

Africa in History

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The African Origins of History

Human history began, of course, in Africa. Barely more than 50,000 years ago, the ancestors of every single human being alive today lived in Africa. World history to that point *was* African history. That is now becoming accepted knowledge. What seems less generally understood is that, just because a few Africans left the continent around 50,000 years ago and began to expand across the rest of the globe, history did not halt in Africa. The Africans who stayed behind in our common ancestral continent did not fall out of time into some kind of ahistorical stasis. They passed through the same big developments of human history, and did so *in the same broad periods of time*, as people elsewhere in the world.

The transformative shift in our ancestors to fully human intellectual and social capacities took place between 90,000 and 60,000 years ago. Human history began at that time, and it began in Africa. Earlier, by around 200,000 years ago, hominins in Africa developed many modern anatomical features,ⁱ and sometime before 100,000 BP, in a period of interglacial climates, expanded their range from Africa to include adjacent warm-climate areas of the Levant. But this intrusion did not last. By around 70,000 years ago, when colder conditions returned, the cold-adapted Neanderthal hominins once again dominated this region, and the “anatomically modern” populations had disappeared. The contrast of this history with human expansions after 50,000 BP could not be starker. Despite Ice-Age conditions, fully modern humans of that later time advanced right across the eastern hemisphere within a relatively few thousand years, even into

periglacial climes. Neanderthal and other hominin populations everywhere eventually became extinct in the face of the advance of fully modern humans.

Clearly, a transformative evolutionary shift took place among in Africa between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago. What was the crucial shift? A recent study gives the answer.ⁱⁱ Critical anatomical changes in the vocal tract, allowing the articulation of the full range of sounds essential to human language, first appeared between 100,000 and 50,000. The crucial changeover was the development two sound-producing cavities of relatively equal length—the mouth cavity with the tongue, and the throat passage with the vocal cords—with the throat passage extending downward, fully perpendicular to the back of the mouth cavity. This feature is lacking in all other primates, including the anatomically modern humans of Africa and the Levant of 100,000 years. Among fully modern humans, language is everywhere the fundamental tool for creating and sustaining wider networks of relationship and thus community. The social and cooperative units of Neanderthals were very small, basically little more than nuclear families. The evolution of the full language capacity, in allowing early fully modern humans to form significantly larger cooperative and habitation groups, was perhaps the prime advantage of our common fully human ancestors over all other hominin species.

Archaeological finds point to the eastern side of the continent as the zone of the emergence of the mental and imaginative capacities that all modern humans share. In those parts of Africa, major new developments in tools, adornment, symbolic expression, and social relations took shape between 90,000 and 55,000 BCE. These include the making of deliberately fashioned bone tools in East Africa; shell beads in southern and eastern Africa; and very small backed stone blades, earliest in southern Africa but later also in East Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ A striking signature of the emergence of the capacities of imagination and thought like those of modern

humans was the making of the earliest symbolic representations, in the form of markings engraved in ochre, dating to 77,000 years ago in South Africa. Another signal development by the period was the exchange of valued kinds of stone or other goods over distance, indicative of the emergence of social relations of reciprocity and formal procedures for cooperation between otherwise separate communities.^{iv}

By 50,000 BP humans were ready to embark on another new direction of history, spreading out from Africa into other parts of the world. Two initial outward movements may have taken place, one along now submerged southern Asian coasts and one across Sinai into the Middle East, branching westward toward Europe and east across Asia.

The First Great Transition

For 35,000 years human beings, wherever they spread in the world, continued to be gatherers and hunters of wild food. Then, separately in different parts of the world, the climatic shifts at the end of the latest Ice Age set off a long episodic “First Great Transition” of human history, from foraging to food production—from the gathering and hunting of wild food to the deliberate tending and protection of animals and plants.

The initial warming of climate in the Bølling-Allerød interstadial, 12,700-10,900 BCE, brought increased rainfall and warmer conditions in many African regions. Three sets of peoples, speaking languages of the three language families that predominate across the continent today, probably began their early expansions in this period. Nilo-Saharan peoples spread out in the areas around and east of the middle Nile River in what is today the country of Sudan. Peoples of a second family, Niger-Kordofanian, spread across an emerging east-west belt of savanna vegetation from the eastern Sudan to the western Atlantic coast of Africa. In the same

era, communities speaking languages of the Erythraic branch of the Afrasian (Afroasiatic) family expanded beyond their origin areas in the Horn of Africa, northward to modern-day Egypt.^v

This last point needs special emphasis, considering how widespread the notion is that the Afrasian family somehow originated in the Middle East. The linguistic, genetic, and archaeological evidence combine in locating the origins of this family far south in Africa, in Eritrea or Ethiopia, and not at all in Asia.^{vi} A complex array of lexical evidence confirms that the proto-Afrasian society belonged to the pre-agricultural eras of human history.^{vii}

The return of colder, drier conditions in the Younger Dryas, 10,900-9500 BCE, set off a new round of subsistence innovation, before fully post-glacial conditions took hold in the tenth millennium BCE. In a few areas of the world people began the first protecting of plants or animals, in this fashion laying the earliest foundations for agriculture. The rise of agriculture after 9500 BCE, separately and independently in different parts of the world, quantitatively transformed the directions of human history. The deliberate tending of plants and animals multiplies by magnitudes the amounts of food potentially obtainable from the same amount of land. The growth of human populations from a few hundred thousand to billions, social stratification, urban life, states, and the development of complex technologies all rest on the development of agricultural sources of food. In Africa peoples of two distant parts of the continent's middle belt independently set in motion developments leading toward agriculture.

In the tenth millennium in the savannas of modern-day Mali, communities speaking early daughter languages of proto-Niger-Congo, itself an offshoot of the Niger-Kordofanian family, began to intensively collect wild grains, among them probably fonio. Their Ounjougou culture is the earliest identified facies of the West African Microlithic,^{viii} the archaeological complex associated with the early Niger-Congo peoples.^{ix} Integral to their new subsistence system was

their invention of the earliest ceramic technology in world history, between 10,000 and 9500 BCE. Rather than grinding whole grains into flour, the Ounjougou people apparently made the whole grains edible by cooking them in pots.

When did the shift from gathering to the cultivation of grains begin among Niger-Congo peoples? The archaeobotanical evidence is as yet unknown for the crucial periods. Provisional reconstructions of several early Niger-Congo verbs specifically connoting cultivation suggest, however, that the transition from collecting to cultivating grains in the grassland savannas of West Africa took place broadly in the period 9000-6000 BCE.^x Black-eyed peas and African groundnuts (*Vigna subterranea*) may have been early cultivated plants along with grains. Niger-Congo peoples certainly domesticated them fairly early because they were among the crops the earliest Bantu took with them into the equatorial rainforests after 3000 BCE.^{xi}

West African agricultural history entered a new stage around the sixth millennium BCE, with the cultivation of two new crops, Guinea yams and oil palms. The technological signature of this development, I would argue, was the adding of polished stone axes to the West African Microlithic toolkit.^{xii} The new crops and tools opened the way for communities of the Benue-Kwa branch of Niger-Congo to spread between 5000 and 3000 BCE into the rainforest zones of West Africa, from modern-day Côte d'Ivoire to Cameroon. With polished stone axes they could clear forest for raising yams and oil palms, both of which require direct sunlight.^{xiii} An additional technological innovation probably dating to this period was the invention by the Benue-Kwa of broadlooms for weaving raffia-cloth. After 3000 BCE one offshoot of the Benue-Kwa group, the Bantu, carried the yam-based variety of West African agriculture farther southward and eastward through the equatorial rainforests of central Africa.

Far to the east, the Northern Sudanians, a Nilo-Saharan people of the southern eastern Sahara, took a very different first step toward agriculture. In the mid-tenth millennium BCE, a belated shift to wetter conditions spread Mediterranean climate, with cool-season rains and Mediterranean wild animals, most notably the cow, south to the middle of the Sahara. Contemporaneously, tropical grassland and steppe environments advanced north to the middle of the Sahara. The Northern Sudanians, following the climatic shift northward, encountered cattle at the interface of the two climatic regimes and, between 8500 and 7200 BCE, initiated the earliest herding of cattle in world history.^{xiv} Like the Ounjougou people 2500 kilometers to the west, they collected wild grains but, differently, they ground their grain into flour.

Around 7200 BCE a new development appeared in the eastern Saharan archaeology: neighborhoods of substantial homesteads, with thornbush cattle pens, round houses, and grain storage pits, and with sorghum as the notable grain.^{xv} The linguistic evidence in this case strongly backs the possibility, suggested by the presence of granaries, that the Northern Sudanians of this era had begun part-time cultivation of some crops, such as sorghum, along with continued collection of grains as well. They had important contacts, too, with the contemporary Afrasian communities immediately east of them in the Red Sea Hills region. These communities spoke early daughter dialects of the proto-Cushitic language. In the second half of the seventh millennium, the northernmost Cushites, ancestral to the modern-day Beja (the Medjay of the ancient Egyptians), were the intermediaries in the diffusion of sheep from the Middle East to their Northern Sudanian neighbors. Even earlier, the Cushites began, like the Northern Sudanians, to raise cattle, and they either collected or cultivated sorghum.^{xvi}

The Northern Sudanians of the ninth millennium, along with a probably closely related set of Nilo-Saharan peoples, whom the archaeologist J. E. G. Sutton called the “Aquatic

Civilization of Middle Africa,” participated also in a second African establishment of ceramic technology. The Aquatic societies responded in a different fashion to the mid-ninth-millennium climatic amelioration. They became specialist fishing and hippopotamus-hunting peoples along the new rivers and lakes of the Sahara, and in the later ninth millennium they spread this economy westward across the southern Sahara.

Drier climates in the mid-Holocene then shrank many Saharan streams and lakes, shifting the balance of advantage away from the Aquatic communities. As a result, in the sixth millennium the descendants of the Northern Sudanians spread their agripastoral economy across the southern Sahara, displacing or assimilating many of the Aquatic communities. Where perennial water resources existed, such as along the Nile, the Aquatic livelihood persisted, but combined now with herding and probably cultivation. The inhabitants of the Khartoum Neolithic site of 5000 BCE along the Nile participated in a particularly notable invention, of cotton textile technology, attested by their possession of spindlewhorls.^{xvii}

As with ceramic technology, here also African societies were leaders in innovation in the early agricultural eras. The history of cotton teaches a striking lesson, as well—that peoples with no knowledge whatsoever of each other can and do arrive at parallel inventions. The domestication of cotton as a fiber plant for textile production took place separately in three distant parts of the globe: the eastern Sudan of Africa, India, and the New World. In each region the inventors of cotton weaving domesticated their own indigenous species of cotton. The evidence from Khartoum places this development as early in Africa as in India.

The Era of Agricultural Elaboration, 6500-3500 BCE

Parallel to trends in other world regions of early agriculture, so also in Africa the period 6500-3500 BCE was a time of growth in the variety and proportional contribution of agriculture to the diet. As already noted, the Niger-Congo farmers brought two savanna legumes, the African groundnut (*Vigna subterranea*) and the black-eyed pea (*V. unguiculata*), into cultivation during this time. The Sudanic agripastoralists of the southern Sahara and the Sahel added melons and gourds of several varieties to their original emphasis on sorghum, and also began raising castor beans, spreading these crops to ancient Egypt by or before the third millennium BCE. Niger-Congo farmers and Sudanic agripastoralists appear to have separately domesticated an additional major grain crop, pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*). In the Ethiopian highlands reconstructed early farming lexicon reveals that the Cushites during this time began to supplement their stock raising with two highland African grain crops, finger millet and t'ef and probably a variety of gourds and calabashes.^{xviii}

The seventh to fourth millennium BCE was also a period of world history in which crops and animals domesticated in one or another seminal region of agriculture first spread to other such world regions. In Africa between 6500 and 4000 BCE, Cushitic peoples domesticated the donkey, native to the Red Sea Hills and the arid foothills of the northern Ethiopian highlands.^{xix} Donkeys then spread via Egypt to the Middle East, where they became the earliest important beasts of burden. Sheep and goats, as noted, spread the opposite direction even earlier, in the second half of the seventh millennium, and rapidly became important animals in the Sudanic and Cushitic agripastoral traditions. From the Sudanic herders both goats and cattle spread west to the Niger-Congo societies of West Africa, again at a still uncertain period, but certainly well before 3000 BCE. An early crop of the Sudanic agripastoralist tradition, sorghum, may have

spread equally early to the Niger-Congo cultivators. African groundnuts and black-eyed peas diffused the other way, from Niger-Congo farmers to their Sudanic and Cushitic counterparts, reaching as far as northern Kenya by the third millennium BCE.

An especially interesting historical problem far from being solved is the question of how three important grain crops domesticated in Africa, sorghum, pearl millet, and finger millet, reached India between 3000 and 1000 BCE,^{xx} without passing through the Middle East first. Sorghum spread still farther eastward, becoming a major crop of northern Chinese agriculture. Might seagoing trade have already connected northwestern Africa and India by that time?

What may surprise is that Egypt was not an initiating region of these seminal developments. The indigenous Afrasian communities of the Egyptian Nile in the seventh millennium were still hunter-gathers. They gradually transformed their subsistence economy by adopting two staple crops, barley and wheat, along with sheep and goats from the Middle Eastern center of domestication. Melons, gourds, and donkeys reached them from the Sudanic agripastoralists to the south; surprisingly, cotton did not. Word borrowings in ancient Egyptian, along with recent archaeological discoveries, confirm that Sudanic herders also significantly influenced Egyptian beliefs and practices relating to cattle.^{xxi}

The Second Great Transition: The African beginnings of urban centers and states

By the fifth millennium BCE, the growing variety and productivity of agriculture brought about a growth in the size and density of human populations, such that a Second Great Transition, from villages and tiny local political units to towns and states, began to take place in several world regions. Historians have long identified Egypt as an early locus of this transition in the African continent. But because of the dominant Western idea of Egyptian exceptionalism,

what historians have often not recognized is that the formative area of ancient Egyptian culture, southern Upper Egypt, was the *northern* outlier of a wider nexus of emerging complexity in the fourth millennium. Pre-dynastic Upper Egypt of the fourth millennium BCE did have encounters at a distance with a separate nexus of town and state development centered on the Fertile Crescent. But the origins of the cultural and political world we identify as ancient Egypt, as recent archaeological discoveries reveal, grew out of institutions and ideas already present among their Nilo-Saharan neighbors in the fifth and early fourth millennia BCE. The southern eastern Sahara and eastern Sudan, though greatly neglected relative to Egypt by scholars, continued to be the locus of towns and cities and powerful states from the third millennium BCE right down to recent centuries.

The first evidence of emerging complexity in the fifth millennium appeared not along the Nile itself, but in the then steppe country west of northern Lower Nubia. Three hundred kilometers from the river, the inhabitants of Nabta Playa erected an extensive megalithic archaeoastronomical array. The associated burials, of both cattle and people, reveal a wealthy pastoral society, with a complex ritual basis, in existence centuries before similar complexity in Upper Egypt.^{xxii}

A further progression toward social and political complexity followed in the fourth millennium BCE, this time along the Nile itself, with states and the first towns appearing between the Nile-Abbay confluence in the south and southern Upper Egypt in the north. Town life along the river grew in importance, even as the drying of the Sahara in fourth millennium brought the Nabta Playa culture to an end. Because of the relative archaeological neglect of Nubia, just two excavated sites, Shaheinab and Qustul, provide most of our knowledge of this era south of Egypt. The two towns lay respectively at the far northern and far southern ends of a

thousand-kilometer stretch of cultural commonality along the Nile. On sites of ritual importance the people of this Middle Nile culture built large conical earthen mounds, reshaped since then by rain and wind into more formless-seeming tumuli. Ritual sites of this type represent a very long-lived cultural and political tradition, lasting in some cases down to recent centuries.

Qustul was the capital of wealthy kings from the mid-fourth millennium BCE up almost to the unification of Egypt late in the millennium. Like the earlier Nabta Playa pastoralist sites, the Qustul sites include numerous cattle burials. Pictorial documents in the royal graves explicitly depict the kings of the Qustul state as having conquered Upper Egypt. There is no *a priori* reason to reject these claims. If one sets aside the received notion of Egyptian exceptionalism, it is quite evident, as the archaeologist Bruce Williams argues, that here was a kingdom every bit as significant as its late pre-dynastic contemporaries in Upper Egypt.^{xxiii}

Behind the rise of the highly centralized kingship of dynastic Egypt may have been an additional factor, the adoption in late pre-dynastic Upper Egypt of elements of the rituals and royal ideology of the Qustul kingdom. Early Egyptian royal tombs, before the shift to pyramid building in stone, were covered with a conical mound of earth, mimicking the practice known as early as the fourth millennium in Nubia and still prevalent 2000 years later in the kingdoms to the south. These outward resemblances accompany resemblances in ideology as well, from the special ritual significance accorded cattle to the claims of both Sudanic and Egyptian kings to a degree of personal sacredness unparalleled in the Middle East. Did Upper Egyptian rulers build their power in the later fourth millennium BCE by adopting legitimizing ideas from Nabta Playa and Qustul? The outward signs, at least, are not inconsistent that proposal.

Two notable kingdoms persisted in Nubia through the Old Kingdom period. The more powerful state, Kerma, ruled the Dongola Reach in Upper Nubia and probably other lands farther

south. The great fortifications at Buhen in Lower Nubia, built by the rulers of the Middle Kingdom, 2040-1700, after their conquest of the northern Sai kingdom, suggest an Egyptian concern with the potential threat from Kerma farther south. The placement of Kerma's capital at the northern end of its territories, closest to Egypt, may imply a similar concern in Kerma about Egypt, or simply that the kings wish to situate their court to better oversee and control trade with Egypt. The massive royal funerary sites at Kerma city give a sense of the power of this kingdom at its height. But as almost the sole excavations relating to the Kerma state, they leave us little idea of urban life more generally in Kerma and no knowledge of how much farther south Kerma's power might have extended.

In the late 1500s Thutmose I accomplished something new, a conquest that extended Egyptian power into the Dongola Reach between the third and fourth cataracts and imposed a thoroughgoing colonial rule over the region. A common historical presumption is that this conquest destroyed the Kerma kingdom. But was that the case? With the decline of Egyptian power in Dongola Reach in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, many features of material culture reminiscent of Kerma's high era re-emerged in the archaeological record. Somewhere to the south, beyond the reach of Egyptian rule, the political and cultural traditions of Kerma apparently persisted.

In the ninth century BCE there arose south of Egypt a new major kingdom, called *Kush* by Egyptians. Historians today give this kingdom two names, Napata during the period up to the sixth century when its capital was at Napata city on the Dongola Reach, and Meroe after the sixth century, when the capital shifted to the southern city of Meroe. Around 750 in the reign of Piye, Napata conquered Egypt, and Piye's successors ruled large parts of Egypt for much of the

next hundred years. The future capital, Meroe city, already existed in the seventh century and surely lay within its southern territories.

The Western scholarly tradition of Egyptian exceptionalism obscures a startling fact. Piye's immediate successors ruled over an empire probably larger in territory than native Egyptian kings ever did, even at the height of the New Kingdom. In Egypt they tailored their religious relations and political propaganda to appeal to their Egyptian subjects, and for their efforts got recognition, from the parochial perspective of the Egyptians, as Egypt's twenty-fifth dynasty. From the record they left behind in Egypt, it is nevertheless evident that the Napata-Meroe rulers understood themselves as ethnically different and were not hesitant to represent themselves as such in royal art. Nor were they hesitant to make changes in the relations of political to religious power, with lasting effects even after Egypt regained its independence in the seventh century.^{xxiv}

The Napatan rule in Egypt from the mid-eighth to mid-seventh century was a conquest by a foreign power as much as the subsequent Assyrian and Persian conquests. The foreign power did not fade away just because it eventually lost the conquered Egyptian lands. The lands from the first cataract to the Nile-Abbay confluence remained the territory of one Napata-Meroe empire from the eighth century BCE until the third or fourth century CE, a period of more than 1,000 years. The empire became a manufacturing center of cotton textiles in its several cities along the Nile; Meroe city itself was a major iron-producing center. The building of dams in the steppes east of the Nile surely served to enhance animal husbandry and cultivation, and the state began to keep written records in its Meroitic language.

Early Towns and States in West Africa

A Third “Great Transition” in world history was the emergence of merchant-managed commerce, an economic changeover beginning in the later second millennium BCE that transformed the nature of economic transactions and created the earliest forms of the relations of capital and production that characterize the world today. More significantly, it was these new kinds of relations that began the long drawn-out process of building global connections among human societies around the world. Over the later second millennium and the first millennium BCE, merchant enterprise of the First Commercial Revolution eventually brought into being a series of long-distance links extending from the Pillars of Hercules to the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and China.^{xxv}

What has not been understood until recently is that a separate West African commercial revolution was underway through almost precisely the same era of time. It began with the towns and manufacturing villages of Tichit in the middle second millennium BCE and grew into an extensive network of trade routes and commercial towns and cities all across the eastern and central Sudan over the course of the first millennium BCE. Sporadic contacts between the two commercial revolutions in the first millennium BCE changed into regular trans-Saharan trade by the early first millennium CE, bringing West Africans in as full participants and contributors to the networks of contact and movement of things and ideas from one end of the Eastern Hemisphere to the other.

In Tichit, located in modern-day southern Mauretania along a low escarpment with reliable water sources, a skein of large villages and at least one town flourished in the middle and second half of the second millennium BCE. Different settlements seem to have specialized in a particular product for trade: one produced grindstones, another arrowheads, still another beads,

and so forth. At the middle of the skein lay one town larger than all the rest. Its location and greater size mark it out as the probable capital town of an early polity ruling over that skein of settlements.

An additional region where the development of more complex polities appears to have been underway in the mid-second millennium was the Air Mountains of modern-day Niger. The archaeologist Augustin Holl argues for an independent invention of copper metallurgy in Air in the period 2500-1500 BCE. Five large megalithic elite burial sites existed in the mid-second millennium in different parts of the region, indicative of the existence of five chiefdoms or small kingdoms, each associated with copper production and strongly pastoral in other aspects of economy.^{xxvi} Possibly they formed provinces of an overarching larger polity.

Most intriguing, sub-Saharan Africans may have separately invented ironworking. Iron smelting dates to the tenth and eleventh centuries BCE in sites as far apart as Rwanda and Lake Chad, too early and too far south to be reasonably explained as having diffused from an origin just 500 years earlier, 3,000 kilometers away in Anatolia, especially since ironworking did not reach the intervening lands, such as Carthage and Egypt until *after* the tenth century BCE, and Meroe until still later than that.

As early as the eleventh century, the centers of lasting urban development and commerce in West Africa shifted south to the better-watered Sahel belt. Central in the new developments was the Inland Delta of the Niger River in modern-day Mali. Well before 1000 BCE peoples of this region specialized in different kinds of food production for trade. Farmers among the bayous of the Delta domesticated African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*) probably as early as the fourth millennium, while other communities became fishing specialists. Savanna farmers outside the Delta supplied sorghum and other savanna crops, along with domestic animals to the Delta

communities. By the early first millennium BCE, the growth of manufacturing helped turn these long-existing trade relations into an emerging commercial revolution, with merchants, regular market centers, and long-distance transport of goods by both boat and donkey.

Urban life in the western Sudan and Sahel evolved in a unique fashion. The towns and cities developed as market centers for earlier village clusters, in which each village had engaged in a different kind of production—cotton textile weaving in one village, potting in another, and leather working in still another. A fourth manufacturing specialization, ironworking, further diversified production in the first millennium BCE, while the importation of copper from Air and from new mines in the far western Sahara greatly expanded the long-distance sector.^{xxvii} Another valued metal, gold, coming from upper Niger and Senegal River goldfields, further enhanced these trends by the late first millennium.

In the north-central parts of modern-day Nigeria, the new directions of economic change eventuated, between 700 and 400 BCE, in the emergence of the earliest significant polity as yet known from West Africa, associated with the Nok culture. Around the central areas of this culture, excavators have unearthed many huge terracotta sculptures, broken and buried in the graves of high-rank persons. From the distribution of its cultural remains, the Nok polity may possibly have been as large, or had as great an influence on surrounding peoples, as any state of more recent centuries in the region. Iron was a major product, and the Nok region was probably a center for tin mining as well.^{xxviii}

It is often assumed that the contemporary rise of the Garamantes in the Fezzan oases of the north-central Sahara after 900 BCE owed to their position as intermediaries between the First Commercial Revolution of world history and the West African commercial revolution.^{xxix} The evidence for a direct Garamantes role is still sparse, but at least occasional contacts of some kind

did exist between the Carthaginian and Inland Niger Delta commercial spheres: the peoples around the Delta acquired the Punic name for the horse, and thus presumably the animal, sometime in the first millennium BCE.

Regular trans-Saharan trading networks likely did not develop, however, until the establishment of camels as beasts of burden and primary food animals among the inhabitants of the northern Sahara. Timothy Garrard has proposed that the opening of the Roman mint at Carthage in the late third century CE reflects the arrival for the first time of West African gold from across the Sahara. Most tellingly, he shows that the system of gold weight measures used by West African merchants right down to the nineteenth century preserved the particular system put into effect at the Carthage mint.^{xxx}

Early Towns and States in the Horn of Africa

Urban centers newly emerged also in the Horn of Africa in the first millennium BCE. Differently from the endogenous rise of towns and cities in the western Sahel and Sudan, the founding of urban centers in the Horn owed in large part to the First Commercial Revolution. South Arabians from the opposite shore of the Red Sea, like the Phoenicians who founded Carthage, and Greeks who founded Cyrene, came to Africa seeking new commodities and new sources for old commodities—initially frankincense and myrrh, but subsequently tortoise shell and ivory—and their settlements took the form, like Carthage and Cyrene, of city-states, planted amidst the indigenous Cushitic pastoral and farming populations of the northern Ethiopian Highlands.^{xxxi}

At first, the routes tying the Horn of Africa to the First Commercial Revolution of world history passed overland through South Arabia to the Levant. After 300 BCE, the Red Sea itself

became the central conduit of trade between the Mediterranean and the expanding commercial networks of the Indian Ocean. Sea routes passed from the Gulf of Aden across the Arabian Sea to India and from India to Indonesia, and south down the East African coast at least as far as modern-day Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania. The terminus of this latter route at the close of the first millennium BCE was Rhapta, the earliest known East African town.

In the early first millennium CE, the kings of one far northern Ethiopian city-state, Aksum, brought all the towns and the countryside of the northern Horn of Africa under their rule. By controlling, protecting, and taxing commercial enterprise in the Horn and in the southern Red Sea, the Aksumite kingdom grew into a major regional power, with its hegemony periodically extending to South Arabia as well. A notable effect of Aksum's dominant position along the main route linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean was the spread of Christianity to Aksum, with King Ezana adopting it as the official religion about thirty years after Constantine had taken the same step for Rome.

The Sassanian conquest of South Arabia in the 570s undermined Aksum's predominance in the Red Sea trade, and the rise of the first Islamic Empire in the 640s to 750s completed Aksum's isolation from the main lines of commerce. In establishing Damascus as their capital, the Umayyad caliphs shifted the pivotal commercial sea link between east and west to the Persian Gulf. For a century the Red Sea became a commercial backwater.

From a comparative world history perspective, the significant consequence was that the Aksumite kings built a new material basis for their state, feudal in character. The transformation of Aksum from the later seventh to the ninth century strikingly parallels the course of change in contemporary, early Medieval western Europe. Urban life collapsed, with even the city of Aksum shrinking to an episcopal center of perhaps a thousand people. The kings created a

horse-mounted military class by granting fiefs to their soldiers, with the peasants of each fief owing a portion of their product to their lord. The titles of provincial officials in late pre-feudal Aksum became the titles of the higher nobility. Monasteries became the principal centers of education and literacy. Kings granted fiefs of land to the monasteries to support their activities as religious centers, and the monks often acted as missionaries in spreading Christianity into the outlying areas of the kingdom.

One notable difference distinguishes the feudalisms of Europe and the Ethiopian highlands. Rights to land in pre-feudal Aksum were vested in the local peasantry, rather than in great landed magnates, as in the western Roman Empire. As a consequence, a fief in feudal Aksum—and in its successor states, the Zagwe kingdom of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the Solomonic kingdom from 1270 onward—gave the lord a right to a portion of the peasant's production and certain other manorial privileges, but left the local farmers not as serfs, but as free people, able to bequeath the land they worked to their relatives and descendants.

An Era of Empires, an Era of Cities and Commerce

Even as the northern Horn of Africa was entering into a long period of feudal governance in the later first millennium CE, in the savannas of western Africa an age of empires was beginning. Wagadu (Ghana), the earliest known large empire, rose to prominence before mid-millennium. Stretching from the Inland Delta of the Niger to Senegal, Wagadu lay athwart the key trade routes linking the goldfields far to the south to the merchant networks of the Sahara. In an age when cities as such did not exist north of the Pyrenees, urban life flourished not just in Wagadu, but all across the western and central Sudan belt.

A series of other empires succeeded Wagadu in the centuries after its decline in the twelfth century: Susu from the mid-twelfth to early thirteenth century, with its power resting on control of the actual goldfields^{xxxii}; Mali from the 1240s to mid-15th century, controlling access to both the gold sources and the northern outlets of the trade; and Songay from the mid-1400s to late 1500s, commanding the major Sahel trading cities and the salt trade of the Sahara. In the Chad Basin the Kanem empire built its wealth and power, from the ninth to the fifteenth century, on a similar control over the access of neighboring states to the main trade routes of the central Sahara.

The commercial interests of these empires gave them strong ties to the Muslim world of those times. Islam had become established initially across North Africa following the early Muslim conquests between 642 and 710 CE. In the next several centuries it became the religion of the trans-Saharan trading networks. In the Wagadu and Mali empires as well, it became the religious allegiance of the merchants and the commercial centers. In the eleventh century the rulers of the Takrur kingdom of the Senegal Valley and the Kanem Empire of Lake Chad converted to Islam. The rulers of the later Mali and Songay empires also professed Islam, but the rural majority population in all those areas long continued to follow their older religions. Islam also spread with commercial relations along the East African coast, becoming integral to urban identity in the Swahili city-states by the twelfth century CE. In the Horn of Africa the spread of Islam, again among merchants, but also among the Cushitic pastoralist populations of the eastern Horn, provided religious backing for the military jihad of Ahmad Gurey, 1527-1543, against the Christian Solomonic kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands. In these various fashions Islam linked up large areas of Africa to major currents of world history between the seventh and fifteenth centuries. Timbuktu in the thirteenth century, for example, was not only a trade center

intimately connected to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern worlds, but a university town in the early sense of that term, with the university as a place where noted scholars gathered to write and teach.

West of the lower Niger River in today's Nigeria, a rich city-state-based urban life developed in the second half of the first millennium CE. Ife, an early Yoruba city-state, grew into a major commercial entrepot, manufacturing glass beads and dealing in goods from the rainforest and from the savannas to the north. Home to a splendid sculptural tradition of brass casting, using the lost wax method, Ife became, as well, the leading religious and ritual center of the Yoruba. An equally notable contemporary of Ile-Ife was the Igbo city of Igbo-Ukwu, also an artistic center for brass sculpture and the capital of a state, whose highly ritualized kings ruled the lands across the lower Niger, east of the Yoruba.

From Farming to Commerce and States: the Southern Half of Africa

In the southern half of Africa, where agriculture did not arrive until 5,000 years ago, the first appearance of towns and states, not surprisingly, lagged behind areas farther north. In the equatorial rainforests of west-central Africa, long-distance commerce on the rivers of the Congo Basin developed in the last millennium BCE out of an earlier trade in fish, farm products, products of the hunt, and stone tools among the Bantu societies, who had spread agriculture across the region 3000-1000 BCE, and the ancient foraging peoples of equatorial Africa, the Batwa ("Pygmies"). By mid-first millennium BCE the spread of iron across the Congo Basin everywhere introduced a new manufacturing component to this trade. Other industries, notably raffia textile weaving and boat building, further fueled trade expansion. The Batwa carved out

their own niche in the new economy by becoming specialist providers of honey, wax, skins, ivory, and other forest products.^{xxxiii}

In the Great Lakes region of East Africa, iron-using Mashariki Bantu settlers set off a different chain of developments in the early first millennium BCE. Encountering Sudanic and Cushitic agripastoralist communities, the Mashariki added sorghum and pearl millet from the Sudanic tradition and finger millet from the Cushites to their previously yam-based farming. The new crops, which required less rainfall than yams, allowed the Mashariki peoples to scatter out between 300 BCE and 300 CE across most of eastern and southern Africa. Iron technology spread with them, and the demand for iron helped stimulate new kinds of regional trade wherever they settled.^{xxxiv}

Mashariki communities who arrived at the East Africa coast toward the close of the first millennium BCE soon came into contact with the Indian Ocean developments of the First Commercial Revolution. The most salient and lasting effect of this encounter came not from the merchants who frequented East Africa's earliest town, Rhapta, but from Indonesian immigrants, who followed the Indian Ocean trade routes to East Africa and settled for a time at the coast before moving on to Madagascar around 300 CE. These ancestral Malagasy brought along several Southeast Asian crops, most importantly bananas, well suited to the wetter African tropical environments.^{xxxv} Banana cultivation, which spread rapidly west to the Great Lakes and into the Congo Basin, was far less labor intensive as well more productive than yam raising. The historians Jan Vansina and Kairn Klieman have argued that the arrival of bananas in the Congo Basin fostered a major leap upward in commercial activity in those areas, because reliance on the new crop freed up time for people to engage in trade and in the production of trade commodities.^{xxxvi}

In the Congo Basin political growth followed on the heels of these developments, with chiefdoms emerging between 500 and 1100 and, after 1100, kingdoms. The two earliest known kingdoms of the deep interior, the Songye and Upemba states of the middle Lualaba River region, date to roughly 1100-1400.^{xxxvii} In the lower Congo areas near the Atlantic coast, Kongo with its large capital city, Mbanzakongo, and several smaller provincial capitals flourished from around 1300 up to 1665. Both regions lay along major routes of long-distance trade and close to prime copper- and iron-producing areas.

In the African Great Lakes region, the earliest large states date also to 1100-1400. Supported by great wealth in cattle rather than trade, the rulers built extensive earthworks in their capitals. Several thousand people lived in these capitals, with their residential areas scattered over several square kilometers, interspersed with fields and pasture. These dispersed towns undoubtedly attracted trade in salt, iron, and foodstuffs, but their primary function was as political and ritual centers.^{xxxviii}

In contrast, Southern Africa's first town, Mapungubwe, which flourished in the Limpopo Valley in the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE, was both a royal capital, with large stone structures, and the central entrepot connecting the source areas of ivory and gold in the interior to the sea routes of the Indian Ocean. The establishment of the Zimbabwe empire in the thirteenth century shifted the heartland of urban development north to modern-day Zimbabwe. The capital city of Great Zimbabwe, famous for its great stone buildings, had 15,000-18,000 inhabitants in the fourteenth century. Several provincial capitals in the empire, though smaller, appear also to have deserved the appellation of town.

Africa in World History

To view Africa over the very long term is to discover that the notable developments of Africa's past followed similar pathways and proceeded at similar paces as comparable changes elsewhere in the world. These developments affirm something historians more widely in the world, including unfortunately only too many historians of the African continent itself, have not yet assimilated—namely, the comparability in the timing and content of historical change in Africa to the timing and content of historical change elsewhere. Two great transitions of human history in the Holocene—from foraging to farming and, several thousand years later, from villages and informal governance to towns and states—not only were *not* late in emerging in Africa, but Africa was a continent of primary invention in those times. Cultivation of crops and herding of animals began in Africa as early as anywhere else except the Middle East, and only slightly later than there. The first domestication of cattle in world history took place in the southern half of the eastern Sahara 1000-1500 years earlier than the separate domestication of cattle around the eastern Mediterranean. West Africans living south of the Sahara were the first peoples in the world to invent ceramic technology, *before* 11,500 years ago. A probable second independent African invention of ceramics took place almost as early in the eastern Sahara. The independent inventions, by different Africans populations in different regions south of the Sahara, of cotton textile weaving 7,000 or more years ago, of raffia cloth weaving and polished stone tools equally early, and probably of copper metallurgy in the Sahara by 2000 BCE, and ironworking in north-central Africa before 1000 BCE reaffirm something that historians have long understood—that particular advances in human technical capacities often arise more than once and in disparate parts of the world.

Within the overall progression of human history since the end of the latest Ice Age, the lag time between the earliest agriculture and the earliest towns and states in Africa accords with wider world history patterns. Typically, whether in the Middle East, Middle America, China, or Africa, the earliest urban centers and states came into being around 4,000 to 5,000 years after the first deliberate plant or animal tending. In the eastern Sahara the initial stage of the First Great Transition, from foraging to the cultivation and herding, began around the mid-ninth millennium BCE. The second Great Transition in those areas, from localized political relations to states and from villages to towns, began as early as anywhere in the world—in the fifth millennium at Nabta Playa and in the fourth millennium along the Nile itself, at such places as Shaheinab and Qustul in Nubia and Naqada in southern Upper Egypt. In West Africa the earliest towns and larger polities date to the second millennium. In those regions the span between first farming and first towns may have been as much as 6,000 or as little as 4,000 years, depending on how early the shift from gathering to cultivating wild grains came about.

African history cautions, as well, against the mistake of attributing all invention to the early regions of cities and states—to the cultural complexes historians have traditionally called “civilizations.” Ironworking, for instance, rapidly established itself as a key productive sector in the commercial towns of West Africa in the first millennium BCE. But the men who innovated this technology lived elsewhere, in regions where village-scale residence patterns long prevailed; and ironworking spread equally rapidly across the non-urbanized, non-state parts of the continent. Civilization is not a thing; it is an evaluation, and only too often an evaluation that non-historians turn into a judgment on human worth. A historian’s job is to seek to give historical ordering to, and make historical sense of, the changes societies and people have undergone, to the extent possible from the evidence available. When historians fall into the trap

of defining some cultures as ‘civilizations’ and others as not, they make a value judgment even if they mean not to. More to the point, they inevitably narrow the scope of their inquiry and, as a result, very often fail to recognize the more encompassing history which makes the culture they single out in this fashion worthy of attention in the first place.

The glorification of ancient Egypt is a prime illustration of the need to discard the fallacious Western idea that there really is something called ‘civilization.’ Putting Egypt back into Africa, where it has always properly belonged, is fundamentally important, but it is a bootless exercise if we perpetuate the equally fallacious Western attribution of everything notable in Africa to the ancient Egyptians. As important as Egypt was in the history of early state formation, it was not an initiating region in the crucial transitions of Holocene human history to food production, but rather a crossroads in the subsequent diffusion of crops, animals, and technology. The crucial early innovative areas in the continent lay in the Sudan belt and in West Africa. Even within the gyre of political history, Egypt’s first large state, the Old Kingdom, took shape not at the center, but at one edge of a wider nexus of early complexity that included Saharan pastoralists, Nubian town dwellers, and the Qustul state and probably other, as yet undiscovered small states farther south in Nubia. The major technological turning points of early African history, from the invention of ceramics to the invention of ironworking did not originate in Egypt, but spread there from other areas.

The events of the third great world historical transition of the last millennium BCE, the First Commercial Revolution, and the developments of the first 1500 years CE deepened and extended the ways in which Africans from many parts of the continent participated in the wider compass of global history. The Sudan belt and northern Africa already in the first millennium BCE had numerous urban centers, when the western and northern Europeans of the same period

had none at all. During much of the first thousand years CE, the northern three-fifths of Africa as well as the eastern coasts and coastal hinterlands of the continent, were intertwined economically with other world regions to an extent that Europe north of the Pyrenees and Alps only began to approach between 1000 and 1450. The first millennium and a half CE, it can be argued, were times of economic development and advance overall for Africa, in which large parts of the continent contributed to the far-flung currents of historical change across the Eastern Hemisphere.

Through all the eras before 1500, Africa did not follow behind or lie outside the main trends and pathways of human history. The great question that we as historians of Africa must grapple with is how and why the developments of the past 500 years in the end so greatly redirected history across large parts of the continent. A fuller understanding of African history over the very long term casts in sharpest relief the salience and complexity of that problem for historians.

ⁱ S. McBrearty and A. Brooks, "The Revolution That Wasn't: A New Interpretation of the Origin of Modern Human Behavior," *Journal of Human Evolution* 39 (2000): 453-563.

ⁱⁱ Philip Lieberman and Robert McCarthy, "Tracking the Evolution of Language and Speech: Comparing Vocal Tracts to Identify Speech Capabilities," *Expedition* 49, 2: 15-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ S. Ambrose, "Small Things Remembered: Origins of Early Microlithic Industries in Sub-Saharan Africa," in Robert G. Elston and Steven L. Kuhn (eds.), *Thinking Small: Global Perspectives on Microlithization* (Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association, Number 12, 2002).

^{iv} C. Henshilwood, "Modern Humans and Symbolic Behaviour: Evidence from Blombos Cave, South Africa," in G. Blundell (ed.), *Origins* (Cape Town: Double Storey), pp. 78-83.

^v C. Ehret, "Reconstructing Ancient Kinship in Africa" in *Early Human Kinship: From Sex to Social Reproduction*, Nicholas J. Allen, Hilary Callan, Robin Dunbar, and Wendy James, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 200-231, 259-269.

^{vi} C. Ehret, S. O. Y. Keita, and Paul Newman, "The Origins of Afroasiatic," *Science* 306 (3 December 2004): 1680-1681, concisely summarizes the convergent findings of these three fields.

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- ^{vii} C. Ehret, “Linguistic Stratigraphies and Holocene History in Northeastern Africa,” in Marek Chlodnicki and Karla Kroeper (ed.), *Archaeology of Early Northeastern Africa* (Posnan: Posnan Archaeological Museum, 2006), pp. 1019-1055, provides a detailed exposition.
- ^{viii} MacDonald, K.,
- ^{ix} C. Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002), pp. 44.
- ^x C. Ehret, “Linguistic Evidence and the Origins of Food Production in Africa: Where Are We Now?” in *African Flora, Past Cultures and Archaeobotany*, Dorian Fuller and M. A. Murray, eds. (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010).
- ^{xi} C. Ehret, *An African Classical Age* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), pp. 104-105.
- ^{xii} T. Shaw, “Holocene adaptations in West Africa: the Late Stone Age,” *Early Man News* 3/4 (1980): 51-82.
- ^{xiii} C. Ehret, *Civilizations of Africa*, pp. 84.
- ^{xiv} Fred Wendorf and Romuald Schild, “Nabta Playa and Its Role in the Northeastern African History,” *Anthropological Archaeology* 20 (1998): 97-123.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvi} C. Ehret, “A Linguistic History of Herding and Cultivation in Northeastern Africa,” in A. Fahmy et al. (eds), *Proceedings of 6th African Archaeobotany Workshop, Cairo, 2009* (forthcoming as special supplement to *Journal of African Archaeology*).
- ^{xvii} For published plates showing the spindlewhorls, see A. J. Arkell, *Early Khartoum* (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1949). I am indebted to Merrick Posnansky for bringing these materials to my attention and explaining their significance.
- ^{xviii} C. Ehret, “A Linguistic History.”
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} D. Fuller, reference to be chosen.
- ^{xxi} C. Ehret. “The African Sources of Egyptian Culture and Language,” in *África Antigua. El Antiguo egipto, una civilización Africana*, Josep Cervelló, ed. (Barcelona: Centre D’estudis Africans, 2001), pp. 121-128.
- ^{xxii} J. McKim Malville, R. Schild, F. Wendorf, and R. Brenner, “Astronomy of Nabta Playa,” in *African Cultural Astronomy*, J. C. Holbrook, J. O Urama, and R. T. Medupe, eds. (Dordrecht, New York: Springer, 2008); M. Kobusiewicz and R. Schild, “Prehistoric Herdsmen,” *Academia*, no. 3 (7) (2005): 20-24.
- ^{xxiii} Bruce B. Williams and K. C. Seele, *The A-Group Royal Cemetery and Qustul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Oriental Institute, 1986).
- ^{xxiv} William Gordon, *Cultural Identity of the 25th Dynasty Rulers of Ancient Egypt in Context: Formulation, Negotiation and Expression*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 2009.
- ^{xxv} The characteristics and consequences of this “First Commercial Revolution” are described in C. Ehret, *An African Classical Age* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), pp. 16-20.
- ^{xxvi} Augustin F. C. Holl, *Holocene Saharans* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 122-137, 164-184.
- ^{xxvii} Roderick J. McIntosh, *The peoples of the Middle Niger* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

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- ^{xxviii} A planned 12-year project archaeological investigation of Nok, led by Peter Breunig of the Goethe Universität, Frankfurt, is currently underway.
- ^{xxix} Ray Kea, "Expansions and Contractions: World-Historical Change and the Western Sudan World-System (1200/1000 B.C.-1200/1250 A.D.)," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 10, 3 (2004): 723-816.
- ^{xxx} Timothy F. Garrard, "Myth and Metrology: The Early Trans-Saharan Gold Trade," *Journal of African History* 23 (1982), 4: 443-461.
- ^{xxxi} C. Ehret, "Social Transformation in the Early History of the Horn of Africa," in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Taddese Bayene, ed. (Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1988), Vol. 1, pp. 639-651; *The Archaeology of Ancient Eritrea*, Peter R. Schmidt, Matthew C. Curtis, and Zelalem Teka, eds. (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2008).
- ^{xxxii} Stephan Bühnen, "In Quest of Susu," *History in Africa* 21 (1994): 1-47.
- ^{xxxiii} K. Klieman, *The Pygmies Were Our Compass* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003), explores this history in considerable detail.
- ^{xxxiv} C. Ehret, *An African Classical Age*.
- ^{xxxv} R. Gonzales, *Societies, Religion, and History: Central-East Tanzanians and the World They Created, c. 200 BCE to 1800 CE* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); C. Ehret, *An African Classical Age*, Chap. 6; C. Ehret, "Linguistic Testimony and Migration Histories," in J. Lucassen, L. Lucassen, and P. Manning (eds.), *Migration in World History* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010).
- ^{xxxvi} Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Kairn Klieman, *The Pygmies Were Our Compass: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).
- ^{xxxvii} C. Ehret, *Civilizations of Africa*, Chap. 6; J. Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests*, shows that the Songye, although an oligarchic republic in recent centuries, most probably evolved out of an earlier monarchy.
- ^{xxxviii} J. E. G. Sutton, "Ntusi and Bigo: farmers, cattle-herders and rulers in western Uganda, AD 1000-1500," *Azania* 33 (1998): 39-72.