

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

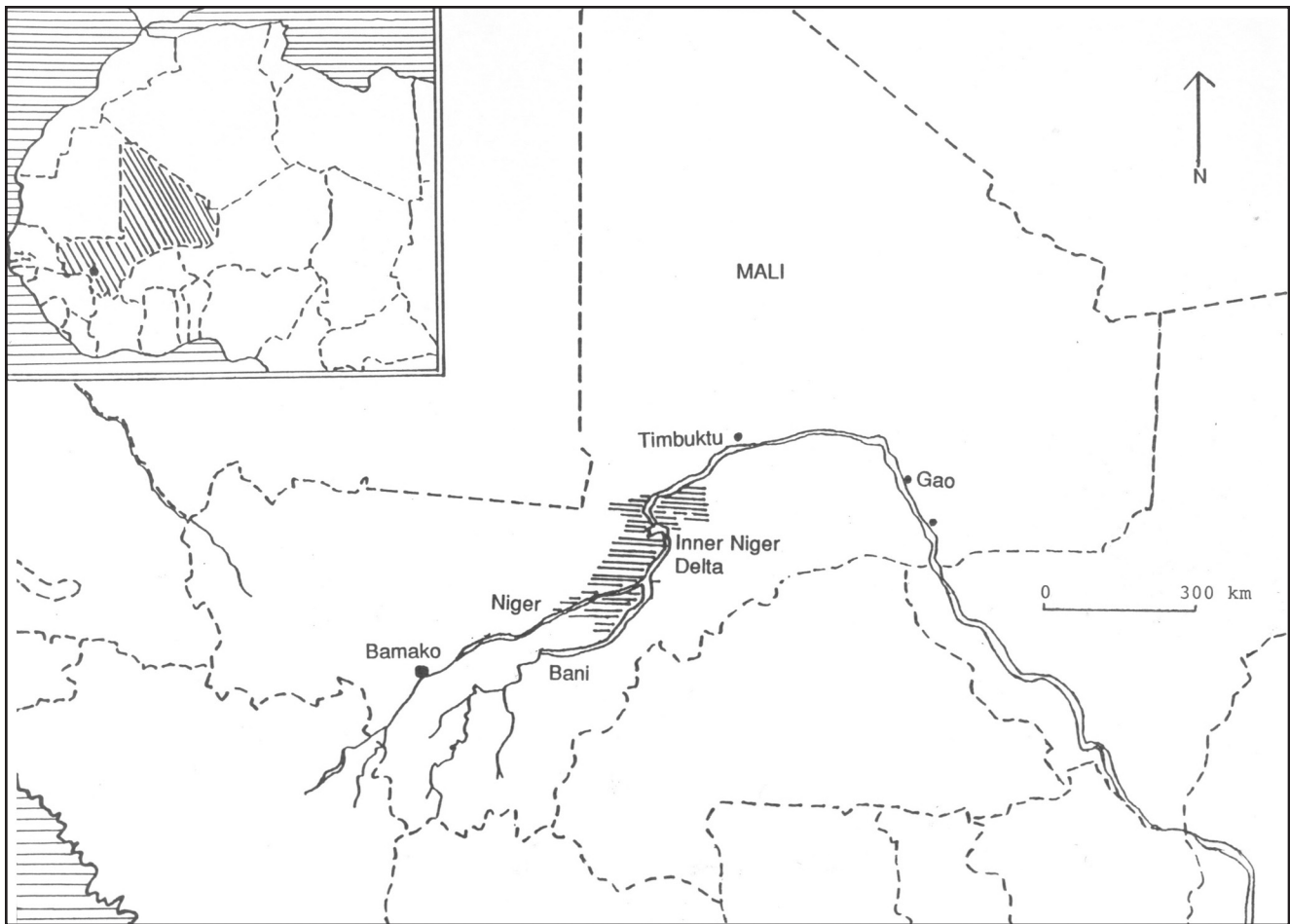


Figure 1. The Republic of Mali and its location within West Africa. Adapted from Insoll (1993:629).

Culturel, visited the site of Saney (Insoll 1993a). The scene which greeted us was literally shocking. Two-man teams of robbers had worked their way across the habitation mound sinking four-meter-deep bore holes into the archaeological deposits, leaving the surface of the site covered in craters. The object of the robbers' attentions can easily be seen merely by looking at the material they have discarded. Metalwork, glass, bones, potsherds, and complete vessels litter the surface of the site. The items noticeable by their absence are beads. Only the occasional fragment of a broken glass or stone bead is left behind. The beads are recovered from the deposits by one of the two robbers who stays on the surface and hauls up and sieves the earth passed up by his accomplice from the pit below.

Gao ancien has also suffered from the attention of treasure hunters. Here, though, the archaeological deposits are somewhat shallower, so people have been more content with collecting from the surface, thereby sparing this area from complete destruction. The assemblage of beads recovered from excavations conducted in September and

October 1993 at the site of the "Mosque of Mansa Musa" in *Gao ancien* gives an idea of the richness and variety of beads which have disappeared from so many other sites. Hundreds of imported and locally manufactured beads of bone, glass, copper, and stone were found. No further detail can be given as analysis of these beads is not yet complete.

The beads which have been plundered are transported to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, where they are used in charm and jewellery production (Toure: pers. comm.). Some also turn up in the stalls of antiquity sellers where they are restrung and sold to tourists.

Whose Responsibility?

The Malian government and its agents, the local authorities, are well aware of the problem and must be congratulated for doing what they can to stop these activities. The authorities in Gao have recognised the seriousness of the problem and have responded by fencing off the site of

the “Mosque of Mansa Musa” and providing a four-man guard to watch over the site. Funds are also being sought to provide similar measures at Saney. This, however, is not a viable option for every archaeological site in the Gao region, let alone the whole of Mali, as obviously the costs of such action would be crippling. Similarly, it is difficult to blame the robbers themselves who are supplementing their very meager incomes dangerously to supply eager, distant (often very distant) markets (Insoll 1993a:631).

Even though in this case the prime market is not a Western one, some of these beads are bought by tourists from North America and from Europe. Educating people not to buy beads from these sources could well slow down the rate of destruction of important archaeological sites. It is the responsibility of archaeologists, bead researchers, collectors, and all those who study and write about beads and other such material to set an example to the general public by, as far as possible, checking the provenience of the material they deal with and by not purchasing or handling materials of dubious origin. It is worth remembering that a bead without context is not much more than a pretty object.

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35. SACRED PALM-LEAF BEADS, by Alok Kumar Kanungo (2000, 37:9-15)

This paper discusses palm-leaf beads, each comprised of 31 overlying discs. Being of a religious nature, their production and usage are intimately related to a particular cultural context in which the right to wear such beads is restricted to a person's status (religious hierarchy). Their manufacture is done solely by hand, entailing a high level of dexterity, sophistication, and exquisite craftsmanship.

Introduction

The palm-leaf bead is a type of sacred bead composed of 31 disc-shaped, centrally punched palm leaflets, of which 29 are inscribed with religious texts on both sides. The remaining two leaves, which are placed at the two ends of the bead, are uninscribed. These leaflets are sized and strung in a manner imparting a spherical shape. The largest disc fits in the middle position, i.e., the 16th position, and the size of the remaining leaflets reduces towards both the ends. Once strung, each bead begins and ends in a knot which keeps it, segregated from others, thereby rendering the string infallible. The diameter of leaflets ranges from 0.5 cm to 2.5 cm. The number of characters on each disc varies from 4 to 20 in accordance with their respective size.

The author came across four such palm-leaf bead strings and one pendant, located in different parts of India. These are as follows:

1. A string made of 58 beads and one pendant with *Srimad Bhagvat Gita* part I, inscribed on it, at the Berhampur University Manuscript Library, Berhampur, Orissa.
2. *Srimad Bhagvat Gita* part II, consisting again of 58 beads and one pendant, at the Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar, Orissa (Fig. 1).
3. A string containing 27 beads and one pendant with