



Kathleen Bickford Berzock (Ed.): *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa*

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This beautiful and remarkable book is the companion volume to an exhibition held at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, USA, from January to July 2019, then at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada, and at the National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C., USA, organized with partner institutions in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria. The editor describes the volume as taking a wider and more in-depth view of the topics introduced by the exhibition.

The book consists of 19 chapters, split into four sections. Section 1, *Groundwork*, has an eclectic content, covering theoretical themes, heritage management, and historiography. Appropriately, it closes with a series of accounts of cultural heritage preservation initiatives in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria. Section 2, *Sites*, is coherent and firmly rooted in place: first comes a description of the Sahara, then a series of archeological case studies presenting remarkable data from well-known sites, tied to wider considerations such as the nature of urbanism or the role of pluralistic communities. Section 3, *Matter in Motion*, presents case studies highlighting the movement of specific materials, objects, and forms of knowledge: metals, glass, ivory, texts, and so forth. Finally, Section 4, *Reverberations*, brings together a diverse set of themes under the overarching umbrella of the post-fifteenth century period. For example, the concluding chapter considers the contemporary geopolitics of migration and passage through and within the Sahara.

A thread running through the volume is the desire to foreground West African value systems, and to think of ways in which items such as gold and ivory were assigned value in West Africa and given roles to play as artistic materials—rather than taking the Mediterranean sources' hierarchy of desirable items. The book is beautifully illustrated and, although firmly rooted in the “humble remains” of archeological data and the ability of such fragments to move us, it very successfully deploys a whole range of material culture. Indeed, this is absolutely the point, as explains Bickford Berzock in the introduction to the volume. In order to “bring the archaeological imagination to life,” the exhibition invited visitors to make connections between archeological fragments, contemporaneous objects and texts, and recent practices that help visualize what the objects once were. Thus, linkages are (cautiously) made between archeological fragments and more complete items issued from ethnographic and textual sources. To give just one example, an early twentieth-century Tuareg shield from Niger (Fig. 1.10), a copper alloy disk excavated at Gao Ancien in Mali (Fig. 1.11a), and an illuminated thirteenth-century codex from Spain (Fig. 1.12.) all speak to one another. The archeological finds are beautifully photographed (though unfortunately many images lack a scale), and figures are impressively cross-referenced across chapters. Objects and themes recur, too. Nobili's chapter (Chapter 16) on trans-Saharan caravans as “caravans of literacy” begins with an imagined account of Muhammadin climbing the hills around Tadmekka to inscribe his declaration of faith in the early part of AD 1011, and picks up on Nixon's account of these inscriptions within Chapter 8.

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The focus is, then, on humble things. This said, a good number of “superstar” archeological objects are also featured. These include, for example, terracotta figurines from Mali (Figs. 1.14, 10.5, 10.6) and Nok (Fig. 5.7); the Ife “Olokun” head (Fig. 5.8); the Tellem textiles (Figs. 10.7–10.9); the blue bead armlets, equestrian figure, and roped pot from Igbo-Ukwu (Figs. 12.12, 15.12, 15.14); the Durbi Takusheyi cowrie shell cap and Mamluk brass containers (Figs. 11.7, 11.9); the Rao pectoral (Fig. 12.5); the Killi tumulus lost wax copper hornbill and lizard (Figs. 12.11a, b); and the Tada figurine (Fig. 12.13). However, these are unapologetically set alongside potsherds and corroded iron fragments. Occasionally, images set side by side show artifacts at their moment of archeological discovery and then cleaned and artistically photographed; this is the case of Figs. 9.11 and 9.12 showing a painted ceramic dish from excavations at Gao.

This recourse to the archeological imagination is a salutary one, not least in the present context of the debate on the repatriation of museum collections to their presumed country of origin. The book moves the reader to focus on what the humble items can tell us, once subjected to painstaking, devoted study. There are also stark reminders of all that has happened to obscure African agency and creativity. Some of this is overt and relatively well known. The chapter by Guérin is especially evocative. As she states, the “horrific background” to her enquiry into the uses of gold and ivory is the “scale of destruction of West African patrimony during the colonial period” (p. 180). The roped pot that speaks of the “audacity” of the Igbo-Ukwu metalworkers, allowing a “virtuosic effect” through the use of a “prodigious” and “unparalleled” method (p. 189), has survived to the present day. But the nineteenth century gold and silver treasury of Ahmadou Sekou Tall has not: partly melted down,

partly auctioned off, partly stolen from French store-rooms, it is now largely lost to public collections, a mere 428 g of the 75 kg of gold objects remains. France’s return of the sword of Ahmadou Sekou Tall’s father to Senegal, in a ceremony attended by some of the family’s descendants, made the news in late November 2019. Some of this obscuring of African agency is less overt. Becker, discussing the Sahara as an artistic and cultural zone (Chapter 6), reminds us that tanned cow and goat hides arriving via trans-Saharan trade routes were termed “morocco leather” or “maroquinerie” because they came via Moroccan ports. Of course, they actually originated in places such as Sokoto and Kano. Authors such as Cissé (Chapter 9), Pastorelli et al. (Chapter 14), and Babalola (Chapter 15) echo this point, focusing on production processes of glass, copper, and gold in sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter 17, by Silverman, discusses the remarkable fourteenth- to fifteenth-century brass and bronze vessels from Syria, Egypt, and England that were appropriated and repurposed by Akan communities.

This book deserves to be a coffee table book: it will hopefully appeal widely, and the suggested retail price is reasonable for a book of this quality. At the same time, the book offers the latest scholarship on the important topic of trans-Saharan trade. It contains material which even many specialists may not know, all of it superbly presented; and several chapters will certainly make excellent set reading material for undergraduate and graduate courses. The editor and authors are to be congratulated for producing such an impressive book.

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