CHAPTER ONE

The Middle Niger in Pre-Antiquity and Global Context

WORLD HISTORY PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE within the larger discipline, providing a unitary lens, a panoptic, through which the drama that constitutes the human experience can be observed at once. The artistic achievements, the scientific breakthroughs, the political innovations, and the revelatory imagination are all on display, with an emphasis on the spectacular, the monumental. Creativity, urbanity, social and commercial intercourse, productive capacities, and the dynamics by which relations of power change or remain unaltered often form the threads by which the narrative coheres, the indices held to be common to cultures upon whom fortune smiled. By inference it follows that areas of the world consistently overlooked by scholars play no significant role in the unfolding of world history. That segments of the human family have, at no time in their existence, ever been worthy of mention, let alone included in sustained study and investigation, is a claim made indirectly, faintly whispered, with implications for the past and present.

It is therefore sobering that world history scholarship (in English) has remained fairly consistent, even formulaic, over many years. Though there is certainly organizational variation, it is often the approach to begin with ancient civilizations and to proceed in linear and diachronic fashion. Sumer, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia are initially discussed, followed by Pharaonic Egypt. The focus then swings to the dawn of Harappan culture in the Indus valley and Vedic civilization in India in the third and second

millennia BCE, after which follows a succession of Chinese dynasties from the second millennium BCE Shang all the way to the Tang of the eighth through tenth centuries CE. Graeco-Roman civilization is a staple, to which are added the rise of Islam in the seventh century CE, the Mayans of Central America from the fourth to the tenth century, and the Incas of the eleventh through the sixteenth century. The collective story then commonly features the transformation of Europe from its medieval preoccupations to a triumphalist world expansion.[1]

A developing cognate of world history is the study of empire, chiefly distinguished from the former in its preoccupation with more recent history (though with some attention to antecedent periods) that involves sweeping vistas and expansive, transregional landscapes. A "history of empire" approach can go to considerable lengths demonstrating how those under threat of subjugation resist, influence, or otherwise redirect certain consequences, and in ways that subvert if not transform the imperial project, so that imposition is an open-ended process of contestation and negotiation. As such, imperial histories are in instances quite sophisticated in their analyses, but even so, they share world history's apparent disdain for empire as envisioned and engendered by Africans themselves, as none of the texts go beyond a cursory mention of such formations as Mali or Songhay—if they are mentioned at all.[2]

What therefore unites world and imperial histories, at least for the purposes of this study, is their consistent omission, their collective silence on early and medieval Africa, of saying anything of substance about it, with the exception of Egypt, Nubia, and North Africa. West Africa is certainly left out of the narrative of early human endeavor, and only tends to be mentioned, with brevity, in conjunction with European imperialism. This sort of treatment can be observed in a leading tome of more than 550 pages, out of which the discussion of sub-Saharan Africa, in a chapter entitled "Changes in the Barbarian World, 1700–500 BC," is exemplary:

> Sub-Saharan Africa also remained apart from the rest of the world. In all probability, cultivation of edible roots and all other crops made considerable progress in West Africa, while the east coast of the continent was visited at least occasionally by seafarers from civilized ports.[3]

Later in the same volume, slightly less than four pages are devoted to a discussion of sub-Saharan Africa that includes Ghana, Mali, and the spread of Islam. The chapter is called "The Fringes of the Civilized World to 1500" and, according to the author, "rests on nothing more solid than shrewd guesswork."[4] As such, we are not at a significant remove from Hegel.[5] To

be sure, world history as well as the imperial annal requires substantial preparation and endeavor, often an impressive, invaluable feat of erudition. It is therefore all the more disappointing that Africa continues to receive such short shrift.

A more promising development may be the rise of big history, resembling world history but extending it by light years, literally, connecting the immediacy of the planet's past with the universe's origins some 13.7 billion years ago. Continental shifts and drifts hundreds of millions of years old, combined with ice ages and other ecological transformations taking place 90,000 to 11,000 years ago, set the stage for the emergence of humans. In particular, big history provides a solar context for the Sahara's unfolding, central to the region's history. But once the discussion reaches Sumer, we are back to a very familiar narrative, and though Africa's consideration is at times informed by more current scholarship, the continent remains a bit player in a much larger drama, its leading roles assigned to others.[6]

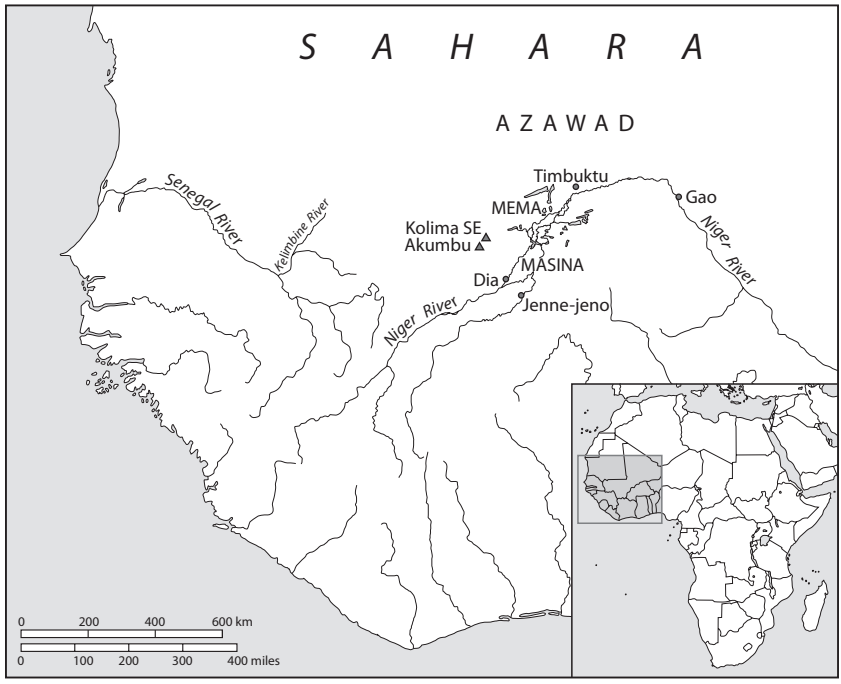
Whether world or imperial or big history, none is invested in ongoing research in Africa, where developments have been considerable. Substantial archaeological work has been underway in West Africa for decades, particularly in the middle Niger valley, and should scholars of world and big histories take note, they would need to seriously revise their accounts. For it was during the period of the Shang, Chou, Shin, Han, and Tang dynasties of China, the Vedic period in India, and the Mayans in central America, that another urban-based civilization flourished in West Africa, in the Middle Niger region. From the late first millennium BCE into the beginning of the second millennium CE, a series of communities were nurtured by a floodplain that at its apex covered more than 170,000 square kilometres, comparing favorably with Mesopotamia's maximum range of cultivable land of 51,000 square kilometres, and ancient Egypt's 34,000 square kilometers. Spanning the Iron Age (from the first millennium BCE well into the first millennium CE), the region was dotted with literally hundreds of urban sites characterized by a variety of crafts and productive capacities, constituting a collective center of human organization and activity, deserving its rightful place among world civilizations customarily acclaimed. Indeed, a number of the region's six basins have yet to be adequately excavated, and even more urban settlements await discovery. Given its location, the early Middle Niger is critical to any serious investigation into the region's subsequent history—precisely the present study's major preoccupation. A consideration of what has been uncovered there is consequently both appropriate

and necessary, bearing directly upon key issues reverberating well into the medieval period.[7]

To an appreciable extent, the history of civilization in the Middle Niger is a study of the multiple ways in which communities continually adjust to and engage with one of the more "variable and unpredictable" environments in the world.[8] Indeed, the story of the Middle Niger connects directly with the celestial preoccupations of big history in that much of its climatic variability is explained by slight alterations in solar radiation, produced in turn by the intricacies of the sun's cyclical patterns. The sun's behavior, in concert with shifting distributions of the earth's mass, resulted in such drastic changes that tenth millennium BCE conditions supporting teeming aquatic life together with lush flora and fauna, extending from the Middle Niger to what is now the Sahara Desert, had by 5,500 BCE undergone extensive desiccation, only to be followed by a massive dry period around 2,200 BCE, and yet another between 1,800 and 1,000 BCE. A firmament in the land had effectively taken shape, dividing Sahara and Savannah.

Though humans had entered the Middle Niger as early as 7,000 BCE, their first "serious" settlement in the region was not until 3,000 BCE.[9] Still, it was only some 2,700 years later, between 300 BCE and 300 CE, that the Middle Niger experienced a "massive influx" of human populations, corresponding to a time of dramatic decline in precipitation in West Africa as a whole, the so-called Big Dry. Rainfall patterns in the Middle Niger would stabilize from 300 CE to 700 CE, leading to an important theme that would characterize not only the narrative of the Middle Niger, but West Africa and the continent as a whole: namely, repetitive, numerically significant patterns of human migratory activity. In the case of the Middle Niger, perhaps what is most arresting is the transfer of substantial populations from the Sahara into both the southern Sahel (*sāḥil* or "shore") and the floodplain, a movement from very poor soils to those marginally less so.[10] This points to one of the signature features of the region—the perpetual transgression of differentiated landscapes by diverse communities and cultures that is only one of many reasons for conjunctively reconsidering the histories of Sahara, Savannah, and Sahel.

In response to the stresses of meteorological transformations, far beyond the capacity of anyone on earth to comprehend, populations throughout West Africa packed their belongings and sought better conditions. For the Middle Niger, the result was the gradual rise of urban culture and society, a period during which the necessary elements of urban civilization became identifiable from 800 to 400 BCE, followed by the



Map 2: The Middle Niger Valley in Pre-Antiquity

emergence of the first cities from 500 BCE to 400 CE. A focus of archaeological studies has been Jenne-jeno (or "original/old Jenne"), founded about 250 BCE, with some attention given to Dia/Diagha of Masina and other sites, with much work remaining to be done.[11]

Jenne-jeno and Dia/Diagha are indispensable to the history of the Middle Niger, but critical to their own development was the anterior province of Mema in the southwestern basin of the Middle Niger, where arose a "vast number and size" of urban sites (including Kolima and Akumbu) during the Iron Age, having been preceded by an "equally impressive network of clustered Late Stone Age hamlets and villages."[12] This earlier history of Mema underscores the theme of significant migratory patterns in the region, linking Savannah and Sahara in an inextricable matrix of associations and interactions, as inhabitants of the Azawad, another of the six Middle Niger basins to the north of Timbuktu, may well have traveled south to Mema with the desiccation of the basin between 4,000 and 3,200 BCE.[13] In concert, Mema's occupation began between 3,800 and 2,200 BCE, antedating the founding of Jenne-jeno by at least two thousand years. In addition to the archeological record, the vital role played by Mema in the ancient history of the region can be heard in the oral

traditions of various groups, including the Fulbe of Masina, who claim to have originated in "the west," a probable reference to Mema and by extension the Sahel. The Fulbe, the veritable embodiment of Savannah-Sahara human interaction, would have been driven out of the Sahara in the first millennium BCE, existing as a group or set of groups lacking coherence until entering Mema and Masina much later, between the tenth and fifteenth centuries CE.[14] The land of Mema would be the source of legitimization for a number of polities, including Guidimakha (or Gajaga, to the west of the Karakoro River), Mali, and that of the Susu.

Not unlike claims surrounding Mema, the oral traditions of Dia/Diagha of Masina maintain it was the first city in the Middle Niger, constituting the center of a Soninke or Serrakole world that would subsequently undergo a diasporic phase.[15] It is clear from such traditions that Dia/Diagha was an important town, and although work remains to either confirm or enfeeble such claims, there is material evidence in support. The ceramics of the site suggest it enjoyed a sizable population during the early Iron Age, and when all data are considered, it is entirely possible it emerged as an urban site by 500 BCE, approximately 250 years before the founding of Jenne-jeno. Indeed, the traditions maintain that immigrants from Dia/Diagha founded Jenne-jeno, which if true may provide insight into Dia/Diagha's diminution. Situated astride a commercial axis privileging East-West exchange, Dia/Diagha may have been detrimentally impacted by the emergence of North-South trade between 850 CE and 950, prompting commercial families to relocate to Jenne-jeno.[16]

The pattern of migration from North to South, into and through Mema, is certainly supported by the flow of Saharan ceramics and semi-precious stones into the Sahel, where early urban dwellers also enjoyed the benefits of iron, produced in Jenne-jeno throughout its existence. Both *in situ* smelting (reducing the ore to a bloom) and smithing (refining the bloom and removing the slag) resulted in a product "of exceptionally high quality."[17] The two operations proceeded jointly from 250 BCE to 400 CE in Jenne-jeno, when the more polluting smelting process was relocated to surrounding sites. This was also around the time that copper made its appearance, followed by gold some four hundred years later. Rice (*Oryza glaberrina*) appears to have been the major staple, followed by sorghum and bulrush millet. These crops, together with what was gathered from undomesticated plant sources, would have been stored in pottery in Jenne-jeno, the earliest of which seems to be Saharan (and whose shards yet cover the site of Jenne-jeno as far as the eye can see). Glass beads known only to have been manufactured in Southeast Asia during the Han dynasty

are proof that commerce was far from confined to the region, and that so much more awaits discovery.

Though its agricultural productivity was lacking in innovation and organization, remaining largely subsistent, Jenne-jeno nonetheless entered a more mature urban phase from 400 CE to 850, by the end of which the use of copper had developed into the manufacturing of bronze, which in turn was superseded by brass some 200 years later.[18] Copper could have been transported to Jenne-jeno from mines some 350 kilometers away, in what is now Burkina Faso, or from sources as distant as 500 kilometers in what is now Mali and Mauritania. When such importations are considered in conjunction with the presence of natron glass beads, a Roman manufacture issuing from either Egypt or (what becomes) Italy, the emerging picture is one of significant intraregional as well as trans-Saharan trading activity. Indeed, European classical sources have long suggested that commerce between the Mediterranean and the West African Sahel antedates the advent of Islam in the Maghrib, an enterprise controlled by the shadowy Garamantes, an apparent early reference to the so-called Tuareg.[19] But it was with the introduction of the camel into the Maghrib between 100 BCE and 100 CE that regularized trade between North and West Africa became viable. By 800 CE, then, Jenne-jeno had emerged as "a full and heterogeneous agglomeration of craftsmen, herders, farmers, and fisherfolk of different flavors," with a surrounding wall 2 kilometers in circumference.[20] Together with its nearby outposts, Jenne-jeno's population in 800 CE is estimated to have been from 10,000 to 26,000.

Timbuktu, that other major and far better known site of medieval West Africa, had probably assumed an urban status sometime during the first millennium CE, long before local chronicles allow, and the likelihood that it had developed trade relations with entities in the Upper Niger Delta means it was not necessarily dependent on Jenne for its foodstuffs, though such trade does not preclude the same with Jenne (or the Sahara and lands further north).[21] There will be much more to say about Timbuktu.

Constituting another of the region's six basins is the Lakes Region-Niger Bend, the northern cap of the Middle Niger floodplain, in which emerged an urban complex that would come to be associated with the town of Gao, also known by its Tamasheq (spoken language of the Kel Tamasheq, otherwise known as the Tuareg) designation as Kawkaw, along the eastern buckle of the Niger River. The archaeological record suggests the site has been occupied since the Late Stone Age, which means its settled existence antedates Jenne-jeno and Dia/Diagha by fifteen hundred years or more—more or less contemporary with early developments in

Mema, with evidence of secondary processing of copper and pottery fragments, and glass and carnelian beads between 700 and 1100 CE.[22] As the next chapter argues, Gao was critical to the formation of West African civilization and culture from earliest times, as instrumental as ancient Ghana. Indeed, Gao would maintain a more or less commanding presence in the *sāḥil* from the Late Stone Age through the seventeenth century, a remarkable longue durée rivaled only by developments bordering Lake Chad.

By 800 CE, then, there were several urban areas in the Middle Niger engaged in commerce and manufacturing and agricultural activity sufficient to support numerically significant populations. When Jenne-jeno's "satellite sites" are taken into consideration, the whole "urban cluster" increases the population to an estimated fifty thousand.[23] The Gao region was occupied as early as 2000 BCE, while cities such as Jenne-jeno and Dia/Diagha had emerged from the late first millennium BCE to the first millennium CE, by which time a number of sites near Jenne-jeno and Dia/Diagha had been abandoned, an indication of a complex early urban history about which so little is known. Urban retrenchment, however, begins to set in around 1100, lasting until about 1300. Demographic atrophy is precipitous in Jenne-jeno after 1200, and it (and its satellites) are defunct by 1400, a fate also suffered by Mema by 1300.[24]

Explanations for the demise of Jenne-jeno lay in the realm of informed speculation, beginning with the possibility of a new disease environment brought south of the Sahara through the expansion of trans-Saharan exchange or with the introduction of militaristic "Bambara" agriculturalists and/or combative Fulbe pastoralists. Its decline relative to contemporary Jenne is also matter of surmise, since it took place concomitantly with the latter's full occupation, such that it is not at all clear that Jenne-jeno's inhabitants simply resettled in Jenne, as local traditions claim. Climatic change could also have had an impact, but the rise of state formations, subject of the next chapter, cannot be removed from considerations of causation.[25] Indeed, Gao, Timbuktu, and contemporary Jenne escaped Jenne-jeno's fate, tied as they were to subsequent patterns of commerce and polity.