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INTRODUCTION

Africa in the Middle Ages

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By opening this book, the reader is taking the first steps on a journey across several centuries of African history. Our first guide on this journey will be an eighth-century Chinese traveler, our last, a fifteenth-century Portuguese conqueror. Between the two we will sometimes follow merchants, diplomats, or modern archaeologists in their travels through African cities and countrysides; we will meet kings, clerics, traders, and ordinary people—individuals whom we would be honored or pleased to meet in person, and highly unsavory types it would be better never to come across; we will encounter Muslims, Jews, Christians, and people practicing nonmonotheistic religions, such as ancestor cults or cults dedicated to territorial spirits. Marco Polo and Ibn Battûta will be our companions. We must not expect to always understand everything we see on our journey, and we must reject the certainty that our guides saw and understood things any better. For what they describe, and what we would never have known without their testimony, most often derives from what they themselves had heard or read. We must not be shocked by the geographical uncertainties about the precise location of a lost capital city or the name of a given archaeological site, the informants' contradictions of one another, or the sometimes arrogant and touristic judgment that travelers bring when they venture from one world to another. In the face of the diversity in achievements and societies we are going to encounter, we must remember Vumbi Yoka Mudimbé's and Ali A. Mazrui's warnings that "Africa" as a space of knowledge was repeatedly *invented* from the outside. We must indeed free ourselves from the image of a "uniform" and "eternal" Africa, of an Africa of innumerable and unchanging "tribes," of an Africa conceived as the reliquary of our "origins," for we are going to speak about African societies *in* history.

Eight centuries, almost a millennium, and yet so little is known. Let us confess, our attention, as readers and viewers of documentaries, turns most often to the African civilizations of antiquity: the Egypt of the pharaohs; Meroitic Nubia; Punic or Roman Africa; Aksum in Ethiopia:

civilizations whose spectacular architectural remains have long captured the imagination of all who enjoy reflecting on great civilizations. Perhaps we are also familiar with more recent centuries, when the African continent, strongly tied to the destiny of the Western powers, was supposedly “discovered,” then “explored” (two rather Eurocentric terms), and most of all exploited by those who set about taking possession of it. During the last five centuries, Africans suffered the slave trade followed by colonization; finally, they confronted the violent transformations of the postcolonial present. Between these relatively familiar Africas—the antique Africa, whose splendors nourish a nostalgic erudition, and contemporary Africa, whose convulsions arouse an avid curiosity—stretch what have been called the “dark centuries” of African history.

“Dark centuries”—really? This expression was sometime used to designate a period of African history prior to the so-called Age of Discovery (inaugurated by Portuguese navigators in the fifteenth century) and colonization (inaugurated in the seventeenth century and generalized in the nineteenth), periods that produced a relative abundance of written sources. Far from seeking to denigrate Africa’s ancient past, such an expression articulates a frustration with the cruel lack of available sources for recounting that past. So if there exist “dark centuries” of African history, it is only by virtue of the weak light shed by the documentation. But the case made in this book is that even if the sources relating to the “dark centuries” of African history are rare and uncertain, the period would surely better merit the name of “golden age.” As far as clichés go, the latter is more accurate: our meager sources tell us that the Africa of this period was home to powerful and prosperous states, and that it integrated itself into some of the great currents of global exchange that circulated people, merchandise, and religious conceptions. It witnessed the development of cities where African princes had their palaces, where foreign merchants resided, where luxury products and slaves were exchanged, where mosques or churches were built. Africa was then a major player in

the exploitation of its own resources, among which gold held a prominent place. The continent enjoyed a considerable reputation, from Europe to China, a reputation exemplified by the celebrity that Mûsâ, king of Mâli during the first third of the fourteenth century, achieved in the Islamic world and Christian Europe.

But we are not going to swap a reputation for darkness for a golden legend. It is more important to understand how the Africa of the intermediate centuries between the antique and modern periods could be a cradle of civilizations so radiant, and yet so obscured in the surviving documentation that its rediscovery seems a thankless task. What are the reasons for this apparent paradox?

The first reason for the neglect of this “golden age” is that few African societies of this period used writing or kept archives that could testify from within to their power and prosperity. It is true that a number of ancient African societies produced written texts in diverse languages and writing systems, including ancient Egyptian (in Egypt), Punic (in the Maghreb), Libyco-Berber (in the Maghreb and the Sahara desert), Ge’ez (in Eritrea and Ethiopia), Old Nubian (in today’s Sudan), Greek (in Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia), Latin (in Christian North Africa), or Arabic (in Islamic North Africa, but also in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ethiopia, Nubia, and Mali, as early as the eleventh century), among other examples. Later, beginning in the seventeenth century, some societies would produce historical chronicles (one thinks of the Sahelian communities, in particular Timbuktu, or the diverse communities of the Swahili coast), and writing would spread across the continent from the nineteenth century on. But even if writing before the modern era was geographically much more diverse and widely distributed than is generally believed, its use was considerably restricted among any given society. The African societies of the period that interests us knew about writing but, with a few exceptions (North Africa, Nubia, and Ethiopia), did not develop written traditions that could serve as sources for today’s historians. That they

did not do so was not the result of a lack of motivation or competence; rather, they chose not to. Indeed, another form of transmission, likewise entrusted to specialists, existed in many African societies, a transmission not of the written word but of the spoken one: what we call “oral traditions.” Passed down over the generations, some stories have reached us. The question of the reliability of these oral traditions for reconstructing the distant past is a matter of heated debate among historians of Africa. Nonetheless, most among them would agree that, if oral traditions should certainly not be denied their status as historical documents for accessing the past two, three, or sometimes four centuries, their inherent limitations preclude their enabling any thorough reconstruction of earlier periods. It should not, of course, prevent us from listening very closely to African voices when they have come down to us thanks to a written document, as is the case, for instance, with the account of the rise to power of King Mûsâ of Mâli, told by the king himself to an Arab secretary in the chancery of Cairo. However, though such voices are clearly a bonanza for the historian and the reader, one should resist the temptation—rooted in both the relief of a sudden and direct access to the past and a naive attitude toward the interpretation of all things African—of taking such discourse at face value. A political statement by a Malian king of the fourteenth century is no less elaborate and finely chiseled than any diplomatic statement today, and thus it must be studied as such.

So, with few exceptions, we are left mostly with documents produced by outsiders. The outsiders, by then, were not Christian Europeans, but Muslims and sometimes Jews from the Islamic world, with whom their African partners found themselves in a closer relationship between the eighth century and the fifteenth. In fact, since the eighth and ninth centuries, Arab and Islamic powers had established themselves in most regions north of the Sahara, ruling societies that had until then been predominantly Christian, and had thus interposed themselves between the countries of “inner” Africa and the outside world. Although Marco Polo

and Vasco da Gama will, at a late stage, be mentioned, it might come as a surprise to readers of this book to notice how little space is given to written European sources, which represent a very small proportion when compared with the Arabic sources (i.e., written in Arabic, not necessarily by Arab people) relative to our period. But in turn, one should not exaggerate the number and extent of Arabic sources, as contrasted with the much more substantial corpus available for Europe or the Islamic world of the time. Consider the fact that all we know from written documents in Arabic about the peoples, kingdoms, and societies of the regions today called the Sahel, stretching from Mauritania and Senegal to Chad, fits in a volume only a few hundred pages long! Why? Because information follows the same routes as ships and long-distance caravans, and because the Sahel region and the shores of East Africa were very remote from the economic and political centers of, say, Morocco, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, or Iran. Information circulates, furthermore, with merchants, individuals who are generally inclined to remain discreet about supply points, modes of transaction, precise itineraries, and personal contacts, and who, when they prove talkative, are more often than not interested only in places of commerce and powers likely to favor their business. As luck would have it, however, a few armchair geographers curious about the world, such as the Andalusian al-Bakrî in the eleventh century, and a few less scrupulous travelers, such as the celebrated Ibn Battûta in the fourteenth century, have occasionally offered the fruits of their experiences and inquiries to posterity.

But what about material remains from the past? Don't we at least have cities, palaces, various monuments, and places of worship as material witnesses to the political history of elites, the religious history of peoples, the architectural achievements of societies, their everyday life? So few, often so poorly preserved, sometimes so pathetically documented by research. Consider that we do not even know where the capital of Mâli was located at the time of its mid-fourteenth-century splendor. Is our ignorance due

to a lack of research? Undoubtedly. But we should add that if the sites are lost—swallowed up by dunes, mangroves, or savanna—or if those re-discovered by archaeologists through pedestrian surveys have not retained their original significance, it is due not only to the lack of writing and the environmental changes that took place during the intervening centuries, but also to a rupture of memory. For a site or monument to retain its significance across time, it must be the subject of continual reinvestment; that is to say, it must be modified and transformed by others who take on its legacy, even if they distort it. Memory is the condition, not the negation nor the opposite, of history. Yet we should note that this continuity of memory was lacking in most of the regions where kingdoms and cities developed. Gone were the long-established foreign merchants; gone the African traders who were their longtime partners; but gone, too, were the elites and, quite often, the local population. In this book, we will sometimes visit deserted, mute places, such as the site of the likely capital of Ghâna, a brilliant kingdom of the tenth to twelfth century centered in present-day southeast Mauritania, where no urban planner would suggest having a city today. Golden centuries: not dark, but forgotten.

This forgetfulness conditions access to the distant African past, and consequently to the writing of its history. Of these forgotten centuries we have only traces, vivid but uncertain. Not even the scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, for we often do not know which puzzle they belong to. A nearly worn stone inscription, a few coins, objects found in amateur or clandestine excavations, partially destroyed monuments, the terse text of a foreign author—such fragments will often be the sole surviving witnesses of a chronological slice of several centuries, of a historical context that remains, in just about every other respect, more or less inaccessible. Historians often have nothing more at their disposal than “lost items,” orphaned traces. These constitute the material from which they derive their fragmentary knowledge. Let’s come to terms with it: if this book presents itself to the reader as an arrangement of fragments illuminated

side by side in turn, it is because I have preferred the stained-glass window to the grand narrative fresco that would have produced only the illusion of an authoritative discourse. For such an authoritative discourse on ancient Africa is impossible; the sources are hopelessly silent when it comes to entire sections of reality, such as the local economy, social organization, the family, peasants in rural areas, the daily life of women, men, and children. Yet the stained-glass window has its advantages: by carefully selecting the fragments, we can construct a history whose dominant features are the aspects best illuminated by the sources: royal power, cities, trade goods, sociability among the male members of the commercial, religious, and political elites. Even the lead joints that tie together the glass fragments are not so much a problem as a condition of a modest, perhaps frustrating, but more truthful, vision of history. The very process of putting the fragments together can transmute our frustration into an exciting challenge: that of crafting an incomplete history open to comparisons between one region and another, new discoveries, and interpretative changes.

The rarity of our sources creates an obligation—undoubtedly one of the hallmarks of the historian of ancient Africa—to consider each trace a document, be it a written text, an architectural monument, or a tiny piece of charcoal. Some might think this goes without saying. Is it really so? The historian who works on written traces from the past likes to know what they are. Their work transforms the textual fragment into a document—this is what “philology” is about. But do we really take care to apply the same techniques we use for texts to other traces from the past? The question is essential when textual sources are not the principal base for historical reconstruction, as is our case. Do nontextual traces have their philologists? Sometimes methodical excavations and exhaustive reports of archaeological operations have succeeded in turning a site into such a document through the work of cautious, systematic description of the material facts as well as the methods that brought them to light. When it comes to archaeological facts, such a document is all the more precious, as

excavations efface most of what they observe. More often than we would like to admit, the excavators did not follow proper methodology or produce a meticulous report, to say nothing of the fact that, working in a colonial context, they often coerced local people to extract objects from the ground with little regard for the significance of the site to the latter or for its preservation. Occasionally some objects have likewise acquired the status of a document. But how many times has the context of their unearthing been wrapped in an impenetrable haze because of systematic pillaging that feeds the international market in cultural objects, when they do not simply disappear into private collections before having been properly described? Suffice it to say, the requirements of an investigation oriented toward the production of documents—documents useful to the recovery of the past—are not always met. Field research and erudition, from this point of view, do not always harmonize. An example, at least, has been set by the indefatigable Théodore Monod, a pioneer of document collection. Watching him at work in the 1960s in eastern Mauritania—in the most sterile quarter of the Sahara and certainly one of the most hostile environments in the world—we find him incapable, given the practical conditions of his mission, of fully documenting (as he certainly wished to) the tiny though immensely important medieval site that had been discovered only months earlier by local antelope hunters. Yet by immediately producing, in just a few hours, records of his discovery, he left behind documentation that is at once imperfect and unequalled.

In the absence of this pragmatic ideal, we must often turn to the circumstances of the discovery. This is why many stories in this book will start from a departure point situated not ten centuries ago but just one or two, in an attempt to glimpse how the site or object has come down to us. This approach takes into account the “social life” of sites, objects, and texts; it produces a social biography that reflects not only their documentary dimension but also their changing appearance and historical significance as perceived by the archaeologist or in the eyes of the local

people. On this point, we will perhaps marvel that so many “treasures” unearthed from the African soil—beginning with the golden rhinoceros of Mapungubwe, which provides the title of one of the chapters and of the book as a whole—often serve as the story’s starting point. “Treasures” are good documents to use in assessing the past, one might think. But we can also shift our perspective by suggesting that treasures exist only when the archaeological documentation that should have accompanied their discovery is missing. The fruits of hasty collections, of casual or selective excavations, “treasures” may sometimes be a godsend for the historian; but they also illuminate processes of elimination that have reduced all the potential documentation of a site, or indeed of a region or period, to this residual form. The “treasure” is what remains when everything else has disappeared. Any narrative history built around such traces cannot ignore its dependence on such phenomena, in Africa more than elsewhere, owing to lack of research, the violations of the underground heritage that went hand in hand with the coercion of individuals and societies during the colonial period, and the low level of awareness, until recently, of the concept of archaeological heritage on the continent.

If for no other reason than the fact that these forgotten centuries had acquired a new historical value through their coming to light, they would sufficiently warrant being called by a grand chrononym like the “Middle Ages.” This expression has already been applied by a number of authors to the African past. Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore initially titled their famous book *The African Middle Ages 1400–1800* (1981) before changing it to *Medieval Africa 1250–1800* in their revised edition (2001). But the adjustable dates of their chronological range are ample evidence that “medieval” here just meant “precolonial”; perhaps the latter word was avoided because it would have put emphasis on the changes later to be introduced by the colonizer. In his now-outdated *The Lost Cities of Africa*, Basil Davidson had a chapter on “medieval Rhodesia,” the word “medieval” in this case used to counter the colonial narrative of the famous ruins of Zimbabwe

as the vestiges of antique, “Mediterranean” (i.e., white), settlers. So let us admit that there can be many reasons to use the term “Middle Ages” or the adjective “medieval” that are not particularly related to the way medieval Europe is medieval. There’s also a good reason not to use it; for if its usefulness resides only in designating a period of almost a millennium roughly coeval with the European Middle Ages, one could rightfully ask why we should import a label that conveys unwanted associations with medieval Europe: Christianity, feudalism, the crusades against Islam. True. But despite all this, I think that applying the term “Middle Ages” to Africa is justified. The justification concerns the scale at which we observe the Middle Ages: for one of the benefits of the current trend of historical research aiming at “provincializing Europe” (to use Chakrabarty’s term) is that the European Middle Ages tends to be perceived as a province of a global world that deserves to be called medieval based only on its distinctive way of being global. This is not to say that medieval Europe has no specific characteristics. But they appear all the more interesting, or let us say more interestingly exotic, when contrasted with the background of broader phenomena like the interconnectedness of all the provinces of the medieval world, the physical centrality of the Islamic civilization within this global world, the role of specialized long-distance merchants (mostly Muslims and Jews) as connecting agents between different provinces, or the related significance of a few chosen commodities (such as slaves, gold, china, glass beads, ambergris) as evidence of an interconnectedness of a kind limited to what met the needs and tastes of the elites. In that sense, the broad picture that this book wants to draw, its fragmentary nature notwithstanding, is that Africa also deserves to be considered a province of the medieval world. Not out of a will to “provincialize” Africa in the sense of making it marginalized or peripheral, but, on the contrary, to make it part of a world made up of other such provinces.

It is beyond the scope of this book to suggest anything like precise geographical and chronological boundaries to the global Middle Ages. After

all, to be a Europeanist medievalist or to read a book on medieval Europe, one needn't possess certainty about when exactly medieval Europe starts and ends. But let us only note that, just as the global Middle Ages is as much a space as a time period, so too is the African Middle Ages in this book. Let us look at the map of the areas where the histories in our book take place. We encounter a vast crescent, stretching over the entire width of the continent from the Atlantic coastlines of the Sahara and the Sahel to the Red Sea, encompassing the basins of the Niger River and middle Nile Valley. Covering the high plateaus of the Horn of Africa, it spreads from the African side of the Gulf of Aden to the eastern edges of southern Africa and Madagascar. The immensity and diversity of this space straddling the two hemispheres scarcely need emphasizing. It was home to a wide array of natural environments and a number of vastly different cultures. Yet all these diverse regions and cultures had one point in common during the period that interests us: between the eighth and the fifteenth century, they reciprocated the desire for contact expressed by merchants and clerics from different regions of the Islamic world; they contributed to the establishment of a regular system of long-distance commercial exchange across the Sahara or Indian Ocean; they were nowhere (except in part of Nubia) conquered or forced to submit to foreign rule, but willingly participated in a global political, religious, juridical, intellectual, aesthetic conversation. They were not passive partners in a vast global system into which they were slotted, but actors attentive to procuring their share of the benefits of commercial exchange, capable of negotiating the conditions of this exchange, of accepting certain social transformations—especially religious ones—and of constructing “bricolages” in order to be considered full partners. If nothing else, these vanished cities—once humming with multiple languages, the brusque cries of merchants unpacking their loads or the custom officers inspecting them, commercial arguments played out in court or before the mosque, secrets divulged in alcoves—can make us feel at once the intensity and the insecurity of their efforts to control

their destiny. Of course, we should not imagine that only the societies that fell within our geographical, chronological, and documentary medieval domain had a history. If history is more *visible* here than elsewhere, it is because they appear in the documentation as active commercial partners, energetic and famous leaders: in other words, agents of historical change equipped with will, ambitions, and intentions, inevitably at the expense of those whose lower status or economic condition confined them to documentary darkness, including the innumerable slaves who were the main victims of this glorious age.

The connection between Africa and the outside world was not achieved everywhere with the same speed, nor did it have everywhere the same intensity. If partners from the Islamic world made contact simultaneously with the long Sahelian “shore,” south of the Sahara, and the northern portion of the lengthy coastline extending from Somalia to Tanzania, contact with their hinterlands, as well as with the regions extending to the south of these first edges, was made only later. The fleeting images from the sources thus reveal a changing geography through the centuries, meeting points that burgeoned and declined, societies newly integrated in turn into the circle of regional systems under constant organization. Thus we see the geography deepen, the maps change. Beyond every geographer’s royal market city—an already formidably exotic horizon for an inhabitant of Baghdad or Cairo—existed in its hinterland subject African populations we can scarcely perceive. Slaves and gold came from societies even farther away, of whom we catch only indistinct glimpses, absent as they are from written sources, their tenuous participation in the regional system sometimes brought to light only by archaeology. In that sense, the African Middle Ages is not only a space and a time; it is also a certain documentary regime characterized by the disparity of external written sources and the scarcity or absence of internal ones, as well as the isolated and largely incomplete nature of material remains. Moreover, texts and material traces may be sharply at odds, as when a city described in an Arabic text has no

corresponding site known in the field, or when a site well known to archaeologists cannot be related to any precise location in the written records. This regime of documentation started to change around the end of the fifteenth century, with the growing importance of the European written documents. That alone would be sufficient to warrant closing the book by this date, if the European attempts, and eventual success, at circumnavigating the continent had not produced their enormous effects: major disruptions of the economic circuits inside Africa; a decline in the intensity of its exchanges with its partners in the Islamic world; the decline of the political influence of once-major African powers such as the kingdom of Mâli, the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, or the city-state of Kilwa in Tanzania, which had virtually all disappeared in the early sixteenth century; and the emergence of new African broker states along the coasts—thus inaugurating a new, marginalized place for Africa in its relationship with the capitalistic and imperial modern world.

This book's chapters conform to a generally chronological framework, but one that allows for geographic zigzags and ample thematic pursuits that lead the reader from one end of the continent to the other. The starting points for the accounts are sometimes "classic" documents from medieval African history; others will perhaps be more unfamiliar. Either way, all may benefit from a new look, particularly since recently published critical editions, the publication of long-delayed archaeological monographs, and reopened investigations into the conditions of an object's exhumation, or a site's excavation, or a date calibration shed new light on the scene. Whether the document is famous or little known, rather than simply re-treading familiar ground, I often chose to vary the scale; to bring forward unusual sources or to hold a mirror up to documents from remote regions; to shift perspective or to suggest a new hypothesis.

The reader will be spared the footnotes that usually clutter the bottom of the page, but may, if he or she chooses, turn to short bibliographic essays at the end of each chapter. These essays are intended mainly to bring

together references to the primary (textual and archaeological) and secondary sources cited in the text. They are especially useful to those who would like to go deeper into the primary sources, to check the references I allude to, to have a look into how I know what I say. But they also present a selection of other textual and archaeological references, personal appraisals of the state of the documentation, or even analyses of certain aspects relevant to the context and history of the fieldwork and domain under consideration. Made within a literature in different languages, of sometimes uneven quality, which has a knack for synthesis more often than for careful attention to the sources, the bibliographical choices reflect the desire to illuminate the document itself as much as possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Vumbi Yoka Mudimbé's work alluded to is *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Ali A. Mazrui's is "The Re-Invention of Africa: Edward Said, V. Y. Mudimbe, and Beyond," *Research in African Literature* 36, no. 3 (2005): 68–82. The expression "dark ages" ("siècles obscurs" in French) is that of Raymond Mauny, one of the major founders of ancient African history in France, from the title of his *Les Siècles obscurs de l'Afrique noire* (Paris: Fayard, 1971). I have recently applied the expression "golden age" to African medieval history in my contribution "Trade and Travel in Africa's Golden Global Age (700–1500)," in Dorothy Hodgson and Judith Byfeld (eds.), *Global Africa into the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), pp. 17–26. For an illustration of the complementary, if sometimes opposite, views on oral tradition, see the various contributions in the excellent volume edited by Ralph A. Austen, *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), which deals with the famous epic of the foundation of the kingdom of Mâli. The expression "social life" alludes to Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Oliver and Atmore's book was published by Cambridge University Press. Basil Davidson's *The Lost Cities of Africa* was initially published in Boston by Little, Brown and Company in 1959 and went through multiple editions. Dipesh Chakrabarty's book is *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Reflections on the marginalized place of Africa in the global processes that took place in the modern period are based on Frederick Cooper, *Africa in the World: Capitalism, Empire, Nation-State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).