INTRODUCTION

The period covered by this book is often referred to by historians of sub-Saharan Africa as "the Middle Ages", though this expression is not always relevant to African history. This is the period between the conquest of Egypt and North Africa by the Muslim Arabs and the great geographical discoveries of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Research on the history of Africa south of the Sahara during this period has so far been confined mainly to archaeology, historical geography and political history; many other subjects, and particularly economic history, have been neglected, and research has gone no further than the noting of the most important facts found in archaeological and written sources. One of the chief reasons for the delay in investigating the economic history of sub-Saharan Africa in the period between the seventh and the sixteenth centuries (and this also applies to other branches of history) is the absence of a critical edition, with commentary and translation into a modern European language, of the written sources in various languages. Such a Corpus scriptorum antiquorum Africæ subsaharaneæ illustrantium, with translations in a language understandable to scholars inside and outside Africa (probably English or French), is essential for research on the history of Africa from the seventh to the sixteenth century.

Admittedly the situation is much better than it was even a few decades ago. We have now modern critical editions of a number of European sources from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which are very important for the history of sub-Saharan Africa* and also a collection of Arabic sources, though these have not been edited so as to be of maximum value for non-Arabists.* These Arabic sources are particularly important for the history of Africa before the sixteenth century; the absence of up-to-date critical editions and translations makes it necessary to call in the help of Arabists, who will clearly have to face a number of problems when working on the history

*Asterisks in the text, together with Arabic figures in the left-hand margins, indicate a note in the endnotes section (pp. 135-226).
West African food in the Middle Ages

of sub-Saharan Africa. Just as an Africanist who does not know Arabic cannot always see the real meaning of the Arabic text in a European translation, Arabists can also make mistakes if they do not fully understand the problems of African history. But this does not exempt them, particularly those who are familiar with the historical problems of North Africa, from the duty of carrying out research based on the Arabic sources for the history of Negro Africa. Even before the cooperation of various specialists is achieved in the production of a collection such as our proposed Corpus, Arabists must engage as often as possible in research into the earlier history of Africa. Arabic sources, which are almost the only written sources for the history of Africa up to the middle of the fifteenth century, have often been under-estimated by Africanists, who, though they have used them repeatedly in their own work, often fail to understand their peculiar character.

This is particularly true of West Africa, the northern part of which was repeatedly penetrated during our period by Arab travellers and merchants, and for which there is consequently much more information in Arabic sources than for other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Some of the facts in these sources have been used by Arabists and others in studies of the earlier history of North Africa; less attention has been paid to the information in these sources about the economic history of West Africa before the sixteenth century. This has encouraged me to present an English version of an account, first published in Polish in 1963, of the foods of the peoples of West Africa between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries, as revealed in Arabic sources.*

Since I am only an Arabist, not an Africanist in the strict meaning of the word, I have limited my investigation to the use of a single category of written sources, though I fully realize the drawbacks of this method. With a few exceptions I have omitted the information to be found in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European sources. On the other hand, I have made use of the accounts of European travellers from the second half of the eighteenth century up to the beginning of the colonial period, since these are even more helpful in understanding the Arabic sources than the works of recent ethnographers, though these have also been used in the present study.
Introduction

The period covered by this book begins with the tenth century — the date of the first information by Arabic writers on the food of the people of West Africa.* It ends in the early sixteenth century with the Description of Africa (completed in 1526) by Leo Africanus, the last original author of Arab origin to write about our area, though he wrote in Italian, not in Arabic; his description is based on his own observations made during two journeys to West Africa (in 1511 and 1512), and on information collected during these travels.

His book, which we have taken as the end of our period, contains the last extensive description of West Africa during the time when it was almost completely isolated from the rest of the world apart from North Africa and, to a lesser extent, from the Nile valley. The next few decades witnessed the beginning of lively economic intercourse between West Africa and the countries of South-east Asia and the newly-discovered continent of America. One result of this was the appearance in West Africa of new edible plants, mainly of American origin, but including also coconut and other plants from Asia. Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, these new foods have to a considerable extent displaced the traditional local vegetable foodstuffs, and also the social and religious customs and beliefs associated with them.

The important information to be found in the writings of the medieval Arabic authors about the foods of the peoples of West Africa during our period has hitherto been used in only a fragmentary way by historians.* Indeed, apart from the work of ethno-botanists, it is only very recently that there has been any attempt to investigate the foods and methods of food preparation used by the West African peoples either in the past or at the present day.*

The geographical scope of the present book is limited to West Africa. By this term, in keeping with recent usage, I mean that part of the African continent inhabited by Negro peoples which is bounded on the south and west by the Atlantic Ocean, on the north by the Sahara, and on the east by the eastern frontier of Nigeria. The boundaries of West Africa so delimited are of a somewhat conventional character. This applies particularly to the northern boundary, which is not a distinct geographical barrier; the transition from desert areas to areas
West African food in the Middle Ages

occupied by permanent settled populations is gradual, and even the desert itself is not completely uninhabited. Nor is the Sahara an ethnic boundary between the white peoples and the Negroes, since within its southern part there are still some remnants of the Negro population whom we shall call Sudanic. Negro territory once extended much further to the north, particularly in southern Mauritania, in the area to the north of the middle Niger, and in the country of Air. On the other hand, white peoples are found both on the Senegal and on the Niger and in the country east of the Niger. These are Tuareg tribes, descendants of the former Berber nomads who came there from the north — from southern Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Tripolitania. Having settled in the northern Sudan, these tribes frequently intermingled with the local Negro population and sometimes played a part in the history of the countries.

It is also hard to justify our eastern boundary of West Africa solely in geographical or ethnic terms. There is, in fact, no clear-cut geographical barrier separating Nigeria and the basin of Lake Chad from the countries on the Nile, and it is hard to detect any significant ethnic boundary. The eastern limit of West Africa is thus of a purely conventional character.

The vagueness of our northern and eastern boundaries has an obvious bearing on the geographical scope of this work. To throw more light on our subject, we must use not only information relating to the countries of the lower and middle Senegal, the middle Niger and eastwards to Lake Chad, but also references to the peoples of the southern Sahara and to peoples living north and east of Lake Chad.

On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that the whole southern part of West Africa, and the tropical forest area in particular, was completely unknown to the Arabs of the Middle Ages. These countries were not normally reached by Arab merchants or travellers; that is why there is almost no mention of them in the Arabic sources earlier than the sixteenth century. It is only through works written in the western Sudan in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that we can look, even superficially, into the ethnic relationships and the history of these southern areas. There is very little information about the food of the peoples of the southern parts of West Africa. In some cases, however, the population
was related to the peoples of the northern zone; this was true, for instance, for the southern part of the Mande group or Mandingoes (unknown to medieval Arabs) who are closely related in culture, and particularly in their use of foodstuffs, to the northern Mande peoples. Thus we may assume that information in the medieval Arabic sources referring to the population settled on the middle Niger is also of value for peoples living in the basin of the upper Niger. Moreover, it seems that the peoples of the southern part of West Africa, particularly those living to the north of the tropical forest, though ethnically distinct from the peoples of the northern part, had a similar culture and economy, and ate the same foods that the Sudanic peoples were recorded as eating by the medieval Arabic authors. The peoples of these more isolated parts of the West African interior often succeeded in retaining their ancient customs, including traditional foodstuffs and cookery, right up to the nineteenth century and beyond, while in the more accessible coastal regions and on the southern borders of the Sahara the food of the people had been radically altered; the reasons for this are economic — the adoption of new cultivated plants — and religious — the suppression of alcoholic drinks under pressure of the rapid spread of Islam.

West Africa is by no means uniform in climate or vegetation. In the north is the desert zone, devoid of water and almost completely without plants; there is virtually no arable land and even pastoralism is extremely difficult, so that the population is sparse and mainly nomadic. In complete contrast, the southernmost zone has very heavy rainfall, and supports the rich vegetation of the tropical forest; the land can be cultivated practically everywhere, and the population is comparatively dense. Between these two extremes lie intermediate zones. The desert gradually gives way to thorn scrub on the south, and the thorn scrub merges into grassland with occasional trees. Further south, the grass grows gradually richer and the trees taller until finally the forest is reached. The country is generally flat, the monotony interrupted by the Jos plateau to the east and the Futa Jallon plateau merging into the Nimba Mountains in the far west, in the Republic of Guinée. In this area rise the three largest rivers of West Africa: the Niger, the Senegal and the Gambia, all three serving as important
6 West African food in the Middle Ages

arteries of communication.

The interior of West Africa is not easily accessible. Only from the east, from the banks of the upper Nile, is penetration facilitated by the absence of any geographical barrier. Along this route, along the southern margins of the Sahara, influences penetrated from Nubia; trade from Egypt had earlier passed this way, and also along the partly desert route which connected Egypt with the area of the historic state of Ghīrā, a route known and used by the beginning of the tenth century A.D.* The tropical forests made penetration of the interior difficult from the south, though by the early sixteenth century it was possible to transport kola nuts, an important product of the countries on the Gulf of Guinea, through the forest.* From the coasts of Mauritania and Senegal on the west, foreign influences penetrated only very occasionally before the middle of the fifteenth century. Incidents like Hanno's expedition in the fifth century B.C., undertaken to found Carthaginian trading-posts on the west coasts of Africa, or the journey of the Arab Ibn Fāṭima (? twelfth century) who came into the western Sudan by way of the inhospitable coastlands of the Atlantic Ocean, were rare and can hardly have exerted any major influence.

Foreign influences penetrated West Africa from the west at a comparatively late date, and began with the foundation in 1448 of a Portuguese post on Arguin Island off the Mauritanian coast south of Cape Blanco. This was a trading post to which local products were brought in large quantities, including gold and slaves, which were exchanged for European goods; or, more accurately, goods such as the spices, mainly from South-east Asia — saffron, cloves, pepper and ginger — for which Europeans acted as commercial middlemen. We owe this information to Valentim Fernandes, whose account of the West African coast was written in 1506-7, after the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498. It was this discovery which probably began the economic exchange between East Africa, India and the other countries of South-east Asia on the one hand, and the Portuguese post of Arguin on the other.*

On the northern borders of West Africa, which are also the southern borders of the Sahara, the situation was different. The desert was less inhospitable and more densely
Introduction

peopled in the past, and during the Middle Ages — and probably also in ancient times — it was crossed by numerous paths running roughly north and south along which nomadic Berber peoples penetrated from the north, and many Sudanic groups from the south. These peoples were seeking edible wild plants, game, pasture, or land suitable for cultivation. Following them, and benefiting from their knowledge of the country, came expeditions of various kinds, even in very early times; such expeditions usually started from the North African countries with towns on the Mediterranean coast, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and finally Arab. Their purposes varied; some were undertaken to capture Negro slaves,* or to gain control of the various salt-mines scattered in the desert; some were merchant caravans in search of the gold of the Sudan, then profitably exchanged in West Africa for Saharan salt and glass beads. The introduction into North Africa (about A.D. 300?) of the camel, that most useful of animals in the desert, made travel along these routes considerably easier. The breeding of camels, undertaken on a large scale in the southern parts of present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Tripolitania as early as the fourth century, facilitated southward expeditions of large groups of Berbers looking for fodder for their herds, or fleeing from Roman, Byzantine or Arab rule; also, very importantly, it facilitated caravan commerce with the countries south of the Sahara.*

When the first Arab conquerors reached the borderlands of the Sahara, some of the local Berbers for various reasons favoured the conquerors; some of these also knew the caravan paths which crossed the Sahara, and these Berbers became the first guides of the Arabs in their penetration towards West Africa — a penetration which was at first mainly military in character, but soon became commercial.* In this way the first commercial and cultural ties were formed between the North African Muslim Arabs and the western and central Sudan; at the beginning of the period of Arab rule in the Maghrib, the most important part was played not by the new conquerors, but by the gradually Islamizing and Arabizing Berbers. The truth of this is confirmed by the part played in the early Middle Ages by Sijilmāsa in south-eastern Morocco, Tāhert and Wargla in the Algerian Sahara, the cases of southern Tunisia and Jabal Nafūsa in northern Tripolitania, all Muslim, but essentially Berber,
West African Food in the Middle Ages

15 centres.

The information concerning countries and peoples of the western Sudan which began to reach centres of Arabic scholarship from the seventh and eighth centuries thus comes only in part from Arab warriors or merchants; most of this information was given to the Arab geographers by Berbers who had long been in close touch with Negroland, and who knew what was going on there. This is what makes the information so valuable. It is only at a later date, from the second half of the tenth century, that genuinely Arab travellers and geographers appear on the scene; it is their descriptions of the Sudan which provide the principal sources for the questions dealt with in this work.

The ethnic and political situation in West Africa, as seen by Arab travellers, geographers and historians between the late eighth century and the early sixteenth century has often been studied and examined. In this limited space, I will not deal with this in detail, but will concentrate on the most essential points.

In the extreme west of the Sudan, long before the first Arabic references to this country, lived the Sudanic peoples known as Tukolor (Tucurolôs according to the early Portuguese travellers), Serer and Wolof. In about A.D. 1000 the first of these, known to medieval writers as Takrûr (Tékûrûr), founded a state on both sides of the lower and middle Senegal, with a capital also known as Takrûr in the neighbourhood of the modern town of Podor. This state was converted to Islam at an early date; and by the first half of the eleventh century A.D., Islam had also become the ruling religion in the state of Sûlà (subordinate to Takrûr), with a capital of the same name, on the middle Senegal between Takrûr and the town of Gâhà. A rather earlier organized state in this area was the kingdom of Warûm, attested at the end of the eighth century by the geographer al-Fazârî. Some investigators place this in the part of Senegal which was later to be taken over by the Wolof state.

The country east of the upper Senegal to the upper Niger and the adjacent lake district to the west was a region occupied from the earliest times by the Mandingoës. In about the third or fourth century A.D. the northern peoples of that group, including the Soninke, founded the kingdom of Gâhà, the
Introduction

earest of the known states of the western Sudan. The earliest political centre of this kingdom lay in the land of Aukar, north-west of the oasis of Walata, colonized by the Soninke even before 200 B.C. In historical times, the capital of the state of Ghāna was the town of Ghāna, now the ruins known as Koumbi Saleh in Mauritania. In the eleventh century the capital included a large Muslim quarter inhabited by North African merchants, with twelve mosques, though the local population was still pagan.

Al-Pazārī gives the dimensions of the kingdom, which at that time was undoubtedly the largest political unit in West Africa. The whole of the western Sudan was subordinated to it, including the gold-bearing areas in the basin of the upper Senegal known as Bilād at-Tibr, "the land of gold-dust", a country which later Arab geographers were to call Waŋqara or Waŋgara, and which was also inhabited by Mandingo peoples.* According to a later legend, the first rulers of the state of Ghāna were immigrants from the north arriving in the fourth century A.D., of Berber or perhaps Jewish origin; in about 770 they were replaced by rulers from the Soninke.

The kingdom of Ghāna, whose inhabitants were partly Muslim as early as the eleventh century, had begun to decline from about 1076, after being attacked by Berber tribes from neighbouring Mauritania. These same tribes were later to lay the foundations of the great state of the Almoravids, which also took in Morocco and Spain. The gradual decline of the kingdom of Ghāna continued until the early thirteenth century, when the paramountcy of the western Sudan was taken over by the rulers of another people of the Mande groupe, the Malinke (Malinké).* These people founded a great state, the centre of which near the town of Jeriba was already known in the ninth century as Mallel (Mallīl). This is stated by the Arab geographer al-Yaʿqūbī (late ninth century)* and also by al-Bakrī (1068), who tells us that the king of Mallel had been converted to the Muslim faith some time before he wrote. The later Arabic name was Mālī. The capital of this state was first at Jeriba on the Niger, and later at the town of Niani (Nyani, Nyeni), some distance lower down the Niger, and known also as Mālī. * According to the Arab geographers, the town developed into an important centre of trade with North Africa, and, as in the town of Ghāna, a large quarter grew up inhabited by white Berber and Arab merchants,
West African food in the Middle Ages

Immigrants from North Africa. There is no doubt that the towns of Ghana, Mali and other urban centres of the western Sudan with North African immigrants among their populations played an important part in spreading the cultivation of some edible plants which were characteristic of North Africa rather than of the Sudan.

The state of Mali went into decline in the fifteenth century. Most of the provinces which had belonged to it when it was flourishing in the fourteenth century went over to the neighbouring state of Songhai, and the power of the kings of Mali was limited to the region of Jeriba, which had been the cradle of the state.

The state of Ghana included the small state of Samana or Samaqanda, reported first by al-Ya’qubi and then by al-Bakri, who places it four days’ journey from Ghana in the direction of the town of Ghayārī (Gadiaro) on the upper Senegal. In the same country, two days from Samaqanda, was the town of Tāqā.

North of the states of Takrūr and Ghana (and, later, Mali) lay areas inhabited by various Berber peoples. Some of these formed the federation reported as early as the eighth century by al-Fazārī, and later by al-Ya’qubi, under the name of Aniba; the whole of the western Sahara was under its rule. In all probability, these peoples were the Ṣanhaja (Zanaga) — the Lamtūna (Lamtūna), Judda (Joddala, Jedala, Guedala) and other Berber tribes which were later to play an extremely important part in the creation of the Almoravid state. Even at this early date, an important political and commercial centre of this region seems to have been the town of Awdaghast or Awdaghast, on the Rkis plateau in southern Mauritania north-east of Kiffa. It is mentioned as a kingdom (called Ghast) by al-Ya’qubi, who adds that it was inhabited by a heathen tribe at war with the numerous kingdoms of Negroland. Further east to the north of the Niger bend, another tribe of the Ṣanhaja group, the Berber Madīsa people, were living in the eleventh century; this same tribe in the ninth century had been living in southeastern Morocco.

East of the area occupied by the state of Ghana, and later by the state of Mali, the agricultural and fishing people of the Songhai lived in the Dendi area. According to historians of Africa who have drawn on rather late sources and on local