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052181300X - Ancient Middle Niger: Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape

Roderick J. McIntosh

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## Ancient Middle Niger

The cities of West Africa's Middle Niger, only recently brought to the world's attention, make us rethink the "whys" and the "wheres" of ancient urbanism. These cities present the archaeologist with something of a novelty: a non-nucleated, clustered city-plan with no centralized, state-focused power. *Ancient Middle Niger* explores the emergence of these cities in the first millennium BC and the evolution of their hinterlands from the perspective of the self-organized landscape. Cities appeared in a series of profound transformations to the human-land relations and this book illustrates how each transformation was a leap in complexity. The book ends with an examination of certain critical moments in the emergence of other urban landscapes in Mesopotamia, along the Nile, and in northern China, through a Middle Niger lens. Highly illustrated throughout, this work is a key text for all students of African archaeology and of comparative pre-industrial urbanism.

RODERICK J. MCINTOSH is Professor of Anthropology at Rice University and visiting Professor of Archaeology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. His recent publications include *The Peoples of the Middle Niger. Island of Gold* (1998), *The Way the Wind Blows: Climate, History, and Human Action* (2000), and *Geomorphology and Human Palaeoecology of the Méma, Mali* (2005).

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# Ancient Middle Niger

*Urbanism and the Self-Organizing Landscape*

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For Alex and Annick

The most precious companions in the field

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Tera Pruitt: Figs. 1.4, 1.7, 3.1–3.4

Matt Harvey: Figs. 4.2, 4.3

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M. Kirtley and A. Kirtley: Fig. 4.13

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## Preface

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The core approach taken in this book emerged from two conversations. At first glance, the two conversations could not have been more different – one, in the shadow of a ravine cut deeply into the heart of Jenne-Jeno, with my long-term Malian collaborators, Drs. Téréba Togola and Boucacar Diaby – the other around a campfire in a national forest in Texas, with a field class of my Rice University students. One with my source of many insights into the deep-time, evolving landscape of the peoples who built the ancient city we were in the process of probing. The second with one segment of this book’s intended readership, with those open to learn about motivations of peoples very different than themselves, curious to know how archaeologists massage such knowledge from dry stone, brittle bone. At the confluence of those two conversations emerged this book and the self-organization approach to origins of complex systems cascading throughout its pages – a concept fundamental to the enduring Middle Niger vision of causation in the world and one that sits very comfortably with those frighteningly numerate undergraduates. (Just how many calculus jokes can one professor take in an evening?)

It has been a lifetime privilege to excavate the cities of the ancient Middle Niger. I sometimes walk through the vast fields of these towering *tells* in a state of awe. They are also a source of frustration. No kings, apparently no armies, no palaces nor citadels – for the longest time we were frustrated in our attempts to imagine the social glue holding together these vast populations. The archaeological mounds, or *tells*, themselves are vast and each frustratingly resides as a city within a larger urban cluster. From a purely selfish stance, how many lifetimes would it take even to scratch the surface of this, the most recent of the world’s major urban civilizations to be discovered? Yet there have been many joys and the deep satisfaction of working with the many colleagues and institutions that made this book possible. Greatest satisfaction has been in the partnership in discovery with Susan McIntosh, always one of the most original minds in the business. In addition to my friends and co-directors, Drs. Diaby and Togola, over twenty-five years I have generated a list, too

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Preface

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large for me to mention everyone on it by name, of Malians without whom the research, frankly, would simply have floundered. Topping the list, of course, are our friends in Jenne, principally our phenomenally dedicated workers (led by our foreman, Baoukassou Traouré), whom it has been a privilege to learn from. Never say “Abana” (“It’s finished.”). Thank you, a thousand times, to those many who have adopted us, especially Dani and Yama Traouré, Jaje Traouré, Petit Baba Traouré, and Hama Bocoum. Our deepest respect and thanks for three decades of support go to El Hadj Ba Hasseye Maïga, the Chief of Jenne, and to the Imam of the Great Mosque, El Hadj Alman Korobala. The staff of the Mission Culturelle de Djenné (Dr. B. Diaby, Director) supported the research in innumerable ways; thanks go also to the Jenne mayor’s office, the office of the Deputé (formerly Commandant du Cercle), all the Amis de Djenné, and members of Patrimoine Djenné. Jenne lives (!) because of their efforts. I am pleased to acknowledge with gratitude and personal affection the continuing interest in the Middle Niger research (where he dug with us in 1977) of His Excellency Dr. Alpha Oumar Konaré, former President of Mali and now Chairman of the African Union, and of his wife, the distinguished historian Dr. Adam Ba Konaré. (As together we’ve often pledged, we’ll get you back in the field . . . someday.)

Research permission and encouragement for the various Middle Niger campaigns has been granted over the years by the Director and Assistant Director of the Institut des Sciences Humaines, Drs. Kléna Sanogo and Mammadi Dembélé, and by Dr. Mamadou Diallo, Director of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique. Thanks, especially, go to the many staff members of the ISH, the Direction National des Arts et de la Culture (Dr. T. Togola, Director), and the Musée National (Samuel Sidibé, Director) who lent their various technical skills to our missions. I am particularly happy to heap praise on our Malian field supervisors, M. Cissé, B. Sékou, and M. Samaké – the work continues! Thanks go also to our many workmen, officials and friends at Dia, Kayes, Nampala and Timbuktu who have made possible some twenty years of survey and excavation at urban sites within the larger Middle Niger. With too many to mention by name, I would particularly wish to thank the mayors of Timbuktu, Nampala and Dia for their personal kindnesses, as well as for officially facilitating the research.

Funding for twenty-five years of Middle Niger research has come from the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, the Olive Branch Foundation, the American Association of University Women, and the Fulbright Senior Scholar program. Over the years we have enjoyed the support and friendship of the official American community in Bamako, that of many ambassadors (I mention the particular

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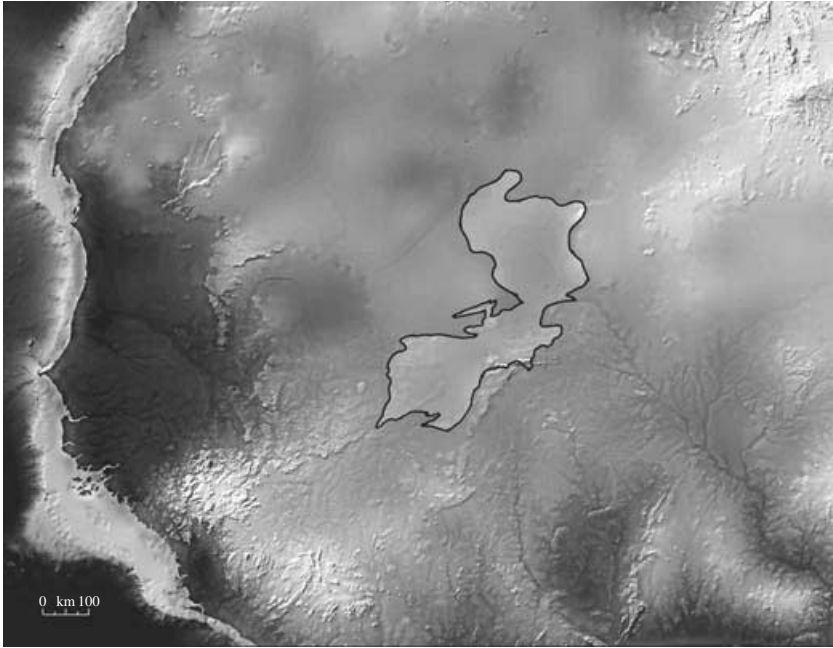
friendship of Dr. David Rawson), heads of the USIS bureau and of the Peace Corps. Too many Peace Corps volunteers, expatriate students and specialists (Senegalese, European, Canadian and American) have contributed to be acknowledged individually (but are in the monographs on each “mission”) – but I would have a mutiny of Malians were I not to mention Karol Stoker, a participant in every campaign since 1977. Scores of specialists and laboratories in the US, the UK, France and elsewhere have analyzed materials from the Middle Niger. To the many Rice University graduate and undergraduate students who contributed in innumerable ways to the vetting and production of the research results, many thanks – particularly to Matt Harvey, Tera Pruitt and Matt Prater for the graphics that contribute so much to the creative heft of this book. Many of the satellite and aerial images (including this book’s cover) were generously provided by Gray Tappan of the EROS Data Center. And to Kriss Barker, thanks for patience when the creative juices just aren’t flowing, unaffected praise when they are.

Rita Wright suggested this book; our many conversations together about alternative urbanisms and heterarchy nurtured it. Simon Whitmore of Cambridge University Press professionally and with good humor brought it into existence. I am grateful for the comments of the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, but particularly need to apologize to the many, many friends, colleagues, and collaborators who have contributed to my vision of the dynamics of the ancient Middle Niger landscape, all of whom cannot be mentioned individually here. I dedicate this book to my patient – and exhilarating – children.

## Chronology

---

	Present AD 1750	
“SOLITARY” CITIES REMAIN	1500	Urban clusters eviscerated Regional abandonment of “live” basins
REGIONAL ABANDONMENT	1250	Abandonment of Jenne-jeno  Regional abandonment of “dead” basins
	1000	
CLIMAX OF URBAN CLUSTERS	750	
	500	
HETERARCHICAL URBANISM MATURES	250	
	BC–AD	
	250	Founding of Jenne-jeno urban cluster? Founding of Jenne-jeno
EMERGING CITIES	500	Permanent occupation – “live” basins
	750	Metallurgy – Fe, Cu
	1000	
	1250	
	1500	Elaboration of niche specialization
CORPORATE GROUPS IN FULL ACCOMMODATION	1750	
	2000	Small, seasonal clustered hamlets
	2250	Permanent occupation – Méma
	2500	Domestication rice/millet/sorghum
	2750	Emergent pulse dynamics
INCIPIENT SPECIALIZATION	3000 BC	Azawad peoples under climate stress



Map 1. Map of the Middle Niger