



LABORATOIRE TRAVAUX ET RECHERCHES ARCHÉOLOGIQUES  
SUR LES CULTURES, LES ESPACES ET LES SOCIÉTÉS

2012 # 4

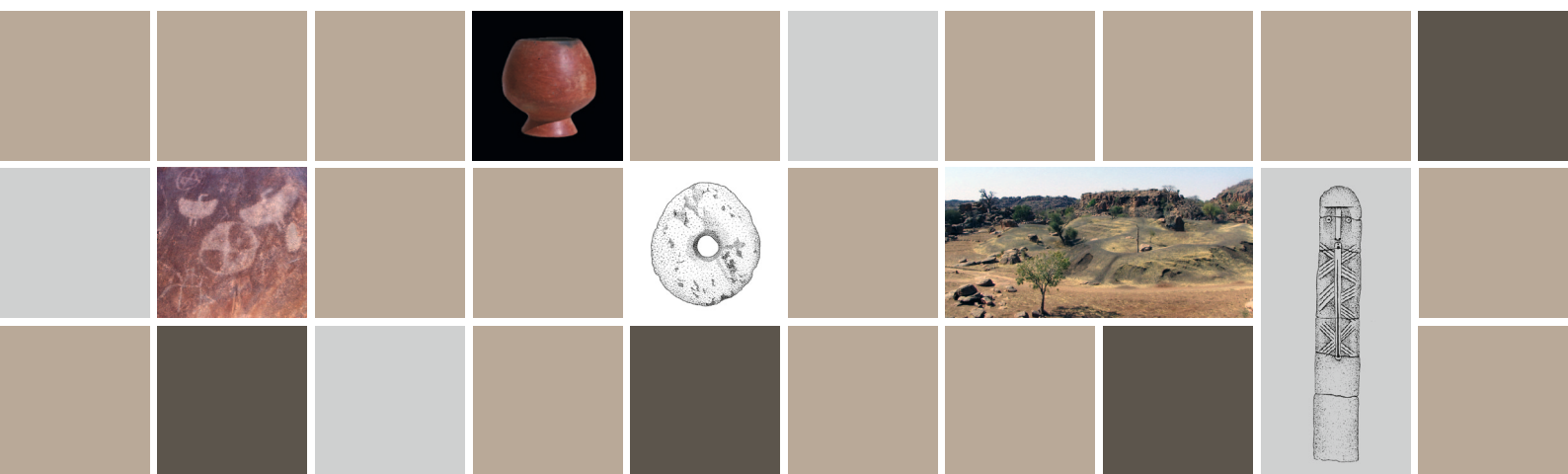
<http://www.palethnologie.org>

ISSN 2108-6532

edited by

PALETHNOLOGY OF AFRICA

François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR



Review published by the P@lethnologie association, created and supported by the TRACES laboratory, the Ethnologie Préhistorique laboratory, the University of Liège and the Ministry of Culture and Communication.

## Director

Vanessa LEA

## Editorial committee

François BON

Sandrine COSTAMAGNO

Karim GERNIGON

Vanessa LEA

Monique OLIVE

Marcel OTTE

Michel VAGINAY

Nicolas VALDEYRON

## Scientific committee

Michel BARBAZA, university of Toulouse, France

Laurent BRUXELLES, INRAP, France

Jacques CHABOT, university of Laval, Canada

Jesús GONZÁLEZ URQUIJO, university of Cantabria, Spain

Dominique HENRY-GAMBIER, CNRS, France

Jacques JAUBERT, university of Bordeaux, France

Béatrix MIDANT-REYNES, CNRS, France

Karim SADR, university of Witwatersrand, South Africa

Boris VALENTIN, university Paris I, France

Jean VAQUER, CNRS, France

Randall WHITE, university of New York, USA

## Editorial office

Claire LETOURNEUX

## Translation

MAGEN O'FARRELL

## Layout, graphics

Fabien TESSIER

**The contributions should be addressed to:**

REVUE P@LETHNOLOGIE

Vanessa LEA, Research associates

TRACES - UMR 5608 of the CNRS

Maison de la recherche

5 allées Antonio Machado

31058 Toulouse cedex 9, FRANCE

Phone: +33 (0)5 61 50 36 98

Fax: +33 (0)5 61 50 49 59

Email: [vanessa.lea@univ-tlse2.fr](mailto:vanessa.lea@univ-tlse2.fr)

**This numeric publication received support from**



## Article outline

### NIANI *REDUX*

A Final Rejection of the Identification  
of the Site of Niani (Republic of Guinea)  
with the Capital of the Kingdom of Mali

François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR

<b>1 - The Niani hypothesis</b>	239
<b>2 - The lost capital of the kingdom of Mali</b>	239
<b>3 - Evidence open to interpretation</b>	241
<b>4 - The excavations of Niani, or archaeology as a catalyst</b>	243
<b>5 - What the excavations tell us</b>	244
<b>Conclusion</b>	250
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	250
<b>Bibliographic references</b>	250

## To cite this article

Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., 2012 - Niani *Redux*. A Final Rejection of the Identification of the Site of Niani (Republic of Guinea) with the Capital of the Kingdom of Mali, in Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X. (ed.), *Palethnology of Africa*, *P@lethnology*, 4, 235-252.

NIANI *REDUX*A Final Rejection of the Identification  
of the Site of Niani (Republic of Guinea)  
with the Capital of the Kingdom of Mali

François-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR

**Abstract**

*Over the last century, a considerable body of literature has asserted that the site of Niani, in the Republic of Guinea, conceals the ruins of the capital of the medieval kingdom of Mali at the height of its splendour, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. This hypothesis was constructed under the influence of a number of factors, but always independently of the archaeological data. This article provides an examination of the archaeological data available for Niani, and concludes that there are no arguments in favour of this hypothesis.*

**Keywords**

*Niani, Republic of Guinea, Kingdom of Mali, archaeology, Middle Ages (14<sup>th</sup> century AD).*

Niani is a small village with thatched circular houses set beside a broad river, the Sankarani, which is a tributary of the upper Niger (figures 1-2). It is a two-day car journey from the capital, Conakry. The village is located in the far east of Guinea. The watercourse marks the frontier with the neighbouring Republic of Mali.

Is it here, on the bank of the river, beneath the almost flat surface of the alluvial plain now partially inundated by the waters of a dam, or at the foot of the Koulikoro hill – the first approaches to which reveal the remains of tumuli and siderurgical furnaces among the vegetation – that are to be found the ruins of the town inhabited by the sovereigns of the kingdom of Mali at the height of its splendour, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD? Was it here that the famous Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta stayed with *Mansa* (Mandinka for “king”) Sulaymân between the months of June 1352 and February 1353? Was it here that a palace was once erected, with a domed audience chamber looking over the parade ground and the Friday Mosque described by Ibn Battuta and another contemporary Arabic author, al-Umari (Cuoq, 1985)? Was it from here that in 1324, according to a number of authors, *Mansa Mûsâ*, brother and predecessor of Suleiman, set off at the head of a procession of thousands of men and slaves on a diplomatic visit to Cairo and a pilgrimage to the sacred sites of Arabia (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013a: Chapter 28)? Was it here, in the slack season, that *Wangara* traders arrived carrying the gold from the auriferous region of Bouré, on the edge of which Niani lies? Was it from here that once or twice a year the great merchant caravans set off for Sijilmâsa (Morocco) or Cairo, bearing the precious metal that had been exchanged for bars of salt, ingots of metal, bales of cloth or sacks of cowries? If we walk on the plain, though we can observe a few hillocks with an anthropogenic appearance (figure 3), nothing leads us to think that this was once the site of the political and commercial capital of a great medieval African kingdom.



**Figure 1** – Niani, Guinea: view of the village from the hill of Nianikoro. The watercourse is the Sankarani, a tributary of the Niger, which here constitutes the frontier with Mali (photograph: F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar).



**Figure 2** – Niani, Guinea: circular houses made of banco and straw (photograph: F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar).



**Figure 3** – Niani, Guinea: immediate approaches to the village (left of image). The slight topographic prominence on which the group of people is walking (right of image) is Władysław Filipowiak's mound 6M (photograph: F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar).



## 1 - The Niani hypothesis

Nevertheless, the hypothesis that the capital of Mali once stood here, at Niani, has not ceased to gain currency since it was first proposed by colonial administrators (Vidal, 1923b; Delafosse, 1924). The identification of Niani-on-Sankarani (which we will call it to distinguish it from other similar names) rested firstly on the conjunction of two onomastic connections: on one hand between the toponym Niani and the name Yani' indicated in a 17<sup>th</sup> century chronicle of Timbuktu – an rather distant source both in time and space – and on the other between the name of the Sankarani and that of the watercourse (Sansara) which, according to his own account, Ibn Battuta crossed in order to reach the capital. It was also discovered a little later that the name of this village is not completely incompatible with that of the capital indicated by the Arabian authors of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, to the point that the name of Niani was sometimes substituted, through a kind of philological *coup*, for the original term in the various editions of these texts (for example Cuoq, 1985: 262, 264). This is to forget the fact that, while the restitution “Nanî” is possible, the script of the Arabic manuscripts in question, unvocalised and without diacritical marks, may also be transliterated in the forms “Binî”, “Butî”, “Tatî”, and “Yity”, among a host of other possibilities (Collet, in press). While toponymic games are never risk-free, their relevance here is still more diminished by the fact that, in the absence of any accurate geographical location for the kingdom, the area in which we must search the capital is enormous: nothing less than the whole area of the Mandinka language. We might as well seek out a “Villefranche” on the map of France! But here, Niani-on-Sankarani has the advantage of being located in the heart of what is called “Vieux Mandingue”, the central region of the Mandinka area in which a chiefdom is settled which, on the basis of oral traditions, proclaims itself the heir of the ancient kingdom. In short, it is at the crossroads between complacently-sought philological sources and regional political claims that the Niani hypothesis – and soon the “Niani solution” – has taken shape.

But while oral traditions enable the reconstruction with some probability of the dynastic history of the chiefdom of Niani over the last three or four centuries (Person, 1981), it is by means of a double short cut that one has given credence to the “memory capture” in which the oral tradition indulges regarding this glorious medieval kingdom and to the “substitution of places” in which this capture becomes caught up by suggesting that the ruins of the capital of the supposed ancestors of the current dynasty are hidden beneath the current Niani-on-Sankarani. In other words, while over recent centuries our Niani could have been the location for a chiefly power laying claim to former glory, this affirmation teaches us nothing about the capital of medieval Mali. This capital is lacking an essential feature: the physical evidence for a genuine site. While it has sometimes been written that we should not seek too much of a “capital” in the usual sense of the word, on the pretext that the royal African city is sometimes multi-centred, sometimes itinerant, we must in the case of Mali repudiate this indolent argument. We are therefore seeking a site which, according to those who lived there under kings Mûsâ and Sulaymân, was a site for trade and royal display, where royal monuments were constructed and where foreign merchants had permanent residences. In other words, whatever the name that we wish to give it, it was a city which at the time had the status of capital.

## 2 - The lost capital of the kingdom of Mali

We will not here reconsider the history of the search for the lost capital of Mali. This has already been done (Masonen, 2000; Collet, in press). We will merely state that the geography of the hypotheses formulated to date is itself an illustration of the plasticity of the criteria that instigate

their creation. On the basis of the itinerary described by Ibn Battuta – the complete reliability of which may also be called into question (Fauvelle-Aymar, Hirsch, 2003) – several authors (Cooley, 1841; Binger, 1892; Hunwick, 1973) have proposed seeking the capital of 14<sup>th</sup> century “Imperial” Mali on the left bank of the river Niger, downstream of Bamako (in present day Mali). But on the basis of the same information, and relying no less than the others on an intimate knowledge of West Africa, another author has been able to propose a location on the banks of the river Gambia, in what is now Senegal (Meillassoux, 1972). However, none of these diverse hypotheses have ever been supported by accurate surveying in the field. On the basis of the oral sources, David Conrad (1994) identified the capital of Mali in its formative period (13<sup>th</sup> century) in another location in “Vieux Mandingue”, Dakajalan, while still retaining the possibility of a more northerly location for the imperial period itself. Still other locations have been suggested for the capitals of Mali’s successive historical phases, some of which grant Niani a place in the succession of seats of royal power. The geographical extent of these hypotheses (figure 4) is breathtaking: it covers an area almost 600 km in diameter, which says less about the coordinates of the capital of medieval Mali than about the latitude allowed the historians in the analysis of the available sources.

Within this area, Niani occupies the most southerly point. This could constitute another reason for not dwelling too long on its candidacy, as the site is several hundred kilometres distant from the Sahelian strip in which were established, from the 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the points of contact between West African kingdoms and the trade network of the Islamic world. It is along this Sahelian strip that cities such as Takrur, Ghana, Timbuktu and Gao flourished over the centuries. Should we imagine that the capital of Mali was an exception to this historical recurrence determined by the Sahel’s centuries-long role of ecological, human and economic interface? Why not? But here we should not accept too strict a determinism, given that many of the places mentioned in the written sources are still unknown to us in the field. So perhaps we must turn to Niani to seek out the expected remains.



**Figure 4** – Distribution map of possible locations (black squares) for the medieval Malian capital (basic map: d-maps.com. Data transferred to the map after P. Masonen, 2000: 459).

### 3 - Evidence open to interpretation

Here too, there are – and for a long time have been – numerous reasons to reject Niani. Raymond Mauny, the great French historian of Africa, whose *Tableau géographique de l'Ouest africain au Moyen Âge* (1961) remains a model for the integration of written, archaeological and ethnographic sources, criss-crossed the region by bicycle. His unpublished field notebooks<sup>1</sup> show that he was somewhat sceptical in view of the meagreness of the visible remains at Niani, which he visited in February 1958 (figures 5-7). As early as 1923, M. Gaillard, a colonial official, undertook investigations and excavations on the site (Gaillard, 1923), at the request of J. Vidal, who originated the first Niani hypothesis and had visited the site some months earlier (Vidal, 1923a). Published by his superiors in order to validate Vidal's hypothesis, Gaillard's observations are quite remarkable for their degree of historical resolution. Gaillard distinguishes four phases in the occupation of Niani (presented here from the most recent to the earliest):

- Niani 4, founded in 1877, which is the current village (in Gaillard's time);
- Niani 3, whose ruins were visible at the time, but which have been largely flattened by cultivation and the reuse of materials. These are a thick *tata* ("earth fortification") which a variety of cross-references enable to be attributed to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Its enclosure preserved (in Gaillard's time – this is no longer the case today) elevations the height of a man, and the complex presented a rectangular building which "must be the great mosque [Gaillard noted the existence of a *mihrab* in the eastern wall, which seems to confirm his interpretation]" (Gaillard, 1923: 624);
- Niani 2, which he was informed belonged to a certain *Mansa Mamourou*. Gaillard could not identify any particular ruin from this phase, with the exception of the mosque which he supposed to have been in operation from this period. On the basis of the extent of the mounds on the plain, on which he observed remains of walls constructed of banco (bricks of raw earth) and a type of pottery which was not produced in his time, Gaillard posited the existence of a very large site with defensive positions and lines of communication.
- Niani 1, "founded by the ancestors", says the tradition collected by Gaillard, "who we [the informants] have forgotten" (Gaillard, 1923: 621). Not finding any trace of this first phase, Gaillard questioned "the existence of this first city about which local history provides no detail" (Gaillard, 1923: 630).

Beyond the insistence of Gaillard on the lack of continuous occupation, to which we will return, we can make several comments on the basis of his observations. Firstly, local tradition does not state that Niani had any specific role during the time of the empire. If, by extrapolation, we identified these "ancestors who we have forgotten" with the heroes of the time of Sundiata Keita, the semi-legendary founder of the empire in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, we would have some reasons to see here a claim by the current inhabitants of Niani, members of the Keita clan and holders of the chieftdom: as the seat of power, Niani would act as capital "by proxy" for the royal ancestors of the modern dignitaries. Secondly, if we take the local tradition literally, it provides no details of a historical nature until the time of *Mansa Mamourou*. We easily recognise in this character Mamoudou, or Nyaani Mansa Mamudu ("Mamudu, king of Niani"), the deepest "stratigraphic level" of the collective memory of the region (Person, 1981) who oral traditions often conflate

1. Fonds Mauny (Raymond Mauny archives), Bibliothèque de Recherches Africaines, Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne, 9 rue Malher, 75004 Paris. Some items from the collection can be found online on the site <http://mauny.hypotheses.org>.





Figures 5-7 – Pages from Raymond Mauny's field notebook for 1958: the visit to Niani.

with the other great historical figure, Sundiata. Gaillard, as a victim of this conflation, believed he could state that Mamourou reigned four generations after Sundiata (Gaillard, 1923: note 1, 621-622). It is on the basis of this contingent hypothesis that Gaillard's Niani 2 could be attributed by his successors (Vidal, 1923b; Delafosse 1924) to the imperial period of Mali without anyone later re-examining the grounds for this attribution, even when it became clear that Mamoudou and the memorial stratum that he incarnated corresponded to a level dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> century according to the historical sources (Person, 1981). Thirdly, we can state that although Gaillard's chronology has been shown to be incorrect, its sequence of Niani's archaeological phases is nevertheless accurate and should have been used as the basis for the later examinations of the site.

#### 4 - The excavations of Niani, or archaeology as a catalyst

Until very recently, with the exclusion of several sites having been continuously occupied from the Middle Ages to today (such as Oualata and Timbuktu), no excavations had produced archaeological evidence for the kingdom of Mali in the period of its greatest glory, when it was the favoured recipient for traders from the Islamic world. In 2006, a joint American and Malian team began the excavation of Sorotomo, an archaeological tell of 72 hectares located not far from Segou and which has produced evidence for a major establishment from the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries (MacDonald *et al.*, 2009-2011). According to the excavation team, Sorotomo, which has produced very little archaeological material linked to trans-Saharan trade, was more of a centre of political power than an economic centre. The authors propose the hypothesis that it was the capital of a polity that was then a vassal of Mali. Whatever the case, this discovery has emphasised one point: the largely unexplored archaeological potential of large parts of the Sahel, and in particular of present-day Mali. We must remember this when attempting to explain the success of the Niani hypothesis: it has only been able to flourish in the scarcity of archaeological data.

From this point of view, the fact that Niani possessed, *a priori*, few merits was largely unimportant, for it had a unique advantage: it was the only site to be systematically excavated. In addition to a few minor interventions in the 1920s, Niani was the subject of three excavation campaigns (1965, 1968 and 1973) by a team led by Władysław Filipowiak in the context of scientific cooperation between communist Poland and Guinea under the rule of Sékou Touré. The team included Djibril Tamsir Niane, a Guinean historian specialising in oral traditions, in particular the epic of Sundiata, an epic cycle various versions of which have been collected throughout the Mandinka region (Niane, 1960). While we lack space here to demonstrate how the archaeological data and the oral information have been employed to support the Niani hypothesis, we can point at the role played by the formidable political pressure exercised on the two men, and the nationalistic atmosphere which prevailed in Guinea following Sékou Touré's "No" to the French Union in 1958 (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013b). At Niani today the inhabitants recall – a real or imagined memory? – that the archaeological "confirmation" of the site as the royal capital stimulated several attempts to annex the region by their Malian neighbours. We can also here designate some of the relays and amplifiers from which the Niani hypothesis benefited, at least in the Francophone world: the chapter dedicated by Niane to medieval Mali in the fourth volume (which he himself edited) of the "bible" of African history that was the *General History of Africa*, published under the auspices of UNESCO (Niane, 1985), then the Internet, and, more recently, school history books intended for French secondary schools (Collet, in press).

The paradox is that this transmutation of the hypothesis into truth has taken place without really requiring the results of the archaeology. As if it were only necessary for the excavations to have taken place to surround Niani with a historical aura, nobody has really taken the time to

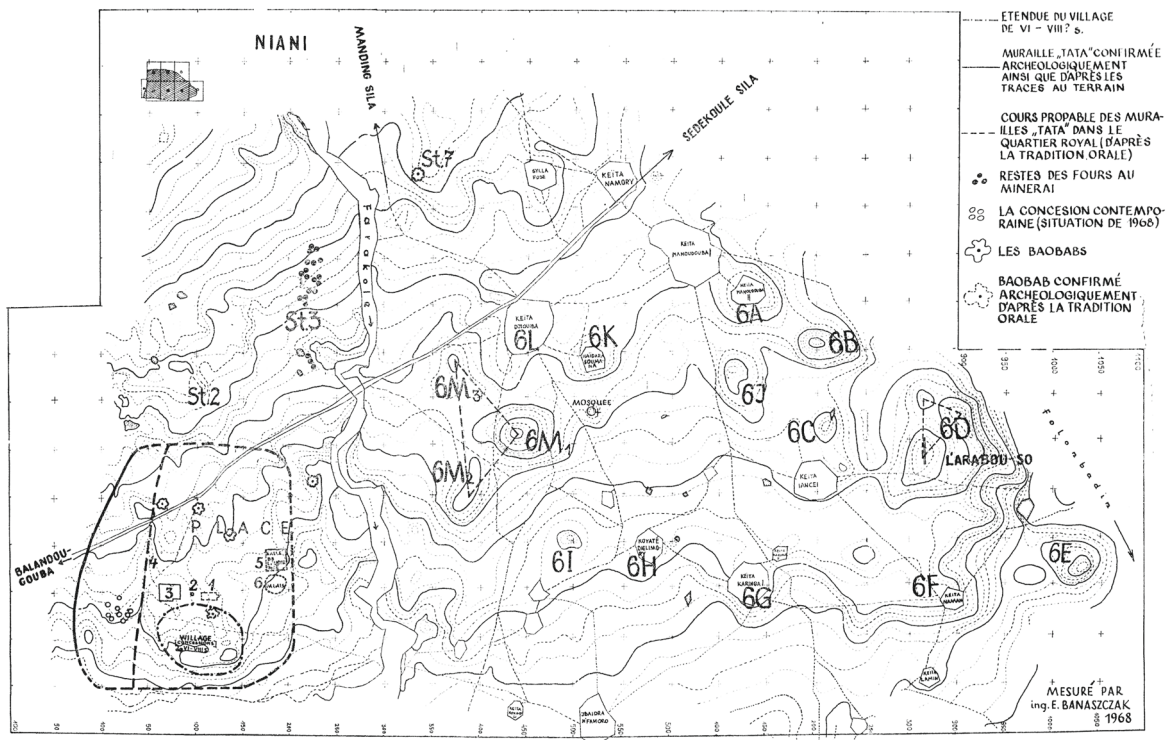
examine the results more closely. Raymond Mauny gave a polite and critical account of the final monograph (Mauny, 1980); his conviction that nothing medieval had emerged from the ground of Niani had been forged throughout his correspondence with Filipowiak (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013b). There are very few other accounts, and the work is very little quoted or commented upon (whether positively or negatively), although it is often listed in the references. Is it because the monograph is written in very poor French, which often goes beyond the limits of comprehension? Is it because a superficial reading of the work has convinced its readers that the arguments were complete or, on the contrary, that a critique was not worth the effort? In any case, it is as if the archaeological results had no place in the economy of the argument, playing in sum the role of chemical catalyst for an imaginary operation whose principle is elsewhere. This is what happens with historical myths.

## 5 - What the excavations tell us

And yet, because there have been excavations at Niani, there is a good chance that a large part of the answer can be found in the results from those excavations. We must be clear here: it will never be possible (unless we turn over every square decimetre of terrain) to prove that the remains of the capital of Mali in the 14<sup>th</sup> century **are not** to be found in Niani or its surroundings. But we can at least demonstrate that there is a broad spectrum of negative arguments which make it impossible, until we have proof to the contrary, that Niani can be identified with this capital. And these negative arguments are weighty: the evidence that should have been revealed during the excavation or simply discovered during surveying is **utterly** absent. As a counterpoint to the archaeological monograph on Niani (Filipowiak, 1979), the remainder of this article is an inventory of what should have been found at Niani – and which was not.

- *A bipolar urban organisation.* All of the written sources referring to West African urban sites of the Middle Ages evoke bipolar towns constituted of an Islamic settlement (the residential quarter of the North African merchant elite) and a royal city (the quarter of the West African elite) (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013a: Chapters 7 and 8). While it is true that no excavation in this area has ever revealed a royal city recognisable as such, the absence of royal complexes at the known Islamic sites, such as Koumbi Saleh in Mauritania (Berthier, 1997), indicates that these cities must be located elsewhere. Filipowiak believed that he had observed a duality at Niani (figure 8) between what he called the “royal quarter” (or Station 1 of his excavations), because he observed there the remains of a *tata* wall and a possible mosque (no doubt the one mentioned by Gaillard) and what, employing a local designation (*larabou-so* in Mandinka), he designates as the “Arab quarter” (or stations 6A to 6M, which correspond to the mounds visible on the plain; figure 3). This apparent polarity corresponds in reality to archaeological assemblages which are not completely synchronous. The excavations carried out in mound 6D have produced a stratigraphy of around 4 m in depth, in which the majority of the sequence (layers III to VI developing over the lower three metres) is constituted of occupation remains from the 7<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries (the uncalibrated dates given by Filipowiak produce the 8<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> centuries; on this subject, see table 1) characteristic of populations of farmers and fishermen practising pottery, weaving and metallurgy. The upper part of the sequence (layers I to II, corresponding to a few decimetres of archaeological levels beneath the topsoil) can be attributed to the same context as the upper level of Station 1 on the basis of stylistic comparison of the pottery. The excavations of Station 1 have produced an even less marked stratigraphy (of the order of thirty to fifty centimetres down to sterile sediment) characterised by a lower level (layer III) dated to around the 5<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries in calibrated results (Filipowiak: 6<sup>th</sup> century) topped by another very shallow archaeological level (layers I and II) directly attributable to the period equal to or later than the 15<sup>th</sup> century, due to the presence of clay tobacco pipes,

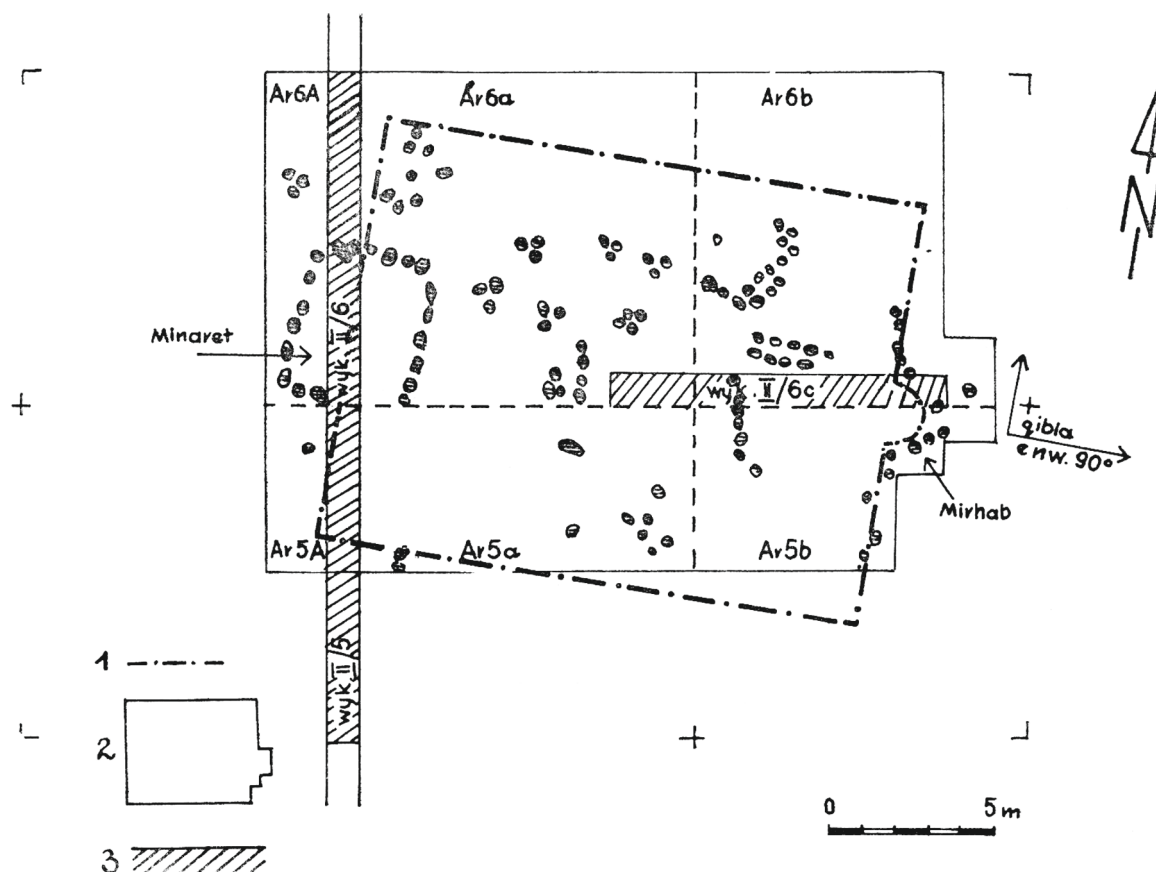




**Figure 8** – Location plan for the archaeological stations of W. Filipowiak's excavation (1979). Figures 1-6 at bottom left of the plan refers to the royal-type structures identified by Władysław Filipowiak on his Station 1. These structures are described as follows. 1: Mosque; 2: Well; 3: Huts; 4: Lower wall; 5: Audience hall of the time of Mansa Mūsā; 6: Palace.

the clear *fossile directeur* for these regions. Taking the archaeological data literally therefore, it documents two phases: initially, prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, an ubiquitous peasant habitat in various parts of the site, followed by one or more “modern” occupations (we will use this term for the post-14<sup>th</sup> century period) centred around Station 1 where there seems to have been a small architectural complex, possibly flanked by a mosque. The question is: was there continuity between these two phases? It is because he assumes a “yes” answer that Filipowiak asserts that the site was occupied during the 14<sup>th</sup> century. We will see that there are no data supporting this assertion.

• *Permanent quadrangular architecture.* All of the recognised medieval Islamic sites in the Saharo-Sahelian area have produced permanent habitations (constructed from slabs of shale or other local rock) with quadrangular plans. Nothing of this type exists at Niani, where all of the construction remains revealed are more or less thick layers or “lenses” of clay, identified by Filipowiak, undoubtedly with good reason, as the remains of banco, the local construction material. In addition, with the exception of two quadrangular buildings – one considered by Filipowiak as a mosque (figure 9) and the other as the audience chamber of the 14<sup>th</sup> century sovereigns – all of the clearly identifiable structures are circular houses indicated by foundations or the bases of walls in lines of pebbles (figure 10). Unless we admit that the Islamic residents borrowed the vernacular architecture here, which is possible but remains to be demonstrated, no architectural evidence indicates the presence of a North African elite. We can also note the complete absence of architectural features (paving, niches, benches, built-in furniture, mouldings, etc.) or high-status architectural decoration (fragments of painted or sculpted stucco from wall friezes or column capitals, etc.) such as are found at Islamic habitation sites from the Sahelian region (for example Oualata, see Jacques-Meunié, 1957).



**Figure 9** – Hypothetical reconstruction of the “mosque” at Niani (Station 1) by Władysław Filipowiak (1979, figure 67). Note that while the reconstruction of the minaret, in the west, could correspond to an alignment of blocks forming a substructure, the reconstruction of the perimeter of the building is not based on any reliable archaeological observation.



**Figure 10** – Niani, Station 1: bases of circular houses; Władysław Filipowiak excavation (1979, figure 69).



• *Islamic artefacts.* In the absence of distinctively Islamic architectural remains, we would expect to find imported objects characteristic of the presence of Islamic merchants in the excavations at Niani, and around it for a fairly wide area. However, the excavations at Niani have produced no glazed turned pottery oil lamps of the type that are so numerous at Tegdaoust (Robert-Chaleix, 1983), no items of jewellery or copperware of Islamic manufacture, no fragments of the Islamic glass from which perfume phials were usually made, and more generally no domestic objects of Islamic origin. Still more significantly, and this time concerning the objects which might indicate the trading vocation of the site or of an activity linked to gold-working technology, no Islamic coins have been found at Niani, nor, still more unusually, any denerals, the glass tokens the same weight as a dinar which are so common at Koumbi Saleh (Devisse *et al.*, 1983), nor, finally, any pouring moulds for the manufacture of objects from gold, which are found in Africa at the interface between production areas and commercial routes (Fauvelle-Aymar, Mensan, 2011). A few imported beads have been discovered (less than a dozen; Filipowiak, 1979: 200) – in this case eye-beads and chevron beads in drawn glass probably originating in the Murano (Venice) workshops around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, together with a few products in cornelian said to be “from Cambay”, of indeterminate age (similar products are still manufactured today) – and... a single cowrie shell (Filipowiak, 1979: 199); these were gathered from the Indian Ocean and imported by the ton to Africa by Islamic traders to serve as a local coinage or for personal ornamentation (Fauvelle-Aymar 2013a: Chapter 27).

• *Glazed pottery.* A special mention must be made on the subject of glazed pottery, an Islamic product which is found, although generally in small quantities, on all of the sites in the Saharo-Sahelian area linked to trade. There was an epistolary debate on this subject between Raymond Mauny and Władysław Filipowiak, the former demanding to see the glazed samples that the latter said he had discovered (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013b). The parcel finally received by Mauny contained only ordinary local pottery (yellow to orange in colour with a red slip and impressed decoration). Nor does the published pottery present any fragments that could be compared to Islamic pottery, with the exception of a single sherd described as belonging to “a vase or basin in faïence” (Filipowiak, 1979: 92-93, 167), to which Filipowiak reluctantly assigned a modern European origin. A re-examination of the ceramic material of Niani would certainly be welcome, but there are questions as to the current location of the collection – a part was preserved in the museum of Conakry in around 1983 (figure 11) while the other was repatriated from Poland in 1999, but none of it could be located in 2004 (personal observation, 2004; correspondence with Serge Robert and the museum of Szczecin, Poland, 2011). In short, what is revealed by the absence of any Islamic material culture or any evidence of commercial activity during the medieval period (with the insignificant exception of a single cowrie), or in the modern period (with the exception of a few beads and a sherd of European faïence) is rather an indication of the great secular isolation of the region in comparison with the areas in which exchange was practised, along the Sahelian facade or, later, along the Atlantic coast.

• *Islamic graves and funerary inscriptions.* In the absence of “proof of life” provided by the material culture, perhaps we can turn to the graves and Arabic funerary inscriptions that sometimes accompany them, indicating that Muslims were indeed on the site, since they are buried there. The distinctive character of Islamic graves is a remarkable characteristic in an African archaeological landscape, and some sites have produced significant corpus of inscriptions enabling us to specify the affiliation (ethnic, social, familial) of those involved and the precise date of their death (for several medieval Malian sites, including Gao, see Moraes Farias, 2003). There is nothing of this sort at Niani: all of the visitors to the site, even those most inclined to believe in the Niani hypothesis and to canvass the memories of the inhabitants, have emphasised the absence of Islamic tombs and epigraphic stelae in the region.

• Dates and chronological attributions to the medieval period. [Table 1](#) presents the radiocarbon dates obtained at Niani and published in the monograph (Filipowiak, 1979) or discussed in the correspondence between Filipowiak and Mauny, the latter having had carried out for his Polish colleague several radiocarbon analyses at the Gif-sur-Yvette laboratory (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013b).

We have already mentioned the apparent hiatus in the occupation of the site between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, separating two fairly well documented archaeological phases. The small series of radiocarbon dates confirms this observation, emphasising a remarkable void for the 14<sup>th</sup> century (we might even say for a long “century” which runs from the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century). Given the very good stratification of the sequences and the excellent resolution of the excavation, we can even observe that the level dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD (but badly dated, due to the plateau in the calibration curve) in layer III at Station 1 is sealed by a well-defined upper level itself dated to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Filipowiak, 1979, figure 68). These observations lead us to conclude in an interruption of the occupation, at least in the excavated areas, during the centuries that particularly interest us.



**Figure 11** – Niani: sample of locally-manufactured pottery; Władysław Filipowiak excavation (photograph: Serge Robert, around 1983, Museum of Conakry).

**Table 1** – Radiocarbon dates for the site of Niani (Guinea)

Station	Sample	Lab. code (Kiel or Gif)	Uncalibrated result	Uncalibrated result, presented in calendar date (Filipowiak, 1979)	2 sigma calibrated calendar result (OxCal program, IntCal09 curve), 2013
1	5	Gif-1291	1400 ± 100 BP	550 ± 100 AD	Cal AD 425-867 (95,4 %)
1	?	KI-292	380 ± 50 BP	1570 ± 50 AD	Cal AD 1440-1636 (95,4 %)
1	8	Gif-1915	300 ± 90 BP	1650 ± 90 AD	Cal AD 1431-1954 (95,4 %)
6D	9	KI-293	1090 ± BP	860 ± 65 AD	Cal AD 774-1146 (95,4 %)
6D	10	Gif-1916	?	930 ± 90 AD	Cal AD 782-1214 (95,4 %)
6D	12	KI-294	1035 ± 35 BP	915 ± 35 AD	Cal AD 896-1118 (95,4 %)
6D	13	Gif-1292	1200 ± 100 BP	750 ± 100 AD	Cal AD 658-1014 (95,4 %)

We have already suggested that it is because Filipowiak made a tacit assumption of continuous occupation of the site that he was inclined to mentally “bridge” the chronological hiatus between two perfectly distinct archaeological phases. This *a priori* assumption of the continuity of occupation (rather than its interruption) certainly results from a conceptual bias. To this bias can also be added poor understanding of the radiocarbon results. The partial publication of the correspondence between Mauny and Filipowiak demonstrates the confusion, in the mind of the latter, between the age and date of a sample analysed using C<sup>14</sup>. The Polish archaeologist thus believed that he was dealing with samples from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, while they were in fact samples 14 centuries old (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2013b). However, this confusion was quickly resolved and cannot explain the attribution to the 16<sup>th</sup> century of structures that are manifestly later. Another explanation comes from the interpretation by Filipowiak of the dating of the “audience chamber” (or building A), which he excavated at Station 1. Commenting on the result obtained from a sample of charcoal (sample 8) from the destruction level (a fire has “baked” the banco bricks, making visible a part of the structure), Filipowiak understood that the radiocarbon analysis dated the episode of the destruction of the building (Filipowiak, 1979, 204 and *passim*). This is evidently not the case, as the date obtained (calibrated result: 1431-1954 AD; Filipowiak: 1650 ± 90) is rather that of the “death” of the wood used in the construction of the said building. This confusion, probably excusable in the context of the period, is what permitted Filipowiak to antedate (all the same, by around three centuries!) the construction of a building for which he believed he had evidence of its destruction. The reality is completely different: the “audience chamber” was not erected in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, then destroyed in the 17<sup>th</sup>. Rather, it was erected at any time **after the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century**, perhaps in around the 16<sup>th</sup> century if we compare the results of the two samples dating the modern levels of Station 1; in addition, it was erected on a set of much older remains among which nothing persists of any occupation during a long 14<sup>th</sup> century.

## Conclusion

We have now examined all of the archaeological data concerning Niani: they tell us of the absence of data for the 14<sup>th</sup> century, as is indeed more generally the case for the period of Malian hegemony, between the mid-13<sup>th</sup> and the mid-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. This striking absence of data is very telling: where we should encounter even some of this evidence – even fragmentary, even dispersed – of the past glory of the capital of *Mansa Mûsâ* and *Sulaymân*, we encounter only an archaeological void that tells us that the capital was not there. As for one's desire that Niani should, despite everything, be this lost capital, it undoubtedly results from the profound wish – which was that of a number of historians and archaeologists who visited and excavated this site – to believe in a mirage rather than to believe in nothing.

## Acknowledgements

Some descriptive elements and several illustrations in this article originate in a mission carried out by the author in the company of Bertrand Hirsch (Université Paris 1), Jean-Pierre Bracco (Université d'Aix-Marseille) and several colleagues from the University of Kankan (Guinea) in 2004, in the framework of a teaching convention. My thanks to Serge Robert for several pieces of information and for figure 11. My thanks to Bertrand Poissonnier for his suggestions, observations on the beads and the calibration of the dates. My thanks to Nicolas Valdeyron and Bertrand Hirsch for their reading and comments.

## Bibliographic references

- Berthier S., 1997 - *Recherches archéologiques sur la capitale de l'empire de Ghana*, Oxford, Archaeopress (BAR International Series 680-Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology 41), 143 p.
- Binger L.D., 1892 - *Du Niger au golfe de Guinée, par le pays de Kong et le Mossi*, Paris, Hachette, 2 vol., 513 + 416 p.
- Collet A., forthcoming - Ne l'appellez plus jamais Niani. Enjeux et réappropriations autour du nom et de la localisation de la capitale médiévale du Mali du xiv<sup>e</sup> et xv<sup>e</sup> siècle, *Afriques. Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire*, dossier 4 [revue accessible en ligne : <http://afriques.revues.org/>].
- Conrad D.C., 1994 - A Town Called Dakajalan: The Sunjata Tradition and the Question of Ancient Mali's Capital, *Journal of African History*, 35, 3, 355-377.
- Cooley W.D., 1841 - *The Negroland of the Arabs Examined and Explained*, Londres, J. Arrowsmith, 143 p.
- Cuoq J., 1985 - *Recueil des sources arabes concernant l'Afrique occidentale du viii<sup>e</sup> au xvi<sup>e</sup> siècle (Bilâd al-Sûdân)*, Paris, Éditions du CNRS (Sources d'histoire médiévale 7), 515 p.
- Delafosse M., 1924 - Le Ghana et le Mali et l'emplacement de leurs capitales, *Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'AOF*, 7, 479-542.
- Devisse J., Robert D., Robert S., 1983 - *Tegdaoust III. Recherches sur Awdaghost. Campagnes 1960-1965. Enquêtes générales*, Paris, Éditions Recherche sur les civilisations (Mémoire de l'Institut mauritanien de la recherche scientifique 3), 569 p.

- Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., 2013a - *Le Rhinocéros d'or. Histoires du Moyen Âge africain*, Paris, Alma, 319 p.
- Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., 2013b - La correspondance entre Raymond Mauny et Wladislaw Filipowiak au sujet de la fouille de Niani (Guinée), capitale supposée de l'empire médiéval du Mali, in Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., Hirsch B. (éd.), *Les ruses de l'historien. Essais d'Afrique et d'ailleurs en hommage à Jean Boulègue*, Paris, Karthala, 331-355.
- Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., Hirsch B., 2003 - Voyage aux frontières du monde. Topologie, narration et jeux de miroirs dans la *Rihla* de Ibn Battûta, *Afrique & Histoire*, 1, 75-122.
- Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., Mensan R., 2011 - Moules de coulées en pierre trouvées à Harlaa, in Fauvelle-Aymar F.-X., Hirsch B. (éd.), *Espaces musulmans de la Corne de l'Afrique au Moyen Âge*, Paris, De Boccard-CFEE, 99-102.
- Filipowiak W., 1979 - *Études archéologiques sur la capitale médiévale du Mali*, Szczecin, Muzeum Narodowe, 316 p.
- Gaillard M., 1923 - Niani, ancienne capitale de l'empire mandingue, *Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'AOF*, 6, 620-636.
- Hunwick J.O., 1973 - The Mid-Fourteenth Century Capital of Mali, *Journal of African History*, 14, 2, 195-208.
- Jacques-Meunié D., 1957 - Cités caravanières de Mauritanie. Tichite et Oualata, *Journal de la Société des africanistes*, 27, 1, 19-35.
- MacDonald K.C., Camara S., Canos Donnay S., Gestrich N., Keita D., 2009-2011 - Sototomo: A Forgotten Malian Capital?, *Archaeology International*, 13-14 [accessible en ligne : <http://www.ai-journal.com/article/view/ai.1315/71>].
- Mauny R., 1961 - *Tableau géographique de l'Ouest africain au Moyen Âge, d'après les sources écrites, la tradition et l'archéologie*, Dakar, IFAN (Mémoire 61), 587 p.
- Mauny R., 1980 - Compte rendu de W. Filipowiak : *Études archéologiques sur la capitale du Mali*, *Journal des africanistes*, 50, 2, 265-266.
- Meillassoux C., 1972 - L'itinéraire d'Ibn Battuta de Walata à Malli, *Journal of African History*, 13, 3, 389-395.
- Moraes Farias P.F. de, 2003 - *Arabic Medieval Inscriptions from the Republic of Mali. Epigraphy, Chronicles, and Songhay-Tuareg History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press (Fontes Historiae Africanae New Series), 280 p.
- Niane D.T., 1960 - *Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue*, Paris, Présence africaine, 153 p.
- Niane D.T., 1985 - Le Mali et la deuxième expansion manden, in Niane D.T. (éd.), *Histoire générale de l'Afrique*, tome 4 « L'Afrique du XII<sup>e</sup> au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle », Paris, UNESCO-Nouvelles éditions africaines, 141-196.
- Person Y., 1981 - Nyaani Mansa Mamudu et la fin de l'empire du Mali, in *Le Sol, la parole et l'écrit. Mélanges en hommage à Raymond Mauny*, volume 2, Paris, Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer - Karthala, 614-653.
- Robert-Chaleix D., 1983 - Lampes à huile importées découvertes à Tegdaoust, *Journal des africanistes*, 53, 1-2, 61-91.



Vidal J., 1923a - Au sujet de l'emplacement de Mali (ou Melli), capitale de l'ancien empire mandingue, *Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'AOF*, 2, 251-268.

Vidal J., 1923b - Un problème historique africain. Le véritable emplacement de Mali, *Bulletin du Comité d'études historiques et scientifiques de l'AOF*, 6, 606-619.

**Francois-Xavier FAUVELLE-AYMAR**

Research director  
CNRS, Traces (UMR 5608)  
Toulouse, FRANCE  
[francois-xavier.fauvelle@univ-tlse2.fr](mailto:francois-xavier.fauvelle@univ-tlse2.fr)

Research Fellow  
Centre Jacques-Berque  
(USR 3136 CNRS-MAEE)  
Rabat, MOROCCO

