

From May 2012 until January 2013 the radical rebel group Ansar Dine destroyed key parts of Timbuktu's cultural and Islamic heritage. The group had occupied Timbuktu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, since April 1, 2012, following a coup in March which had displaced the government. The ICC regarded such destruction as war crimes.

Timbuktu

- Timbuktu, also known as the "City of 333 saints", is a city located in northern Mali on the southern edge of the Sahara desert and is one of the oldest cities in Africa. It has been classed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1988.¹
- Founded in the 12th century, it reached its zenith in the 15th and 16th centuries where it was an important centre for the diffusion of Islamic culture, playing an essential role in the spread of Islam in Africa at an early period.² It was the world centre of Islamic learning from the 15th to the 17th centuries and is regarded as a capital of intellectual and spiritual heritage.
- The city contains three great mosques, estimated to have been built in the 14th century: Djingareyber, Sankore and Sidi Yahia, which were restored by the Qadi Al Aqib in the sixteenth century. It also contains 16 significant cemeteries and mausoleums.
- The city also contains 700,000 manuscripts on religion, law, literature and science in more than 60 private collections.³

The Political Situation in Mali and Ansar Dine

- In January 2012 the Tuareg Rebellion was launched by a coalition of Tuareg and extremist forces. The Tuaregs were an ethnic group seeking to launch a separatist movement leading to the breakaway state of Azawad in the north of Mali. The Islamist forces comprised of an al-Qaeda linked group called Ansar Dine, formed in 2011.
- On March 21, 2012 a group of Malian soldiers⁴ led by a young general, Captain Sanogo, were frustrated by the government politically and the government's response to the Tuareg rebellion.⁵
- They successfully launched a coup d'état against the government. In the ensuing confusion, Ansar Dine and the Tuareg rebels were able to capture key northern towns, including Gao on March 31, 2012 and Timbuktu on April 1, 2012. Ansar Dine quickly established a strict interpretation of Sharia law in the towns that had been captured,⁷ and they held power over much of the north of Mali until France launched a military intervention, Operation Serval, in January 2013, which quickly overthrew the militants.

"God is unique. All of this is haram. We are all Muslims. UNESCO is what?"

**Ansar Dine
spokesman Sanda
Ould Boumama, July
2012⁶**

"I wish to express my solidarity with the people of Mali... UNESCO is more determined than ever to pursue its efforts to rehabilitate the cultural heritage of Mali and the Protection of Ancient Manuscripts".
UNESCO Secretary-General, Irina Bokova, September 2013¹¹

The Destruction of Timbuktu's Heritage Sites

- In June 2012, UNESCO put Timbuktu on its list of endangered World Heritage Sites and on June 28, 2012, Ansar Dine rebels began attacking the shrine of Sidi Mahmoud (which is a place of Muslim worship for local Sufis) with pickaxes and shovels as they regarded the shrine as idolatrous.⁸ A further two shrines, of Sidi Moctar and Alpha Moya, were also destroyed on June 28, with four shrines, including Cheikh el-Kebir's mausoleum, being destroyed by the rebels the next day.^{9,10} Ansar Dine spokesman Sanda Ould Boumama then threatened that the rest of Timbuktu's shrines would also be destroyed: "all of them, without exception",¹² and further threatened to destroy the mosques if there were saints buried

inside them.¹³

- In July, the fighters destroyed the entrance to the 15th century Sidi Yahia mosque,¹⁴ the gate of which was not supposed to be opened until the end of days,¹⁵ and attacked two mausoleums attached to the 14th century Djingareyber Mosque.^{16,17} The ICC designated this destruction as a war crime.¹⁸
- There was a further wave of destruction on December 23, 2012, when three further mausoleums were destroyed, including those of the Al Hassan and Al Houseyni brothers.^{19,20} In January 2013, fleeing Islamist rebels torched a priceless collection of historic manuscripts by burning down a library.^{21,22,23} On September 28, 2013 a suicide bomb attack took place near the Djingareyber Mosque.²⁴

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