

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Destruction of Timbaktu

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The ransom received by Ahmed al Mansur al Sa'adi from the Portuguese at the Battle of al Qasr al Kabir (1578) provided him only temporary financial relief. The traditional sources of income for the emir, namely trade and agriculture, were increasingly out of his reach. In the north, the Mediterranean trade was monopolized by the city-state of Genoa (Italy). A few of the Maghribi merchants worked in partnership with the Genoese and grew rich but the benefits did not accrue to the general population or to the emir. To the west, the Portuguese and the Spanish bypassed the Maghrib and established direct trade with the coast of Guinea. To the south the powerful Songhay Empire had flexed its muscles and had occupied the salt mines of Taodini on the borders of Mauritania. The Maghribi Sultans were cut off from the tax revenues on the salt mines. The Berbers in the Atlas Mountains and the settled farmers in the valleys owed greater allegiance to the local Sufi *zawiyas* than to the emirs who were engaged in constant power struggles. The money that the poor people gave the Sufi shaykhs as *ziyara* was a form of voluntary tax. This was money that was not available to the emirs. The absence of a central authority strong enough to collect taxes and pay a standing army, created a vicious circle. A strong central power was required to collect taxes, which were needed to sustain a strong central power. This vicious circle created a tension between state and society. The armed forces of the emirs became an instrument of coercion to force the rich merchants on the Mediterranean and the poor farmers in the Atlas Mountains to pay taxes. Coercion destroyed what little legitimacy the emirs enjoyed in the eyes of the population.

This issue, the legitimacy of rule, is a key element in understanding the unfolding historical events in the Maghrib, which influenced the struggle between the powers of the western Atlantic coast and ultimately had an impact on world history. In search of new revenues, Emir Ahmed al Mansur cast his eyes southwards to the Sudan. Historical Sudan, which was the traditional supplier of gold to the Maghrib, embraces the entire African belt south of the Sahara and should not be confused with the modern state of the Sudan. Since the 8th century, North Africa had carried on a peaceful and thriving trade with the lands south of the Sahara exporting metal ware, fine cloth, and horses in return for gold, ivory, cola nuts and Benin (Nigerian) pepper. In the 11th century, tribesmen from the Savannah, the Murabitun had burst forth and captured all of West Africa and Spain, a territory extending from Ghana to the borders of France. The trans-Saharan trade fostered the introduction of Islam and the Africans became a part of the universal community of Muslims. Muslim Sultans who occupied an honored place among the emirs of the world ruled the powerful empires of Mali (14th century) and Songhay (15th century). Askia Muhammed, also known as Askia the Great, during whose reign the Songhay Empire reached its zenith (1493-1528), was a patron of Islamic learning and sought to rule his kingdom in accordance with the

Shariah. He performed the Hajj with a large entourage in 1496 and was appointed the spiritual head of the western Sudan by the Sharif of Mecca. Askia Muhammed sought and received the advice of the well-known scholars, among them the celebrated al Maghili (d. 1504) of Algeria. The trading cities of the Niger River, Timbaktu, Gao, Jenne, Kumbi, Tekrur, and Dendi, became centers of learning with extensive libraries. Well-known and respected scholars taught at great mosques. Scholarly interactions between Timbaktu, Sijilmasa (Morocco), Cairo (Egypt), and Mecca and Madina were common. The peace of these scholarly interactions was about to be shattered by the cannons of Ahmed al Mansur.

The occupation of the salt mines at Taodini and Taghaza by Songhay was unacceptable to the Sa'adid emir. At first, Ahmed al Mansur sent a scout to reclaim the salt mines (1580). But distances were large and he could not hold the towns against raids from Songhay. The hostilities only served to further disrupt trade between the Sudan and the Maghrib. Trade caravans avoided the westerly route through Morocco and moved eastwards through the central reaches of the Sahara to the Tunisian coast. A desperate al Mansur now decided to invade the Songhay Empire, which he believed would yield him the gold he needed to pay his army. A strong force of more than 4,000 soldiers was assembled consisting of Berbers, Tuaregs, Turks, Arabs and Portuguese prisoners of war. The force was well armed with muskets and supplied with cannons. The firearms were new weapons not known in the Sudan at that time and played a decisive role in the ensuing encounter.

The planned invasion was opposed by the *ulema* in Morocco as well as by the merchants. The *ulema* took a position based on the inadmissibility of a Muslim ruler invading the territories of another Muslim. The merchants were concerned that the invasion would increase social disruptions and further disrupt the trade. But al Mansur was so strapped for cash that he saw no choice but to proceed with this ill-advised adventure.

The Moroccan force crossed the Sahara and appeared on the borders of the Sudan in 1592 under Judar Pasha, a Spanish Christian who had accepted Islam. The Songhay Empire was far from the well-knit power that it once was under Askia Muhammed. Following the death of the great Askia, the empire experienced a long period of instability under a succession of monarchs. Songhay was not a monolithic kingdom inhabited by a single tribe, but a conglomerate of tribes who owed their allegiance to the emperor, some willingly and some by coercion. As instability increased, the Mossi tribes in the southern Sudan and the Hausa tribes to the east rebelled. In spite of these disturbances, the reigning Askia Ishaq II raised a large army and met with the Moroccan force at Tondibi. The Songhay soldiers were well disciplined but the muskets and cannons of the Moroccans carried the day. Facing defeat, Ishaq withdrew eastwards to the Songhay home base of Dendi. From here, the Songhays continued to wage guerilla war. The Sa'adids took Timbaktu and Gao and fanned out along the Niger River to occupy Jenne. There was a great deal of destruction and mayhem. The great towns along the Niger were looted. Libraries were burned. Scholars perished.

The legacy of this invasion was profound in its impact on Muslim West Africa. Ahmed al Mansur was only partially, and temporarily, successful in solving his revenue problems. The great cities of Timbaktu, Gao and Jenne were so thoroughly destroyed that they never regained their former glory as world-class centers of learning. The trans-Saharan trade along the western routes through Mauritania and southern Morocco was severely disrupted, further impoverishing both the Sudan and the Maghrib. Although Ishaq II continued his rearguard action, the Songhay Empire, which derived much of its power from the thriving trade centers along the Niger River, never regained its former importance. Agriculture suffered, and social disintegration increased, opening up Songhay territories to invasions by the Mossi from the

south and the Tuaregs from the north. Many of the learned men of Timbaktu migrated further east along the Niger River to the prosperous kingdom of Kanem-Bornu providing an impetus to Islamic learning in Katsino and Kano (northern Nigeria).

The Sa'adids could not hold Songhay for long. Although reinforced by additional contingents, they were too few in number to conquer all of Songhay or to police the trade routes leading from the gold mines of Ghana through the Niger valley to North Africa. They soon tired, and by 1618 had given up their efforts to subdue the Sudan. The local Sa'adid governors in Timbaktu, Gao and Jenne were given the grandiose titles of Pasha, and left to their own wits to manage their affairs. These governors intermarried with the local population. The children of these marriages came to be known as Arma. The Arma continued to rule in cooperation with the power brokers of the Sudan until 1700 when they lost their power and were absorbed into the African milieu.

In historical hindsight, the primary beneficiary of the Moroccan invasion was the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The collapse of the Songhay and Mali empires multiplied inter-tribal warfare in West Africa. These wars gained in intensity as the Europeans fueled them with firearms and rum. The soldiers on the losing side in each tribal war were captured as slaves; some were transported to the Sene-Gambia region and sold to the Europeans. Among the slaves were a large number of Muslims.

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