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Peter Mitchell

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AFRICAN CONNECTIONS

An Archaeological Perspective
on Africa and the Wider World

Peter Mitchell



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We carry within us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us.

—THOMAS BROWN,
Religio Medici (1643),
Part 1, Section 15

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Foreword

WHAT ARE AFRICA'S links with the rest of the world? How ancient are they and what is their significance? And how can archaeology shed light on these questions to illuminate the many fancied myths, untested speculations, and academic hypotheses about these links and the flow of people, things, and information into, and out of, Africa?

The practitioners of archaeology, bound by the rules of academic inquiry, attempt to describe and explain things that, for the most part, happened long before anyone thought that the trivialities of everyday life were worthy of note. Our professional interest extends beyond describing and cataloging modes of subsistence, residence, or technology to attempt, as well, to explain how things came to be in the distant past. At one time or another, professionals have utilized simplistic explanations like migration, diffusion, or acculturation arising from contact with a foreign, superior culture. The use of such explanatory modes was long the norm, rather than the exception, in the history of Africanist archaeology. Latterly, however, as more subtle means of explanation have come to the fore, speculative commentators, less bound by the formalities of academic discourse, have also stepped forward to offer alternative views of the value of the African past. As a result, the place of a supposed "dark continent" in the cultural history of the world and its connections with the world has popularly as well as academically, been constructed along a scale ranging from marginal to critically pivotal to the great movements of history.

It is therefore useful to have a scholar like Peter Mitchell not only dissect some of the foibles of past explanations, but also offer a serious estimate of the state of our knowledge of the connectivity of events and cultural processes occurring on the African continent and in the rest of the world from the perspective of archaeology and its ancillary disciplines. In order to do this, he has not only digested a far-ranging literature on the African past, synthesizing a general history of Africa's connections with people and things off the continent, their impact on the developmental history of human communities there, and the effects of contact with Africa and Africans on people and events elsewhere, but also endeavored to clear away some of the obscuring cobwebs of past explanation.

Clearing the explanatory obscurities of past investigators and commentators is not always a simple task. Archaeology is an essentially political process. Like its arch coconspirator history, it often describes not so much the past, or even what we remember of the past, but what we wish the past to have been. Its explanatory fashions, fads, and follies, for better or worse, range from highly disciplined academic science to uninformed speculation embedded in a matrix of prevailing opinion. While archaeology is subject to development, the infusion of new concepts, and change, it, too, still often reflects ideas formed outside its prevailing investigative methodologies, or forms those methodologies in ways that conform to certain kinds of cultural expectation. We need only remember the opinions that the archaeology of James Bent and his contemporaries brought to Great Zimbabwe more than a hundred years ago, the persistence of the Hamitic myth past the middle of the twentieth century, the argument that the Swahili city-states were the product of migrations along Africa's East Coast, or the long political debate over the first appearance of Bantu-speaking populations south of the

Limpopo River to understand a few instances of archaeology's use of faulty premises supported by conventional wisdom.

Sometimes these opinions or debates are held long after archaeology has found more satisfying and testable solutions or they are reshaped to satisfy some other political purpose; Randall-MacIver solved the "mystery" of Great Zimbabwe early in the twentieth century, but objectors to his solution can be found today. Similarly, the Hamitic race may be dead in anthropology, but the corpse has risen from its grave in another, more politically tinged discussion, citing otherwise long-discredited sources. Africa, but not only Africa, has a long history as a center for such arguments staged between academic archaeology and those desiring a different kind of history.

Sub-Saharan Africa, the home of substantial autochthonous polities, once the equal of their contemporaries elsewhere, was, for example, viewed quite differently when met by the industrialized West in the nineteenth century. Nineteenth-century imperialists themselves required a different view of the continent and its inhabitants than that to be encompassed in the vision of twentieth century nationalists. Subsequently, at the same time that a generation of late twentieth century archaeologists and anthropologists forged a new perspective on African culture and history, a growing cadre of Africanists of African origin seriously questioned the descriptions of earlier observers as insensitive and unresponsive to the core of the African cultural and historical experience. Though their criticisms are undoubtedly true, attempts to gild the lily are often as fictive as the reconstructions they seek to supplant. The socialist utopia at Great Zimbabwe envisioned by Mufuka is as misguided in its way as his contemporaries Bruwer and Hromnik, and their reliance on foreign invaders, are in theirs. Fortunately, Mitchell deals with many of these arguments, debates, and fancies in his far-reaching discussion of the real evidence of the links between Africa and the world. Reading Mitchell, one realizes that the continent and the people living there were never the passive receptacles of foreign influences as they were, so often, depicted during the colonialist period, but they were instead active participants in their own destinies, innovating here, absorbing new ideas there, and everywhere adapting to changing social and cultural environments.

The ebb and flow of appreciations of the African career has been suggested in the foregoing. At one time or another, the continent has been depicted as an empty vessel requiring filling from elsewhere; equally, there are those who would claim the origin of most things culturally significant as the creation of African invention. Obviously, these are dichotomous poles that far overreach the realities of the African past. As Mitchell explains, throughout much of history Africa, as a geographic location in the center of the Old World, was in a unique position to participate in interaction spheres that stretched from the Far East to western Europe, as well as, late in its career, affecting and being influenced in return by the New World. Here and there, as we have seen, observers have exaggerated the relative give and thrust of these interactions: once imparting too great an African influence, while at others attributing too small an effect. It is fair to speculate that, since the time that early humans left the African continent to settle the Earth's many and varied environs, they have been handy in the creation of interaction spheres, of greater or lesser dimension, not only adapting people to one place another, but also drawing upon distant resources and ideas to enrich their existence, all the while sending forth local commodities and other ideas. It is this mutual give and take of material culture, people, perceptions of their surroundings, and concepts of society, technology, and worldview that has shaped humanity into the form we know today. And significantly, Africa has been a player in this production from the very beginning, sometimes looming large to fill the center stage, sometimes being a lesser player on the margin, or offstage altogether. But Africa is not unique in this role, since the same characterization can be made of everywhere else, and of every other population, at one time or another. It is this understanding that this book assists in developing. Africa was at once a critical

link in the creation of humanity, a passive observer, and a mutual partner in change.

At present it is politically convenient, in some quarters, to regard Africa, its people, and their cultural history in a unitary fashion, as if there were somehow an African “nation-state,” conversant with a single worldview. Obviously, this is not the case, nor was it ever so in the past. The variety of cultural expression on the continent—ranging from simplistically appearing hunter-gatherer bands to highly complex state-level societies—raises the question of which of these are purely indigenous and which imported from elsewhere. Posing the essential problem of understanding Africa’s links with the rest of humanity during its career on Earth, Mitchell explores some basic technologies of African life—metallurgy and food production—setting them in historical perspective in regard to our present knowledge of their development on the continent and linkages with events elsewhere. The history of Africa’s commerce and trade and their relationships to links with others are also explored, along with the development of African states. Consideration of the roots of the slave trade delves into matters of slavery within traditional African society, as well as the basis, organization, and differences between the Atlantic trade and the cross-Indian Ocean and trans-Saharan links that took slaves to Islamic lands. These are all important issues that Mitchell treats in an exhaustive and balanced fashion, presenting a comprehensive demonstration of Africa’s linkages and the role of Africanist archaeology in gathering the evidence of them.

Joseph O. Vog

Preface

No man is an island.

—JOHN DONNE, 1624, Devotions upon
Emergent Occasions, *Meditation XVII*

OPEN AN ATLAS and look at the world (figure P.1). Africa lies at its center, with Europe to the north, the Middle East at its northeastern edge, and the rest of Asia across the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. To the west, beyond the Atlantic, lie the Americas and beyond them the Pacific. But though Africa may be at the center of the world, and surely lies at the heart and origin of the human evolutionary story, its more recent past, and particularly its connections with other continents, have been neglected in grand historical narratives. Sidelined, except where ancient Egypt is concerned, Africa is excluded from, or only fleetingly acknowledged in, most general discussions of the emergence of food production, the development of centralized political systems, or the origins of urban societies. Where it is taken into account, it is all too often as a passive victim or recipient of the attentions of others, a process often seen as culminating in the iniquities of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, European colonization, postcolonial “underdevelopment,” and ongoing “globalization.”

There is, of course, a degree of hyperbole in what I have just written, and few would now agree (at least openly) with the notorious words of Lord Dacre that, before European contact, Africa had no history, merely the endless gyrations of barbarous tribes (Trevor-Roper 1963, 871). That this is so is partly because of the efforts of those who have produced major syntheses of the African past, from the magisterial, if now dated, *Cambridge History of Africa* and its UNESCO successor, to the single-volume treatments of Davidson (1991), D. Phillipson (1993a), Iliffe (1995), Reader (1998), Connah (2001), Ehret (2002), and others.¹ The contributions of journals, including the *Journal of African History* and *African Archaeological Review*, research institutes (such as the British Institute in Eastern Africa), and societies (like the Society of Africanist Archaeologists) have been central to rewriting Africa’s past, underpinned by the individual efforts of numerous historians, historical linguists, anthropologists, and archaeologists, African and non-African alike. And yet Africa and its connections with the rest of the world are still too little acknowledged in most general syntheses of world history or prehistory, once the initial excitement of human origins is over. Given just five chapters out of forty-six for the last 10,000 years, compared with Europe’s twelve, in an encyclopedia that is now more than 20 years old (Sherratt 1980), Africa beyond Pharaonic Egypt still rates only 5 percent of the coverage for the same period in one of archaeology’s most popular textbooks (Fagan 2001), and a mere two pages (plus map!) in one of its competitors (Wenke 1999).

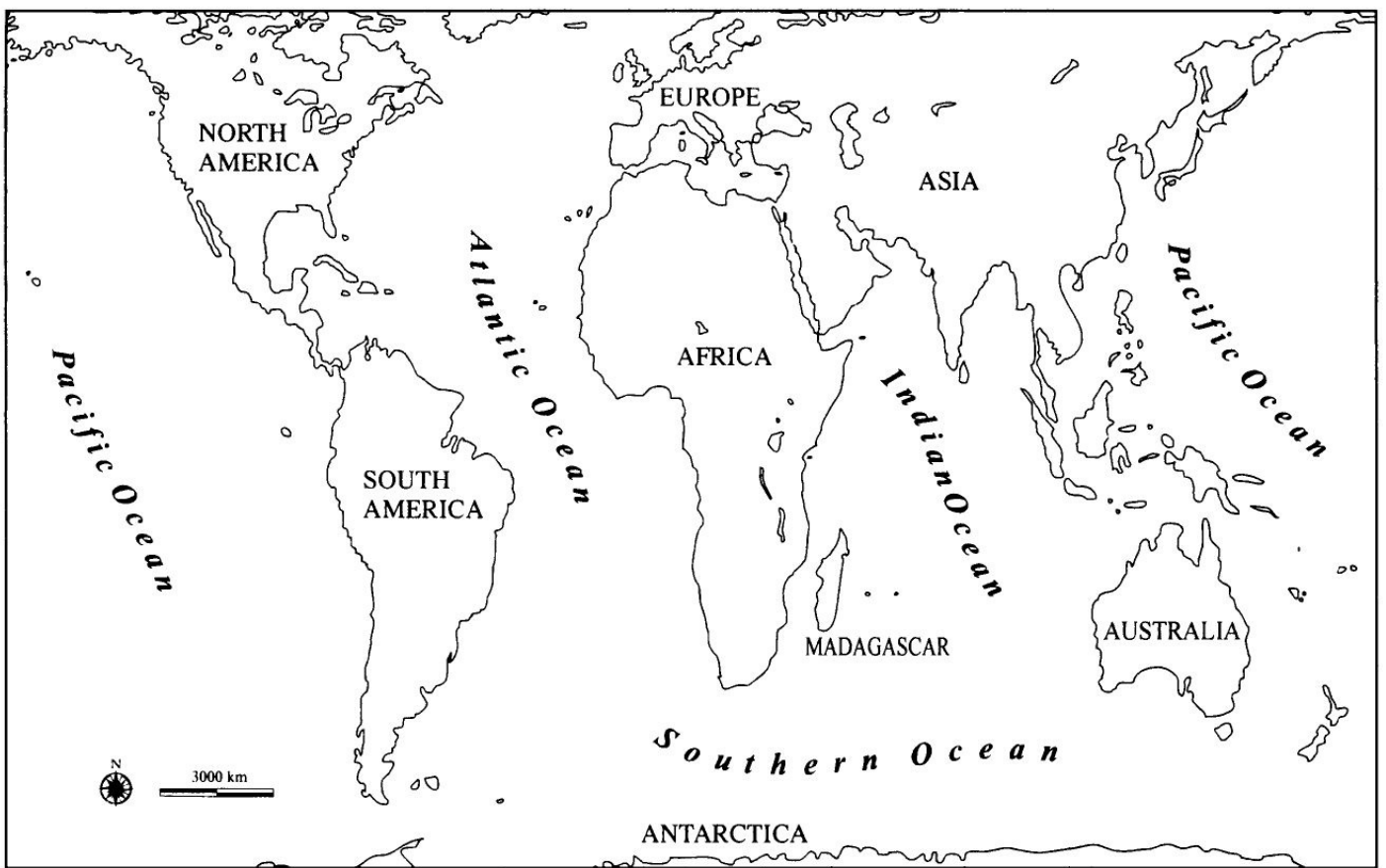


Figure P.1. Africa's central position in the world mapped using Peter's Projection to represent relative landmass size as fairly as possible.

Contributing to the righting of this imbalance is among this book's ambitions. The strategy adopted is to focus on the last 10,000 years, during which climatic conditions were, very broadly, similar to those of today. The emphasis is on looking at how, during this time, Africa's inhabitants interacted with those of other landmasses, not merely as consumers or dependents, but as equal partners in exchange and active donors of goods, ideas, and people. It is archaeology's expansion since 1960 that allows us to question the biases of an earlier era and dispense with models that once saw Africa, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, as passively following influences from elsewhere. Working alongside cognate disciplines such as paleoenvironmental research, historical linguistics, and the study of oral histories, archaeology provides a new basis on which to write an account of Africa's precolonial past, one that pays due attention to the continent's dynamic interactions with the rest of the world. At the same time, focusing on those interactions may help archaeologists working elsewhere to broaden their own perspectives through an acquaintance with African research (Stahl 1994; S. McIntosh 1999a). From the origins and spread of systems of food production and metallurgy, through the organization of trade and exchange, the growth of larger, more politically complex societies, the expansion of world religions, and the impact of slavery, to the effects on each other of colonizer and colonized, African archaeology can increasingly contribute not just examples, but also its own insights to broader theoretical debates. Indicating how this can be done is another of this book's ultimate goals.

But while to an Africanist this agenda has the undoubted benefit of addressing one aspect of Africa's marginalization within the general narrative of human history, it runs the risk of simultaneously reinforcing the traditional social evolutionary model that African data and experience can help us question. There is, in fact, little reason to accept that Africa's historical development must necessarily be constructed in the image of that of Europe and of those societies (in the ancient Near

East and Pharaonic Egypt) that the West privileges as its cultural ancestors. Yet, as Stahl (1999a, 44) reminds us, a research emphasis on “trade, towns and states is consistent with a progressive—developmentalist perspective that is alive and well in African archaeology.” The mere replacement in models of cultural change of simplistic ideas of diffusion or migration by trade with partners based on or beyond the peripheries of the continent will do nothing to address these biases. Indeed, in many cases local and regional networks of interaction were essential to the development of those longer-distance, continent-linking exchanges that still attract disproportionate interest. At the same time we must bear in mind the impact of the distant and the new at the local level and in the realm of the everyday, for it was here that new subsistence staples such as maize and cassava, the development of cash crop economies, such as cocoa, and the introduction of new kinds of artifacts and belief systems affected individuals and effected, or did not effect, social change. Among the questions that we can then ask are: Can we detect any general patterns in the ways in which connections between African societies and those in other parts of the world have been structured? Are distinctive types of communications, transactions, or exchange identifiable? What role has Africa’s physical geography played in framing these interactions? And what degree of continuity can be traced in them over time? To allow readers to check the evidence on which my own answers to these questions have been made and have ready access to the sources that I have consulted, I have deliberately opted to exclude from the bibliography unpublished conference papers or contract archaeology reports. For the same reason I have also tried to keep references to graduate theses to the essential minimum.

Structure

Where to draw boundaries in studying Africa’s past has never been straightforward, and I first consider how the idea of “Africa” has come about and how far it is useful to distinguish Africa as an entity or to separate areas south of the Sahara from those to its north. Next I review the resources, material and intellectual, involved in the interactions between Africans and non-Africans and look at how archaeological thinking about these exchanges has developed. To situate these observations within a physically tangible context, I introduce key features of Africa’s geography and ecology, emphasizing how they can define various frontier areas, or “interfaces,” between Africa and the rest of the world. Though this book’s main theme is the last 10,000 years, chapter 1 concludes with a background sketch of the expansion beyond Africa of the genus *Homo*, the more recent spread of anatomically modern humans, and the evidence for contacts between Africa and Eurasia during the late Pleistocene. With chapter 2, I move on to examine the development and spread of the diverse systems of food production practiced in Africa before the bridging of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. African populations developed many ways of producing food from indigenous resources, while benefiting from and contributing to the range of domesticated plants and animals available elsewhere. In discussing these topics I also consider some of the constraints that disease, geography, and climate imposed on the expansion of these systems. I look too at how the African record compares with the situation in other world regions as regards recognizing cultivation when plants do not exhibit morphological change, experiments in rearing species that were subsequently not retained under close human control, and the extent to which plant and animal species were domesticated across broad zones rather than in just a few localities.

The next four chapters examine several of the interfaces between Africa and the rest of the world, beginning with the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Ancient Egypt and its successors have often been treated so distinctly from the rest of Africa as to make one wonder whether they were located on the same landmass. Without adopting the Afrocentric position of Diop (1967), one concern of chapter 3 is to establish the African basis for the distinctive features of Pharaonic civilization, while still

explaining the different (but how different?) cultural trajectories followed along the Nile Valley. A related question is how far interactions between Egypt, Nubia, and southeastern Sudan, and the physical constraints and opportunities of moving along or beyond the Nile, structured and created the patterns we observe. Here it is important to recall that the Nile is but one of northeastern Africa's waterways. Stretching southeast for almost 2,000 km, the Red Sea is another, and written sources have long alerted us to how it was used by the Egyptians and others to gain access to exotic luxury goods. Archaeological evidence is now starting to illuminate both these north-south contacts and the antiquity of east-west movements between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. The two-way exchange of domesticates, the development of one of Africa's great early civilizations, that of Aksum, and the still more recent spread into Africa of Islam are just three of the topics to which those movements are relevant.

The Red Sea provides a gateway to East Africa and the Indian Ocean. This was home to a complex system of international trade long before the Portuguese entered it and forms the subject matter of chapter 4. New research hints that these networks may be significantly older than previously thought. The antiquity in Africa of ultimately Southeast Asian domesticates such as chickens and bananas is one topic that I consider, the colonization of Madagascar by Indonesian migrants some time in the late first millennium cal. B.C. (sidebar 1, page 22) a second, and the accumulating evidence for a pre-Iron Age African presence on offshore islands like Zanzibar and Mafia a third. But the chapter's main thrust is to look at how archaeology tracks the growth of connections between Africa's eastern coast and the lands on the other side of the annual monsoon system, in Arabia, the Persian Gulf, India, and beyond. These connections were vital to the development of Swahili civilization and the introduction of Islam to this portion of the continent. How far they should be held responsible for the growth of complex societies farther inland is another issue, along with the disruption and transformation of old trading systems after European entry into the Indian Ocean in 1498.

Islam and trading systems intimately associated with its spread are not just a feature of Africa's eastern shores. Indeed, if the Red Sea is a gateway to the Indian Ocean then it also bisects one of the world's great deserts, which stretches from the arid expanses of Arabia in the east through to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. It is easy to see this desert as an impediment to human movement, not least when, during parts of the Pleistocene, it was even larger and drier than today. Conversely, a significantly more benign ecology during the early Holocene facilitated the initial expansion of livestock keeping, only for increasingly arid conditions to encourage the outward movement of people and their animals. But the Sahara is more than a barrier. Chapter 5 thus considers it as the focus of an international trading system once uniquely associated with the expansion of Islam. I show how archaeology demonstrates that urban communities had developed within and south of the Sahara long before the Arab conquest of North Africa. The impacts of Islam and trans-Saharan contacts on the inhabitants of the desert's southern shore, the Sahel,² and on those of the forests yet farther south, as well as the significance of contacts with tropical West Africa to the peoples of the Maghreb, also demand attention.

Europe's entry into the Indian Ocean was from the west, and chapter 6 turns to Africa's other, Atlantic coastline. Excepting the colonization of the Canary Islands and of Bioko, the historical emphasis here is comparatively recent. The main focus is the different forms taken by European movement and expansion and the impacts that they had. Slaves were widely sought out, but we should not forget the importance of gold, ivory, and pepper, and all this before the widespread initiation of plantation-based cash crop economies in the nineteenth century. Stress is placed on the active role of Africans in choosing what they wished to adopt by way of new goods, crops, and technologies, along

with the limited opportunities for European colonization, still less political domination, before the mid-nineteenth century.

Slavery of the kind touched on in chapter 6 removed millions of Africans from their homeland, and in chapter 7, I consider this forced expansion to the Americas and the Indian Ocean in greater detail. One question to be asked of the archaeological evidence is how enslaved Africans related to each other, to their enslavers, and where present, to indigenous peoples; another question is how, and how successfully, Africans maintained their own identity in the face of attempts to destroy it, and how important longstanding African traditions were in this. Here we touch on the ways in which people resisted enslavement, and we can inquire more broadly into what forms this resistance took. Though most of the archaeological work relevant to these questions has been undertaken in the Americas, the scope of this chapter is deliberately set wider to emphasize the value of comparative study.

To conclude the book, chapter 8 reviews the material covered, identifying the main themes that emerge and considering how the archaeology of Africa's interactions with other parts of the world demonstrates the truly global interest and concern of the continent's past. I examine too what general patterns can be discerned and emphasize the value of comparing between the regions into which I have otherwise divided the book. Finally, the challenges confronting archaeological research in Africa today, the contribution that it may, perhaps, be able to make an African "renaissance," and the opportunities for developing distinctively African forms of archaeological research are also considered.

Notes

- 1 Since the original manuscript of this book entered production several other works of synthesis have appeared. Two of particular note are Connah (2004) and Stahl (2004).
- 2 In West Africa a distinction is sometimes drawn between the Sahel, lying immediately to the south of the Sahara, and the more extensively wooded Sudan, or Sudanic belt, still farther south. As this differentiation is less generally made when discussing areas such as Niger and Chad and to avoid any possible confusion with the modern Republic of Sudan, I have opted to employ Sahel alone when referring to the broad band of arid to moist savannas between the Sahara and the West African/Equatorial forest zone.

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This book also draws on—and, I hope, benefits from—contacts with many other Africanists over the years. David Phillipson first interested me in African archaeology as an undergraduate and has been of immense support to me and other British-based Africanists. Teaching with him in the Cambridge of 1982–83 were John Alexander, Graham Connah, and Francis van Noten, all of whom opened my eyes to other parts of the continent. That process continued in Oxford under the supervision of Ray Inskeep, who encouraged me to take on this project and provided important insights in its initial stages; it is a great sadness that he died before its completion. Through him my own fieldwork and research have concentrated in southern Africa and I am grateful to all my colleagues there, but especially to John Parkington and the other members of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Cape Town and to David Lewis-Williams, Karim Sadr, Ben Smith, and Lyn Wadley at the University of the Witwatersrand. John Sutton kindly hosted a visit several years ago to Kenya and Tanzania, while George Abungu helped organize a trip to the Lamu Archipelago. Ken Kelly deserves thanks for allowing me to participate in his excavations at Savi, thereby introducing me to West African archaeology. Pierre de Maret and other contributors to the International Certificate in African Archaeology, as well as the organizers of and participants in successive conferences on African archaeology in Los Angeles, Poznań, Cambridge, and Bamako, expanded my horizons further, with Steven and Melanie Brandt and Susan McIntosh facilitating a truly enjoyable visit to sites in Mali. Proving the worth of conferences still further, the 1992 SAfA meeting at Los Angeles also introduced me to Kit Wesler, a colleague with a great facility for the kind of wide-ranging, intercontinental comparative study of which African archaeology still stands in need if its voice is to be heard beyond the confines of the Africanist community itself. Working in Oxford have also been fortunate to benefit from teaching in an environment where able students are not in short supply: Sam Challis, Luiz Costa, Matt Davies, Will Ellerby, Marcus Starling, and Chris

Wingfield in particular helped me change my mind on many things, while Anne Haour, John Hobart, Fumiko Ohinata, and Brian Stewart helped doctoral supervision to get off to a flying and very pleasurable start. Finally, I should like to thank all those other colleagues who are now working in African archaeology from within the United Kingdom; the growth in our numbers and the collegiality displayed at recent meetings augur well for the future of the subject.

This is the second book I have written since my daughter was born. To Chiara, Gloria who made her and so many other things possible, and—for reasons best known to ourselves—Cesare, many thanks for your support, comment, and distraction.

CHAPTER I

Introducing Africa: Definitions, Routes, Resources, and Interactions

Societies grow and thrive as they successfully interact with Their neighbours.

—SHERRATT 1999, 33

THIS CHAPTER PROVIDES the background for the rest of the book. The first question considered is, What is Africa? To answer this I look at the term's origins and how it has come to be applied to the entirety of the continent. Next I examine the degree to which Africa can be considered to be a coherent whole and how far the frequent separation of sub-Saharan Africa from the rest of the continent is warranted. Attention then turns to the continent's physical geography and how its climate, physiography, and ecology constitute the frontiers through which African populations have interacted with each other and the wider world. These interfaces have been, and continue to be, framed by what Africa produces and what its inhabitants have sought from abroad, as well as by the organizational and logistical structures through which these resources were exploited and moved. Discussion of the material, social, and technological bases of Africa's connections with the rest of the world forms the third part of this chapter.

From here I move to how archaeologists have thought about these connections. Early speculations that emphasized the passive receipt of external influences were closely linked to European colonial conceptualizations of Africa as a "dark" and "timeless" continent where little changed except through contact from outside. Such ideas, which long influenced Africanist scholarship, still cast a shadow today (M. Hall 2002). For archaeologists their rejection encouraged several projects geared specifically toward examining the impacts of long-distance trade, colonial activity, and world religions. (Thinking only of sub-Saharan West Africa, examples include Robert et al. 1970; Posnanski 1976; S. McIntosh and R. McIntosh 1980; Devisse 1983; Insoll 1996, 2000; Berthier 1997; DeCorse 2001a; and Stahl 2001a). Current archaeological research employs several models to help frame interaction between one society and another, and I examine some of these ideas, highlighting those considered later on. Finally, I look at Africa as the continent of origin of both hominids and anatomically modern humans and the extent to which connections with Europe and Asia are traceable through the last stages of the Pleistocene.

Where and What Is Africa?

The answer to the question of where and what is Africa might be thought self-evident, but things are, as so often, more complex than they first seem. A fundamental reason for this is expressed by Appiah (1995, 23):

—Most people in the continent have lived in societies that defined both self and others—
by ties of blood and power. It would never have occurred to most of the Africans in
this long history to think that they belonged to a larger human group defined by a
shared relationship to the African continent.

Consciousness of belonging to “Africa,” rather than to communities defined by religion, language, ethnicity, or political allegiance, came out of reaction and resistance to the experience of colonialism and its aftermath (Mazrui 1986). “Africa,” in other words, as an entity both whole and differentiated from other major landmasses is very considerably a European invention. For the Classical Greeks *Libya* was already one of the world’s three known continents. Roman authors took up this idea, sometimes extending the name of one of their provinces, *Africa* (roughly modern Tunisia and Tripolitania), to the whole continent (Mudimbe 1988, 1994), the southern (broadly, sub-Saharan) portions of which they knew as *Aethiopia*.

Exploration of Africa’s Atlantic coastline during the fifteenth century and the slow accrual of information about its interior that followed were one facet of Europe’s late medieval expansion (J. R. S. Phillips 1988). Confronted with cultural differences on a previously unimaginable scale, Europeans first differentiated between themselves and those whom they encountered on the basis of religion: Christian as opposed to Muslim or pagan. But however keen to seek allies in Prester John’s Ethiopia and however favorably impressed by some of the polities with which they traded, the Portuguese came armed with papal bulls and a heritage of crusading activity that saw them claim ownership of the land they “discovered.” Though actual colonization, as opposed to the establishment of fortified trading posts, was a considerably later phenomenon, the sense of European superiority implicit in such claims was quickly combined with economic imperatives and translated into a developing trade for slaves, most notably for use in Europe’s American colonies (chapters 6 and 7). From the sixteenth century onward, and culminating in the “Scramble” of the late 1800s (Pakenham 1991), Europeans of all nationalities increasingly constructed their own sense of self-identity and self-worth in opposition to the lifestyles and cultural practices of people elsewhere in the world, no longer defined by religion but by increasingly tight linkages between notions of primitiveness, race, and geographical location. Museums, including those exhibiting African artifacts, and the developing disciplines of archaeology and anthropology played important parts in this exercise (Coombes 1997).

As part of this process, “Africa” was increasingly equated with “Black Africa” (Mazrui 1986), an identification that formalized the distinction between “sub-Saharan Africa,” inhabited predominantly by people of negroid physical stock, and areas farther north. There, by contrast, the inhabitants were “white” (Arab or Berber), Islam predominated, not traditional religions or syncretic combinations of the two, and connections across the Mediterranean with Europe could be emphasized, as witnessed by the establishment of Greek and Phoenician colonies along North Africa’s shoreline and its subsequent incorporation into the Roman Empire. Nineteenth and early twentieth century European settlement was more or less explicitly seen as a renewal of the same process, with archaeology duly invoked in its support (Liverani 2000a, 17–18).

At one level of analysis the entire Mediterranean basin does indeed form a coherent whole (Abulafia 2003), and in a long-term perspective it is the comparatively recent advent of Islam, its contraction back into the Maghreb, and the latter’s colonial history that crystallized the distinction here between Africa and Europe.¹ But to admit these points should not confine North Africa to a compartment that excludes or downplays its connections with the much larger landmass to its south.

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