

REVIEWS

WERE THERE 'CULTURE TRAITS' OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AND NEAR EASTERN SOCIETIES IN PRECOLONIAL WEST AFRICA?

doi:10.1017/S002185370621243X

Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa: Africa-Centred and Canaanite-Israelite Perspectives. By DIERK LANGE. Dettelbach: J. H. Roll, 2004. Pp. xiii + 586.
No price given (ISBN 3-89754-115-7).

KEY WORDS: West Africa, archaeology, kingdoms and states, migration, precolonial.

This volume presents, largely in reprinted form, the collected works of Dierk Lange to date. It is divided into five sections of studies considering, respectively, trans-Saharan relations; the history of Kanem-Bornu; the history of the Hausa states; the history of Ife and, to a lesser extent, the other Yoruba states; and, primarily centred around the royal stelae of Gao-Saney, the history of the kingdoms of the Middle Niger. Finally, a section, *Addenda et Corrigenda*, is appended. Obviously, in a review in 800 words of a book of nearly 600 pages, great selectivity has had to be employed in what can be considered.

Lange outlines the multi-source approach he utilizes, both in the papers but also in his preface, which involves, as he states (p. 1), written accounts, oral sources and ethnographic records. He places an emphasis upon the nature of 'very stable' and, for the precolonial period, 'only slowly changing social and political institutions, cultural patterns and cult-dramatic performances' (p. 1). This, however, can be questioned as being a generalization that denies the history, vibrancy and dynamism of African traditions and societies, observed today, but also seemingly indicated by the archaeological record as well. This notion of a timeless, unchanging African past is largely a fallacy.

Moreover, and equally fundamentally, the notion of 'culture traits of ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies' being 'adopted in African contexts almost unchanged ... particularly during the Canaanite-Phoenician period' (p. 1) is the resurrection of a type of unsubstantiated diffusionism long since out of favour in archaeology, anthropology and the majority of African historical studies. Of course, should the evidence support such a picture of African – Near Eastern contacts for this period, then diffusion or whatever mechanism should be suggested and explored, rather than ignored for postcolonial political and academic reasons. Yet the existing evidence does not support the occurrence of such contacts, at least archaeologically, and where such evidence might be expected, as in Saharan-fringe West or Central Africa, it is completely absent. This raises the question of how could such supposed contacts have taken place in a material culture vacuum? Such processes are not without a material culture dimension today in the same area, nor did they take place elsewhere during other periods of time without leaving some form of material 'fingerprint' in the archaeological record.

Indeed, the evidence which Lange alludes to on several occasions as indicative of trans-Saharan contacts in this era, notably Saharan rock engravings and paintings of horse-drawn chariots, for example at Jado (p. 281), can be seriously questioned

on the basis of the chariots represented,¹ their distribution² and their date.³ As far as this reviewer is aware, the only putative evidence for Phoenician influences upon sub-Saharan Africa might extend to their being in some way responsible for the origins of iron metallurgy amongst the Berbers, and then via the latter its subsequent diffusion into West Africa. But this took place without any movement of Phoenicians themselves into West Africa and is far from proven in the first instance.

Unfortunately, similar critical points can be made if we turn to the area considered by Lange that is best known to this reviewer – ancient Gao. For example, the map provided on pp. 6–7 describes Songhay (and thus Gao) as either a ‘Tertiary Canaanite–Israelite state area’ or as having ‘people showing Canaanite–Israelite cultural influences’ – the indecision over what is being ascribed to Songhay being caused by the map’s shading conventions which are not particularly clear. Notwithstanding this stylistic point, such assertions are supported neither by the written or oral historical sources, nor, as yet at least, by the archaeological data.⁴

Equally, if we turn to the paper ‘From Ghana Mali to Songhay: The Mande factor in Gao History’ (p. 495), seemingly a more recent review of later history, we again get an emphasis placed upon the same bodies of evidence that have been exhaustively studied by various other scholars. Notable here are the royal inscriptions from Gao-Saney which must be the most studied Arabic epigraphic corpus in sub-Saharan Africa! But surely what is needed to truly understand their significance (and Paulo Farias must have had the final word here in a study Lange acknowledges⁵) is for them to be contextualized with the archaeology, and especially the archaeology from Gao-Saney, a site where further work is urgently required. Otherwise much of what is said, focused as it is around the same limited database, is conjectural and repetitive.

In summary, this review has of necessity been critical, but it should also be added that though sometimes this book is infuriating, it is also very readable and provocative, and for that Lange is to be commended. It is of a kind of scholarship not encountered that frequently today!