

Introduction

The first volume in this series, *Africa in the Iron Age* by Roland Oliver and Brian Fagan, deals with the period from about 500 B.C. till A.D. 1400. This is a period for which, although there are some important literary sources, the evidence comes mainly from archaeology. What we here call the African Middle Ages is, in contrast, one for which, although archaeology continues to contribute, the dominant sources are literary and traditional. For a part of the continent at least, 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 in detail and to arrange them in chronological order. For our period there is continuous evidence of this kind for Egypt and the Maghrib countries, Ethiopia and the western Sudan, and in some measure also for the central and Nilotic Sudan and a 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 handed 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 1400 and 1800 is of this kind, and obviously it is less reliable than evidence recorded directly 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. 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 traditions 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 centuries. However, in that part of Africa which was in some kind of touch with the civilisation of Islam – and this included a wide zone stretching for 800 to 1,000 kilometres to the south of the Sahara – some traditional history was recorded much earlier. Ibn

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Khaldun, the great Maghribi historian who died at the very beginning of our period, incorporated much traditional material from the Sahara and the western Sudan 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, though known only in nineteenth-century versions, clearly contain material that had existed in written form long before.

Finally, there is the most valuable kind of historical evidence, which is the record written by the eye-witness himself. This may take the form of the narrative of a journey or the report of a mission or the accounts of a trading venture or the correspondence generated by any ongoing enterprise by literate people, whether commercial, religious, diplomatic, military or colonial. Here, although the world of Islam has the first word, it is the European world that comes, by the end of our period, to occupy the dominant role. In 1400 there was no European foothold on African soil, and no European had made any significant journey into the African interior. Yet already from the previous century we have Ibn Battuta's lively accounts of his journeys across North Africa from Morocco to Egypt, from the Persian Gulf down the East African coast to Mogadishu, Mombasa and Kilwa, and from Morocco across the Sahara to the western and central Sudan. From the early sixteenth century we have the no less vivid reminiscences of the Granadan Moor al-Hassan ibn Muhammad al-Wazzani, later converted to Christianity as Leo Africanus, who travelled extensively in Morocco and Songhay and perhaps as far afield as Hausaland, Bornu and Kanem.

However, following the conquest of Ceuta in 1415, the Portuguese began their systematic exploration of the ocean coastlines of Africa, reaching Cape Verde in 1446, the Bight of Benin in 1475, the Congo estuary in 1483, and the Cape of Good Hope, Sofala, Kilwa, Mombasa and Malindi, all in 1497-8. Spurred on by the spread of the printing-press and the expansion of secular education, the Christians of western Europe made a much wider use of literacy than their Muslim contemporaries. From the fifteenth century onwards royal and ecclesiastical archives began to bulge with instructions, reports, accounts and itineraries, and from the sixteenth century there issued from the printing-press a swelling stream of voyages, handbooks, histories and geographies, all of which constitute precious sources for the history of the coastal regions. Fortunately perhaps for Africa, but unfortunately for the study of its history, it is only here and there that

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these European records shed their light at any distance into the

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interior. Taking the continent as a whole, between A.D. 1400 and 1800 it is to the sources of traditional history, with all their difficulties, that the historian must mainly turn.

Another reason for calling the period from 1400 to 1800 the African Middle Ages is because certain features of it correspond with the period of European history known as the Middle Ages, or medieval times. The Middle Ages of European history comprise an earlier period than the African Middle Ages – from about 800 to 1500. One similarity of the Middle Ages of both continents was the emergence and growth of states. In Europe there was an early time of loose-knit empires, such as the Holy Roman Empire instituted by Charlemagne and the large kingdom of the Angevins which straddled the English Channel. In some respects these were not unlike the African empires of the western and the central Sudan, such as Mali and Kanem–Bornu, in which only limited power was exercised from the centre and in which the territorial extent of the empire depended not upon the ethnic or cultural unity of the subjects but upon the military predominance and the dynastic alliances of a small ruling group. Later in medieval western Europe, states began to evolve which were based on the concept of nationality; the examples of France, England and Spain come to mind. In these, power was becoming centralised and institutionalised, and the state institutions reflected, at least to some extent, particular linguistic, cultural, religious or ethnic characteristics. The parallels in Africa were states such as Asante, Oyo, Benin, Kongo and Rwanda, although there were of course many differences. The steady growth of state systems, however different they might be, is one of the dominant features of both European and African medieval history.

A more particular common aspect was the history of the city states, in parts of Italy and Germany on the one hand, and in Hausaland, Yorubaland and the coastal cities of eastern Africa on the other. Finally – and connected with the growth of states and cities – there was the increasing importance of trade, commerce and financial matters, of economic changes generally, in the Middle Ages of both continents. Again, there were many differences, but these are less outstanding than the differences between medieval and modern economies, which are essentially those of scale and conceptualisation. In this respect, medieval Africa and medieval Europe are more similar to one another than they are in their modern counterparts. What sets Africa apart was that this modernising process *began* in Europe long before it did in Africa. Europe had started on the long, hard road of modern, capitalistic economic change while Africa remained in its

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Middle Ages, and this difference more than any other accounts for the difficulties and violence that were to mark many of the contacts between Africa and Europe. Despite the extent and violence of the Atlantic slave-trade, however, these contacts remained limited during the period up to 1800. They were to dominate African history only as the nineteenth century wore on.

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I The African dimension of Islam

THE OLDER MUSLIM LANDS: EGYPT AND THE MAGHRIB

To an impartial observer living in the year 1400 Africa would have seemed inevitably destined to join the world of Islam. By 1400 Islam had been established in Egypt and the Maghrib for more than seven centuries. In origin the religion and culture of the Arab conquerors, it had been strengthened by the westward migration of farmers and nomads (bedouin) from the Arab lands, and it had been adopted by a steadily growing proportion of the indigenous populations. In Egypt Muslims by now outnumbered the Christian Copts, and Arabic, which had long supplanted Coptic as the literary language, was displacing spoken Coptic even in the countryside. In the Maghrib Latin Christianity had ceased to exist. The mixed populations of the towns and the coastal plains were solidly Muslim and Arabic-speaking, as were the pastoral nomads of the Atlas foothills and the desert fringes. Only the Berber farmers of the high mountains preserved their ancient speech and practised a more syncretistic kind of Islam, of which the characteristic leader was the 'holy man' (*marabout*) rather than the teacher, the preacher and the jurist who animated the religious life of the cities and the plains.

Politically, Egypt and the Maghrib had long ceased to observe any common authority. Egypt, together with Palestine and Syria, had been ruled since 1250 by the military despotism of the Mamluk sultans, enforced by a constantly renewed foreign army recruited from Turkish slaves (see Chapter 3). Mamluk authority extended westwards to include Cyrenaica. Tripolitania, on the other hand, formed part of Ifriqiya, a state somewhat larger than modern Tunisia, ruled since the early thirteenth century by the Hafids, a dynasty originally placed there as provincial governors by the Almohad caliphs of Morocco. Beyond Bougie, in the centre and west of modern Algeria, lay the state of Tlemcen, ruled by another successor dynasty of the Almohads, called the 'Abd al-Wadids or Zayanids. Finally, in lowland Morocco the Almohads had been succeeded since 1248 by the Marinids, Zanata Berbers from the Saharan fringes south of the Atlas, who had moved north as conquerors and had made their capital

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at Fez. In all three kingdoms Berber dynasties had consolidated themselves by making close alliances with groups of Arab bedouin immigrants who provided military contingents in exchange for the right to gather taxes from specific areas. The Marinid kingdom, especially, had enjoyed periods of considerable military power, when it had conquered and imposed tribute on Tlemcen and Ifriqiya and had even intervened in Spain. However, by the fifteenth century this dynasty had more than once failed to resolve its succession problems, power was becoming decentralised to the provinces, and what remained at the centre was passing into the hands of the hereditary vizirate of the Wattasids. Such was the situation in which, in 1415, the Portuguese were able to establish a bridgehead at Ceuta on the southern shores of the Strait of Gibraltar.

Despite the rough and ready nature of political power, however, and despite much internecine warfare between state and state, and among the mountain peoples, the nomads and the plainsmen, there remained in the Maghrib enough basic security and good order to permit a great deal of regular, long-distance movement by civilians in the service of trade, religion and education. Trade routes at this time ran mainly north and south, linking the Maghrib with southern Europe on the one hand and with the western and central Sudan on the other. Merchant shipping was almost entirely in European hands, and communities of European traders lived in factory enclaves (*funduq*) in all the large ports such as Oran and Bougie and, above all, Tunis. Maghribi shipping was largely concerned with piracy, preying upon the European trade, and deeply involved in the capture of Christian slaves, who were an important element in all Maghribi armies and navies. Land transport on both sides of the Mediterranean was by pack-animals and not by wheeled vehicles. In the Maghrib donkeys, mules and horses were used in large numbers for short hauls, but the main long-distance baggage animal was the camel. Though usually associated with the desert, it was a familiar sight in every port and market-town from the Mediterranean coast to the Senegal and the Niger.

In contrast to the movements of trade, however, those occasioned by religion and education went mainly east and west. Islam revered knowledge and stressed the virtue of pilgrimage. Knowledge acquired abroad was preferred to the home product, and the ambitious scholar would migrate from one famous law school (*madrassa*) to another, keeping open regular links between Fez and Meknes, Tlemcen and Bougie, Tunis and Kairouan, Cairo and places further to the east.

6 Pilgrimage attracted ever larger numbers. Young men and old, rich

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and poor, some riding but many on foot, swelled the caravans moving to and fro across the Maghrib, from Morocco and Tlemcen across the wastes of southern Tunisia and Tripolitania and on across the Libyan desert to the Siwa oasis and Cairo, and so up the Nile to the Wadi Hamamat, the port of 'Aydhab and the Red Sea crossing to Jidda and Mecca. Often two or three years would be spent on the journey. A large part of Islamic alms-giving and public works was devoted to the provision of hostels and caravanserais for scholars and pilgrims. All this wide world of North African Islam was thus in a real sense intercommunicating. Few Muslim communities can have existed from Morocco to the Nile which did not count some members who had made the journey to the Holy Places. Every town and village along the pilgrimage routes was likewise familiar with a wide cross-section of the population of the Islamic West, from the desert foothills of the Atlas to southern Spain.

ISLAM SOUTH OF THE SAHARA

By 1400 this intercommunicating world of western Islam was by no means confined to the Maghrib. For the desert, too, was regularly crossed by great caravans during several months of every year. The grand trunk routes passed through the Fezzan to Kanem, Bornu and the other states of the central Sudan, and through Sijilmasa and Taghaza to Timbuktu and the empire of Mali. Ibn Battuta, who travelled by the western route in 1352, described a twenty-five days' march from Sijilmasa in the Atlas foothills to Taghaza, the great salt-pan almost halfway across the desert. There followed another twenty-five days, with only a single watering-place, between Taghaza and Walata, still in the desert, but only a few days' march from its southern edge. It took Ibn Battuta twenty-four more days to travel by land from Walata to Niani, the capital of Mali, situated on the Sankarani tributary of the upper Niger, in the forest fringes of modern Guinea. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, most caravans were by-passing Walata and travelling straight from Taghaza to the growing city of Timbuktu, with its river-port close by on the Niger, where the great loads of Saharan salt and other merchandise could be transferred directly from the backs of camels to the bottoms of large canoes for transport up and down the Niger waterways. From Gao, on the north-eastern curve of the Niger bend, another great desert highway led away eastwards through the highlands of Adrar and Air to the Fezzan and Egypt.

Though much less thoroughly Islamised than the Maghrib, the

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western Sudan was thus by 1400 in full contact with the rest of the Muslim world. The empire of Mali, embracing within its suzerainty all the lands between the eastern arm of the Niger bend and the Atlantic coast from Senegal to the Gambia, was ruled by a Muslim dynasty, several of whose kings had themselves made the pilgrimage to Mecca. These men, and many of their leading subjects, had met the rulers of Egypt and Syria, had visited al-Azhar, the university mosque of Cairo, had mingled at Mecca with fellow pilgrims from Baghdad and Basra, from Zeila and Zanzibar. At their courts in the Sudan were Turkish slaves and Andalusian architects, Maghribi merchants and scholars and green-turbaned Sharifs claiming descent from the Prophet's own family. Already at Timbuktu the Sankore mosque was providing education in Arabic for indigenous Sudanese preachers and jurists, many of whom would pass on to the *madrasas* of the Maghrib and Egypt before returning to practise their skills to the south of the desert. Foreigners were welcomed and their goods protected. On the trade routes from Timbuktu northwards there operated Maghribi trading firms like that of the five Maqqari brothers, of whom the senior brother lived in Sijilmasa, with two of his juniors in Tlemcen and two more in Walata. South of the desert the merchants were local Mande, of the occupational caste called Dyula, or Wangara. Muslims to a man, they operated the donkey caravans and the files of human porters which at about this time were beginning to trade salt and manufactured goods for the gold and kola-nuts of the Guinea and Akan forest, and to penetrate eastwards into the central Sudan as far as Katsina and Kano. Though the written word was still expected to serve the needs of religion before all else, here were societies in touch with the outside world, whose affairs were known and understood from Fez to Cairo, from Marrakech to Mecca and Mombasa.

In the central Sudan there was, around 1400, only one area where Islam was well established, and this was Kanem, the country to the north and east of Lake Chad, which had been in regular trading contact with the Fezzan, Ifriqiya and Egypt for more than five hundred years. At Bilma, in the desert between Kanem and the Fezzan, was a salt-mine as inexhaustible as that of Taghaza, which constituted the main resource of the southward trade. Its northward element consisted almost entirely of slaves, captured by the military forces of Kanem in annual campaigns around its extensive frontiers. The rulers of Kanem were essentially nomads, and their capital at Njimi had never grown into a great town like those of the western Sudan. Nevertheless, Kanem had long possessed a class of literate Muslim clerics. Its kings, like those of Mali, had often made the

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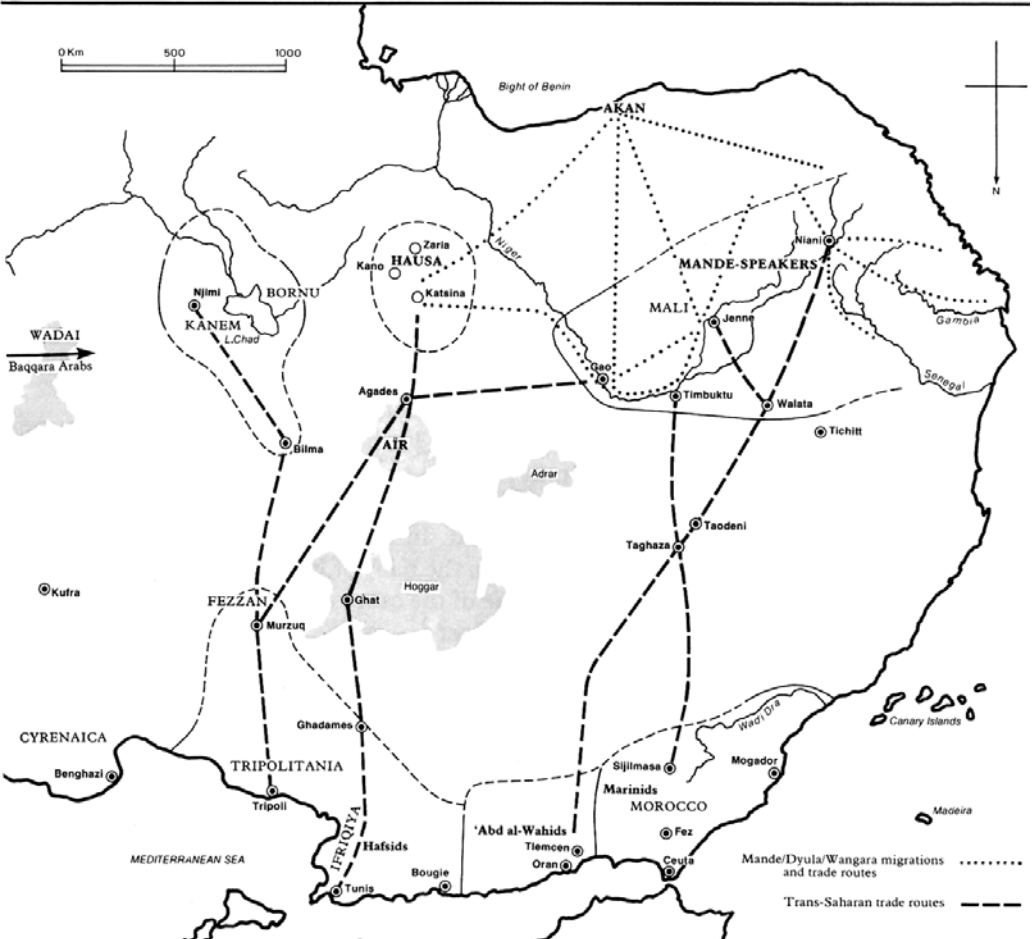
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pilgrimage, lingering on the way to see the wonders of Cairo, and to establish there hostels for students and pilgrims from their own country. For Muslims living on a religious frontier, as in Kanem, there was no perceived contradiction between the profession of intense piety at home and the levying of perpetual war against the surrounding nations of unbelievers. Indeed, on the eve of our period, dynastic rivalries in Kanem had caused the main ruling house to retreat westwards into Bornu, to the west and south of Lake Chad, there to establish another great expanding frontier between the Kanuri invaders and the former Chadic-speaking inhabitants of the land, remembered in Bornu traditions as the Sao.

While Islam was being carried into Bornu by migration and conquest, in nearby Hausaland it was being introduced peacefully by Dyula traders from Mali. According to the traditions preserved in the chronicle of Kano, there were initially only about forty of these strangers. They so impressed the king that he appointed one of them his preacher and another his muezzin, while a third cut the throats of



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whatever flesh was eaten, and a fourth was appointed *qadi* or judge of the Islamic law. And the king commanded every town in the land of Kano to observe the times of prayer. Though by no means the beginning of Hausa history, the coming of Islam seems to have been quickly followed by the development of cavalry forces and the establishment of a regular slave-raiding frontier against the still pagan lands to the south. Kano raided the Jukun, Zaria raided the Nupe, and the captives from this perennial warfare were settled in slave villages around the Hausa towns and put to work in agriculture and industry. The new situation soon led on to the arrival of camel caravans and to the opening of a new trade route running northwards through Air to Ifriqiya and Egypt. Another section of the Sudanic Belt had been added to the Muslim world.

ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY IN NORTH-EAST AFRICA

In the Nile valley south of Egypt Christianity, not Islam, had remained the dominant religion until the fourteenth century, and even by the fifteenth century the transformation to Islam was far from complete. Although the Mamluk sultans of Egypt had at the critical moment helped to overthrow the defences of the northern Nubian kingdom of Maqurra, the real momentum of the Islamic advance into this sector had come from Arab nomads pressing southwards from the deserts of Upper Egypt towards the wider pasture-lands to the east and west of the upper Nile. There was nothing systematic or coordinated in these migrations. The newly Islamised dynasty of Maqurra certainly did not control them, and they soon swept far on towards the south, occupying the lands on either side of the southern kingdom of Christian Nubia, called 'Alwa. The earliest and most far-reaching movements occurred to the west of the Nile, where Arab bedouin known as Kababish (from Arabic *kabab*, ram), herding camels and sheep, occupied the grazing lands between Dongola and Darfur, while others known as Baqqara (from Arabic *baqara*, cow) spread out across an even larger territory stretching from Kordofan through southern Darfur and beyond. In Kanem the impact of the nomads was reported in a letter from the King of Bornu to the Sultan of Egypt in 1391. It was in fact one of the causes of the retreat of the Magumi dynasty from Kanem to Bornu.

East of the Nile the bedouin, here known as Juhayna, moved south down the line of the Red Sea hills, reaching the Butana plain between the Atbara and the Blue Nile by the end of the fourteenth century, and the Gezira country between the Blue and White Niles only a century

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