

33. LOOTING ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES, by M.E. Hutchinson (1996, 29:4)

[The following item is excerpted from *Newsletter* No. 26 of the Bead Study Trust, spring 1996. It has been said before, but needs to be repeated every so often to remind us of the consequences of “just buying that one old bead.”]

Every time you buy a bead which has come from the unauthorized “excavation” (looting) of an ancient site, you are encouraging the looter to continue his destructive work. In principal, every bead enthusiast is against this, but it does not stop people arranging buying trips to those parts of the world which are worst affected, or bead vendors knowingly advertizing and selling these beads.

At some point, bead collectors (and this includes all researchers who have a reference collection) are going to have to decide where they stand. Are they going to continue buying beads from pillaged ancient sites, thereby possibly wrecking any chance of establishing proper chronologies for the history of these areas, or are they going to stand by their principles, refuse to buy looted beads, and by this means help to put an end to looting by making it unprofitable? It is no use saying “one bead won’t make much difference;” 1,000 people each buying one bead is 1,000 beads.

Although several persons have written about the looting of ancient sites for antiquities and beads (e.g., Timothy Insoll in *The Bead Forum* 24:6-10 and Ian Glover in the Bead Study Trust *Newsletter* 26:11), it still continues. Beads from a properly excavated site are historical “documents” and can be used as evidence of ancient trade routes or for dating, but a looted bead is just a pretty bead.

34. THE ILLICIT BEAD TRADE IN GAO, THE REPUBLIC OF MALI, by Timothy Insoll (1994, 24:6-10)

Introduction

This article is a follow up to a note already published describing the looting of antiquities in the Gao region of the Republic of Mali in West Africa (Fig. 1) (Insoll 1993a). Undoubtedly this article could be written about many sites, not only in West Africa but within the world as a whole. The Gao region is being discussed as the author has conducted fieldwork within this area as part of his ongoing doctoral research project, The Archaeological Recognition of the Acceptance of Islam in the Western Sahel, ca. A.D. 800-1200, during the course of which it was impossible not to notice the immense damage done to important archaeological sites by teams of robbers searching for beads and other material.

Secondly, the processes of destruction witnessed in this region are probably symptomatic of the situation in a much wider area.

The city of Gao is located within the sixth region of the Republic of Mali (De Moraes Farias 1990:65; Insoll 1993b). Although Gao developed at the end of the first millennium A.D. as one of the first southern termini for the trans-Saharan trade routes, it is famous historically as the capital of the Songhai empire which reached its peak between the mid-15th and late 16th centuries A.D. The Songhai empire was the last of the three great medieval empires of the West African Savanna and Sahel, and was preceded by the empires of Ghana and Mali (Levtzion 1985). Trade centers such as Gao flourished through participation in the lucrative trade between North and West Africa. Gold, ivory, and slaves were shipped north across the Sahara and finished goods and salt were received in return.

Two sites will be used as examples here: Saney, a large habitation mound or tell located 4 km outside of Gao, and the area within Gao known as old Gao (*Gao ancien*). Saney is the probable location of the first Muslim Songhai capital, and *Gao ancien* would appear to be the site of the town occupied by the merchants involved in the trans-Saharan trade. The site of Saney has been dated on the basis of a series of inscribed grave stones to the 12th and 13th centuries A.D., while excavations at the site known as the “Mosque of Mansa Musa” in *Gao ancien* have provided an assemblage of North African pottery and glass from the 11th and 12th centuries A.D. (Flight 1975; Insoll forthcoming).

A New Problem?

The destruction of archaeological sites in the Gao region to obtain beads and other items is not a recent phenomena. Raymond Mauny, a French archaeologist who excavated in Gao in the early 1950s records that a considerable trade in antique beads was carried on throughout the Sahel and southern Sahara. Beads were collected from archaeological sites during the rainy season (presumably the beads were exposed by rainwater erosion), and sold to merchants who then transported the beads to southern markets, such as the Gold Coast (modern Ghana), where they were resold (Latruffe 1953:102; Mauny 1951:850). Mauny (1951:850) laments that only a small number of beads were found on the surface of the archaeological sites he surveyed as the majority had been removed to supply this trade.

Rather than just picking over the archaeological sites after a rainstorm, which is bad enough, the methods now used are even more severe. In January 1993, the author, accompanied by officials from the Division du Patrimoine