

History's Mysteries

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History's Mysteries

Introduction

Many people have come and gone across the earth. Some have left little trace of their lives. We barely know they existed at all. Others have left books, and pictures, and cities. We know quite a lot about them.

Then there are the people who fit in between, somewhere. They exist in the shadows of history. They built enormous cities. They ruled great empires. But then they disappeared and no one knows why. We have also found weird sculptures and monuments made by unknown people. Sometimes they wrote books no one today can read. We know they existed, but we cannot get a picture of their lives.

History's Mysteries

Some cities have been utterly lost and forgotten. Then they turn up again! They give us a dramatic snapshot of a time that ended long ago. They give us hints about events we can never fully know.

The six stories in this book tell about vanished peoples and lost cities. As you read these stories, think about the life you are living. Could your town ever be lost to history? What if people were to dig up your house a thousand years from now? What if they had nothing from your time but the things you own? What picture would they get of the world you are living in today?

The Wangara



In 1324, the richest man on Earth was surely Mansa Musa. He was the king of Mali, an African empire south of the

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Sahara Desert. Musa was a Muslim. And that year, he made a journey to Mecca, the center of the Islamic religion. That's a journey all Muslims are supposed to make at least once if they can afford it.

Mansa Musa could afford it. His throne was made of pure gold. He hitched his horses to posts made of gold. When he set off for Mecca, he brought along 60,000 servants and followers. Some of the servants came along to take care of his camels. A hundred of these camels carried bags of gold dust. Each bag weighed 300 pounds!

The king of Mali gave generously to

The Wangara



the poor. At one point, he stopped in Egypt. There he gave away so much gold that the price of it dropped. Stories about this amazing king traveled to India and to Persia. They also traveled to Europe, which was a poor and backward place at that time. The Europeans thought Mansa Musa was a made-up character.

He was, however, real enough. So was his gold. How did the king of Mali become so rich?

The answer is a strange one. The roots of Mali's wealth went back many

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centuries. They went back to the days of an earlier kingdom called Ghana. This kingdom was founded by the Soninke people. It took shape around the year 300 C.E. Little is known about early Ghana, because the Soninke wrote no books. They had no writing system. But they did have iron. Other people in their area had only weapons made of wood. So the Soninke took over. They called their leader the *ghana*, which meant “the warrior king.” Thus, their whole empire came to be known as Ghana.

Sometime in the dim past, the Soninke heard about a people called the Wangara. They were a people of the forest. They

The Wangara

lived south of Ghana, beyond the Niger River.

Who were these Wangara?

No one knew. The Wangara kept themselves hidden. The people of Ghana rarely caught a glimpse of them, and they never spoke to one of the Wangara. How they learned to trade with the Wangara remains a mystery. Yet somehow they did learn that the Wangara wanted and needed salt. Somehow they worked out a way to trade with a mysterious people who would never let themselves be seen. They used a system called “silent barter.” It worked like this.

The Wangara

The traders from Ghana came to the banks of the Niger River. They placed their goods by the river. They separated these goods into two piles. One pile was made up of cloth, jewelry, tools, and so forth. The other pile was made up of bags of salt, nothing but salt. When all the goods had been set out, the traders moved half a day's journey away.

The Wangara, meanwhile, had been watching from the forest. As soon as the traders left, the Wangara came out of hiding. They set



The Wangara

some gold next to each pile of goods that they wanted. Then they crossed the river and hid again.

The traders then came back and looked at the gold. If they felt it was fair payment, they took the gold and went home. If they thought they should get more gold, they just went away. Then the Wangara came and set out more gold.

In this way, the Wangara and the traders would slowly work out a deal. After the traders had gone away with their gold, the Wangara took away their goods. They paid the most for salt.

Traders from Ghana once captured a

The Wangara

Wangara man. They tried to make him tell where the gold came from. He would not tell them. He went to his death without saying a word. And after that, the Wangara stopped bringing gold to the river. They were not seen again for three years. The traders learned their lesson from that. They went back to the old system of silent barter.

The Wangara poured gold into Ghana for hundreds of years. After Ghana fell, they traded with the kings of Mali. Eventually, however, they stopped coming out of the forest. To this day, no one knows who they were. No one knows where they got all that gold. The Wangara

The Wangara

were always somewhat like shadows. Now they have vanished from history entirely.

