

Publication

Pre-Colonial Origins of Urban Spaces in the West African Sahel: Street Networks, Trade, and Spatial Plurality

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Present-day West African towns allow us to study how urban space developed in this region. The urban street networks and layout of residential quarters to some extent preserve the possible movement patterns of pre-colonial urbanites. Long-distance trade, in what is ultimately a liminal and transitory locale, linked the urban nodes on the "coast" of the Sahara. This article takes a closer look on the distribution of streets and quarters as a unique kind of material heritage, as well as major trade routes, which linked into the towns. Analyses of the historic towns of Timbuktu and Djenne in Mali are used to demonstrate how the relationships between trade and urban residents were enacted in space. The structuring of the two towns put them in context with the tradition of dual settlements in West Africa, also finding parallels with the role of urban quarters in merchant towns of the East African coast.

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