

The Golden Trade of the Moors: E.W. Bovill's Analysis of Medieval Sudanic States

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Introduction

E.W. Bovill's *The Golden Trade of the Moors* was intended as a new edition of his earlier *Caravans of the Old Sahara*. His intentions were to show the trans-Saharan trade linked Sudanic Africa and included the achievements of West Africans.¹ The problems with the book are numerous. First, Bovill is anti-‘Negro’: it is difficult to ascertain when he is stating a belief generally accepted in Western scholarship and when he is simply being biased. For example, he is careful to let us know that the Carthaginians had no ‘Negro’ blood, in spite of the presence of ‘very dark-skinned Africans, perhaps negroes,’ in the army.² Bovill gives no footnotes or concrete evidence for many of his suppositions; nor does he provide specific traders, dates, maps, or graphs for many of his statements. Within a two-hundred-fifty-one page book covering the Sudan from Roman times through British and French colonialism, there are four hundred and one broadly written notes. Finally, fully one-quarter of the book is devoted to ‘interracial relations’ during the Roman, and early Islamic era,’ before the gold of ‘white-ruled’ Ghana is mentioned. However, in spite of apparent prejudices, Bovill uses *The Golden Trade* to introduce the commerce of the medieval Sudan and explain that the wealth of Africa was the primary draw for European colonialists.

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Prehistoric Sudan

In *The Golden Trade* Bovill comments:

To acquire a more confident grasp of the history of the continent as a whole one cannot allow the mind to be dominated by such conventional divisions as Tropical Africa and North Africa, but rather one must seek to achieve a vision of the whole, in which the Sahara appears not as a barrier, but rather as a filter or as a sea that unites as well as divides.³

The area now covered by the African Sahara was once a vast sea, which supported herds of animals now found further south. Before the area began to dry up around 3000 BCE, the populace produced paintings on the available outcroppings.

On certain rock sites in the central and northern Sahara there have been discovered life-sized engravings done by an early race of hunters. Among the animals depicted are elephant, rhinoceros, hippopotamus...⁴

For the last two millennia, North Africans have used basic tools and sweat labor to remove stones from ancient Roman monuments and build their own art forms. Examples are the Djama al-Kabir of Kairwan. According to Bovill, the desert climate was no barrier to developing civilizations, as the Phoenicians, Romans, and Berbers all built cities within the deserts. However, the Banu Hilali invasions of the eleventh century razed vast areas of coastal North Africa leaving nothing but destruction for the next eight centuries.

Lake Chad, which was central to the economic survival of Sudanic states, shrank exponentially due to the drying up of the Sahara. By the eighteenth century, multiple states had sprung up in the area of the Lake, as the Fulani and Hausa competed over the rights to the trade routes that linked the forest belt states with the coast:

Vol. 1, No. 1
2007

- Borno (14th century)
- Kano (11th century)
- Katsina (12th century)
- Zazzau/Zaria (15th century)
- Gobir (11th century)

Desiccation defined international commerce within the Saharan states because the lack of water limited the types of animals which could be used as beasts of burden. Bovill states that Kemetic rulership (Pharaohs Sethnakhte and the Ramesses) utilized donkeys for short trips; however the introduction of the camel made commerce possible. Unfortunately, he doesn't say by what method the camel may have been imported to the Sudan, or when it may have come into general use.

Salt and Gold

The advent of the camel made it possible for vast caravans to travel across the Sahara and bring salt down from the Mediterranean to the Savannah in exchange for gold, ostrich feathers and slaves. Salt was of great value to the kingdoms of the Sudan because of its nutritional components. Human blood is almost ten percent sodium chloride and without sufficient quantities, people are less able to perform physical activities.⁵ The salt mines of North Africa had been active since Roman times and with the fall of that empire traders turned increasingly to the interior.

Doctors often recommend replacing water and salt lost in exercise and when working outside... Rome may not have developed without Ostia's salt beds... Leptis Magna, a polygonal port in North Africa, was built at the time of Trajan to handle the salt supplies from north Africa...⁶

The Western Sudanese states had access to a small amount of salt via mines such as the Dallul Fogha or the marshes of Birnin Kebbi. The Western Coast from Senegal to the Niger also provided some sources of salt. Also some people were able to meet their salt requirement by including grasses in their diets. Later sources from North Africa included the mines at Taodeni, Seek d'Idjil, and at Taghaza; the latter opened in the sixteenth century and became the major trade source for Middle Niger kingdoms. All mines were constant sources of contest between the ruling kingdoms because of the value that their deposits commanded as currency, while predatory tribes sought to wrest valuable salt from the miners. After Al-Mansur's wars, Morocco became the major salt supplier to the Sudan due to its stability and the instability that had arisen among the southern kingdoms following the fall of Songhai. Still with the coastal sources available, the Moors had to carry vast quantities to attain the gold that they needed in their wars with Europe and the Ottoman Empire. A pound of salt was traded for an ounce of gold.

The Auxiliary Commerce

Trade could not have taken place without reliable means of transportation. The people of Agades raised the camels which carried loads north, south, east and west through the Sahara. Once per year the Adalai caravan traveled from Air to Kavar and then through the Hausa markets to Sokoto and Kano. They brought cloth and corn, kola nuts and gold north. It would be interesting to see the relative price of kola to gold or salt as it not only had a symbolic value to Sudanese rulers, but the practical value of being a stimulant allowed under Islamic law. The religious law and education also spread with Mande speaking traders who controlled the routes.

The importance of the salt-gold trade built up the Taghaza road. It facilitated the exchange of other staples such as rice, millet, ivory and

kola nuts; the latter were used ceremonially. Slaves also traversed the road from the Sudan to the coast and up to the Ottoman Empire and Muslim ruled Sicily. The Mossi sent numbers of castrated boys north.

There had long been a big demand for negro slaves on the North African littoral, partly for local use, but more particularly for export to Egypt and Turkey. In an important, but particularly hideous branch of the trade the traffic in eunuchs for whom, as guardians of the harem, there was a big local and foreign demand. It was customary in the Sudan to geld the most robust of the boys and youths caught in slave raids, and some tribes, notably the Mossi, punished chimp with castration in order, no doubts to foster a lucrative in trade. Only the Mossi were considered exceptionally skilled at the operation and they kept their method a closely guarded secret. They and the Bornuese enjoyed international reputations in the trade in which the principal foreign buyers were Turkey, Egypt, and the Barbary states. Leo. Foreign buyers had to compete with a strong local demand, for eunuchs were as freely used in the Sudan as in any other Muslim country.⁷

The Human Trade and Gold

Bovill's explanation of international relations within the West Sudan is colored by the Hamitic Myth and the nomad versus agriculturalist theory:

Numerous, warlike, and highly mobile, the Old World nomad stood ready to raid or conquer the agriculturalists whenever their internal difficulties gave [them] an opening. Historians of the nineteenth century accepted nomad invasions as one of the basic patterns of history...⁸

...the desert breeds predatory instincts and compels [humanity] to live permanently on a war footing. The desert nomad[s], therefore, has[ve] both the inclination and the power to prey upon [their] neighbours, and not infrequently, [they do].⁹

For example, Bovill devotes a great deal of his descriptions of the foundations of Morocco to the light-skinned northerners versus the Negroes.¹⁰ He further ascribes the fall of Ghana to nomad invasions.¹¹ An earlier, and detailed description of the nomad-lord versus subservient settler is that of the Garamantes. So important were Garamantian slaves that 'the Garamantian road' was established in order to trade with the people who Herodotus had described as at once 'possess no weapons of war, and do not know how to defend themselves' and 'hunt the Ethiopian troglodytes in four-horse chariots.'¹²

There were two roads that linked the Trans-Saharan states¹³:

- The Garamantian Road – The Fezzan to Tripoli - south to north (eastern)
- The Taghaza Road – The Niger River to Sijilmasa in Morocco – south to north (western)

These roads allowed merchants leading caravans to transport gold and slaves. While the slaves, who would form armies of fame under Mulay Ismail and as the Al-Bukhari, were traded consistently through the centuries, gold was the product which maintained the trade. Gold flowed consistently for so long, and in such quantities, that the southern Sudan belt became the goal of avaricious predator states within and without Africa, who sought to form independent ties with the states, which controlled the mines.

The people who were traded north were believed to have been the Haratin (also called Chouchan, Fezzanese, or Dauda). Bovill is unclear on whether these people, whose 'negro features in their dark skin and kinky hair' suddenly make them Black Africans, are a mixture of multiple ethnicities or not. However; he takes care to distinguish them from the abid.¹⁴

After the Prefect Gregory was defeated (647 CE/24AH), the trade in gold seems to have picked up, though the human trade continued. Arabic-speaking adventurers traveled through the Sudan partially in order to spread Islam, partially to map the world, and partially to exchange knowledge with other scholars whom they had met during the obligatory Hajj.¹⁵ For some reason, neither literate Ethiopia, nor Coptic Egypt or eastern Sudan sent scholars to the Western Sudan. This seems to make little sense in light of the 'negro' slave trade that Bovill emphasizes traveling from Fezzan to Carthage, the early date that he ascribes to Ghana's gold trade (before 647/24), nor in light of earlier literate African societies, such as independent Kemet (Egypt), Axum, and Nubia.

No matter what literature the Christian world seemed to be lacking, Muslim scholarship produced multiple resources on the Sudanic states: Al-Masudi, Ibn Haukal, al-Bakri, al-Idrisi, Yaqut, al-Umari, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, Ahmad Baba, Mahmud al-Kati, and Abdarrahman as-Sadi all wrote about the states, the gold, and the women of the regions. Unfortunately, the Shemitic Myth was well entrenched in the minds of some of the foreign scholars when they wrote about the Sudanic states.

Al-Masudi related that "The traditionists say that Nuh [Noah], peace be upon him, cursed Ham, praying that his face should become ugly and black, and that his descendants should become slaves to the progeny of Sam [Shem]." He then states that Ham fled to Egypt and produced the peoples of the Sudan [from the Atlantic to the Red Sea] and that Canaan 'was the eldest of Ham's sons, and the first to corrupt the [monotheistic] religion of Nuh [Noah].'¹⁶

On the other hand, Sudanese literati recorded the history of the Sahara and Sahel with pride. Abdarrahman as-Sadi wrote the *Tarikh as-Sudan* from Timbuktu, bringing middle states, such as Songhai and centers of scholarship such as Jenne and Timbuktu to worldwide attention. Ironically, this would lead to invasion after invasion and massive

instability in the Sudan states as parties sought control of the gold trade.

Competition among Sudanic States

The main beneficiary of the gold trade was the North African state of Morocco. Morocco's economic ties with Soninke or Manding-speaking Ghana began before 750 CE/132 AH when the 'Arabs' attempted to invade the state. The expedition was a failure, but it introduced the Western Sudan to the important role that Manding traders would play in spreading Islam and undertaking reform. From Kumbi, Ghanaian merchants traded with peoples, who were presumably southern. Unfortunately, Bovill provides very little information about the people who actually controlled, or at least mined the gold.

When they reached the river the merchants beat great drums to summon the local natives, who were naked and lived in holes in the ground. From these holes, which were doubtless the pits from which they dug the gold, they refused to emerge in presence of the foreign merchants.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the sources available, do not make clear which river is looked at, nor which ethnic or language group the Ghanaians were trading with. The area was either between the Senegal and Faleme rivers (Bambuk), the junction of the Niger and the Tinkisso (Bure), the Upper Volta (Lobi), or the Gold Coast (Ashanti). It is also possible that Wangara was a label for the Mandinka-speakers (Soninke and Dyula). The monastic Al-Murabitun formed in the early eleventh century in modern-day Senegal. In spite of their religious foundations, competition over resources and prestige drove them into conflict with Ghana, which they destroyed in ten sixty two.¹⁸

The next state to rise up was Mali, which would produce the famous Mansa Musa. The Mali state was a direct product of the Al-Murabitun. Its capital would be moved from Jeriba to Niani apparently to enable

the sovereigns to better control the Wangara gold fields. Gold was so important to the stability of warring Muslim states that, as great a ruler as Sundiata, made no serious effort to convert the miners to Islam if it meant that gold production would be disrupted.¹⁹ Within one century control of the interior gold fields would bring Mali great fame in the Middle East and Europe. Fame that would explode after thirteen twenty four when Mansa Musa voyaged to Egypt on Hajj. The Mansa and his following spent so much gold that it still had an impact on the Cairo business climate twelve years after his departure.²⁰

The gold trade enabled Mansa Musa to recruit the architect as-Sahili to rebuild the mosque at Gao. It also enabled him to expand commercial ties with neighboring Sudanic states, and Egypt. However, the ties made with the sultan of Fez apparently brought Mali to the attention of rapacious European rulers. Thus the atlas attributed to Charles V, already having invaded the Spice Islands of Cape Verde:²¹

‘Musa Mali, Lord of the Negroes of Guinea. So abundant is the gold which is found in his country that he is the richest and most noble king in all the land.’²²

While many African states followed the Maliki school of jurisprudence, rulers favored competition for resources over the Maliki injunction to be just and bring peace.²³ Al-Mansur’s attack on the Western Sudan led to the ultimate unraveling of the region and loss of control of gold, salt and other commodities by laying the foundations; in turn this allowed Europeans to colonize Sudanic and North Africa. His generals not only pillaged the scholarly city of Timbuktu but deported its scholars, such as Ahmad Baba.²⁴ Timbuktu became a new capital for the Moroccans, or ‘Moors, ruled by Askias, whose constant strife further weakened the kingdoms, until the Muslims fell before the non-Muslim Bambara of Segu. In Morocco, families competed for control and allied with the Bambara in order to strengthen their positions. Out of this competition Mulai Ismail formed the abid soldiers. Though the Sudan campaign had enriched al-Mansur so much

that he became known as the Golden, (ad-Dhahabi), the loss to the country had been significant. twenty three thousand troops had died of disease.²⁵

The amount of gold that flowed into Morocco as tribute from Timbuktu and Gao after his conquest caught the interest of European rulers and, more importantly, the new merchant class. For example, Judar Pasha’s return to Morocco from Songhai elicited this response:

He brought with him thirtie camels “laden with tybar, which ys unrefined gold (yet the difference ys but six shillinges in an ounce weight betwene yt and ducattees); also great store of pepper, unicornes hornes and a certaine kynde of wood for diers to some 120 camel loades; all which he presented unto the Kinge... besides 15 virgins, the Kinge's daughters of Gago, which he sendeth to be the kinges concubines.”²⁶

The shipment described above was estimated at six hundred and four thousand eight hundred pounds. With so much wealth flowing through Morocco English merchants, in particular, began to report on the wealth of the Western Sudan. The Barbary Company was formed by the late sixteenth century in order to trade with the Moroccans, whose internecine strife had caused them to fall behind on the sciences that they had introduced to Europe only three centuries before. In the seventeenth century the Company for the Countries of Ginney and Binney was formed. Its stated goal was ‘discovering the golden trade of the Moors of Barbary.’ Europeans began to study the writings of Leo Africanus, on the silent barter, in order to discern the gold producing countries of the Sudan. They looked in ‘Guinea,’ tried to find Kano and Katsina on old maps, and researched the old Sijilmasa-Taghaza road to Timbuktu.²⁷

[In Gobir] are also great store of artificers and linnen weavers; and here are such shooes made as the ancient Romans were wont to wear, the greatest part whereof be carried to Tombuto and Gao.²⁸

The Songhay had arisen around the Niger in the early tenth century CE/3rd century AH. Gao was situated between a famous market (As-Suk) and copper mines. It was believed that mines might be found on the Gambia river or the source of the Niger.²⁹ Numerous European potentates would send explorers to find the source of Wangaran gold. The Portuguese entered Mali in the sixteenth century. They met disaster further north at al-Ksar al-Kbir, in that same century, at the hands of Morocco. Unfortunately, the new Sharif of Morocco Mulai Ahmad Al-Mansur squandered the gains by undertaking a long war against Songhai that would break the cohesion of the Western Sudan and pave the way for a succession of European adventurers- so posing as Muslims- to take the first steps of colonialism.

E.W. Bovill's *The Golden Trade of The Moors* makes it clear that the people of Wangara long produced the wealth that maintained the Sudan. It may be that gold was flowing north from Roman times. From the Ghanaian era onward, a succession of states rose to compete over the wealth that flowed north along two major trade routes. This wealth maintained the Moroccan state, the area around Lake Chad, and the states around the Niger river until the sixteenth century. During that century, the warfare which had plagued the region from the rise of the Al-Murabitun, came to a head under Al-Mansur. His invasion of Songhay pitted one Muslim state against another and opened the way for British and French invasion of the Sudan.

Though competition for gold ultimately destroyed the Sudanic states, the legacy of the gold trade continued through the post-colonial period. Modern Ghana takes its name from the fourth century CE Empire that covered Senegal, Mali and parts of the Sahara. The name Ghana, from the Arabic 'ghani,' proclaimed to the Arabic speaking world that this was the land of richness. Encouraged by this legacy, Kwame Nkrumah took leadership in the Pan-African movement to unite Africa with the final victims of the search for the source of the golden trade- the Africans enslaved and sold into the Americas.³⁰

Notes

1. Bovill, E.W., *Golden Trade of the Moors*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), v
2. *ibid*, 21
3. *ibid*, xii
4. *ibid*, 9
5. [Sodium and Health, www.saltinstitute.org/28.html]
6. *ibid*
7. Bovill, 246-47
8. Linton, Ralph. "Nomad Raids and Fortified Pueblos," in *American Antiquity*; Society for American Archaeology, Vol. 10, No. 1, Jul., 1944, 28-32
9. Bovill, 29
10. Bovill, 21, 22, 44- 46, 48-50, 61-62, 69, 82
11. *ibid*, 11
12. Herodotus, Book 4:174, 183-184
13. Bovill, 22
14. *ibid*, 45
15. *ibid*, 60-61
16. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*, J.F.P. Hopkins translator, Nehemia Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins, editors, (Cambridge University Press, 1981); also Bovill relating Ibn Haukal, p. 61
17. Bovill, 82
18. *ibid*, 121-122
19. *ibid*, 121
20. *ibid*, 87
21. <http://www.tcd.ie/Economics/staff/orourke/irchss/book/Chapter4.pdf>
22. Bovill, 90
23. Zahra, Muhammad Abu. *The Four Imams: Their Lives, Works and their Schools of thought*, 2nd edition, (Dar Al Taqwa Ltd.), 27, 30 and 76
24. Bovill, 186