

## Niger Valley Civilization

The Niger Valley refers to the 2,597-mile Niger River's watershed and its environs, a vast region spanning the lush Delta region of Southern Nigeria, north to the dry highlands of Southern Algeria, and west to the lush highlands of Guinea. Contrary to popular belief, this region of West Africa has been inhabited for tens of thousands of years. The Niger Valley, in particular, lies south of Jebel Irhoud, Morocco, where archaeologists recently found the world's oldest early modern humans (300,000 BC), and north of Iwo Eleru, Nigeria, where 13,000-year-old human remains have been found.

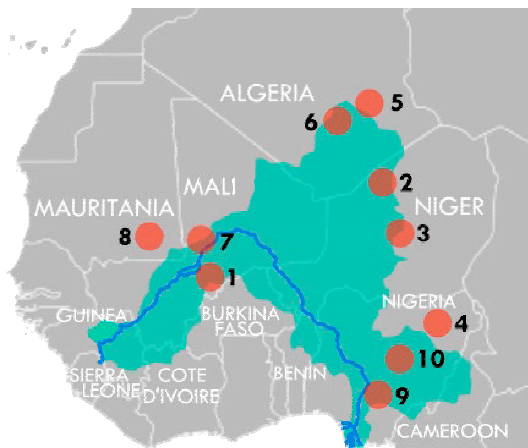
And despite widespread ignorance of West African history, there is an abundance of archaeological evidence and written accounts available to help us trace the development of this region's advanced ancient and medieval civilizations. Early Niger Valley societies were the first to practice ceremonial burials, domesticate millet and smelt iron, and were among the firsts to write, make pottery, domesticate cattle, and use boats for travel. Their industries and strong trading networks gave rise to wealthy empires and city-states whose stone, earthen and walled cities were intellectual hubs of the medieval world.

### Early Pottery

Archaeologists from the University of Geneva dated pottery sherds discovered at the Ravin du Hibou site at Ounjougou, Mali to 9400 BC, making them among the oldest ceramics in the world (only pottery found in Sudan, Japan, China and Siberia, which are generally dated to 10,000-12,000 BC, are supposedly older). Located in the Valley of Yamé (west of the Inner Niger Delta), the ancient, so-called Ounjougou culture lived where the Dogon people reside today. And similar to their current use of ceramics to boil grains and cereal, archaeologists posit that the ancient pottery was used for the same purposes.

### World's Largest Ancient Petroglyphs

The Tenere Desert in Niger is home to over 800 ancient rock carvings that depict humans and animals, including the largest ancient petroglyphs in the world. At Dabous, about 150 miles north of Agadez, lie detailed rock



#### Development of Niger Valley Civilization (credit: AncientAfricanHistory.com)

1. Ounjougou (9400 BC) - early pottery
2. Dabous (8000 BC) - largest ancient petroglyphs
3. Gobero (7550 BC) - early graveyard, early agricultural culture
4. Dufuna (6500 BC) - 2nd oldest dugout canoe
5. Tassili N'ajjer (6000 BC) - early boats, domesticated cattle, horses
6. Oued Mertoutek (3000 BC) - early writing
7. Lower Tilemsi Valley (2500 BC) - oldest domesticated millet
8. Dahr Tichit (2000 BC) - early city
9. Lejja (2000 BC) - oldest iron smelting
10. Nok (1500 BC) - early iron smelting, terracotta statues



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*The Dabous Giraffes in Niger (8000 BC) (credit: Bradshaw Foundation)*

carvings of life-size giraffes, the largest of which is 18 feet long (adult giraffes are generally 15-20 feet tall). Archaeologists date the petroglyphs to 8000 BC, an era when the Tenere Desert was likely greener (as further explained below) and more hospitable for both giraffes and humans.

### Early Aqualithic and Pastoral Civilization; Early Graveyard

Farther south at Gobero, also in Niger's Tenere Desert, archaeologists from the University of Chicago uncovered the remains of an advanced civilization that dates to 8000 BC and continuously occupied this site for nearly 5,000 years (so-called "Kiffian Culture"). This site provides one of the earliest examples of domesticating cattle and practicing ceremonial burials, with one of the oldest graveyards in the world. Moreover, numerous ancient harpoons, fish hooks and pottery with wavy lines, which archaeologists generally associate with pre-historic populations that heavily fished, were among the oldest artefacts identified at the site. There were also the 8,250-year-old remains of catfish, tilapia and hippos, further evidencing that the climate was once much more humid than today.



*One of many harpoons found at Gobero (8000 BC) (credit: Paul Sereno)*



*Pottery shard with wavy lines (8000 BC) (credit: Paul Sereno)*

### Second Oldest Known Boat in the World

Heavy fishing and riparian hunting led early Niger Valley civilizations to boating over 8,500 years ago. One of the oldest boats ever found anywhere in the world, the so-called Dufuna Canoe (6500 BC), was partially discovered by a Fulani cattle herdsman digging a well near Dufuna, Nigeria. This site is not far from the Komadugu Gana River, a tributary of Lake Chad, which would have been much larger in that era.

An advertisement for Algolia with a dark blue background. It features the Algolia logo in the top left, a glowing shopping cart icon on the right, and the text "10 ways how AI is disrupting the ecommerce landscape" in white. A white button with the text "WATCH THE VIDEO" is located at the bottom left.

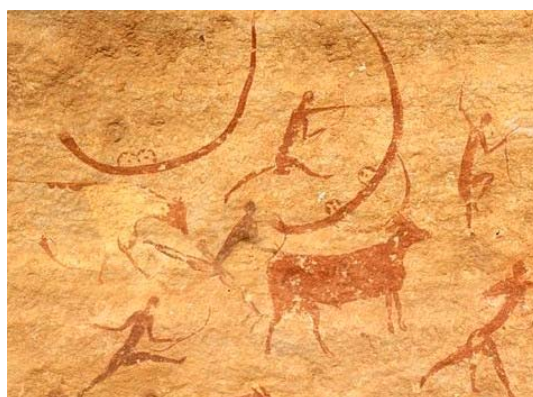
Measuring 27.6 feet long, the Dufuna Canoe is nearly 3 times the length of and carved in a more sophisticated manner than the so-called Pesse canoe, which was found in the Netherlands and is believed to be the only boat older than the Dufuna canoe. The Dufuna discovery demonstrates ancient Nigerians' early use of advanced technology and possibly maritime trade.



*The Dufuna Canoe (6500 BC) being hoisted out of the ground; currently housed at the National Museum at Damaturu, Nigeria (credit: Peter Breunig)*

### Early Depictions of Boats and Domesticated Cattle

Depictions of boats also appear around 6000 BC in Saharan rock art at Tassili N'Ajjer in Southern Algeria, which hosts roughly 15,000 ancient rock drawings, some dating as far back as 12,000 BC, but most dating to 6000 BC. Such boats appear alongside the images of people using bows and arrows, suggesting boats may have been used for hunting or early naval warfare.



*Rock art depicting boats and domesticated cattle at Tassili N'Ajjer, Algeria (6000 BC) (credit: Gruban)*

Recent studies have also shown that the Sahara may alternate between 20,000-year wet and dry cycles, so the desert would have been replete with rivers and lakes during the time the rock paintings were drawn.

The numerous depictions of longhorn domesticated cattle, which feed off grass, provide further evidence that this desert was once green. Such rock paintings of humpless, longhorn cattle predate all others outside Somalia (i.e. Laas Geel) and are generally considered by archaeologists to represent the domesticated *Bos Taurus* species. Such depictions demonstrate that domesticated cows were present in Africa as early or earlier than in Asia.

### Early Agriculture

West Africa is home to the world's oldest evidence of domesticated millet, attesting to the region's long history of agriculture. Dating back 4,500 years, the cultivated millet was identified by University College London archaeologists at a site in Mali's Lower Tilemsi Valley and is centuries older than examples found elsewhere in Africa and Asia. Farther west, archaeologists identified more evidence of domesticated millet dating to 2000 BC at Dahrs Tichit and Walata in southern Mauritania and hundreds of miles away in Birimu, Ghana, which shows the great extent of neolithic agriculture in West Africa.

In addition to millet, early civilizations in this region widely cultivated rice. And recent analyses of rice genomes make it clear that African cultivated rice (*Oryza glaberrima*) was domesticated independently from the more globally popular Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*). Researchers even pinpointed the Inner Niger Delta (i.e. the portion of the river between Timbuktu and Djenne-Djenno) as the most likely birthplace of African rice at least 2,000 years ago, with the oldest evidence from ancient city of Djenne-Djenno in Mali. Such findings shatter longheld misbeliefs that African rice was derived from Asian rice brought to West Africa much later in history.

### Oldest Iron Smelting and Early Terracotta & Bronze Sculpture

Ancient Niger Valley civilizations widely practiced advanced metallurgy and sculpting. In Lejja, a town in the Niger Delta region of Southern Nigeria, archaeologists have radiocarbon dated iron-smelting furnaces to 2000 BC, making them the oldest in the world. Evidence of iron smelting and terracotta pottery have also been found north of the confluence of the Niger and Benue Rivers in Nigeria, where the so-called Nok culture thrived as early as 1500 BC. In the Taruga valley alone, 13 ancient iron smelting furnaces, along with ancient iron tools and weaponry have been identified.

And in Taruga, Samun Dukiya, Jos, Sokoto, and Nok in particular, hundreds of intricate terracotta statues have been uncovered, some dating as far back as 1000 BC--centuries older than any known Greek sculpture. The Nok statues depict men and women wearing ornate costumes and jewelry--some on horseback, others in symbolic and abstract gestures and poses. Eventually the popularity of sculpting in clay gave way to iron and bronze. At numerous archaeological sites in Southeast Nigeria, such as Igbo-Ukwo, there are hundreds of examples of 1,200-year-old, intricate bronze sculptures using advanced methods that Europeans did not learn until the 1500s.



*A Nok terracotta statue (195 BC)*



*Terracotta statue of a man (200 BC)*



*Terracotta statue of a woman (200 BC)  
(credit: Siyajkak)*



*Bronze ornament found at Igbo-Ukwo  
(800) (credit: Ochiwar)*



*Bronze vessel in the shape of a conical shell, found at Igbo-Ukwo (800) (credit: Ochiwar)*

In addition to iron and bronze, sculpting in other metals such as copper, lead, zinc and alloys such as brass (copper/zinc) gained popularity throughout

medieval times, especially in the industrial cities of the lower Niger Valley. Large-scale production of metallic sculptures and other objects like agricultural and hunting tools and weaponry, fueled the growth and influence of the chief Yoruba city of Ife and the Edo city of Benin. In this part of the Niger Valley, in particular, metalworking was considered to be a ritualistic practice and blacksmiths were highly valued and honored professionals.



Famous Ife heads made of brass and designed in a naturalistic style (1300s) (credit: Trustees of the British Museum)

### Medieval Cities and the Rise of Empires

Other ancient agrarian and industrial Niger Valley towns grew into wealthy centers of trade due to their strategic location between the mineral mines to the south and the salt mines in the Sahara. While some major cities, especially Kano, Katsina and Zaria in Hausaland, maintained their independence, other major cities were unified under the first documented empires in the Niger Valley, most notably Wagadu or Ghana (700-1240), Benin or Edo (1000s-1897), Mali (1235-1670) and Songhai (1464-1591). In fact, pottery from Egypt and as far away as China were found while



Major Cities in the Niger Valley (credit: AncientAfricanHistory.com)

excavating the Wagadu capital city of Gao—a testament to its far-reaching trade networks (archaeologists at other sites, such as Yikpabongo in northern Ghana (the modern-day country, not to be confused with the Ghana Empire), have even found evidence of the medieval use of bananas and pine, which are not native to the Niger Valley).

The wealth of this region was well documented throughout the medieval world. Although originally called "Wagadu" by founding Emperor Kaya Maghan (700), the more widely known name, "Ghana", comes from Iraqi scholar Ibrahim al-Fazari (777), who called it the "land of gold." Al-Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Hamdani (893-945 AD), a Yemeni geographer and historian, also described Ghana as having the "richest gold mines on earth." Al Bakri, a historian and geographer from Cordoba (former caliphate in Spain), also said, "On every donkey-load of salt the King of Ghana levies one golden dinar when it is brought into his country and two dinars when it is sent out." And Mali Emperor Mansa Musa I (1280-1337) was famously depicted with a golden crown and coin in the *Catalan Atlas* (possibly written by Iberian cartographer Abraham Cresques in 1375) and is widely considered the wealthiest historic figure in the world. Despite their mineral wealth, Niger Valley cities would become even more famous for their large collections and trade of scholarly books, especially Timbuktu, which was described by Malian scholar, Mahmud Kati (1468-1552), in his *Tarikh al Fettash* as a city with "solid institutions, political liberties, purity of morals...courtesy and generosity



Mansa Musa, emperor of the Mali Empire, on the Catalan Atlas (1375)

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towards students and scholars" -- making it an international intellectual mecca unrivaled in the medieval world.



Stone ruins of Kumbi Saleh, the first capital of the Wagadu Empire (700) (credit: Serge Robert)



Stone ruins of Gao, a capital of the Wagadu Empire (900) (credit: Mamadou Cisee, Shoichiro Takezawa)



Medieval stone buildings in Tichit (1000), a major Soninke city that was settled by 2000 BC and was part of the Wagadu, Songhai and Mali empires (credit: Ville de Tichitt, Mauritanie)



Mosque of Tichit, Mauritania (1100) (credit: Ville de Tichitt, Mauritanie)



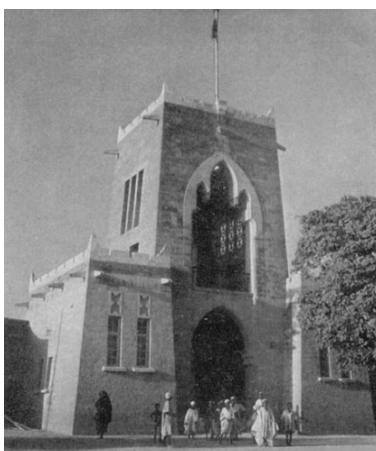
Gates of the original earthen wall that encircled Zaria, Nigeria (1000)



Gate of the original earthen wall encircling Kano, Nigeria (1000)



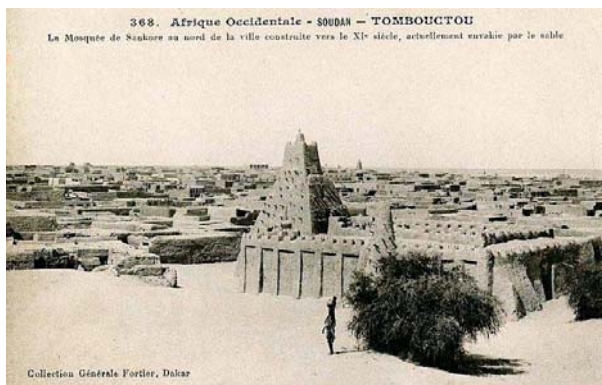
A busy street in front of medieval buildings in Kano, Nigeria (founded in 999)



Reconstructed gateway to Gidan Rumfa, the emir's palace in Kano (1475)

### Second Oldest University (outside of the Nile Valley)

Timbuktu is also the site of the world's second oldest university (excluding ancient Nile Valley temples), established in 989 as the University/Mosque of Sankore Madrasah. At its height, the university enrolled 25,000 students and housed up to 700,000 books--more than anywhere else in the medieval world. Contrary to popular belief, the iconic pyramid-like structure is made of cut stone (not mud brick), covered with a mud stucco that is periodically stripped and renewed--a practice that keeps the interior cool during the day and warm at night.



University of Sankore, with the medieval city of Timbuktu in the background

### Largest Medieval Libraries; Early Literary Industry

Timbuktu and other Niger Valley cities such as Gao, Kano and Djenne remained intellectual and literary hubs for centuries, attracting scholars from all over the world. At their height (1200-1700), such cities were widely known for their large collections of mathematical, astronomical, religious, poetic, legal and administrative texts, including over 700,000 that have been revealed in recent years. Timbuktu's literary culture and industry, in particular, are thoroughly described in medieval literature. Mohammed al-Wazzan al-Zayati (aka Leo Africanus), who visited Timbuktu in 1509, wrote that "Many manuscripts...are sold [in Timbuktu]. Such sales are more profitable than any other goods." In the *Tariqh al-Sudan* (1600), a book that chronicles the city's history, Timbuktu is described as "a refuge of scholarly and righteous folk, a haunt of saints and ascetics, and a meeting place for caravans and boats." Indeed, Mansa Musa I purchased books here and eventually constructed the Great Mosque of Timbuktu in 1326.



Medieval manuscripts from the Djenne Library (credit: Sophie Sarin)

A majority of the so-called "Timbuktu manuscripts" and other regional books were written in the 1300s-1600s in West African Ajami script, which has been used since at least the 11th century to write in certain West African languages, including Kanuri, Hausa, Fulani, Wolof and Yoruba. Although derived from the Arabic script, the two scripts differ in certain respects. A minority of manuscripts, however, especially religious texts, were written in

Arabic, Tifinagh and Hebrew scripts.



Pages from a Timbuktu manuscript showing astronomy tables (1200)



Pages from a Gao manuscript showing mathematics and astronomy (1200)



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