



SAHEL

ART AND EMPIRES ON THE SHORES OF THE SAHARA

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ALISA LAGAMMA

THE
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LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY TIMES: ODES TO SAHELIAN EMPIRES

DAVID C. CONRAD



Today we recognize Homer as the legendary bard who relayed the epic poems widely viewed as the cornerstones of ancient Greek literature and the Western tradition. Bards likewise played an outsized role in the transmission of Sahelian oral traditions, which chronicle the rise and fall of the succession of historical West African empires, in particular Ghana-Wagadu (ca. 300–1200), Mali (ca. 1230–1500), Songhai (1464–1591), and Segou (ca. 1712–1861) (see fig. 00). Among the most celebrated of these epics is *Sunjata*, a record of events leading to the formation of the Mali Empire as recounted through the exploits of its central hero and other distinguished Mande ancestors. Indeed, the *Sunjata* epic has occasionally been described as the African equivalent of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, an appropriate comparison in terms of recognizing that

SCEPTER

Senegal, before 1789.
Ivory, H. 36¼ in.
(92 cm). Musée du
Quai Branly, Paris
(71.1934.33.446 D)

Sunjata is as important to West African civilization as its Homeric counterparts are to the West.

In both epic traditions, thousands of lines were memorized, sung, and recited in public performances by generations of bards in the centuries before they were written down. The two great bodies of literature are starkly different, however, in one key respect, namely, that the Homeric epics were transcribed sometime about the eighth century B.C., whereas the earliest variants of the West African oral traditions were not recorded until the late nineteenth century A.D. Thus, where the ancient Greek epics were frozen in time for nearly twenty-seven centuries, the West African traditions, especially *Sunjata*, are still being performed. The African epics vary, moreover, in terms of which characters and events they emphasize, and there is no single definitive written version of any of them. It is also important to recognize that these two epic traditions represent ancient cultures that were geographically remote from one another. They are thematically distinct because they derive from markedly different value systems, and this is precisely why they remain such important reflections of their respective cultures.

Ghana-Wagadu

During the next seven years, drought descended on Wagadu.

The wells went dry, no rain fell on Wagadu, and no millet grew in Wagadu.

Before the introduction of Islam to sub-Saharan West Africa in about the tenth century, everything that represented the Sahelian collective memory was passed on orally by professional bards. This form of discourse, which continues to be narrated and sung by West African griots to this day, is a paramount form of creative expression, one that has been mined by historians as a repository of commentaries on social values as well as major events. Examples of identifiably pre-Islamic oral

tradition are scarce, however, and the available variants all exhibit some degree of Quranic influence because they were recorded many centuries after the arrival of Islam to the Sahel. Among the earliest is the Soninké oral tradition of Ghana (or Wagadu), a narrative that describes legendary people and alleged events that can be characterized as part of a foundation myth for the historical empire of that name.

In the absence of definitive archaeological or epigraphic evidence, there remains a degree of uncertainty regarding the identification of “Ghana,” as it appears in Arabic written sources, with the “Wagadu” of Sahelian oral tradition. Nevertheless, local nonliterate peoples who have been asked to describe early events in the geographic vicinity of what is thought to have been the location of eleventh-century Ghana (see fig. 00 <map>) have invariably and unhesitatingly responded with some version of the Wagadu narrative. Moreover, many of the written references in the Arabic sources associating what they called Ghana with a place dubbed the “land of gold” accord convincingly with the oral tradition. The conflicting nomenclature of Wagadu versus Ghana no doubt reflects the presence of both pre- and post-Islamic elements in surviving fragments of the legend.

At the heart of the Wagadu narrative is the story of the serpent Bida, a guardian figure of the ancient Soninké state. Certain environmental factors (discussed in greater detail below) provide grounds for a reasonable degree of probability that what was once a more extensive narrative of Bida is rooted in pre-Islamic Wagadu, and that additional episodes were eventually added to embrace the later destruction of the Soninké state termed “Ghana” by Muslim observers. The legend of Ghana-Wagadu thus comprises a series of loosely related episodes spanning the pre- and post-Islamic eras, although the seventeen versions known to us today are nevertheless consistent on several points. With only minor differences, all versions of the defining episode portray Bida as the guardian of Soninké prosperity, its killer as a





50

BALA (XYLOPHONE)
Mandinka people, West Africa, 19th century. Wood, gourd, hide, and membrane, L. 34 1/8 (86.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.492)39 (two views)

the forehead and temples or precise arrangements of the hair. The silhouette of this figure, which represents a high-ranking rider, combines both the volumetric and schematic approaches. The slightly oblique head is squared at the top, the eyes and mouth are minimally inscribed horizontal slits, and bold linear cicatrices accent the temples and forehead. The physiognomy is otherwise defined by a series of cylindrical elements, most notably the rider's elongated arm, which extends to hold the reign, and the horse's dramatically attenuated tubular muzzle. In addition to giving the rider an imposing sense of scale, the sculptor lavished attention on his resplendent bandoliers, necklaces, and bracelets and his steed's elaborate leatherwork harness and headdress. Such emphasis on equine ceremonial finery recalls al-Bakri's description of the ten liveried horses kept at the Ghana sovereign's court during the eleventh century.

The mounted warrior was originally paired with a hollow cylindrical element that served as both a receptacle and pedestal. When in situ, such bipartite cenotaphs, or burial markers, measured between 100 and 150 centimeters in height.⁴³ This one originally stood at the top of one of some four hundred terracotta vessels densely placed in a plot occupying several hundred square meters (fig. 6 <Bura site>). The bodily remains buried 1.4 meters beneath the warrior were found with

a pair of copper bracelets at its side identical to those depicted on the warrior's proper left forearm (fig. <WA250>). The integration of such a complex representation within an elite burial context suggests the presence of wealthy stratified communities south of Gao in about the tenth century.⁴⁴

Middle Niger Equestrians

Beginning in the tenth century, a tradition of figurative sculpture represented by commanding equestrians and foot soldiers in both fired clay and cast metal thrived in population centers across the Middle Niger region, from Jenne to Mopti.⁴⁵ Around the same time (9th–14th century), artists in the region used fired clay to portray other, markedly different types of mounted horsemen. What is most immediately striking about the contrast between the Bura and Middle Niger sculptures is the proportional relationship of figure to horse. The Middle Niger riders are far larger than their steeds, but, more important,

51

SCEPTER
Senegal, before 1789. Ivory, H. 36 1/4 in. (92 cm). Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (71.1934.33.446 D)





62

SEATED COUPLE

Jenne civilization, ca. 1575–1675. Terracotta, H. 10 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (25.5 cm), approx. W. 5 in. (12.7 cm), D. 10 in. (25.4 cm). Private collection, New York

63

**KNEELING FEMALE FIGURE WITH
CROSSED ARMS**

Jenne civilization, ca. 1155–1365. Terracotta, H. 20 in. (50.8 cm), W. 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (21.3 cm), D. 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (27.3 cm). Menil Collection, Houston





64

**KNEELING
DIGNITARY**

Jenne civilization,
ca. 1230–1420.
Terracotta, H. 18⁷/₈ in.
(48 cm), W. 13 in.
(33 cm), D. 8 in.
(20.3 cm). Private
collection



In a dramatic variation, a serpent occasionally encircles a figure's neck while the arms are held at the sides and a curved element is grasped in either hand (cat. WA.060). This representation has been interpreted by some scholars as that of a physically disabled individual whose attributes denote esoteric knowledge (the serpent around the neck) and power (the curved elements in the hands, possibly hippopotamus tusks).⁶⁴

Within this corpus of terracottas is a striking subgroup that depict a deeply introspective seated male figure (cat. WA.174), including several whose otherwise nude torsos are accented by stone bead necklaces and metal bracelets (cats. WA.047 and 164.1; 046 and 067). Further, there are two distinct variations on the type. Some exhibit an elaborate,

somewhat stylized arrangement of the limbs in which one leg is bent at the knee and the calf extends back and out to the side while the opposite knee is bent with the calf extended in front, parallel to the lap (e.g., cat. 00). In others one hand rests on the forward knee while the opposite arm is bent at the elbow, with the forearm extended horizontally in front of the torso and the hand resting on the opposite forearm (e.g., cat. 00). The different definition of the head in either style may reflect the approaches of distinct workshops. In the first, the figure is bearded and wears a conical, striated coiffure that tapers to a sharp point (cat. WA.048); in the second, the proportionately small head is bald and the ears are especially prominent (cats. WA.044, 176).



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CONTENTS

Introduction

ALISA LAGAMMA

Local Perceptions of Early Times: Odes to Sahelian Empires

DAVID C. CONRAD

On the Shoreline of History: The State of Archaeology of the Sahel

RODERICK MCINTOSH AND MAMADOU CISSÉ

Pre-Islamic Artistic Patronage

ALISA LAGAMMA

Islam in the West African Sahel

PAULO F. DE MORAES FARIAS

Sahelian Diasporas:

Migrations from Ancient Ghana and Mali

ALISA LAGAMMA

Collecting the Sahelian Past: Myth Building and Primary Sources

YAËLLE BIRO AND IBRAHIMA THIAW

From the Rise of Songhay to the Fall of Segou

ALISA LAGAMMA

Praying for Life

SOULEYMANE BACHIR DIAGNE

Architecture in Focus: Four Case Studies

GIULIA PAOLETTI

Notes

Works in the Exhibition

Selected Bibliography

Acknowledgments

Index