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978-0-521-09900-4 - Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400

Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan

Excerpt

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I Northern Africa at the end of the Bronze Age

In Africa the Iron Age has a special significance. Over most of the continent there was no preceding Age of Bronze. In most of Africa iron was the first metal to be worked into tools by man. In most of Africa iron tools replaced tools of stone, and in much of the continent these stone tools were not even those of the more advanced, ground and polished kind made by Stone Age farmers. In nearly half of Africa iron tools and weapons replaced stone tools of the kind used by men who were still hunters, gatherers and fishermen rather than farmers and stock-breeders. In most of Africa south of the Equator the coming of the Iron Age marked also the beginning of deliberate food production. In much of Sudanic Africa, between the Sahara and the Equator, Stone Age food production was, so far as we know, a sparse and fragile development, spanning little more than a thousand years before the coming of iron. Only in the northern third of Africa, in Saharan and Mediterranean latitudes, did cereal production and stock-raising spread in the fifth and fourth millennia B.C., at a period comparable with their dispersal through western Asia and southern Europe. And only in these latitudes was a period of Stone Age agriculture succeeded by a well-defined Age of Bronze. Taking the continent as a whole, the ten thousand years before Christ were those in which Africa slept. In the Iron Age it began to re-awake, although the process took a thousand years to spread from one end of Africa to the other.

Though taking its title from the Iron Age, this book is not so much concerned with a particular technological revolution as with a period in African history – a period which runs from about 500 B.C. until about A.D. 1400. Although literary sources are not wanting, particularly for the northern third of the continent, this is a period the evidence for which is dominated by what is usually called Iron Age archaeology. This is not a separate science, but a field of specialisation. The techniques of archaeological excavation and analysis are basically the same for the Iron Age as for any other period. The Iron Age archaeologist is simply one who concentrates his energies on the more recent end of the time spectrum, giving the detailed attention to the comparatively small chronological differences which that involves. For Iron Age archaeology in Africa the crucial development has been

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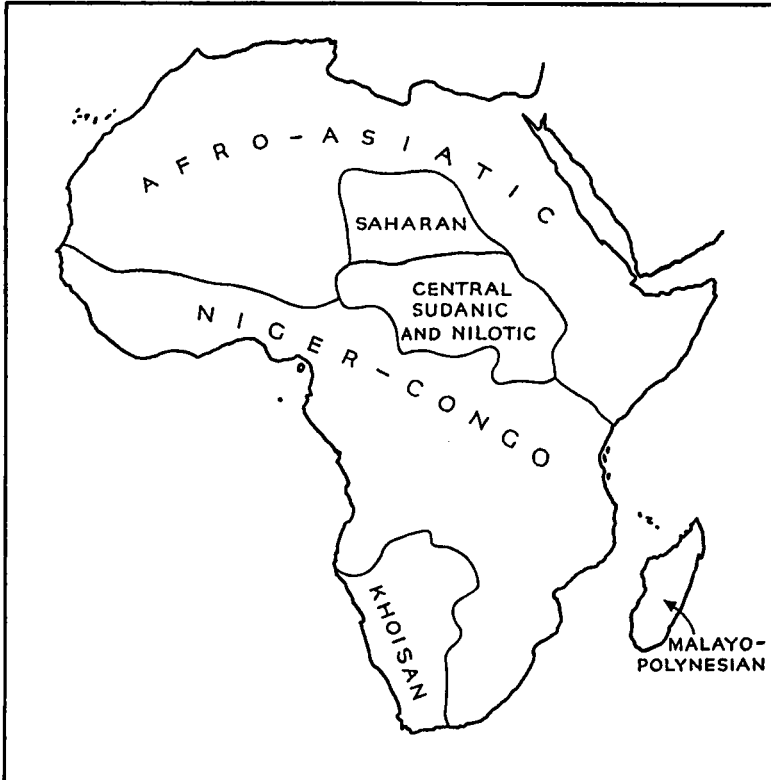
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the technique of radiocarbon analysis, which enables even simple, unstratified sites to be dated, with a high probability of success, within the margin of error of about 200 years. At a distance of 2500 years from the present, such a standard of measurement is good enough for most purposes. At a distance of 1000 years it is by no means valueless. At a distance of 600 years one is approaching the threshold where, in most parts of Africa, other kinds of evidence become more useful. By A.D. 1400 literacy had crossed the Sahara to the Sudanic belt, and had crept down the East Coast to the Zambezi. By 1500 it had encircled the remaining coasts of Africa, and much of the information then recorded has some backward reference. The first whispers of the oral traditions of African peoples, recorded in more recent times, stretch back to about the same period.

By 500 B.C., when our story begins, the climate of Africa had assumed something like its modern pattern. First and foremost this

FIG. 1. Language families of Africa (simplified).



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meant that the Sahara, much of which from about 5500 B.C. till about 2500 B.C. had been open parkland, readily inhabitable by hunters and stock-breeders, and even in part by cultivators, was now once more a desert, almost devoid of game and fish, affording only seasonal pasture to the transhumants who moved in and out of it from bases along its edges, and dividing absolutely the settled populations to the north and the south. In general, the settled peoples to the north and east of the desert were of Afro-Mediterranean or Caucasian stock, speaking languages of the Afro-Asiatic family – ancient Egyptian, Berber, Chadic, Cushitic. Those to the south were Negroes, speaking languages of the Niger–Congo, Saharan, Central Sudanic and Nilotic (including Paraniotic) families. For most of its course, the frontier between Afro-Asiatic and Negro languages followed the southern edge of the desert; but east of the Nile Afro-Asiatic languages made a great loop to the southward, encompassing much of the Ethiopian and East African highlands. It was in the lands of the Afro-Asiatic speakers that the history of food production was the longest. It was among them that the later stone industries could most generally be described as neolithic. It was among some of these peoples that copper and bronze had come to the aid of stone.

The most important and the most numerous of the Afro-Asiatic speaking peoples were, of course, those who lived in the Nile delta and along the thin green ribbon, seldom more than ten miles wide, of the great river valley. By 500 B.C. the glory of ancient Egypt had long departed. The proud kingdom of the Pharaohs, which had dominated the Near East for more than two thousand years, was now a Persian satrapy. Its agricultural surplus supported a foreign army of occupation, and its manufactures were sold to enrich an Asian capital. Egyptian youths were drafted to serve on distant frontiers, and to dig the great canal from the Nile to the Gulf of Suez, intended to carry the intercontinental trade of the Persian overlord. Nevertheless, even a subjugated Egypt was by far the most significant corner of Africa. To Herodotus, surveying the known world from the vantage-point of mid-fifth-century Athens, there was nowhere with 'so many marvellous things, nor in the whole world beside are there to be seen so many works of unspeakable greatness'. About the main reason for this greatness, Herodotus was in no doubt:

Now, indeed, there are no men, neither in the rest of Egypt, nor in the whole world, who get in their produce with so little labour; they have not the toil of ploughing up their land into furrows, nor of hoeing, nor of any other work which other men do to get them a crop; the river rises of itself, waters the

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fields, and then sinks back again; thereupon each man sows his field and sends swine into it to tread down the seed, and waits for the harvest; then he makes the swine to thresh his grain, and so garners it.¹

Though the whole of habitable Egypt could be traversed from end to end in little more than fifteen days of river travel, Herodotus was told that on the eve of the Persian conquest in 525 B.C., when Egypt 'attained to its greatest prosperity, in respect of what the river did for the land and the land for its people', there were twenty thousand inhabited towns in the delta and strung out along the valley's edge. It is obvious that Herodotus looked up to the Egyptians, even under Persian rule, as the most civilised and cleanly, and certainly as the most religious of mankind. He reported that seven hundred thousand people gathered annually at Busiris in the delta for the great festival of Osiris. No doubt this was an exaggeration; but with a population of perhaps five million crowded into a habitable area the size of Belgium, it is clear that the Egypt of 2500 years ago was as urbanised as most modern industrial societies.

Even granting the unique opportunities offered to Egypt by the Nile flood, it is at first sight astonishing that one small corner of Africa should have progressed so immeasurably beyond the rest. There is no doubt that, physically, the Egyptians were Africans, in the sense that their Afro-Asiatic stock had been present in Africa for at least ten thousand years before Christ. And certainly to comparative students of the Bronze Age it is clear that dynastic Egypt had an African culture and a sense of values quite different from anything found in the eastern European and western Asian Bronze Age world to the north. Yet the predominant factor was the ecological one, that to the east and the west Egypt was surrounded by deserts habitable only very sparsely by hunters and pastoralists, whereas to the south lay a frontier hardly less formidable, in the climate of the Sudanic belt, with its uniform hours of daylight and its pattern of summer rainfall. Wheat and barley, the staples of the food-producing revolution in Egypt, could not grow in the Sudan. Therefore, although Egyptian miners, hunters and traders had been penetrating the Sudan since the earliest dynastic times, the growth of a significant agricultural population there was necessarily delayed until the successful ennoblement of cereals such as the millets and sorghums from the wild ancestral grasses that grew in these latitudes.

Thus, although the Egyptians had been pushing their religious and political influence southwards into the cataract region of Nubia from

4 ¹ Herodotus, *History*, Book II, Ch. 14. Tr. A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library.

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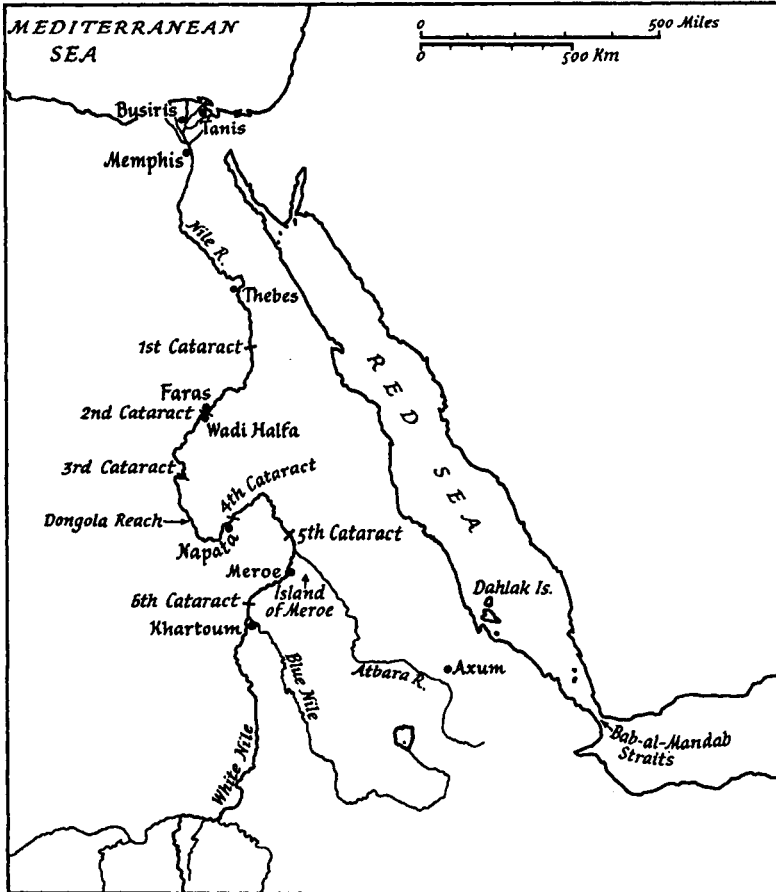
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the early second millennium onwards, it was not until a thousand years later that there emerged a culturally Egyptianised kingdom of Kush, with its capital at Napata near the fourth cataract, of the size and strength to be independent of even a decadent Egypt. For a brief period, from 750 until 664 B.C., the kings of Kush conquered and ruled Egypt as the XXV Dynasty of Pharaohs. Driven out by the Assyrians under Ashurbannipal, the dynasty retreated to Napata, where neither the Assyrians nor the Persians ever followed them. By the middle of the sixth century they had shifted their headquarters still further southwards to Meroe, situated in the well-watered triangle above the confluence of the Nile and the Atbara. Here at last was a growing-

FIG. 2. The Nile valley: localities and sites mentioned in the text.



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point of Egypt-inspired civilisation, statecraft and religion, which had emerged to the south of the ecological barrier, in the land of the summer rains. We do not yet know exactly what languages were spoken in the Meroitic kingdom, nor even how the central Meroitic tongue itself should be classified; but it seems likely that the population was composed at least as much of Negro elements as of Afro-Asiatic ones.

The Meroitic state was based, like that of Egypt, on the Nile. The central population of Meroe consisted of the settled, farming and fishing communities of the more open stretches of the river valley, such as the Dongola reach between the third and fourth cataracts, the island of Meroe between the fifth and sixth cataracts, and the lower valley of the Blue Nile. Here, and especially in the central 'island', the narrow strip of alluvial flood-plain was backed by wooded savanna with plentiful grass, watered by occasional floods as well as by annual rains. Cattle and other stock were relatively more important than in Egypt, and in the rainy season herders no doubt wandered far from their riverine bases. Where the Egyptians grew wheat and barley, the Meroites grew millet. Where the Egyptians grew flax and wove linen, the Meroites used cotton. Like the Egyptians, their nobles bred horses and used them both for riding and for driving in light, swift chariots. Unlike the Egyptians, who had little iron ore and even less fuel with which to smelt it, the island of Meroe was rich in both commodities, and the arts of iron-working, stimulated no doubt by the victories of the Assyrians with their iron weapons, were practised to some extent from the occupation of Meroe onwards.

It is abundantly clear that both the international standing and the urban wealth of Meroe came from its hunting, mining and trading activities in connection with the traditional luxury commodities of inner Africa, ivory, slaves, rare skins, ostrich feathers, gold, copper and ebony. Throughout early African history, the hunting of elephants for their ivory was apt to be an almost military operation, involving not merely the slaughter of large and dangerous animals but the protection of rich caravans travelling through alien country. Slave-catching, too, is a military activity, the success of which depends on removing the victims to a distance from which escape is a hopeless risk. We may suppose, therefore, that the armed hunters and horsemen of Meroe ranged even further afield than her transhumant pastoralists, and that they contacted barter networks extending deep into the Ethiopian highlands on one side and far across the sub-Saharan savanna on the other. Both the Nile and the Red Sea provided routes for Meroe's trade with the civilised world, which now included not only the Mediterranean lands but, increasingly, eastern countries, the south Arabian states, Persia and India.

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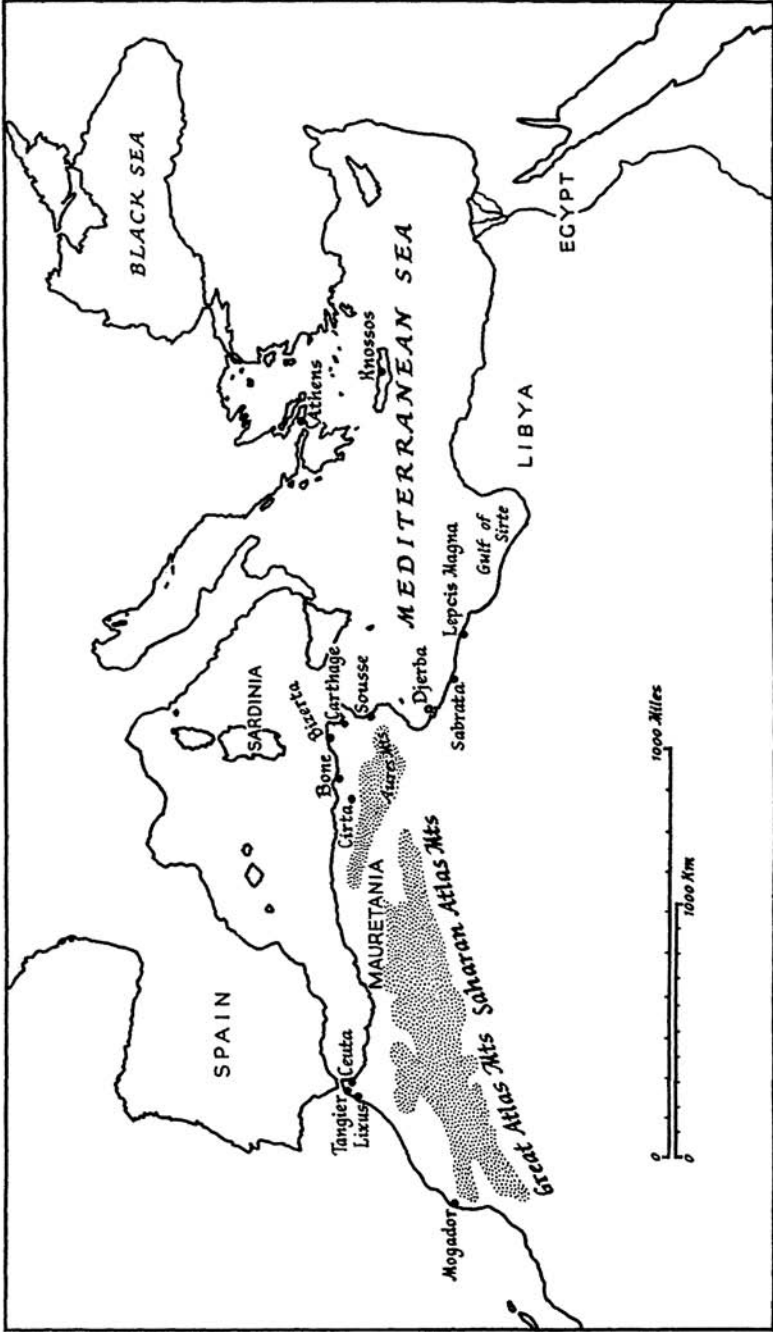
Indeed, it was developments in Mesopotamia and Persia, even more than those in Egypt, which were ultimately responsible for awakening the Horn of Africa and bringing it into the age of metals. The main Stone Age populations of all this region, stretching from the Red Sea far down into East Africa, had been Afro-Asiatics speaking languages of the southernmost Afro-Asiatic sub-family called Cushitic. Some of them, at least, had become Stone Age food producers by the early part of the first millennium B.C. The introduction of metals, however, came only in the fifth century B.C., with the migration across the Red Sea of Bronze Age settlers from southern Arabia. These people are known to us from the inscriptions written in the Sabaean language found at sites on the Red Sea coast between the Dahlak Islands and the Bab-al-Mandab straits. The pioneers were hunters and traders, seeking ivory and slaves for the great intercontinental trade route then being developed by the Persians in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. Soon, however, Bronze Age agricultural colonists were pressing into the delectable highlands of Tigre and Amhara, bringing with them the Semitic speech of south-west Arabia, and building up on the Ethiopian plateau a pocket of dense population, from which the powerful state of Axum would one day emerge to conquer and supersede the kingdom of Meroe.

West of the Nile, in North African and Saharan latitudes, the main indigenous populations of neolithic and Bronze Age times were the Berbers, their languages representing the western sub-family of Afro-Asiatic. These are the Libyans of classical literature, and from the time of Herodotus onwards references to them are frequent. From the edge of the Nile valley to the western corner of the Gulf of Sirte nearly all of them were still at this time pastoralists, moving between the coastlands and the edges of the desert according to the seasons. In the Tunisian plains, however, and between the Atlas and the sea, there were already in Herodotus' time some settled communities of agricultural Berbers tilling the fertile soils of the river valleys and the coastal plain, and looking with the wary eye of the possessor at the warlike propensities of the nomads to the south of them.

The other inhabitants of North Africa were, as Herodotus remarked, the newcomers, the Phoenicians and the Greeks. The Egyptians, lacking any large timber for shipbuilding, had always been indifferent mariners. For their trading contacts across the Mediterranean they had relied much upon the coastal peoples of the Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. The Phoenicians were the most active merchants of the Bronze Age Mediterranean. From prosperous homelands in Syria, they dominated the trade of the Levant and the Red Sea. With the decline of the Minoans and the Mycenaeans late in the second

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millennium, the Phoenicians began to venture into the western Mediterranean in search of the copper, silver, lead and iron of Spain and southern Sardinia. By the middle of the first millennium B.C., when the eastern Mediterranean was passing into the power of the Persians and the Greeks, the Phoenician trading posts in the west, especially Carthage on the site of modern Tunis, were growing into true colonies, based around manufacturing cities and surrounded each by its own agricultural territory under Phoenician rule. On the Tripolitanian coast were Sabrata and Lepcis Magna; in Tunisia, besides Carthage, there were cities at Djerba, Sousse and Bizerta; in Algeria were Bone and Cirta; in Morocco, Ceuta, Tangier, Lixus and Mogador. From Carthage and from Spain, further maritime networks extended into the Atlantic, northwards to reach the tin of Brittany and Cornwall, and southwards down the coast of Morocco in search of West African gold. A trading-post at Mogador is archaeologically attested. The invariable pattern of strong north-easterly winds blowing from the Sahara makes it almost certain that no ancient voyages passed beyond Cape Juby.

The influence of the Carthaginians touched the Berber populations of north-west Africa in many ways, and indirectly it reached across the desert into the heart of black Africa. Carthage itself had a profound effect on its own surrounding territory. Bronze Age agricultural techniques turned north-eastern Tunisia into a fertile granary, worked by large labour forces of Berber tribesmen. Independent Berber nomads settled near the Phoenician colonies, acquiring new agricultural methods and assimilating some of the benefits of the new culture. By the time of Carthage's decline some Berber chieftains had founded settled agricultural kingdoms around the edges of the Tunisian plain. The Phoenician language, Punic, became the common language of trade, administration and urban life. Its alphabetic script was even applied to writing Berber languages, and still survives in the Tifinag script of the Tuareg of the central Sahara. By the time of Herodotus, the Phoenician cities were trading extensively with the Berbers of the Sahara, bartering cloth and beads and metal goods for ivory, gold and slaves from south of the desert. The Berbers brought black African commodities across the Sahara, no doubt using Carthaginian beads and trinkets to augment an already existing trade in Saharan salt for West African gold. Herodotus reports that the Berber Garamantes

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of the Fezzan had four-horse chariots 'in which they chase the troglodite Ethiopians'. This is presumably an early reference to slave-raiding practised by the Berbers against the Negroes then living in the Hoggar and Tibesti massifs of the central Sahara. The horse is well authenticated in Bronze Age Libya, and the chariots were of a light two-wheeled variety, well known in Asia Minor during the first millennium B.C. Again, Herodotus tells of a journey made by some young Libyans, who had crossed the desert to a wooded country on its southern side, where they had been captured by small black men, by whose town there flowed a great river, running from west to east and full of crocodiles. This suggests the Niger, and this supposition has been confirmed by the discovery of numerous rock drawings of horse-drawn chariots in the Sahara. These are clustered along two main routes, still used by desert caravans and motor traffic, one passing over the Hoggar and along the ridge of the Adrar of the Ifoghas running south-westwards to the Niger bend, and the other passing to the west of the main desert area, through inland Mauritania towards the upper Senegal. It is known that wheeled vehicles were superseded by camels in the central and western Sahara during the early centuries A.D., so that the rock drawings are probably old enough to support the travellers' tales told to Herodotus.

It is clear, then, that by the middle of the first millennium B.C. northern Africa, from Mauritania in the west to Ethiopia in the east, was at the threshold of a new age. Food production had been practised in a few favoured areas for nearly five thousand years. Copper and gold had been worked for three thousand years, bronze and all that went with it for at least a thousand. Iron-working had been discovered in Asia Minor, but it was as yet a very minor element in the African scene. In politics and civilisation Egypt had lost its long and unique predominance. The brilliant art and culture of earlier millennia had faded to a dull stereotype. Nevertheless, a living offshoot of Egyptian civilisation had, at long last, sprung up in the Meroitic Sudan, among people of predominantly Negro stock and in a region where iron was plentiful. Through Meroe, Egypt was able to influence profoundly, though often at tens and hundreds of removes, nearly all the African peoples to the west and the south. Finally, the world to the north and the east of Egypt had matured into the fullness of Bronze Age life, and was making demands upon a far wider stretch of Africa than Egypt had ever contacted during the times of her greatness. Ships were plying the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, the Mediterranean and even the wild Atlantic. Caravans were crossing the Sahara. Semitic-speaking Bronze Age farmers were irrigating the Tunisian plain and terracing