Primary Source: Leo Africanus Describes Timbuktu

Traveller and scholar Leo Africanus was born in Spain during the late fifteenth century. His education in Morocco and travels to North and West Africa during the sixteenth century informed -- at least partially -- The History and Description of Africa, which was published in 1550. The History and Description of Africa was considered by Europeans to be the essential text about the African continent for four centuries, and Leo Africanus the essential expert on Africa and Islam.

Below are excerpts from Africanus' The History and Description of Africa where he describes the historic city of Timbuktu.

The name of this kingdom is a modern one, after a city which was built by a king named Mansa Suleyman in the year 610 of the hejira [2123 CE] around twelve miles from a branch of the Niger River.

The houses of Timbuktu are huts made of clay-covered wattles with thatched roofs. In the center of the city is a temple built of stone and mortar, by an architect named Granata, and in addition there is a large palace, constructed by the same architect, where the king lives. The shops of the artisans, the merchants, and especially weavers of cotton cloth are very numerous. Fabrics are also imported from Europe to Timbuktu, born by Berber merchants.

The women of the city maintain the custom of veiling their faces, except for the slaves who sell all the foodstuffs. The inhabitants are very rich, especially the strangers who have settled in the country; so much so that the current king has given two of his daughters in marriage to two brothers, both businessmen, on account of their wealth. There are many wells containing sweet water in Timbuktu; and in addition, when the Niger is in flood canals deliver the water to the city.

The royal court is magnificent and very well organized. When the king goes from one city to another with the people of his court, he rides a camel and the horses are led by hand by servants. If fighting becomes necessary, the servants mount the camels and all the soldiers mount on horseback. When someone wishes to speak to the king, he must kneel before him and bow down; but this is only required of those who have never before spoken to the king, or of ambassadors. The king has about 3,000 horsemen and infinity of foot-soldiers armed with bows made of wild fennel which they use to shoot poisoned arrows. This king makes war only upon neighboring enemies and upon those who do not want to pay him tribute. When he has gained a victory, he has all of them—even the children—sold in the market at Timbuktu.

The city is very much endangered by fire. At the time when I was there on my second voyage, half the city burned in the space of five hours. But the wind was violent and the inhabitants of the other half of the city began to move their belongings for fear that the other half would burn.

There are no gardens or orchards in the area surrounding Timbuktu.

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This map shows the various North and West African trade routes through Timbuktu.

Artifacts:

Many civilizations constructed structures using wattle and daub walls and thatch roofs. This is a temple that has been recreated at Town Creek Indian Mound.