

□ **READING CHALLENGE**

The Library That Saved Books from War

When armed fighters took control of Timbuktu, brave librarians secretly moved 300,000 ancient manuscripts to safety.

Level	A2 — Elementary
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	History & Culture
Duration	~12-15 minutes
Skill	Reading
Vocabulary	15 words
Quiz	5 questions

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In the middle of the Sahara Desert in West Africa, there is an **ancient** city called Timbuktu. Today, when people hear the name Timbuktu, they often think of a place that is very far away — almost imaginary. In English, people sometimes say “from here to Timbuktu” to mean “the farthest place in the world.” But Timbuktu is a very real city in the country of Mali, and for hundreds of years, it was one of the most important places for learning and knowledge in all of Africa. In 2012, when armed fighters took control of the city, a group of brave **ordinary** people risked their lives to save its greatest **treasure**: more than 300,000 ancient books and documents.

The City of Books

Timbuktu became a centre of learning in the 1300s and 1400s, when it was part of the powerful Mali Empire. The city sat at the meeting point of important trade **routes** across the Sahara Desert. Merchants brought gold, salt, and other goods through the city, and with them came **scholars**, teachers, and students from across the Islamic world. The University of Sankore in Timbuktu had around 25,000 students at its peak — a huge number for a medieval city.

Over the centuries, scholars in Timbuktu wrote thousands of **manuscripts** by hand. These manuscripts covered an amazing range of subjects: mathematics, astronomy, medicine, law, history, poetry, and religion. Some manuscripts contained detailed maps of the stars. Others described how to treat diseases using local plants. Some discussed the rights of women, the importance of education, or the rules of fair trade. These documents proved that Africa had a rich tradition of written knowledge, science, and philosophy — something that many people in Europe did not know or did not want to believe.

For centuries, families in Timbuktu kept these manuscripts hidden in their homes, buried under floors, or locked in wooden chests. The dry desert air helped **preserve** the paper and ink. By the early 2000s, librarians and historians had found over 300,000 manuscripts in and around Timbuktu. They were an incredible part of Africa’s **heritage**.

War Comes to Timbuktu

In January 2012, a group of **rebel** fighters from northern Mali started a war against the government. By April, the rebels and a group of extremist fighters linked to Al-Qaeda had **occupied** Timbuktu. The extremists imposed very strict rules on the city. They **banned** music, football, and television. Women were forced to cover their entire bodies. People who broke the rules were punished severely.

The people of Timbuktu were terrified, but they were also worried about something else: the manuscripts. The extremist fighters did not value the ancient books. They considered many of them to be against their beliefs. There were real fears that the fighters would destroy the manuscripts, burning hundreds of years of African knowledge and history in a single day.

The Secret Rescue

One man decided that he could not let this happen. His name was Abdel Kader Haidara. He was a librarian and manuscript collector who had spent his entire life finding, buying, and protecting Timbuktu's manuscripts. He ran a private library called the Mamma Haidara Library, which held thousands of precious documents. When the fighters arrived, Haidara knew he had to act fast.

Haidara organised a secret operation to move the manuscripts out of Timbuktu. He gathered a team of local librarians, volunteers, and family members. They worked mostly at night, when it was safer. They carefully packed the **fragile** manuscripts into metal and wooden **trunks**. Some manuscripts were hundreds of years old and could fall apart if they were not handled gently. The team wrapped them in cloth and placed them into boxes, sometimes hiding the boxes under vegetables or other goods so that the fighters would not notice.

Then they had to **smuggle** the trunks out of the city. This was the most dangerous part. The fighters controlled the roads and checked vehicles. Haidara's team used donkeys, small boats on the Niger River, and cars to move the manuscripts. They used many different routes to avoid being caught. Some trips were short, just to safe houses in nearby villages. Others were long journeys of over 900 kilometres south to Bamako, the capital of Mali.

The operation took several months. During this time, Haidara and his team lived in constant fear. If the fighters had discovered what they were doing, they would have been punished or killed. But the team kept going. By the time French soldiers arrived in January 2013 to help push the fighters out of Timbuktu, Haidara and his team had already saved most of the manuscripts. They had moved approximately 300,000 documents to safety.

What Was Lost

Sadly, not everything could be saved. When the extremist fighters realised they were going to lose control of the city, they set fire to one of the main libraries. About 4,000 manuscripts were destroyed in the fire. Television cameras showed the flames and smoke rising from the building, and people around the world watched in horror. But because of Haidara's secret rescue, this was only a small part of the total collection. The vast majority of the manuscripts were already safe in Bamako.

Why These Books Matter

The manuscripts of Timbuktu are important for many reasons. First, they show that Africa had advanced centres of learning long before European explorers arrived. For centuries, many Western history books described Africa as a place without written knowledge. The Timbuktu manuscripts prove this is completely wrong. African scholars were writing about science, medicine, and human rights while Europe was still in the Middle Ages.

Second, the manuscripts contain knowledge that is still useful today. Some describe medicines made from plants that grow in the Sahara region. Scientists are now studying these manuscripts to see if the old treatments could help modern medicine. Others contain

detailed records of trade, weather patterns, and social life that help historians understand how people lived in West Africa hundreds of years ago.

Third, the story of saving the manuscripts is a powerful example of what ordinary people can do when they care about something important. Haidara was not a soldier or a politician. He was a librarian who loved books. The people who helped him were shopkeepers, drivers, and fishermen. They risked their lives not for money or fame, but because they believed that knowledge and history are worth protecting.

The Manuscripts Today

After the war ended, the manuscripts stayed in Bamako for several years while experts worked to keep them safe. The conditions in Bamako were not ideal — the city is much more humid than the dry desert of Timbuktu, and humidity can damage old paper. International organisations, including UNESCO and several universities, sent money and experts to help. Teams began the slow, careful work of cataloguing, photographing, and digitising the manuscripts so that copies would exist even if something happened to the originals.

Today, some manuscripts have been returned to Timbuktu, where new, climate-controlled storage rooms have been built to [restore](#) and protect them. The work of digitising all 300,000 manuscripts will take many years, but it has already begun. Once digitised, scholars and students around the world will be able to study these amazing documents online.

Abdel Kader Haidara became famous for his bravery. His story was told in a bestselling book called “The Bad-Ass Librarians of Timbuktu” by Joshua Hammer. But Haidara has always said that the real heroes were the ordinary people of Timbuktu who helped carry, hide, and transport the manuscripts. Without them, centuries of African knowledge would have been lost forever.

The story of Timbuktu’s manuscripts teaches us that books are more than just paper and ink. They carry the thoughts, discoveries, and dreams of the people who wrote them. Destroying a book is like destroying a voice from the past. And protecting a book — even when it is dangerous to do so — is one of the bravest things a person can do.

Vocabulary

#	Word	Definition
1	manuscript	a very old book or document written by hand, before printing was invented
2	ancient	very, very old; from a time hundreds or thousands of years ago
3	smuggle	to move something secretly from one place to another, often to keep it safe or because it
4	rebel	a person who fights against the government or the people in control
5	treasure	something very valuable and important that people want to protect
6	fragile	easy to break or damage; delicate
7	scholar	a person who studies and knows a lot about a subject
8	heritage	the history, traditions, and important things that belong to a country or group of people
9	occupy	to take control of a place by force, especially during a war
10	ordinary	normal; not special or different in any way
11	preserve	to keep something safe so that it is not damaged or destroyed
12	banned	not allowed; officially stopped by someone in power
13	trunk	a large, strong box used for storing or moving things
14	route	the way or path you follow to get from one place to another
15	restore	to bring something back to its original condition; to repair or fix something old

Comprehension Quiz

1. What is Timbuktu famous for?
 - A) It is the largest city in Africa
 - B) It was an important centre of learning with hundreds of thousands of ancient manuscripts
 - C) It is where the first printed book was made
 - D) It has the oldest university building in the world

2. What happened when the rebel fighters took control of Timbuktu in 2012?
 - A) They built new libraries for the city
 - B) They immediately burned all the manuscripts
 - C) They banned music, football, and television, and began to threaten the city's libraries
 - D) They left the libraries alone because they did not care about books

3. How did Abdel Kader Haidara and his team save the manuscripts?
 - A) They asked the rebel fighters for permission to move the books
 - B) They secretly packed them in trunks and smuggled them out of the city by boat and car
 - C) They hid all the manuscripts under the sand in the desert
 - D) They sent the manuscripts to Europe by aeroplane

4. Why were the manuscripts so important?
 - A) They were written in gold and were worth millions of dollars
 - B) They contained ancient knowledge about science, medicine, law, and religion from West Africa
 - C) They were the oldest books ever found anywhere in the world
 - D) They were written by European explorers who visited Africa

5. What is happening with the manuscripts today?
 - A) They are all still hidden and nobody can see them
 - B) They were all destroyed during the war
 - C) Many have been returned to Timbuktu and experts are working to preserve and digitise them
 - D) They were sold to museums in other countries

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	B	What is Timbuktu famous for?
2	C	What happened when the rebel fighters took control of Timbuktu in 2012?
3	B	How did Abdel Kader Haidara and his team save the manuscripts?
4	B	Why were the manuscripts so important?
5	C	What is happening with the manuscripts today?