Above and opposite Pirogues on the River Niger. A pirogue is a shallow, canoe-like boat which can be paddled or punted, sometimes with sail or even motor added. It is used chiefly for transportation, fishing and — historically — hippopotamus hunting. Securing and maintaining control over the boatmen and their pirogues was essential to empire-building in the region in centuries past.
TIMBUKTU: WHERE THE CAMEL MEETS THE CANOE

'Salt comes from the north, gold from the south and silver from the country of the white men, but the word of God and the treasures of wisdom are only to be found in Timbuktu.'

West African Proverb
The historic city of Timbuktu lies at a point where the Sahara Desert meets the River Niger along its great northward curve often referred to as the Niger Bend. This geographical setting made it a natural meeting point for settled African populations and nomadic Berber and Arab peoples. The Niger Bend or Middle Niger is to West Africa what the Nile Valley is to Egypt: an ecological lifeline and a magnet for civilization. Historically, this huge swathe of river with its floodplain has allowed for the relatively dense settlement of populations along a vast stretch of well-watered terrain. It also provided a great highway of communication across the region and a link between the lands of the desert and North Africa and the savannahs and forests in the south. In time, this strategic location was to make Timbuktu a natural locus of trade between the lands of the Mediterranean and tropical Africa, called in Arabic the Bilad al-sudan or land of the blacks.

The extensive human activity that has taken place in the Niger Bend for thousands of years has left behind its traces in a large number of archaeological sites. The river was a natural refuge for populations facing the increasing desiccation of the Sahara after 5,000 BCE. By 250 BCE we have the earliest evidence of urbanization in the region: archaeological work in the 1970s and 1980s at Jenne, south of Timbuktu, revealed the site of a complex society that had developed into a considerable regional centre.

Climatically, the first millennium CE was a relatively benign period for this part of the world, with increased rainfall allowing for sufficient tree growth to fuel an iron industry. This was the era in which the ancient Empire of Ghana flourished in what is now southern Mauritania and extending into northwest Mali. Since about 1100 CE, the general pattern for the West African Sahel – the region bordering the Sahara – has been one of reduced rainfall, with significant long- and short-term deviations which have at times gravely threatened the lives and livelihoods of its people. Timbuktu now has an average annual rainfall of 231 mm (9.1 in.), though this varies greatly from year to year. During the hottest months, from April...
to June, Timbuktu is fiercely hot, with highest daily temperatures averaging between 41°C (105°F) and 43.5°C (110°F).\(^1\)

In such inhospitable conditions, the river is truly a lifeline, providing year-round drinking water for humans and their domestic animals. Annual flooding creates a huge Inland Delta extending some 500 km (300 miles) to a point just upstream of Timbuktu, and stretching as much as 250 km (150 miles) wide. As the flood waters recede, a moist agricultural terrain watered by creeks and lakes is left behind. Here grains and vegetables can be grown and cattle pastured, forming a breadbasket for Timbuktu and its desert and riverine hinterland.

Timbuktu came into existence at the beginning of the 12th century as a settlement for nomads of the southern Sahara, who would camp near the river during the dry season and take their animals to graze in the inland territories during the rainy season. It was originally established a few miles from the river to avoid its humidity and water-borne diseases. While the nomads were away they would leave their belongings with their slaves, one of whom, we are told, was called Buktu, hence the name Tim Buktu or the well of Buktu.\(^2\) These nomads were Sanhaja, most probably members of the Masaufa branch of this great confederation, who were to remain an important element in the population of Timbuktu through the next six centuries.

It would seem that Timbuktu remained little more than a semi-permanent nomadic settlement in the 12th century, and probably through the 13th. But as this campsite gradually attracted permanent settlers, and commercial links were established between Timbuktu and the Saharan oases, Timbuktu became an attractive city for people from North Africa and the oases, and its population increased significantly.\(^4\)

**Sources of Early West African History**
A local tradition of history writing in Timbuktu surfaced in the 16th century with the works of Ahmed Baba, and later in the great Timbuktu