

The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages, by François-Xavier Fauvelle. Translated by Troy Tice. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 264. ISBN: 9780691181264.

For medievalists like myself, trained in a very Eurocentric version of the premodern past, *The Golden Rhinoceros* fills an important knowledge gap, offering a look at the history of the entire African continent from the birth of Islam through European colonization. Troy Tice's highly readable translation of François-Xavier Fauvelle's 2013 *Le Rhinocéros d'or* shows the import of this oversight in our training and reveals Africa's place in the global Middle Ages. Assembled from a combination of archeological finds (the author is an archeologist), manuscripts, objects, maps, and accounts from outside Africa, Fauvelle reveals a world of political achievement, significant and lucrative trade, diplomacy and connection, and fascinating individuals. After an introduction speaking to the necessity of understanding the central place of Africa in medieval global history, thirty-four more-or-less chronologically organized vignettes, each arranged around an event, object, or story, demonstrate Fauvelle's argument; although they have no footnotes, each ends with a useful bibliography. The book also offers some suggestions for further reading.

One disappointment is the dearth of images; each chapter is prefaced with a black and white drawing representative of the event (ranging from a beached sperm whale to an Ethiopian monastery to the titular golden rhinoceros), and a section midbook contains two maps of Africa, one of the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, the other covering the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and five other images. Given Fauvelle's use of archeological finds and art objects to tell his stories, images of these might further enhance the reading experience; even the golden rhinoceros is not pictured.

One of Fauvelle's main goals seems to be to explode European supremacist ideas of Africa in the Middle Ages and, thus, the myths of colonialism as well, particularly those which construct the African premodern as "dark centuries" (3) rather than a "golden age" (3) of prosperity and global exchange. He comments on his choice of the word "medieval," noting that while it "conveys unwanted associations with medieval Europe: Christianity, feudalism, the crusades against Islam," the current trend in medieval studies to provincialize Europe emphasizes "a global world that deserves to be called medieval based only on its distinctive way of being global" (11). The specific characteristics of medieval Europe "appear all the more interesting, or let us say more interestingly exotic, when contrasted with the background of broader phenomena like the interconnectedness of all

the provinces of the medieval world” (11). Investigating the interconnections of religion, trade, politics, and economics, Fauvelle underscores that “Africa also deserves to be considered a province of the medieval world . . . part of a world made up of other such provinces” (11). Secondary goals include recognizing the history of medieval Africa as part of several key histories: the history of Islam, the history of mercantile exchange and trade, the history of travel, and the history of cultural and political encounter.

One of the challenges the *Golden Rhinoceros* takes on is the fragmentary source material. Just as now, Fauvelle suggests, Africa is often created as a space through the perceptions of others; many of his textual accounts come from travel narratives written by visitors as diverse as Chinese sailors, Arabic traders, and Vasco de Gama, many of whom were drawn to Africa through the multiple networks, particularly trade routes and legal precepts as well as faith, that connected across geographies in the period. Fauvelle also relies on non-textual sources; while he suggests that oral history traditions are only reliable for about the past 300 years, art objects and archeology can supply a great deal of information, although he criticizes colonial digs that were basically opportunities for looting (such as the disruptive excavation at Great Zimbabwe that made it impossible to date most of the objects, detailed in chapter 31). That said, Fauvelle tends to view archeological discoveries as raising questions rather than answering them. His description of the treasures and manuscripts housed in Debra Damo, in Ethiopia, does not emerge as a way to understand how monasteries functioned as parts of trade networks connecting people on the continent and beyond; instead, Fauvelle seems more interested in why the treasures might have been buried there and what that might say about the status of the place itself.

The titular chapter, “The Golden Rhinoceros,” brings readers to thirteenth-century South Africa. The Mapungubwe site, Fauvelle notes, was contested by the country’s colonizers who did not want to believe that such sophistication could be produced by the local Bantu population, but instead wanted to assume an earlier colonization by “a population with a more noble pedigree” (136). Fauvelle’s approach erases the colonial and looks to the world of Mapungubwe itself, showing in its rich archeology a multidirectional trade, and particularly a triangular network evidenced by Indian glass beads, East African gold, and the remains of local goods such as ivory and animal skins. The rhinoceros itself appears to underscore this; made of regional gold, it represents the one-horned Asian rhino rather than the local, two-horned African species—only the wooden core over which the gold foil was shaped, and which has disintegrated through its lengthy burial (and its careless removal from the site by a Western

treasure hunter), would be able to settle whether it was actually created elsewhere and simply gilded locally, or whether it was an entirely local image of a distant creature. In any case, Fauvelle notes, it indicates that Mapungubwe was part of a powerful, royal site, one able to harness “the political benefits of a commercial relationship with unknown worlds” despite its traditional agricultural economy (140). This section both dismantles a colonial ideology (and takes the destruction it wrought to task) and provides an alternative rich history in opposition to those colonial notions.

Even when Fauvelle leans on outside descriptions of the continent and its people, he unpacks any biased assumptions that underlie them and justifies these sources’ utility in gaining access to the African past. He is aware of the challenge his sources pose and meets it head on; the book does not equivocate. The vignettes he offers provide local examinations that add to a continental (and ultimately global) sweep; the stories of individuals like King Mansa Musa of Mali intersect with the stories of places—the Sahel, the Sahara, Ethiopia. For all that it is an easy read, it still provides a great deal of information about Africa, about the Middle Ages, and about how to do history (and how not to). The short sections and its accessibility make it useful for teaching in global medieval courses; for instance, I taught the chapters on Mali along with the *Sunjata* in a medieval global literatures class.

Describing trade encounters in the Sudan, Fauvelle asks “How to meet when the land is unfamiliar? How to establish communication when the same language isn’t spoken? . . . How to adjust supply and demand on this improvised market? How to settle the terms of trade to the satisfaction of each partner if neither uses the same measures of currency?” (123). These questions might be a metaphor for *The Golden Rhinoceros* itself, which offers nonspecialist readers a bridge to an unfamiliar story in an unfamiliar place.

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