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# **Visualizing Sarah Sophia Banks' African Coins**

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## Introduction: Sarah Sophia Banks, Collector

Sarah Sophia Banks (1744-1818), sister of Sir Joseph Banks, famed botanist and President of the Royal Society, was like her brother, an avid collector. Born on October 28, 1744, 1.5 years after her brother, Sarah Sophia spent much of her childhood and teenage years on the family's estate at Revesby Abby, Lincolnshire, where the Banks family grew up collecting antiquities and objects of natural history (Leis, *Sarah Sophia Banks: Femininity, Sociability and the Practice of Collecting* 9). While her brother's collections focused on specimens of natural history, Sarah Sophia collected printed ephemera and contemporary coins, tokens, and medals from around the world. Her collections, amassing to more than 30,000 objects, were presented to the British Museum upon her death in September, 1818, by Sir Joseph's wife, Lady Dorothea Banks. After working through her sizable collections, the curators at the British Museum donated 2,000 out of the 9,000 combined coins, medals, and tokens to the Royal Mint Museum, and a portion of her books and printed ephemera to the British Library.

While there is no record of when Sarah Sophia began collecting objects, two fashion plates from her collection of pocket-book imagery dated 1760 suggest she began collecting while she was a teenager (Leis, *Sarah Sophia Banks: Femininity, Sociability and the Practice of Collecting* 11). Later in life, her collections were heavily influenced by her brother's travels and collections of natural history. Between 1768 and 1771, Sarah Sophia corresponded with her brother regularly during his international travels aboard the *Endeavor Voyage*. He accompanied Captain James Cook on his first journey to the South Seas. As a natural scientist and botanist on the *Endeavor*, Sir Joseph collected natural specimens and descriptions of flora and fauna that astounded the scientific community when he returned home to England. Sir Joseph kept his collections from his journey which Sarah Sophia helped him organize throughout his life. After his marriage to Lady Dorothea Banks, he invited Sarah Sophia to live with him and his wife at their house at 32 Soho Square in 1777. Sarah Sophia never married and was drawn into the same elite circles as Sir Joseph, and, through her close relationship with her brother, was able to form her own connections in order to develop her collections of coins and printed ephemera, while supporting the organization of her brother's collections of natural history.

Although there are direct parallels between the collections of brother and sister, there has been very little analysis done on the connections between their collections. As

Anthony Pincott has noted, the “interwoven” lives of brother and sister makes their shared lives, interests, and collecting activities difficult to unravel and analyze together (3). Sarah Sophia's sizable collections, in particular, have only been noted occasionally and, with the exception of the scholarship by Arlene Leis and Catherine Eagleton, little research has been done on them. Leis notes, “The gift of Sarah Sophia’s collection to the British Museum was the largest and most varied collection of printed ephemera the museum had ever accepted. That it was a woman's collection rendered its acquisition all the more remarkable” (“Collecting Ephemera in Late Georgian England”). This fact, in itself, makes Sarah Sophia’s collection a fascinating and deserving object for further inquiry.

Sarah Sophia's collecting practice has often been gendered and overshadowed by her brother’s life and collections, but recent scholarship on Sarah Sophia has showcased the strategic manner of her collecting practice, as well as her distinct tastes and taxonomies (Leis, “Cutting Arranging, and Pasting, Sarah Sophia Banks as Collector”). Patricia Fara contends, Sarah Sophia “seems to have been a frustrated academic,” and “as an adult she was ridiculed for stuffing her pockets with books so that she would never be short of something to read” (15). Fara writes, “[h]ad she been a man, her inelegant clothes and studious demeanor would have been praised as signs of her intellectual aptitude. Instead, she was mocked for lacking the appropriate feminine graces” (15). Our goal with this project, then, is to move away from this trend of perceiving Sarah Sophia’s collection as somehow less significant or serious than Joseph Bank’s collections. We aim to answer the call by Leis to give Sarah Sophia’s collections the critical attention it deserves on its own for its unique perspective on the political and social life of her period.<sup>1</sup>

The size and dispersed nature of Sarah Sophia's collection makes it challenging to study. Eagleton notes that “one of the biggest challenges scholars face studying Sarah Sophia Banks’ is the quantity of the material—more than 9,000 coins and medals, and 19,000 prints” (24). Our digital project, *Exploring the Collections of Sarah Sophia Banks*,<sup>2</sup> focuses on two aspects of her collection: her African coins and her scrapbooks on hot air ballooning and other curiosities, with the goal of bringing more attention to her life, while creating an accessible, manageable, and interactive space for the study of the political and social worlds Sarah Sophia documented through her substantial collections.

## Sarah Sophia's Numismatic Collections

According to Eagleton, it appears that Sarah Sophia began collecting coins in “the mid-1780s, around the same time that her brother began to be involved in discussions about the UK coinage, through his membership of the Privy Council Committee on Coins” (26). On June 24, 1788, James Mario Matra sent a box of coins to Joseph Banks, along with a box of plants, local drugs, and a live bird. The coins were given to Sarah Sophia for her collections, and in another letter dated October 1789, Matra sent her an updated note on the coins with a corrected list of Arabic names for the coins he had sent her previously, indicating her interest in learning more about the coins themselves (Eagleton 26).

From 1791, Sarah Sophia kept a detailed list and arrangement of the coins she collected. This list included the provenance of more than 8,500 coins, tokens, and medals in her collection, acquired from 523 individuals, along with a separate list of coins she gave away or exchanged with individuals. For some of these individuals, she listed who these people were, making it easier to identify the contacts she drew from to compile her collection (Eagleton 26). During the last few years of her life, she reorganized these lists into eight volumes of coin catalogues. The volume numbers of the coin catalogues are arranged geographically, summarized below (Eagleton 26-29):

1. England, Scotland, Ireland
2. Holland, Germany
3. Denmark, Sweden, Russia, Poland, Prussia, Hungary, Italy
4. Switzerland, France, Spain, Portugal
5. Africa, Asia, America, Siege Pieces, Miscellaneous
6. Tokens
7. Medals
8. Coins<sup>3</sup>

The geographical arrangement of coins in the catalogues are subdivided by the rulers of a particular country, and include transcriptions of the coin's obverse and reverse sides with the currency values of each coin listed. Although this arrangement is now considered common, Eagleton notes this geographical arrangement of the coins was rather new for its time. The practice “had been for collectors to focus on classical coins and medals, and to arrange them alphabetically” (29).

Sarah Sophia's numismatic collections are of interest to us, since they focused on “contemporary material, and on coins struck for use outside Europe, including the new

coinages being struck in the UK for use in the colonies and trading posts of what was to become the British Empire" (Eagleton 29). According to Kim Sloan, Sarah Sophia's collections created "an ethnography of Britain with direct parallels to her brother's collection" (12). Leis argues that Sarah Sophia's coin collection "seems to have complemented her brother's dedication to reforming British coinage" (*Sarah Sophia Banks: Femininity, Sociability and the Practice of Collecting*, 11). Sarah Sophia's collection, however, remains distinct in its objects and formation. Neil Chambers argues that Joseph Banks's interest in coinage "derived from a formidable knowledge not only of their history but also of the contemporary economic and monetary arrangements of the realm" (117). Unique as a female collector of coins, a pursuit generally considered to be "for gentlemen and antiquaries" (Chambers 117), Sarah Sophia demonstrates through her collection not only her own "formidable knowledge" of the subject of coinage and antiquity but also her own perspective on the geopolitical structures of her time. In a letter dated August 1789, Joseph Banks wrote to Matthew Boulton, founder of the Soho Mint in Birmingham, that his sister's coin collection had become "very respectable" and that if he had any coin specimens in the way that he could share with her, he would not give them to an "ungrateful person" and that she was a "keen collector" of coins and her collections were in better arrangement than any he knew of (Eagleton 26). A note included in Volume 3 of her *Catalogue of Coins* also asks Sarah Sophia her opinion on the value of certain coinage (13). In this letter it is Sarah Sophia, not Joseph, who is cited as an authority on the subject of numismatics. Beyond this, her coin catalogue, in its structure, reads as a history of authority and political power explored through the collection of the world's money. Her unique geographical approach to the organization of coinage, noted by Eagleton to be new in Sarah Sophia's period and distinct from her brother's empirical strategies, reflects the geographical and cultural constructions of eighteenth and nineteenth century conceptions of global power and space (Eagleton 29). It is these geographical constructions that shape Sarah Sophia's collecting practice and organizational methods, which we explore through the digital mapping of a selection of her African coins.

## **Sarah Sophia's African Coins: Mapping the Personal onto the Global**

Sarah Sophia's collection, as a whole, is international in scope. According to Leis, "[i]t maps a personal geography onto the geography of nations and reflects personal exchanges with members of Europe's social, intellectual and political elites" (*Sarah Sophia Banks: Femininity, Sociability and the Practice of Collecting* 249). This mapping of the personal or familiar onto the global is particularly apparent in her coin

collection's organization of global currency. It is this pattern of placing the unfamiliar within the context of the familiar that is behind the organizational structure of Sarah Sophia's numismatic collection. Sarah Sophia's cataloging of coins attempts to organize the world in a drawer, making the world large, but also quite small, in terms of the whole collection's organization by country of issue and use, and then subdivided by authority (Eagleton 29). Her collection's "organization upholds nationalistic borders," while at the same time seems to mimic "a larger world within which different national cultures interact and overlap" (Leis, *Sarah Sophia Banks: Femininity, Sociability and the Practice of Collecting* 249).

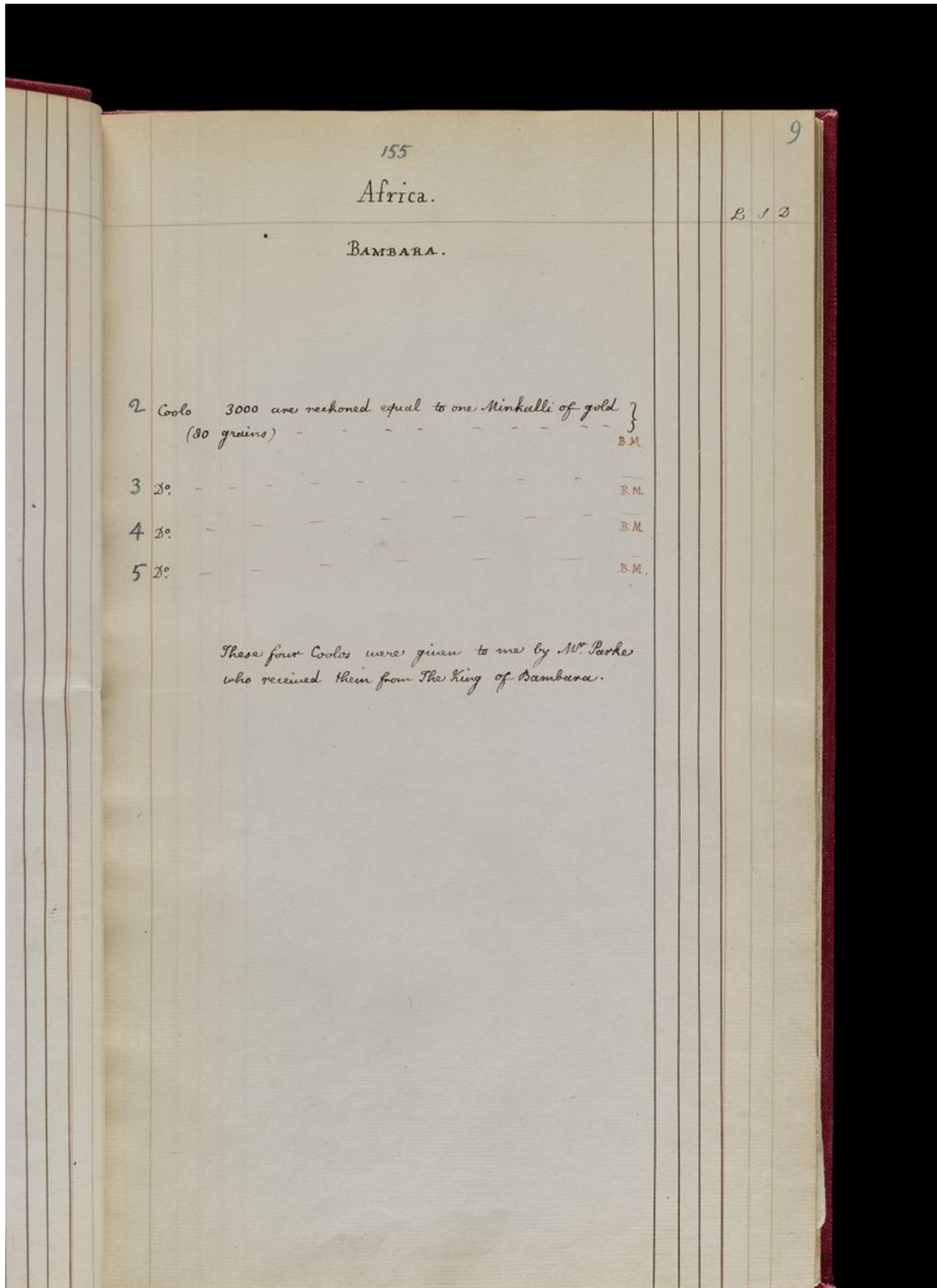
Sarah Sophia's collection of African coins, in particular, illustrates a distinct overlapping perspective on the history and politics of African coinage. At the time of Sarah Sophia's collecting, amid the whirl of the anti-slavery movement, the question of commerce with Africa had taken a center stage (Coleman 13). Globally-minded eighteenth-century Europeans inscribed "on the tabula rasa of the African continent" and backed expeditions, like that of Scottish explorer, Mungo Park's travels of West Africa to explore the relatively unknown interior of the continent (Coleman 15), where the aims of commerce and civilization collided (Coleman 16). Coins and paper money were made in European style and were introduced into sub-Saharan Africa in the late eighteenth century (Eagleton and Williams 194). Eagleton and Johnathan Williams note that the imagery on these forms of African currency "reflects European interests" (194). The form and character of African currency later changed during the consolidation of European rule in the late nineteenth century and the African independence (Eagleton and Williams 194). While much writing about European encounters with the economic practices of places like Africa is tinged with racism and notions of primitivism, today these practices have been examined for their advanced integration into particular patterns of social development (Eagleton and Williams 207). Collecting African coins took part in a larger history of Europe's fascination with monetary practices in regions that did not use coinage (Eagleton and Williams 196-197), such as West Africa's cowry shells that were used as currency, and were later imported by Europeans in vast quantities to trade for slaves and other goods across the continent.

Within Sarah Sophia's coin collection are four of West Africa's cowry shells from the Kingdom of Bambara that were gifted to Sarah Sophia by Mungo Park after his return from his travels to Africa (Figure 1). The African coinage in Sarah Sophia's collection exists in a curious space between Africa and Europe. As Sophie Mew notes, examining the coinage of West Africa illustrates some of the difficulties Europeans faced when

attempting to control African currency; the European monetary systems were met with a range of responses by the people of Africa, everything from curiosity to resistance (198). With the exception of the four cowry shells gifted to Sarah Sophia by Mungo Park, the African coins in Sarah Sophia's collection reflect, as Eagleton and Williams point out, European interest and design. The African coin collection, therefore, is highly symbolic, not of African monetary practices, but of the European imperial and commercial interest in Africa. Our mapping of Sarah Sophia's African coinage explores these complexities of European and economic interest in Africa, while leaving room for the examination of Sarah Sophia's unique collecting practice, and geographical and categorical organization of coins.



Figure 1: Sarah Sophia Banks's four cowry shells gifted to her from Mungo Park, page 9. The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.





## Mapping Sarah Sophia Banks's African Coins

Sarah Sophia organized her coinage by the type of coin "with each register containing a group of geographically and culturally linked countries" (Barrett 70). Eagleton notes the arrangement of the African coins and tokens, "as elsewhere in the collection, is geographical, running anticlockwise around the coast of Africa, beginning with Madeira, then listing two British colonies in West Africa (Sierra Leone and the island of Bulama), Angola, and Mauritius (off the South-East coast). From there, the sequence jumps to the West African kingdom of Bambara (Figure 2), inland, and ends with the North African coins" (29-30). In our map of Sarah Sophia's African coinage, we have plotted a sample of these African coins in the anticlockwise ordering of the coins reflected in Sarah Sophia's catalogue, with network lines drawn connecting the coins' location of authority to their place of issue and use. By displaying these connections on the map in the order of Sarah Sophia's coin collection, we can visualize how significant Sarah Sophia's unique geographical organization of coins were in portraying these monetary networks of power.

Developed by the Scholar's Lab at the University of Virginia Library, Neatline (<http://neatline.org>) is a geotemporal exhibit builder and plug-in for the Omeka platform that allows for the creation of timelines and "complex maps, image annotations, and narrative sequences from Omeka collections of archives and artifacts" ("Neatline"). In selecting tools for building our digital map of Sarah Sophia's African coinage, we chose Neatline and Omeka because of their flexibility and multimodal approaches to presenting geospatial and temporal information. In our map, we've included annotations from Sarah Sophia's coin catalogues, digital images of the coins, and two layers of georeferenced historical maps of Africa from the 18th century. The first georeferenced historical map we included was Samuel Bolton's 1787 map of Africa from the David Rumsey Historical Map collection. This map<sup>4</sup> illustrates all of the states, republics, kingdoms, and regions of Africa, as they were understood to be located in the late eighteenth-century, including the Kingdom of Bambara, where Mungo Park acquired the four cowry shells he gifted to Sarah Sophia. One of the major challenges we ran into while mapping Sarah Sophia's African coins was locating obscure places like the Kingdom of Bambara. While we know the Bambara Empire was located in Mali and was based at Ségou, there were a number of other cities under its control, including Timbuktu, Bla, Djenne, and Mopti, making it almost impossible to know the exact location where Mungo Park acquired the coins from the Kingdom of Bambara.

In order to place the kingdom in as precise a location as possible with the information provided to us, we examined where explorers thought the Kingdom of Bambara was situated and georeferenced Samuel Bolton's 1787 map of Africa using Map Warper, developed by Tim Waters. We then uploaded the georeferenced historical map to our Neatline exhibit, which uses the standard Web Map Service (WMS) protocol to present the georeferenced map. Due to projection issues and a lack of information about the historical map's proportions and actual size, some geographic accuracy had to be sacrificed for legibility. As David Rumsey and Meredith Williams in "Historical Maps in GIS," have discussed regarding the challenges around georeferencing, it is "almost impossible to perfectly align an old map to modern coordinate systems because mapping methods before the age of aerial photography often only very imprecisely represented scale, angle, distance, and direction" (4-5). In addition to these technical challenges, much of the world was still uncharted territory at this time. Cartographers in the age of early modern mapmaking created maps by gathering information from triangulation methods and the drawings of explorers.<sup>5</sup>

Although the exact location of the Kingdom of Bambara is difficult to determine, the georeferenced version of Samuel Bolton's 1787 Map of Africa (Figure 3) indicates it was located within the Tombouctou Region not far from the capital, Timbuktu. The georeferenced map and the contemporary GIS map of Africa today offers us a lens through which to examine the possibilities of the Kingdom of Bambara's location. Turning, now, to the Angola coins, we will demonstrate a similar process of mapping locations based upon comparisons between another historical map of Africa and today's contemporary GIS map of Africa.







migration went to Brazil” with the “boom of the gold fields” bringing “further demands for slave labor from African sources” (895). Along with the traditional sources on the Upper and Lower Guinea coast, Angola met the increasing demand for slave labor (895). While Sarah Sophia does not list these details about Angola and Brazil, she carefully lists the sections on the Angola coins under their authority and place of issue, Portugal. As Eagleton notes:

the coins in these sections are carefully listed, with each country’s coins arranged first by monarch, in date order of their reigns; then by metal, with gold preceding silver, and then copper; then in descending order of their denominations. This organization of information reiterates the importance to Sarah Sophia of the authority issuing the coins, and links to her cataloguing of coins under their place of issue, not their place of use, since the coins of Angola were issued specifically for that country, in the name of the Portuguese King (31).

With a number of the North African coins in Sarah Sophia’s catalogue, however, we see the authority behind the issue of the coin move beyond Europe and into places like Morocco. Sarah Sophia’s focus on contemporary material and her progressive classificatory strategies makes her collection stand out, and her collection of African coinage, which we have mapped, represent her involvement in “a period when European powers were just beginning to explore and to trade with African peoples” (Eagleton 29).<sup>7</sup> In our map (Figure 5), we have visualized the coins in her collection based on Sarah Sophia’s geographical ordering of African coins in her coin catalogues. Using the metadata that she provides about the coins, we can see a network of geographical data surrounding Sarah Sophia’s African coinage that highlights the ways that Sarah Sophia’s organizational strategy reflected not only her desire to map the personal onto the global, but also the manner in which her catalogue shaped her understanding of the distribution of money during the growing British Empire’s shifting geopolitical landscape.

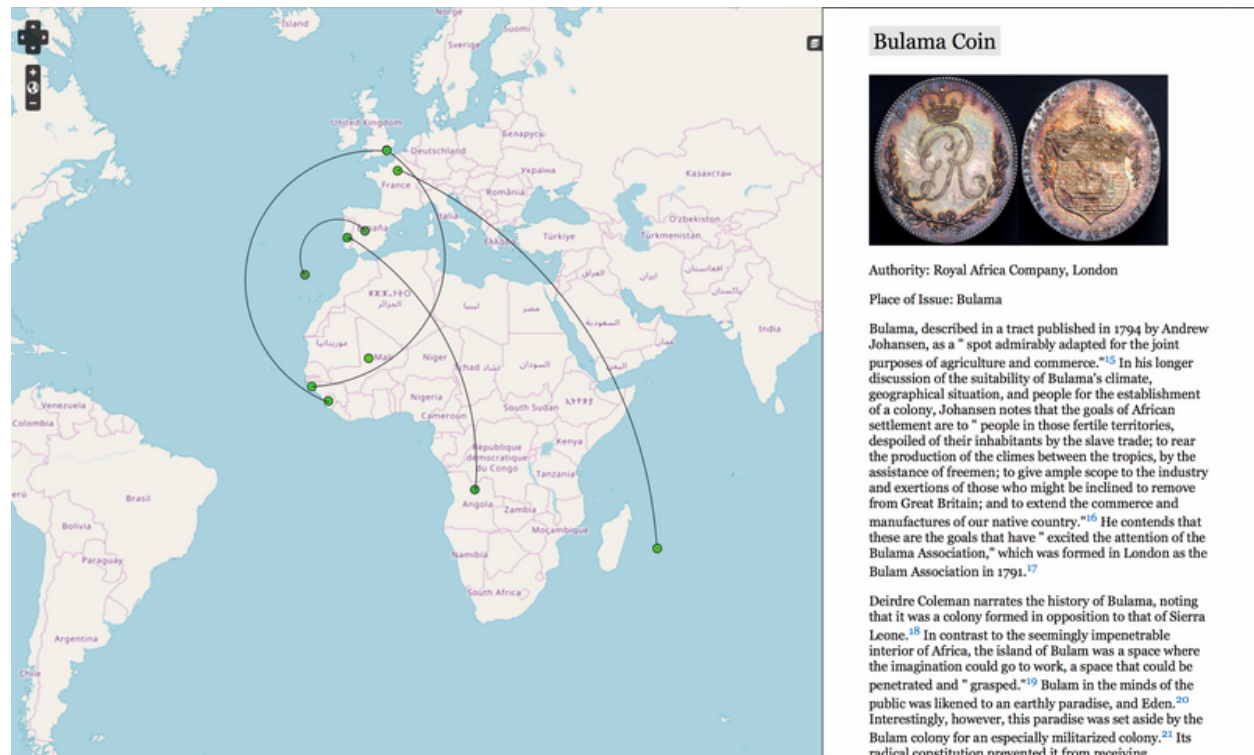


Figure 5: [Mapping Sarah Sophia Banks's African Coins](#)

## What our Map Illustrates

By placing images of the coins on the map and providing georeferenced historical maps of Africa from the eighteenth century for comparison, we can analyze Sarah Sophia's African coin collection through a multi-dimensional lens afforded by a digital platform. Not only can one see the digitized images of the coins we have gathered from the British Museum and the Royal Mint, one can also scroll through them in the same geographical anti-clockwise order that Sarah Sophia organized and listed her coins in her catalogues and intended for users to learn more about them. Drawing attention between the coin's authority to their place of issue, we can see a visual network of Sarah Sophia's metadata within her collections. Additionally, we have been able to make a difficult-to-understand collection of coins more accessible through displaying the information as Sarah Sophia recorded it in her coin catalogues. While the map we have created is one interpretation of the material at hand and illustrates our specific goals of making her coin collections and her catalogues more accessible, it ultimately enables her collection to be viewed and studied in new ways.

Sarah Sophia built her collection of African coins amid the larger historical context of global interest and colonial development in Africa, and her taxonomies within her coin catalogues transcribe for us these changes over time. As Katy Barrett notes, coins are

"objects on which histories are written" (64). Coins were initially seen and classified as written documents (Barrett 65). Sarah Sophia "annotated her [catalogue] entries with comments about find sites, provenance, and related anecdotes" and her categorical strategies are in contrast to those of George III, another significant coin collector of this time period (Barrett 72). In her coin catalogues, one can see that Sarah Sophia privileges the place of England first and then arranges coins by "country of production, date, subject matter, maker, and so on," a metadata structure that "has obvious parallels with the ways in which we use database fields today" (Barrett 72).

Sarah Sophia's unique organizational structure is manifest beyond her coin catalogue; it is apparent in other parts of her collection, from her scrapbooks on various subjects to her catalogue of Joseph's and her collections and libraries. In all of these instances, her cataloguing practice grows and adapts with her collections, and it includes metadata about the objects she acquires as she learns more about them. Her catalogues, far from being static objects, show the practice of collecting to be a continual process of knowledge accumulation and a means of processing and working through information.

Using GIS mapping tools, we have been able to provide a more visual and geographical means for exploring the networks of power at work in Sarah Sophia's coin collection, while analyzing how a woman like Sarah Sophia thought about and organized her world and collections. Barrett, in her discussion of Sarah Sophia Banks's coin collection, brings us to the conversation of how modern databases and metadata might provide us with means for exploring and visualizing collections in new ways. With this map, we hope to open the door for further analysis of women's numismatic collecting, the relationship of numismatics to the expanding British Empire, and the role of women in curating and collecting objects on a global scale.

## **Sarah Sophia Banks & Digital Humanities: Future Directions**

The scope and organization of Sarah Sophia's collections readily lend themselves to digital humanities research. Since Sarah Sophia was curating and cataloguing her collections at a time where vast amounts of information were suddenly available, much of her cataloguing and collecting process is engaged in the act of information processing. While our map is still a work in progress as we seek out further funding for digitization of her coins in her collections, our map allows us to begin sorting through these vast collections of knowledge, while bringing more attention to Sarah Sophia's life and work.

Recent work on GIS for numismatics speaks to the potential for digital tools like GIS in the study of Sarah Sophia Banks's collections. Markus Breier states, "[h]istoric geoinformation systems demonstrate impressively the power and usefulness of geoinformatics and cartography for research in the humanities as well as for the visualization and communication of their scientific findings. Browsing, analyzing, and viewing data by their location and attributes simultaneously—as can be done with geographic information systems—offers new possibilities to historians and other experts from various disciplines" (171). Some of these possibilities include unprecedented access to material, as well as the ability to make visible the ways that catalogues like that of Sarah Sophia Banks processed and categorized information. According to Donatella Calabi in "[t]he role of digital visualization for the history of the city," GIS can help us better understand and represent transformations of space and networks (7). She notes, "the digital representations communicate scholarly research in a way that has adaptability for a range of users with varying skills and interests – students, scholars, museum visitors, tourists, and citizens as well as people from different generations, from small children to the elderly in search of their past" (7). Through GIS, we can move beyond studying the coins as isolated objects and view them as a network of data that spans space and time.

By utilizing different digital tools, we hope to continue "collecting and recording data, disseminating information, explaining processes, and engaging students at all levels in new kinds of learning" (Bruzelius 15). In addition to studying Sarah Sophia's coin collections, our future research includes studying her printed ephemera, particularly her scrapbook on ballooning. Housed in the British Library, this ballooning scrapbook presents the mania for the hot air balloon during the eighteenth century from the perspective of a female collector intimately connected with the voyages of discovery championed by Sir Joseph Banks. Additionally, it demonstrates an intense interest and investment in the sensational that broadens the scope of our understanding of science in the life of the public during this period of growing specialization, highlighting the function of spectacle and performance in the pursuit of improvement, progress, and national identity. Through displaying not only her coin collection, but also portions of her scrapbooks, we hope to ultimately demonstrate the relevance of her collections, in its organization and content, as well as its relationship to modern information processing and media culture. Across the various aspects of her collection, from her coins, to her scrapbooks, and other printed ephemera, one can trace a theme of interest in not only print culture, but also metadata and information access to and engagement in historical events, and, most importantly, in the objects and subjects of



public interest themselves. It is this interest that the methods and means offered to us by digital humanities research can be of particular value and which we hope to continue to explore.

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## Footnotes

1. See Leis, "Cutting, Arranging, and Pasting," 128, 129; see also Susan Pearce *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, London: Routledge, 1995: to understand collections like that of Sarah Sophia Banks is to understand social life as a whole (3). [↵](#)
2. <https://www.sarahsophiabanks.com> [↵](#)
3. Layout borrowed from Eagleton, "Collecting African Money," p. 26-30. [↵](#)
4. David Rumsey Historical Map Collection  
<https://www.davidrumsey.com/maps2522.html> [↵](#)
5. This section draws from three sources:  
[http://academic.emporia.edu/aberjame/map/h\\_map/h\\_map.htm](http://academic.emporia.edu/aberjame/map/h_map/h_map.htm), Rumsey, David and Meredith Williams, "Historical Maps in GIS," *Past Time, Past Place GIS for History*, ed. Anne Kelly Knowles. ESRI: 2002. pp. 1-18., and  
<http://wiki.gis.com/wiki/index.php/Triangulation> [↵](#)
6. For information on the relationship of imperialism and cartography in the European vision of Africa, see Jeffrey C. Stone, "Imperialism, Colonialism, and Cartography," *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers*, vol. 13, num. 1 (1988) pp. 57-64. [↵](#)
7. For more information on Arabic trade, exploration, and imperialism in Eastern Africa, see Richard D. Wolff, "British Imperialism and the East African Slave trade," *Science and Society* vol. 36, num. 4, (1972); Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices and Ivory in Zanzibar*, Ohio University Press, 1987; Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (African Studies Series, 67), Cambridge University Press, 1990. [↵](#)