African Civilizations

This major new revised edition of *African Civilizations* re-examines the physical evidence for developing social complexity in Africa over the last six thousand years. Unlike the two previous editions, it is not confined to tropical Africa but considers the whole continent. Graham Connah focuses upon the archaeological research of two key aspects of complexity, urbanism and state formation, in ten main areas of Africa: Egypt, North Africa, Nubia, Ethiopia, the West African savanna, the West African forest, the East African coast and islands, the Zimbabwe Plateau, parts of Central Africa, and South Africa. The book’s main concern is to review the available evidence in its varied environmental settings and to consider possible explanations of the developments that gave rise to it. Extensively illustrated, including new maps and plans, and offering an extended list of references, this book provides essential reading for students of archaeology, anthropology, African history, black studies, and social geography.

African Civilizations

An archaeological perspective

THIRD EDITION

Graham Connah

Australian National University
In memory of Nora Fisher McMillan
## Contents

* List of figures  page viii
* Preface and acknowledgements  xi

1 The context  i
2 Origins: social change on the lower Nile  17
3 The Mediterranean frontier: North Africa  43
4 Sudanic genesis: Nubia  69
5 Isolation: the Ethiopian and Eritrean Highlands  111
6 Opportunity and constraint: the West African savanna  149
7 Achieving power: the West African forest and its fringes  185
8 Indian Ocean networks: the East African coast and islands  221
9 Cattle, ivory, and gold: social complexity in Zambezia  260
10 Central Africa: the Upemba Depression, Interlacustrine Region, and Far West  299
11 Settlement growth and emerging polities: South Africa  330
12 What are the common denominators?  347

* References  355
* Index  399
Figures

1.1 Location of the areas discussed in this book page 13
1.2 Approximate chronology of the areas of social complexity discussed in this book 15
2.1 Principal archaeological sites and places on the lower Nile 20
2.2 One side of the ‘Cities Palette’ fragment 24
2.3 Plan of the Middle Kingdom town of Kahun 25
2.4 Plan of the Middle Kingdom fortress of Buhen 26
2.5 Reconstruction of part of the New Kingdom city of El-Amarna 27
2.6 Plan of Deir el-Medina village at Thebes 28
2.7 Plan of the Fatimid city of al-Qahira, founded in AD 969 29
2.8 Wooden model of a peasant ploughing with oxen 31
2.9 Two Giza pyramids: Menkaure’s in foreground, Khafre’s in distance 33
2.10 Plan of part of the Graeco-Roman city of Berenike 38
3.1 Principal archaeological sites, places, and people in North Africa 45
3.2 Plan of the Punic city of Kerkouane, Tunisia 50
3.3 Plan of the Large South Baths at Timgad, Algeria 52
3.4 Plan of the central area of the Roman city of Sabratha, Libya 54
3.5 Plan of the Roman city of Thamugadi, Algeria 55
3.6 Plan of the Islamic city of Qsar es-Seghir, Morocco 57
3.7 Silver denarius of Hadrian, commemorating visit to Africa 60
3.8 Reconstruction of a Roman olive-press, southeast of Tripoli 61
3.9 Marble portrait head of Septimius Severus, from Djemila, Algeria 64
3.10 Arabic inscription from Durbi Takusheyi, northern Nigeria 67
4.1 Principal archaeological sites and places on the middle Nile 71
4.2 Plan of Kerma during its ‘Classic’ period 79
4.3 Upper part of a stone statue of Taharqa, from Pnubs, near Kerma 83
4.4 Plan of Meroë, in Sudan 85
4.5 Meroitic ‘Upper Town’ of Hamadab, near Meroë 87
4.6 Plan of Tomb 95 at Ballana, Egypt 91
4.7 Plan of Arminna West, Egypt 94
4.8 Cross-section of castle-house at Kulubnarti 95
4.9 Pastoral scenes on two bronze bowls from Karanog, Egypt 97
5.1 Principal archaeological sites and places in Ethiopia and Eritrea 113

viii
Figures

5.2 Inside the temple at Yeha, Ethiopia 119
5.3 Stelae 3 and 6 at Aksum, Ethiopia 122
5.4 Plan of the ‘Dongur Mansion’ at Aksum 127
5.5 Plan of Matara, Eritrea, showing Aksumite urban layout 128
5.6 Beta Giyorgis, one of the Lalibela rock-cut churches, Ethiopia 131
5.7 The castle of Emperor Fasiladas, Gondar, Ethiopia 132
5.8 Glass goblet from a tomb in the Gudit Stelae Field, Aksum 139
5.9 Aksumite bronze coin of Armah, with Christian cross on reverse 140
6.1 West African environmental zones showing major yam cultivation 152
6.2 Principal archaeological sites of the West African Holocene 156
6.3 Plan of Dakhlet el Atrous I, Mauritania 158
6.4 Plan of Jenné-jeno, Mali, showing growth 159
6.5 Plan of Building Sequence 6, at Tegdaoust, Mauritania 163
6.6 Magnetogram of the settlement at Zilum, north-east Nigeria 166
6.7 Plans of the Kano city walls, Nigeria, showing phases of growth 168
6.8 Elite burial in Tumulus 5, Durbi Takusheyi, northern Nigeria 171
6.9 Precolonial trade routes and commodities in West Africa 182
7.1 Plan of the site of Bono Manso, Ghana 193
7.2 Plan of the site of Asantemanso, Ghana 194
7.3 Plan of Abomey, Bénin, showing royal palaces 196
7.4 Plan of the city walls of Old Oyo, Nigeria 197
7.5 ‘Bronze’ casting of an Oni of Ife 199
7.6 Plan of Ife city walls, Nigeria 200
7.7 Shaft containing mass sacrifice, Benin City, Nigeria 201
7.8 Ground plan of Ogiamien’s House, Benin City, Nigeria 202
7.9 Earthwork enclosures in the Benin City area 204
7.10 Plan of the burial at Igbo-Ukwu, Nigeria 207
8.1 Principal archaeological sites on the East African coast and islands 223
8.2 Principal archaeological sites in the Lamu Archipelago, Kenya 226
8.3 East Africa in the Eurasian and African world system 227
8.4 Plan of Gedi, Kenya, showing two construction phases 233
8.5 Plan of Shanga, Kenya 235
8.6 Plan of Takwa, Kenya 237
8.7 Examples of Triangular Incised Ware sherds 241
8.8 Antananarivo, Madagascar, in the 1850s 244
8.9 Section through the Small Domed Mosque, Kilwa 248
9.1 Distribution of Zimbabwe- and Khami-style sites 263
9.2 Principal archaeological sites in Zambezia 268
9.3 Stonework in the Hill Ruin at Great Zimbabwe 273
9.4 Great Zimbabwe: the Maund Ruin 275
9.5 Commoner housing at Great Zimbabwe 276
Figures

9.6 Plan of Great Zimbabwe showing stone structures and daga huts 277
9.7 Zvongombe South, Zimbabwe, reconstructed layout 280
9.8 Plan of Khami, showing stone structures and daga huts 283
9.9 Spatial analysis maps of Zimbabwe sites 291
10.1 Principal archaeological sites in Central Africa 301
10.2 Archaeological sites in the Upemba Depression, Democratic Congo 307
10.3 Early Kisalian burial at Kamilamba, Democratic Congo 309
10.4 Principal archaeological sites in the Ugandan Interlacustrine Region 312
10.5 Plan of earthworks at Bigo, Uganda 314
10.6 Plan of Ntusi, Uganda 316
10.7 Traces of fourteenth- to fifteenth-century circular houses at Ntusi 317
10.8 Axes and other iron artefacts in burial, Corisco Island, Equatorial Guinea 319
10.9 Ceramic head from Luzira, near Kampala, Uganda 326
11.1 Distribution of stone-walled settlement units on the South African Highveld 332
11.2 Types of stone-walled settlement units on the South African Highveld 335
11.3 Settlement unit at Molokwane, North-West Province, South Africa 338
11.4 Centre of the settlement of Marothodi, North-West Province, South Africa 342
Preface and acknowledgements

I started to write this book in 1983, with previous editions appearing in 1987 and 2001 and a Japanese translation in 1993. Any book that originated so long ago and has remained in print for so long will become seriously out of date, but this is particularly the case for a publication about later African archaeology, which has seen an enormous increase in research activity in recent years. I am therefore very grateful to Cambridge University Press for the opportunity to provide a third edition. In doing so, I feel it essential to stress two points. First, people are sometimes unconvinced about the newness of new editions, but this really is a new edition and I hope that it will assist those who have ignored the second edition and continued to cite the outdated first edition. Second, preparing a new edition of a book will inevitably be constrained to some extent by the thinking that influenced its original content and form, in this instance many years ago; the only way to prevent this is to write a completely new book.

Failing this, what is new about this ‘new’ edition? First, it is larger and covers the whole continent, not just tropical Africa, like the two previous editions. This has meant the addition of three completely new chapters, on Egypt, North Africa, and South Africa. Although the book is consequently longer, the extra chapters could only be added by also shortening some of the chapters that already existed. In addition, those chapters have required considerable additions to include recent research, and as a result parts of some of them have been substantially rewritten or subjected to numerous smaller changes. Inevitably this has resulted in the deletion of older source material, wherever it could be replaced by newer information. This has included the replacement of some illustrations, as well as the addition of new ones. The whole process has taken more than three years but I remain concerned about recent publications that might have been missed; in spite of the Internet, accessing sources remains one of the main difficulties for the writers of synthesizes. However, as far as possible, I have tried to include a representative sample of recently published material. I hope that not too many people will think that I have ignored their work.

Second, although this does not pretend to be a theoretical study, there are inevitably theoretical implications in the way that its subject matter has been treated. As with previous editions, it has been my intention to examine the archaeological evidence for emerging social complexity in Africa,
Preface and acknowledgements

particularly the evidence for urbanization and the formation of states. These subjects have a very large literature, particularly concerning social theory, and in the previous editions I tried to outline the most significant of the relevant ideas in the opening chapter. Given the main purpose of the book, however, which is to ask of the physical evidence how we know what we think we know, it is impossible to give adequate space to theoretical matters, and in this new edition I have further compressed the relevant material as well as updating some of its more important aspects. One review of the first edition was headed ‘Complex societies made simple’ and I have never been able to decide whether this was intended as an insult or a compliment. Whatever the case, is it a crime to attempt straightforward explanations of complex data?

In attempting those explanations, the book continues to emphasize geographical and environmental matters, but sociopolitical aspects are now given greater attention than formerly. The changes in human societies that led to the development of cities and states were clearly influenced by many external factors, but in the end it was changes in the societies themselves and the way that they organized themselves that were of greatest importance. Such changes took place in many different ways and sometimes did not happen at all. There is no magic formula to explain their occurrence or absence, and old explanations involving social evolution and the emergence of so-called civilization have ceased to be adequate. Unfortunately, archaeology is often insufficiently informative on these matters, and our understanding is compounded by the variety of ways used by different researchers to extract meaning from the evidence that is available. It is to be hoped that as time passes, the picture will become clearer.

So many colleagues have assisted in my work on this and previous editions that it is impossible to thank them all here. Instead, the text is heavily referenced to the sources used, and the captions of the illustrations acknowledge the origin of those that are not my own or that have been redrawn. Great efforts have been made to obtain permission to reproduce copyright material where necessary, and in cases where copyright holders could not be contacted, usually because of the passage of time, the author would like to hear from them and offers his apologies for the omission. Some line drawings have been updated by Andrew Stawowczyk Long and/or myself, but I remain grateful to Douglas Hobbs, who did the initial work on many of them long ago. Finally, as for previous editions, I remain greatly in debt to Beryl Connah, whose continuing support and encouragement has been vitally important.
Preface and acknowledgements

In the meantime, a whole generation of Africanist archaeologists has gradually departed the scene, leaving a legacy of research on which a younger and more numerous generation can build, and one that increasingly includes African scholars as well as those from many other parts of the world. I wish them all well in their future endeavours.

Graham Connah
School of Archaeology and Anthropology
Australian National University
Canberra