

CARAVANS OF GOLD FRAGMENTS IN TIME

ART, CULTURE, AND EXCHANGE ACROSS MEDIEVAL SAHARAN AFRICA

A Teacher's Guide

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Introduction

This educational resource was developed in conjunction with The Block Museum of Art's exhibition *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*.

The legacy of medieval trans-Saharan exchange has largely been omitted from Western historical narratives and art histories, and certainly from the way that Africa is presented in art museums. 'Caravans of Gold' has been conceived to shine a light on Africa's pivotal role in world history through the tangible materials that remain.

– Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Associate Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Block Museum of Art, Curator of *Caravans of Gold*

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Caravans of Gold invites us to journey to a medieval world with Africa at its center.

Caravans of Gold is the first major exhibition addressing the scope of medieval Saharan exchange and the shared history of West Africa, the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe from the eighth to sixteenth centuries. Presenting more than 250 artworks spanning five centuries and a vast geographic expanse, the exhibition features unprecedented loans from partner institutions in Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria, many of which are in North America for the first time. These objects tell the story of how demand for West African gold fueled expansive networks of trade and drove the movement of people, culture, and religious beliefs.

The exhibition also draws on recent archaeological discoveries, including rare fragments from major medieval African urban centers that served an important role in the economy of trans-Saharan exchange: Sijilmasa, Gao, and Tadmekka. These “fragments in time” are seen alongside works of art that invite us to imagine them as they once were. They are the starting point for a new understanding of the medieval past and for seeing the present in a new light.

While over time the central role of the African continent in the medieval world has been diminished in historical memory, today's interdisciplinary “global turn” is bringing attention back again to this critical chapter. *Caravans of Gold* makes a unique contribution to that effort by examining the history and legacy of medieval trans-Saharan exchange through its dispersed and fragmented material remains. Weaving stories about interconnected histories, the exhibition showcases the objects and ideas that connected at the crossroads of the medieval Sahara and celebrates West Africa's historic and under-recognized global significance.

Organized by The Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, the exhibition was on view from January 26 through July 21, 2019. The exhibition was also presented at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada (Sept. 21, 2019–Feb. 23, 2020) and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. (TBD, Fall 2020–21).

WHY TEACH WITH CARAVANS OF GOLD?

From the beginning, the organizers of *Caravans of Gold* have been interested in supporting educators in using the exhibition as a resource in their teaching. We believe the following:

- ***Caravans of Gold* helps students make connections between the past and the present and expand their worldview.**
 - » Our contemporary moment is defined by a rise of global connectivity as well as by entrenched ideas of difference. Using historical objects connected to the trans-Saharan trade, some over 1,000 years old, *Caravans of Gold* helps us see ways in which West Africa has been connected to far-reaching networks of trade through time, even in the deep past. In reconsidering popular beliefs about the medieval period and about Africa, the exhibition's content provides a means for understanding the present in new ways.
- ***Caravans of Gold* helps students critically examine history.**
 - » *Caravans of Gold* shifts popular narratives of the medieval period—inviting people to expand their perceptions beyond knights and castles—by situating Africa's Sahara Desert at its center. When seen from the perspective of Europe, the medieval period is commonly framed by the decline of the western Roman Empire between the fifth and seventh century, the emergence of the Renaissance in the fourteenth century, and the Age of Discovery in the mid-fifteenth century. *Caravans of Gold* asks us to shift our focus. Seen from the perspective of Africa, the medieval period opens with the spread of Islam in the eighth century and recedes with the arrival of Europeans along the continent's Atlantic Coast at the end of the fifteenth century. This reframing helps students move beyond a Eurocentric view of the Middle Ages and, by extension, to reconsider and push against singular views of any period in world history.
- ***Caravans of Gold* can shape perceptions of Africa.**
 - » This project is designed to shatter preconceived notions about Africa. U.S. students (and, more generally, North Americans) may be aware of only a “single story” of Africa, one that paints a picture of what Africa lacks (key words in this story include *impoverished, chaotic, isolated, static, tribal*).¹ *Caravans of Gold* connects students to new, complex stories of the African past that expand and enrich our notions of people living 1000 years ago in Saharan Africa and beyond. The exhibition acknowledges how African states and peoples shaped global networks of exchange and challenges common notions of Africa as a place isolated from world history.

By addressing the history of medieval West Africa and its resonances today, in this guide we aim to encourage students to consider far-reaching and enduring questions such as the following:

- How do we construct an understanding of the past?
- How does history get written?
- What and whose stories are told in history? What stories are left out?
- How do objects speak to us across time?
- How and why is the past relevant to us today?
- How are people and places around the world connected to one another?

¹ This phrasing is drawn from Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” filmed in July 2009 at TEDGlobal, Oxford, England, video, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript. See **Lesson 1** for suggestions on how to utilize this talk as a way to enter into this unit.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE AND HOW TO USE IT

This guide is based on the exhibition *Caravans of Gold*. The exhibition was not intended to serve as a comprehensive introduction to West Africa and the medieval period. Likewise, the teacher resources presented here are not comprehensive. Instead, they have been organized around specific regions, sites, and case study objects that were part of the exhibition. We have included some references to additional resources below and encourage you to look for others that illuminate the content presented here.

This guide begins and ends with a series of activities to contextualize the *Caravans of Gold* story and to help your students understand what is at stake in learning this history. Individual lessons explore different facets of the story through key objects and case studies. We offer prompts for looking closely at objects, and we share background information that can help teachers and students learn more about medieval trans-Saharan trade. Each lesson also includes potential activities or resources for further exploration related to people, places, things, and ideas introduced in the lesson.

We encourage you to adapt what you find here to advance your own curricular goals or to meet the needs and interests of your students.

FURTHER RESOURCES

The Block has developed additional resources around the *Caravans of Gold* exhibition:

- The exhibition was accompanied by a [scholarly publication](#), co-published by The Block Museum of Art and Princeton University Press. The publication draws on emerging research from disciplines including archaeology, art history, comparative literature, history, and material science to construct a compelling look at medieval trans-Saharan exchange and its legacy. Contributors present case studies that form a rich portrayal of a distant time.
- The [Caravans of Gold progressive website](#) presents a condensed digital version of the exhibition and highlights some of the important objects featured in it. Users can explore themes or key artworks from the exhibition. The app was conceived in collaboration with undergraduates at Northwestern University in a course taught by the exhibition's curator, Kathleen Bickford Berzock, and developed through a partnership between The Block Museum of Art and Northwestern Libraries.
- The [Caravans of Gold companion website](#) offers an overview of the exhibition's themes and case studies. It includes high-resolution images of artworks and objects from the exhibition, video interviews with experts, downloadable resources such as maps from the exhibition, and more.
- We have also compiled a list of [recommended resources](#) related to the *Caravans of Gold* story.

Pre-Activities

Entry Points to Caravans of Gold

We recommend the following entry points and activities before engaging with the key objects and stories of *Caravans of Gold*. Students may begin this unit without significant knowledge of the medieval period or the African continent. These activities will help students begin to think critically about ways in which our knowledge of time periods or certain places in the world may be incomplete.

1. “THE DANGER OF A SINGLE STORY”

“Single stories” are often told about Africa, limiting our understanding of how African states and peoples have shaped and continue to shape world history. *Caravans of Gold* aims to shatter and expand those single stories by bringing in multiple distinct perspectives. This activity is inspired by Chimamanda Adichie’s TED Talk, “[The Danger of a Single Story](#),” which is available [here](#) as a video with full transcript.²

Adichie’s speech clearly and thoughtfully explains the dangers of stereotyping and the powerful ways that narratives shape our perception and understanding of people and the world. It is an effective resource for any unit that concerns stereotypes and challenging perceptions and is particularly appropriate for teaching African history. In Adichie’s terms, *Caravans of Gold* disrupts a single story of Africa by illuminating Africa’s vibrant but little-known medieval past.

ACTIVITY

Together as a class or as homework ask your students to watch Adichie’s TED Talk in full or in part. Facilitate a discussion about it. You might prompt them to consider questions such as

- What characterizes the “single story” of Africa that Adichie shares in her talk?
- Can you think of a time when you have either heard or told a “single story”?
- What single stories are told about places you are from or know well? What about places you don’t know well?

2. LOCATING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Students may have some familiarity with the medieval period from popular culture. This activity helps them reflect on their understanding of the Middle Ages and better understand material in *Caravans of Gold* in relation to other global historic events.

ACTIVITY

- Ask students what comes to mind when they hear the word “medieval.”
- Generate lists of associations by discussing together as a class or by having students brainstorm in small groups.
- Review the lists and discuss. Your students may have associations that are more rooted in a Eurocentric context. Pose questions prompting them to consider if their lists tell the whole story of the medieval era worldwide, or if there might be gaps in the associations they have.
- **Optional:** As a class, construct a timeline of this period in world history (8th–16th century). You can do this by plotting out, ordering, and describing historic events that your students might know or have studied. This exercise will help them see where the stories told in *Caravans of Gold* fit in. Northwestern University Knight Lab has a new open-source tool that students can use to construct their own timelines at <http://timeline.knightlab.com/>.
- **Optional:** Select a year, date, or event that falls within this time period that your students might know well (for instance, 1492) and expand it to consider what was happening all around the world at that time.

2 Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.”

3. AFRICA AT THE CENTER

Caravans of Gold places Saharan Africa at the center, so we recommend beginning by checking your students' understanding (or perhaps misunderstandings) of the African continent.

Many common world map projections create a mental image of Africa as much smaller than it actually is in comparison to other continents. For instance, in the Mercator Projection, Greenland looks enormous compared to Africa. In reality the African continent is fourteen times larger than Greenland. Africa is also approximately three times the area of the United States. The Mercator projection was created in 1569 but remains in common use to this day and can be found in thousands of classrooms across the United States. Because of the way it renders latitude and longitude lines, it remains an excellent map for navigators and shipping routes. The trade-off is that it distorts land masses, making those near the north and south poles seem much larger than they actually are and making land masses along the equator seem smaller.

All maps that turn the globe into a flat surface distort it in one way or another, but because the Mercator map is in such widespread and common use, it has the effect of imprinting its distortions on our brains. It makes us think of the global North (and Antarctica) as much larger (and perhaps more important) than they are—and creates mental images of Africa (and the global South) as much smaller.

The team involved in creating *Caravans of Gold* sought to create maps (included in this guide) that would represent the African continent at its true scale, ultimately using Google Maps, which also uses an equal-area projection. See **Lesson 1** for an activity that will engage your students in examining one of these maps.

ACTIVITY

- Have your students play around with the digital interactives and read the content in the CNN article "[What's the Real Size of Africa?](#)" Your students can see firsthand some of the distortions that common map projections perpetuate.
- Have a discussion: We know that Africa is not a country, yet it is often represented as being around the same size as other countries around the world. What do we make of that misrepresentation?

4. LOCATING THE SAHARA

Caravans of Gold takes Western Africa (including North Africa, the Sahara, and West Africa), and specifically the Sahara Desert, as its geographic focus. Situated at the center of Western Africa, the Saharan region lies between Europe and the Middle East, and it is often described either as a divide or a crossroads. Travel across the Sahara, while difficult, is not impossible. People continue to make the Sahara their home; today the population within the region is approximately three million.

ACTIVITY

- Locate the Sahara Desert on a map or use Google Earth to analyze this vast region.
- Have any of your students been to a desert before? What words would they use to describe this environment? What do they know, if anything, about the Sahara Desert?
- Make a list to collect their impressions or create a [K-W-L chart](#) (charting what students "Know" and "Want to Know") about the Sahara. You can return to this (completing the "What did you learn?" column) after completing other lessons in this guide.

5. DISCUSS: WHAT STORIES DO WE LEARN ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD AND AFRICA'S PLACE IN IT?

Once your students have considered the concept of the “single story” and situated the medieval period, the continent of Africa, and the Sahara Desert in their minds, put these pieces together. Consider as a class the stories that have been told about Africa in world history.

ACTIVITY

- Share and discuss the following quotes with your students:
 - » In the 1830s, the German philosopher Georg Hegel wrote, “At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . 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.”³
 - » In 1963, Oxford historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper stated, “Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness. . . . And darkness is not a subject for history.”⁴
 - » In 2007 President Nicolas Sarkozy said in a speech in Dakar, Senegal: “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. . . . They have never really launched themselves into history.”⁵
- Questions to provoke conversation could include the following:
 - » Note the dates of these statements. What historical moments do they emerge from?
 - » How many years have passed between these quotes? Why do statements like this persist?
 - » What is the implicit bias that underpins these statements separated by 300 years?
 - » What impact does it have on people when their histories are belittled or negated?

³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. by J. Sibree (New York: American Home Library Company, 1902), 157.

⁴ Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Rise of Christian Europe,” *The Listener*, November 28, 1963, 871.

⁵ We quote here the most common English interpretation of Sarkozy’s speech, as found in “Africans Still Seething over Sarkozy Speech,” *Reuters*, September 5, 2007, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-africa-sarkozy/africans-still-seething-over-sarkozy-speech-idUKL0513034620070905>. A literal transcription of the passage reads: “The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. . . . This man (the traditional African) never launched himself towards the future.” This translation can be found at “The Unofficial English Translation of Sarkozy’s Speech,” *Africa Resource*, October 13, 2007, <https://www.africaresource.com/essays-a-reviews/essays-a-discussions/437-the-unofficial-english-translation-of-sarkozys-speech>; for a full transcription of the speech in French see “Le discours de Dakar de Nicolas Sarkozy,” *Le Monde*, November 9, 2007, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2007/11/09/le-discours-de-dakar_976786_3212.html.

Lesson 1

Mapping the Medieval World with Africa at Its Center

Caravans of Gold demonstrates how the Sahara was for centuries a site of movement of things, people, and ideas that connected Western Africa to a much wider world across multiple regions. In this lesson set the scene for this story for your students by examining two maps that demonstrate the important place that the Sahara occupied in the medieval period.



Abraham Cresques (?). Leafs 3 through 6 from the *Atlas of Maritime Charts (The Catalan Atlas)*, 1375. Illuminated parchment mounted on six wooden panels, each 64.5 x 25 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Ms. Espagnol 30

ACTIVITY 1: THE CATALAN ATLAS

- Project an image of the *Catalan Atlas* and its related detail for your class. If you would like to explore a high-resolution version of the map, it can be found [here](#) in its entirety.
- Ask your students to “read” this map using the following questions:
 - » What jumps out at you the most when you first look at this map? Why do you think that is?
 - » What do you recognize, if anything, in this map?
 - » List everything you can see. What geographical elements do you see? What place or places does the map show?
 - » What do you think this map is trying to convey?
 - » What functions might the map have?
 - » What questions does this map raise for you?
 - » What do you wonder about. . . (who? what? when? where? why? how?)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The *Catalan Atlas* was created in 1375 on the Mediterranean island of Majorca. It is frequently attributed to the Jewish cartographer Abraham Cresques (1325–1387) and some believe it was commissioned by Pedro IV of Aragon as a gift for his cousin Charles V, the king of France. The Mediterranean Sea is featured prominently at the center of this medieval depiction of the world. People and places from across the Middle East, Asia, and Africa are also depicted through illustrations and written notations.

The detail from the atlas included here has representations of two compelling figures. The first is the turban-wearing man riding a camel near a group of tents. Near this figure, a notation explains that this land is “inhabited by people who go heavily veiled, so nothing can be seen of them but their eyes. They live in tents and ride on camels.”⁶

The figure on camelback appears to be approaching another figure who is identified as the ruler Mansa Musa. He is portrayed wearing a golden crown and grasping a large gold orb and gold-topped scepter. Alongside this depiction there is a caption that proclaims: “This Moorish ruler is named Musse Melly [Mansa Musa], lord of the negroes of Guinea. This king is the richest and most distinguished ruler of this whole region on account of the great quantity of gold that is found in his lands.”⁷

Mansa (ruler, emperor, king) Musa ruled the Empire of Mali from 1307 (or 1312) to 1332 (or 1337). His territory was rich in natural resources. Multiple sources of gold, including the Bambuk and Bure gold fields, were located within the kingdom. The Niger River, which was abundant with fish, produced fertile soil for growing food, and was a thoroughfare for long-distance travel and exchange, ran through its heartland. At its northernmost point, the river reached the southern fringe of the Sahara Desert. Control of this vast territory made Musa immensely wealthy and powerful, and he made full use of his empire’s strategic location at the crossroads of these major zones of trade. Some have suggested that by contemporary measures, Musa may have been the richest person in the history of the world.⁸

Notice how large Mansa Musa appears on the *Catalan Atlas*. The map was created about fifty years after his death. This map, then, offers evidence of his renown and also speaks to the importance of his empire to the broader medieval world.

6 Georges Grosjean, *Mapamundi: The Catalan Atlas of the Year 1375* (Dietikon and Zurich: Urs Graf, 1978), 63.

7 Georges Grosjean, *Mapamundi*, 63.

8 Naima Mohamud, “Is Mansa Musa the Richest Man Who Ever Lived?,” BBC News, March 10, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47379458>; Jessica Smith, “Mansa Musa, One of the Wealthiest People Who Ever Lived,” TEDEd, animation, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/mansa-musa-one-of-the-wealthiest-people-who-ever-lived-jessica-smith>.



A map of global trade networks made for the exhibition *Caravans of Gold*, 2018.

ACTIVITY 2: MAP OF SAHARAN AND GLOBAL TRADE NETWORKS

- Ask your students to analyze this map, beginning with general impressions and observations and then zooming in on Western Africa and its connections to the rest of the map.
 - » What jumps out at you the most when you first look at this map? Why do you think that is?
 - » What do you see? What geographical elements do you see? What places are shown?
 - » What do you recognize, if anything, in this map?
 - » What do you think this map is trying to convey?
 - » What questions does this map raise for you?
 - » What do you notice about how the African continent is represented on this map?
 - » Trace the lines on this map. Where do these lines lead? How far do they reach?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Notice how some of the lines on this map crisscross the Sahara Desert. These lines represented major trade routes across the Desert. The routes connected cities and towns, many of which functioned as trade centers. Moving southward they connected with the Niger River, a major byway to Africa's forest region. Moving northward they connected to the vast trade networks of the Mediterranean Sea and the land routes of Europe and the Arabian Peninsula. Routes headed east met the Levantine routes and ultimately the Silk Roads of Central and East Asia. This map was developed to highlight the trans-Saharan routes and their linkages. The Trade routes that crossed other parts of the African continent are not rendered here.

Remember the figure of the man on camelback from the *Catalan Atlas*? During the medieval period, between the eighth and the sixteenth century, there would have been camel caravans made up of hundreds or even thousands of camels traveling across the Sahara following these routes. These caravans were manned by a leader, guides, and camel handlers and accompanied by merchants and other travelers transporting goods, people, and their supplies. They were bound for cities and towns that were important trade centers, which appear as dots on the map.

Imagine the journeys these caravans took across the Sahara.

- The journey across the Sahara Desert would have been arduous and at times treacherous. Why do you think that might have been the case?
- While travel across the desert was difficult, it was not an impossible journey to make. What do you think travelers might have needed to survive the trip?
- Do the math: A camel caravan's pace is about three miles per hour, and caravans could travel more than 2,500 miles on a trans-Saharan trek. How long would this journey take?
- Notice how routes on the map connected places in the Sahara to other places within and beyond western Africa. Trace them: where did they go and how far did they reach?

Ultimately this map, like the *Catalan Atlas*, demonstrates the prominent place of Western Africa and its connection to the rest of the medieval world through trade.

WRAP-UP: CONNECT THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

It is important to note that this movement and trade across the Sahara did not end after the sixteenth century. The main routes across the Sahara on the map were already established by the 5th century CE, and most continue to be used today. Likewise, while not all of the medieval trading centers survived, some of the towns and cities that appear on the map still thrive today.



A map made for the exhibition *Caravans of Gold*, 2018, showing an estimate of the route of Mansa Musa's hajj.

EXPLORE FURTHER: MANSA MUSA'S JOURNEY

Merchants crossing the desert by camel caravan were not the only travelers to traverse the Sahara. In 1324 Mansa Musa departed on the hajj, the religious pilgrimage to the Muslim Holy City of Mecca. This is a pilgrimage that all Muslims are expected to make in their lifetime if they are able. For Mansa Musa, in addition to being one of the Muslim pillars of faith, the journey also served as an opportunity to forge alliances beyond his kingdom and to advertise his wealth and power through lavish displays. It was a highly publicized journey. Accounts of the period describe his voyage, which reportedly included 8,000 courtiers, 12,000 slaves, and 100 camels, each carrying up to 300 pounds of pure gold.

This map traces the route Mansa Musa might have taken, based on our knowledge of the cities he visited. Musa traveled over 4,000 miles on this pilgrimage and made a lengthy stop in Cairo, Egypt, on the journey to Mecca. A scholar named Al 'Umari wrote a description of his visit to Cairo. In it, he describes how Musa was showered with gifts by sultan al-Nasir al-Din Muhammad during his stay:

The sultan sent to him several complete suits of honor for himself, his courtiers, and all those who had come with him, and saddles and bridled horses for himself and his chief courtiers. His robe of honor consisted of an Alexandrian open-fronted cloak embellished with . . . cloth containing much gold thread and miniver fur, bordered with beaver fur and embroidered with metallic thread, along with golden fastenings, a silken skull-cap with caliphal emblems, a gold inlaid belt, a damascened sword, and a kerchief embroidered with pure gold.⁹

⁹ Nehemia Levtzion, trans. and ed., and J. F. P. Hopkins, ed., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981; repr. Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2000), 270.



Cap with striped inscribed silk, Egypt or Syria, Mamluk period, probably sultanate of al-Nasir al-Din Muhammad (reigned 1293–1341, with two interruptions), 14th century. Lampas fabric, silk and gold, 14 x 15.5 x 10.5 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund, 1985.5. Photograph courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art

We can imagine what these gifts may have been like by looking at similar surviving examples, such as this elaborate fourteenth-century cap, which evokes Al ‘Umari’s above description of a “silken skull-cap with caliphal emblems.” The cap given to Musa undoubtedly resembled this luxurious example, which is inscribed “Glory to our lord sultan al-Malik al-Nasir.”

In addition to receiving a considerable number of gifts, Mansa Musa also gave many valuable gifts to his hosts. Al ‘Umari interviewed residents of Cairo who were present at the time of Musa’s visit. He wrote:

This man flooded Cairo with his benefactions. He left no court emir nor holder of a royal office without the gift of a load of gold. . . . They spent gold until they depressed its value in Egypt and caused its price to fall.¹⁰

It is impossible to know if the details of these accounts are accurate or exaggerated; however, they make clear that he was received with great honor and that he was generous in sharing his prodigious wealth.

Though his journey to Mecca was an opportunity to forge alliances and demonstrate his wealth and power, it was fundamentally a religious pilgrimage. Accounts suggest that Mansa Musa was deeply committed to his faith as a Muslim. It is said that as Musa returned home from his pilgrimage he built mosques in major cities within his empire. Mansa Musa was also keenly interested in learning and the pursuit of knowledge; from his pilgrimage to Mecca he brought books addressing the theory or philosophy of law back with him to western Africa.¹¹

Mansa Musa’s story has been recounted many times in many places over time and so it comes to us filtered through many different voices and perspectives. Locating the “true” biography of Mansa Musa is difficult. What we know about him is actually quite slim. Still, his story has fueled imagination over the centuries and his influence has long outlasted his eventful life.

¹⁰ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 270–71.

¹¹ Mauro Nobili, “Islamic Literacy and Arabic Manuscripts in West Africa,” in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa*, ed. Kathleen Bickford Berzock (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 243. Nobili refers to the account of Cairo-based historian al-Maqrizi (d. 1442). See Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 351.

- **You may want to have a discussion with your class:** Have you heard of Mansa Musa before? Do you think your friends or family members know about him? If Mansa Musa is potentially the richest person to have ever lived, why is it that his story is not more widely known?
- More resources on Mansa Musa and Sudanic Empires:
 - » You can read more of Al-Umari’s account of Mansa Musa’s visit to Cairo on the website of the African Studies Center at Boston University: http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/k_o_mali/.
 - » Stanford History Education Group’s “Reading Like a Historian” lesson on Mansa Musa also includes suggested activities to gauge the trustworthiness of historic and contemporary sources about this important historical figure: <https://sheg.stanford.edu/history-lessons/mansa-musa>.
 - » Control of West African gold sources provided rulers like Mansa Musa with the wealth that allowed them to exercise and expand their power. In fact, control of production and trade on the southern edge of the Sahara was a crucial factor in the rise and fall of three medieval Sudanic empires: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. This resource from “Exploring Africa,” an educational project from the African Studies Center at Michigan State University, includes a map, short texts about each empire, and graphic organizers to prompt students to apply what they learned about them: <http://exploringafrica.matrix.msu.edu/activity-3-history-of-africa-during-the-time-of-the-great-west-african-kingdoms-expand/>.

Lesson 2

Driving Desires of Medieval Trans-Saharan Trade

From the eighth to sixteenth centuries, the Sahara Desert was a thriving crossroads of exchange for West Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Trans-Saharan trade contributed to the power and prosperity of empires such as the fourteenth-century Mali Empire in West Africa. In this lesson, we examine the key drivers of this trade through medieval objects, the things that people desired enough to make the long and arduous journey across the Sahara. North of the Sahara the primary driver of trade was the desire for gold, while south of the desert the primary desire was for salt, a mineral that is essential to human life.

ACTIVITY 1: INTRODUCTION TO TRADE, THEN AND NOW

- Ask your students the following questions to begin thinking about the concepts of trade and exchange:
 - » What is trade? Have you ever traded anything before?
 - » What did you give and what did you get in return?
 - » What motivated you to want to make the trade? What about the person who traded with you? Did you each get something you needed, something you wanted, or both?
- **Have a discussion:** In the medieval period, caravans comprising hundreds or even thousands of camels crisscrossed the Sahara along established trade routes. The journey across the desert, while not impossible, would have been difficult, long, and sometimes dangerous. To overcome the risks that travel across the Sahara posed—including thirst, hunger, even death—merchants and traders would have needed a strong motivating force. Despite these obstacles, why do you think people risked so much to journey across the Sahara?

ACTIVITY 2: GOLD OBJECTS FROM THE GLOBAL MEDIEVAL WORLD

- Project or print out images of these of medieval objects that prominently feature, or are made of, gold. Ask your students—in pairs or small groups—to take a close look at these objects. Have them answer the following questions using their observations of the objects themselves and the basic information in the captions.
 - » When were these objects made? What year? What time period?
 - » Where were they made?
 - » Try to imagine how someone might have made this object. What steps would they have taken? What materials did they use?
 - » One thing that these objects all have in common is that they all use gold. What are the different ways that gold is being used in these objects? Make a list of where gold shows up in these artworks.
 - » Why do you think the people who made these objects chose to use gold? Make a list of as many reasons as you can think of.



▲ Florin, with the emblem of Florence (obverse) and John the Baptist (reverse), Florence, 1252/1303. Gold, diameter 1.23 cm. American Numismatic Society, New York, 1954.237.214. Photograph courtesy of the American Numismatic Society



◀ *Coronation of the Virgin*, Italy, 15th century. Tempera and gold on panel, 76.2 x 55.9 cm. Loyola University Museum of Art, Chicago, IL, the Martin D'Arcy, S.J., Collection, gift of Eileen O'Shaughnessy, 1985, 1985:03. Photograph by Clare Britt



◀ Leaf from the “Blue Qur’an,” Chapter 2, Al-Baqara (The Cow): verses 148–150, Iraq, Iran, or Tunisia, 9th/10th century. Gold and silver on indigo-colored parchment, 28.5 x 35.3 cm. Photograph © The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, AKM248

▼ Biconical bead, Egypt or Syria, 10th/11th century. Gold, with filigree, granulation, and “rope” wire, length 7.2 cm. Photograph © The Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, AKM610



BACKGROUND INFORMATION - MORE ABOUT THE OBJECTS

GOLD FLORIN

In 1252 the city-state of Florence in Italy adopted the gold standard and began minting its own currency. This adoption was supported by an influx of gold from West Africa via trans-Saharan trade routes. Florins were stamped with a fleur-de-lis on one side and an image of John the Baptist, the patron saint of the city of Florence, on the other. A mint mark appears above John the Baptist's right hand, indicating where the coin was produced. Florins could also be hammered out to form valuable gold leaf, which was used to embellish objects including religious paintings.

CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN ALTARPIECE

Medieval Christian artworks were often embellished with gold leaf. In this panel painting from Italy, Christ places a crown on the head of his mother Mary, symbolizing her role as Queen of Heaven. Angels and other holy figures fill the heavenly space that is conveyed by the golden background. Much of the gold used in Italy came from West Africa through trans-Saharan trade routes. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Italian city-states such as Florence and Venice began minting gold coins largely made from West African gold. These coins were beaten into thin sheets of foil, which were then used as gold leaf. From one coin, craftsmen could make more than one hundred leaves.¹²

LEAF FROM THE BLUE QUR'AN

The page of this sumptuous Qur'an features gold and silver script on indigo-colored parchment. The Blue Qur'an was housed in the library of the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia from at least 1294. Today more than one hundred of its 600 pages are dispersed in collections around the world and more than sixty are still in Tunisia. Although scholars disagree on the precise origins of this sumptuous book, the use of gold and silver script on parchment colored a deep blue nevertheless signals competition with the expensive purple-dyed manuscripts (from the murex sea snail) also circulating in courts around the Mediterranean basin.¹³

During the medieval period, a shared manuscript culture among Muslims, Christians, and Jews extended across North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. Common elements in this manuscript tradition included elegant calligraphy, colorful embellishments including gold, and decorative leather bindings. Gold and leather, both prominently used in bookmaking, were imported from West Africa. Book culture likewise spread to West Africa as Islam spread across the Sahara Desert.

BICONICAL BEAD

The wealthy and powerful Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171), which ruled across North Africa, Egypt, and Syria, was active in Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and trans-Saharan trade networks. Its rulers vied with the Umayyads of Spain for access to West African gold and for control of major trading cities like Sijilmasa. This large and elaborate Fatimid bead is composed of two filigree cones joined along a central seam, a shape that originates from antiquity. Filigree is a complex technique that is based on the soldering of fine-gauge wires to a base sheet, where goldsmiths twist thin sheets of metal and create a visually compelling decoration.

12 Sarah M. Guérin, "Gold, Ivory, and Copper," in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, 184.

13 Sarah M. Guérin, "Gold, Ivory, and Copper," 181; Guérin suggests that 67 pages reside in Tunisia, though that number is unconfirmed.

MORE ABOUT GOLD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In the medieval period, gold was in high demand in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Across these regions gold was minted into coins to be used for currency. In addition to its exchange value, a single gold coin could also be hammered out to make one hundred sheets of gold leaf, very thin sheets of gold that could be used to embellish many different kinds of luxury objects like the ones in this lesson. Gold also held powerful symbolic value. The special material qualities of gold—its rarity, its sparkle and reflectiveness, its malleability, and its resistance to tarnish, as well as the difficulty of extracting it from the earth—all contributed to its value.

People may not always stop to wonder where the gold used to create medieval luxury objects came from, but it is likely that each of the objects in this lesson was made from gold that came from West Africa. Look again at **Lesson 1 Activity 2: Map of Saharan and Global Trade Networks**. Locate the Bambuk gold fields, between the Senegal and Falame Rivers, and the Bure gold fields, on the upper Niger River. Gold from these places was primarily extracted from alluvial deposits, the silt, sand, and gravel that comes from a riverbed.

In the tenth century, Persian author and traveler al-Istakhri wrote of the Bilad al- Sudan, literally the “land of the Blacks,” which lay south of the great Sahara desert: “It is said that no other mine is known to have more abundant or purer gold, but the road there is difficult and the necessary preparations are laborious.”¹⁴

As this passage indicates, West African gold was perceived by outsiders to be plentiful and was widely admired for its purity. For merchants traveling southward across the Sahara Desert, the lure of gold made the difficult journey worthwhile. From the perspective of West Africans, surpluses of gold could be exchanged for high quality Saharan rock salt, which camel caravans acquired during the desert crossing. In the next activity, your students can learn more about why salt was so highly valued south of the desert.

14 Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 41.

ACTIVITY 3: GOLD FOR SALT

- **Have a discussion:** What was exchanged for gold in trans-Saharan trade? The following passages from writers in the medieval era point to the significance of salt in trans-Saharan exchange:
 - » Writing in the eleventh century, Abu Hamid al-Gharnati described North African merchants who traveled across the Sahara Desert to trade: “They travel over sands like seas, led by guides who direct themselves over the wastes according to the stars. . . . [T]hey sell the salt at one weight for one weight of gold, or sometimes they sell it at one weight for two weights or more.”¹⁵
 - » Another traveler, Ibn Battuta, wrote in 1355 that “The [inhabitants of the Western Sudan] use salt for currency as gold and silver are used. They cut it into pieces and use it for their transactions.”¹⁶
 - » This description of a salt mine in the Sahara Desert by Al-Bakri also shows the extent of the demand and production of salt: “The salt is uncovered by removing a layer of earth as other minerals and precious stones are dug up. The salt is found two fathoms or less below the surface and is cut [in blocks] as stone is cut. The mine is called Tantantal. Above the mine stands a castle built from rock-salt. The houses, battlements, and rooms are all of this salt. From this mine salt is transported to Sijilmasa, Ghana, and other countries of the land of the Sudan. Work there continues uninterrupted and merchants arrive in a constant stream for it has an enormous production.”¹⁷

These sources tell us that rock salt, mined in the heart of the Sahara, was among the most important goods exchanged for gold. From a contemporary perspective, it might be surprising that salt sometimes fetched a higher price than gold. Salt, however, is essential for the health of humans and of livestock, and its scarceness in Africa’s landlocked Western Sudan region made it highly valuable. This is not the only historical context in which such a high value was placed on salt: the root of the term “salary” refers to the Roman practice of paying their soldiers with rock salt.¹⁸

WRAP-UP: CONNECT THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Gold and salt were at the heart of medieval trans-Saharan exchange; together they supported a global economy that defined the Middle Ages.

- **Have a discussion:** Connect the driving motivations for this medieval trade to the present.
 - » What carries more value: Something you have in abundance, or something that’s in scarcer supply? Something you want or something you need? Why do you think that is?
 - » Can you think of present-day examples of commodities that fall along this value scale? How and why might the value of these things change over time?
- Recall conversations you may have had with your students about the dynamics of trade they may have experienced in their own lives. Had they ever given up something they had for something they wanted?
 - » A similar dynamic is at play here. Societies on both sides of this exchange were trading something they had in order to get something they wanted. This is important to emphasize. Medieval writers chronicling this trade, and even later historians, have sometimes implied that West Africans were duped into giving away their riches for things of less value. Ask your students to discuss this “single story” in relationship to the exchange of gold for salt. Is it true or untrue?

¹⁵ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 132.

¹⁶ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 282.

¹⁷ Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 76.

¹⁸ Sarah M. Guérin, “Gold, Ivory, and Copper,” 184; Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 63.

EXPLORE FURTHER: BEYOND GOLD AND SALT

Other materials and goods were also traded in this trans-Saharan exchange. At a place called Tadmekka, a key medieval trans-Saharan trading city located in present-day Mali, archaeologists have found many different fragments of objects that help paint a fuller picture of medieval Saharan trade. Archaeologist Sam Nixon writes,

During excavations a range of imported materials were immediately apparent, including fragments of broken or discarded glass beads, glass vessels, and glazed ceramics. . . . Goods that traveled across the Sahara from much further afield include cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean. . . . Products traded from the south include a significant amount of ceramics that traveled over 300 kilometers from the Niger River region, potentially containing products like shea butter or honey. There is also a glass bead produced in Nigeria, one of the beautiful dichroic types that change color according to how they are held up to the light.¹⁹

You can learn more about the finds at Tadmekka and how archaeology has been key to understanding trans-Saharan trade in **Lesson 3**. In **Lesson 4** we examine two artworks that tell us how other important materials were exchanged across vast distances through trans-Saharan trade.

Diverse peoples, each with their own languages, perspectives, systems of supply and demand, resources, and expertise, supported these far-reaching networks of exchange. As things and people circulated through this trading system, so too did ideas.²⁰ For instance, the Arabic language and the Islamic faith traveled together across the Sahara Desert and then spread gradually across Africa's Western Sudan, often on the heels of trade.

In addition to merchants, others including diplomats, scholars, pilgrims, enslaved people also traveled across Saharan routes. Passages from medieval accounts specifically talk about slavery as an important facet of trans-Saharan trade, such as this quote from twelfth-century geographer Mohammed ibn Abu Bakr al-Zuhri:

From this land they import sugar to Tunisia and the Maghrib and Andalusia and Byzantium and Western Europe. They also import indigo, alum, and brass. From this region too come the imports of the desert such as male and female slaves and abqar, which in their language means gold. [From this region] caravans enter the land of Janawa, Ghana, Ethiopia, Gao, Zafun, and Amima. They also enter from Tafilalat and Sijilmasa, and to these two places come their booty and everything that is imported in the way of male and female slaves and gold and ivory and ebony and elephant tusks and reeds and oryx-hide shields and other things.²¹

An examination of the movement of ideas and people, whether by choice or by force, across the Sahara in the medieval period is beyond the scope of this Teacher's Guide, but you can learn more about these human histories in the *Caravans of Gold* companion publication.²²

19 Sam Nixon, "Essouk-Tadmekka: A Southern Saharan Center of the Early Islamic Camel Caravan Trade," in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, 126.

20 Kathleen Berzock, "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: An Introduction," in *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time*, 29.

21 Levtzion and Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 95.

22 Kathleen Bickford Berzock, "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: An Introduction," 27–28 and footnotes 13–19. On the difficulties of learning more about Islamic forms of slavery in Africa through archaeological evidence, see J. Alexander, "Islam, Archaeology, and Slavery in Africa" *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1: The Archaeology of Slavery (2001): 44–60. On the differences between trans-Saharan slavery and Atlantic slavery, see David Richardson, "Review: Across the Desert and Sea: Trans-Saharan and Atlantic Slavery, 1500–1900," *Historical Review* 38, no. 1 (1995): 195–204.

Lesson 3

Fragments in Time: How Archaeology Helps Us Imagine the Past

Archaeological evidence is a critical source of information that helps us to imagine the distant past. This lesson begins by considering what types of historical sources are used to understand medieval trans-Saharan exchange and then focuses on a group of fragments found at the important trading city of Tadmekka (sometimes also called Essouk-Tadmekka), located in present-day Mali. In learning more about Tadmekka and what archaeologists have found there, we can explore how different sources of information help us understand the past, and how history is written.

ACTIVITY 1: UNDERSTANDING MEDIEVAL TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE

- Have a discussion with your students about how they learn about history. What sources do they use?
- Review the kinds of sources they have used so far in their study of *Caravans of Gold* (such as maps, excerpts from passages of the time, and art objects that date from the medieval era).
- Provide some context for understanding the historical sources used to understand trans-Saharan trade from the eighth to sixteenth century. Written, firsthand accounts have become a favored form of historical evidence; however, there are only a few firsthand accounts of the Sahara and West Africa from before the sixteenth century. This has meant that historians must rely on other sources of information, including second- and thirdhand accounts, oral accounts, and material evidence, to understand this history.

Lesson 1 and **Lesson 2** included **second- and thirdhand accounts from travelers, merchants, geographers, and historians** based in North Africa or Spain who were writing in Arabic.²³ Though the accounts were often written in great detail and with an authoritative voice, many of these writers relied on information from other sources rather than firsthand knowledge from travel into the Sahara or West Africa. **Oral narratives from West Africa** are another important though more generalized source, most notably the celebrated epic of Sunjata, which recounts the founding of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century.²⁴ Whether written or oral, textual accounts of the period are complex and incomplete. They were filtered through local perspectives and prejudices, and they come to us equally filtered through time. Nonetheless, when viewed in conjunction with other sources, they can provide valuable information and reveal facets of history that are not in the archaeological record.

Objects, especially **archaeological fragments**, play a crucial role in this equation. The exhibition *Caravans of Gold* includes fragments that were excavated from key archaeological sites that were once thriving cities and towns involved in Saharan commerce. These fragments function as primary sources because they were present in the medieval period and have survived into the present. We can see them as time travelers and as witnesses to history. They can connect us to a period that is today almost completely veiled by the passage of time.

ACTIVITY 2: TADMEKKA: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CASE STUDY

- First, locate Tadmekka on **Lesson 1 Activity 2: Map of Saharan and Global Trade Networks**.
- Use Google Maps to approximate the site of Tadmekka in present-day Mali, near the city of Essouk. In fact Tadmekka is sometimes also called Essouk-Tadmekka (*essouk* means market).
- Provide some context: Today, if you were to travel to the site of Tadmekka, you would see only the remaining ruins of this once famed city. However, for about 500 years, from the tenth to the fourteenth century, Tadmekka was a major city with a diverse population of people engaged in commerce, craft production, religious study, and farming. Tadmekka was an important center of medieval trans-Saharan trade, “located at the desert’s southern fringe, where camel caravans arrived from and departed for the journey across the Sahara.”²⁵

The city had a far-reaching reputation. Writing from Andalusia, the eleventh-century geographer and historian al-Bakri proclaimed, “of all the towns in the world, [Tadmekka] is the one which resembles Mecca the most. . . . Its name means ‘the Mecca-like.’”²⁶

Excavation of its ruins undertaken in the early 2000s has illuminated the town’s history and its role in the early trans-Saharan world. Next we will look at two case studies of fragments found at Tadmekka.

²³ Kathleen Bickford Berzock, “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: An Introduction,” 27.

²⁴ Kathleen Bickford Berzock, “Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: An Introduction,” 27. For an expanded consideration of written and oral sources for medieval West Africa, see Michael Gomez, *African Dominion: A New History of Empires in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

²⁵ Sam Nixon, “Essouk-Tadmekka: A Southern Saharan Center of the Early Islamic Camel Trade,” 123.

²⁶ Sam Nixon, “Essouk-Tadmekka: A Southern Saharan Center of the Early Islamic Camel Trade,” 123.

ACTIVITY 3: WHAT DID ARCHAEOLOGISTS FIND AT TADMEKKA?

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CASE STUDY #1: GOLD MOLDS

- Project or pass out this image of fragments without revealing their original function. Ask your students—in pairs or small groups—to take a close look at these objects, which are fragments broken off of several larger objects, and describe them in detail.
- Ask students to pretend they are describing these objects to someone on the phone who can't see them. What details can they notice about their form, color, texture, etc.? What size are they? What material are they made from? What is missing?
- These are all that remain of several larger objects. Ask students to speculate, based on what they see here, on what those objects might have been.



These coin mold fragments excavated at the site of Tadmekka, Mali. 10th/ 11th century, Terracotta, Institut des sciences humaines, Bamako, Mali. Photograph by Clare Britt

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2005 archaeologists uncovered these fragments at Tadmekka. They are made of fired terracotta clay and have small, round, cup-like indentations. When archaeologists first found these objects, they didn't know what they were, but text and material evidence together helped them solve this puzzle.

In his writings, the geographer and historian al-Bakri described how the people of Tadmekka had a currency, the dinar, that was called “bald” because they are of pure gold without any stamp.”²⁷ Until recently al-Bakri's allusion to the making of unstamped or “blank” gold coins at Tadmekka was largely dismissed. While abundant gold mines existed in West Africa south of the Sahara, it has been widely believed that the *processing* of gold—taking the raw gold, purifying it, and forming it into ingots or coins or standardized weights that could be used for exchange or to make other things—happened only north of the Sahara.

Careful analysis led scientists to conclude how these objects were used. Looking at one of the fired clay fragments, archaeologists found small droplets of gold adhered to the surface. This finding and comparison with similar objects from elsewhere led scientists to conclude that these were molds used to make the very same “bald dinars” that al-Bakri described. Sam Nixon, the archaeologist who recovered the mold fragments, worked together with material scientists from Northwestern University to test out a process for working with gold using the same material resources that would have been available at Tadmekka. In the medieval period, gold workers at Tadmekka would have taken gold dust, which was usually panned from a riverbed, and melted it along with crushed glass. Being of different weights the gold and glass would separate, and impurities (usually small pebbles) that had been mixed in with the gold would remain in the glass. This purified gold could then be cast into coins using these molds. It is fascinating to imagine this process being developed and refined in the desert in the medieval period!

The creation and use of a currency are important aspects of the development of complex social structures. These humble fragments are proof of the earliest fabrication of currency in West Africa.

²⁷ Nehemia Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, 85.



Fragment of Qingbai porcelain (1.48 x 1.74 cm) found at Essouk-Tadmekka, Mali. China, Northern Song dynasty, 10th/12th century. Institut des sciences humaines, Bamako, Mali. Photograph by Clare Britt



Fragment of silk textile excavated at Essouk-Tadmekka (3.75 x 2.25 cm). Institut des sciences humaines, Bamako, Mali. Photograph by Clare Britt

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CASE STUDY #2: SILK AND PORCELAIN FRAGMENTS

- Project or pass out the image above. Ask your students—in pairs or small groups—to take a close look at these fragments and describe them in detail.
- Ask students to pretend they are describing these fragments to someone on the phone who can't see them. What details do they notice about their form, color, texture, etc.? Any guesses about their size? What kinds of objects might these fragments have come from?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

These small fragments date from the tenth to the fourteenth century. The first fragment is a piece of fired and glazed ceramic ware about the size of one of your fingernails ($\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch high). Its shape suggests that it once formed part of the rim of a bowl.

The second fragment is a small piece of fabric (about $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch wide by 1 inch high). It is mostly woven from cream-colored silk, but the red, looped decoration is embroidered in another fiber, likely cotton or wool.

These fragments were excavated by archaeologists at the site of Tadmekka, Mali, but they originally come from Central Asia. The small piece of glazed ceramic is a kind of porcelain that is known as Qingbai ware. Produced in southeastern China, Qingbai pottery was widely exported between the tenth and twelfth centuries; pieces similar to this have been found at medieval sites in Central Asia, Egypt, and Syria, and at multiple sites south of the Sahara. The shape of this fragment suggests that it once formed part of the rim of a bowl like the one pictured to the right.



Foliolate bowl with stylized peony spray, China, Northern Song dynasty, 12th century. Porcelain with underglaze carved decoration, height 7.1 cm, diameter 20.1 cm. Art Institute of Chicago, bequest of Russell Tyson, 1964.847. Photograph courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY

In order to learn more about the small silk fragment, experts looked carefully at the way that it was woven. The cream-colored material has a distinctive style of weaving that proves it was also made by Chinese artisans. Do you notice the red looped stitches on the piece of silk? That chain-stitch embroidery was likely added later in Tadmekka as further embellishment to a luxury garment.

These small and broken fragments tell us something big: that a place like Tadmekka, a town in the Sahara Desert in West Africa, was linked through trade to places as far away as China.

WRAP-UP

- Watch this [video](#) of curator Kathleen Bickford Berzock to learn more about why these fragments are so special.
- Imagine the journey: These fragments journeyed from East Asia all the way to a city in the Sahara Desert, as far back as 1,000 years ago. Recreate the journey that these objects must have taken.
 - » Find China on **Lesson 1 Activity 2: Map of Saharan and Global Trade Networks**. Trace the routes that people carrying these objects would have followed from China to Tadmekka.
 - » How many miles is it from southeastern China to Mali? How long do you think the journey would have taken? It is likely these objects would have been carried on camelback in the last leg of the journey across the Sahara. A camel can walk about three miles per hour, and caravans could travel more than 2,500 miles on a trans-Saharan trek. Do the math.
- Archaeologists use skills from science and history to do their work, but they also have to use their imaginations. Use your imagination. Write a life history, or biography, of these objects. How and when were they made? What would the journey across the world, from China to West Africa, have been like? Write, too, about the journey these objects might have taken across time from the medieval period to being “discovered” in our present day. Through whose hands did these objects likely pass?

EXPLORE FURTHER: MEET THE ARCHAEOLOGISTS

- The exhibition *Caravans of Gold* was developed in consultation with a team of international archaeologists. On the [Caravans of Gold companion site](#) you can find video interviews with them and with other specialists whose work has helped illuminate this history of medieval trans-Saharan trade.
- In April 2019 six of the archaeologists whose research has been critical to *Caravans of Gold* came to the Block Museum and gave talks, led workshops, and visited with local K-12 students.²⁸ This included a visit to nearby Niles North High School in Skokie, Illinois, to speak about their pathways to archaeology as a profession, what their work looks like, and issues of concern to archaeologists. Videos of their public program at the museum, and their career panel discussion for high school students can be found [here](#).

28 Archaeologists who gathered at The Block Museum of Art to discuss their research and contributions to the field of archaeology included Abidemi Babatunde Babalola, Mamadou Cissé, Abdallah Fili, Mamadi Dembélé, Sam Nixon, and Ron Messier.

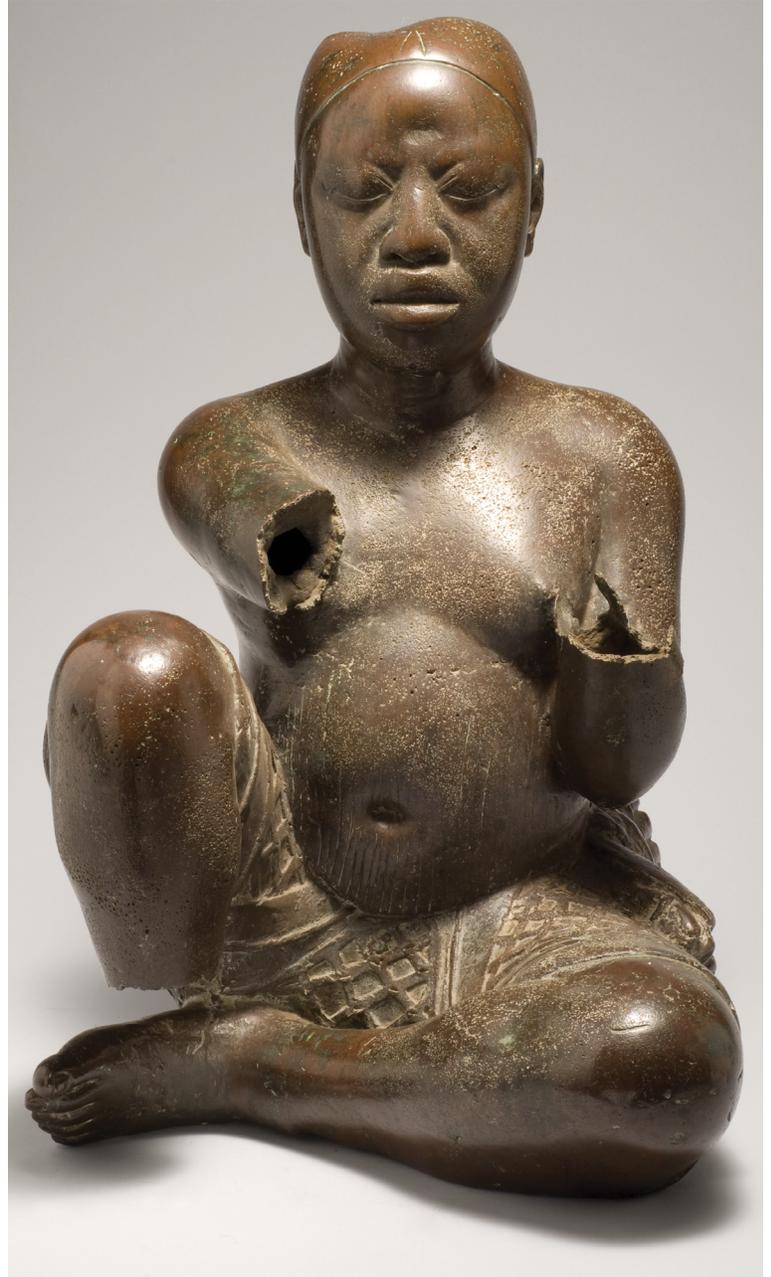
Lesson 4

Across Continents: Connecting the Dots to See the Impact of Trans-Saharan Trade

In **Lesson 2**, we learned how gold and salt were key drivers of a medieval economy centered in Western Africa. These precious commodities moved across Saharan trade routes along with other goods such as ceramics, copper, glass beads, ivory, leather, and textiles. At the same time as goods were crossing the Sahara northward, so too were goods being transported southward. This reciprocal exchange across vast distances is represented in a pair of sculptures made in the medieval era in different parts of the world, which are the focal points of this lesson. Your students will engage in close looking at two masterpieces of medieval art and understand how they are connected.



Virgin and Child, France, ca. 1275/1300. Ivory with paint, 36.8 x 16.5 x 12.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.190.295. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY



Seated figure, possibly from Ile-Ife, found at Tada, Nigeria, late 13th/14th century. Copper with traces of arsenic, lead, and tin, height 54 cm. National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Abuja, Nigeria, 79.R18. Photograph by Museum for African Art and The Fundación Marcelino Botín/ Karin L. Wilis

ACTIVITY 1: LOOK CLOSELY AT TWO MEDIEVAL SCULPTURES

- Invite your students to analyze these two sculptures with the following prompts:
 - » Look closely.
 - ❖ Take a few minutes to look closely at these sculptures. Look at them from top to bottom and left to right. Even if you think you've seen it all, look again. Is there a detail you notice that you think no one else might have seen?
 - ❖ Draw what you see. Don't worry about making your drawing perfect. Sometimes sketching helps us notice more details than a first glance can reveal.
 - » Focusing on each sculpture separately, describe only what you can see.
 - ❖ How would you describe these artworks to someone on the phone who is not here?
 - ❖ Write about what you see. Make a list of everything you notice about this artwork. What's something you see that you think no one else might have noticed?
 - ❖ How would you describe its color?
 - ❖ What words would you use to describe the texture? How might it feel to touch the sculpture?
 - ❖ Both sculptures are representing people. How are the figures sitting? What are they wearing? What are their expressions?
 - » Wonder.
 - ❖ How do you think these sculptures might have been made? What parts may have been the most challenging to make?
 - ❖ What might have motivated someone to make these sculptures?
 - » Compare and contrast.
 - ❖ Ask your students to consider the sculptures. In what ways are these sculptures similar? In what ways are they different?
- As an alternative to a whole-class activity, you could assign one sculpture to smaller groups. Have them work through some of the above questions, and then ask each group to present their findings to the class.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

VIRGIN AND CHILD SCULPTURE

This sculpture depicts the Christian figure of the Virgin Mary, who sits on a throne and holds a playful baby Jesus. Depicted as the mother of God, Mary stomps on a serpent with her left foot, signifying the triumph of good over evil.

The sculpture was made in France in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and was carved from ivory. In the medieval period, European artisans used ivory to carve luxury objects such as combs, mirrors, chests, chess pieces, and statuettes of religious figures like this one. Ivory comes from the tusks of elephants, which were not found in Europe in the medieval period. This means that Europeans had to trade with other regions to get this precious material.

Elephants are found in both West Africa and Asia, but experts know that the ivory used in this sculpture came from Africa because of its large size. Its dimensions are 36.8 cm x 16.5 cm x 12.7 cm and the two figures were carved from a single piece of ivory. (To give students a sense of its scale, use a ruler and measure these dimensions on a piece of paper or the whiteboard.) African Savanna elephants are the only elephants who can grow tusks to a diameter larger than eleven centimeters. Because the sculpture's diameter is larger than eleven centimeters, experts know that the ivory used for this sculpture can only have come from West African elephants.

Around 1230, political shifts allowed Europeans to be in closer contact with trans-Saharan trade. As a result, greater numbers of ivory tusks from West Africa began arriving in northern European harbors. Based on our understanding of trans-Saharan trade networks, we can assume that this ivory likely traveled from West Africa, up through the Sahara, across the Mediterranean Sea, along the Atlantic Coast of Western Europe, and then across land routes to France, where it was carved.²⁹

SEATED FIGURE, POSSIBLY FROM ILE-IFE, FOUND AT TADA, NIGERIA

This impressive naturalistic figure was likely made in the late thirteenth or fourteenth century in the city of Ife, the royal capital of a powerful kingdom that was located in modern-day Nigeria.

In the early twentieth century, this sculpture was kept on a shrine in Tada, a small village on the banks of the Niger River 120 miles north of Ife. According to a report, in the early twentieth century it was taken to the river every Friday and scrubbed and washed with gravel and water along with other sculptures that were kept on the shrine. Because Tada's economy was largely focused on fishing, it is possible that this ritual was connected to maintaining a healthy river with plentiful fishing. You can ask your students to think about what effects the repeated washing and scrubbing has had on the figure. Note that some parts of the sculpture are smooth while other parts have a rougher texture.

The sculpture was made from copper with traces of arsenic, lead, and tin, using a technique called lost-wax casting. Copper is difficult to cast in this way, making this sculpture extremely rare. In this region, copper was frequently alloyed with other metals to give it strength for casting.

Scientists have analyzed the copper from this sculpture. Copper can be mined in many places, including in West Africa. We cannot know for sure where the copper originated, but the information they gathered suggests it may have come from a mine as far away as the Alps mountains in present-day France.

²⁹ For more on the circulation of West African ivory through medieval trade routes, see Sarah M. Guérin, "‘Avoir d’ogni ragione’: The Supply of Elephant Ivory to Northern Europe in the Gothic Era," *Journal of Medieval History* 36 (2010): 156–74, and Sarah M. Guérin, "Forgotten Routes: Italy, Ifriqiya, and the Trans-Saharan Ivory Trade," *Al-Masāq* 25 (2013): 71–92.

WRAP-UP: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THESE SCULPTURES?

- Trade helped make the production of these sculptures possible.
 - » The materials from which these sculptures were made tell an important story. As ivory tusks traveled north from the savanna regions of Western Africa, copper mined from sources including in Western Europe and the Sahara Desert traveled south. These materials traveled on the same camel caravans that transported gold, salt, and other goods across the desert, where they were disseminated throughout Western Africa.
 - » Locate Ife on **Lesson 1 Activity 2: Map of Saharan and Global Trade Networks**. Now locate France. Using the routes indicated on the map, can you imagine the journey that these materials would have taken?
- Indirect connections can have a big impact.
 - » Ivory and copper were not exchanged directly. They were exchanged by a system called “relay trade.” In relay trade goods pass from hand to hand over short and long distances. People on the far ends of such trade networks may have no idea where the thing that they value originated. Or they may have ideas about distant places that are inaccurate.
 - » Ask your students to think about objects that they value that are made in other places. Using cell phones or blue jeans as an example, ask them to research where the raw materials that are used to make these items come from and where the objects themselves are made. What do they know about these places?

EXPLORE FURTHER: HOW WERE THESE SCULPTURES MADE?

- In addition to helping us understand the long-distance connections between West Africa and Europe in the medieval era, these sculptures also represent incredible feats of technology and masterful art-making techniques. Today technology allows us to use methods like 3D scanning and printing to make complex, detailed three-dimensional objects. Medieval artists had to master other kinds of refined techniques to make sculptures like these.
 - » The seated figure from Nigeria uses a technique called “lost-wax casting.” As part of their Timeline of Art History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art describes the longstanding practice of this complex method on the African continent and points to the Tada figure as an exemplar: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wax/hd_wax.htm.
 - » A video created by the British Museum speaks about the history of the Ife heads and describes the lost wax casting technique: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/west-africa/nigeria/v/ife-uncovered>.
 - » For more on ivory carving in the European context, see the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s essay in their Timeline of Art History: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/goiv/hd_goiv.htm.

Closing Activities & Further Extensions

After your students have completed some or all the lessons above, wrap up and extend their exploration of *Caravans of Gold* using some of the following suggestions:

To reinforce your students' understanding of this history, share with them two very watchable videos.

- » Portions of the *Caravans of Gold* story are recounted in Henry Louis Gates's six-part PBS program, *Africa's Great Civilizations*. Part 3, "Empires of Gold," describes the trans-Saharan trade, including the exchange of salt for gold, the rise of the Empire of Mali and Timbuktu as an important center of learning, and kingdoms of Ile Ife. <https://www.pbs.org/weta/africas-great-civilizations/home/>
- » Episode #16 of John Green's popular and accessible *Crash Course* series provides an overview of the kingdom of Mali, Saharan trade, Mansa Musa's pilgrimage (hajj) to Mecca, and Ibn Battuta's travels. He addresses West Africa's connections to North Africa, Europe, and Asia; gold as a driving force of trade; and the crucial role of Islam in facilitating trade. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvnU0v6hcUo>

Revisit "The Danger of a Single Story."

- » What "single stories" of Africa might your students have known before learning about *Caravans of Gold*? What are some of the new stories they might tell now? To whom?
- » Share and discuss this quote from Adichie's TED Talk: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity." https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript
- » Ask students to think of examples of other instances when their perspectives were changed from hearing new or different stories about a place, a person, or history.

Return to the quotes from the Pre-Activities section.

- » Return to the quotes below and discuss as a group: Who has the power to shape history? Who has the power to decide what versions of history are told and which get left out? Put students in the drivers' seat: if they were to write a syllabus and teach a history class that includes lesser-known stories, what would they include?
 - ❖ In the 1830s, the German philosopher Georg Hegel wrote, "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. . . . 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."³⁰
 - ❖ In 1963, Oxford historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper stated, "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness. . . . And darkness is not a subject for history."³¹

30 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 157.

31 Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe," 871.

Consider the stories conveyed in *Caravans of Gold* within a historical continuum.

- » Ask your students: What happened before? What came next?
- » The Boston University African Studies Center has developed resource guides to support exploring different topics within African History, including the Empires of Medieval West Africa (of which the *Caravans of Gold* story is a part) and what follows this medieval era: slavery and the slave trade, colonialism, and independence movements in Africa. <http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/teachingresources/history/>

Learn more about countries whose histories are a part of *Caravans of Gold*.

- » For the exhibition, The Block Museum of Art developed deep partnerships with institutions in three countries: Mali, Morocco, and Nigeria. Ask your students to learn more about these nations. Boston University's African Studies Center has resource guides about these three countries featured in *Caravans of Gold*. <http://www.bu.edu/africa/outreach/teachingresources/specific-african-countries/>

Imagine a journey to West African cities, then and now.

- » Explore the article "I Didn't Know There Were Cities in Africa!" on the website Teaching Tolerance. At the end of the article there are suggested activities, including asking students to imagine and plan a trip to present-day and ancient cities in Africa. Prompt students to imagine a trip to different trading centers you encountered that were critical to trans-Saharan exchange, such as Tadmekka in present-day Mali or Ife in present-day Nigeria. Or recreate Mansa Musa's hajj along these same lines, examining the points on the map as destinations along the way. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/fall-2008/i-didnt-know-there-were-cities-in-africa>

Consider how objects speak about the past.

- » In the *Caravans of Gold* exhibition, objects serve as primary sources, alongside other kinds of data, to help us understand the past. Teaching History with 100 Objects, a project of the British Museum, similarly explores how objects have been witnesses to the past. This lesson tells a fascinating and powerful story of a journey from West Africa to America and then to England through the "Akan drum." The lesson includes detailed information about what is known of the object, contextualizes it in a broader historic context including the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Asante Empire, and offers ideas for activities to engage students in your classroom. http://www.teachinghistory100.org/objects/akan_drum

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