UC San Diego
New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession

Title

Centering Medieval Africa: Guidelines and Resources for Non-Specialist Educators

Author

Terry, John T. R.

Peer reviewed

Centering Medieval Africa: Guidelines and Resources for Non-Specialist Educators

John T.R. Terry

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3019-6844

The Westminster Schools, Atlanta GA, USA

Centering Medieval Africa: Guidelines and Resources for Non-Specialist Educators

John T.R. Terry
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3019-6844
The Westminster Schools, Atlanta GA, USA

Abstract

In this article I argue for the importance of centering medieval African in both secondary and post-secondary settings and offer some concrete resources and guidelines for doing so, especially for non-specialists. In my teaching context—high school students in the United States between ages 15 and 17—many state standards emphasize African history during and after European colonialism. Overlooking Africa's medieval past maintains colonial historical narratives that depict Africa as a region without history. Instead, by choosing discrete sources and cultures to teach, maximizing the global aspect of medieval African trade and cultural networks, and adapting these approaches for their specific classroom needs, educators can emphasize a story of African history that appropriately situates African societies as part of the medieval world's constellation of cultural and power centers.

It is sometimes difficult to chart one's growth as an educator, but one way to do so is to think back to that very first year in the classroom. What did you teach? How did you gather and organize resources? Whom did you rely upon for resources and advice? For educators like me, the memories required to answer these questions are murky at best: there's nothing quite like that first year. When I earned my doctorate in early medieval European history nearly a decade ago from a program that emphasized the importance of teaching, I had relied on the expertise and generosity of brilliant teachers and had emerged with some competence and good classroom instincts. But it was not until my first year teaching in my current capacity—as a world history teacher of students in the 15- to 17-year-old range at an American independent school—that I realized how much I had to learn about everything in general and that vexing question of curricular coverage in particular.

Since 2016 I have taught my school's semester-long course called "History of the Ancient World," which traditionally has emphasized Mediterranean and European cultures between about 500 BCE and 1500 CE. The course is required for all students in the tenth grade—also known as "sophomores" in the United States, around ages 15 to 16 and two grade levels prior to their graduation—and corresponds well with common state standards in the United States. One of my favorite periods to teach is medieval Africa, in part because of the generous mentorship of scholars in that field but especially because of my students' positive and energetic responses to learning about a blind spot in their education that challenges several of their assumptions. My argument in this article is that centering medieval Africa in a world history course (or similar sequence) serves to illuminate a part of the world typically ignored in most world history curricula, and by doing so, can challenge modern colonial historical narratives that depict Africa's history prior to European subjugation as less important than or inferior to that of other regions. To correct this, I offer here several concrete resources and guidelines for teaching medieval Africa, especially for non-specialists and teachers with a background in medieval or other European historical topics. By choosing discrete sources and cultures to teach, maximizing the global aspect of medieval African trade and cultural networks, and adapting these approaches for their specific classroom needs, educators can emphasize a story of African history that appropriately situates medieval African societies as part of the medieval world's constellation of cultural and political centers.

My students typically respond well to storytelling. What follows is one such anecdote upon which I sometimes rely to illustrate how religious change could operate in medieval Africa. Around the year 1000, several small kingdoms in western Africa began, in fits and starts, to convert to Islam. One early convert was an eleventh-century king of Malal (which would later become part of the Mali Empire), apparently the result of a series of conversations with a Muslim member of his court. Medieval historians discussing the conversion indicate that a long drought and famine fueled the king's curiosity and motivated him to consider new sources of religious legitimacy. Indeed, after a Friday night vigil during which the king imitated the prayers and gestures of his Muslim courtier, the rains came; now convinced, the king of Malal dutifully converted to his new rain-inducing religion by professing his faith that there was only one God and Muhammad was his prophet (Levtzion and Hopkins 2000, 77-78; Fauvelle 2018, 70).

The king's subjects, however, weren't so sure. It was well and good for their king to convert, but they successfully persuaded him not to force his new religion upon them as other monarchs had done. For François-Xavier Fauvelle—whose recently-translated book *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages* takes an episodic approach to the period's history and is essential, accessible reading for students and teachers—this conversion process challenges our assumptions. Typically, "conversions affected the top of society: the king converted first, then his entourage, while perhaps waiting for the rest of his subjects" (Fauvelle 2018, 71). This may have been the general pattern in the region, but the king of Malal decided to be flexible, allowing his subjects to retain their traditional religion. "There was no contradiction here, either for him or for the population that remained 'pagan'," even though the king might have practiced his own new faith exclusively: "in Malal's case, it was precisely the efficacious intercession of the God of the Muslims that allowed the king to preserve his traditional role as guarantor of the rain and the harvests . . . As the sovereign's legitimacy was everyone's concern . . . it was particularly important that the monarch was a good Muslim, even if Islam was not the religion of his subjects" (Fauvelle 2018, 71).

At first, this anecdote typically perplexes my students, who are high school sophomores taking a required ancient world history course. They're accustomed, like many modern people, to thinking about religion in rigid categories. I start by asking students to identify the "what": what were the geographic realities of eleventh-century Malal? What chronology are we concerned with? What did king-court-subject relationships look like in the region? Then we can move on to the "why": why did this conversion process take the shape it did? Students should formulate questions that begin with "why" or "how" and through a circular motion of questioning and speculation, together we can close in on the realization that religious conversion could be uneven, flexible, and practical. The king of Malal is a rational, goal-oriented agent in this story and, while his conversion may have been heartfelt, he was surely concerned with good leadership and effective policy as the "guarantor of the rain and the harvests" in a religiously "competitive environment" (Fauvelle 2018, 73). This thousand-year-old African vignette immediately challenges students' assumptions about issues of agency, religion, and history (and who gets to have it) in the medieval world. It also places West Africa squarely at the center of a medieval map which tells the story of the spread of Islam and the cultural origins of great intellectual and cultural centers like Gao, Jenne, and Timbuktu.

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

In keeping with the pedagogical goal of centering Africa, my medieval unit begins on that continent, where, as I emphasize to my students, both Christianity and Islam spread from southwest Asia relatively swiftly and comprehensively. Early in this unit it is important for my students to have had some background reading in medieval Africa and to get used to the phrase "medieval Africa" itself (Conrad 2005; Berger 2016). At the very beginning of our unit on medieval history, I usually ask students to write down any words, phrases, or images that come to mind when I say "medieval." This brings up a host of ideas mostly filtered through icons of popular culture many scholars refer to as examples of "medievalism" — or "manifestations of the middle ages in postmedieval times" (quoted in Matthews 2015, 1) — like *Game of Thrones*, *Assassin's Creed*, or even the irresistible campiness of

Medieval Times dinner-theater jousts. It seldom occurs to them immediately that regions outside of western Europe also have a medieval period. The term "medieval" is itself not without its problems, but its near-universal usage for the period c. 500-1500 in textbooks and other resources that influence state standards merits its use here (Fauvelle 2018, 11; Holmes and Standen 2018, 1-2). My goal in this article is not to critique terms of periodization but to offer teachers of the medieval world, especially at secondary and higher education survey levels, some guidelines as a non-specialist teaching a topic that was new to me just a few short years ago.

For context, while I have a Ph.D. in early medieval European history, I have recently produced primary source lesson plans on the medieval period from a global perspective (Terry 2021). My aim here is to provide resources for history teachers and to embolden them, regardless of specialist training, to illuminate an important area of world history typically erased by centuries-old narratives of imperialist self-interest. In this case, my students are remarkably self-aware about their previous assumptions when they are tasked with researching, contextualizing, and teaching key medieval African primary sources such as the royal epics the *Kebra Nagast* and the *Epic of Sundiata*, the oral legal code the *Manden Charter* (a source whose debates and challenges I will discuss below), and the much more famous travel accounts of Ibn Battuta. For one project I ask my students to design a lesson centered on primary source evidence. One of them observed that, while medieval Europe "is generally depicted as a dark time in the realms of art, science, and education, I assumed that African history would follow the same trend" (Student M, interview by author, March 15, 2022). Through historical inquiry, they learned that not only were their assumptions untrue in both cases, but that centering medieval Africa "challenges preconceptions shaped by western narratives." (ibid). A classmate shared similar conclusions after the teaching exercise: "I feel like it just formed a much more complete picture of what the world was like during that time," a world in which Africa's "sophistication and achievements" were (at minimum) comparable with regions elsewhere in the world (Student I, interview by author, March 17, 2022). Another student was genuinely surprised by their research into the *Manden Charter*, "one of the oldest constitutions in the world albeit in oral form" (UNESCO 2009), because they "expected medieval Malian society to be patriarchal as so many ancient civilizations were." Responding to modern oral versions of Charter that emphasize the equality of social classes, that student was "shocked to find that that was not the case . . . Medieval Malian society valued gender equality, both in culture and in law. Unexpected insights like these are what make learning about medieval African cultures so vibrant and engaging" (Student T, interview by author, March 14, 2022). Here I am reminded of Roland Betancourt's recent discussion at the Medieval Academy of America's annual meeting of, among many other topics, "positive medievalisms" which help to rehabilitate a period of history from modern stereotypes and assumptions while avoiding nostalgia for it (Betancourt 2022). Even keeping "positive medievalisms" in mind, it's still crucial to remind students that, while it "cannot be assumed that all Sahelian states were similarly engaged in trafficking," (Gomez 2018, 43) Mali was certainly an empire built with systems of slavery both regionally and across the Sahara:

> Directly connected to empire's formulation in West Africa was the emergence of both Islam and domestic slavery, and it is impossible to understand imperial Mali and [its successor] Songhay without appreciating the close if not inextricable relationship

between these two forces. As Islam and empire became tightly intertwined, slavery became increasingly insinuated within both. In turn, religion and labor were highly gendered, and in ways deeply woven into the fabric of society and its collective consciousness (Gomez 2018, 6).

Students often want to try to make things simple, but when faced with such contradictions in their research, teachers are presented with a brilliant opportunity to complicate the social cohesion sources like the *Manden Charter* might suggest.

The assumptions of which my students become aware mirror several of the myths that form the backbone of Kisha Tracy's recent and ongoing online course, co-sponsored by the National Humanities Center and the Medieval Academy of America, on "Medieval Africa and Africans": that medieval Africa did not exist, was isolated, uncultured, illiterate, and insignificant (Tracy 2022). Myth-busting is an effective way to present historical material to students because they occasionally recognize their own inherited assumptions in those myths. For Tracy, a course primarily designed for K-12 teachers and higher education instructors should be organized not just around content that's ready to be delivered but also around the work of challenging broad assumptions: "When people think of the Middle Ages, they tend to focus almost exclusively on Europe. It is important to understand that life and culture are going on in other parts of the world: Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean. These areas were all connected through trade and religion, among other things" (Kisha Tracy, interview by author, March 28, 2022).

As one of my students beautifully put it, "the sources we used served as windows through which we could peer into the past and see with our very own eyes how expectation-defying medieval Africa really was" (Student T, interview by author, March 14, 2022). In the spirit of defying those expectations, I use three main guiding principles when it comes to teaching the previously unfamiliar: first, to avoid being overwhelmed, choose discrete sources, texts, and geographies by utilizing open-access resources. Second, maximize the global by focusing on specific examples that emphasize medieval Africa's connections beyond the continent, keeping Africa at the center of the course's conceptual map. Finally, make these new topics work for you and your students. If adaptation into existing curriculum is the goal, this can be as simple as integrating medieval Africa into what you already teach well as a necessary step toward centering that history. While inherited survey course curricula and state standards often de-center Africa, educators at all levels can work within the institutional structures they inherit in order to center medieval Africa in the medieval story.
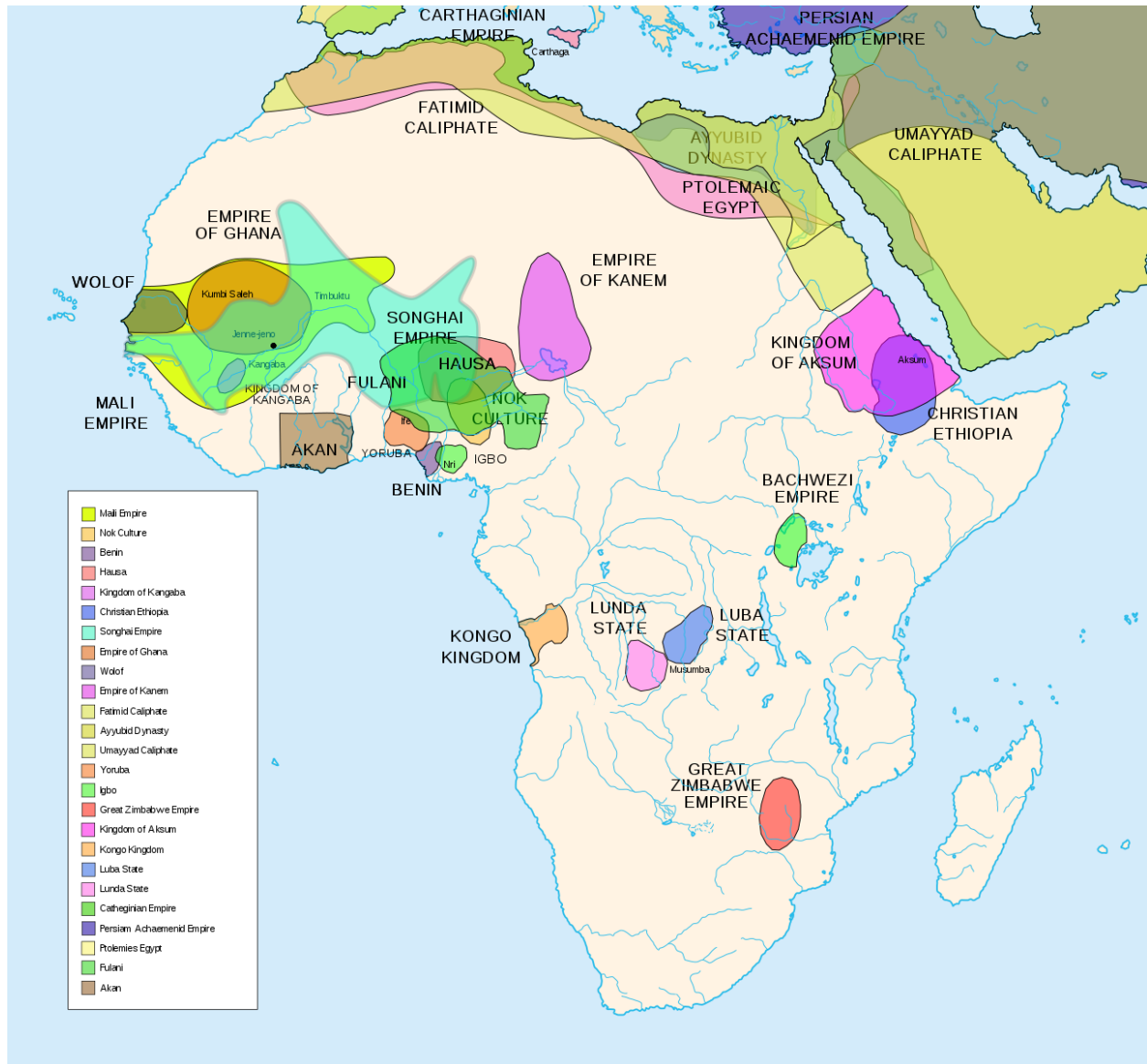
Figure 1: Map of many prominent medieval African states, including the Mali Empire in the West, Aksum in the East, and Great Zimbabwe in the South. (Jeff Israel, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:African-civilizations-map-pre-colonial.svg).

Discrete Sources, Texts, and Geographies

Among the greatest obstacles to teaching new, unfamiliar topics is simply being overwhelmed by the prospect of doing so. Where do I go for resources? What if I do it poorly? Where do I find the time? I sympathize with this last obstacle in particular, but how did any of us get to the point of being able to teach, well, anything? Given the stereotypes and impressions in my student interviews as well as a general de-emphasis of African history prior to colonization, shifting focus to medieval Africa serves to globalize the Middle Ages in an important way because it is more honest about the broad

trade worlds of medieval Afroeurasia and places African regions alongside others in Asia and Europe as partners in trade and ideas.

Leveraging what's freely available online is key to this success. Katie Peebles, who specializes in and teaches medieval European literature at the college level, stresses that the value of "free online resources that I can use to supplement textbooks" as a non-specialist teaching medieval Africa cannot be understated. For her teaching, which integrates medieval African and European history and culture together, news reporting and blogs are particularly important because all they require for access is an internet connection (Katie Peebles, interview with author, March 29, 2022). This mirrors my own experience teaching medieval African history to my high school sophomores. The following is an incomplete but broadly representative list of open-access resources available both to students and educators, adapted from Tracy's "Medieval Africa and Africans" course as well as from my own teaching:

Databases and Collections. I return often to two of these: 1. Howard University's "The Gold Road," an interactive map of African natural resources in the Middle Ages such as gold and salt, as well as cultural artifacts like books and other manuscripts, archaeological sites, and architectural wonders (Oyugi 2020). 2. "Caravans of Gold," a traveling exhibit (appropriately), contains useful, short articles and case studies focused on the material culture of the Saharan trade (Berzock 2019). Both of these sites include teacher resources such as essays (Watkins 2020) and pronunciation guides, and both are ideal for student navigation.

The Public Medievalist. Paul Sturtevant and the Public Medievalist staff put together a series of essays on "Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages" in 2017. Some articles go beyond a focus on European racism to cover medieval Africa specifically (Sturtevant 2017). The interview series with anthropologist Chapurukha Kusimba is particularly useful and accessible for students because it brings up several examples of medieval African cultural achievements, challenging modern assumptions about Africa as a continent without a history. The series is split into three parts, covering topics such as recovering a "lost" medieval Africa, the question of who built medieval Africa, and a special section focusing on East Africa.

Video Resources. There are many to choose from, but I rely on two in particular to frame discussions with students. Both of them are short, accessible, and serve as useful entry-points to discussion after watching them together as a group: the first is Kevin MacDonald's remarks on "History We Aren't Being Taught," in which he frames the archaeological record of medieval Africa in ten minutes (MacDonald 2013). Sirio Canós-Donnay's TedTalk from 2015 is a tour of African archaeology through the lens of the myth of "Africa without History" (Canós-Donnay 2015).

Other resources, including "Middle Ages for Educators" as discussed in this issue, are numerous, but these are a few that are touchstones in my classroom. World History Encyclopedia (formerly Ancient History Encyclopedia) is a great starting point for student research and easily found

online, while short articles by Fauvelle (2020) as well as a longer overview of early African literature by Wendy Belcher on her personal website help frame bigger questions about African history for students (2022). Students find the Berkeley Office of Resources for International and Area Studies (ORIAS) resources on Ibn Battuta particularly helpful for contextualizing their reading, and there are a growing number of 3D visualization projects on African architecture, such as that of Kilwa Kisiwani from the Zamani Project (Rüther, 2022). For more general overviews, I have found the open-access textbook *World History: Cultures, States, and Societies* by Eugene Berger (and others) to be an excellent starting point for any new teaching material (Berger 2016). Finally, two projects that I have been directly involved with are LibreTexts and The National Humanities Center. LibreTexts is an open-access textbook resource in which, with Jessalynn Bird of St. Mary's College (IN), I have produced primary source editions with critical introductions, notes, and images—all ready-to-go classroom resources (Bird 2021; Terry 2021). The National Humanities Center's Humanities in Class Digital Library is also a repository for lesson plans, available with a free account, and each of the participants in the "Medieval Africa and Africans" course has produced or recommended at least one resource there (National Humanities Center 2022).

In short, the best starting point for putting new teaching materials together for this period of history unfamiliar to most teachers is to be selective by choosing distinct sources and geographies and by using what's freely available online. If Ibn Battuta is already in the curriculum—as he is for many––where can students go deeper in his descriptions of specific African cities and regions such as Timbuktu and Kilwa? If students already do work with oral tradition—think of Homer or *Beowulf*—how can the *Manden Charter* as an oral, legal tradition fit into this work? For one of my students, the *Charter* "provides unanticipated insights into everyday life and culture in the medieval Mali Empire" because of its emphasis on gender equality (Student Q, interview by author, March 17, 2022). Even if one does not accept the *Charter* as a "medieval" source given its oral nature, what can its modern form tell us about modern assumptions about the medieval past? Once accepted mostly uncritically as an example of intangible medieval Malian culture, the *Manden Charter* cannot be proved to be medieval, and scholars have justifiably critiqued its medieval credentials largely on the basis of its omission in Islamic histories from the period (Thornton 2020). Yet as Kisha Tracy has told me, from a teaching standpoint, "Traditionally, oral culture has either been ignored or marginalized, perceived as somehow lesser than written text. As such, we have missed out on the richness of these traditions, especially considering that modern African cultures are still transmitting many of these stories" (Kisha Tracy, interview by author, March 28, 2022). Indeed, my approach in teaching the *Manden Charter* acknowledges that while oral traditions cannot be proven to stretch back to the Middle Ages, discussing the multigenerational values embedded in them can tell students important things about how modern people feel connected with the past through the transmission of history, stories, and other tradition by griots, or professional storytellers and musicians who often advised heads of state during the medieval period. This approach also helps students go beyond the question of "authenticity" toward more important questions of who gets to have a history and why:

> Oral and written tableaux center very different principals to tell stories for entirely different audiences, and for radically different purposes. Their conjunctive examination reveals a process

as integral to the accounts as the characters and plots they feature. The result is a wholly new interpretation of West Africa's early and medieval history, facilitating its relocation from the periphery to the center of world history (Gomez 2018, 7).

Maximize the Global

Once specific geographies or sources have been established, the next step is to emphasize the global nature of African trade routes (Fauvelle 2018, 241-242; Hansen 2021, 227-228). Doing so not only goes well beyond representation of diverse peoples and voices in the curriculum, but is also intellectually and historically honest about the time period. Emphasis of global trade networks also serves to help students understand part of the long history of the racial slavery system. For this I rely on the scholarship of Michael Gomez, among others (see Heng 2018; Whitaker 2019). Gomez has recently shown that a "range of opinions existed" especially in medieval North and West Africa about the supposed superiority or inferiority of races prior to sustained Portuguese contact, and that these opinions were actively shaped by shifting balances of power as Islam spread in the region, informing legal traditions of slavery (Gomez 2018, 53).

How else, other than "globalization," can we describe the relatively swift spread of Christianity outside of southwest Asia to east Africa by the middle of the 300s? To help tell this story, my students look at coinage from the reign of Ezana of Aksum (d. c. 356) alongside that of his near-contemporary Constantine (d. c. 337), comparing the ways in which both rulers used pre-Christian iconography and Christian symbolism in their visual language. Both heads of state converted for reasons not completely comprehensible to modern historians but both clearly thrust their images of rulership into a system in

Figure 2: Gold coin featuring Ezana flanked by stalks of wheat with new moon and disc, traditional symbols of the Sabaean moon god Almaqah, c. 300-340 (British Museum, https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/d725d317-4fb4-4cd1-a01d-096536711fc9/).

which one ruler operated with the blessing of one God, and both used their newfound faith to great effect when it came to the top-down conversion influence Fauvelle describes in the passage from *The Golden Rhinoceros* cited above.

Figure 3: *A gold coin featuring Ezana flanked by stalks of wheat with small crosses at the top, bottom, and both sides, c. 340-400 (British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1921-0316-1).*

Centuries later, the Zagwe king Lalibela sought to place his kingdom at the center of Christendom's map. To do so, his artisans and architects constructed—rather, sculpted out of stone––a complex of churches at a site now named for him in the Ethiopian highlands around the early thirteenth century. The church complex, eponymously called *Lalibela*, stands as a powerful testament to medieval Ethiopian dynastic claims to be descended from Solomon and thus inheritors of God's favor. Not only this, but as a response to Jerusalem's recapture by Saladin in 1187, King Lalibela was reportedly inspired to relocate the city itself in the Ethiopian highlands. The church complex was meant to be a New Jerusalem, a sacred landscape both all its own and derivative of the holiest place on earth; in other words, the Zagwe king made universal claims for his New Jerusalem (Phillipson 2009, 123-125). I typically ask students to research and present Lalibela as a primary source (described above), offering them resources from the World History Encyclopedia as a starting point, but expecting them to answer the crucial question of why a head of state would undertake such a project and what it might mean to pilgrims, both medieval and modern.

Figure 4: *The cruciform church of Beta Giyorgis, Lalibela*
(Photograph by Nick Corble, https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/5c41112a-c127-48ad-8ba8-2cd1f4ce4bb1).

Moving south outside of the realms of Christianity and Islam, the archaeological site at Great Zimbabwe keeps giving up its secrets in the modern age. The Great Enclosure site itself is a granite ruin of a massive fortress built and continuously maintained between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, though the enclosure's use has long been debated. Despite the vagueness of some details from early twentieth century archaeological digs, it's clear that elites at Great Zimbabwe were enjoying the finer things, including glazed pottery and glassware from southwest Asia, glass beads from Venice, and ceramics from China (Zhao 2015). Glass production was flourishing elsewhere on the continent in Nigeria but elites at Great Zimbabwe flexed their power by importing glass from further afield (Babalola 2020; Babalola, Ogunfolaken, and Rehren 2020). Once assumed for racist reasons to be the work of foreign Arab traders who built the enclosure to house their trading center (Fauvelle 2018, 219-220; French 2021, 277-278), Great Zimbabwe was the work of local elites who not only commanded trade routes from central Africa to the Swahili Coast, but also took advantage of the globalization brought about by sophisticated navigators who exploited trade winds to move products among continents (Hansen 2021, 117-118). The public scholarship on the Great Enclosure is less accessible than other topics, so I usually provide images and information to students and ask them to discuss the implications of these archaeological discoveries.

Figure 5: The Enclosure of Great Zimbabwe
(Photograph by Richard Pluck, https://wordpress.org/openverse/image/f900dd38-aae8-499f-9d07-2c344f60c1b1/).

Figure 6: Conical tower in the Enclosure of Great Zimbabwe
(Photograph by Andrew Moore, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Conical_Tower_-_Great_Enclosure_V_(33736897638).jpg)

Finally, students ought to understand that objects and sacred sites outside of Africa bear the continent's mark. Focusing on, for example, the sourcing of materials for European art and artifacts can help "provincialize" Europe—again, a more realistic way to look at global medieval history (Chakravarty 2000, 3-6). Sarah Guérin has recently written convincingly on the importance of African sourcing for European artifacts such as a thirteenth-century ivory statuette of the Virgin and Child from the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis, whose size indicates that the artist used the "full breadth of the tusk" in carving it (Guérin 2019, 146). The Virgin and Child is "an object whose very existence is contingent upon a profoundly interconnected world" (Guérin 2019, 151) and is a physical reminder of why, when we teach material history, we ought to maximize the significance of globalization:

> Understanding the trade routes that brought elephant ivory to Western Europe allows us to picture the actors involved, actively exchanging surpluses, even creating surpluses, to participate in interregional trade. From the banks of the Senegal River, traveling with Amazigh across the windswept Sahara, passing through the hands of

Arab merchants in well-stocked funduks, onto the Italian ships that sailed from the Mediterranean almost to the North Sea—ivory traveled through many hands, hands of a vast array of shades. Should the display of these ivory statuettes ever be curtailed, we would lose—no, we would be suppressing—important witnesses to medieval Europe's dependence on the transregional interconnected web that constituted the world system (Guérin 2019, 152).

This connected world system is what prompted the Portuguese, beginning in the fifteenth century, first to contact then to exploit societies in West Africa whose wealth was legendary (French 2021). While many teachers of medieval Africa might be content with leaving the medieval African story at the level of representation in the curriculum, even simple classroom exercises in provenance take us well beyond representation into the vitality of premodern trade worlds and the power of local elites in global markets. Focusing on discrete examples that shimmer with global possibilities more accurately reveals that "interconnected web that constituted the world system."

Conclusions and Adaptations

Teaching medieval Africa in any structured capacity is always worth the effort because, in the words of one of my students, it "challenges preconceptions shaped by western narratives and oversight of Africa." In this student's mind this is particularly important for "young historians" because it shakes up what many assume to be the "centers of medieval culture" (Student S, interview by author, March 23, 2022). When students begin to realize this, they're ready to analyze the famous Catalan Atlas, produced by Majorcan cartographers in the late 1300s. In it, Mansa Musa, the great fourteenth-century king (or "mansa") of Mali, represents just one of a great number of cultural centers of the Middle Ages and simultaneously looms across the landscape of western Africa as an outsized figure famous for his wealth and generosity (Fein 2022). Yet in the map, Mansa Musa is singular, with a posture, appearance, and materiality all his own. While the Catalan Atlas tells a story of centers and peripheries, it is clear that in the late medieval Mediterranean, West Africa held a special place in the global imagination.

Figure 7: The Catalan Atlas, c. 1375, attributed to Abraham Cresques (1325-1387). Mansa Musa, admiring his gold, is depicted in West Africa. (Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1375_Atlas_Catalan_Abraham_Cresques.jpg).
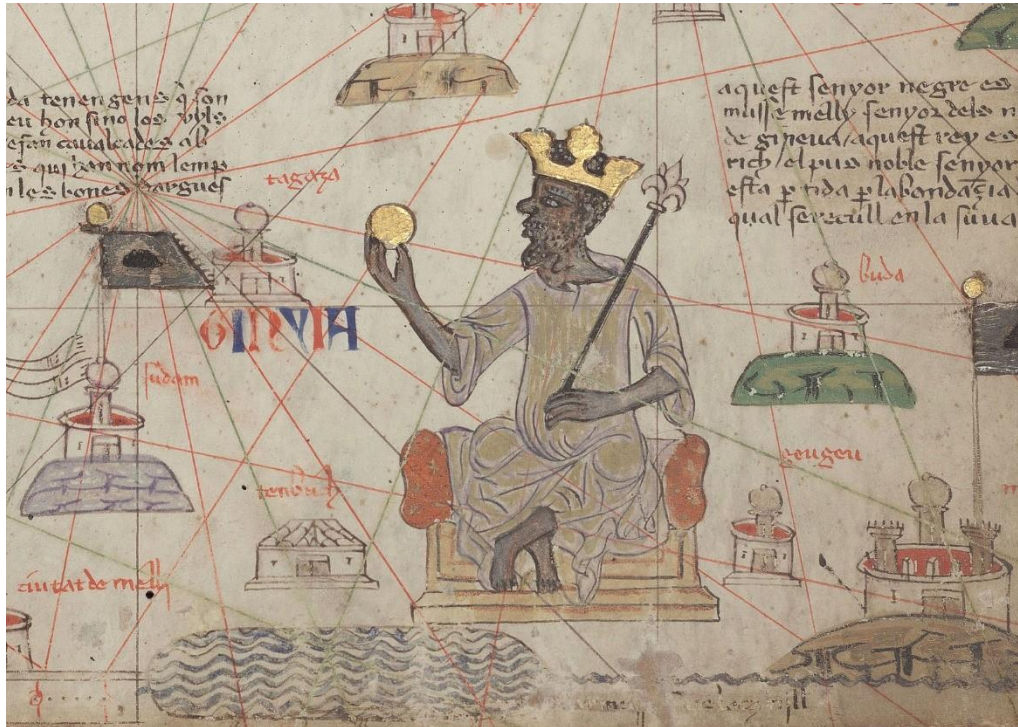
Figure 8: Detail from the Catalan Atlas of Mansa Musa admiring his gold.
(Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Catalan_Atlas_BNF_Sheet_6_Mansa_Musa.jpg).

In the United States, medieval African topics align with common state standards, almost all of which encourage focus on Christianity and Islam in premodern Africa. While many of those state standards give minimal attention to premodern Africa in favor of Africa during modern colonial periods, it's important to remember the broader context when we teach. Reflecting on the backgrounds of her participants in the "Medieval Africa and Africans" online course, Tracy observed that in particular

> "K-12 teachers tend to have more of a general understanding of the period with more detailed understanding of the colonial era. This latter familiarity is very useful in studying medieval Africa because we can build backwards. I look upon the colonial era as a major interruption of the medieval period in Africa, stopping or slowing down independent control of their own kingdoms" (Kisha Tracy, interview by author, March 28, 2022).

This approach decenters the colonial story as an "interruption" rather than the primary historical narrative.

Especially for teachers who feel overwhelmed teaching entirely new material or those whose curricula or state standards constrict the centering of medieval Africa, teaching medieval Africa ought to be considered a part of—rather than apart from—what one already teaches well. If Christian history

is the main focus of a unit or a course, consider the kingdom of Aksum as a case study for the ways in which traditional expressions of power on coinage or victory monuments seamlessly integrated Christian symbolism and language to credit a newly-embraced God with prosperity. This is a story that would make sense to many early medieval Christians. (It would, as we have seen, also have made good sense to the eleventh-century king of Malal when he carefully considered whether or not to convert to Islam.) Consider, too, how the Garima Gospels were themselves on the cutting edge of codex production beyond the Mediterranean world and Europe, predating more famous examples from Italy and the British Isles (Klimek 2021, 67-69). Integrate sites of pilgrimage and worship like Lalibela and the Nubian cathedral of Faras into broader units on Christian pilgrimage in Europe. If Islam is the focus, place centers of learning like Timbuktu and Jenne in the Mali Empire nearer the center of the map instead of the periphery; this, at least, was the argument of the mansas of Mali and their ideological ancestors of Malal and other kingdoms, especially during and after the reign of Mansa Musa, fastidious as he was about importing scholars to these urban intellectual centers. Focus, too, on sacred spaces along the Swahili coast such as the Great Mosque of Kilwa alongside more famous examples in Isfahan and Baghdad. By beginning with focused, discrete sources and geographies and building out to the global, both students and educators are able to craft a more thorough historical map, one that treats the medieval world appropriately as a constellation of centers of culture and power.

Works Cited

Babalola, Abidemi Babatunde. 2020. "How We Found the Earliest Glass Production South of the Sahara, and What It Means." *The Conversation*, July 14, 2020. https://theconversation.com/how-we-found-the-earliest-glass-production-south-of-the-sahara-and-what-it-means-142059.

Babalola, Abidemi Babatunde, Ogunfolaken, Adisa Benjamin, and Thilo Rehren. 2020. "Semi-finished glass from Ile-Ife, Nigeria: implications for the archaeology of glass in sub-Saharan Africa." *Antiquity* 94 (375) (June): e16. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.77.

Belcher, Wendy. 2022. "Early African Literature: An Anthology of Written Texts from 3000 BCE to 1900 CE." Accessed 25 March, 2022. https://wendybelcher.com/african-literature/early-african-literature-anthology/.

Berger, Eugene and others. 2016. *World History: Cultures, States, and Societies*. Dahlonega, GA: University of North Georgia Press. https://oer.galileo.usg.edu/history-textbooks/2/.

Betancourt, Roland. 2022. "Plenary Address: The Allure of Secrecy and the Challenge of History: Crafting the Middle Ages in an Era of Conspiracy and Radicalization." Plenary paper given at the Medieval Academy of America, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, March 10, 2022.

Bird, Jessalynn. 2021. "LibreTexts: Humanistic Studies (St. Mary's College)." Accessed March 25, 2022. https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Saint_Mary's_College_(Notre_Dame_IN)/Humanistic_Studies.

Berzock, Kathleen Blickford. 2019. "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa." Accessed March 25, 2022. https://caravansofgold.org.

Canós-Donnay, Sirio. 2015. "The Underappreciated Archeological History of Africa." Filmed June 15, 2015 at Goodenough College, London. Video, 10:18. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBMretoTFJg&scrlybrkr=88fefb31.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Conrad, David. 2005. *Empires of Medieval West Africa: Ghana, Mali, and Songhay*. New York: Facts On File.

Fauvelle, François-Xavier and Troy Tice, trans. 2018. *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Fauvelle, François-Xavier. 2020. "Africa's Medieval Golden Age." *History Extra*. July 29, 2020. https://www.historyextra.com/period/what-was-africa-like-middle-ages-medieval-golden-age-culture/.

Fein, Ariel. 2022. "The Catalan Atlas." *Smarthistory*. Accessed July 5, 2022. https://smarthistory.org/catalan-atlas/.

French, Howard W. 2021. *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*. New York: Liveright.

Gomez, Michael. 2018. *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Guérin, Sarah. 2019. "Ivory and the Ties that Bind" in *Whose Middle Ages? Teaching Moments for an Ill-Used Past*, edited by Andrew Albin and others, 140-153. New York: Fordham University Press.

Hansen, Valerie. 2020. *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—And Globalization Began*. New York: Scribner.

Heng, Geraldine. 2018. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Holmes, Catherine and Naomi Standen. 2018. "Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages." *Past and Present* 238 (13): 1-44. https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gty030.

Klimek, Kim and others. 2021. *Global Medieval Contexts*, 500-1500. New York: Routledge.

Levtzion, Nehemiah and J.F.P. Hopkins. 2000. *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History*. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener.

MacDonald, Kevin. 2013. "African Empires: The History We Aren't Being Taught." Filmed September 12, 2013 at University College, London. Video. 10:02. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEtDLBGGQeQ.

Matthews, David. 2015. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

National Humanities Center. 2022. "Humanities in Class Digital Library." Accessed March 25, 2022. https://education.nationalhumanitiescenter.org/.

Oyugi, Vanessa and others. 2020. "The Gold Road." Howard University, Center for African Studies. Accessed March 25, 2022. https://cfas.howard.edu/outreach/gold-road.

Phillipson, David. 2009. *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Rüther, Heinz and others. 2020. "The Ruins of Kilwa Kisiwani." The Zamani Project. Accessed March 25, 2022. https://www.zamaniproject.org/site-tanzania-kilwa-kisiwani.html.

Sturtevant, Paul and others. 2017. "Race, Racism, and the Middle Ages." The Public Medievalist. Accessed March 25, 2022. https://www.publicmedievalist.com/race-racism-middle-ages-toc/.

Terry, John. 2021. "LibreTexts: Global Middle Ages (The Westminster Schools)." Accessed March 25, 2022. https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/The_Westminster_Schools.

Thornton, John. 2020. "Mandan Charter." Filmed on October 9, 2020 at Boston University, Boston, MA. Video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLg2kBLqlxQ.

Tracy, Kisha. "Medieval Africa and Africans." *National Humanities Center.* Accessed March 25, 2022. https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/education-programs/courses/medieval-africa-and-africans/.

UNESCO. 2009. "The Manden Charter, Proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga." United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization Intangible Cultural Heritage. Accessed March 15, 2022. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/manden-charter-proclaimed-in-kurukan-fuga-00290.

University of California, Berkeley. 2022. "The Travels of Ibn Battuta." University of California Office of Resources for International and Area Studies (ORIAS). Accessed March 25, 2022. https://orias.berkeley.edu/resources-teachers/travels-ibn-battuta.

Watkins, Lauren and others. "Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa, A Teacher's Guide." The Block Museum of Art. Accessed March 25, 2022. https://africa.si.edu/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/caravans-of-gold-fragments-in-time-art-culture-and-exchange-across-medieval-saharan-africa/teachers-guide/.

Whitaker, Cord. 2019 Black Metaphors: *How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Zhao, Bing. 2015. "Chinese-style Ceramics in East Africa from the 9th to 16th Century: A Case for Changing Value and Symbols in the Multi-Partner Global Trade," *L'Afrique orientale et l'océan Indien: connexions, réseaux d'échanges et globalisation* 6. https://doi.org/10.4000/afriques.1836.