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1
Introduction: the world from 1200 BCE to 900 CE

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This volume traces processes associated with the creation of large-scale political entities and networks of exchange, within a time frame that builds on and expands the usual limits of the classical era. It considers the formation and expansion of states and empires, and the attendant economic, political, social, cultural, and intellectual developments in various regions of the world. It explores these processes at three interacting scales. At the global scale, the initial chapters provide an overview of the key economic, political, social, cultural, and intellectual developments that occurred between 1200 BCE and 900 CE. Chapters at the interregional level focus more tightly on developments in a number of clearly defined political and cultural entities within the four distinct world zones of the period – Afro-Eurasia, the Americas, Australasia, and Oceania. These interregional perspectives are then complemented by a series of regional studies, which use a "close-up" view of events to illustrate the developments and patterns identified at the interregional and global scales. This introductory chapter offers a brief global-scale overview of some of the key developments in the evolution of states, empires, and networks between *c.* 1200 BCE and *c.* 900 CE.

Introduction

When the sun rose above the eastern horizon on the first day of the year world historians designate as 1200 Before the Common Era (BCE), its rays progressively illuminated the continents and oceans of earth. As the world spun on its axis, light spread westwards across the face of the globe, and night gave way to day. The earth was almost 4.6 billion years old, one of a number of planets and smaller objects orbiting an obscure, medium-sized star in the spiraling Milky Way Galaxy, home to perhaps 200 billion other stars. Yet of all the planets, moons, and asteroids in the solar system upon which the sun shone that day, only one was known to be home to life, which covered its surfaces and

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deeps in teeming variety. Each one of these countless organisms was a product of evolutionary processes that had begun with the emergence of archaebacterial life forms some 3.8 billion years earlier, and each was perfectly adapted to the environmental niche in which it dwelt. Although all of these life forms were extraordinary in their own way, one relative newcomer had proven exceptionally versatile since making its modest appearance somewhere in Central Africa 200,000 years earlier, and which now occupied every continent on earth with the exception of Antarctica. It is with the affairs of this species – *Homo sapiens* (or "wise man") – between *c.* 1200 BCE and *c.* 900 CE that this volume is principally concerned. In this introductory chapter we unfold the events of that period as though they took place in a single day, from "sunrise" in the Year 1200 BCE to "sunset" more than two millennia later in the Year 900 of the Common Era (CE). *Homo sapiens* are a product of hominid evolution, a unique bipedal species descended from some common ancestor of both apes and hominids that lived approximately 7 million years ago. As a result of geographical isolation through earthquake or some other natural event, a small group of hominids had found themselves isolated and following a different evolutionary path to other members of their *homininae* genus. The result was the emergence of a large-brained hominine, *Homo sapiens*, which possessed specialized cognitive abilities that eventually facilitated the acquisition of complex, symbolic language. This had given *Homo sapiens* an adaptive advantage that had allowed them to prosper and spread at the expense of their closest hominine relatives, *Homo erectus* and *Homo neanderthalis*. By *c.* 27,000 years ago only one type of hominine remained on the planet – *Homo sapiens* – already distinguished as one of the most remarkable, but also most dangerous, species on earth.

After pursuing a nomadic, hunter-foraging lifeway for 190,000 years or so, some groups of humans had adopted agriculture and sedentism from *c.* 9000 BCE, an "agrarian revolution" that set human history off upon different trajectories. In those regions where agricultural lifeways were pursued, some villages evolved into towns and cities, and by *c.* 3200 BCE complex societies had emerged in southwest Asia and northeast Africa. In the centuries that followed, the increasingly powerful leaders of these early states learned to control larger regions and more and more resources, until by *c.* 1200 BCE huge agrarian civilizations, each ruled by coercive political structures called "states," controlled substantial portions of the Afro-Eurasian world zone. Historians have traced the experiences of these agrarian civilizations across large scales of time and space. Many of the chapters in this volume are concerned with the history of these civilizational structures, the

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cities and states that sustained them, and the networks of exchange that connected them together into vast webs between *c.* 1200 BCE and *c.* 900 CE.

In many other regions, however, humans had continued to follow the foraging, nomadic lifeways of our ancestors and had not even adopted agriculture and sedentism, let alone states and civilizations. It was the agricultural revolution that created different human histories, then, because the hitherto shared and common global experience of hunting and foraging that continued in some regions was replaced in others. In parts of Afro-Eurasia and later the Americas, historical change began to occur at a faster pace and on larger scales than was the case in, for example, Australia, where aboriginal people continued to pursue their perfectly adapted foraging life-ways. As the sun rose on the first day of the year we now think of as 1200 BCE, some 8,000 years after the first appearance of agriculture and sedentism, this extraordinary variety of human lifeways was very much in evidence.

Setting aside the fact that on the first day of January of any new year the sun is shining continuously above the frozen continent of Antarctica, the sun's first rays fall initially upon a part of the earth just to the west of the International Date Line, an imaginary line extending north–south across the Pacific Ocean. Dawn then progresses from east to west, with the moment of sunrise being recorded according to a series of local time measurements. The first point of land to be touched by the light would probably have been a headland near Victor Bay in Antarctica, but in 1200 BCE this was a place completely uninhabited by humans. Further north, however, early sunlight found the mountains, forests, and coral-fringed beaches of thousands of scattered Pacific islands, many of which were most certainly occupied by humans.

Oceania world zone

This occupation was a result of the most extraordinary maritime migrations in human history, which occurred largely within the 2,100-year period of principal interest to this volume. Sometime around 1500 BCE migrants from the Tongan and Samoan island groups had begun a series of lengthy ocean voyages in large canoes. Navigating by the stars, these mariners settled in parts of the Cook Islands and Tahiti-nui. A later wave of migration resulted in the spread of these Polynesian peoples as far east as Rapa Nui (Easter Island) by 300 CE, and as far north as Hawai'i by 400. A third wave of migrations occurred late in our "day" when groups from the Cook or Society Islands eventually settled Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the ninth century. By the time

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European explorers began to survey the Pacific in the sixteenth century, Polynesian and Melanesian peoples had occupied virtually every single habitable island in the Pacific.

The inhabitants of these widely scattered islands practiced a variety of lifeways somewhere along the continuum between nomadic foraging and sedentary agrarian states. Archaeological evidence reveals distinctive Polynesian agrarian and fishing technologies in most of the island groups, based on the successful domestication of plants like taro, breadfruit, banana, coconut, and sweet potato, and of animals including the pig, dog, and chicken. On Rapa Nui and Hawai'i, coercive leaders emerged to control state-like structures complete with most of their defining characteristics – monumental architecture (notably the *Ahu* of Rapa Nui), the accumulation of surpluses, and inter-tribal conflict. Rapa Nui also provides early evidence of the potential for humans to self-destructively impact the natural environment. Encouraged by their chiefs, intra-village competitive monument building (again of the *Ahu*) resulted in the impoverishment of a previously vibrant society through rapid deforestation. Yet on Rapa Nui and elsewhere, sunrise on any day late in the chronology of our volume would have found hundreds of thousands of farmers and fishermen, leaders and servants, warriors and builders, all going about their business upon the forest-covered islands, atolls, and deep-blue surface of the Pacific.[1]

Australasian world zone

The harsh southern hemisphere summer sun next beat down upon the highlands of New Guinea, and the plains and bush-covered regions of Australia, a vast continent located along the southwestern edge of the Pacific Basin. To the casual observer of this world zone, time might appear to have stood still. In the jungles of New Guinea, which humans had begun to occupy perhaps 60,000 years earlier, farmers had been following early agrarian lifeways based on small-scale horticulture and slash-and-burn technologies since perhaps 5000 BCE. There were villages aplenty in the forests, but none of these had evolved into towns or states, and power in these communities was still consensual rather than coercive. Yet agricultural practices were sophisticated; some agri-historians believe that New Guinea farmers understood the principles of crop rotation, mulching, and tillaging long before Eurasian farmers did.

1 See McNiven, "Australasia and the Pacific," Chapter 22, this volume.

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In Australia, the ancestors of the aboriginal people had arrived by sea from Southeast Asia 50,000 years earlier, demonstrating advanced boat building and navigational skills that had made them amongst the most technologically sophisticated people on earth at that time. By *c.* 1200 BCE the aboriginal population numbered anywhere between 300,000 and 750,000, with the densest concentrations living in the southeast of the continent. Their languages were many, up to 750 different dialects, although similarities in the phenome sets indicate a probable single common origin. The variety of dialects might also suggest a wide range of lifeways, but to our casual observer daylight revealed indigenous Australians engaged in a set of semi-unified cultural practices.

Whether in the arid interior of Australia, in the great tracts of eastern bushland, or along the coasts, the overwhelming majority of aboriginals remained semi-nomadic hunter-foragers from the time they first migrated to the continent until the arrival of Europeans. Each group had its own traditional territories, which were defined by geographic markers like rivers, mountains, and lakes, and the well-being of these lands was fundamental to the success of the people. Indigenous Australians "cared" for their environments in the manner of foraging peoples everywhere, although paleo-aboriginals unwittingly contributed to the extinction of many large animal species in Australia, and their practice of fire-stick farming helped lead to the eventual desertification of much of the continent. There were some exceptions to this nomadic lifeway, like the Gunditjmara people of Western Victoria, who supported a semi-sedentary lifeway through eel farming. Archaeologists have found the remains of hundreds of permanent huts, 75 square kilometers (45 square miles) of artificial channels and ponds for farming the eels, and trees used for smoking the product to facilitate its transportation to other parts of southeast Australia.

With the exception of the Gunditjmara, any dawn across Australia during our two-millennia "day" would have revealed small groups of humans fishing with fishbone-tipped spears; others hunting kangaroos with wooden weapons like the boomerang or woomera spear-thrower; and yet others (particularly women) using wooden and stone digging sticks to access nutritious roots and insects living just below ground. At a number of sacred sites across the landscape, elders prepared to pass on oral creation stories from the Dreamtime, when humans, animals, and spirits all emerged and peopled the land. Critical to the spiritual practices of indigenous Australians were music and dance, and both men and women had been up since dawn, preparing to perform ritualized dance-like ceremonies, accompanied by

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vocalists, percussionists, and musicians, at large ceremonial gatherings called corroborees, where goods, ideas, and marriage partners would also be exchanged.[2]

Afro-Eurasian world zone

As the corroborees were gathering in the Australian outback, further to the north sunrise drew steam from the dense jungles of Southeast Asia, on the fringes of Afro-Eurasia. The adoption of agriculture in multiple places across this vast world zone had led to the emergence of cities, states, dense populations, professional leaders, military, and religious elites, and complex intra- and interstate political relations that would have seemed utterly alien to Pacific Islanders and Australian aboriginals. Given the political focus of our volume, this brief survey will identify the key developments in state and empire construction that occurred between *c.* 1200 BCE and *c.* 900 CE, and highlight the critical networks of exchange that developed between all the different types of human communities that populated the Afro-Eurasian world zone.

Humans had occupied the islands and mainland of Southeast Asia since Paleolithic times, and during the centuries preceding 1200 BCE they had gathered together into a range of agrarian communities. The country known today as Vietnam developed its own distinctive culture during the first millennium BCE, but from the moment the Qin Dynasty unified much of China in the third century BCE, Vietnam had been seen by the Chinese as an almost inevitable part of their empire. After being colonized by the Han Dynasty soon afterwards, the Vietnamese decided to adopt important cultural ideas from the Chinese, including Confucian and Buddhist ideology, but also to fiercely resist political assimilation. This resistance came to fruition late in this volume's day, and by 939 the Vietnamese had won a political independence they were destined to keep until French colonialists turned up in the nineteenth century.

A powerful state, based on political and commercial control of the narrow Isthmus of Kra, also developed in Malaysia, where the rulers of Funan used Indian models of power to declare themselves *rajas*. After the fall of Funan in the sixth century, leadership of the region passed to the Srivijaya state on the island of Sumatra, which constructed a formidable navy that dominated the port cities of Southeast Asia between 670 and 1025 CE. Once in control of all

2 See McNiven, Chap. 22, this volume.

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the major sea lanes, the rulers of Srivijaya grew wealthy through their role as intermediaries in the thriving spice routes trade between India and China, itself part of a much wider Afro-Eurasian maritime network of commercial and cultural exchanges that had been flourishing since the first millennium BCE. By the tenth century CE, the Srivijaya capital of Palembang was a thriving commercial hub in which merchants from many ethnicities and belief systems went about their lucrative daily business amongst the docks and warehouses of the port. On the mainland meanwhile, in present-day Cambodia, the Khmer people were in the process of constructing a soon-to-be powerful kingdom known as Angkor, which would rule for more than 500 years and erect, at Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat, two of the most extraordinary religious complexes in world history.

North again, along the western shores of the Pacific, the thousands of islands of the Japanese archipelago were also enjoying the "rising sun," a symbol that in the seventh century CE inspired rulers Tenmo and Jito to actually name their country *Nippon* – the "base of the sun." Humans had come to Japan perhaps 35,000 years earlier and had eventually made the transition from foraging to farming. During the first millennium BCE, migrants from Korea introduced new pottery, technologies, and lifeways to create the Yayoi Culture. Rice agriculture expanded throughout the islands, leading to increased populations and the appearance of social hierarchies and coercive power structures. In the third century CE, one of these rulers had been a woman, the enigmatic shaman Queen Himiko. The power of Himiko and the other rulers of the period is still visible today in the massive tombs they left behind. However, it was the arrival of Buddhism and its accompanying hierarchy, along with the promulgation of laws and a constitution by Prince Shotoku early in the seventh century, which really consolidated and centralized power in Japan, until a fully fledged imperial court system was in place in the great wooden city of Nara. In 794 a decision was made to build a new capital at Heian in modern Kyoto, a city destined to be the capital of Japan for the next thousand years. But just as the sun was setting on the ninth century, the authority of the Heian emperor was being superseded by members of the Fujiwara clan, who functioned as the real power behind the Japanese throne until late in the twelfth century.[3]

In the Korean Peninsula, to the west across a narrow strait from Japan, the process of building a unified state had been similarly complicated. Paleolithic migrants had practiced hunting and foraging for perhaps 50,000 years, until

3 See Holcombe, "East Asia," Chapter 15, this volume.

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the adoption of agriculture had led to increased populations and villages. Bronze technology appeared in the first millennium BCE, but it was the introduction of iron tools and weapons in the second century BCE that dramatically increased agricultural productivity. At about the same time, as with Vietnam, the Chinese had come to regard the Korean Peninsula as part of their domain, and for almost 400 years much of Korea had been a colony of the Chinese. In the midst of this, three regional kingdoms emerged, Paekche, Koguryo, and Silla. By 313 CE the northern Koguryo kingdom had driven the Chinese out, but this only led to centuries of bitter conflict between the three rival states during the ensuing "Three Kingdoms Period." Indeed, seemingly endless interregional and trans-regional conflict characterized the history of much of Afro-Eurasia throughout virtually all of the period covered by this volume.

Ongoing tensions between Koguryo and the Chinese helped the southern kingdoms of Silla and Paekche grow stronger. Archaeological evidence shows an increase in social hierarchy in burial practices, and also the emergence of intense specialization in pottery manufacturing by an artisan class under elite patronage. Each of the three ruling dynasties adopted Buddhism, although Confucianism and Daoism were also widely practiced. The Chinese Sui Dynasty attempted to invade Korea in 612, but Koguryo forces killed thousands of Chinese troops and inflicted a defeat on the Chinese so humiliating it contributed significantly to the demise of the Sui. Eventually Silla forged an alliance with the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), which resulted in the defeat of the other two kingdoms. The Tang then attempted to recolonize Korea, but this was thwarted by Silla, who went on to unify and rule southern Korea until late in the ninth century. But at the end of our "day," early in the tenth century, two powerful generals, Wang Kon and Kyonwhon, were engaged in a virtual civil war, which led to the abdication of the last Silla king in 935 and his replacement by Wang Kon and his new Koryo Dynasty, the state that gave the modern nation of Korea its name.[4]

On the mainland of East Asia, morning sunlight in *c.* 1200 BCE illuminated the astonishing geo-diversity of China: a 9,000 mile coastline dotted with thousands of islands, two of the greatest river systems on the planet, steppe grasslands in the north, tropical wetlands in the southeast, inhospitable deserts, and great mountain systems that include seven of the world's fourteen highest peaks in the west. By 1200 BCE these environments were already home to an ancient and complex civilization. Early farming

4 See Holcombe, Chap. 15, this volume.

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communities along the Yangtze and Huang He river systems had evolved into a series of sophisticated cultures like Yangshao and Longshan, a process that by the late third millennium BCE led to the appearance of powerful dynastic states such as the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. But Zhou central rule, so stable and impressive for the first 500 years, collapsed in the sixth century BCE to be replaced by half a millennium of bitter conflict. It was during this age of "warring states" that hundreds of schools of political and ideological thought developed in China, from which the three great philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism emerged to guide Chinese political and religious thinking for the millennia that followed.[5] During the third century the most powerful of the warring kingdoms used Legalism to secure victory over its rivals and reunify much of China in the name of the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE).

The brief period of Qin rule paved the way for the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), which used a combination of the three ideologies, but particularly Confucianism, to build a well-organized and wealthy bureaucratic state. It was also during the Han dynastic era that China became connected for the first time with the rest of Afro-Eurasia via the Silk Roads, the greatest trade and cultural exchange network of the premodern world. The involvement of the Chinese in Silk Roads trade meant that virtually every state, nomadic confederation, small-scale agrarian community, and even remaining hunter-gatherer bands in this vast world zone were now connected into a single exchange network for the first time in history.[6]

During the third century CE, Silk Roads trade declined dramatically as the key players in the network – the Han, Kushans, Parthians, and Romans – all withdrew. The Later Han suffered from a dearth of effective leadership, and a series of peasant uprisings led to the demise of the dynasty in 220, and to centuries of internal disunity and conflict. The first emperor of the Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE) ended this "Age of Disunity," but the abortive campaign against the Korean Koguryo kingdom noted above, and a massive "Grand Canal" engineering project completed by the second Sui emperor Yangdi, fostered so much resentment that the emperor was assassinated in 618.

A Sui governor named Li Yuan instituted a new dynasty, the Tang, which went on to rule China for the next three centuries. The Tang organized China into a powerful, prosperous, unified, and culturally sophisticated imperial state. The Early Tang Era was marked by strong and benevolent

5 See Yao, "Confucianism and the State," Chapter 16, this volume.
6 See von Reden, "Global Economic History," Chapter 2, this volume.

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rule, successful diplomatic relationships across much of Eurasia, economic and military expansion, and a rich cosmopolitan culture that resulted in the production of superb literature and visual art,[7] and also in increasingly complex and sophisticated relations between men and women.[8] It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that during the Tang Dynasty China was the wealthiest and most powerful state thus far seen in world history. Tang wealth and stability ushered in another great age of commercial and cultural exchange across Afro-Eurasia. As we will see below, Tang control of Eastern Eurasia corresponded with the Islamic caliphates (and to a lesser extent the Byzantine Empire) gaining control of much of Western Eurasia. With strong, commercially minded states also in place in Central Asia, material goods, ideas, and diseases flooded back and forth across the world zone in a second great Silk Roads Era, which continued to operate, although with lesser intensity, even after the collapse of the Tang in 907.[9]

North and west of the mountain ranges and deserts that had kept China isolated from Central Asia for millennia were the great steppe grasslands, the realm of pastoral nomads who played a vital role in facilitating exchange between empires and states throughout much of the period of this volume. Pastoral nomads formed communities that lived primarily from the exploitation of domestic animals such as cattle, sheep, camels, or horses. The appearance of burial mounds across the steppes of Inner Eurasia shows that some of these communities became semi-nomadic during the fourth millennium BCE. By the middle of the first millennium BCE, several large pastoral nomadic communities had emerged with the military skills and technologies, and the endurance and mobility, to raid and even dominate sedentary agrarian states and empires. Some of them, such as the Saka, Xiongnu, and Yuezhi, established powerful confederations that controlled the vast steppe lands between civilizations.[10] Because they could survive in the deserts and mountainous interior of Inner Eurasia, it was the nomads who facilitated the linking up of all the different lifeways and communities. Ultimately, it was the role of pastoralists as facilitators and protectors (as well as periodic raiders) of mercantile exchange that allowed the Silk Roads and other networks to flourish.[11]

7 See Bagley, "Art", Chapter 8, this volume.
8 See Yao and Wells, "The Gendering of Power in the Family and the State," Chapter 3, this volume, and "Discourses on Gender and Sexuality," Chapter 7, this volume.
9 See Holcombe, Chap. 15, this volume.
10 See May, "Pastoral Nomads," Chapter 9, this volume.
11 See Liu, "Exchanges within the Silk Roads World System," Chapter 17, this volume.

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