

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

THE GOLDEN RHINOCEROS AND AFRICA'S MIDDLE AGES

The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages.

By François-Xavier Fauvelle. Translated by Troy Tice.

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Key Words: precolonial, sources, archaeology, kingdoms, states.

In *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*, historian and archaeologist François-Xavier Fauvelle has written a resourceful book that reclaims what he calls the 'African Middle Ages', a timespan ranging from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries. This volume is the English language edition of an original French publication (2013), which includes an introductory historiographical essay, thirty-four chapters, each with a short bibliographical essay, a glossary of terms, an annotated bibliography, and a comprehensive index. There are two maps, one covering the period from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, and the other of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; each depicts principal political formations, oases, salt and gold production sites, and the continent's physiographic features and ecosystems, but they do not demarcate any trade routes. There are also useful reproductions of archaeological and documentary evidence, such as illustrations of tenth-century Christian Nubian frescoes, the plan of a thirteenth-century Ethiopian tomb, and an extract of the fourteenth-century Catalan Atlas depicting the Malian ruler Mansa Musa.

The introductory chapter provides a survey of postcolonial Africa historiography and the debates, controversies, and shifting interpretations that surround the recovery of the continent's past. Fauvelle assesses a range of present and past interpretative strategies that 'invent' different pasts for a reified 'Africa'. His study is intended to be a critical counterpoint to the historiographical tradition of invented Africas. From the point of view of methodology, he relies on a detailed critique of relevant textual and non-textual sources pertaining to the African Middle Ages, carefully assessing their relative value and their limitations. His presupposition is that the African Middle Ages left significant and material 'traces' which have been largely ignored in current Africanist historiography.

Fauvelle notes that in contrast to ancient Africa (such as Egypt of the Pharaohs, Punic Africa, and Meroitic Nubia), and post-fifteenth century Africa of the slave trade and the colonial eras, the history of the African Middle Ages is generally dismissed as an implausible enterprise, on the grounds that there is a dearth of reliable sources. The author challenges this assessment, proposing that the African Middle Ages represent a continent-wide 'golden age' when examined within a world history framework. Using documentary and archaeological evidence, Fauvelle makes the argument that the African Middle Ages operated according its own distinctive dynamic and cohesion, that this era was indeed a continental golden age, and that Africa played a central role in the global 'medieval' world. Fauvelle makes his case in thirty-four chapters that offer synchronic or snapshot views

of different parts of the continent, interpreting the evidence as material traces of micro-histories which he locates in a medieval global perspective.

Textual sources include Chinese accounts of eastern Africa dating from the eighth and fifteenth centuries, Marco Polo's thirteenth-century description of Madagascar and the Horn of Africa, a fourteenth-century Italian description of the Saharan trade, and late fifteenth-century Portuguese texts on the 'discovery' of Atlantic and Indian Ocean Africa. However, the bulk of the author's documentary sources come from the Islamic world: geographies, travelers' accounts, correspondence, and administrative reports. Archaeological data provide valuable information relating to elite material culture, as revealed in architecture, for example, Nubian cathedrals and monasteries, Ethiopian churches, Great Zimbabwe constructions, as well as in richly endowed elite tombs, such as in Ethiopia and in the Middle Senegal Valley, and in buried 'treasures' discovered at sites in Ethiopia and southern Africa.

It might seem that the limitations of the source material would produce disjointed narratives and preclude the construction of a synthesizing theme-driven narrative; however, this is not the case. Through the African golden age metaphor, the author is able to shift from the fact and event-driven optic of the sources to engage with broader issues concerning connections between continental history and world history. The reader gains not only a sense of upper-class material life and the circulation of prestige objects, but also a vantage point on political, cultural, and commercial milieus, and their interactive networks. Sources offer vignettes of particular episodes, such as a Malian ruler's early fourteenth-century Atlantic voyages, commercial transactions and political interactions, and events, such as religious conversion. Fauvelle gives the African Middle Ages an 'identity' and demonstrates that this phase of African history is a rich and fruitful academic field of study. While this proposition is self-evident for Africanists, it would be a revelation for non-Africanist scholars as well as university students with an interest in the African past. Fauvelle has written an intellectually provocative and insightful study that offers interested Africanists new channels of historiographical inquiry and new conceptual possibilities.

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FASHION AND BODY POLITICS IN IMPERIAL SUDAN

Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan.

By Marie Grace Brown.

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Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan, by Marie Grace Brown, is a well-researched and well-written volume guided by an insightful understanding of