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3

FROM ONE SEA TO ANOTHER
TRADING PLACES IN THE EUROPEAN
AND MEDITERRANEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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To the Other Shore: West African trade centre and the wics

Introduction

This essay, written by an Africanist, suggests that Africanists and Europeanists who consider the period roughly AD 500-1000 can learn from each other new ways of thinking about their data. Building on an earlier publication, which developed axes of comparison between the central Sahel and northwest Europe¹, I will here focus on the matter of early medieval trade by using the example of the central Sahelian settlements which joined trans-Saharan and Sahelian trading networks. Such places are naturally never called *wics* (a type of settlement familiar to those working along the North Sea coast) – yet they bear compelling similarities to places such as Hamwic or Haithabu. In trying to understand such places, there is great potential in combining local, particularistic detail and a comparative global overview.

My own archaeological work in the central Sahel has focused on large-scale, often walled sites, which date to later than the period discussed here, typically the first half of the second millennium AD. Trade and the definition of urbanism are key questions, and it is impossible to fully understand these settlements without considering what preceded them. Problematically, however, in the central Sahel societies, polities and towns appear abruptly in the written record around the time when Islam links them into a global network and a tradition of literacy. Thus, many of the build-up phases remain undocumented, and researchers attempting to grapple with these early periods often resort to projecting what is known of later times onto the past.

A prime example of this problem is the case of the Hausa. Today, the Hausa are a group in southern Niger and northern Nigeria who are linked by a shared language, a shared faith (Islam), and a shared reputation as

¹ A. Haour, *Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics: the central Sahel and the North Sea, 800-1500*, Oxford, 2007.

skilled traders. The Hausa make a fairly sudden appearance in historical records after the 15th century as builders of massively walled cities and as traders with international links. The Granadan traveller Leo Africanus² described Hausa towns populated by skilled craftspeople and affluent merchants, both local and foreign. Later, D'Anania, an Italian traveller to the West African coast, described the Hausa town of Kano, with its large stone walls, as one of three cities in Africa (together with Fez and Cairo) where any item could be purchased³. By the 19th century, the fame of the Hausa cities had spread widely and the first European explorers made the cities a particular goal of their travels. Our knowledge of the long-standing organisation of trade and the extensive international links of the Hausa cities emerges through written reports. For example, Hugh Clapperton, upon making his entry into Kano in January 1824, was disappointed to find that his foreign appearance was not a novelty and that items of European trade had preceded him to the city⁴.

The Hausa picture is, then, relatively clear for the latter half of the second millennium. Yet almost nothing is known of the preceding time periods that made these developments possible. Archaeological enquiry into the current Hausa area, which might reasonably be expected to shed light on the question, includes my incipient investigation of the alleged predecessor of Kano⁵. As the pace of archaeological research increases, we will no doubt come to find that the picture described for later periods had deep roots. It

² I.L. Africanus, *A geographical historie of Africa*, London (Georg Bishop, John Pory), 1600.

³ D'Anania, in S. Berthoud, D. Lange, «L'intérieur de l'Afrique occidentale d'après Giovanni Lorenzo d'Anania (XVI siècle)», *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale*, 14:2 (1972), p. 298-351. For the quotes paraphrased above, see p. 338-339.

⁴ D. Denham, H. Clapperton, W. Oudney, «Captain Clapperton's narrative», in *Narrative of travels and discoveries in northern and central Africa in the years 1822, 1823 and 1824*, Boston (Cumings, Hilliard & co.), 1826. For Clapperton's account of his entry to Kano, "I might have spared all the pains I had taken with my toilet; for not an individual turned his head round to gaze at me, but all, intent on their own business, allowed me to pass by without notice or remark", see p. 30; for his purchase on Kano market of "an English green cotton umbrella, an article I little expected to meet with, yet by no means uncommon... these umbrellas are brought from the shores of the Mediterranean", see p. 42.

⁵ For overviews of the archaeology, see A. Haour, *Ethnoarchaeology in the Zinder region, Republic of Niger: the site of Kufan Kanawa*, Oxford, 2003, p. 53-68; and A. Haour, *Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics*, p. 39-42. For anthropological, historical and archaeological perspectives on the time-depth of Hausa identity, see A. Haour, B. Rossi (eds), *Being and becoming Hausa: interdisciplinary perspectives*, Leiden, 2010.

seems unlikely, for example, that 16th-century Hausa society, as described by Leo Africanus, involving “rich merchants and most civil people” and providing “great traffic unto other nations”, could have come suddenly into being without local antecedents. This is true of the central Sahel more generally, and indeed of much of West Africa, and archaeology has had an important role to play here. For example, the well-known case of Jenné-jeno (in the western Sahel, in the Middle Niger region of modern Mali) has shown that the archaeologically determined date for urbanism and long-distance trade preceded by several centuries the date advanced by the written record⁶. This archaeological realisation completely rechanneled expectations, reworking models for the beginnings of long-distance trade and urbanism in sub-Saharan West Africa as a whole.

Considering our current state of knowledge, a comparative approach will be most effective in yielding insights as we search for the dimly documented roots of these phenomena. In particular, in approaching early medieval traders and their trading places, several issues and areas of debate emerge, some developed in – and for – the European context, others better known to Africanists. In this paper, I will argue that transferring these ideas from one context to another can be a fruitful exercise. To make this point, I shall suggest that Africanists can learn from the long-standing debate of Europeanists regarding the definition of early medieval central places and that Europeanists can profitably draw from Africanist literature concerning trading diasporas.

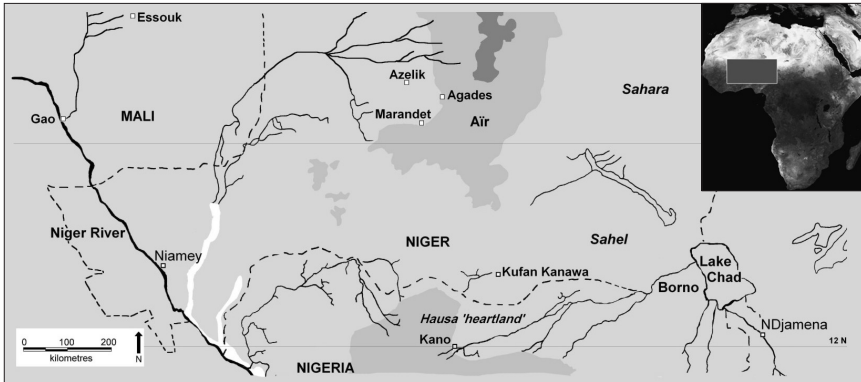
First, however, it may be useful to set the scene for those readers unfamiliar with the central Sahelian past and to provide a brief introduction to the data sources relating to trade, traders and trade settlements.

Central Sahelian traders and trading places

The Sahel – a name deriving from the Arabic word for *the shore* of the Sahara desert – is a strip of grassland savannah about four hundred kilometres wide, sandwiched between the desert to the north and forests to the south, and running east to west through Africa from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea. The central Sahel, the focus of this paper, is defined here as the part of the Sahel which lies between the Niger River and Lake Chad.

With some notable exceptions, the written evidence derives overwhelmingly from external sources. From the 9th century onwards, North African

⁶ R.J. McIntosh, S.K. McIntosh, «From *siècles obscurs* to revolutionary centuries in the Middle Niger», *World. Archaeology*, 20:1 (1988), p. 141-165.



i. Map of the central Sahel, showing places named in the text.

and Middle Eastern authors (some of the same to describe northern Europe) wrote accounts of the areas they called the *Bilad al-Sudan*, 'the land of the Blacks'. These sources were collated second- and third-hand, often from traders, and they emphasise commercial and religious questions; gold and infidels are a particular concern. Partial as these sources may be⁷, they demonstrate that as early as the 9th or 10th century the Sahel possessed a level of economic organisation important enough to impress foreign observers.

The commodity attracting most attention in the historical sources and which has dominated the study of trans-Saharan trade was gold, which is assumed to have fed the North African and European markets⁸. Most of the gold mines appear to have been in the westernmost parts of the Sahel, in the headwaters of the Niger River. The central Sahel itself appears to have had no major known gold mines, and therefore has been relatively neglected in studies of early medieval West African trade. Even if gold *was* absent from the Central Sahel (which is not a certainty), this academic neglect is unjustified, since other commodities likely generated both a substantial long-distance trade and a widespread involvement of individuals and settlements. These goods included salt, leather, feathers, and slaves. We know from the late 9th-century historian, geog-

⁷ T. Insoll, «The external creation of the Western Sahel's past: use and abuse of the Arabic sources», *Archaeological review from Cambridge*, 13:1 (1994), p. 39-49.

⁸ See, for example, M. Lombard, *Les métaux dans l'Ancien Monde du V^e au XI^e siècle*, Paris/The Hague, 1974; P. Spufford, *Money and its uses in medieval Europe*, Cambridge, 1988; P. Johanek, «Merchants, markets and towns», in *The New Cambridge Medieval History, volume III: c. 900-1024*, ed. T. Reuter, Cambridge, 1999, p. 64-94.

rapher and Abbasid functionary al-Yaqubi⁹ that the people of Zawila. In the Fezzan, built their fortune on trading slaves from south of the Sahara. The early medieval trans-Saharan trade remains poorly understood¹⁰, but we can confidently assume that its scale has, if anything, been underestimated¹¹.

Until recently, very little has been known of the early medieval central Sahel¹². However, the situation is quickly changing – studies published in the past two decades document a cluster of sites in the central Sahel that might be taken as an indication of the types of economic centres occurring in early medieval times.

Of these sites, Gao (Mali) is perhaps the best known. Gao has long been of interest to archaeologists and historians due to its recorded history, which stretches back to 9th-century mentions of the name ‘Kawkaw’ by Arab geographers¹³, and its tradition of epigraphy going back to the mid-11th century at least¹⁴. Controlled excavations within the city centre and at the nearby site of Gao-Saney were carried out by T. Insoll in the 1990s, both within the city centre and at the nearby site of Gao-Saney – the existence of these twin centres was perhaps initially due to religious differences¹⁵.

⁹ In N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins (eds), *Corpus of early Arabic sources for West African history* (second edition), Princeton, 2000, p. 22.

¹⁰ A. Haour, «The early medieval trans-Saharan slave trade», in *Comparatives dimensions of slavery in Africa: Archaeology and memory*, eds P. Lane, K. MacDonald, London, 2011, p. 61-78; and references therein.

¹¹ This, of course, has potential parallels with the situation in Europe during some periods; see M. McCormick, *Origins of the European economy: communications and commerce, AD 300-900*, Cambridge, 2001; M. McCormick, «New light on the ‘Dark Ages’: how the slave trade fuelled the Carolingian economy», *Past and present*, 177 (2002), p. 17-54; J. Henning, «Strong rulers – weak economy? Rome, the Carolingians and the archaeology of slavery in the first millennium AD», in *The long morning of medieval Europe: new directions in early medieval studies*, eds J.R. Davis, M. McCormick, Aldershot, 2008, p. 33-53.

¹² A. Haour, *Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics*, 2007, chapter 2. Trading centres to the west remained slightly better known archaeologically, in particular through the investigation of Kumbi Saleh, S. Berthier, *Recherches archéologiques sur la capitale de l’Empire de Gbana: étude d’un secteur d’habitat à Koumbi Saleh, Mauritanie. Campagnes II-III-IV-V (1975-1976) – (1980-1981)*, Oxford, 1997, and Tegdaoust J. Devise (ed.) *Tegdaoust III. Recherches sur Aoudaghost (campagnes 1960-1965, enquêtes générales)*, Paris, 1983, both sites in Mauritania.

¹³ N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus*.

¹⁴ P.F. De Moraes Farias, *Arabic medieval inscriptions from the Republic of Mali: epigraphy, chronicles and Songhay-Tuāreg history*, Oxford, 2003. See especially p. cli-clii.

¹⁵ T. Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 233.

The earliest occupation of the Gao area is thought to occur earlier than the 9th- and 10th-century dates obtained at both sites¹⁶. Early medieval evidence for export trade comes most notably from a mid-9th century cache of over fifty hippopotamus tusks possibly destined for workshops in North Africa and Spain. Later, imported materials such as 11th- and 12th-century glazed pottery and glass from various areas of the Islamic world (including Spain, the Maghreb, and Egypt) testify to Gao's wide-ranging links¹⁷. The presence of diverse communities – North African Arab, Berber, and indigenous, including perhaps a nomadic component – was apparent archaeologically. In addition, a Muslim community appears in the 10th century and a 'boom in trans-Saharan trade' occurs in the 11th and 12th centuries¹⁸.

Farther into the desert and also in Mali are the ruins of Essouk, known historically as Tadmakka¹⁹. Essouk's 11th- to 14th-century epigraphy had long been known²⁰, but systematic investigation of the site did not occur until the 21st century (excavations by S. Nixon²¹). This investigation revealed an emergence of permanent architecture (drystone and rammed earth), an 'occupational intensification' and the first evidence of long-distance trade at approximately the same time – during the mid-8th century. The recovery of Islamic glass and grains of wheat even suggests a long-distance trade link across the Sahara²². At this time the community may have been culturally and ethnically mixed, since Berber, North African, and Sahelian cultural influences are apparent²³. Large-scale trade, and thus a well-developed commercial settlement, appears to continue through to the 14th century (affected, but not terminated, by the rise of the Almoravids in the 11th century)²⁴. In short, the excavations at Essouk contradict the previously held view that significant commerce did not develop until the 10th century. The excavations also suggest that one particular strength of the settlement

¹⁶ T. Insoll, «Iron age Gao: an archaeological contribution», *The Journal of African History*, 38 (1997), p. 1-30.

¹⁷ T. Insoll, *Archaeology of Islam*.

¹⁸ T. Insoll, «Iron age Gao», p. 28; T. Insoll, *Archaeology of Islam*.

¹⁹ P. F. De Moraes Farias, *Arabic medieval inscriptions*.

²⁰ P. F. De Moraes Farias, *Arabic medieval inscriptions*, p. cxlv.

²¹ S. Nixon, «Excavating Essouk-Tadmakka (Mali): new archaeological investigations of early Islamic trans-Saharan trade», *Azania: archaeological research in Africa*, 44 (2009), p. 217-255.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

was the existence of a culturally mixed community, including Saharan Berbers who had secure access to the desert²⁵.

Moving east along the northern fringes of the Sahel, the settlement of Marandet has also been the object of much speculation, since it possesses substantial archaeological remains, is cited in historical records and is mentioned in oral tradition as a past settlement of the Hausa²⁶. The place (and a people) called Maranda are first mentioned in the 11th century by al-Yaqubi²⁷ and Marandet and its people are typically referred to as lying on the route from Gao to Egypt²⁸, which highlights their role in North African trade. A site near the town of Agades, Niger, which could be identified as Marandet was first reported in the mid-1950s²⁹; but the first archaeological investigation there was not until thirty years later when D. Grébénart began excavating the middens at the site³⁰, yielding tens of thousands of cone-shaped crucibles, ash, charred bone and ceramics, and providing radiocarbon dates spanning a period between about the 3rd and 15th centuries. The clay crucibles seem to have been employed for the working of copper, a commodity in high demand in West African trade centres; indeed, at Marandet, crucibles were found in high enough numbers to suggest trade. Archaeological work at Marandet has recently resumed³¹, yielding four additional radiocarbon dates between the mid-6th and the late 9th centuries, indicating that the copper-working area may have been larger than anticipated, and providing the first ceramic typology for the site, which featured

²⁵ S. Nixon, «Excavating», p. 246-247.

²⁶ I have argued elsewhere (*Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics*) that the link made by oral tradition between Marandet and the Hausa people, who later became famed throughout West Africa for their role in long-distance trade, is not fortuitous. It may well represent a latter attempt to make a logical link between a reputed former trading place and a modern trading group.

²⁷ N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 21.

²⁸ As for example by Ibn Faqih, in the early 10th century; in N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 27.

²⁹ Prautois, cited in R. Mauny, «Découverte d'un atelier de fonte du cuivre à Marandet (Niger)», *Notes africaines*, 58 (1953), p. 33-35.

³⁰ D. Grébénart, *La région d'In Gall – Teggida n Tesemt (Niger) – programme archéologique d'urgence, 1977-1981. Le Néolithique final et les débuts de la métallurgie*, Niamey, 1985. Overview in A. Haour, *Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics*.

³¹ T. Fenn, «Copper metallurgy and trans-Saharan commerce: report on summer 2006 field research in the western Agadez region, central Niger», *Nyame Akuma*, 66 (2006), p. 25-34; S. Magnavita, A. Maga, C. Magnavita, O.A. Idé, «New studies on Marandet (central Niger) and its trade connections: an interim report», *Zeitschrift für Archäologie Außereuropäischer Kulturen*, 2 (2007), p. 147-165.

predominantly pottery of likely local manufacture, wheel-made items seemingly of North African origin and some red-slipped sherds suggesting links with the Lake Chad area³².

Despite the wide span of the radiocarbon dates, it seems that the prominence of Marandet was short-lived; it is no longer mentioned (at least under that name) in the written sources after the 12th century and the later radiocarbon dates from the site are thought to relate to much reduced activities³³. Activities may have moved to other settlements in the region, for instance, the nearby settlement of Azelik-Takadda (excavations by Bernus and Gouletquer³⁴), which apparently flourished slightly later than Marandet, leading Bernus and Cressier³⁵ to outline a regional model involving changing patterns in trade routes and copper exploitation to explain the growth and decline of sites.

Apart from Gao, the settlements described above now lie in marginal areas and have ceased to exist as major settlements. As the economic tides changed and trade routes withered, settlements existing along those routes would have also declined. It is likely that a number of sites that were centres of economic importance existed in early medieval times, but were later superseded by places which attained higher political and economic recognition and, being closer to us in time, are easier to recognise in the written record.

In order to understand the early medieval settlements of the central Sahel, it is useful to look at examples much farther afield, in northern Europe.

Defining trading places and their agents

Early medieval settlements in northern Europe have a long and distinguished academic history and the idea that processes of political centralisation and increasing volumes of trade played a large part in the 'rebirth of

³² S. Magnavita *et al.*, «New studies».

³³ S. Bernus, P. Cressier, *La région d'In Gall-Tegidda n Tesemt – Programme archéologique d'urgence 1977-1981*, Niamey, 1991. Al Idrisi wrote in the mid-12th century of Marandet as a populous town, but where merchandise was scanty, industries scarce, and the inhabitants in possession of few good things (in N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 125). Other places in the area once described as flourishing came to be in ruin (*ibidem*).

³⁴ S. Bernus, P. Gouletquer, «Du cuivre au sel: recherches ethno-archéologiques sur la région d'Azelik (campagnes 1973-1975)», *Journal des Africanistes*, 46:1-2 (1976), p. 7-68.

³⁵ S. Bernus, P. Cressier, *La région*.

towns' in northwest Europe is a well-established research angle. In these debates, one central question has been regarding the involvement of political authorities in trade. This has been the subject of debate since the time of Henri Pirenne, and has been perhaps most forcefully played out in the case of the *wics*³⁶. The situation of the *wics* is enviable by the standards of central Sahelian archaeologists: first, the *wics* have experienced over sixty years of academic enquiry and over forty years of theoretical debate, which has resulted in a gradual refinement of urban studies; second, a number of key *wic* sites have been comprehensively excavated over a period of decades (Haithabu, admittedly an exceptional case, saw 12 000 cubic metres investigated between 1962 and 1980³⁷); and finally, results have been published in sufficient detail that reliable comparisons can be made between sites.

This state of affairs is enviable to Sahelian archaeologists largely because the archaeology of the central Sahel is such a young discipline, with the vast majority of work being carried out in the past twenty-five years³⁸. It is precisely at this juncture that we should take time to re-evaluate, and clarify exactly which questions we are seeking to answer and what methodologies should be deployed. One centrally important question concerns the organisation and control of places such as Marandet, Essouk, Gao and Azelik in the hazy period before historical records are available. Who was controlling trade activities? Who maintained trading settlements? What was the purpose of trade? Africanists, relying rather heavily on later written sources, have generally emphasised the influence of rulers. However, a look towards debates in the well-theorised northwestern European context helps reframe the issues. There, scholars have debated whether the archaeologically documented exchanges at *wics* represent the beginning of a market economy or a socially embedded economy³⁹. Here, there are both methodological and theoretical lessons that can be applied to the Sahelian case.

³⁶ See in particular R. Hodges, *Dark Age economics: origins of towns and trade, A. D. 600-1000*, London, 1982. Also, useful summaries by D. Hill, «150 years of the study of wics: 1841-1991», in *Wics – the early medieval trading centres of northern Europe*, eds D. Hill, R. Cowie, Sheffield, 2001, p. 3-6; and T. Saunders, «Early medieval emporia and the tributary social function», in *Wics – the early medieval trading centres of northern Europe*, D. Hill, R. Cowie, Sheffield, 2001, p. 7-13.

³⁷ S.M. Sindbæk, «Networks and nodal points: the emergence of towns in early Viking Age Scandinavia», *Antiquity*, 81 (2007), p. 119-132; see there Figure 2.

³⁸ Clearly shown by the history of investigation of the sites discussed above, most of which took place in the past fifteen years; but for a geographically wider overview see A. Haour, *Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics*, chapter 2.

³⁹ Overviews in R. Hodges, *Dark Age economics*, and T. Saunders, «Early medieval emporia».

For instance, it is important to link early medieval settlements with their wider landscape⁴⁰. Archaeozoological work in the medieval central Sahel is progressing⁴¹, mirroring the type of investigations done more routinely in northern European contexts. Archaeological work is uniquely placed to illuminate the social and economic organisation of the rural landscape, since the written records have typically ignored the more mundane aspects of economy – crops, farmers, and subsistence goods – in favour of exotic trade goods and urban lifestyles. Nevertheless, it seems plain that some of the practical support for trading activities – if only through increased food production to nourish incoming traders – must have come from the rural hinterland and was not confined to high-value or specialist commodities.

Although long-distance trade may have indirectly stimulated local, specialised production and involvement as helpers and local agents, we still need to look more closely at the role of the long-distance traders themselves. I suggest that anthropological case studies point to powerful means of structuring exchange which is independent from, yet linked to, direct political control, involving a trader group operating at a level of activity socially divorced from local populations. This mechanism for the structuring and regulation of trade is that of the trading diaspora.

Models of the trade diaspora

The model of the trade diaspora has become a basic interpretive tool for economic historians of West Africa. Its clearest theoretical formulation was proposed by anthropologist Abner Cohen⁴² on the basis of fieldwork

⁴⁰ H. Hamerow, *Early medieval settlements – the archaeology of rural communities in Northwest Europe 400-900*, Oxford, 2002, especially chapter 6; C. Wickham, *Framing the middle ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800*, Oxford, 2005, especially p. 681-688; A. Haour, *Rulers, warriors, traders, clerics*, p. 58-60. For a summary of archaeozoological evidence from English sites, see A. Vince, «Saxon urban economies: an archaeological perspective», in *Environment and economy in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. J. Rackham, York, 1994, p. 108-119.

⁴¹ See, for recent studies in the Chad basin, V. Linseele, *Archaeofaunal remains from the past 4,000 years in Sahelian West Africa. Domestic livestock, subsistence strategies and environmental changes*, Oxford, 2007; C. Magnavita, O. Adebayo, A. Höhn, D. Ishaya, S. Kahlheber, V. Linseele, S. Ogunseyin, «Garu Kime: a late Borno fired-brick site at Monguno, NE Nigeria», *African archaeological review*, 26 (2009), p. 219-246; V. Linseele, A. Haour, «Animal remains from medieval Garumele (Niger)», *Journal of African Archaeology* 8 (2): 167-184.

⁴² A. Cohen, «Cultural strategies in the organization of trading diasporas», in *The development of indigenous trade and markets in West Africa*, ed. C. Meillassoux, London, 1971, p. 266-281.

amongst Hausa traders in southern Nigeria, but the concept is widely applicable to other periods and regions.

Cohen's research on commerce and ethnicity in Ibadan (southern Nigeria) developed from the observation that much of the trade in present-day Africa was in the hand of specific groups such as the Hausa. In his study of the mechanisms of integration (or rather non-integration) of Hausa migrants in the 'Hausa' quarter of the primarily Yoruba town of Ibadan, Cohen argues that ethnic cohesiveness was intentionally maintained, with Islam serving as a blueprint. A trading diaspora, consisting of a network of dispersed but socially highly interrelated communities, was created, its main role being to regulate trade between different cultures⁴³ – a development "made possible through the marginal position of merchants and commercial agents"⁴⁴. This idea makes sense when Cohen cites the problems faced by long-distance merchants⁴⁵. The distances involved posed practical problems in the exchange of information, speedy dispatch, credit, and security. Cohen proposes that such needs are most easily met when individuals from one ethnic group, lineage or family control all or most of the stages of a trade in a particular commodity.

Cohen suggests that diasporas remain vastly under-researched, and that the study of 'live' diasporas such as those of the Hausa would shed light on the structure and functioning of past diasporas, in Africa and elsewhere⁴⁶. His model has since been applied by Lovejoy⁴⁷ to the West African pre-colonial period to analyse 'Wangara' trade to Hausa cities. The term Wangara occurs in early Arabic sources in reference to traders, particularly dealers in gold who were connected with some of the great medieval Sahelian empires. Lovejoy⁴⁸ argues that the Wangara were linked to the commercial diaspora operating out of the areas held by the Songhay polity (based in what is now Mali) up to the late 16th century and subsequent to its collapse. Lovejoy suggests that the Wangara introduced to the Hausa area a trading diaspora system based on a sense of cultural exclusiveness and contributed to a "major turning point in the economic history [of the area]"⁴⁹. Lovejoy's subtle analysis confronts the fluidity of ethnic labels by

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ P. Lovejoy, «The role of the Wangara in the economic transformation of the central Sudan in the 15th and 16th centuries», *Journal of African History*, 19:2 (1978), p. 173-193.

⁴⁵ A. Cohen, «Cultural strategies».

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 267-269.

⁴⁷ P. Lovejoy, «The role of the Wangara».

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

untangling the changes in the meaning of the term ‘Wangara’ over time, while simultaneously demonstrating processes of diaspora development and contraction as parallel to political consolidation. It certainly seems that this system would have provided an effective organisation of trade, through which identity and economic activity became merged.

Diaspora members’ preserved cultural identity and distance from local people may have manifested in spatial separateness. Certainly, modern West African cities such as Ibadan – where Cohen conducted his fieldwork – retain a ‘Hausa’ quarter, and ethnohistorical (and, to some extent, archaeological) investigations describe suburbs ordered along ethnic or functional lines⁵⁰.

The archaeological data from Gao and Essouk discussed above seems to show that central Sahelian trading settlements regrouped people of various cultural backgrounds. A scattering of early medieval historical evidence further suggests that separate quarters were maintained; for example, al-Bakri writes that 11th-century ‘Ghana’ (probably in Mauritania) “consists of two towns situated on a plain⁵¹”.

Interestingly, many of these points also apply to northern Europe. Callmer⁵² suggests that trade in the first millennium may not have been integrated with local society. Instead, he argues that trade involved foreign merchants dealing with local rulers and trading only at fixed points on set itineraries⁵³. More recently, Sindbæk⁵⁴ makes a similar point regarding

⁵⁰ For information regarding suburbs ordered along ethnic or corporate lines, see examples from second-millennium AD Ghana summarised by J. Anquandah, «Urbanization and state formation in Ghana during the Iron Age», in *The archaeology of Africa: food, metals and towns*, eds T. Shaw, P. Sinclair, B. Andah, A. Okpoko, London/New York, 1995, p. 642-651. For some general points regarding the causes for diaspora members’ separateness, see p. 5-6 in P. Curtin, *Cross-cultural trade in world history*, Cambridge, 1984. Though cases may vary, Curtin notes that, fundamentally, “Whatever the balance of power between the traders and their hosts, the relationship was necessarily asymmetrical. The traders were specialists in a single kind of economic enterprise, whereas the host society was a *whole* society, with many occupations, class stratification, and political divisions between the rulers and the ruled” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

⁵¹ N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus*, p. 79.

⁵² J. Callmer, «Three fundamental perspectives for the study of trade and exchange in northern Europe in the second half of the first millennium AD», in *Trade and exchange in prehistory*, ed. B. Hårdh, L. Larsson, D. Olausson, R. Petré, Lund, 1988, p. 261-270.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 266-267.

⁵⁴ S.M. Sindbæk, “The small world of the Vikings: networks in early medieval communication and exchange”, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 40:1 (2007), p. 59-74; p. 70.

networks of early medieval communication and exchange in northern Europe: “[c]ommunications across long-distances were achieved through a spindly combination of hubs and weak ties”. This model recognises the existence of only a few hubs (Haithabu, Dorestad, etc.) and a limited group of people – “mainly specialised travellers somehow separate from the mass of society⁵⁵” – travelling between these sites. Whilst Sindbæk’s ‘complex network theory⁵⁶’ can no doubt help us conceptualise of communications in early medieval history, we must also turn to the comparative case studies that contemporary societies offer. Callmer notes that ethnographic materials which might help illuminate the type of exchange he envisaged (namely, trade relations not integrated into local society) are quite rare, but he suggests that the closest parallels might exist with 18th- and 19th-century trade in West Africa, citing especially sources relating to the central Sahel⁵⁷.

Can the West African notion of ‘stranger-trader’ be identified as a recurring feature of the northern European record? Cohen’s model of the trading diaspora, which envisages ethnic self-definition as an instrument for effective trade, provides a valuable structure, which can be linked to modern anthropological theory through case studies from around the world. As Georg Simmel points out⁵⁸, “Throughout the history of economics, the stranger everywhere appears as the trader, or the trader as stranger”. The trading diaspora would have offered a network of trusted, safe ports along the northern shores of Europe, which long-distance traders would have needed – just as in the central Sahel. So the idea of a trading diaspora offers an interpretive framework reinforcing the studies of early medieval trading networks and should be amenable to testing through archaeology⁵⁹.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ J. Callmer, «Three fundamental perspectives», p. 267. Callmer does not, however, go on to consider Cohen’s work, despite in a later paper referring explicitly to ‘trading diasporas’ to describe the establishment of Frisian traders, perhaps whole family groups, at key places of the trade network; see J. Callmer, “Archaeological sources for the presence of Frisian agents of trade in Northern Europe ca. AD 700-900”, in *Studien zur Archäologie des Ostseeraumes, Festschrift für M. Müller-Wille*, ed. A. Wesse, Neumünster, 1998, p. 469-481.

⁵⁸ L.A. Fallers (ed.), *Immigrants and associations*, The Hague/Paris, 1967, p. 7.

⁵⁹ In particular, the significance of continental pottery at places such as Hamwic has been debated; see R. Hodges, *Dark Age economics*, especially p. 57-8; A. Morton, «A synthesis of the evidence», in *Excavations at Hamwic. Vol. I: Excavations 1946-83, excluding Six Dials and Melbourne Street*, ed. A. Morton, London, 1992, p. 20-77, especially p. 68-69.

What of the case of the Frisians? Mentioned in a number of written sources from the late 7th to the late 11th centuries, the Frisians are seen as important agents of trade from the Rhine to the southern part of the North Sea, with likely involvement in the Baltic⁶⁰. Much like Lovejoy in the case of the West African Wangara, Lebecq⁶¹ and Callmer⁶² discuss the changing meaning of the term 'Frisian' and conclude that in the written sources 'Frisian' often becomes a synonym for long-distance traders or sailors. Far from weakening the prospects of an archaeological recognition, the fact that the label 'Frisian' might not always imply a particular ethnic or geographic identity makes the whole story more interesting when viewed through the lense of Cohen's findings⁶³ among the Hausa in Ibadan. In that case, traders intentionally maintained their 'Hausanness' in order to carry out business more effectively. What if, far from being eclectic and quick to adopt local ways of life⁶⁴, traders in northern Europe were in fact keen to mark out their difference through carefully-selected material or performative aspects of culture? If Cohen is right in highlighting the essential instrumentality of the diaspora members' identity, it is clear we cannot expect to detect a wholly different material culture and settlement traditions attributable to visiting traders, but we may be able to identify specific items that were enlisted to signify cultural difference. In a general overview of possible material signatures of a Frisian presence in northern Europe during the 8th and 9th centuries, Callmer⁶⁵ suggests that the manner of carrying and the style of antler combs and their cases may have been markers of 'a special Frisian identity'.

The possibility of a "nation of socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed, communities"⁶⁶ also helps shed light on the short and brilliant careers of some trading settlements. Such spindly networks would have been both effective and very vulnerable to defections or reconfigurations⁶⁷. In conclusion, the northern European *wics* may have been symptomatic of a particular set of trade relations, which West African data are well placed to illuminate.

⁶⁰ S. Lebecq, «The Frisian trade in the Dark Ages; a Frisian or a Frankish/Frisian trade?», in *Rotterdam Papers VII*, ed. A. Carmiggelt, 1996, p. 7-15, especially figure 2; J. Callmer, «Archaeological sources».

⁶¹ S. Lebecq, «The Frisian trade».

⁶² J. Callmer, «Archaeological sources», p. 470-471.

⁶³ A. Cohen, «Cultural strategies».

⁶⁴ J. Callmer, «Archaeological sources», p. 479.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ A. Cohen, «Cultural strategies», p. 267.

⁶⁷ See S.M. Sindbæk, «The small world», p. 71 for a formulation of these points.

Conclusion

This paper has pointed to some common ideas and theories applicable to early medieval trade in both the central Sahel and northern Europe. I argue that data from these two regions make most sense when considered together. Faced with reconstructing societies far removed from anything we know now, comparative history and archaeology can offer valuable insights. In order to approach our subjects of expertise with a new and critical eye, we can use this comparative approach by reading and tuning our minds to questions and problems relating to other parts of the world. My aim in this brief paper has been to stimulate discussion rather than provide a thorough overview of themes and theories well-published elsewhere. I have suggested two bodies of data which may be usefully transferred from one geographical context to the other when approaching questions of early medieval trade. It seems likely that the operation of trading settlements in the early medieval period could have followed principles not well described in the available sources. Archaeological and historical sources make only partial allusions to the full range of economic activities and goods, so that places or items currently of little significance may once have been important. Trade may have been organised along corporate lines in a landscape that was criss-crossed by tenuous links between places and individuals rather than as a 'state' endeavour.

There is no difficulty in accepting a connection between northwest Europe and the Mediterranean at the end of the first millennium, nor is there difficulty in accepting commercial links between the Mediterranean and the central Sahel – the role of the Lake Chad area in supplying slaves for markets of the Islamic world appears clearly in the written record from about AD 900. Like northwest Europe, the central Sahel was linked to the eastern Mediterranean: a 10th-century Egyptian slave seller might conceivably encounter captives shipped from the heathen hinterlands of Scandinavia and Lake Chad⁶⁸. How these two regions eventually became

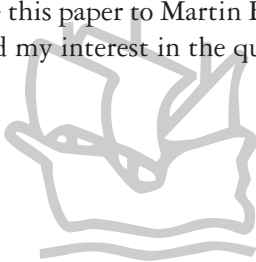
⁶⁸ It is thought-provoking to recall that given the prevalent view of the world among medieval Arab scholars, the area most moderate in its climate and most civilised in its inhabitants was the Mediterranean. For Ibn Khaldun (in N. Levtzion, J.F.P. Hopkins, *Corpus*, 2000, p. 321) in the 14th century, the "Saqāliba" [Slav, slave (P. Spufford, *Money*, 1988, p. 65) or Northern European in general (J. Hunwick, «Arab views of black Africans and slavery», Paper presented at the fifth international conference of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, November 7-8, 2003, Yale University, available on <http://www.yale.edu/glc/events/race/Hunwick.pdf>)] on the one hand, and the people of the African Sahel and savanna on the other, were barbarian reflections of one another, sharing manners close to those of animals on account of their distance from temperate regions.

embedded in the emerging world-system of the early post-medieval period remains to be analysed, and a methodology and theory for such wide-ranging comparisons must be developed. This expansive economic world is brought to light by studies of individual biographies, such as McCormick's monograph, *Origins*⁶⁹; this sort of anecdotal evidence is telling. And so, much as the meeting which gave rise to this book has taken as its theme 'one sea to the other', I would suggest we look from one shore of the Sahara to the other.

Acknowledgments

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I would like to dedicate this paper to Martin Biddle who first, in my undergraduate days, sparked my interest in the question of the *wics*.



⁶⁹ M. McCormick, *Origins*, p.118.