

Africa's Lost Kingdoms

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The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages

by François-Xavier Fauvelle, translated from the French by Troy Tice
 Princeton University Press, 264 pp., \$29.95

African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa

by Michael A. Gomez
 Princeton University Press, 505 pp., \$45.00

African Kings and Black Slaves: Sovereignty and Dispossession in the Early Modern Atlantic

by Herman L. Bennett
 University of Pennsylvania Press, 226 pp., \$34.95

A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution

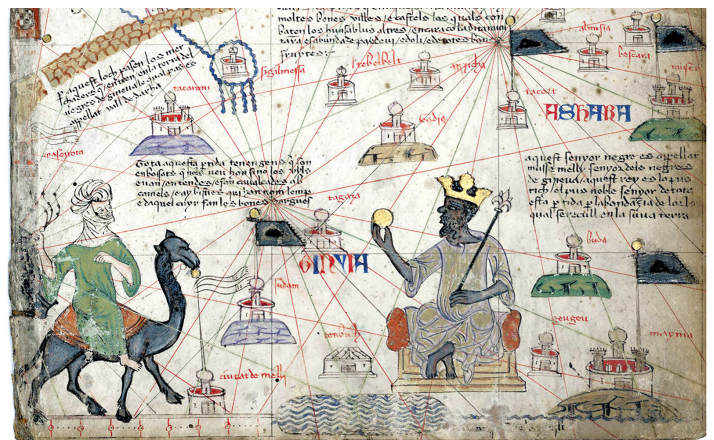
by Toby Green
 University of Chicago Press, 614 pp., \$40.00

Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa

an exhibition at the Block Museum of Art, Evanston, Illinois, January 26–July 21, 2019; the Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, September 21, 2019–February 23, 2020; and the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., April 8–November 29, 2020

Catalog of the exhibition edited by Kathleen Bickford Berzock
 Block Museum of Art/Princeton University Press, 311 pp., \$65.00

There is a broad strain in Western thought that has long treated Africa as existing outside of history and progress; it ranges from some of our most famous thinkers to the entertainment that generations of children have grown up with. There are Disney cartoons that depict barely clothed African cannibals merrily stewing their victims in giant pots suspended above pit fires.¹ Among intellectuals there is a wealth of appalling examples. Voltaire said of Africans, “A time will come,



Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris

Mansa Musa, the king of Mali, approached by a Berber on camelback; detail from The Catalan Atlas, attributed to the Majorcan mapmaker Abraham Cresques, 1375

without a doubt, when these animals will know how to cultivate the earth well, to embellish it with houses and gardens, and to know the routes of the stars. Time is a must, for everything.” Hegel’s views of Africa were even more sweeping: “What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.” One can hear echoes of such views even today from Western politicians. Donald Trump referred to a number of African nations as “shithole countries” in 2018, and French president Emmanuel Macron said in 2017, “The challenge Africa faces is completely different and much deeper” than those faced by Europe. “It is civilizational.”

It may remain a little-known fact, but Africa has never lacked civilizations, nor has it ever been as cut off from world events as it has been routinely portrayed. Some remarkable new books make this case in scholarly but accessible terms, and they admirably complicate our understanding of Africa’s past and present.

The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages by François-Xavier Fauvelle reveals—to many readers almost certainly for the first time—the existence of what specialists increasingly construe as medieval Africa. For Fauvelle, a leading French scholar of the continent, this was a period between the antiquity of places like Egypt, Nubia, and Aksum, all of which left spectacular archaeological legacies, and around 1500, after which Africa was deeply scarred by the slave trade and Western imperialism.

In a succession of brisk chapters, Fauvelle makes the case that medieval Africa suffered no dearth of cultural accomplishments. There is, for example, evidence of long-distance trade as early as the ninth century between northern African settlements and caravan towns like Aoudaghost, at the southern edge of the Sahara. Manufactured copper goods were sent south in exchange for gold dust, to be cast into ingots out of which much of the fast-rising Arab world’s coinage was struck.² To illustrate just how well established these commercial exchanges were by the late tenth century, Fauvelle describes an order of payment—what we might call a check³—sent by a sub-Saharan merchant to a businessman in the Moroccan town of Sijilmasa for the sum of 42,000 dinars.

Fauvelle also writes of sophisticated diplomacy in the seventh century between newly Islamized Egypt and Nubia, a Christian society to its south, in the course of which the Egyptians complained that their neighbors had not been living up to one of the terms of the pact between them, which required the return of any Egyptian slaves who escaped to Nubia. Twelve hundred years later, similar complaints by the American South against the North became a major cause of the Civil War.

The most intriguing story in Fauvelle’s book comes from the kingdom of Mali in the early fourteenth century. More than a century and a half before Columbus’s voyages, a Malian

ruler named Abu Bakr II was said to have equipped an expedition involving two hundred ships that attempted to discover “the furthest limit of the Atlantic Ocean.” The expedition failed to return save for one vessel, whose survivor claimed that “there appeared in the open sea [as it were] a river with a powerful current. . . . The [other] ships went on ahead but when they reached that place they did not return and no more was seen of them.” Some modern historians (Michael Gomez, Toby Green, and John Thornton, among others) have interpreted this to mean that the Malian ships were caught in the Atlantic Ocean’s Canary Current, which sweeps everything in its path westward at about the same latitude as Mali.

Abu Bakr II supposedly responded not by abandoning his dreams of exploration but by equipping a new and far larger expedition, this time involving two thousand ships and with himself in command. That was the last that was seen of him. We know of this story only because when Abu Bakr’s successor, Mansa Musa, was staying in Cairo in 1324–1325 on his pilgrimage to Mecca, the secretary of the chancery of the Mamluk Dynasty asked him how he had come to power and recorded his reply. There are no other traces of Abu Bakr’s attempt.

Fauvelle expends more effort than seems warranted in knocking down widely discredited efforts to connect Abu Bakr’s expeditions to unsubstantiated claims of an African presence in the New World prior to Columbus’s voyages. He then runs through a series of alternate explanations for why Musa would have told this extraordinary story, such as a contested succession between rival branches of the ruling family or an effort by Musa to prove Mali’s Islamic bona fides by claiming that a previous ruler had martyred himself while trying to carry the religion to the unknown extremities of the Atlantic. Today the question of what befell the shadowy Abu Bakr appears to be beyond the powers of modern historical inquiry to resolve.

Mansa Musa, however, who took power in 1312, left such a powerful stamp on his time that it is remarkable how little known he is today. Recently it has been claimed that he was the richest person who ever lived. Speculation over the size of his fortune (“Mansa” means ruler) is based almost entirely on his three-to-twelve-month stay in Cairo on his way to Mecca. The Arabic-language sources vary on many of the details but leave an unmistakable impression of lucre the likes of which have rarely been seen anywhere. Badr al-Din al-Halabi wrote that Musa “appeared [in Cairo] on horseback magnificently dressed in the midst of his soldiers” with more than 10,000 attendants. Another source claims that he “brought with him 14,000 slave girls for his personal service.” A third spoke of the “great pomp” of the pilgrimage, saying that Musa traveled “with an army of 60,000 men who walked before him as he rode. There were [also] 500 slaves, and in the hand of each was a golden staff each made from 500 mithqāls of gold.”

In *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*, Michael Gomez, a historian at New York University, makes the intriguing point that although Musa's extremely ostentatious use of gold is what receives most of the attention in this story, the Malian leader's huge slave entourage may have cemented the image of Sudanic Africa as an inexhaustible source of black labor in lastingly harmful ways.⁴ This part of Africa had already long furnished slave markets in the Near East, and a little more than a century after Musa's pilgrimage it would begin supplying slaves to the Portuguese and other Europeans.

Contemporaneous sources estimated that the Malian emperor made the 2,700-mile trip to Cairo with between thirteen and eighteen tons of pure gold. It was handed out in mosques and to officials of all ranks along his route and given as alms to the poor. Musa personally bestowed an estimated four hundred pounds of gold on the Mamluk ruler in Cairo, al-Nasir Muhammad. Between the money handed out and that spent extravagantly in the markets of the city, the value of gold in the region dipped sharply, and according to some accounts remained depressed for years. Musa was so profligate that he had to borrow funds to finance his return voyage.

Gomez goes well beyond the basic parameters of the Mansa Musa story to seek its deeper meaning. Mali was playing sophisticated geopolitics, he argues, bidding for recognition by the Mamluks as a peer in the Islamic world, and perhaps looking for a buffer against the kind of aggression that Sudanic Africa had periodically suffered at the hands of the Islamic Amazigh, or Berber, kingdoms of North Africa, whose Marinid Empire then stretched deep into Iberia. Gomez speculates that the grand geopolitical gambits of Abu Bakr and Mansa Musa shared similar motives: both were looking for a way for Mali to escape the threatening political interference and costly economic control of the Berber middlemen of North Africa through whose territory their gold passed on its way to Europe and elsewhere.

Something altogether different happened instead. Within a decade of Musa's pilgrimage, Mali and its king began to appear on European maps, most famously the 1375 Catalan Atlas, helping to lure Iberian fortune-seekers down the coast of Africa in search of the source of Musa's gold.

The figure of Mansa Musa looms at the center of a major new exhibition, "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time," that recently opened at the Block Museum of Art in Evanston, Illinois. Both the catalog's cover and an interior page carry a vivid reproduction of the best-known panel of the Catalan Atlas, which bears an image of Musa seated on a golden throne, wearing a heavy golden crown, much in the manner of contemporaneous European royalty, holding a golden scepter in one hand and lofting a large ball of gold in the other, and seemingly greeting a camel-riding Berber dressed in green robes and a white turban (see illustration on page 47). The catalog makes the point, as does much recent writing on

medieval Africa, that the Sahara has long been miscast as a barrier separating a notional black Africa from an equally notional white or Arab one. In reality, it argues, the desert has always been not just permeable but heavily trafficked, much like the ocean, with trade as well as religious and cultural influences traveling back and forth, and with world-shaping effects. Part of the difficulty in conveying the importance of this region's history has been its paucity of documentation, and the exhibition and its catalog make up for this spectacularly with their display of the region's legacy of artifacts, from pottery shards to sculpture and gold weights and coins.

Herman L. Bennett's *African Kings and Black Slaves* gives extended attention to an altogether different kind of precolonial African diplomacy: Portugal's early ties with the African kingdoms it encountered. Bennett launches into this theme with an incident he describes as an inaugural event in the Atlantic slave trade. In 1441 a Portuguese expedition under the command of Antão Gonçalves landed near Cabo Blanco in present-day Mauritania and, after a clash with a man following a camel, seized their first captive, whom they deemed a Moor (not a racial designation but signifying, here, a Muslim). Hours later, at nightfall, the Portuguese seized their second captive, a woman, whom they described as a "black Moress," thus creating a stark distinction between supposed races that would have immense, long-lasting effects on Europe's attitudes toward slavery and Africa in general. As Bennett notes, early in the European encounter with Africa there was a tremendous fluidity and confusion over the labels the newcomers applied to the indigenous peoples they met, with the newly explored lands of West Africa being variously fancied as Guiné, Ethiopia, and even India. Blackness, however, was essentialized from the very beginning.

Bennett, a professor of history at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, argues that before the Atlantic slave trade reached its immense scale in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Portuguese struggled with matters of church doctrine that governed who, between Moors and an expanding catalog of "pagan" Africans, was and was not fair game for conquest and enslavement. In religiously divided Iberia, Muslims and Christians had long enslaved one another, but some Catholic teaching insisted that in the new world of sub-Saharan Africa, only so-called pagans, meaning nonfollowers of Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions, lacked reason and hence could be sold into slavery. This debate was also influenced in important ways by what Portuguese explorers came into contact with on the continent: when they crossed the Senegal River on their way south down the coast of West Africa, they found that they lacked the means to prevail militarily over the confident and capable African kingdoms they encountered. The Portuguese thereafter made a pragmatic turn away from an approach that relied on surprise raids to one based instead on trade and diplomacy.

In a subsequent mission that same decade, through an interpreter, the Portuguese second-in-command urged an African he met to “tell your lord...we are subjects of a great and powerful Prince...who is at the limits of the west, and by whose command we have come here to converse on his behalf with the great and good King of this land.” Thus was born a pattern in which the Portuguese obtained slaves not from unclaimed territories inhabited by stateless societies but rather from African kings with legitimate sovereignty over their lands, as when they sold captives won in wars with their neighbors.

After a voyage he took in 1455, Alvise Cadamosto, a Venetian slave trader and chronicler in the employ of Prince Henry, wrote that the authority of a West African king named Budomel in the Senegal River area was so complete that “if God himself came to earth I do not think [his subjects] could do Him greater honor and reverence.” Of the broader interactions in the region between these early Portuguese seekers of fortune and local sovereigns, Bennett writes:

While both sides constantly struggled to impose their traditions on the commercial formalities, the African elite usually dictated the terms of trade and interaction. Portuguese subjects who violated African laws quickly risked stiff fines or found their lives in danger.

Here we are clearly a very long way from the view—commonly propagated in the ascendant West after the transatlantic slave trade had increased dramatically and European colonization and plantation agriculture had taken firm hold in the New World—that Africans were mere savages who subsisted in a near state of nature.

Bennett invests these early encounters with major significance. His book was written, he says, to “trouble the existing narrative of the West and its emergence,” an account in which the history of early-modern Africa has traditionally been framed as a direct leap from “savage to slave.” Bennett questions “the telos that has long served to absorb the African-European encounter...into the story of New World slavery, thereby overlooking the part that Africa and Africans played in the evolution of Iberian sovereignty and imperial expansion before 1492.”

Around the time of Cadamosto’s voyages, little had been settled between Castile and Portugal, Iberia’s principal Christian powers, concerning the future of their nascent imperialism or the destiny of West Africa and its relations with the rest of the world. Bennett relates how in 1454 King Juan of Castile warned his nephew, King Afonso V of Portugal, to stay out of Africa, which the Spaniard boasted was “our conquest.” If his command went unheeded, he vowed to “make war upon [Portugal] with fire and blood as upon an enemy.”

By that time, Lisbon had already been proclaiming its progress in a just war against African pagans on behalf of the Catholic Church. Bennett rightly dismisses this as “a fiction designed to stave off other Christian ‘princes’ from staking claims in the newly ‘discovered’ territories.” Although Afonso of Portugal was already known as “the African,” he was exaggerating his claims of success at war on behalf of Christendom in Africa. He was also playing for time, hoping for relief in his conflict with Castile from Pope Nicholas V, which arrived in 1455 in the form of a papal bull, *Romanus Pontifex*. It granted Portugal dominion over most of Africa and was one of the first in a series of papal charters that would divide the expanding known world between Portugal and Spain.



Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Dom Miguel de Castro, Emissary of Kongo;
painting attributed to Jaspas Beckx, circa 1643

At the core of Bennett’s book is the argument that the fierce competition between Portugal and Spain over the African Atlantic, which was significantly mediated by the Church, was crucial to the creation of the modern nation-state and of what became modern European nationalism. Early national identities in Europe were forged, to a substantial extent, on the basis of competition over trade and influence in Africa. And this, Bennett says, gets completely lost in Western histories that fast-forward from the conquest of the Canary Islands to Columbus’s arrival in the Americas. “We lose sight of the mutually constitutive nature of fifteenth-century African and European history...whereby Africa figured in the formation of Iberian colonialism and thus the emergence of early modern Portugal and Castile,” he writes.

Chronologically, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* by Toby Green, who teaches at King’s College London, is by far the widest ranging of the books considered here, beginning with the founding of Mali under a ruler named Sunjata around 1235 and reaching to the nineteenth century. It includes such an extraordinary range of field research, archival material, and study of African oral traditions that it is difficult to succinctly categorize.

One of its great strengths is that it reveals the often surprising success that Africans had throughout the first four hundred years of their encounter with Europe. Early in his book, Green makes a general observation about the effects Europeans had on African politics when they began trading in West Africa in the fifteenth century. Big, sophisticated states like Songhai, the empire that succeeded Mali, were weakened and eventually broke up, while smaller ones, including many petty kingdoms, became autonomous and were strengthened by economic exchanges with the newcomers.

Initially, European interest in Africa was largely driven by gold, but with the development of New World plantation agriculture in the late sixteenth century, demand for African slaves rose dramatically, and it was these small kingdoms, constantly warring with one another, with stateless peoples, and with larger kingdoms, that became Europe's biggest sources of chattel. That Africans themselves participated in the Atlantic slave trade is by now widely known, and Green by no means skimps on the details. What is less well known in his account is the determined and resourceful ways that a number of major African states struggled to insulate themselves from the slave trade and resist Europe's rising dominance.

The examples of such efforts range across kingdoms in present-day Ghana, Benin, and Congo that refused outright to sell slaves to Europeans (but sometimes purchased them from Europeans), and for a long time successfully fended off the newcomers' efforts to gain access and control to other coveted resources, such as metals. The story of the kingdom of Kongo is particularly instructive. Already an advanced state with elected kings at the time of the Portuguese arrival in the 1480s, Kongo quickly and fervently embraced Christianity, which had hitherto made little headway in West Africa. In 1516 a Portuguese visitor wrote of the second Christian king of Kongo, Afonso I, "His [devotion to] Christianity is such that he seems to me not to be a man but rather an Angel that God has sent to this Kingdom so as to convert it."

Kongo maintained ambassadors at the Vatican from the 1530s through the 1620s, but its relationship with Portugal broke down over the issue of slavery. As King Afonso complained in a letter to his Portuguese counterpart in 1526:

Many of our people, for the avid desire which they have for the merchandise and objects of [your] Kingdoms which your people bring here, and so as to satisfy their rampant appetites, steal many of our free and protected people. And it has happened many times that they have stolen nobles and the sons of nobles, and our own relatives, and have taken them to sell to the white men who are in our Kingdoms; and they take them hidden and others go by night, so as not to be discovered. And as soon as they are in the power of these white men they are at once branded with fire and clapped in irons.

Faced with Kongo's resistance to expanding the slave trade, in 1575 Portugal founded a colony adjacent to the kingdom, at Luanda (now in Angola), which it used as a base to wage an aggressive destabilization campaign against its old partner. Kongo resisted the Portuguese doggedly, eventually turning to Holland as an ally, because that country was not yet engaged in slaving and was an enemy of the then unified kingdoms of Spain and Portugal. The 1623 letter by Kongo's King Pedro II initiating an alliance with Holland requested "four or five warships as well as five or six hundred soldiers" and promised to pay for "the ships and the salaries of the soldiers in gold, silver, and ivory." Holland soon

entered into the proposed alliance, hoping that by cutting off the supply of slaves from this region, which alone supplied more than half of those sent to Brazil and the Spanish Indies, Brazil itself, a plantation society and at the time Portugal's leading source of wealth, would become unviable.

As a result of the alliance, Africa came to play a major part in the struggle for control over the South Atlantic during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), with Dutch warships being dispatched in 1624 and again in 1641—this time successfully helping Kongo drive off the Portuguese. Later, in 1648, blacks from Brazil were shipped across the Atlantic by Lisbon to restore its hold on Angola. Hegel may have been unaware of all of this, but here, without a doubt, was African history as world history.

What ultimately undid Kongo, the horrific demographic drain of the slave trade that followed its defeat by Portugal in 1665, was a vulnerability it shared with some of the other important late holdouts against European encroachment—powerful and sophisticated kingdoms like the Ashanti Empire and Benin—which was a loss of control over its money supply. In Kongo, a locally made cloth of high quality was the main traditional measure of value and means of exchange, alongside a type of seashell, the nzimbu, harvested along the nearby coast. The Dutch, discovering the local fixation on cloth, flooded the region with its early industrial textiles, wiping out the market for Kongo's own manufacture. After they gained control of Luanda, the Portuguese similarly flooded the region with shells, both local ones and others imported from the Indian Ocean. Similar monetary catastrophes befell the few big surviving West African kingdoms—mostly as a result of the fall in the price of gold following New World discoveries of gold and silver.

“Inequality between West and West-Central Africa and the rest of the Western hemisphere arose from inequalities in the exchange of economic value,” Green writes. “For several centuries, Western African societies exported what we might call ‘hard currencies,’ especially gold; these were currencies that, on a global level, retained their value over time.” In return, Africans received cowries, copper, cloth, and iron, all things that declined in value over time. All the while, Africa was bled of its people, as slave labor was being put to productive use for the benefit of the West.

Green concludes his sprawling and nuanced look at the steady depletion of a continent with a powerful lament about the lack of academic interest in Africa's precolonial eras:

The focus is on the present, and on the problems of the present, as it is in the overwhelming number of universities where African history is taught, from the UK and the US to Brazil. Where older African history is taught in the West, it is almost always as relates to slavery, repeating an old trope of primitivism and oppression. Yet African history is much more complex than this allows; and the root causes of many of the problems of the present lie precisely in this more distant past.

- 1 The image of the black as cannibal is one of the earliest stereotypes in the annals of the encounter between Europeans and Africans that began with the slave trade in the early fifteenth century. With no evidence, sea captains working for Portugal's Prince Henry "the Navigator" lamented that Africans who fought back against their slaving raids ate any Europeans they captured. What few in the West have ever heard is that Africans in societies along the coast of their continent regarded the whites who came to their shores in search of slaves as themselves cannibals. How else, they wondered, to explain their persistent lust for human flesh? ↵
- 2 For the importance of sub-Saharan African gold to the rise of the Arab world, see Timothy F. Garrard's authoritative "Myth and Metrology: The Early Trans-Saharan Gold Trade," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1982). ↵
- 3 The word "check" may come from the Arabic term *sakk*. ↵
- 4 The word "Sudan" means "land of the blacks" in Arabic and has been used historically to refer to a broad east–west belt of the continent just below the Sahara Desert. ↵

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