*Focus of the issue:*

AFRICA: INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

*Research article*

# SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AND THE WORLD: HISTORY OF CONNECTIONS

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LVOVA Eleonora Sergeevna, Dr.Sc. (History), Professor, Department of African Studies, Institute of Asian and African Studies, M.V. Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russian Federation. ORCID: 0000-0001-7713-112X. E-mail: eleonora.lvova39@yandex.ru

**Abstract.** Today, the attention of the public, businessmen, politicians, scientists is increasingly attracted to Africa, including Tropical (Sub-Saharan) Africa. However, these areas have never been isolated and always occupied a special place in the global economic and cultural ties. This paper, based on the research of a wide range of written sources of ancient, classical, and medieval periods, is devoted to the historical analysis of the relations of the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa with the outside world. The work highlights the depth and long history of economic, cultural, and trade contacts going back several thousand years. It explores the directions of trade routes that facilitated the spread of goods, cultural ideas, and technologies, as well as the types of goods that were of particular value to participants in international trade. The author describes in detail such phenomena as the slave trade and the book trade, the money, and the exchange values that were circulating on the continent. It is known that African traders entered into transactions with merchants from China, India, the Roman Empire, Byzantium, and European countries, were involved in world trade, and had a good command of the market trends. Africa became part of the world economy many centuries ago, and this fact is evidenced by written and material sources from different parts of the world. Nevertheless, this area of African studies remains understudied, creating lacunas in understanding the pre-colonial history of the region. This article is, in a way, an appeal to contemporary Africanists to pay more attention to the study of Africa's pre-colonial history, without knowledge of which it is often difficult to explain some current conflicts and contribute to their resolution.

**Keywords:** Africa, history, classical sources, Arab medieval literature, trade, money, exchange values, Egypt, China, India

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## RESEARCH CHALLENGES IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA STUDIES

It is frequently asserted that the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa only entered the world arena during the colonial era as an exploited part of the European dominions. For example, the Guyanese historian, sociologist, and Pan-Africanist politician W. Rodney observed that the social and economic development of Africa was connected to the unequal relations between Europe and African societies [Rodney 1974]. The concept of the American sociologist, political scientist, and philosopher I. Wallerstein takes as a basis the "capitalist world system," which began to evolve "in the long 16th century," which he discusses in the first volume of his multi-volume work [Wallerstein 2011]. In the subsequent volumes, he examines later periods, up to the 20th century.

The hypothesis that Africa developed in isolation was long supported by Western historians, until about the 1950s and 1960s. In their works, they asserted that Africa was on the periphery of world history. It is important to note that the insufficient written tradition of some African peoples has contributed to a certain Eurocentrism in modern historiography regarding Africa.

After numerous African countries gained independence, there was a notable shift in the focus of historical research on the continent, which soon broadened and deepened regional studies. In the 21st century, as the continent's countries are strengthening their positions in the global economy and politics, this is perceived as a major breakthrough.

The majority of works by Africanists have focused on the later period of the region' development than that described in this article. Research into the relations between pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world still represents a significant research gap within the field of African studies. The history of African relations with peoples and countries outside the continent extends back many centuries. However, it is also important to bear in mind that the world is not limited to Europe, and that global relations have existed for many centuries.

## AFRICA AND THE WORLD IN ANCIENT AND CLASSICAL ERAS

The southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea has long been in a constant relationship with the ancient "*oikoumene*" and has been part of it since the Punic Wars. It was from the Roman colony of "Africa" that the name was then transferred to the entire continent. However, the first information dates back to 4000–3000 BC, and it was found on the territory of ancient Egypt. There, the courtiers of pharaohs admired the art of "oriental" magicians and dancers and dressed in clothes sewn from fabric from the *country of Seres*[1] [Velgus 1978: 10-17]. Images of that time draw us both military campaigns against the southern peoples and attempts to establish peaceful trade relations with them. The most famous evidence of this is a relief preserved in the temple complex of Deir el-Bahri, which tells about the voyage to the Land of Punt[2] on the order of Hatshepsut[3] in the 15th century BC (Fig. 1).

The relief also depicts and describes the goods exchanged between the Egyptians and the inhabitants of the Land of Punt. Accordingly, it speaks of three ships filled with "the most beautiful things." For the ruler of Punt, "bread, wine, beer, meat, fruit" and "all

[1] I.e., the country of Chinese silk. In antiquity, China was called "*the country of the Seres"* (*Author's Note*).
[2] The land of Punt is an area of East Africa known to the ancient Egyptians. Modern researchers identify Punt as the coast of the Red and Eritrean seas, today's Somalia, Djibouti, and Eritrea.
[3] Hatshepsut was a female pharaoh of the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt from the 18th Dynasty.

sorts of things" were sent, and "gold, incense, ebony, pure ivory, myrrh resin, baboons, monkeys, precious stones..." were received. Everything acquired was weighed and valued. The relief depicts the god *Horus* bearing scales and the goddess of writing and wisdom, *Seshat*, counting millions of "marvelous things of the southern countries" [Journey to the Land of Punt 1979: 13].

Fig. 1. **Relief in the temple complex of Deir el-Bahri: Journey to the Land of Punt**
https://rg.ru/2023/12/24/uchenye-nashli-legendarnoe-carstvo-punt.html

It has been suggested by various sources that the Horn of Africa and the Nile Valley were rich in obsidian. Evidence of this can be found in fragments of vessels made from this natural material. Most of the obsidian reached the territory of Egypt. Information about it can also be found in Egyptian inscriptions.

Ancient Egypt's ties with southern countries endured for centuries. These relations encompassed both peaceful trade relations and military clashes, with varying degrees of success. During the first millennium BC, Egypt was even ruled by a dynasty from Meroe (a state on the territory of the modern Republic of Sudan), known as the "Ethiopian."

The ancient Ethiopian state of Axum is thought to have emerged in northeastern Africa in the 1st century AD, maintaining relations with both its northern neighbor, Egypt, and the Roman Empire [Hatke 2013]. It has been argued that one of the main reasons for the development of Axum was the availability of ivory [Tefera 2004], given the relative proximity of the Axum center to the elephant hunters of Ptolemy. The presence of elephants has also been proven in central Tigray[4] and south-central Eritrea. Ivory exports were one of Axum's main sources of income. Another significant source of revenue was gold. For example, a 4th century inscription indicates that by the second half of the 3rd century, Axum's economy had expanded through control of the gold mines within its annexed territories. Ships arrived from the east, with Arab sailors bringing not

[4] Now one of the regions of Ethiopia.

only their own goods but also products from China and India in exchange for gifts from African lands.

These peoples traded with African communities and established links between them and countries near and far: Ptolemaic Egypt, “Persis,” India, Sri Lanka, and China. Thus, medieval Chinese encyclopedias mention goods from distant Africa, as well as the geography and people of this region [Ulyanov 2018; Lvova 1994: 327]. Furthermore, the Arab historian, geographer, and traveler Al-Masudi writes that Arab merchants purchased elephants in Africa, which were killed for their tusks, which they transported “to the lands of al-Sina and al-Hind through Oman from the country of the Zinj. They do not use them themselves, as they do not use gold and silver” [Al-Masudi, 1979: 202]. This is further evidence of working exclusively for the external market.

The discovery of Kushan coins[5] in Ethiopia (Fig. 2) indicates the existence of historical and enduring links with the most remote regions. The states of these regions have had continuous, mainly trade-based, relations with Africans since ancient times.

Fig. 2. **Two Kushan coins of Vasudev from the Axum hoard**
https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:India,_Kushan,_Vasudeva_II,_3rd_century_-_Coin_of_Kushan_King_Vasudeva_II_-_2011.212_-_Cleveland_Museum_of_Art.jpg

## CLASSICAL AND ARABIC SOURCES

It should be said that there are few sources describing pre-colonial Africa’s economic relations with the rest of the world. Therefore, scholars in African Studies, in their research of ancient trade routes, relied on inaccurate reports and information from Arab traders who had visited the regions of East and West Africa. For a long time, the main trading partners of African rulers and merchants remained people from the East. In West Africa, these were the Arabs; in East Africa, also Arabs, Indians, and Chinese. Northeast Africa, especially Christian Ethiopia, retained links with Byzantium, which continued the practice of relations with Ptolemaic Egypt. A considerable number of merchants left their records, many of which have been translated into European languages and have not lost their importance as reliable sources on the history, economy, and culture of sub-Saharan Africa. A similar observation can be made about the chronicles of Ethiopia and the peoples of West Africa (Hausa, Songhai, Kanuri), and East Africa (Swahili).

Ancient authors, such as Herodotus in the 5th century BC; Diodorus Siculus in the 1st century BC; Strabo at the turn of the 1st century AD; Claudius Ptolemy in the 2nd century

[5] The Kushan Empire was an ancient state on the territory of modern Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Northern India.

AD; and others, wrote about the links between the Mediterranean and Africa. From their works, we are able to ascertain that an expedition was sent around the continent by Pharaoh Necho at the end of the 6th century BC [Claudius Ptolemy 1979; Strabo 1979]. It is also probable that they were also aware of the later voyage of the Phoenician from Carthage, Gannon, south along the African coast. However, some historians question the reliability of his "Periplus."

At the turn of the 1st and 2nd centuries, an anonymous "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" appeared, describing the sea route along the Red Sea. It describes cities and harbors for the import and export of goods, markets where it was profitable to bring fabrics, metal products, gold and silver vessels, and to buy turtle shells, ivory, rhinoceros' horns, which were believed to have healing properties [Periplus of the Erythraean Sea 1979: 97]. Heliodorus, in his "Ethiopica," in the 3rd century AD speaks of "yarn and fabrics from the spider's web of the country of the Seres, clothes dyed with purple." This is often repeated by other ancient authors.

From time to time, rulers, from Egyptian pharaohs to the Roman emperors, made attempts to establish diplomatic relations or to launch military expeditions. As early as during the reign of Hatshepsut, there was an exchange of gifts between Egypt and the Land of Punt; later, classical era sources repeatedly mention Indian and Chinese fabrics, Arabian cloth, weapons, and so on. For instance, in the 1st century, the Greek-Egyptian scholar Claudius Ptolemy stated in his "Guide to Geography" that "...thanks to merchants, well-known is the way from Fortunate Arabia to Aromata, Azania, and Rhapta" on the coast of East Africa, naming many markets south of the equator [Claudius Ptolemy 1979: 137]. Furthermore, the Greco-Roman ancient historian, geographer, and philosopher Strabo, in his "Geography," speaks of Indian, Arabic, and Ethiopian goods arriving at the port of Philadelphia in Egypt.

The "Periplus of the Erythraean Seas" tells us about trade relations of the population of the Red Sea coasts of Africa with overseas countries, about many markets that imported fabrics, clothes, glassware, copper, and brass, and for the king, gold and silver vessels in the local style [Periplus of the Erythraean Sea 1979]. The author adds that in Egypt, blankets "produced for the barbarians" were also made, so there was already production for foreign trade. And exports included ivory, rhinoceros' horn, tortoises, and incense. Author of the 6th century A.D., monk Cosmas Indicopleustes, in his "Christian Topography," states that "Adulê (the seaport of Aksum) <...> is often visited by merchants from Alexandria and the Elanitic Gulf (Gulf of Aqaba)" and that Aksum merchants received "many ships from all over India, from Persia," and they sailed to Taprobanê (Sri Lanka) and formed their small colonies there [Periplus of the Erythraean Sea 1979].

The goods they exchanged included silk, sandalwood, aloe, cloves, pepper, copper, and fabrics. Notably, from Ethiopia, elephant tusks were exported "even into India, Persia, the Homerite country (modern Yemen)," and the Roman dominion [Cosmas Indicopleustes 1979: 72]. It is noteworthy that African elephant tusks remained a raw material for Chinese bone carvers for a long time, as they were comparatively softer than those of Indian elephants and more amenable to processing. Already in ancient times, stations had been "adapted for traders on camels" along the road from the interior of the continent to the Red Sea. It is also said that here "the traders were very intransigent," apparently because they were well aware of the world market conditions at that time [Periplus of the Erythraean Sea 1979: 97].

## CULTURAL CONNECTIONS WITH THE MEDIEVAL EAST

The peoples of the Middle East, Byzantium, and the Arabian Peninsula have always remained constant partners for African traders. In Aksum, a city in northern Ethiopia, Christianity appeared in the 4th century, and the Greek language began to spread. Inscriptions in Greek were found on coins and many archaeological artefacts. And of Ezana, the ruler of Aksum in the 6th century, an inscription in two languages (ancient Ethiopian Geʿez and Greek) was preserved, telling of his victories.

The rulers and nobles knew Greek well [Hendrickx 1999]. For example, Zoskales, one of the rulers of Aksum, was described as a learned man who also knew Hellenic. However, both in ancient and medieval times in this region, translated books (as well as local chronicles) were the exclusive property of only the upper classes and monasteries and were never used as a commodity.

The links with the North and the East were constant, both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, and could not, of course, be carried out without intermediaries who knew foreign languages. All the above-mentioned authors of the classical era and the early Middle Ages attest to the fact that warriors, travelers, and traders going to Africa were accompanied by interpreters, although it was not always easy to find them. They are echoed by later witnesses: the authors of Arabic-language works of the Middle Ages, such as Al-Bakri, Yaqut, Ibn Battuta, Ibn Khaldun, and one of the first Europeans, the Venetian merchant Da Mosto [Da Mosto 1979]. Many merchants and foreign interpreters stayed to live in African cities. Medieval sources are full of descriptions confirming this.

The medieval city of Sijilmasa in the south-east of modern Morocco, one of the main trading cities of Western Africa, located on the territory of modern Mauritania, Aoudaghost, as well as the capital of medieval Ghana, were for many years inhabited by merchants from Iraq, Basra, Baghdad, and other cities of the East. Al-Omari, an Arab geographer and historian, met in Niani, the capital of Mali, with a certain sheikh who had lived for 35 years at the time of the meeting [Al-Omari 1979: 215]. The Arab philosopher and social thinker Ibn Khaldun wrote: “They and their descendants (sic!) constantly travel <...> back and forth” and further: “And the caravans of these merchants invariably bring great gain, large profits, and enormous wealth, which can rarely be compared with the income of merchants in the countries of Islam.” He also mentions a receipt in Aoudaghost for 24,000 dinars, adding, “I have not heard accounts like this in the East” [Ibn Khaldun 1979]. The basis of such wealth was the trade in gold and salt. Let us recall that this region of West Africa was called “the land of gold,” which, through the hands of Muslim merchants, reached Europe [Berzock 2019].

There are records of the presence of Arabic-language goods in West and East Africa. With the arrival of caravans of Arab traders, Islam began to spread across the regions, not only as a religious practice but also as a social and political system. This process is exemplified by the establishment of extensive Muslim states, such as the Mali Empire.

With the advent of Islam, another commodity appeared in West and East African societies: books. These, as well as scientific works on astronomy, medicine, and mathematics, were transmitted via trade caravans [Battestini 1986]. The establishment of educational centers, such as the Sankore University in Timbuktu [Saad 2010], was facilitated through the interaction of these centers with scholars from the Maghreb and the Middle East. For example, the works of Al-Farabi, one of the greatest representatives of medieval Islamic philosophy, a mathematician, astronomer, and physicist, reached

Africa and were adapted to local needs, influencing the development of medicine and philosophy in the region.

## TRADE AND EXCHANGE BETWEEN AFRICA AND THE EAST

The African continent is renowned for its well-developed system of trade and exchange between groups in select regions. However, it should be noted that trade patterns exhibited significant variation across different communities. In some communities, trade was seasonal and irregular, while in others it was controlled by higher authorities and more organized. It was motivated by a variety of factors, including socio-cultural and religious needs, economic and political considerations. Regardless of the motivation, trade and exchange stimulated innovation, cultural interaction, and human resettlement, as well as the dissemination of plants and animals [Chirikure 2017].

The records found indicate that the nomenclature of imported and exported goods generally did not change. However, as the geography of trade expanded (not only in coastal and border areas but also gradually penetrating into the interior of the continent), the range of goods expanded: the need for overseas luxury goods grew in African societies, and interest in metals increased: gold, iron, copper (not without reason one of the translations of Al-Masudi's work on his visits to Africa bears the title "Meadows of gold and mines of gems" [Al-Masudi 1979]) and live goods—"slaves and camels" [Al-Masudi 1979]. It has already been pointed out that trade relations were largely oriented outwards from the continent, and the income from selling exclusively to foreigners stimulated domestic occupations.

It has been asserted by some that the main commodity exported from Africa, from ancient times up until the 19$^{th}$ century, was black slaves. They were not in high demand within local economies; however, involvement in the global slave trade first led to military raids for the purpose of capturing slaves, who were then resold, and then to selling by the local kings of their own subjects, typically convicts. In the 9$^{th}$ century, the Arab historian, geographer, and traveler Al-Yaqubi testified, "And it has come to my attention that the kings of the blacks sell blacks easily and without any war" [Al-Yaqubi 1979: 196–197].

The trade in slaves was quite profitable. However, this "commodity" did not occupy the foremost position in Africa's supply to the world market. It was outstripped by the export of gold. It was available both in the form of ingots and as gold sand. Special weights were even made for the latter, either with stylized numbers indicating the weight or in the form of figurines illustrating proverbs and folk tales. Such weights have been found by archaeologists at Kumbi-Sale, the ancient capital of medieval Ghana. Gold was exported both to the East and to Europe via the Arabs. Before the arrival of the so-called Spanish gold from the New World, West African countries (particularly medieval Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, which have retained the name "Land of gold") were the primary sources of this precious metal for European countries. For a long time, it was used to mint "guineas" in Great Britain (found, among others, in the Uspensky Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin during restoration). The nomenclature of the coin is associated with Guinea and the city of Djenne.

From the port cities of East Africa, the Arabs exported not only gold but, more importantly, iron. These areas acquired and retained the name of "Copper Belt." It went to India, where it became instrumental in the production of alloys known as "Indian iron," from which the famous Damascus daggers were forged.

The same trade relations continued in the 12th century. This is mentioned by Al-Idrisi, a statesman at the court of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the greatest historian of his era. He writes that African gold "is exported to the mints," that "iron is the main source of their (East Africans'—*E.L.)* income and the main item of their trade", to the ports on the Indian Ocean "come ships from Oman and other places," they go to India, where it is used with alloys to make "Indian iron," famous throughout the East [Al-Idrisi 1979]. He is echoed by Yaqut ibn Abdullah al-Hamawi and Ibn Said al-Maghribi [Ibn Said 1979] in the 13th century: "Their commodity is salt. Rosaries of palm wood... necklaces of green glass, bracelets of red copper, copper rings and signets"; "Their wealth is salt, iron. <...> Ships come to this island (Zanzibar—*E.L.*) from all directions" [Yatsunsky 1958: 233, 238–243].

The range of imported goods was preserved in the 14th century and beyond. For example, Al-Omari reports that "in Habasha (on the territory of modern Ethiopia), tribute is paid in the form of linen and silk fabrics and what is brought from Egypt, Yemen, and Iraq," and that the nobles wear clothes made of Indian fabrics [Al-Omari 1979: 215]. The Muslim traveler and merchant Ibn Battuta, describing his visit to Mansa[6] Suleiman in West Africa, refers to Rumi (Byzantine—*E.L.*) fabric, and speaking about Sheikh of Makdashu (modern Mogadishu), mentions silk umbrellas and a skirt (from China) and "a robe of green Jerusalem fabric; underneath it is clothing made of Egyptian brocade" [Ibn Battuta 1979]. In the Middle Ages, these items were in great demand in Muslim areas.

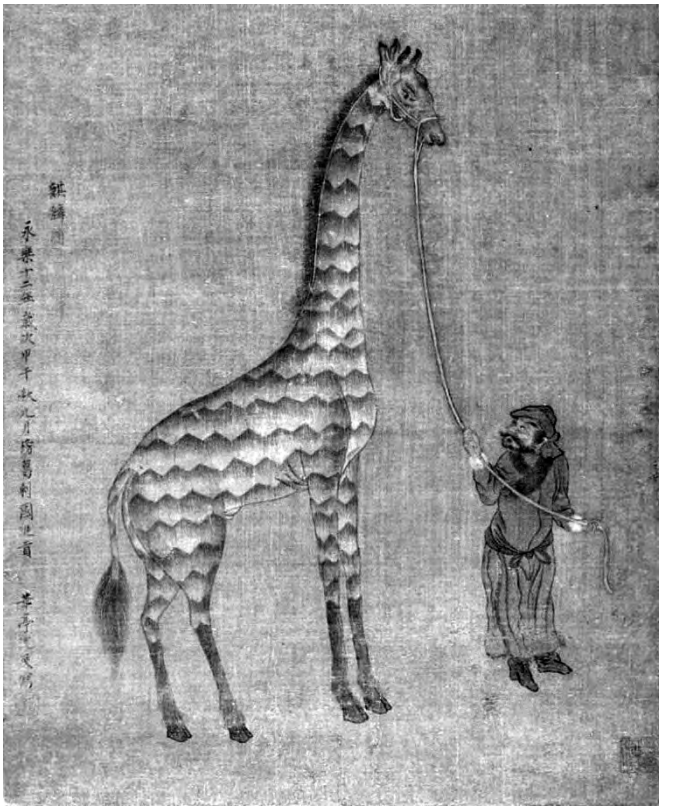

Fig. 3. **Illustration from a medieval Chinese encyclopedia.**
https://smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/peculiar-story-giraffes-medieval-china-180963737/?ref=liberatingnarratives.com

[6] Mansa is a title of the rulers of the Mali Empire.

Leo Africanus, a Muslim diplomat and scholar, who was baptized after being captured by Christian pirates and who traveled extensively throughout the Mediterranean, Arabia, and Africa, recommended that merchants bring books to West Africa [Africanus 2010]. In his description of the city of Ghinea (Djenne—*E.L.*), he notes that the inhabitants have a large income from the cotton fabric trade, which they conduct with the Barbar merchants. In exchange, they sell a lot of "European cloth, copper, brass, weapons, etc."; in the same way, he evaluates the cities of Gao, Zegzeg (Zaria—*E.L.*), and others: "Blacks come to Gao with gold to buy goods from Barbaria and Europe" and further: "The inhabitants are very rich, for they go with their goods to distant countries." And above all, he stresses: 'In this city (Djenne), there are many judges, scholars, and clergymen; they all receive a good salary from the king. The king greatly respects learned men. Many manuscript books are sold there, which are brought from Barbaria, and there is more income from them than from other goods" [Leo Africanus 1979].

There is evidence of trade in animals and crops [Lane, Shoemaker 2017]. Evidence suggests that communities in the Sahara and the Nile Valley were engaged in trade and exchange 10,000 years ago, and by 5000 B.C., they were acquiring domestic animals from Asia. In the 15th century, a Chinese fleet led by Zheng He appeared off the coast of present-day Kenya [Li, Zheng 2018]. There was an exchange of ambassadorial gifts between China and the ruler of Malindi, in modern Kenya. Among the gifts, the Africans sent a giraffe. The precise depiction of this exotic animal, endemic to Africa, in a Chinese manuscript (Fig. 3) is additional proof that the artist saw it himself and that there were indeed connections between these regions [Ulyanov 2018].

## FIRST CONTACTS WITH EUROPE

The 15th century was the time when new trading partners—Europeans—appeared in Africa, and, as a result, various "descriptions of Africa" started to appear as well. They were written by people who had both visited and served in Africa (e.g., the Venetian traveler and slave trader Alvise Cà da Mosto, the Flemish sailor and merchant E. de la Fosse, the Portuguese military officer, traveler and cartographer D. Pacheco Ferreira, the English sailor A. Battel, the Portuguese historian and writer J. de Barros, and others), as well as officials and courtiers of European monarchs, who, by virtue of their official position, received reports from captains, merchants, military officers, and officials (G. Azurara, V. Fernandes, H. Münzer, and a number of others).

At first, the trade routes from Europe to Africa were controlled by the Arab Caliphate, then the Ottoman Empire tried to monopolize them. Apparently, it was this situation that forced European merchants to search for new sea routes to the mysterious and rich East [Davidson 2017; Petrov 1996]. The main actors here were Genoa and Venice, each seeking its own routes to the coveted Eastern lands. For Europe as a whole, Africa remained *terra incognita*. This is evidenced by the maps of that time. The Florentine portolan reproduces the coastline more or less accurately only up to the Guinea coast. The inner regions of the continent were unknown, but some information about them had been obtained. For example, there are not very clear indications that some merchants from Europe visited the Yoruba land. The Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias was the first to circumnavigate the southernmost point of Africa, Cape Agulhas in Southern Africa (Fig. 4).

There were attempts to find a sea route to China via the African continent. For example, it is known about the voyage of the Genoese sailor brothers Vandino and

Ugolino Vivaldi in 1421. It is believed that their two ships probably reached the Gulf of Guinea [Yatsunsky 1958].

Fig. 4. **Bartolomeu Dias (late 15th century)**
https://66sean99.livejournal.com/367055.html

It is posited that Cà da Mosto, a Venetian in the service of the Infante of Portugal, was perhaps one of the first Europeans to introduce his compatriots to the possibility of trading with Africa. After reaching the shores of present-day Senegal and communicating with local traders, he described the trade in gold and salt, the prices of these goods, the caravan routes, and the difficulties faced by traders within the continent. By this time, African merchants had already entered not only the eastern markets (through which gold and slaves were transported to Europe also) but also the global market, engaging in direct trade with Europeans. As Cà da Mosto writes: "...gold is taken <...> by us, Italians and Christians, for various goods that we give them" [Cà da Mosto 1979: 310].

In his "Description of the Coast of Africa," the publisher and translator Valentim Fernandes, who served at the Portuguese court, also wrote about goods from the interior of the continent and the trade links of local merchants, the prices of the main commodities (salt and gold), and major transactions. Furthermore, he emphasized Africa's involvement in connections beyond the continent: "Here are all the goods that are sold in Mecca," at that time one of the most important intermediary markets between West and East. He was surprised by their manners and customs: "They trust each other without waybills, without receipts, without witnesses," though they meet only once a year, and adds: "They are so honest that if one of them dies before the reckoning, his son or his heir immediately arrives to settle the debt very accurately" [Valentim Fernandes 1979: 337].

During this period, Europeans primarily sought to establish trade relations with African rulers and societies, rather than to conquer new lands and establish colonies. Accordingly, the relations were formed as with equal partners. This is evidenced by numerous historical sources, including the correspondence between the trading partners, where the address to each other was standard, friendly, and accepted worldwide; the surviving treaties between European merchants (both individuals and trading campaigns established in European countries, such as the East India Company or the Unions for

Trade with Africa); and the friendly, sometimes even admiring, characteristics given by authors of the time to their African partners.

Apart from F. Alvares' memoirs of Ethiopia and the enthusiastic descriptions of Anna Nzinga Ngola, the head of the anti-Portuguese movement in the territory of modern Angola [Khazanov 1976; Alvares 1889], engravings of the 17th and 18th centuries serve as an example of this equal relationship (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. **Reception of Portuguese missionaries by the ruler of Congo (16th century engraving)**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:King_Dom_Garcia_of_Kongo.JPG

Evidence of this can be found in captains' logbooks and in the diaries of traders who sailed from southern Africa to Madagascar to buy slaves cheaply [Campbell 1981]. However, as Europeans began to engage in direct land seizures, which led to active resistance from the African population, the European perception of Africans underwent a transformation. They began to be portrayed as ignorant, indolent, and deceitful, and the mutually beneficial exchange of goods gave way to the establishment of colonies and their subsequent exploitation [Lvova 2015].

The goal of this research does not entail a comprehensive analysis of all extant works; rather, the focus will be on a select number of those that have left evidence relevant to the topic under investigation. The prevailing objective during this period was trade, and the focus of these authors' writings was on its potential benefits and opportunities. These writings were mainly devoted to coastal African societies, while information about the interior of the continent was based on Arabic notes or on the accounts of local merchants whom the Europeans met in the ports, who, like, for example, the Hausa people, engaged in trade across the African continent.

## TRADE PATTERNS AND EXCHANGE VALUES BEFORE COLONIZATION

It should be noted that the continent had long been crisscrossed by caravan and foot (in the case of Central Africa) routes, which carried both goods and knowledge from the

coast to the interior. Consequently, local traders were very familiar not only with the domestic markets but also with the global market situation. Thus, their knowledge of the latter, of the world prices of most popular goods (mainly slaves, spices, gunpowder, and firearms), and of the exchange rate of guilders, dinars, and conventional exchange values, amazed European captains and merchants who wanted to buy slaves cheaply in Madagascar and neighboring islands [Lvova 2007].

Fig. 6. G**old coin of Ezana, ruler of Aksum, 6th century A.D.**
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezana_of_Axum

Most African peoples did not mint coins. But in Aksum, there were gold coins (probably in the 4th–8th centuries) of the most famous rulers, such as Ezana (Fig. 6). There were also local commodity money circulating throughout Africa. These comprised items crafted from natural materials: salt in bars, handfuls of loose salt extracted from lakes, cowrie shells, or local shells "*nzimbu*" (in the Congo, these were found on a coastal island, and this was a government monopoly) (Fig. 7). Both types of shells were collected in bundles or bags of 100, 1000, and so on, pieces. In medieval Songhai[7], they were used to pay for children's education, and in the Congo, it was used to pay the salaries of the Portuguese working for the local ruler (those Portuguese asked Lisbon not to pay them in gold, as it was not in circulation there).

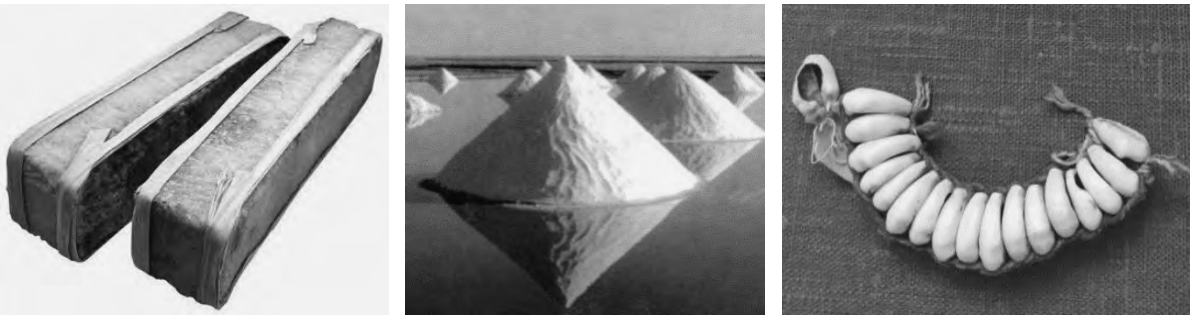

Fig. 7. **African commodity money (natural materials): amole (blocks of rock salt, Ethiopia); loose salt (Senegal); cowrie shells**
https://dzen.ru/a/Ze1x6DjEVWzVPnGW?ysclid=m51fzzofxu501046548

[7] Songhai was a trading state established in the 15th–16th centuries by the Songhai people along the middle reaches of the Niger River in the territory of the modern states of Mali, Niger, and Nigeria.

Subsequently, a variety of bead necklaces of differing lengths appeared, with their length determining their economic value. Metal jewelry, especially necklaces or bracelets in the form of open cuffs (*manillas*), fulfilled a similar function. Many of them can be found in European museums. Of particular interest is the bronze cast figurine of a Portuguese merchant (Fig. 8), which depicts the merchant holding a piece of such jewelry in his hand, received as payment for his goods. Additionally, there were skeins of wire of a specific length or pieces of metal of regulated shape and size (the Russian ruble, too, was originally a piece cut off from a silver ingot).

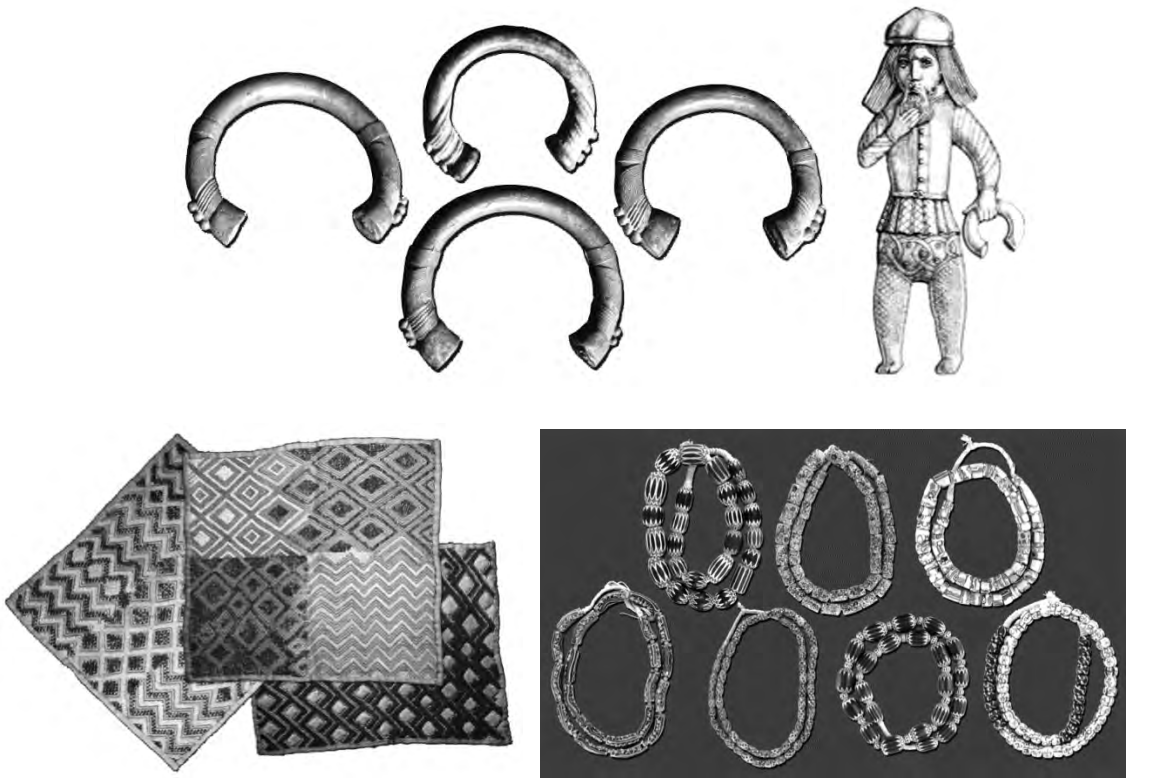

Fig. 8. **African commodity money: open metal cuffs, pieces of cloth, beaded bracelets, and a bronze figurine of a Portuguese man**

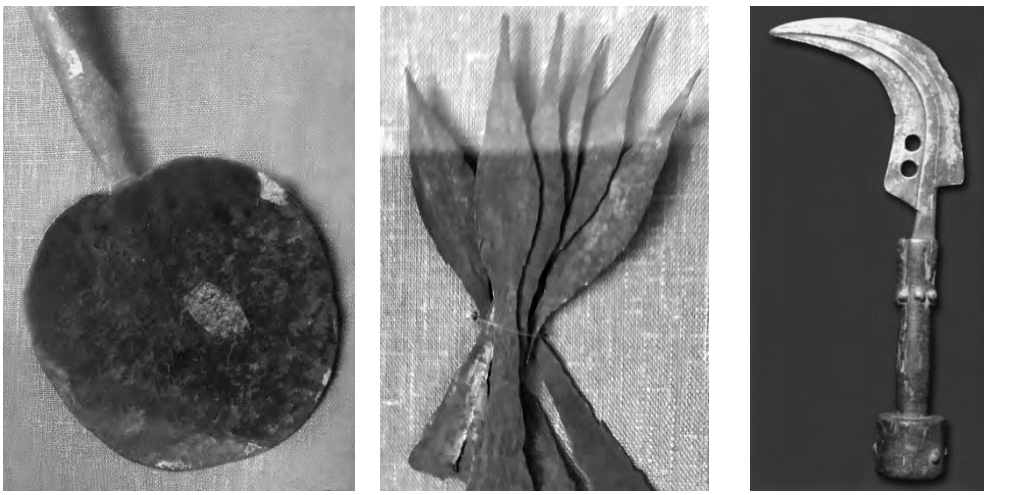

Fig. 9. **African commodity money (household items): a shovel, arrowheads or spearheads, ceremonial knife**

In West Africa and medieval Congo, specially woven pieces of cloth (from cotton in West Africa, from raffia palm fibers in Central Africa) and beaded bracelets, whose value depended on the color and length of the bead thread, were used for the same purpose (Fig. 8). Household items made of metal were also widely used in this capacity, including tools and weapons such as arrowheads and spearheads, throwing and regular knives, hoes, and the like (Fig. 9). Open neck rings made of metal were also of considerable exchange value (recall the ancient Russian *grivnas*, which played the same role and gave rise to the "*grivennik*," a 10-kopeck coin, which, although no longer in use, existed for a long time in Russia).

The use of weapons as a means of payment was also encountered in southern Ethiopia up to the late 20th century, at some peoples' who retained their traditional way of life. In this capacity, Kalashnikov assault rifles, even when out of order, were utilized. On the shores of the Gulf of Guinea, there were "nail-shaped" metal castings, which were used as ceremonial commodity money; cross-shaped "handa" castings were in use in Central Africa; and at the end of the 19th century, in Ethiopia, after a long break (since about the 8th century), coins with the image of the then Emperor Menelik II were minted, who issued a decree to use exclusively these coins for all transactions (Fig. 10).

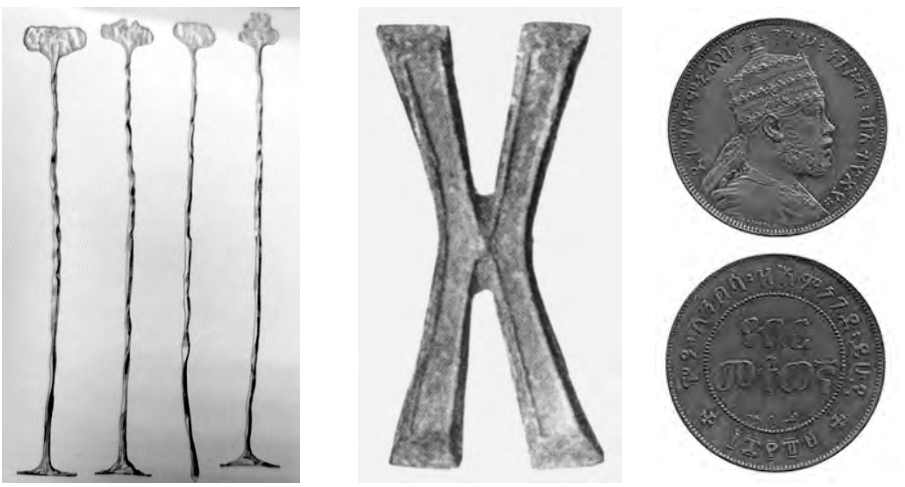

Fig. 10. **Specially cast "money" that were in circulation until the end of the 19th century: ceremonial money in Guinea; "handa" in Central Africa; the first coins of Menelik II (Ethiopia, late 19th century).**

The renowned Russian botanist and geneticist, N.I. Vavilov, recounts in his 1927 expedition through Ethiopia that he had to hire guides and porters for handfuls of pepper [Vavilov 1997]. Ibn Battuta wrote that purchases were made for salt, spices, and glassware; settlements were also made in bulls [Ibn Battuta 1979: 292]. Just as the name of the Russian ruble or grivennik survived for modern monetary units, so in Africa, we observe the legacy of such commodity money. In Zaire, during the 1960s, there were banknotes called "likuta" (plural "makuta") to honor specific sizes of cloth; in some countries modern coins are still embossed with "handa," kauri, or manillas [Lvova 2007].

In West Africa, the utilization of "hakunu"—thick and thin bars or rods of metal—has been documented as a means of exchange for goods such as slaves, meat, wheat, etc. A form of exchange akin to barter was also observed, whereby slaves were exchanged for horses or handicrafts.

Foreign money also appeared relatively early. For example, a hoard of Kushan coins has already been mentioned. With the emergence of Arab traders, dinars, miscals, and dirhams became widespread, and with the Europeans, florins, guilders, and the like. Cowrie shells, once only a raw material for jewelry, became a common measure of value and were imported to Africa in large quantities for this purpose. Fixed prices and standards of exchange were established for some commodities and money for others. For example, a miscal was worth 400 metal ingots, and a piece of cloth of a certain size, 600. Al-Omari wrote that although there was "no mint or coinage," there existed a uniform notion of a certain value of whatever was being sold. For example, for 1 dirham one could buy a measure of wheat or a tall mule [Al-Omari 1979: 274].

* * *

It is evident, therefore, that historical sources—although not exhaustive—demonstrate that Africa has long been an equal member of the world community. Furthermore, the circle of countries and regions with which it has had a fairly long and partnership-based relationship has gradually expanded. It was only during the colonial period that it lost its position as a subject of these relations and became predominantly an object in the world community. And it is only since the second half of the 20th century that it has regained its lost place on a new level.

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## АФРИКА ЮЖНЕЕ САХАРЫ И МИР: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ РАКУРС

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ЛЬВОВА Элеонора Сергеевна, доктор исторических наук, профессор, кафедра африканистики, Институт стран Азии и Африки, Московский государственный университет имени М.В. Ломоносова, Москва, Российская Федерация. ORCID: 0000-0001-7713-112X. E-mail: eleonora.lvova39@yandex.ru

**Аннотация.** Внимание общественности, предпринимателей, политиков, ученых все чаще привлекает Африка, в том числе Тропическая (Субсахарская). Однако эти области никогда не были изолированы и всегда занимали особое место в мировых экономических и культурных связях. Статья, основанная на исследовании широкого спектра письменных источников, охватывающих древний, античный и средневековый периоды, посвящена историческому анализу отношений народов Африки южнее Сахары с внешним миром. Работа освещает глубину и древность экономических, культурных и торговых контактов, уходящих корнями в историю на несколько тысячелетий. В статье исследованы направления торговых маршрутов, которые способствовали распространению товаров, культурных идей и технологий, а также виды товаров, представлявших особую ценность для участников международной торговли. Автор подробно описывает такие разные явления, как работорговля и книжная торговля, деньги и меновые стоимости, имевшие хождение на континенте. Известно, что африканские торговцы вступали в сделки с купцами из Китая, Индии, Римской империи, Византии и европейских стран, были вовлечены в мировую коммерцию и хорошо владели конъюнктурой. Африка стала частью мировой экономики много столетий назад, о чем свидетельствуют письменные и вещественные источники из разных частей света. Тем не менее, это направление африканистики остается недостаточно изученным, что создает лакуны в понимании доколониальной истории региона. Статья представляет собой своеобразный призыв современным африканистам уделять больше внимания изучению доколониальной истории Африки, без знания которой зачастую сложно объяснить некоторые современные конфликты и найти пути их разрешения.

**Ключевые слова:** Африка, история, античные источники, арабская средневековая литература, торговля, деньги, меновые стоимости, Египет, Китай, Индия

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