

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

Author: Steven Gish

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Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time is a companion to a groundbreaking exhibition at the Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University (2019), the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto (2019-20), and the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. (2020). Both the book and the exhibition examine the history of the Saharan region by showcasing medieval remains from Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria and highlighting Africa's central role in world history, before the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism. More than thirty institutions lent items for the exhibit, including those from Canada, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Edited by Kathleen Bickford Berzock, a specialist in African art history and associate director of the Block Museum of Art, the book is intended to appeal to both scholars and general readers.

Twenty-one authors contributed to the book, including archaeologists, art historians, curators, and historians from Africa, Europe, and North America. Much more than an exhibition catalog, the book contains a detailed series of essays on medieval Saharan Africa's connections to the wider world. The first section, "Groundwork," discusses material fragments, Arabic language sources, the gold trade, and "protecting Africa's medieval cultural heritage" (p. 35). The second, "Sites," surveys key locations in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria that have yielded evidence on medieval trans-Saharan exchange. Section three, "Matter in Motion," features case studies that reveal specific aspects of trans-Saharan trade. The last section, "Reverberations," looks at the legacy of trans-Saharan trade after the fifteenth century, when West African coastal trade began to flourish. The book is richly illustrated with color photographs of sculptures, pottery, jewelry, ceramics, rock paintings, Arabic language manuscripts, coins, textiles, gold and ivory objects, and archaeological sites and excavations. It also includes many helpful maps of early and contemporary Africa. This is a handsome book that beautifully captures the items on display at the physical exhibition.

Caravans of Gold is more than a mere coffee table book, however. Its nineteen chapters cover a

diverse range of topics and are clearly written and insightful. The essays are distinct rather than part of a single overarching narrative. One essay (chapter 5) discusses the dangers facing West Africa's archaeological sites, many of which have been looted, damaged or destroyed over the years. Another (chapter 7) shows that much of the gold mined and minted in Africa became the basis of currency in Europe and the Middle East. Chapter 12 shows the extent to which West African gold, ivory, and copper were coveted across the Mediterranean world. It also briefly discusses Mansa Musa, the fourteenth century king of Mali who made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca. The authors of chapter 14 explain how gold was mined, processed, refined, and made into coinage and correct the assumption that all gold processing occurred north of the Sahara. In an essay on Islamic literacy and Arabic manuscripts (chapter 16), another author demonstrates that West Africans did not just receive or absorb Islamic scholarship but contributed to it with their own writings and intellectual traditions. The last essay (chapter 19) discusses contemporary migration across the Sahara, which has risen steadily in recent years as West Africans seek higher wages and educational opportunities in Europe. The author draws parallels between slave traders of the past and contemporary human traffickers, both of whom exploited West Africans and facilitated their passage to North Africa. The bibliography at the end of the book is extensive and up-to-date and includes primary and secondary sources in English and other languages.

As wide-ranging as *Caravans of Gold* is, a few topics merit additional attention. There is no substantive discussion of Timbuktu, which might disappoint some educators and the wider public. Similarly, a more in-depth discussion of Mansa Musa would interest general readers and those who teach African history. Also deserving of more attention is the extent of damage done to artifacts, manuscripts, and historic structures in West Africa by Islamist groups in the twenty-first century. The book would also have benefited from an index.

Despite these small gaps, *Caravans of Gold* is a treasure. The diversity and quality of the archaeological evidence unearthed, displayed, and discussed show that medieval trans-Saharan exchange played a key role in connecting West Africa, Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, foreshadowing the globalism of today. Reflecting on the exhibition, Annelise Rice, director of Northwestern's Buffett Institute for Global Studies, wrote, "By coupling cutting edge scholarship with beautiful objects, the exhibition makes the history of Medieval Africa captivating and accessible to a broad range of people - including many who will be introduced to this history for the first time" (p. 10). The same could be said about this excellent book.

Steven Gish, Auburn University-Montgomery

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