Leo Africanus' Description of West Africa (1500)
Leo Africanus


Leo Africanus was an early-sixteenth-century traveler who recorded in great detail the life of many remote African kingdoms. His work, *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*, was translated from Arabic for the first time into Latin in 1526. Little is actually known of the early life of Leo except that he was born in Granada and later moved to Fez, a great commercial center in the Sudan and a seat of learning with many mosques and libraries. It was obvious to Pope Leo X, after meeting the Moorish slave, that Leo was originally from a wealthy family and educated.

Leo's account of his travels throughout the Sudan were particularly important because it described the region just when Songhai had been raised to its political and economic zenith by the conquests of Askia Muhammad (1493-1528). His accounts clearly show that regional and international trade played a dominant part in the economic life of the entire Maghrib. The rich city of Timbuktu, the large armies of the kings, the wide variety of goods sold by merchants, and the intellectual and cultural life of the Muslim inhabitants of the Songhai Empire were all described in fascinating detail. Cartographers in Europe redrew the map of Africa in light of Leo's documentary, and for two-and-a-half centuries, his travel accounts were an indispensable source of knowledge to all concerned with the study of Africa.

IOHN LEO HIS SEUENTH BOOKE OF the Historie of Africa, and of the memorable things contained therein. *Wherein he intreateth of the land of Negros, and of the confines of Egypt*. Our ancient Chroniclers of Africa, to wit, Bichri and Meshudi knew nothing of the land of Negros but onely the regions of Guechet and Cano: for in their time all other places of the land of Negros were vndiscovered. But in the yeere of the Hegeira 380, by the meanes of a certaine Mahumetan which came into Barbarie, the residue of the said land was found out, being as then inhabited by great numbers of people, which liued a brutish and saugae life, without any king, gouernour, common wealth, or knowledge of husbandrie. Clad they were in skins of
beasts, neither had they any peculiar wives: in the day time they kept their
cattell; and when night came they resorted ten or twelue both men and
women into one cottage together, using hairie skins instead of beds, and
each man choosing his leman which he had most fancy vnto. Warre they
wage against no other nation, ne yet are desirous to trauell out of their
owne countrie. Some of them performe great adoration vnto the sunne
rising: others, namely the people of Gualata, worship the fire: and some
others, to wit, the inhabitants of Gaoga, approch (after the Egyptians
manner) neerervnto the Christian faith. These Negros were first subiect vnto
king Ioseph the founder of Maroco, and afterward vnto the fiue nations of
Libya; of whom they learned the Mahumetan lawe, and diuers needfull
handycrafts: a while after when the merchants of Barbarie began to resort
vnto them with merchandise, they learned the Barbarian language also. But
the foresaid fiue people or nations of Libya diuided this land so among
themselues, that every third part of each nation possessed one region.
Howbeit the king of Tombuto that now raigneth, called Abuacre Izchia, is a
Negro by birth: this Abuacre after the decease of the former king, who was
a Libyan borne, slue all his sonnes, and so vsurped the kingdome. And
hauing by warres for the space of fifteene yeeres conquered many large
dominions, he then concluded a league with all nations, and went on
pilgrimage to Mecca, in which iournie he so consumed his treasure, that he
was constrained to borrow great summes of money of other princes.
Moreouer the fifteene kingdomes of Negros knowen to vs, are all situate
vpon the riuer of Niger, and vpon other riuers which fall thereinto. And all
the land of Negros standeth betweene two vast deserts, for on the one side
lieth the maine desert betweene Numidia and it, which extendeth it selfe
vnto this very land: and the south side thereof adjoineth vpon another
desert, which stretcheth from thence to the maine Ocean: in which desert
are infinite nations vknown to vs, both by reason of the huge distance of
place, and also in regarde of the diuersitie of languages and religions. They
haue no traffique at all with our people, but we haue heard oftentimes of
their traffique with the inhabitants of the Ocean sea shore. A description of
the kingdome of Gualata. This region in regarde of others is very small: for
it containeth onely three great villages, with certaine granges and fields of
dates. From Nun it is distant southward about three hundred, from Tombuto
northward fiue hundred, and from the Ocean sea about two hundred miles.
In this region the people of Libya, while they were lords of the land of
Negros, ordained their chiefe princely seate: and then great store of
Barbarie-merchants frequented Gualata: but afterward in the raigne of the
mighty and rich prince Heli, the said merchants leauing Gualata, began to
resort vnto Tombuto and Gago, which was the occasion that the region of
Gualata grew extreme beggerly. The language of this region is called Sungai,
and the inhabitants are blacke people, and most friendly vnto strangers. In
my time this region was conquered by the king of Tombuto, and the prince
thereof fled into the deserts, whereof the king of Tombuto hauing intelligence, and fearing least the prince would returne with all the people of the deserts, graunted him peace, conditionally that he should pay a great yeerely tribute vnto him, and so the said prince hath remained tributarie to the king of Tombuto vntill this present. The people agree in manners and fashions with the inhabitants of the next desert. Here groweth some quantitie of Mil-seed, and great store of a round & white kind of pulse, the like whereof I never saw in Europe ; but flesh is extreme scarce among them. Both the men & the women do so couer their heads, that al their countenance is almost hidden. Here is no forme of a common wealth, nor yet any gouernours or judges, but the people lead a most miserable life. A description of the kingdome of Ghinea. This kingdome called by the merchants of our nation Gheneoa, by the natural inhabitants thereof Genni, and by the Portugals and other people of Europe Ghinea, standeth in the midst betweene Gualata on the north, Tombuto on the east, and the kingdome of Melli on the south. In length it containeth almost fiue hundred miles, and extendeth two hundred and fiftie miles along the river of Niger, and bordereth vpon the Ocean sea in the same place, where Niger falleth into the saide sea. This place exceedingly aboundeth with barlie, rice, cattell, fishes, and cotton : and their cotton they sell vnto the merchants of Barbarie, for cloth of Europe, for brazen vessels, for armour, and other such commodities. Their coine is of gold without any stampe or inscription at all : they haue certaine iron-money also, which they use about matters of small value, some pieces whereof weigh a pound, some halfe a pound, and some one quarter of a pound. In all this kingdome there is no fruite to be found but onely dates, which are brought hither either out of Gualata or Numidia. Heere is neither towne nor castle, but a certaine great village onely, wherein the prince of Ghinea, together with his priestes, doctors, merchants, and all the principal men of the region inhabite. The walles of their houses are built of chalke, and the roofes are couered with strawe : the inhabitants are clad in blakke or blew cotton, wherewith they couer their heads also : but the priests and doctors of their law go apparelled in white cotton. This region during the three moneths of Iulie, August, and September, is yeerely enuironed with the overflowings of Niger in manner of an Island; all which time the merchants of Tombuto conueigh their merchandize hither in certaine Canoas or narrow boats made of one tree, which they rowe all the day long, but at night they binde them to the shore, and lodge themselves vpon the lande. This kingdome was subject in times past vnto a certaine people of Libya, and became afterward tributarie vnto king Soni Heli, after whom succeeded Soni Heli Izchia, who kept the prince of this region prisoner at Gago, where together with a certaine nobleman, he miserably died. Of the kingdome of Melli. This region extending it selfe almost three hundred miles along the side of a river which falleth into Niger, bordereth northward vpon the region last described, southward vpon certaine deserts and drie
mountaine, westward upon huge woods and forests stretching to the
Ocean sea shore, and eastward upon the territorie of Gago. In this kingdom
there is a large and ample village containing to the number of sixe thousand
or mo families, and called Melli, whereof the whole kingdom is so named.
And here the king hath his place of residence. The region it selfe yeeldeth
great abundance of corne, flesh, and cotton. Heere are many artificers and
merchants in all places: and yet the king honourably entertaineth all
strangers. The inhabitants are rich, and haue plentie of wares. Heere are
great store of temples, priests, and professours, which professours read
their lectures onely in the temples, because they haue no colleges at all. The
people of this region excelle all other Negros in witte, ciuilitie, and industry;
and were the first that embraced the law of Mahumet, at the same time
when the vnkle of Ioseph the king of Maroco was their prince, and the
gouernment remained for a while unto his posterity: at length Izchia
subdued the prince of this region, and made him his tributarie, and so
oppressed him with greeuous exactions, that he was scarce able to
maintaine his family. Of the kingdom of Tombuto. This name was in our
times (as some thinke) imposed vpon this kingdome from the name of a
certain towne so called, which (they say) king Mense Suleiman
founded in the yeere of the Hegeira 610, and it is situate within twelve miles of a
certaine branch of Niger, all the houses whereof are now changed into
cottages built of chalke, and couered with thatch. Howbeit there is a most
stately temple to be seene, the wals whereof are made of stone and lime;
and a princely palace also built by a most excellent workeman of Granada.
Here are many shops of artificers, and merchants, and especially of such as
weaue linnen and cotton cloth. And hither do the Barbarie-merchants bring
cloth of Europe. All the women of this region except maid-servants go with
their faces couered, and sell all necessarie victuals. The inhabitants, &
especially strangers there residing, are exceeding rich, insomuch, that the
king that now is, married both his daughters vnto two rich merchants. Here
are many wels, containing most sweete water; and so often as the riuier
Niger overfloweth, they conueigh the water thereof by certaine sluices into
the towne. Corne, cattle, milke, and butter this region yeeldeth in great
abundance: but salt is verie scarce heere; for it is brought hither by land
from Tegaza, which is fiue hundred miles distant. When I my selfe was here,
I saw one camels loade of salt sold for 8o. ducates. The rich king of Tombuto
hath many plates and scepters of gold, some whereof weigh 1300. pounds:
and he keepes a magnificient and well furnished court. When he traveleth
any whither he rideth vpon a camell, which is lead by some of his noblemen;
and so he doth likewise when hee goeth to warfar, and all his souldiers ride
vpon horses. Whosoeuer will speake vnto this king must first fall downe
before his feete, & then taking vp earth must sprinkle it vpon his owne head
& shoulders: which custom is ordinarily obserued by them that neuer
saluted the king before, or come as ambassadors from other princes. He
hath alwaies three thousand horsemen, and a great number of footmen that shoot poysoned arrowes, attending vpon him. They haue often skirmishes with those that refuse to pay tribute, and so many as they take, they sell vnto the merchants of Tombuto. Here are verie few horses bred, and the merchants and courtiers keepe certaine little nags which they vse to trauell vpon : but their best horses are brought out of Barbarie. And the king so soone as he heareth that any merchants are come to towne with horses, he commandeth a certaine number to be brought before him, and chusing the best horse for himselfe, he payeth a most liberall price for him. He so deadly hateth all Iewes, that he will not admit any into his citie : and whatsoeuer Barbarie merchants he understandeth haue any dealings with the Iewes, he presently causeth their goods to be confiscate. Here are great store of doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men, that are bountifully maintained at the kings cost and charges. And hither are brought diuers manuscripts or written booke out of Barbarie, which are sold for more money than any other merchandize. The coine of Tombuto is of gold without any stampe or superscription : but in matters of smal value they vse certaine shels brought hither out of the kingdome of Persia, fower hundred of which shels are worth a ducate : and sixe pieces of their golden coine with two third parts weigh an ounce. The inhabitants are people of a gentle and chereful disposition, and spend a great part of the night in singing and dancing through all the streets of the citie : they keep great store of men and women-slaues, and their towne is much in danger of fire : at my second being there halfe the town almost was burnt in fiue howers space.

Glossary

Timbuktu (Tombuto) Perhaps the most famous Muslim town on the Niger River, Timbuktu was a thriving commercial center for Maghribi traders in the Sudan. It is estimated to have had a population of 25,000 when Leo Africanus visited it in about 1510. Timbuktu also became a great center of Muslim learning and scholars from North Africa and Egypt visited the city for its universities and libraries. Doctors, judges, priests, and other learned men were maintained in Timbuktu at the king's cost.
Study Questions: BE SURE TO ANSWER IN COMPLETE SENTENCES

1. **What is Leo Africanus' opinion of the people of Mali (Melli)?**

2. **Reading the geographical descriptions provided by Leo proved very useful to geographers of the period. What is the importance of the Niger River to kingdom-building in the Sudanic region?**

3. **The role of merchants is well described by this Arab traveler. What are the most important trade goods of the region? How is the trade conducted, and by whom?**