TOWARDS A REASSESSMENT OF THE DATING AND THE
GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGINS OF THE LUSO-AFRICAN
IVORIES, FIFTEENTH TO SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

PETER MARK
WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

I

Fifty years ago, a group of 100 ivory carvings from West Africa was first identified by the English scholar William Fagg as constituting a coherent body of work. In making this important identification, Fagg proposed the descriptive label "Afro-Portuguese ivories." Then, as now, the provenance and dating of these carved spoons, chalices (now recognized as salt cellars), horns, and small boxes posed a challenge to art historians. Fagg proposed three possible geographical origins: Sierra Leone, the Congo coast (Angola, ex-Zaïre), and the Yoruba-inhabited area of the old Slave Coast. Although Fagg was initially inclined on stylistic grounds to accept the Yoruba hypothesis, historical documents soon made it clear that the ivories—or at least many of them—were associated with Portuguese commerce in Sierra Leone. This trade developed in the final decades of the fifteenth century.

Today approximately 150 works have been identified by scholars as belonging to the "corpus" of carved ivories from West Africa. Although the sobriquet "Afro-Portuguese" remains the most common appellation, these pieces should more appropriately be referred to as Luso-African ivories. The latter term more accurately reflects the objects' creation by West

* A National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship enabled me to carry out research towards this paper. I wish especially to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the Probenius-Institut, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, whose longstanding support has enabled me to bring this project to fruition. I also wish to express special thanks to my colleague and friend José da Silva Horta, with whom I am preparing a series of articles on the Jewish merchants of the Petite Côte, for his assistance with sixteenth-century Portuguese orthography (not to mention calligraphy). He kindly provided the essential information on the orthography of "spoons" in Pacheco Pereira.

History in Africa 34 (2007), 189–211
African sculptors who were working within Africa. The works, although hybrid in inspiration, are far more African than they are Portuguese. In addition, no documentary evidence exists to indicate that any of the ivories were carved by African artists living in Portugal. West African artists created the sculptures within the context of their own cultures.

Nevertheless, the artists clearly were responding to a hybrid Luso-African cultural presence that was first established on the West African coast from Senegal to present-day Sierra Leone in the late fifteenth century. The carvings were a direct response to demand on the part of these commercial middlemen, and of visiting European Portuguese merchants, for ivory implements and luxury items. The ivories are definitely West African, and they are assuredly not a product of Portuguese culture. They do, however, reflect both the close commercial relations that existed between West Africans and Europeans, and the presence in coastal societies of the acculturated descendants of Portuguese who had settled there and had intermarried with local African women.

II

Portuguese commerce and settlement on the West African coast developed in the decades immediately following the first seaborne explorations of the Senegalese coast in the mid-1440s. By the early 1460s this commerce extended southeast to the region subsequently known to the Portuguese as “Serra Leoa,” or simply “the Serra.” From the early sixteenth century there existed two concepts of ‘Serra Leoa.’ The narrowly defined area comprised the present-day Sierra Leone peninsula and its mountainous hinterland. The wider ‘Serra Leoa,’ however, in the sense used by Almada (1594), extended along the coast from the site of present-day Conakry (Guinea) or even Cape Verga, 200 km south to Sherbro Island. Throughout the sixteenth century,

1This situation contrasts with the case of Indo-Portuguese art of the sixteenth century, some of which was produced by Indian or Ceylonese artists living and working in Lisbon. It is possible that some carvers from “Serra Leoa” did work in Lisbon, and that documentation of their presence in Portugal may surface as scholars continue to do research in Portuguese archives.
2See P.E.H. Hair, notes to Almada, chapter 5; André Alvares de Almada, Brief Treatise on the Rivers of Guinea...; on intermediates and make-shift editions; translation, introduction, and notes on chapters 13–19 by P.E.H. Hair, organized by A. Teixeira da Mota, Department of History, University of Liverpool; see also Hair, notes to Donelha, French edition, 239n118; André Donelha, Descrição da Serra Leoa and dos Rios de Guiné do Cabo Verde (1625), A. Teixeira da Mota, ed., P.E.H. Hair, trans.; Lisbon: Junta de Investigação Científica do Ultramar, 1977, Almada, as historian P.E.H. Hair notes, “equated the limits of Serra Leoa with those of the ‘Sapes.’” Almada and Donelha were both talking about a coastal region and giving it a cultural meaning, the Sapes region. Hair, however, argues ‘contra’ Almada and Donelha, that this region, which supposedly corresponded to the territory of those Sapes who had been subjected to the Mane “invasion” (see below), could not have extended north beyond the site of present-day Conakry.

3Avélio Teixeira da Mota, As Viagens do Bispo D. Frei Vitoriano Portuense à Guiné e a Cristianização dos Reis de Bissau (Lisbon, 1974), 13.
4Manuel Alvares, Ethiopia Minor, and a Geographical Account of the Province of Sierra Leone (ca. 1615), translation and annotation by P.E.H. Hair, based on the transcription made by Avélio Teixeira da Mota of the original (seventeenth-century) copy of Alvares’s manuscript, Department of History, University of Liverpool, 1990.

6Eymologically both terms appear to refer to these individuals’ renegade status, since their presence on the coast was generally not legally recognized by the Portuguese Crown: “tangos milos” (those who hold hands) and “lançados” (those who are thrown/cast themselves). Some Portuguese sources give the former term as “tangos maus” (they hold to ill or evil). On the “lançados” communities see Jean Boullée, Les Luso-Africains de Sénégal (Lisbon, 1989); see also George Brooks, Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society and Trade in Western Africa, 1000-1630 (Boulder, 1993). And Peter Mark, “Portuguese” Style and Luso-African Identity (Bloomington, 2002).
located south of the seventeenth-century Portuguese trading settlement of Cacheu. The Jesuit missionary Manuel Alvares, writing in the period 1609-1613, described this ruler’s unparalleled wealth:

Within his house he keeps many trunks and boxes full of different articles of clothing, such as very elaborate smocks, doublets and breeches, sheets, coverlets and canopies made in silk, and items in gold and silver...these items he has bought and continues to buy from the Portuguese who come there with their ships to obtain slaves....

I have already mentioned the king’s gold, silver, etc. He keeps his table with silver tableware and a silver water jug additionally gilded. The table linen [is] very rich and varied like the rest of the table set...he possesses tapestries, decorations in leather, carpets, a fine wardrobe. As for weapons, apart from the cannon given him by his admirer, he has muskets, swords, and daggers...The king has his own house, in which he sleeps, and this is a very large one, like the best-situated ones in Cacheu?7

Clearly the ruler of Bussis had surrounded himself with trappings of European material culture worthy of a European ruler. Alvares recounts that the King’s Portuguese “major domo” nearly succeeded in acquiring for him a writing desk from China. Yet even without this treasure, the man’s possessions included luxury items from throughout the Portuguese empire. Whereas his clothing was European, some of the silk and the tapestries very likely came from Asia. And this ruler was not the only wealthy African to amass cultural artifacts from a global empire. Towards the end of the century the French merchant Michel Jajolet de la Courbe traveled south through the Gambia. At the trading community of Geregia he met the local ruler (whose daughter was a Christian married to a European):

... the king of Geregia... had on a Portuguese cap and an African robe; in his hand he carried a Spanish style sword upon which he leaned. After greeting us, he bid us enter his house...his house is built in the Portuguese style; we found lunch waiting...he joined us to eat, as did his wife, which showed me that, in this place, they have begun to take on English manners.8

---

7Manuel Alvares, *Ethiopia Minor*, 30v, 31r.
8Pierre Cureau, *Premier voyage du Sieur Jajolet de la Courbe fait à la côte d'Afrique en 1685* (Paris, 1913), 205-6: “Je roi de Geregue: ...avait un bonnet à la portugaise et un habit de nègre, et tenait une épée à l'espagnole à la main sur laquelle il s’appuyait. Après avoir salué, il nous fit entrer dans sa case... sa case est faite à la portugaise; nous trouvâmes le déjeuner tout prêt...il se mit avec nous et en mangea aussi bien que sa femme, ce
is a consideration of the factors—linguistic, disciplinary, even sociological—that have led many art historians to ignore the relevant historical publications for thirty years.

The first Luso-African ivories arrived in Europe towards the end of the fifteenth century; this fact is beyond dispute. Iconographic elements in the works themselves, along with indisputable documentary evidence, firmly establish this date. The terminus ad quem for the production of the ivories, however, has been subject to significant disagreement. Art historians, and in their wake numerous museum curators, have dated the works from Sierra Leone to the period 1490-1530 (Bassani) or 1490-1550 (Cumow). They have proposed that, while some ivory carvings continued to reach Europe until the beginning of the seventeenth century, these later works were produced not in Sierra Leone, but rather in Benin (southwestern Nigeria).

Portuguese sources from the beginning of the sixteenth century firmly document the production and export of ivory carvings from "Serra Leoa." Customs records from the "Casa da Guiné," dating from 1504/05 and preserved in the National Archives in Lisbon, cite the importation of dozens of ivory spoons and of at least three "saloíros," or salt cellars. The ships had sailed from Elmina, on the Gold Coast but, as the historians Alan Ryder and Avelino Teixeira da Mota have pointed out, these vessels also transported rice, implying that they had stopped in the rice-producing area that includes Sierra Leone. Parenthetically, the customs records refer to "colhares de marfy;" the modern Portuguese orthography is "colheres de marfim."  

12See E. Bassani and W. Fagg, Africa and the Renaissance (Prestel, 1988). This work, published as the catalog to an exhibition at the Center for African Art, New York, is co-authored by Bassani and Fagg, with an independent historical essay by myself. I had nothing to do with the proposed dating of the ivories. At the time the book was written, Fagg was in ill health, and the central essays appear to represent in large measure the work of Bassani. The bifurcated dating proposed, with everything after 1530 being ascribed to Benin, essentially contradicts Fagg's earlier assessment of the ivories. In his 1959 essay, he had written: "In fact, there is no similarity between Afro-Portuguese and Bini work, and I cannot discover that any piece or fragment in this style has been found at Benin, or indeed anywhere in Africa in modern times. It is easy to rule out Benin..." William Fagg, Afro-Portuguese Ivories (London, [1959]), 60. For the 1490-1550 dating see Kathy Cumow, "Black or Accepted: African Perspectives on the Western "Other" in 15th and 16th Century Art." Society for Visual Anthropology Review (Spring 1990), 38-44.


14AN/TT Nucleo Antigo 799, f. 13v: "de hum salzeyro e tres colhaces de marfy de Diego Lopez capitan de Myne que pagou pello todo avaluaydo em..."; "of one salt cellar and three spoons of Ivory of Diego Lopez Capitan at Elmina who paid for the entirety the value of..."
Also in 1505 Duarte Pacheco Pereira, former capitão-mor at Elmina, wrote his Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis, which incorporates a description of the Bulom peoples of Serra Leoa: "The largest group of inhabitants of this land are called Boulos, a warlike people who are rarely at peace... In this land they make very clever spoons of ivory, the best finished works that there are in any of these parts." At least one of the Portuguese who brought ivory spoons through the Lisbon customs house in 1505, Diego Lopes, was also capitão at Elmina; one wonders whether the two men had communicated about the trade in ivory carvings.

Pacheco Pereira’s contemporary, Valentim Fernandes, a German-born geographer living in Portugal, never visited Africa, but his account is based on information provided by traders familiar with "Guinea of Cape Verde." Fernandes writes:

In Sierra Leone the men are extremely subtle and ingenious; they fashion works of ivory that are very wonderful to see, of all things that they are asked to make - to wit - some make spoons [colheiros], others make saltcellars and others make handles for daggers and any other subtlety.16

The antique and non-standardized spellings of "spoon: "colares," "colheiros; "colheres," or even "coheares," used in the early sixteenth-century sources, have occasioned confusion. The first modern translation of Fernandes (into French) translates "colheiros" as "colliers" or "necklaces."18 No

15Duarte Pacheco Pereira, Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis (Lisbon, 1888), 117, "E a maior parte dos moradores desta terra por um nome são chamados Boulos, e é gente belicosa que poucas vezes estão em paz... (118): Nesta terra se fazem mais sotis colares de marfin e milhar lavrados que em nhuma parte." Note that the writer uses nearly the same orthography for "spoon" found in the customs records.

16Códiçe Valentim Fernandes, leitura paleográfica, notas e índice de José Pereira da Costa (Lisboa, 1997), 111. I wish to express my gratitude to José da Silva Horta for calling my attention to this document. For the original manuscript, see "Codex hispanicus 27" microfilm 1282 363 Akin, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich. The above citation is from folio 136r. This manuscript gives three different spellings of "spoon": "colheres," (f. 125); "colheiros," [at?]; and "colares" (f. 140). On later misreadings of early orthography see note 17 below.

17It should be noted that the Portuguese "lh" (virtually unpronounceable by non-Portuguese) is properly pronounced in "colheres" in a manner that approximates "they." Fernandes was not a native speaker and the mistaken orthography reflects the sounds he was attempting to transcribe. I wish to thank José da Silva Horta for sharing with me both his knowledge of the Fernandes manuscript, and his insight into non-native pronunciation (including my own efforts) of "lh."

18Valentim Fernandes, Déscription de la Côte occidentale d’Afrique (Sénégal au Cap de Monte, Archipels), Théodore Monod, et al., trans. (Bissau, 1951).

IV

The ivories from Serra Leoa are commonly dated to the period from 1490 to 1550. Although no documentary evidence for this artistic cut-off date exists, it is argued that local "Sapes" society was destroyed and ivory production ended by the invasion of coastal Serra Leoa by a people called the "Manes." For example, Curnow writes: "the [ivory carving] industry appears to have ceased by the mid-sixteenth century when the Mand-speaking Mane people invaded the region." The 1970 writing of the historian Walter Rodney is often cited as a source for the Mane invasions. But West African historians have largely discredited the theory of a cataclysmic invasion; this reassessment dates to an article published by Adam Jones in 1981.

In his article "Who were the Vai?" Jones casts doubt on the theory of a devastating invasion, suggesting rather a gradual—and, one may infer, far less disruptive—migration towards the coast by Mané-speaking "Manes," who were actually Vai. Jones observes that oral traditions often recast gradual historical processes as sudden cataclysmic events. He observes that "[i]t is the kind of picture oral traditions tend to give: historical processes lasting decades or centuries are best explained and memorized in terms of a single battle or the action of one leader."22

Early seventeenth-century Portuguese narratives do refer to an invasion. However, the most dire descriptions of cannibal armies destroying Sapes
cultural are, as a critical reading of these sources shows, highly exaggerated and misleading. The nightmare account of the Jesuit Manuel Alvares describes waves of warriors literally eating their way across the African continent, in what anthropologists today might term a "trope," or recurrent stereotyped image of bloodthirsty man-eating savages. Furthermore, Father Alvares, who lived in Sierra Leone half a century after the alleged invasion, firmly contradicts his own account of the invasion. He specifically likens the situation (ca. 1612) between the recently conquered "Sapes" and their suddenly docile conquerors, to that prevailing between the Mandinka and the Soninké in the Gambia. The Mandinka and Soninké are two closely related groups, differentiated primarily by their religion (the Mandinka are Muslims), who lived in harmony for centuries after a supposed Mande "invasion." The parallel is historically appropriate. In both instances, the invasion found in local oral traditions was probably a gradual process of migration and cultural assimilation.

Recent historiographic advances in the interpretation of oral traditions thus cast doubt on the so-called "Mane invasion" of Sierra Leone. The early history of European collecting of the Luso-African ivories confirms this doubt. West African ivories were imported into Europe throughout the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century, and not just in the period up to 1550. The Munich "Kunstkammer," founded by Albrecht V of Bavaria (reigned 1550-1579), was collected after 1550. The "Kunstkammern" of the Habsburgs, which include several important Luso-African ivories, were also assembled during the second half of the seventeenth century. The acquisition of ivories by Italian collectors, including the Medici, is documented to the 1560s. (While Bassani cites this documentation to support his thesis of Benin origins for late sixteenth-century works, the Italian documentation does not mention Benin.)

The mid-seventeenth-century African collection amassed by the German merchant Christoph Weickmann from Ulm also includes several carved ivory spoons. While the provenance of these spoons is not established, they were undoubtedly collected, as Adam Jones has demonstrated, shortly after 1650. It is unlikely that these fragile and rather exotic items were simply being traded across Europe for a century after they ceased being made. The continued demand for and importation of these sculptures into seventeenth century Europe, strongly suggests that ivory spoons, at least, continued to be produced long after 1550. If Sapes society was not destroyed in 1550, this demand would likely have encouraged the continuation of local carving traditions.

Bassani and Curnow account for continued ivory production by arguing that European imports from Sierra Leone were replaced by carvings from Benin after 1530 (Bassani) or, in accord with the "Mane invasion" thesis, after 1550 (Curnow). Their argument faces several problems. First, the earliest written reference to ivory carvings from Benin dates to 1588. And, as Stefan Eisenhofer points out, it is not at all clear that even this reference by an English ship’s captain named James Welsh refers specifically to Benin. Second, as Alan Ryder observes in his study of Europeans in Benin, the ivory trade between Portugal and Benin had virtually disappeared in the seventy years preceding the 1588 reference. This is precisely the period when Benin is hypothesized to have exported ivory carvings. Bassani’s and Curnow’s theories are incompatible with this historical information. Third, Portuguese trading visits to Benin, which lay inland and was not accessible to seaborne vessels, appear to have ceased or become quite rare after 1535. It is difficult to see how the Portuguese could have been obtaining ivory spoons and salt cellars from Benin at a time when they were rarely visiting the kingdom.

Bassani’s thesis is furthermore based upon an arbitrary chronology and a methodology that is neither historically nor art-historically convincing. He argues that ivories were produced in Sierra Leone only from 1490 to 1530. He bases this argument not on documentary sources, but rather on the dubious grounds that "the European iconographic elements can all be dated to the last quarter of the fifteenth century and the first quarter of the sixteenth century."

In fact, if foreign iconographic elements all date to 1490-1525, this proves only that the ivories could not have been made earlier than that date.

23Vujok, "Africana und Americana."
26Eisenhofer’s work is a thoroughly critique of the widely-accepted association of Benin ivory carving with the early history of this kingdom. Eisenhofer applies critical historical methodology to the "oral traditions" that art historians have used to argue for the antiquity of the institution of the Oba, and for the early introduction of ivory-carving in Benin. In the course of this argument he pretty well dismantles the theory of Benin origins of any sizeable number of "Afric-Portuguese" ivories. See Stefan Eisenhofer, Höfische Elfenbeinschnitzerei im Reich Benin (Munich, 1993).
27Ryder, Benin, 64 "Ivory, however, had by this time seemingly priced itself entirely out of the market, for the Portuguese bought none in Benin after 1522."
38Ibid., 67.
29Bassani, in Africa and the Renaissance, 146.
It does not by any means rule out a later date. It is possible that European illustrations of clothing and weapons, or the accoutrements themselves, continued to arrive on the Guinea Coast after the objects fell out of fashion in Europe. It is likely that, once a market had developed for the ivory carvings, popular motifs continued to be sculpted by the artists, even though some of the imagery may have become out of date in Europe. They would not have been the first artists to be guilty of anachronism. Furthermore, Bassani’s argument cannot apply at all to the spoons, which do not include European motifs.

Another possible source of artistic inspiration is from elsewhere in the Portuguese commercial empire—India. Bassani offers the plausible suggestion that Indian themes may have reached Luso-African hunting horns through the intermediary of European engravings. 30 But the fact that ivory production from Sierra Leone continued into the seventeenth century (see below) suggests another possibility. Some of the African horns contain hunting scenes that are nearly identical to scenes embroidered into “colchas,” large embroidered textiles from India commissioned by the Portuguese during the second half of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century. 31 That some Asian textiles arrived in Guinea as luxury items is implied by Fr. Alves’s 1615 description of the ruler of Bussis (see above). “Colchas” may have served as a template for some of the hunting horns. 32

Bassani posits that a small number of salt cellars portraying figures in motion cannot be from Sierra Leone because artists there only depicted static figures. The attribution of dynamic figures to Benin is strange, since most royal sculpture from the kingdom is notoriously static and hieratic. But here Bassani’s underlying logic is circular: our knowledge of Sierra Leonean art of the sixteenth century comes exclusively from the Luso-African ivories. By removing “a priori,” all dynamic representations of the human form from this body of work, Bassani establishes that Sierra Leone ivories do not depict motion. Hence figures that show motion must come from elsewhere. But some or all of the dynamic figures might just as easily come from Sierra Leone. Might not Sapes artists have developed more than one style in the course of several generations? Is it not conceivable that individual Sapes artists may have worked in more than one style?

31 Curnow, in her unpublished doctoral dissertation, observes the appearance of hunting motifs on “colchas.” Her dating of the Sierra Leone ivories, if correct, would effectively rule out the possibility of Indian influence.
32 I wish to thank Dr. Barbara Karl for providing access to her comprehensive photographic archives of Indian “colchas.” Indian influence via “colchas” is only possible for hunting horns produced after 1570.

Having argued for a 1530 cut-off date for ivory production in Sierra Leone, Bassani adduces that virtually all later carvings come from Benin. He argues on the basis of this abbreviated time period that only a small number of artists were active in Sierra Leone. 33 This claim is disproved by the recent publication of late sixteenth-century inventories from south German collections. These lists show a loss of only 90 percent of the ivories. Existing ivories represent less than 10 percent, and perhaps as little as 4 percent of the objects acquired four centuries ago. 34 The loss was probably significantly higher among objects that never entered princely collections, such as the numerous spoons imported by Portuguese sailors and listed in the 1505 customs records. In addition, Valentim Fernandes’s description of the Sapes...

Em Serra Lyoa som os homens muyo sotisj muy engeniosos... hús fazem colhayros outros saleiros outros punhos pera dagas e qualquer outra sotileza 35 makes it clear that, at least in the first decade of the sixteenth century, there were more than a few ivory carvers, and that the artists specialized, so that some produced spoons, others salt cellars, and still others dagger handles or other objects. Hence the argument that there were only as many artists as could have produced the known ivories cannot be sustained.

The earliest presumed documentation of sculpted ivory exports from Nigeria (Welsh’s brief mention) dates to 1588. 36 Bassani gets around the evidentiary problem by the simple expedient of attributing “a priori” all ivories collected after 1530 to Benin. Yet the later sixteenth century documents that he cites do not attribute the pieces mentioned to Africa, let alone to Benin. Bassani’s argument is based on circular logic: no pieces were produced for the Sapes after about 1530; hence any objects arriving in Europe after that date must come from Nigeria. His argument is methodologically flawed; it is contradicted by contemporary written sources from Sierra Leone; and it runs counter to historical evidence that there was little Portuguese trade with Benin in the second half of the sixteenth century.

33 Bassani, in Africa and the Renaissance, 146: “certainly fewer than the forty [artists] previously suggested.”
35 Códice Valentim Fernandes,” 111. “In Sierra Leone the men are extremely subtle and ingenious... some make spoons others make saltcellars and other make handles for daggers and any other subtly.”
36 As noted above, Eisenhofer warns that even this reference to ivory spoons might not specifically target Benin.
In view of the absence of historical documentation of ivory exports from Benin to Europe before the very end of the sixteenth century, and given the relative infrequency during that period of Portuguese trade missions to Benin or of ivory exports in general, the stylistic evidence of Benin origins would have to be very strong to sustain Bassani’s and Curnow’s theory. Eisenhofer has already noted that the pieces Bassani groups together as coming from Benin are not uniform in style. Nor does their form clearly indicate Benin origins.\textsuperscript{37} Eisenhofer seems inclined to argue for Yoruba provenance for some of the “Bini-Portuguese” works. In my view, with the exception of some of the spoons, convincing stylistic evidence of Benin origins does not exist.\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, there is no radical stylistic discontinuity between those salt cellars generally attributed to Benin, and other works attributed to Sierra Leone. Furthermore, we will see below, in the context of newly-discovered historical documents about Portuguese commerce in Guinea, iconographic details on some of the “Benin” salt cellars suggest an origin in “Guiné do Cabo Verde.”

VI

The critical information for the provenance of post-1550 Luso-African ivories must of course be provided by historical documentation. Such documentation exists. In Sierra Leone the Sapes did continue to carve ivory spoons, and quite possibly other items, into the seventeenth century. Manuel Alvares, the Jesuit missionary who lived in Sierra Leone from 1607 to 1616, describes the creation of these works in his Etiópia Menor. Astoundingly, this documentation was published thirty years ago, in Italian and Portuguese, by Portugal’s most respected West Africa historian, Avelino Teixeira da Mota, and it has been available to scholars in English translation since 1990.\textsuperscript{39}

In 1975 Teixeira da Mota published an article in the Italian journal Africa, in which he cited a series of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century docu-

\textsuperscript{37}Eisenhofer, Höfische, esp. 99-114: “Zusammenfassend lässt sich deshalb sagen, dass weder die ... formalen noch die stilistischen Kriterien eine Herkunft der sogenannten “bini-portugiesischen” Hörner aus Benin belegen kann,” ibid., 114.

\textsuperscript{38}Eisenhofer is in my estimation, too categorical in dismissing all possible historical documentation of Benin origins for ivory spoons. He apparently overlooked the citation by Teixeira da Mota, “Avori,” of a 1621 manuscript describing ivory spoons from Benin.

\textsuperscript{39}Inexplicably, Curnow (“Oberlin’s,” 15) actually cites Teixeira da Mota’s “Avori” to document her assertion that ivory-carving from Sierra Leone: “appears to have ceased by the mid-sixteenth century, when the Mande-speaking Mande people invaded the region...” Yet Teixeira da Mota clearly contradicts Curnow’s assertion. To cite one’s source in such a way as to make it appear that the document confirms a theory which, in fact, it clearly contradicts, is very sloppy scholarship.

\textsuperscript{40}An interim translation of Manuel Alvares S.J. “Etiópia Menor e Descrição Geográfica da Provincia da Sierra Leoa” [c. 1615]; transcription from an unpublished manuscript by the late Avelino Teixeira da Mota and Luís de Matos on behalf of the Centro de Estudos de Cartografia Antiga, Lisbon; translation and introduction by P.E.H. Hair. Department of History, University of Liverpool. 1990. [hereafter Etiópia Menor].

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., f. 54r.
and other small creatures. In sum, they are, in their own way, skilled at handicrafts. 42

Alvares is absolutely clear: The Sapes are still highly-skilled artists. They continue to carve ivory spoons with great skill long after the invasion—or migration—of the preceding century. Furthermore, the description of the decorated handles perfectly fits surviving spoons, some of which have been attributed to Benin.

The description of the large wooden bowls might fit salt cellars, too. The original manuscript reads: “que são hás escudellas grandes de pá, mui curiosas, e lindas, que cá servem nas mesas; das quais hás ao mais pequeñas, outras maiores”—some of which are large dishes of wood, most unusual and beautiful, and that here are used at table; [Alvares is writing from Sierra Leone] of which some are rather small, others larger. 43

Alvares is clear that the vessels are not made of ivory. Nevertheless, the artistic talent and requisite technical skill would have been similar for both ivory and wood, and the description makes quite clear that these were not simply rough-hewn containers. While this passage makes it clear that the Sapes had not lost their ivory carving skills, it also raises a new question: were they now making bowls of wood, but no longer of ivory? Alvares may simply have overlooked ivory tableware, but this passage is detailed and precise; he is clearly familiar with the objects he describes. He lived ten years on the coast and he may, one suspects, actually have owned some of these pieces. Had he seen ivory dishes, he would likely have mentioned them. Alvares’ description then would seem to imply that ivory “saleiros” were rare, or perhaps no longer made, in the early seventeenth century. Accordingly, one may ask why, if ivory spoons were still carved, “saleiros” were not. Certainly the answer is not the “Manes.” Two other possible explanations appear plausible.

By the early seventeenth century, throughout “Guinea of Cape Verde” from Senegambia to Sierra Leone the ivory trade had grown to sizeable proportions. On Senegal’s Petite Côte, for example, during the second decade of the century, ivory ranked with wax and hides as the primary goods acquired by the predominantly Jewish merchants at the trading centers of Joal and Porto de Ali. 44 The historian Tobias Green believes that, along with hides, ivory surpassed slaves in importance among exports from the Petite

42Ibid., I. 55v.
43My translation of Manuel Alvares, Etiopia Menor e Descrição Geographica da Província da Sierra Leoa, Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa, Res. 3, B-7. Cópia do séc. XVIII. I wish to thank José da Silva Horta for extensive conversations about the wording of this text.
44AN/TT, Inquisição da Lisboa, livro 59 film 5120 f. 153v.

Côte. 45 In 1611 one merchant on the Petite Côte held 2000 pounds of ivory as surety for a loan. 46

The magnitude of this trade, maintained over a period of years, would have had two results. First, it is likely that the value of ivory—and certainly its rarity—declined on the European market. This would have had little impact on the trade in relatively low-value items such as spoons. The ivory spoon trade had been carried on in small quantities, often by individual sailors, as is indicated by the 1505 customs records from the Casa da Guiné. Spoons were exported into the seventeenth century from Sierra Leone, and certainly by the second decade of the century, if not before, they were also exported from Benin. 47 However, within Europe, the demand for ivory as a rare material, appropriate for more highly-valued objects such as the “saleiros,” may well have declined as ivory became increasingly common.

Secondly, the increased hunting of elephants in the Senegal-Sierra Leone region may have had an impact on the size of herds. Since the animals were hunted for their tusks, those most rapidly killed off would have been, in all likelihood, the largest elephants. Although a later Portuguese observer, Francisco de Lemos Coelho, implies that, even early in the second half of the seventeenth century, elephants remained plentiful in Sierra Leone, it may be that animals of sufficient size to provide tusks large enough to be turned into “saleiros” had already been hunted out by the early seventeenth century.

Conceivably the Sapes were no longer carving salt cellars by the early 1600s. Perhaps the vessels were being produced elsewhere in West Africa... such as in Benin. However, no seventeenth-century sources document either the carving or the arrival in Europe of “saleiros.” Written sources simply do not confirm the production of ivory salt cellars in the seventeenth century.

Two other seventeenth-century Portuguese merchants, both of whom lived in the Cape Verde Islands and had first-hand familiarity with the coastal peoples, described ivory carving from Sierra Leone. Avelino Teixeira da Mota first identified these references in 1975. 48 They too have been largely ignored by art historians. André Donelha’s 1625 Descrição da Sierra Leoa e dos Rios do Guiné do Cabo Verde was based on two decades of experience as a trader, at the end

45Tobias Green, “Further Considerations on the Sephardim of the Petite Côte,” HA 32(2005), 175. Green’s observations are consistent with our own findings about the same trading communities.
46Ibid.
47In his seminal but largely ignored “Avori,” Teixeira da Mota includes (ibid., 587) a 1621 reference to ivory spoons from Benin (cf. Garcia Mendes Castelo Branco, “Relação da costa da Africa da Mina...até ao cabo Negro”).
48Teixeira da Mota, “Avori.”
of the sixteenth century. Hence, Donelha’s account actually refers to a period slightly anterior to Father Alvares’ report. Donelha mentions ivory trumpets among the Temne neighbors of the Sapes.49 The term Donelha uses, “buzinas de marfim,” probably refers to African side-blown trumpets and not the hunting horns exported to Europe a century earlier. Yet clearly, somebody still retained the ivory-carrying skills to produce trumpets at the end of the 1500s, well after the supposed “Mane invasions.”

More significant, because of its later date, is the account of Francisco de Lemos Coelho, a Portuguese Cape Verdean trader who frequented the coast in the middle decades of the century. Lemos Coelho, who had visited Sierra Leone at least as late as 1658, wrote an account of Guinea in 1669 which he revised and expanded in 1684.50 He writes that in Sierra Leone “the Blacks make many curious things in ivory,” and he adds that “they [worship] a piece of wood or ivory which they have carved with a knife into a human shape.”51 This terse notation does make it abundantly clear that ivory-carrying in Sierra Leone continued, and continued to be appreciated by Portuguese merchants, through the seventeenth century. Hence, far from disappearing in the mid-1500s, the ivory carvings of the Sapes and their neighbors are clearly documented for at least another 100 years.

VII

The iconography of some of the ivory salt cellars, correlated with existing historical documents about Portuguese commerce in Guinea, affords additional insights into their possible geographical origins. Recently discovered documents from the Lisbon Inquisition have cast light on the ivory and weapons trades in early seventeenth-century Guinea. Much of this trade was in the hands of New Christian and Sephardic Jewish merchants who settled in two villages on Senegal’s Petite Côte, Joal and Porto de Ali (Portodale) by 1608.52 These traders were the descendents of forcibly-converted Por-

tuguese Jews, but they had returned to their ancestral Jewish faith in Amsterdam. In Senegal they lived publicly as Jews and maintained close religious and commercial ties to Amsterdam.53 They had their own rabbis, sent in 1612 by the Sephardic community in Amsterdam. By 1618 the Jews of the Petite Côte had established commercial relations with São Tomé, Angola, and Brazil.54

These Jewish merchants traded for ivory, which they obtained from (New) Christian traders—presumably “lançados”—living in Senegambia.55 The “lançados” had established contact with the Dutch Jews as soon as the latter settled in Senegal, a fact that strongly suggests pre-existing contact. Certainly the “lançados” had not themselves just arrived in Senegal. One may hypothesize that these “lançados” were also involved in a more specialized coastal trade in carved ivory. If so, might the sculptures themselves give some iconographic evidence of the role of New Christians?

José da Silva Horta and I are studying the New Christian weapons trade to Senegambia. Our study is based on documents from the Lisbon Inquisition preserved in the Portuguese archives in Torre do Tombo, including the following:

E estes ditos mercadores que todos são Cristãos novos mandão muita quantidade das ditas espadas aos Rios da Costa de Guine que são Gentios e confinão com mouros.56

The “espadas,” also called “terçados,” were three or four palms (approximately 60-88 cm) in length,57 some curved and others straight.58 Production of these daggers was sub-contracted by New Christians in Lisbon to artisans in Antwerp and in northern Italy, while the weapons were finished in Lisbon. In Cacheu and the Rivers of Guinea, the daggers were in great demand and were an essential item in the slave trade. This weapons trade was offi-

49Donelha, Descrição da Terra Leoa, “Buzinas de marfim,” p.102, 103.
50See Francisco de Lemos Coelho, Description of the Coast of Guinea (1684); P.E.H.Hair, translation, University of Liverpool, History Department, 1985, introduction.
51Lemos Coelho, chapter 9, paragraphs 72 and 73.
52See José da Silva Horta and Peter Mark, “Two Portuguese Jewish Communities in Early Seventeenth-Century Senegal,” Ha 31(2004) 231-56. See also Antonio Mendes, “Le rôle de l’Inquisition en Guinée, vicissitudes des présences juives sur la Petite Côte (XVe-XVIIe siècles),” Revista Lusífona de Ciencia das Religiões 35(2004), 137-55. See also Green, “Further Considerations,” 175. Rufisque, located on the same coast, also housed a Jewish community as late as 1647; this community too appears to have been linked to Amsterdam. See N.I. de Moraes, “Le commerce des peaux à la Petite Côte au XVIIe siècle (Sénagal),” Notes Africaines 34(April 1972), 39-40. For a brief mention of the Petite Côte communities see also Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, “A Inquisição na Guiné, nas ilhas de Cabo Verde e São Tomé e Príncipe,” Revista Lusífona 35(2004), 165, 167.
53Some New Christians who were already in West Africa traveled to Amsterdam to reconvert as a result of the contact with the Jews directly arrived from Holland.
54AN/TT, Inquisição de Lisboa, livro 202, f. 643 and livro 203 ff. 515-16. The sources are a “relação” and a denunciation both made in Lisbon by João Cansuel, Flemish, born in Antwerp. On Brazil see AN/TT livro 59, f. 153.
55AN/TT Inquisição da Lisboa, livro 39, film 5120, 13 October 1612 f. 153v. “no dito Porto de Ale, e no de Joaia, ... E todos tratavam em couroma e cera, e marfim que aly compravam a negros gentios, e a homens branquos x.os, e em mandavo a pera Frandes.”
56And these said merchants, who are all New Christians, send a great quantity of the said “espadas” [daggers, short swords] to the Rivers of the Coast of Guinea who[se inhabitants] are non-Christians and who live adjacent to the Muslims.” AN/TT Inquisição de Lisboa. Livro 208 MF 5178 f. 640v; witness Adrião de Abreu, violeiro.
57A “palmo” was 22 cm. in length.
58Ibid. “...que são espadas larguas de quatro palmos pouco mais ou menos huas voltas (curved) e outras direitas.”
cially illegal, since Christians were not permitted to provide weapons to infidels. Nevertheless, it constituted an important export from Portugal to “Guiné do Cabo Verde.” Inquisition witnesses who were interrogated in 1618 named 15 Lisbon-based contractors and sub-contractors. Each of the latter produced up to 50 or 60 “espadas” a year for the African trade. These witnesses estimated that 500 or 600 of the weapons were traded, primarily for slaves, at the height of the commerce in the first and second decades of the seventeenth century. To date, however, we have found no references to any dagger trade to early seventeenth-century Nigeria.

The origins of this specialized weapons trade to Guiné remain obscure, but a strong New Christian role even in the sixteenth century is probable. Since at least the end of the fifteenth century, as Labelle Prussin has demonstrated, weapons production in Morocco and the western Sahara was in the hands of sephardic Jewish artisans. The New Christian metal workers who produced swords and daggers for West Africa at the beginning of the seventeenth century were heirs to this longstanding tradition.

Some of the saltcellars portray Portuguese soldiers and cavalrymen who prominently display their swords and daggers. These images serve as documentation of the commerce in weapons (“terçados”), while the material of which the sculptures are made, of course, attests to the trade in ivory. Furthermore, some dagger handles were made by Sapes ivory carvers. An art form thereby documents its own role as an item of commerce.

A salt cell in the Museu de Arte Antiga in Lisbon portrays mounted cavalrymen who carry daggers. These are clearly the weapons known, even today in Guiné-Bissau, as “terçados.” Two other vessels, one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the other at the British Museum, depict Portuguese soldiers who wear short swords or long daggers. The standing figures on the New York and London salt cellars conflate the roles of soldier, merchant, and Portuguese colonial official (and perhaps missionary) to create images of wealth and power. These figures appear to illustrate a weapons trade that historical sources document for the Upper Guinea Coast but not, to the best of our knowledge, for Nigeria. Thus, the subject matter of the Lisbon piece, and very likely also of the salt cellars in New York and London, casts further doubt on the attribution of the salt cellars to Nigeria. At the very least, the attribution of these works, purely on stylistic grounds, to Benin, needs to be reconsidered.

The Portuguese generally documented their trade in West Africa quite well. Yet we possess very little information about sixteenth-century Portuguese commerce with Benin. Although the absence of contemporary information about the Benin ivory trade is not definitive proof that the trade did not exist, and while it is possible that Portuguese archives contain as yet unpublished documentation of such a trade, the lack of evidence likely reflects the absence of extensive commerce. This is consistent with the interpretations of Ryder and Eisenhofer, both of whom are skeptical that Benin exported ivory carvings in the sixteenth century.

VIII

A reassessment of Portuguese primary sources, most of them previously published or otherwise available to scholars, demonstrates conclusively that artists from Sierra Leone (Sapes, Temne, and other closely-related groups) carved ivory spoons and other objects from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. Previous theories that Sapes artistic production was destroyed about 1550 by “the Mane invasions” are mistaken. This historical re-evaluation necessitates a reappraisal of the hypothesis that, following the presumed “Mane invasion,” Benin ivory carvers replaced Sapes artists as the major producers of works for the European market. This theory is not confirmed by presently-known primary documents. Furthermore, theories of Benin origins for sixteenth-century Luso-African ivories are not consistent with secondary historical literature about sixteenth-century European commerce in Nigeria.

In addition, newly-discovered documents that detail an important New Christian and Jewish trading presence in early seventeenth-century “Guiné do Cabo Verde” offer insight into the iconography and likely provenance of some of the ivory salt cellars that entered European collections in the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. This information also suggests Sierra Leone as the geographical origin for at least some of the ivories that had previously been attributed to Benin.

IX

How have these fundamental historical errors occurred? First, several scholars who studied the Luso-African ivories failed to consult methodically the primary sources that document the Portuguese trade in the ivories. Fre-

61 In fairness, a partial exception to this oversight should be noted. In 1995 W. A. Hart cited both seventeenth-century references (Alvares and Lemos Coelho) to ivory-making in Sierra Leone. He nevertheless accepted Bassani and Fagg’s dating of Sierra Leone ivories to the period 1490–1530. While Hart correctly states that the “Mane invasion” was not a catastrophe for the arts in Sierra Leone, he discounts post-1530 ivory produc-
quently, these scholars cite only the writings of other historians. At best they cite those primary documents readily available in English translation. For the Luso-African ivories, however, most of the primary documents are in Portuguese, a fact that seems to have made these primary sources inaccessible. Consequently, the original Portuguese documents have not been fully utilized for their historical information about ivory production and trade.

The inevitable result underlines the futility of undertaking historical research in a field where one either cannot read—or simply chooses not to read—the language/s in which most of the primary sources are written. In the absence of primary documentation that had been published in Portuguese and Italian as early as 1975, theories of provenance and chronology of the Luso-African ivories have been built almost exclusively on stylistic analysis. This approach derives from methods of connoisseurship associated with an earlier moment in the study of European art history, methods that seek to identify individual Hands or workshops based on style. In the case of the ivories, such a methodology is particularly dubious, given the failure first to establish either a firm dating or geographical provenance for the objects. Stylistic analysis alone cannot be used both to situate geographically and to date works about which so little is known.

Parenthetically, historical interpretations have been published questioning the role of Benin in the creation of sixteenth-century ivories. But the scholars—Ryder and Eisenhofer—who confirm William Fagg’s initial skepticism about Benin origins for the carvings are historians. Their work has not had sufficient impact on art historians, let alone on museum curators. The most difficult lapse to explain is the failure to consult the work of Avelino Teixeira da Mota, who was the pre-eminent historian of Portuguese West Africa of his generation and whose work remains highly regarded more than two decades after his death. Perhaps he is overlooked not only because he wrote in Portuguese, but also because much of his career was spent under the Salazar and Caetano dictatorships. The political situation in Portugal before 1974 dissuaded some foreign scholars (myself included) from working in the Lisbon archives. But Portugal has been a thriving democracy for over thirty years now, and all the important texts initially studied and transcribed by Teixeira da Mota (Almada, Donelha, Alvares) are available to scholars in masterful English translations by P.E.H. Hair. It is therefore difficult to find any excuse for the failure to do the historical spadework necessary to establish chronologies for this important chapter in the history of precolonial West African art and material culture.

The persistence of the theory of Benin origins for the ivories deserves additional attention. There is perhaps a deeper significance to the resilience of the “Benin thesis” in the face of significant historical evidence that Benin was not a major supplier of ivory or ivory carvings in the sixteenth century. Since the 1897 punitive expedition brought hundreds of works from Benin City to Europe, the art of this kingdom has held an important place in historical studies and in the popular consciousness about Africa. For over a century sculpture from Benin has been widely seen as an exception, first to the supposed “primitive” nature of West African art and more recently to perceptions of widespread African artistic norms of abstraction. Benin also serves as a model of indigenous artistic achievement in Africa. This special consideration—both scholarly and popular—often comes at the expense of other African societies whose artistic accomplishments are implicitly held in lower regard.

One result is that, to attribute Benin provenance to a work of art is to impart an aura of historical significance and cultural prestige to the work and, by extension, to the collection and to the collector. There is considerable reluctance, even outright opposition, to efforts to reattribute works initially thought to be from Benin to other parts of the continent. It is as though one were questioning the attribution of a cherished painting by Raphael, and reassigning the work to some lesser-known master. As a label, Benin has value within what we may term the “political economy of art history.” “Sapes” certainly does not have equivalent value.