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INTRODUCTION: SOME INTERREGIONAL THEMES

There is obviously no scheme of periodization which is valid for Africa as a whole, and the opening and closing dates of this volume are not intended to be more than notional. In terms of political history, they fit best with events in North and West Africa, where the period opens with the great conquests of the Almoravids to the north and south of the western Sahara, and where it closes with the Moroccan conquest of the Niger bend, which destroyed the political unity of the western Sudan established during more than three centuries of strong rule by successive dynasties of Mali and Songhay. It is significant that these were the first and the last occasions on which conquering armies crossed the desert, and, taken together, they demarcate the high period of trans-Saharan communications, when the comings and goings of pious Muslims were reinforced by the golden trade of the Sudan, which fertilized the economic revival of all the Mediterranean lands. At its height, the Almoravid empire stretched from the Senegal to Saragossa, while that of the Almohads, which succeeded it, was narrower only in its lack of direct control over the desert routes. The golden trade, however, continued to flourish and to bind the two shores of the Mediterranean into a single network, which survived through medieval times. The Hafsid successors of the Almohads in Tunisia were trading, by the fifteenth century, as far afield as Norway in one direction and Bornu in the other.

In north-eastern Africa, the period almost coincides with that in which Egypt was the seat of an independent, sovereign power, controlled first by the Fatimids, then by the Ayyubids and finally by the Mamluks – a period during which Egypt enjoyed a special pre-eminence throughout the northern half of Africa on account of its central position across the pilgrimage routes both of African Muslims travelling to Mecca and of African Christians travelling to Jerusalem. During this period Egypt repelled both the Crusaders and the Mongols. It controlled the Red Sea and most of the eastern trade. It helped to overthrow the Christian kingdoms of Nubia, but continued to supply Ethiopia with its Christian bishops. Above all, Egypt provided both

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the Maghrib and sub-Saharan West Africa with a standard of civilization, learning, luxury and temporal power, which was emulated wherever in Africa Muslim rulers, scholars, pilgrims and merchants carried the tale of their long-distance travels.

Throughout the northern half of Africa, the period was one in which the religion of Islam made striking progress. To the north of the Sahara, and among the desert peoples, it was a period of consolidation, when the largely nominal adherence of Coptic and Berber populations already established during earlier centuries was built up through a peculiarly Islamic combination of revivalist propaganda and military action, whereby communities of active believers gathered around a reforming teacher would forcefully impose a stricter observance upon wider groups. The proliferation of these local movements was greatly assisted by the institution of the Pilgrimage and by the growing tradition of travel for study to schools in the Islamic heartlands. The parallel spread of Arabic as the language of theology and higher learning was helped forward by the progressive dispersion of bedouin Arabs through the arid pastoral lands on either side of the desert. It began with the penetration of northern Nubia by the Rabīʻa and Juhayna Arabs, and with what has been called the second Arab conquest of North Africa, initiated by the westward movement of the Banū Hilal and the Banū Sulaym into the southern borderlands of Ifrīqiya. It ended with the arabization of Mauritania by the Kunta tribes and with the penetration of southern Nubia, Kordofan, Darfur and Wadai by the Baqqāra and Shuwa pastoralists.

In the Negro lands of the sub-Saharan Sudan, the period saw the religion of the Prophet established as a potent factor in the political and trading systems of most of the major states. At the courts of Takrur, Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Kanem-Bornu and those of the Hausa city-states, Islam was recognized as the religion of men of cosmopolitan outlook, even though concessions had still to be made to the indigenous beliefs of the majority of the population. Kings processed in state to the Friday prayer, went on Pilgrimage and honoured those learned in Islamic law and theology. Muslim merchants held a near monopoly of long-distance trade, whether across the desert routes or southward through the savanna and the forest margins. Wherever two or three Muslim merchants settled with their dependants to found a warehouse compound, there a Muslim cleric of some description was likely soon to be found. South of the Sahara, there were as yet no mass movements such as had occurred to the north of the desert and in it, but the

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growing-points for future expansion were established. Not merely at the great capitals, but in scores of small towns and commercial settlements, there grew up a *noblesse de la robe* of preachers and teachers, lawyers and merchants, scribes and holy men, literate in Arabic, travelled, aware of a wider world, indispensable to rulers for a variety of worldly skills and thaumaturgical services, respected for their knowledge if not for their beliefs by the pagan people among whom they lived, growing steadily in numbers as the generations passed, and looking consciously towards a future when all women would go decently veiled and all men bow down together at the times of prayer.

In East Africa, too, Islam spread far to the south during this period, though in a rather different way. The conversion of the Danakil and the Somali corresponded rather closely with that of the Saharan nomads; but the penetration of the Ethiopian highlands, though attempted, was largely blocked by the southward expansion of a militant Christian kingdom, the dynamic vitality of which remains a source of wonder. South of the Juba, Islam reached as far as the Zambezi, but only along the palm-fringed coastline and on the offshore islands, where ocean shipping could keep open the lines of communication with the heartlands of the faith. There is no doubt that in this region Islam retained a more exotic flavour than in sub-Saharan West Africa. In racial composition the Muslim communities of the East African coast were no doubt predominantly African, but the nuclear elements of these societies were either foreign or at least claimed a foreign origin. These were not African societies which had been penetrated by Islam, but foreign settlements around which African elements had gathered. The difference was all important. In both religion and politics the leaders were from the immigrant communities. Though the material monuments were impressive, there was no basis here for Islamic expansion inland.

In those parts of Africa which were still largely beyond the range of Islamic influence, it was only during the last century or so of our period that the opening of the Atlantic sea-routes by the Portuguese began to provide regular, though even then hardly comparable, means of communication with the outside world. During the first four or five centuries of the period, therefore, the main themes of historical development were internal ones, and their discernment is made more difficult by the relatively thin and uneven nature of the surviving evidence. For many areas and for most of the period, the best potential source of evidence is archaeological; but this branch of inquiry is as

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yet little developed, partly through lack of research, but even more because it was only in the 1960s that the radiocarbon method began to provide a sufficiently accurate means of dating material from the first half of the present millennium. At the present time, therefore, most of our knowledge of these areas comes from the earlier and less chronologically structured layers of the oral traditions of the African peoples, which, even when taken together with the earliest reports by literate outsiders, hardly extend further backwards in time than about the middle of our period.

Nevertheless, certain broad themes can be dimly perceived. For example, the part of West Africa lying to the south of Hausaland – the country of the Jukun and the Nupe, the Yoruba and the Edo – was one area which, although as yet unpenetrated by Islamic influence, seems to have carried a particularly dense population, and to have been the scene of important developments in state formation. These states were based, like their Hausa counterparts, on walled towns, which were not only centres of government and religious cults but also supported a wide variety of local industries, such as iron-working and metallurgy, glass-making, weaving, tanning, leatherwork and dyeing. Agriculture was, of course, carried on in the surrounding countryside; but the fact that town walls enclosed considerable areas of unbuilt land suggests that these were cities of refuge into which rural populations could retreat in times of danger. It is probable that, then as now, many farming families had a city base. Wherever the country was open, horses were used for warfare and slave-raiding; and the fact that horses were kept for ceremonial purposes even in forest states to the south of the region suggests that cavalry power had originally been at the heart of the whole process of state formation. Archaeological investigation has shown that, as far south as Ife, which lies within the forest margin, the origins of urban settlement go back to the very beginning of our period. We thus see that the pattern of city-states, for so long associated by historians primarily with Hausaland, was in fact something much more widely spread, a pattern of settlement embodying a highly developed material and social culture, which owed little to Islamic or to any other trans-Saharan influences. And yet it was a pattern which conspicuously failed to penetrate some parts of the region, notably that occupied by the Ibo people of south-eastern Nigeria, which was certainly an area of dense population and, at least on the evidence of Igbo-Ukwu (see p. 501), one not without the stimulus of long-distance trade or a high order of technological skills.

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West of the Volta, a different pattern prevailed. Here the terrain was more forested, the horse much less prominent, the walled city an exceptional feature. The most widespread social configuration was that of the Mande peoples, based upon groups of villages, each group ruled by a king, above whom there might at some times and in some cases be a king of kings, receiving tribute from lesser rulers. This region comprised the four main gold-producing areas of West Africa – those of Bambuk on the upper Senegal, of Bure on the upper Niger, of the Lobi country in the valley of the Black Volta, and the Akan forest of modern Ghana and the eastern Ivory Coast. It also comprised the main sources of the highly valued kola nut. Long-distance trade was therefore a much more important factor than in the part of Guinea to the east of the Volta, and it is tempting to ascribe a large role in political as well as economic development to the influence of the Mande merchant caste, the Dyula or Wangara, who operated over a wide region to the south of the Mali empire. Certainly the Dyula, in their ever-widening search for the materials of long-distance trade, and with their need for political protection along an extensive network of caravan routes, may have been the purveyors of a fund of common ideas, political and military, social and religious and economic. Nevertheless, the Dyula were few in number and were seldom in a position to use force. Although, here and there, they allied themselves with troops of horsemen, there was no real counterpart to the cavalry forces responsible for the pattern of settlement in so much of the territory to the east of the Volta.

It has to be remembered that, until the opening of the ocean trade by the Portuguese, the Atlantic seaboard represented to West Africans the end of the world. The sea was a source of fish and of salt, both of which could be traded profitably inland; but its shores held few other attractions for human settlement, and nor for the most part did the great forests of the coastal hinterland. Intensive settlement of the forest region proceeded gradually from its northern margin. As Samuel Johnson wrote of the Yoruba, 'The coast tribes were of much less importance then than now, both in population and in intelligence . . . The centre of life and activity, of large populations and industry . . . was in the interior . . . Light and civilization came from the north.'[1] In West Africa the intensive penetration of the forest region was probably a by-product of the growth of dense food-producing populations in the savanna. It was the opening of the sea-borne trade which, during

[1] Samuel Johnson, *The history of the Yorubas* (Lagos, 1921), 40.

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the last century and a half of our period, began to shift the momentum of change from the northern to the southern margin of the forest.

Eastwards from the Bight of Biafra, the equatorial forest region broadens out to cover the whole northern half of the Congo basin, forming a natural barrier much more formidable than that between the West African savanna and the Atlantic coast. It was not, of course, an absolute barrier. In addition to the hunting bands of Pygmies, food-producing peoples lived strung out along the river lines. Canoes helped mobility. Migrations could occur and innovations could spread through the forest from one side to the other. For all that, it was not a terrain in which regular communications could be maintained as they could be in West Africa. Nor was there, in the Sudanic belt to the north of the Congo forest, a density of population or a state of social organization comparable to that existing further to the west, where the Hausa and the Dyula Mande spread their trading networks. The people inhabiting the territory of the modern Central African Republic appear, during our period, to have lived in chiefless, 'palaeonegritic' communities, still unaffected by the growth of states in Kanem and Darfur to the north, and exerting little pressure on the forest areas to the south. There was thus an immense and scantily populated region straddling the centre of the continent, and dividing the denser populations of Africa to the north of the equator from those to the south.

During our period at least, the main developments in Africa south of the equator occurred, not in the forest, but in the regions to the east and the south of it. In part, these were developments stemming naturally from the successful settlement of these regions by Bantu food-producers in an earlier period. The nuclei of comparatively dense farming populations emerged in the areas best suited to agriculture, which were in general the areas of high, but not excessive, rainfall. The interlacustrine region of East Africa was one such area. The Katanga/Kasai/Lower Congo region of southern Zaïre was another. The lands adjoining the middle and lower Zambezi were a third, and Iron Age archaeology is beginning to indicate that there may have been a fourth such area in the south-western Transvaal. In part, however, the developments of our period were a response to the advent of new population elements, bringing new farming techniques and a new concept of wealth and status based on the ownership and milking of cattle. This was, of course, something quite different from the first herding of cattle, which, as we know, was practised from the beginning of the Iron Age, and in some places earlier. Rather, it had to do with the

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interaction of pastoralism and agriculture in a way which gave a social and political advantage to the polygamous and patrilineal descent-group specializing in the ownership of cattle. (See pp. 626–8, 640, 643, 645–6, 650–1.) There can be little doubt that this was initially a result of the southward drift of Nilotic and Paranilotic peoples from the southern Sudan into northern Uganda and western Kenya, the impact of which is clearly marked in the archaeological record from about the beginning of the present millennium. The stages of its southward progress and diversification within the Bantu sphere are as yet imperfectly understood; but it would seem that here is a major theme linking the history of much of eastern, central and southern Africa.

On the whole it would seem that, in most of the sub-continent, influences passing overland from the north were more significant than those entering from the coasts to the east and the west. There is as yet no hard evidence of any sea traffic between West Africa and western Central Africa before the coming of the Portuguese. Along the Indian Ocean coast maritime trade with the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and India grew steadily from the beginning of our period until it was interrupted by the Portuguese; but the only part of the interior to be seriously affected by it was the region between the Rovuma and the Limpopo, and more especially that between the Zambezi and the Limpopo. Here there were large resources in gold, the mining and trading of which invited political centralization. It is impossible accurately to locate the great kingdom of the Zanj reported by al-Mas'ūdī in the early tenth century; but there is no doubt that by about the eleventh century political organization on a scale unique in Bantu Africa was beginning to take shape around Zimbabwe Hill on the Rhodesian plateau. From all the evidence, it would appear that this organization bore a wholly African character, and one fairly strongly influenced by the pastoral revolution, but at the same time its growth in scale must have been largely a response to the external stimulus of the Indian Ocean trade.

On the western side of Bantu Africa the influence of the pastoral revolution and that of the Indian Ocean trade are equally nebulous. Developments in the mining and working of copper in what must have been a densely settled region in northern Katanga were already in progress on the eve of our period, and it is not yet clear from where the necessary skills were transmitted. On present evidence, coastal imports, though not quite absent, were very scarce. Here, as in the whole of the wooded savanna to the south of the Congo forest, where advanced

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metallurgical techniques were combined with a high level of domestic industries such as wood-carving and the weaving of palm fibres, a connection, however tenuous, with the forest region of West Africa must be suspected. In the region to the south of the Lower Congo we have firm evidence of the existence, by the time of the first Portuguese contact, of at least one large state, more considerable than any then existing in the interlacustrine region, and perhaps approaching the dimensions of the Mutapa kingdom to the south of the Zambezi. It may be, as Dr Birmingham suggests, that here the main incentive to political enlargement was the wealth of local trade and exchange within the region itself. Certainly, one lesson to be drawn from all the detailed studies of political growth in sub-Saharan Africa carried out in recent years is that larger states have always emerged as the result of a long period of piecemeal expansion, and never by means of the sudden conquest of large, previously stateless areas by migrants coming from a distance and imposing at a stroke the political institutions necessary to rule a large territory. It would in fact probably be true to say that larger states could only be founded on the backs of smaller ones, and that in most of Africa south of the equator the political units were, even by the end of our period, very small indeed.

On the whole, the chapters which follow lend little support to the idea that Africa, so long as it was developing independently, was showing a healthy progress, which came to an end with the establishment of the European connection in the mid fifteenth century. It is abundantly clear that the parts of the continent where development of all kinds had gone farthest before 1450 were precisely the parts which had long interacted with other cultures, including those outside Africa – first of all, Egypt and the Maghrib; next, the sub-Saharan, Sudanic belt from the Senegal to Somalia; next, the sub-Sudanic 'middle belt' of West Africa, which was in regular touch with the civilization of the Sudan. These parts of Africa were the remotest from the paths of the European expansion, which mainly affected peoples who were at a much simpler stage of development. The Portuguese opening of the Atlantic coast in fact resembled very closely the earlier opening of the Indian Ocean coast by Muslim traders and settlers. It was based on a monopoly of maritime shipping, and its local operations were conducted from coastal forts and offshore islands, where communities of slaves and mulattoes, corresponding to those of the Arab colonies of the east coast, soon supplied the intermediaries with the African peoples. The diplomatic and missionary contacts with the kingdoms of

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Benin and Kongo were as exceptional for the Porguguese as those of the Arabs of Sofala with the fifteenth-century *mwenemutapas*. It was only with the conquering expedition of Paulo Dias de Novais to Luanda in 1575 that contact turned into colonization, and then only in a very limited area. The Portuguese settlements in East Africa within our period, even those at Sena and Tete on the Zambezi, were in every case taken over from those of the Swahili-Arabs. To the historian of Africa the activities of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Portuguese were more of a portent than a reality. The battle of Tondibi, at which the enormous host of Songhay turned and fled before a desert-weary force of 3,000 Moroccans, was a more important event than the building of Elmina Castle. In the history of Africa, as distinct from that of European exploration and discovery, the Portuguese pioneers were more significant as observers of the African scene than as agents of change in Africa.

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CHAPTER 1

EGYPT, NUBIA AND THE EASTERN DESERTS

THE FATIMIDS

The Fatimid conquest of Egypt in AD 969 was accomplished without much difficulty, as the country had for some time already been in internal chaos and had suffered heavily from famines. The skilful political and religious propaganda of the Fatimids also prepared the ground for a ready acceptance of the new dynasty by the population. When the Fatimid general Jawhar (a former slave of Dalmatian origin), after overwhelming the last feeble resistance of the Ikhshidid army, entered al-Fusṭāṭ on 1 July 969 and formally proclaimed the new regime by introducing the *khuṭba* (Friday sermon) in the name of his master, the caliph al-Mu'izz (952–75), the event had a more profound significance and more far-reaching consequences than a simple change of dynasty so common in the annals of the Islamic world. The coming of the Fatimids marked a new epoch in the history of Egypt which, for the first time since the Ptolemies, became not only the seat of a completely sovereign dynasty, but also the centre of an empire that survived its original founders and lasted for more than five centuries.

The imperial idea was, indeed, inherent in the Ismā'ili ideology, of which the Fatimids were the most prominent champions, and only they, among all the Ismā'ili Shī'a branches, came within reach of attaining the ecumenical goal of the doctrine. They considered their North African period merely a preparatory stage, and the conquest of Egypt only one of the stepping-stones, on the road to the creation of the universal Ismā'īlī empire, ruled by the Prophet's descendants in accordance with the esoteric doctrine of the Ismā'īlīya. Nevertheless, they were realistic enough to see the strategic importance of Egypt as a bridge to the eastern parts of the Islamic world and as the economic basis for their political power.

Shortly after the conquest of al-Fusṭāṭ, Jawhar started to build a new capital, Cairo (in Arabic, *al-Qāhira*),[1] destined to overshadow the splendour of Baghdad, the seat of the rival 'Abbasids. Later he also

[1] So called, because on the day of its foundation the planet Mars (*al-Qāhir*, lit. 'the subduer') was in the ascendant.

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