

I Introduction: the medieval scene

If it is universally acknowledged that geography and climate shape and mould the course of history, it is a truism peculiarly self-evident in Africa, where humankind has had to contend with environmental conditions often harsh and always challenging. The continent's broad vegetation zones are best portrayed on a map, which will show at a glance the contrast between the areas lying roughly to the north and south of the equator. In the northern sector, the lines demarcating these zones march horizontally across the continent with almost the precision of the lines of latitude, and the determining factor is that of rainfall. The Mediterranean zone, with its coastal plains watered by regular winter rains, and at its western end the high pastures of the Atlas ranges, is bordered by the arid and stony Sahara, measuring more than 1700 miles from north to south, and stretching for more than 4000 miles from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea. On its southern 'shore' (in Arabic, *sahel*) the desert merges into the open savanna of the Sahel, free from the tsetse-fly and offering pasture for most domestic animals, notably, cattle, sheep and goats, donkeys and the small horses native to the region. Southwards, the Sahel merges into the bush and light woodland of the Sudanic belt, offering rainfall enough for cereal agriculture, but where infestation by tsetse-fly poses a mortal danger to the larger domestic animals, especially to cattle and all the regular beasts of burden and traction. The hard, sun-baked soil must be tilled with hoes and not with ploughs. The bush of the Sudanic belt ends abruptly with the margin of the equatorial forest, where vegetables and root crops, nut and fruit trees can be grown in clearings. There is no doubt that during the second millennium a general drying of the climate has caused the zonal boundaries to shift southwards, perhaps by as much as 600 miles, but the sequence of the vegetation zones has been largely maintained.

South of the equator, the vegetation map shows a very different picture. Here, the vegetation zones criss-cross, with forest or woodland running from the Cameroon highlands in the north-west to coastal Mozambique in the south-east, and dry savanna from Somalia in the north-east to Namibia in the south-west. Here, the determining factor is not so much rainfall as height above sea level.

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Very much of Africa south of the equator is covered by mountain and tableland at heights varying from 3500 to 6000 feet, with peaks rising to 15,000 feet or even more. This mountain country begins in the Ethiopian highlands and runs with scarcely a break from there to the South African highveld. Most of it is in vegetational terms savanna, corresponding to the Sahelian and Sudanic belts of Africa north of the equator. Much of it until recently abounded in wild game and was heavily infested by tsetse-fly. But over the course of 3000 years of bush-clearing by humans, fly-free grasslands were gradually established on a scale which enabled cattle pastoralism to become the main occupation of significant groups of people living all the way down the highland spine of the subcontinent at heights between 3500 and 6000 feet. This central tableland is cut through by two great volcanic rifts, one running down the centre of the Ethiopian and Kenyan highlands, and the other cleaving the watershed which divides the Congo drainage system from that of the Nile. The escarpments of these deep valleys offer specially rich opportunities for combining agriculture and pastoralism, and the floors of both hold chains of lakes, round the shores of which some of the earliest fishing industries of the world developed. At higher levels, mountain valleys and ridges offer fertile volcanic soils to those prepared to undertake the heavy work of forest clearance. Areas below 3000 feet occur mainly in the coastal plains and in the great basins of the Congo and the lower Zambezi river systems, where most of the land remains under primeval forest and where human populations have traditionally lived by a combination of fishing and riverside agriculture.

Thus far, it might seem that humans living in the southern half of the continent have enjoyed a better range of natural environments than the northerners. But, for the whole period covered by this book, we have to consider not only the natural conditions of each zone, but the possibilities for creative interaction between one zone and another. Viewed from this angle, the situation of northern Africa looks in nearly every way preferable to that of the south. This vital distinction has been seen by some scholars as one between those parts of Africa that were open to influences from the outside world and those which lacked this advantage and so were left to develop in isolation. While there is some truth in this view, its weakness lies in the unspoken premise that everything of value to Africa was introduced from the outside, with the initiative coming always from the outsiders. More pertinent is the fact that throughout northern Africa there have long been in existence more effective means of

2 transport than the human head or shoulder. The southern coast of

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West Africa, for example, is honey-combed with lagoons and barrier islands, where people lived by fishing and salt-boiling, but depended for their vegetable food on the surplus produce of the forest dwellers on their landward side, which reached them down the rivers in fleets of huge dug-out canoes. Several major river systems, including those of the Senegal, the Gambia, the Casamance, the Comoe, the Volta, the Niger and the Cross, offered waterways cutting right through the forest zone to the agricultural country of the Sudanic belt. The great Niger waterway made a double traverse of the entire savanna belt, from the Guinea forest north-eastwards to the desert edge and thence south-eastwards to its delta in the forest. Thus, the boat traffic of the Niger and its many tributaries could carry the surplus grain of the Sudan to feed the textile weavers and leather-workers of the Sahel cities and return southwards with the all-important salt of the central Sahara which was brought on camel-back to the river-ports around the river's northern bend. The Niger waterway had its eastern counterpart in the Logone-Chari river system draining northwards from the Cameroon highlands to Lake Chad, where it connected with the camel trade of the central Sudan and the salt deposits of Bilma in the central Sahara, midway between Bornu and Tripoli.

Eastwards again, the valley of the great River Nile crossed all five vegetation zones in its step-by-step descent from the Ethiopian mountains and the great lakes of eastern equatorial Africa to the south-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. On the Nile flood depended the unique fertility of riverine Egypt and the ease of navigation within the boundaries of that country, although from the cataract region southwards the camel and donkey trails offered a shorter and swifter mode of transport than the river boat. In Ethiopia and the Horn it was once again these two beasts of burden which carried the salt of the Afar desert to the dense agricultural population of the highlands and brought down the grain surplus of the Christian kingdom to feed the Muslim pilgrims visiting the holy cities of Islam.

Seen in the light of these interzonal exchanges within the northern half of Africa as a whole, the connections with the outside world across the Mediterranean and the Red Sea do not seem quite so all-important. The gold of the Sudan and the ivory of the forest contributed a small, luxury element to this general pattern of interregional trade, the role of which has been much exaggerated by historians, because these items travelled much further afield than the rest. But right through our period, and on a steadily increasing scale, it was

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the exchange of produce between the different climatic zones that really signified. For northern and western Africa itself, the salt deposits of the central Sahara were more important than all the gold of Guinea and the camel-breeders of the desert more indispensable than the merchants of the Maghrib.

The existence of the interzonal trade of course made it easier for individuals to travel, not merely as merchants and caravan drivers, but as captives, as pilgrims, as students, and as skilled artificers of every kind. Many of these travellers remained permanently at their various destinations. During the early centuries of Islam the armies of North African states, as also the harems of their more prosperous urbanised citizens, were largely recruited from the captives brought across the Sahara, whose descendants merged with the local populations at a whole variety of social and occupational levels. No less certainly, the populations of the Sahelian and Sudanic belts were deeply penetrated by the centuries-long westward migration of pastoral Arabs, most of whose descendants turned themselves into semi-sedentary cattle farmers on the Sahelian pattern, all the way from Upper Egypt and the Nilotic Sudan to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The Saharan camel pastoralists who mined the salt and carried it across the desert in both directions were among the first black Africans to convert to Islam, and to the south of the desert the first to follow their example were the Sudanese Dyula traders who met them at the terminals of the desert trails with their river boats and their caravans of donkeys and human porters, and conducted the trade from there southwards to the margins of the forest belt. Thus, as a concomitant of its interzonal trade, the Sudanic belt of West Africa joined the wider household of Islam. No more than in other medieval societies did any but a handful of clerics actually read the sacred texts, written in classical Arabic, but many could listen to those who did, and many more could learn something at second or third hand and so pick up a rudimentary knowledge of a world wider than that of their home towns. They knew that Muslims dressed in decent cotton clothing, washed before eating and abstained from alcoholic beverages. And that, in itself, meant much. It signalled that Africa north of the equator was on the move.

In Africa south of the equator the environmental conditions were far less favourable to the interchange of produce over any distance. Here, the continuing prevalence of the tsetse-fly over large parts of the highland savanna meant that beasts of burden were unknown except in the far south. And waterways, although they existed in the forested centres of the great river basins, were seldom viable for the

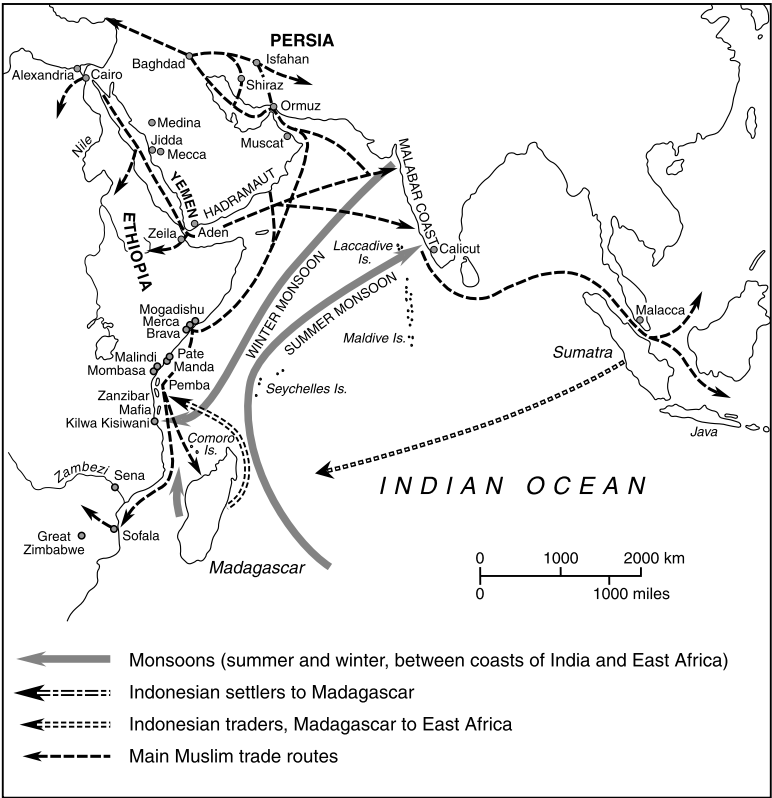
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interchange of produce between different climatic zones. Their high-land tributaries tended to be too shallow and fast-flowing for canoe traffic, and their lower reaches were nearly always broken by cataracts where they made their final descent to sea level. There remained the central basins, where people who lived mainly by fishing also used their boats for river trading, and carried metal goods and other artefacts from one community to the next. But it seems to have been only towards the end of our period that systems for relays and portages were organised capable of handling any quantity of long-distance trade.

For the rest, which included all of inland East and South-East Africa, trade was limited to what could be carried by human porters, and therefore to produce of light weight and high value, such as gold and copper, ivory and rare skins, glass beads and cotton textiles and, later, tobacco and spirits, guns and gunpowder. A porter's load might weigh 60 or 70 pounds. The journey to the coast and back might take anything up to five or six months. Food would have to be purchased along the way, and tolls paid for safe transit. Given all the difficulties, it is hardly surprising that the earliest oral record of imported textiles reaching the kingdom of Buganda, on the western shores of Lake Victoria, dates from the second half of the eighteenth century.

In fact, in the southern half of Africa, the only climatic zone which saw the development of a really active exchange of bulk produce was the coastal plain which faced the Indian Ocean. It used to be assumed that this was entirely due to the commercial enterprise of the Asian settlers who came to live there, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the dominant factor was the comparative ease of navigation in the western Indian Ocean, which enabled even the outrigger canoes of the Indonesian islanders to make the voyage there, providing only that they observed the regular alternation of the monsoon winds. The sea-going craft of the Persian Gulf and southern Arabia were no doubt more strongly built, but archaeological research is showing that the earliest Muslims to build their little mud-and-wattle mosques on the East African coast during the eighth and ninth centuries were few and poor, and that it was only with the awakening of the African coastal peoples, and also those of Madagascar, to the opportunities offered by the export of foodstuffs and the gathering of hardwood timber for the Arabian market that the coastal cities grew prosperous enough to build mosques, tombs and palaces in coral rag. Significantly, only the slightest signs have as yet emerged of any commercial interchange between the populations

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2 Indian Ocean trading activities, 1250-1400

of the coastal plain and the interior tablelands behind – except in the hinterland of southern Mozambique, between the Zambezi and the Limpopo, where gold, copper and ivory were close enough and valuable enough to stand the cost of human portage. All down the Indian Ocean coast, the outreach of Islam remained confined to the harbour towns of the coastal plain, which recruited their citizens from the fisherman-farmers of the surrounding countryside, who, on coming to town, became Muslims and learned to speak the Bantu lingua franca called Kiswahili. But it was only in the nineteenth century that coast-based caravans began trading into the interior in a regular way. Until then, it was left to the peoples of the interior to get their trade goods to the coast. The gold and ivory trade of Zimbabwe may well have influenced the concentration of political and economic power in that region, but there is no shred of evidence to

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suggest that individuals from there travelled northwards up the sea routes of the Indian Ocean to learn from the knowledge and experience of a wider world.

The contrast between the northern and southern halves of Africa appears no less strongly when we turn from the consideration of peaceful commerce and travel to the nature and significance of warfare. Here, the most essential distinction was that between the horsed and the unhorsed, and the most crucial military frontier was that where the two modes of warfare interacted. Roughly speaking, Africa as far south as the Sahel lay within the horse belt, and as far back as the first millennium BC horses harnessed to light war-chariots had been used for slave-raiding in the Saharan highlands. In the first millennium AD the Christian Nubians, riding their small horses bareback, were respected for their skill as cavalry archers in the manner of the steppe peoples of Central Asia. The Arabs brought the bridle and stirrup in their conquest of North Africa. Chain-mail and horse-armour followed as luxury imports from southern Europe and put a premium on the big Barbary horses of North Africa, which were exported southwards across the desert in increasing numbers by the beginning of our period. Thenceforward, politics in the city states of the Sahel were dominated by the aristocracies of armoured knights, whose dry-season raiding brought in both the slaves needed for the agricultural work and other industries of the towns and those exported northwards across the desert for more horses and their equipment. Gradually, during our period it was discovered that horses, if stabled in town and attended by four to six slaves each to cut and carry in fodder from the surrounding countryside, could survive through the wet season even within the fly-ridden Sudanic belt, and so the cavalry frontier moved south to the fringes of the forest. Even within the forest, as in Benin city for example, these animals enjoyed so much prestige that they were kept by rulers purely as symbols of political power.

Very different was the warfare of the southern half of Africa, where, prior to the late eighteenth century, the only standing armies consisted of the personal bodyguards of kings and other great men, and where military action could normally take place only as a temporary response to the summons of the big war drum. In some cases specified areas of land could be allotted, together with rights over the services of those who lived on them, to military leaders who could muster a following to join in a campaign or in dealing with an attack from the outside. In pastoral kingdoms a frontier district might be entrusted to the herdsmen of a section of the royal cattle. But, most

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typically perhaps, military prowess was associated, at least in legend, with the smithing skills of a band of hunters, living apart from the ordinary people of a farming community, in the uncleared woodlands where they could be close to their prey and at the same time preserve the technical secrets of their trade as armourers and makers of agricultural tools. In a later chapter we shall see how easily an ivory-hunting expedition could turn itself into an army of conquest (below, pp. 182-3). Very occasionally, a whole community, smitten by some natural disaster, or finding itself overcrowded in its home territory, would temporarily abandon its own efforts at food production, put itself on to a war footing and live by terror and predation on the harvests and domestic stock of their neighbours – ‘cultivating with the spear’, as the leader of one such episode called it. In general, pastoralists were more warlike than cultivators, if only because they had to defend their herds against wild animals and human predators by day and night. They did their everyday work spear in hand. But it was also the case that in good times herds increased faster than the human population, so that herders were always competing with each other for the best pasturelands and trying to infiltrate the spaces between, and within, agricultural settlements.

Our starting-date in the middle of the thirteenth century, then, was not one which had continent-wide significance in any particular field. The Muslim heartlands of Africa, however, did experience a series of decisive changes around this time. In Egypt, Mamluk rule, which was to last into the nineteenth century, was established in 1250, and in 1260 the Mamluk sultans consolidated their rule and their reputation in the Muslim world by defeating and turning back the advance of the Mongols towards the eastern Mediterranean. One of the earliest initiatives of the Mamluks in Africa was to drive the Arab nomads of upper Egypt southwards into Nubia, and so set in motion the Islamisation of the Christian kingdoms of the middle Nile. Likewise, beyond Egypt’s western frontier, the middle years of the thirteenth century were those in which the Hafsid governors of Tunis were establishing their independence from the fading empire of the Almohads in Morocco and southern Spain, and were creating the new sultanate of Ifriqiya, stretching from Tripoli to eastern Algeria, which in the sixteenth century would fall, like Egypt, under the dominion of the Ottomans. To the south of Ifriqiya, the kings of Kanem, ruling around the basin of Lake Chad, had been Muslim since the eleventh century and by the thirteenth century several of

8 them had made the pilgrimage to Mecca and had even built a hostel

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in Cairo for their subjects studying at the university mosque of al-Azhar. By about 1300 the rulers and courtiers of the rising empire of Mali on the upper Niger were Muslims and already participating in the pilgrimage to the holy cities of their faith. There, as also in Kanem, a literate class was emerging, and the *shari'a* law was beginning to be applied in the highest courts.

The attraction of key groups towards Islam is, however, only one perspective on the history of Africa, even of northern Africa, at this period. Looked at from within the continent, and searching for the connections of any one neighbourhood, encampment, village, town, chiefdom, kingdom or empire, it is obvious that Africa was still moving mostly to its own rhythms, following its own procedures and seeking its own paths, channels and routes. Socially and economically, the tendency during the period covered by this book was for societies to expand, sometimes by natural increase, but often by conquest, by the absorption of war captives and of people in various other forms of dependency, who can be described in some cases as subjects, and in others as slaves. If the economic gain was favourable enough, such dependent people might be traded abroad – in the case of the Muslim world, across the Sahara or over the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. But in many other cases war captives might be deported from a frontier district and resettled in a mining area to clear the forests and dig the shafts, or else to help with the production of food around a growing capital town. In political terms, this tendency to enlargement covered a broad continuum, from village to neighbourhood, from chiefdom to kingdom, from kingdom to empire. Always, however, political enlargement had to reckon with the limitations imposed by distance and the available means of travel and transport. This meant that conquered territories could seldom be directly administered. Most were simply placed under tribute, which generally meant that the task of slave-raiding or ivory-hunting was delegated to subordinate rulers, leaving the paramount to enforce prompt payment by occasional punitive expeditions to the periphery of the kingdom or empire. It was, generally speaking, a typically medieval scene, which remained in place in most of Africa until the nineteenth century.

The historical processes represented by the encroachment of the wider world on the one hand, and by the political and economic enlargements and accommodations of the different regions of Africa on the other, are mirrored in the changes in the nature of the evidence available to historians of the continent. The first volume in this series, *Africa in the Iron Age*, by Roland Oliver and Brian Fagan,

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dealt with the period from about 500 BC to the early centuries of the second millennium AD. This is a period for which, although there are some important literary sources, the evidence comes mainly from archaeology. What we here call Medieval Africa from about 1250 to 1800 is, in contrast, one for which, although archaeology continues to contribute, the dominant sources are literary and traditional. For that part of the continent open to the wider world, we now have chronicles, by which we mean historical information collected and written down more or less within the lifetime of living witnesses of the events, by learned men concerned to establish facts accurately and to arrange them in chronological order. For our period there is continuous evidence of this kind for Egypt and the countries of the Maghrib, and for Ethiopia, the western and central Sudan, the Nilotic Sudan and a considerable portion of the East African coast.

At one end of the spectrum, chronicle material shades off into recorded tradition, by which we mean information about the past remembered by non-literate witnesses of events, and passed on by word of mouth from one generation to another until eventually it was told to a literate person who recorded it in writing. Most of the evidence about most of Africa between 1250 and 1800 is of this kind, and obviously it is less reliable than evidence directly recorded from eye-witnesses. People tend to forget the things which are not in some way relevant to their daily lives, and non-literate people lack the means to place past events within an accurate chronological framework. Also, for so long as it remains in an oral state, tradition is liable to be distorted in order to serve the ideological and propaganda needs of succeeding generations. Much therefore depends on how soon and how carefully oral tradition came to be recorded.

In most of Africa this process had to wait until some members of the societies concerned began to adopt literacy in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. However, in that part of Africa which was in some kind of touch with the outreach of Islam, some traditional history was recorded much earlier. Ibn Khaldun, the great historian and philosopher, who was born in Tunis in 1332 and died in Cairo in 1406, incorporated much traditional material from the Sahara and the western Sudan, as well as from the Maghrib itself, in his 'History of the Berbers'. The mid-seventeenth-century chronicles of Songhay and Timbuktu by al-Sa'di and Ibn al-Mukhtar incorporate traditions of the earlier empires of Ghana and Mali. The fragmentary chronicles of Hausaland, Aïr and Bornu,