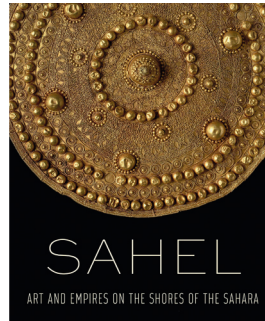
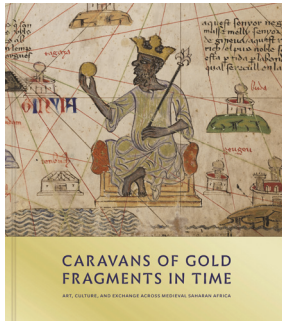


KATHLEEN BICKFORD BERZOCK (ED.),  
*CARAVANS OF GOLD, FRAGMENTS  
IN TIME. ART, CULTURE, AND  
EXCHANGE ACROSS MEDIEVAL  
SAHARAN AFRICA AND*  
ALISA LAGAMMA (ED.), *SAHEL. ART  
AND EMPIRES ON THE SHORES OF  
THE SAHARA*

Princeton: Princeton University Press 2019, 312 pp. incl. 192 colour  
illus., ISBN 978-06-91-18268-1.

New Haven: Yale University Press 2020, 304 pp. incl. 277 colour  
illus., ISBN 978-15-88-39687-7.



Reviewed by  
Andrew Sears

In 1943, when Jean Joire published his initial archaeological findings from a series of burial tumuli in the Senegalese village of Rao, he presented them as a plate of sketches [Fig. 1]. While most fragments are composed of sparse lines delineating only size, shape, and massing, the work of goldsmiths display cross-hatching to convey surface texture, luminosity, and shadows. The renderings of pendant and necklace remnants from Mound P (P1 and P3) are by far the most didactic, with tightly packed spirals and concentric circles approximating the minutiae of intertwined filigree designs and granulation. Unlike the earthenware sherds from Mound K, where the blank surface of the page stands in for the material of clay and concentrated lines indicate damage, for works in gold lines are

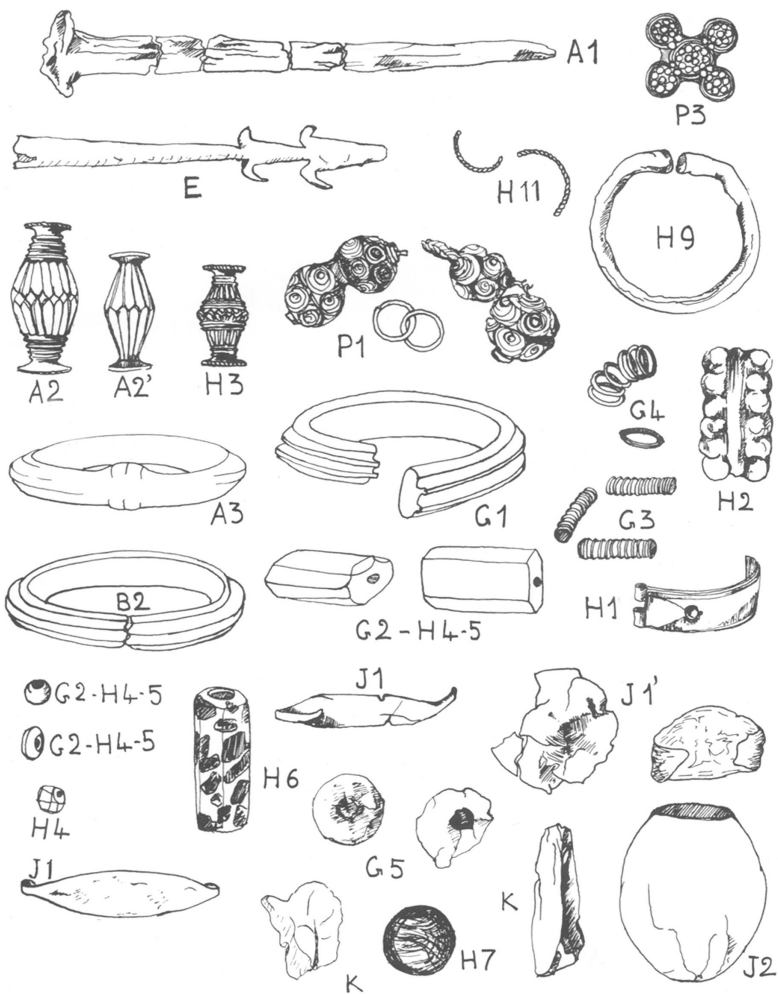


FIG. 3.—SOME FINDS FROM THE EXCAVATIONS AT RAO.

The letters refer to the Mounds A-P.

[ 51 ]

[Fig. 1]

In: Jean Joire, Archaeological Discoveries in Senegal, in: *Man* 43, 1943, 51.

employed to represent the complexity of the material itself. Yet drawing did not suffice for representing the most sumptuous item unearthed at Mound P, the now infamous Rao Pectoral, which was the only object in Joire's article to necessitate a photograph [Fig. 2]. It was not the pectoral's forms or materials that most incited Joire's interest, but its craftsmanship: "a very large gold pectoral plate," he starts, "the finest jewel of the set, ornamented with filigree and smooth, hollow, hemispherical cabochons, only the big central one bearing some of those granules still known to the modern Senegalese jewellery as 'millet-grain' decoration."<sup>1</sup> For Joire, such artistry straddled extremes of comprehension and mystery. He finds a vocabulary for describing the pectoral's making, albeit a reductive one that compares fine gold granulation to the staple foodstuff millet, a move of colonialist (dis)ordering that sits uncomfortably within stereotypes of Africa as a land of natural resources.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, he expresses that his findings are difficult to contextualise culturally, given that the region's premodern inhabitants were nomadic, lacking clear governance structures and borders, and linked to vast trade networks stretching to North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. As might be expected, Joire labels this type of manifold culture as a "problem" for interpreting his own archaeological findings, rather than a standard to which his inquiry should strive.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth reiterating Joire's statements to demonstrate the mischaracterisations upon which the field is based as well as the degree to which they are still in need of upending. The two exhibition catalogues under discussion, *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa* (2019) and *Sahel: Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara* (2020), take seriously the task of rewriting history, and their treatment of the Rao Pectoral is a useful starting point. What Joire juxtaposed as knowable (goldsmithing techniques) and unknowable (cultural context) has been reversed. *Sahel* stresses the pectoral's manufacturing as an extraordinarily complex and still enigmatic enterprise. According to Roderick McIntosh and Mamadou Cissé, the work's imposing materiality – 18.4 cm in diameter, 191 grams – must be considered not only through the history of craft, but also through histories of science and pyrotechnology that made possible the smelting and shaping of large quantities of gold and other met-

1

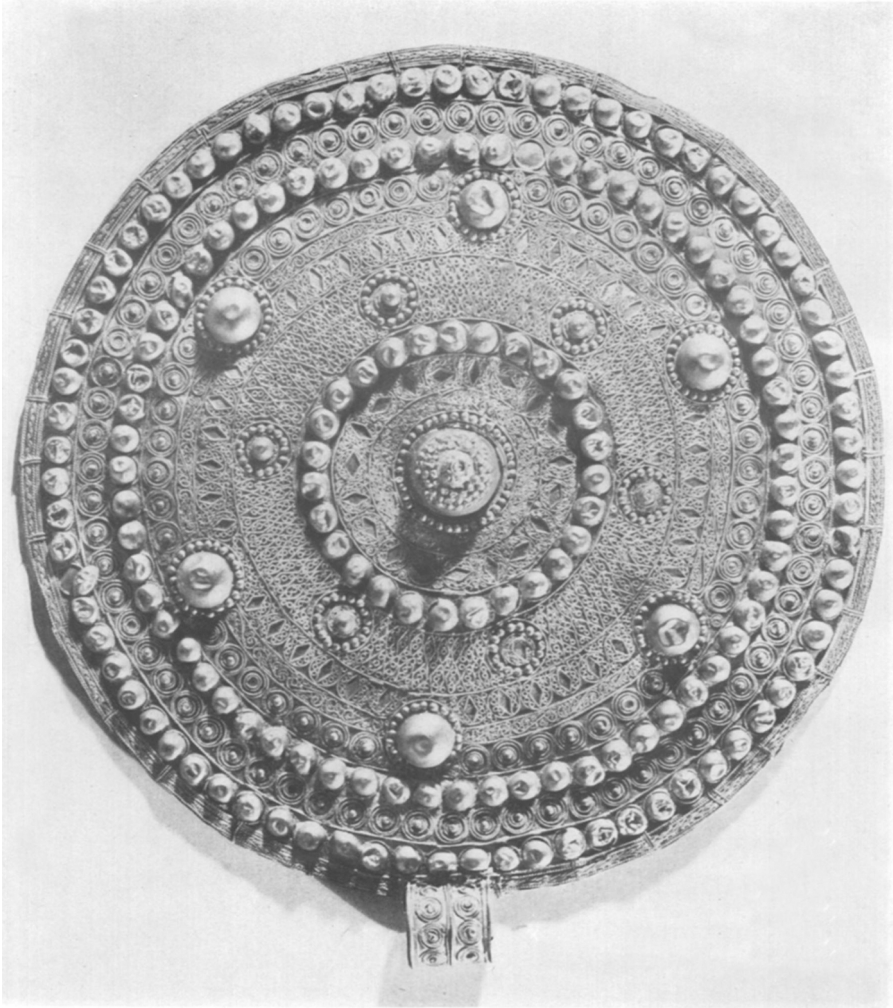
Jean Joire, Archaeological Discoveries in Senegal, in: *Man* 43, 1943, 49–52, 49.

2

Later Marian Ashby Johnson used the term "thioup-thioup" based on her field work in Senegal and Gambia: Marian Ashby Johnson, Gold Jewelry of the Wolof and the Tukolor of Senegal, in: *African Arts* 27, 1994, 36.

3

The exact phrase is "Problems involved by the Finds": Joire, Archaeological Discoveries, 52. It is vital to note the complexities and paradoxes of such figures' political leanings, more of which is discussed in Gregory Mann, Anti-Colonialism and Social Science. Georges Balandier, Madeira Keita, and "the Colonial Situation" in French Africa, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, 2013, 92–119.



[Fig. 2]  
Gold Pectoral from Mound P at Rao, Senegal, diameter 18.4 cm. Photograph by Courtesy of the Institut Français d'Afrique Noire, Dakar, in: Joire, *Archaeological Discoveries*, 48.

als. The question also remains who possessed the relevant knowledge and skill. Excavations since the 1980s have revealed that the Rao Pectoral did not necessarily come from a codified courtly context, since the region was less consistently populated than initially thought, making the production and later burial of precious metalworks more collaborative in nature. *Caravans* recasts the Sahel's ties across the Sahara and beyond as enlightening, rather than obfuscating, our understanding of the region. As shown in Sarah Guérin's article, the evidence for the Sahel's interactions with and influences over distant lands is remarkably concrete. The Rao Pectoral shares craftsmanship techniques with North African gold objects found in Spain and England. Gold from sources in Bambuk and Buré was instrumental in initiating the rise of gold coinage in Florence and Venice in the thirteenth century. Rather than asking how international influences imposed themselves on the local, we should ask how localised sites of international activity incubated a vibrant cross-cultural community that reverberated across the premodern world.

Scaling global networks while remaining attentive to local nuances and artistic innovations is a difficult balance to achieve, and one that both catalogues are committed to maintaining. *Caravans*, according to Kathleen Bickford Berzock, seeks to reconstruct "thriving, far-reaching systems of circulation and exchange in the Sahara", though also demonstrates a distinct focus on the individuals involved in said systems.<sup>4</sup> Networks depended on human agency – artisans making objects, caravans traversing the Sahara, chroniclers recounting travels – as well as the human subjugation of the pre- and early modern slave trade. *Sahel*, rather than focusing on trade itself, centres on the vibrant eponymous region stretching the borders of modern-day Niger, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal, from which many of *Caravans*' caravans departed. According to Alisa LaGamma, we must investigate how this "culturally diverse population of many faiths has always been interconnected and responsive to ever-expanding global networks".<sup>5</sup> Like with the Rao Pectoral, both catalogues converge around a variety of shared objects that simultaneously embody the local and global. North African and Middle Eastern glass beads excavated in Gao express both the trans-Saharan economy as well as local systems of valuation. The libraries of Timbuktu held both imported Arabic manuscripts as well as locally, serially produced copies. Abraham Cresques' 1375 *Catalan Atlas*, commissioned by Pedro IV of Aragon, visualises the geographical distance between Europe and Mali but is derived from interpersonal transmissions of knowledge. In certain instances, artworks reflect a reluctance to become global, such as with the terra-

<sup>4</sup>

Kathleen Bickford Berzock (ed.), *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time. Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa*, Princeton, NJ 2019, 25.

<sup>5</sup>

Alisa LaGamma (ed.), *Sahel. Art and Empires on the Shores of the Sahara*, New Haven, CT 2020, 33.

cotta figurines of the Middle Niger, whose production and sudden decline has been attributed to pressures put on indigenous religious beliefs by the spread of Islam. Even more, Mamadi Dembélé notes, certain examples made after the purported conversion of the region indicate the use of local sculptural traditions as a form of local “cultural resistance” against homogeneity.<sup>6</sup> The catalogues then diverge. *Caravans* expands its discussion geographically and materially, with six chapters dedicated to important sites of exchange (Sijilmasa, Essouk-Tadmekka, Gao, the Inland Niger Delta, and Northern Nigeria) and five chapters to materials traded (gold, ivory, copper, coinage, glass, and manuscripts). *Sahel* moves mostly temporally, from the fall of the Mali and Songhay empires around 1600, to the rise of Segou as cultural and political centre of the Bamana, to the armed encroachments of the Fulani and their destruction of Bamana patrimony.

Neither book loses sight of how today’s intellectual and political climates inflect our examination of Africa’s past. *Caravans*, particularly Chris Abani’s contribution, glosses the word “fragments” from the book’s title, equating the discussion of historical fragments to a kind of scholarly divination. Much like the divination process uses fragmented materials as “stand-ins for objects that cannot be used in the process”, we as academics use past objects to divine a present meaning or impact. This act requires introspection and restraint: are the fragments “performing themselves or doing what the curator requires”?<sup>7</sup> In *Sahel*, Souleymane Bachir Diagne describes what we can learn from the shared aspects of West African cosmologies, most notably the notion of a “life force” (*nyama* in Bamana) as the ontological principle by which the universe is ordered. “To be, to exist, is to be a force”, Diagne notes, and “forces can increase or decrease, ‘reinforce’ or ‘de-force’”.<sup>8</sup> Just as artists of the Sahel understood their creations as generative forces, we must ensure our writing of history does the same for the present day.

6

Berzock, *Caravans*, 155.

7

Ibid., 39–44.

8

LaGamma, *Sahel*, 252.