville	West African Muslim scholar. Educated in the Quranic/manuscript tradition descended from Sankore. Enslaved and sold at auction in Fayetteville, NC, c. 1807. Arabic autobiography (1831) at the Library of Congress: loc.gov/item/2021667037 .
Ahmad Baba → Omar ibn Said lineage	Ahmad Baba's tradition (Sankore, disrupted 1591) survived in West African Senegambian scholarly networks through the 17th–18th centuries. Those networks trained Omar ibn Said. The 1591 invasion and the Atlantic slave trade are the same story's two halves.
The Mi'raj al-su'ud · 1615	Ahmad Baba's anti-enslavement treatise, written from exile in Marrakesh, argued on Islamic legal grounds against enslaving free Black Africans. It predates most canonical Western anti-slavery literature by more than a century. The man sold on Hay Street was descended from the tradition this treatise defended.
Fayetteville State University	FSU's African American Studies curriculum and the Chesnutt Library hold primary materials connecting the West African Islamic scholarly tradition to Cumberland County. The Omar ibn Said collection at the LOC is the primary documentary anchor for this connection.

**Recovery · present
day**

The Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu — named for the scholar deported in chains in 1594 — is the successor institution to the University of Sankore. Its digitization partnership with SAVAMA-DCI and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library is the living continuation of what P-3 documents as lost.

CITATIONS

Chicago Manual of Style • Primary and Peer-Reviewed Sources

1. al-Sa'di, Abd al-Rahman. *Tarikh al-Sudan*. c. 1655. Translated by O. Houdas. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900.
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2. Kati, Mahmud, and Ibn al-Mukhtar. *Tarikh al-Fattash*. c. 1519–1665. Translated by O. Houdas and M. Delafosse. Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1913.
Primary Source • Arabic Chronicle
3. Hunwick, John O. *Timbuktu and the Songhay Empire: Al-Sa'di's Tarikh al-Sudan down to 1613 and other Contemporary Documents*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
Peer-Reviewed Secondary • Primary Source Translation
4. Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti. *Mi'raj al-su'ud ila nayl hukm mujlab al-sud*. Marrakesh, 1615. 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.
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5. Hunwick, John O. *Arabic Literature of Africa*, Vol. IV: *The Writings of Western Sudanic Africa*. Leiden: Brill, 2003.
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6. Saad, Elias N. *Social History of Timbuktu: The Role of Muslim Scholars and Notables, 1400–1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
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10. Cissoko, Sékéné Mody. "The Songhay from the 12th to the 16th Century." In Niane, D. T., ed. *Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century*. General History of Africa, Vol. IV. Paris: UNESCO, 1984.
Peer-Reviewed Secondary • UNESCO
11. 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

PAIRED ENTRY REFERENCE

entry_related / entry_see_also

C-5	Contribution • Timbuktu: The Library That Predated Oxford • Prologue • Direct Pair
C-6	Contribution • Songhai: Africa's Largest Empire • Prologue • See Also
P-2	Persecution • The Hamitic Hypothesis — The Second Destruction • Prologue • See Also
C-4	Contribution • Mansa Musa & the Mali Empire • Prologue • See Also

P-3 is the Prologue's most personal persecution entry. Where P-2 documents an institutional project, P-3 documents a man — Ahmad Baba al-Timbukti — arrested in his home, his library confiscated, deported in chains, and still writing against the

enslavement of his people from exile. The Omar ibn Said NC connection makes P-3 the entry that brings the abstract destruction of Timbuktu's intellectual world onto the streets of Fayetteville. Ahmad Baba was deported in chains in 1594. The man who carried his tradition was sold in chains on Hay Street two hundred and thirteen years later. The archive holds both.

TWO AMERICAS · [twoamericas.us](#) · P-3 The Burning of the Scholar Class: Timbuktu 1591 · Prologue Persecution Entry