African civilizations

An archaeological perspective

SECOND EDITION

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DRAWINGS BY DOUGLAS HOBBS

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Chapter 1

The context

Find a map of Africa's physical geography and another of its vegetation. Coded into those two maps is important information that you will need to understand before reading this book. To begin with, Africa is huge; it is so big that you can put the United States of America and the Australian continent into it and still have a bit of space left over. It extends from about 37° North to about 35° South, and has an altitudinal range from depressions that are below sea level to mountain peaks that exceed 5000 metres. As a result it has an incredible diversity of environments. It contains some of the driest deserts in the world, and yet has three of the world's major rivers: the Nile, the Niger and the Zaïre (Congo). Some of the hottest places on earth are in Africa, and yet there are glaciers on its highest mountains. There are steaming rainforests and dry savanna grasslands, low-lying river valleys and high plateaux, extensive deserts and gigantic lakes, mangrove coasts and surf-pounded beaches. This is to give only an impressionistic picture of the very large number of differing environments to be found in the African continent. In reality the major zones merge into one another, so that there is an even greater variety of conditions. Add to this the effects of climatic variation through time and you have an infinitely complex environmental situation.

Into this environmental kaleidoscope introduce human beings and remember that they have been in Africa longer than in any other part of the world. For at least 2 million years (depending on how humanity is defined), people have been learning how to get the best out of African environments. Those environments have not determined what men and women could do, nor have the latter been able to ignore the environments in which they have lived. Instead there has been a dynamic relationship between the two, in which human beings have sought to turn to their advantage the opportunities offered by each environment and to come to terms with its constraints. This relationship can be traced throughout the long course of human history in Africa. First as hunters, gatherers and fishers who gradually intensified their exploitation of available resources; then as pastoralists and cultivators; eventually as city dwellers, artisans and traders: men and women have continued to interact with their environment, retaining this remarkable variety of strategies for doing so. Geographical location; seasonality of climate; water availability; soil fertility; plant species; access to resources such as timber, stone, clay, minerals and animal products; and disease vectors. These are merely some of the

factors that have helped to shape human culture and which in many cases have themselves been affected by human activity. If you seek to study the history of Africa, you must understand human ecology.

Without doubt, you must also understand archaeology, which is a major source of information about Africa's past. Documentary sources for African history are limited: their coverage is often chronologically patchy and tends to be geographically peripheral. For large areas of Africa, particularly tropical Africa, their time-depth is restricted to the last century or two. In addition, many of the documentary sources that we do have are based on the observations of outsiders; such people as explorers, traders, missionaries, colonial officers and others, who did not always understand what they observed and were sometimes prejudiced in their assessment of it. Such documentary evidence that does exist is often invaluable but Africanist historians themselves have acknowledged its shortcomings for many areas, by giving considerable attention to oral sources of history. Extensive research has been conducted into oral traditions in many parts of the continent and our knowledge of African history has been greatly enriched by these endeavours. However, although it is a matter of some dispute, it seems unlikely that oral sources can throw much light on periods more than say 500 years ago. Indeed, Jan Vansina (1973: xiv) thought that 250 years was often the maximum. In these circumstances, scholars interested in Africa's past have turned to a variety of other information sources. Thus, art history and linguistics have contributed useful information (the latter particularly so, e.g. Ehret 1998), as have ethnographic and anthropological investigations. In addition, a number of other disciplines have been of assistance, such as investigations of DNA, blood group studies, plant genetics, and faunal research of one sort or another. It is in these circumstances that the archaeological evidence for Africa's past has assumed the very greatest importance.

Many people who are not archaeologists are uncertain about what archaeology is. As for archaeologists themselves, they have spent a lot of time over the last few decades arguing about it. Basically, however, the subject is concerned with the study of the physical evidence of past human activities, in order to reconstruct those activities. Such a reconstruction, it is hoped, will enable us to understand the undocumented past or to increase our understanding of inadequately documented periods of the past. Archaeological evidence, however, has its own strengths and weaknesses and we are still learning ways of gaining the maximum reliable information from it. Perhaps its greatest advantage is that it enables us to examine things that were actually made by people in the past and to investigate the impact that those people had on their environment. We can discover what human beings actually did, not merely what they or others said that they did. The main disadvantage of archaeological evidence is that it is almost always partial evidence, reflecting only part of the activities of past men and women. The differential effects of

human behaviour, of climate and soil chemistry, and of subsequent disturbance by either natural or human agencies, cause most archaeological evidence to be rather like a jigsaw puzzle from which two-thirds of the pieces are lost, whilst the rest have the picture worn off or corners missing. These strengths and weaknesses of archaeological evidence can be seen in this book. On the middle Nile and in the Ethiopian Highlands we have the remains of stone-built cities and clear indications of centralized authority and we would not know much about this if we were dependent on historical sources alone. In Central Africa, on the other hand, archaeology has contributed much less information on urban settlements that were constructed in grass, wood and other organic materials and occupied by people who did not express their sense of nationhood in such a material fashion. Unfortunately, however, archaeological evidence has another drawback: it results from human endeavour, and archaeologists (just like other human beings) tend to vary in the amount of effort that they expend on different problems. Thus it is easy to search for settlement sites in the open grasslands of the African savanna but extremely difficult to do so in the tangled undergrowth of the rainforest, where in places one has to chop out a path even to walk through it. Similarly, it is easier to locate the sites of stone ruins than those of timber buildings and it is easier to excavate mud-brick structures than those of pisé. As a result, archaeological distribution maps of Africa tend to show the distribution of archaeological research, rather than that of archaeological evidence. Indeed, for extensive areas of the continent one might as well write the word 'unexplored' across such archaeological maps, just as was done a couple of centuries ago with so many maps of Africa.

Despite these problems, archaeology is very good for certain things. No longer merely concerned with studying artefacts, archaeologists have turned their attention to the study of human behaviour and its change through time. This is as it should be, for over a long time-scale it is probably only they who can throw much light on when and how and why human societies changed in the way that they did. In this book, for instance, an attempt is made to assess how much archaeology can tell us about two aspects of the development of social complexity in tropical Africa: the growth of cities and the appearance of states. The purpose is not to dispute with historians or social anthropologists or sociologists or geographers, who already have their own ideas, but to evaluate the archaeological data and to determine what it has to contribute to the debates on these issues. In doing this, it will also become apparent that future archaeological fieldwork will need more carefully thought-out research designs than has sometimes been the case in the past.

As has already been stated, human beings have been in Africa for at least 2 million years but for most of that time they scavenged, collected, hunted and fished for their food and there were probably few of them, widely scattered across

the landscape. From the available archaeological evidence (Phillipson 1993a), it was only about 100,000 years ago that human societies were able to diversify in ways that allowed them to adapt to virtually all the varied African environments. As a result, it is likely that the size of some groups increased and that overall population levels rose. This led to increasing pressure on food resources, which during the period between about 18,000 and about 7000 years ago resulted in an intensification of exploitation strategies, such as the harvesting of grass seed, the manufacture of specialized fishing equipment, and possibly the development of management techniques over herds of wild animals. These changes did not take place everywhere, nor did they all take place at the same time but they are known to have occurred at various dates during this overall period, in parts of what is now the Sahara, in parts of the Nile Valley, and in some areas of the East African savanna. It seems likely that it was these changes that then led to the development of food production, which was well under way in the northern half of Africa by about the sixth millennium BC. Thus Africans have been farmers for less than half of one per cent of their history but the development of farming has had a major accelerating effect on the evolution of human culture and particularly on social organization. The domestication of sorghum, millet, teff, African rice, wheat, barley, yam, and a host of plants of lesser importance, plus the domestication of cattle, sheep and goats, has had the most profound effect on the growth of human populations, on the densities of population that could be maintained and on the growth of human sedentism. This is not the place to discuss the extent to which the development of food production in Africa resulted from local experimentation and the extent to which it was stimulated by influences from South-West Asia. However, the evidence available seems to indicate that plant domestication was generally an indigenous achievement but that most animal domestication, at least of sheep and goats, resulted from Asiatic initiatives. Whatever the truth of the matter, it is in the context of the development of African farming that all subsequent changes in the continent must be seen.

One of the most important of these changes was the adoption of iron metallurgy, which in Africa was taking place from about the middle of the first millennium BC. So great was the impact of this development on both the means of production and the means of destruction during the last two millennia in Africa, that archaeologists have tended to emphasize it almost to the exclusion of other considerations. Thus has come into use the phrase 'the African Iron Age', terminology that is difficult to apply chronologically and which distracts attention from other important changes that were occurring in some African societies. We still do not know enough about these but it would seem that over the last 3000–4000 years or more there was a rapid growth of interation between groups. This was probably brought about by a combination of population growth, increasing sedentism, ecological diversity, and an uneven distribution of resources. Certain animal and plant

products, salt, copper, iron and other commodities were increasingly exchanged between different population centres and it was into such exchange networks that long-distance trade, both within and outside of Africa, was eventually able to tap. At the local level, such intergroup dependence encouraged a complex interaction between individual settlements, so that some became larger and more important than others and in time came to control all the other settlements in their immediate region. At the same time there was increasing specialization and social stratification amongst the people living in the larger settlements. In certain instances elite groups gained control of crucial resources, which became the basis of political power over the rest of the population. It was in some such manner that there emerged in particular parts of Africa the cities and states that were the principal manifestation of social complexity and which form the subject of this book. For such there were in tropical Africa before the advent of nineteenth-century colonialism. Neither urbanization nor the idea of the state was grafted onto Africa from modern Europe, as some might think. Particularly was this not so for tropical Africa and this book is an archaeologist's attempt to explain how and why this came to be the case.

Scholars considering the origins of cities and states as global phenomena have tended to see them as components of what they have called the emergence of civilization and have generally concentrated on West Asia, India, China and America, with Egypt being the only part of Africa to which attention has been given (Daniel 1968). The basic reason for this has been the concept of 'civilization' itself, which to Gordon Childe and many of his generation implied the existence of writing (Childe 1951: 161; 1957: 37), and which subsequently continued to attract prescriptive definition, although this became broader as time went on (for example, Kluckhohn 1960: 400; Renfrew 1972: 11; Redman 1978: 218–20). In general it seems to have been thought that 'civilization' implied cities, and vice versa, and inevitably this led to a debate about the definition of the word 'city', in which a list of ten criteria by Childe long remained influential (Childe 1950: 3, 9–16). The latter clearly reflected the circumstances of city development and state formation in South-West Asia, and, like Childe's definition of 'civilization', they were, as a result, of only limited value in other parts of the world. As with the term 'civilization', subsequent attempts to define the term 'city' became increasingly generalized (for example, Sjoberg 1960; Mumford 1961: 85; Jones 1966: 5; Beaujeu-Garnier and Chabot 1967: 30; Redman 1978: 215–16) and by 1981 Adams could comment that: 'Urbanism, to be sure, denotes no set of precise, well understood additional characteristics for societies so described' (R. McC. Adams 1981: 81).

Implicit in these attempts at definition was a concern with process, that is to say: how did states emerge, how did cities develop? It has been these questions that have increasingly attracted attention, resulting in a large and sophisticated literature. Investigations have concentrated on what has often been called 'the rise of complex

society' and there has been a tendency to separate the study of urbanization from that of state formation. Indeed, the rise of the state has been seen as central to the emergence of 'complex societies', which some anthropologists would prefer to call 'stratified societies' or even 'pluralistic societies' (the latter as defined by Kuper and Smith 1969: 3–4). There has been much discussion of what has been called 'the anthropology of political evolution' (for example, Cohen and Service 1978; Claessen and Skalník 1978; Claessen and van de Velde 1987; Eisenstadt, Abitbol and Chazan 1988; Claessen and Oosten 1996) but its emphasis has tended to be on theoretical considerations and much of the evidence used has been drawn either from historical sources or from ethnographic and anthropological observations in the recent past. It has been difficult to relate such theories to archaeological evidence, although Jonathan Haas (1982) made an important attempt to do this, just as Roland Fletcher (1995) has constructed a theory of urbanization on a similar basis.

After reviewing the literature of state-formation theory, Haas presented a modified theory of his own and discussed how it might be used in the interpretation of archaeological data. He defined a 'state' as being 'a society in which there is a centralized and specialized institution of government' (Haas 1982: 3) and examined the various ways in which scholars have attempted to explain the emergence of such societies. He grouped these explanations into two schools of thought: the 'conflict' school and the 'integration' school (p. 15): the former arguing that 'the state evolved in response to conflict between unequal social classes' (p. 34) (for example, Fried 1967), and the latter arguing that the state evolved when 'social groups voluntarily came together and submitted to a governing authority in order to gain the military and economic benefits of centralization' (p. 61) (for example, Service 1975). Haas suggested that a more useful theory could be produced by 'introducing major integration elements directly into a broadened conflict model' (p. 129). Examining the main specific theories for the emergence of state societies, he identified three different groups (pp. 132–52): (1) warfare theories (for example, Carneiro 1970); (2) trade theories, either (a) inter-regional (for example, Rathje 1971; 1972) or (b) intra-regional (for example, Wright and Johnson 1975); and (3) an irrigation theory (Wittfogel 1957). Haas argued that in spite of differences between them, 'All the theories begin with stratification and outline alternate ways by which certain members of a society may gain differential access to basic resources' (Haas 1982: 150). In all the theories, he observed, 'This differential access is based on *control over the production or procurement* of the resources in question' (p. 151; italics in original). It is that control, according to Haas, that gives rulers power and he has advanced what might be called 'the power theory of state formation'. Indeed, others have also recognized the importance of power in the development of social complexity (for example, Earle 1997).

Haas understood power to be the capacity to oblige somebody else to do something that he would not otherwise do, through the application, threat or promise of sanctions (p. 157). He identified nine variables that could be used to measure power in social relationships and demonstrated how each of these could be recognized in the archaeological record (pp. 159–71): (1) power base; (2) means of exerting power; (3) scope of power; (4) amount of power; (5) extension of power; (6) costs of power; (7) compliance costs; (8) refusal costs; and (9) gains. Redefining the word 'state' in terms of power, Haas called it 'a stratified society in which a governing body exercises control over the production or procurement of basic resources, and thus necessarily exercises coercive power over the remainder of the population' (p. 172).

Although Haas attempted to relate some of the anthropological ideas about state formation to archaeological data, he made little mention of precolonial African states, drawing all his archaeological evidence from Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica and Peru. Like many anthropologists who have written about state formation theory, he restricted his discussion to what have been called 'pristine' states. These are states which arose so early or in such isolation that there can be no question of their being influenced by other states, as may have been the case with what have been called 'secondary' states. Thus, Haas ignored the archaeological evidence from precolonial African states, presumably because he considered them to be 'secondary' in origin, even excluding the early Egyptian state on this basis. It seems strange that so much sophisticated theoretical work should have gone into attempting to understand 'pristine' state formation when, in fact, the greater number of states were inevitably 'secondary' in their origins. Indeed, Barbara Price (1978: 161) commented that there had been 'almost no systematic theoretical treatment of the secondary state'. However, Renfrew referred to the whole idea of a division into 'pristine' and 'secondary' 'civilizations' as 'unacceptably diffusionist', offering, he claimed, 'a facile taxonomy in place of serious analysis' (Renfrew 1983: 17). Many archaeologists would agree with Renfrew that 'to understand the origins and development of any civilization, it is necessary to look at the local conditions of its existence: at its subsistence, at its technology, at the social system, at population pressures, at its ideology, and at its external trade' (p. 17). This is the approach adopted in this book because, important though state formation theory and urbanization theory might be, it is also important to examine the actual physical evidence that we have on and under the ground.

The ground in question is African ground and it is therefore appropriate to consider the ideas of the Nigerian geographer Akin Mabogunje (1968), on the subjects of urbanization and state formation. Reviewing 'the functional specialization theory of urbanization', he pointed out that the mere existence of specialists within a community need not give rise to urbanization. For that to happen, anywhere in the world, it was essential that functional specialization should take place

under three 'limiting conditions': (1) the existence of a food surplus to feed the specialists; (2) the existence of a small group of people able to exercise power over the food producers and ensure peaceful conditions; and (3) the existence of traders and merchants to provide raw materials for the specialists (Mabogunje 1968: 35).

Mabogunje defined urbanization as simply 'the process whereby human beings congregate in relatively large number at one particular spot of the earth's surface' (p. 33) and rejected the ethnocentric notions that the presence of writing or the absence of agricultural workers could be used to distinguish between those communities that were urbanized and those that were not. He appears to have been convinced that it was the development of long-distance trade that led to the growth of cities in both East and West Africa (p. 45). On the other hand, the general process of state formation, in his opinion, originated in the necessity to defend urban centres against external aggression, resulting in the extension of control over neighbouring cities (p. 37). Explanations of this sort belong to what may be called the 'conquest hypothesis' of state formation in Africa, such as that favoured by Jack Goody (1971). Concerned mainly with West Africa, he distinguished between what he called the 'horse states of the savannahs' and the 'gun states of the forest' (Goody 1971: 55). To Goody, it would appear that the crucial factor in state emergence was the actual means of destruction and their ownership.

Such an hypothesis is only one of a number that have been advanced by both anthropologists and historians to explain the development of states in Africa, but because of the greater time-depth of their evidence it is perhaps those from historians which are the more useful. John Lonsdale (1981) reviewed the historiography of states and social processes in Africa, commenting on the range of conventional explanations that: 'The point of all these hypotheses was that something rather exceptional was needed to explain any concentration of power in a logically tribal Africa' (Lonsdale 1981: 172). Lonsdale identified the following hypotheses: (1) imposition 'by an autonomous will with a political vision'; (2) the conquest hypothesis, already mentioned, which Lonsdale called 'a favourite explanation'; (3) the demographic pressure hypothesis, 'with the appropriation of power growing out of conflict over resources'; (4) the managerial hypothesis, with the 'articulation of two or more forms of subsistence, typically farming and herding' or the existence of 'deposits of scarce but necessary minerals' providing the basis of power; (5) the long-distance trade hypothesis, as Lonsdale says, the 'most popular explanation for the rise of state power . . . the Pirenne thesis of medieval Africa' (pp. 171–2); and (6) 'Drought . . . as a major explanation of state formation' (p. 175). These hypotheses were not seen as mutually exclusive, Lonsdale accepting that combinations of them might be used in an explanatory role in particular instances. Nevertheless, he stressed that most of these hypotheses originated at a time when there was relatively little known about African state formation. Lonsdale thought that three things had since become apparent. First,

state formation was a very slow process: 'it was frequently botched and started again', so that 'the decay and fall of kingdoms is as important a process as their rise'. Second, a great deal more had become known about the politics of state formation and state collapse (for subsequent discussion of the latter, see Tainter 1988). Power seems to have been decentralized in early kingdoms with their kings acting as mediators rather than autocrats. State emergence involved centralization of that power and this was achieved by coercion not by consensus. Third, it was more useful to explain the rise of particular states in terms of local politics, rather than to hypothesize about 'the idea of the state' and the diffusion of political ideas (Lonsdale 1981: 172–3).

The foregoing discussion has considered only a small sample of the extensive theoretical literature on these complex subjects, drawing mainly from the work of anthropologists, historians and geographers. So, what about the archaeology of precolonial cities and states in tropical Africa, which is the subject of this book? There is obviously a need for theory, but what about the physical evidence that might be used to test some of those theories? Two things are immediately apparent: first, that there seems to have been less general writing on the archaeological evidence than on explanatory theories; and, second, that so limited is our knowledge of the later archaeology of tropical Africa that it is unwise, if not impossible, to consider the archaeological evidence without also considering ethnohistorical and historical evidence. Clearly, there are dangers here, for we may 'allow the ethnographic present and the historically constructed past to exercise tyranny over our perception of past human behaviour' (Fletcher 1995: 212).

The scarcity of general studies concerned with the archaeology of precolonial cities and states in tropical Africa results in part from the relatively limited amount of excavation and other field research that has been carried out and from its uneven geographical distribution. It also results from the fact that archaeological research projects in tropical Africa have rarely been designed specifically to throw light on the origins and development of cities and states. Nevertheless, scattered through the archaeological literature there is much relevant information that can be garnered by the would-be synthesizer. An early attempt to do this was Margaret Shinnie's book *Ancient African kingdoms* (1965), which was so widely used that seventeen years after its publication it was still in print. This was an important book but unfortunately it was pitched at too popular a level to achieve the notice from scholars that it probably deserved. A similar fate had overtaken an earlier general study that covered a comparable range of subject matter: Basil Davidson's *Old Africa rediscovered* (1959). Nevertheless, Davidson's book was so widely read that over a decade later a second edition was published in the United States, under the title *The lost cities of Africa* (Davidson 1970).

After Margaret Shinnie's book, the most significant contribution to the general archaeological literature on cities and states in tropical Africa was Peter Garlake's

The kingdoms of Africa (Garlake 1978a). This had a wide geographical coverage and also examined the archaeological background of the emergence of African kingdoms. Again, an attempt at popularization weakened its impact but it provided numerous black-and-white and colour illustrations of relevant archaeological material. In addition, it was noteworthy for Garlake's insistence on the indigenous evolution of African states, although he also stressed the importance of external trade, whereby a small group could monopolize not the resources but the outlets by which they could be converted into a useful surplus. Thus, in Garlake's view: 'centralized authority grew from a monopoly of foreign trade' (p. 24).

Another general work that made an important contribution to this subject, although it ignored archaeological evidence almost totally, was Richard Hull's *African cities and towns before the European conquest* (1976a). Hull also outlined his approach to this subject in a paper published at the same time (Hull 1976b). His main interest was the history of African settlement planning and architecture, and his starting point was that: 'Scholars in the past have either neglected or grossly underestimated the urban factor in African history' (Hull 1976a: xix). Most relevant to the present discussion were the parts of the book concerning the origins of cities and towns and their decline and disappearance. Hull identified five main types, assuming that major function explained origin but emphasizing that most cities and towns served a combination of such functions. The types were: (1) spiritual and ceremonial centres; (2) commercial centres; (3) centres of governance; (4) centres of refuge; and (5) 'cities of vision' (pp. 120–1). Hull also outlined what he saw as the prerequisites for the growth of cities and towns in Africa: (1) government had to be sufficiently developed to exert control over the agricultural surplus; (2) leaders had to have enough power to demand labour from their people for the construction of public works; (3) specialist craftsmen had to be present; and (4) government had to have an ideological power-base (p. 2). So far as decline and disappearance were concerned, Hull suggested four main causes: (1) environmental deterioration; (2) collapse of political superstructure; (3) revolt of peripheral cities against the mother city; and (4) external military invasion (pp. 114–16). In addition, Hull's book contained useful information about traditional African architecture and building techniques, topics that were also examined by Paul Oliver (1971) and Susan Denyer (1978).

A new publication that contributes significantly to the overall study of African complex societies is a book edited by Susan McIntosh titled *Beyond chiefdoms: pathways to complexity in Africa* (McIntosh 1999).

Studies with a more general relevance to the archaeology of precolonial cities and states in tropical Africa include David Phillipson's *African archaeology* (1993a), which is invaluable for contextual information; the volume edited by Thurstan Shaw *et al.*, *The archaeology of Africa: food, metals and towns* (1993), which consists of specialist papers of which some are relevant; and Joseph Vogel's

edited *Encyclopedia of precolonial Africa* (1997) that also contains some pertinent material. At an even more general level but still useful are Roland Oliver's *The African experience* (1993), John Iliffe's *Africans: the history of a continent* (1995) and John Reader's *Africa: a biography of the continent* (1997).

Turning to the archaeological evidence itself, a serious discrepancy immediately becomes apparent. According to historical sources, there was a substantially greater number of cities and states in precolonial tropical Africa than the archaeological literature would suggest. Fage and Verity's *An atlas of African history* (1978) shows numerous cities and states on its maps of which little or nothing is known archaeologically. What about the early-second-millennium AD state of Kanem east of Lake Chad, for instance, of which the capital Njimi has not even been located by archaeologists? Or what about the sixteenth-century state of Kongo with its capital Mbanza Kongo, that (with its environs) was thought by Leo Africanus to have had a population of about 100,000 people (Africanus 1896: Vol. 1, 73)? Virtually nothing is known about its archaeology either. There are other similar examples that could be cited, but these illustrate well enough the two main reasons for the patchy state of archaeological knowledge on this whole subject. First, there is the problem of the archaeological visibility of the actual sites. There is a great range of variation in the archaeological evidence that might be expected; at the one extreme, a long-established, partly stone-built, commercial centre like Kilwa (Chittick 1974b) and, at the other extreme, a short-lived, grass-built, centre of governance like the Bugandan capital at Rubaga visited by Henry Morton Stanley in 1875 (Stanley 1878: Vol. 1, 199–202). It is likely that the pastoralist/shifting cultivator settlements of Kanem, including Njimi, were even more mobile than those of nineteenth-century Buganda and were, as Hull (1976a: 7) has described them, 'tent-cities' that 'could be moved quite easily'.

The second of the main reasons for the patchy state of our archaeological knowledge is the uneven distribution of archaeological field research in Africa, unevenly distributed both in space and time. A relatively large amount of excavation and fieldwork has been carried out, for instance, on settlement sites belonging to the last three millennia along the Sudanese Nile but, in contrast, relatively little such work has been done, for example, on the Mozambique coast. Thus Mbanza Kongo (later called São Salvador) is archaeologically unknown probably because it is situated in northern Angola, where very little work has been done on any later archaeological sites. Of course, the two problems of archaeological visibility and uneven field research should not be viewed in isolation; they frequently compound one another. Quite clearly, only the most intensive field investigations will reveal sites of low archaeological visibility and in tropical Africa such investigations have been rare.

An obvious consequence of the patchy state of archaeological knowledge concerning precolonial cities and states in tropical Africa is that any discussion of the

relevant archaeological evidence is in danger of giving a distorted picture or at least an incomplete one. However, some indication that this is probably not as serious as it might be can be gained from Chandler and Fox (1974), who made a world-wide study of the statistics of urbanization over the last 3000 years. They produced a series of maps of African cities in AD 1000, 1200, 1300, 1400, 1500, 1600, 1700, 1800 and 1850. These maps are mainly based on historical sources and, although the distribution of cities is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the distribution of states, it is interesting that they reflect very generally the geographical pattern indicated by the archaeological evidence. Thus they show (Fig. 1.1) that the main areas of urban development in tropical Africa were: in West Africa along the southern edge of the Sahara; in the West African forest west of the lower Niger River; on the middle Nile in the Sudan; and in the Ethiopian mountains. They also record urban centres on the East African coast; on the Zimbabwe Plateau; around the lower Zaïre (Congo); and in the Lake Victoria area. So, however deficient the archaeological evidence might be in *quantity*, it does produce a crude geographical *pattern* comparable to that derived from historical and ethnohistorical evidence. It is this that has prompted my choice of subject matter for the substantive chapters of this book.

The chapters that follow might be regarded as a series of case studies, whose choice has been dictated by the availability of archaeological evidence. In reality, they are probably something more than this and it is hoped that they provide an overall picture, however rudimentary, of the processes of state formation and urbanization in tropical Africa. Chapters 2–8 examine the main areas of archaeological evidence by grouping that evidence both geographically and chronologically (Fig. 1.2). Thus, Chapter 2 discusses the evidence from the middle Nile for the cities and states of Kerma, Napata and Meroë, perhaps the first of such developments in tropical Africa, and also considers the evidence for the successor states of Christian Nubia. This is followed in Chapter 3 by an examination of the evidence for Aksum and Christian Ethiopia, in an adjacent part of the continent. The scene is then changed to West Africa, and Chapters 4 and 5, respectively, look at what archaeology has to tell us of the cities and states of the West African savanna and of the West African forest and its fringes. Chapter 6 takes us across the continent again to examine the archaeological evidence available from the cities of the East African coast. In contrast, Chapter 7 considers the evidence from the Zimbabwe Plateau and related areas in the interior, and Chapter 8 focuses on the Upemba Depression and the Interlacustrine Zone, in the heart of Africa.

A problem with this choice of subject matter is that it excludes North Africa and most of Egypt; areas where the processes of state formation and urbanization predate those of tropical Africa, and which are thought to have influenced to varying extents the developments that took place in the West African savanna, the Sudanese Nile Valley and the Ethiopian Plateau. This exclusion may seem unfortunate but the
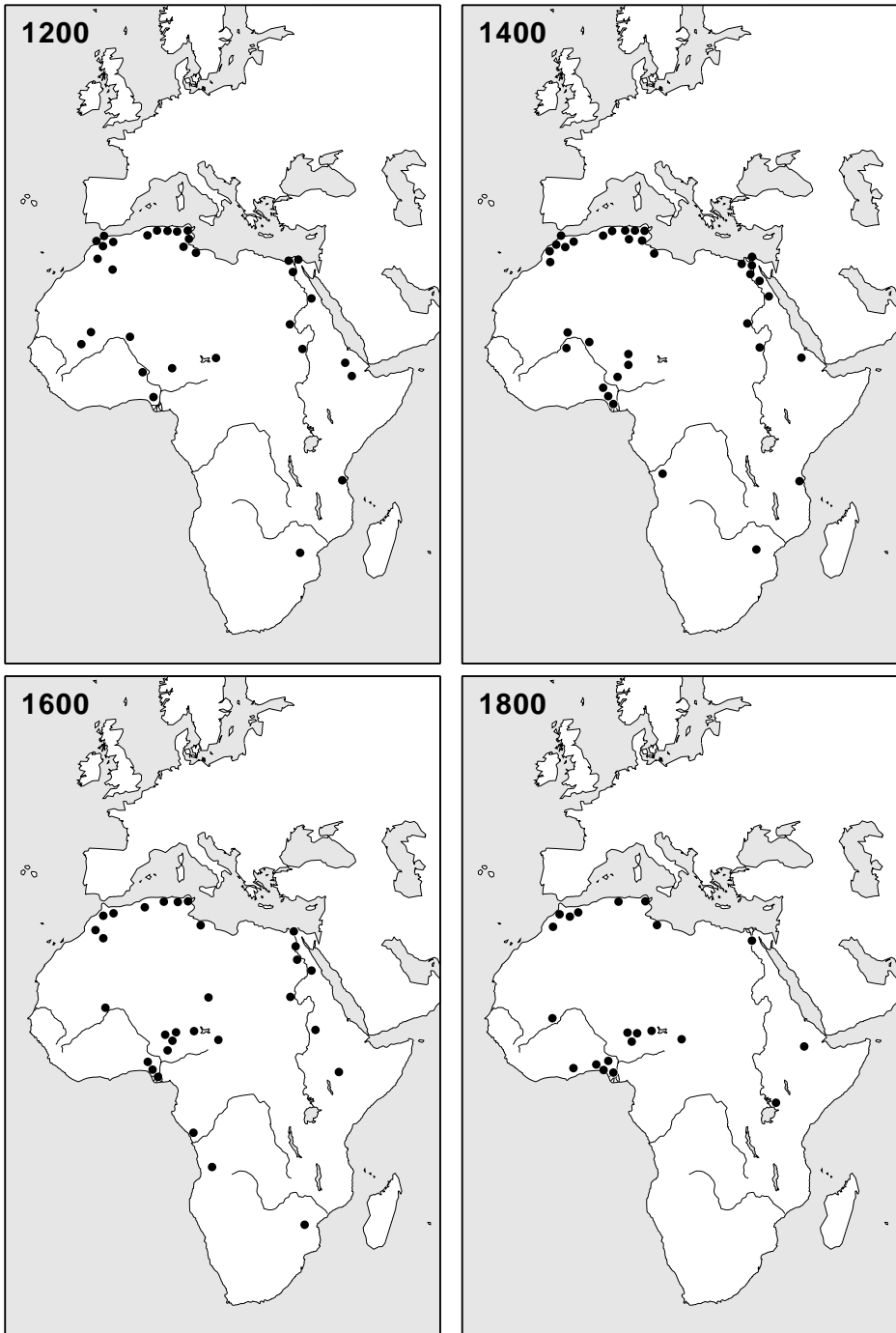
Fig. 1.1 Distribution of African cities with 20,000 or more inhabitants in AD 1200, 1400, 1600 and 1800. After Chandler and Fox (1974: 50, 52, 54, 56).
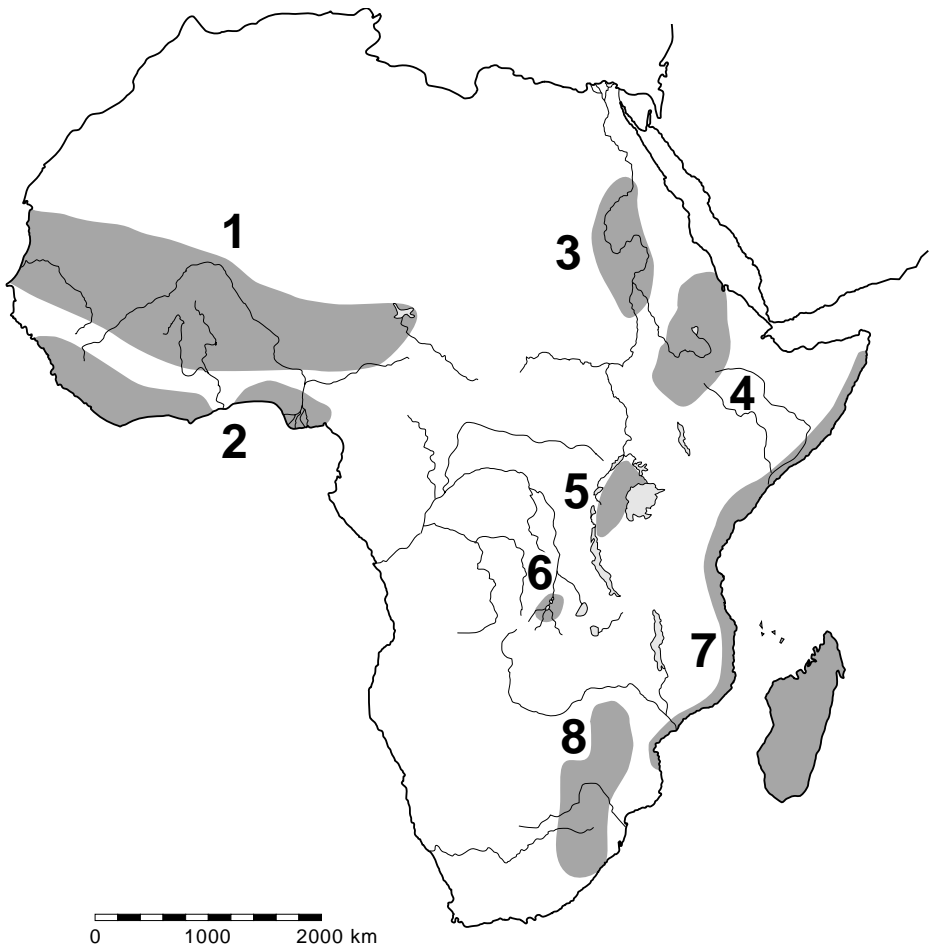
Fig. 1.2 Location of areas discussed in this book.
1: West African savanna (Ch. 4). *2:* West African forest (Ch. 5). *3:* Middle Nile (Ch. 2).
4: Ethiopian Highlands (Ch. 3). *5:* Interlacustrine Region (Ch. 8). *6:* Upemba Depression
(Ch. 8). *7:* East African Coast and islands (Ch. 6). *8:* Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent areas
(Ch. 7).

intention has been to look at the cities and states of *black* Africa, because they comprise a logically coherent group. In contrast, North Africa and Egypt have long had such diverse connections with the Mediterranean and South-West Asian world, that it seems legitimate to exclude them from this study. Therefore, the area considered in this book is defined as 'tropical Africa', because in the most literal sense of that term the book is concerned with Africa between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. The former passes through the centre of the Sahara Desert and the latter through the Kalahari Desert, so that few of the areas that it is proposed to consider are excluded. The only occasion that the discussion strays outside

of the Tropics, in this strict sense, is in Chapter 7 where it is necessary to include some evidence from parts of South Africa.

The subject matter of this book is limited in time as well as in space. The term 'precolonial' has been used to define chronological coverage purely for convenience and without any other intention. The aim has been to find a suitable descriptive term for that complex intermixture of prehistory, protohistory and history constituted by the last four and a half millennia of Africa's past (Fig. 1.3), but prior to colonial take-over and decolonization. The last two millennia or so have often been referred to as 'the African Iron Age' but such techno-epochal terminology has little explanatory value and obstructs rather than aids understanding (Connah 1998b: 5–6). Certainly the period concerned was one of substantial technological change but there were also profound economic and social changes, which it is the purpose of this book to investigate.

This investigation is carried out principally by examining the relevant archaeological evidence for African cities and states. That evidence consists of the material remains of urban settlements and of the culture of their occupants, together with inferences about the relationship of such settlements to the populations of their hinterlands and to the resources available in those hinterlands. In assessing this evidence, it is instructive to test against it some of the theoretical ideas that have been discussed in this chapter. It is important, for instance, to ask how we know that a particular archaeological site represents the remains of a city and how we are able to assume that the area around it constituted a state controlled either from that or from some other city. We can also compare the picture that emerges from the archaeological evidence with the picture that can be reconstructed from any ethnohistorical or historical evidence that is available. At the very roots of our enquiry, however, are basic questions around which the whole discussion revolves. When, how and why did cities and states emerge in tropical Africa? In particular, what factors led to their development in some parts of the continent but not in others? Perhaps it is premature to attempt to answer such difficult questions in our present state of knowledge but each of the substantive chapters of this book has been written with these questions in mind. The final chapter, Chapter 9, seeks to identify any 'common denominators' in the different examples of urbanization and state emergence that have been examined. Such common denominators may not answer our questions as satisfactorily as could be wished but they do begin to provide some sort of an answer. They also allow us to assess, principally using archaeological evidence, both the general theoretical explanations of anthropologists like Haas (1982) and the range of explanatory hypotheses advanced by Africanist historians that Lonsdale (1981) has reviewed. In attempting such an assessment, the approach is based on that advocated by Renfrew (1983: 17) that has been discussed above (p. 7). Each set of archaeological evidence for African cities and states is investigated from the point of view of geographical location, environmental conditions,
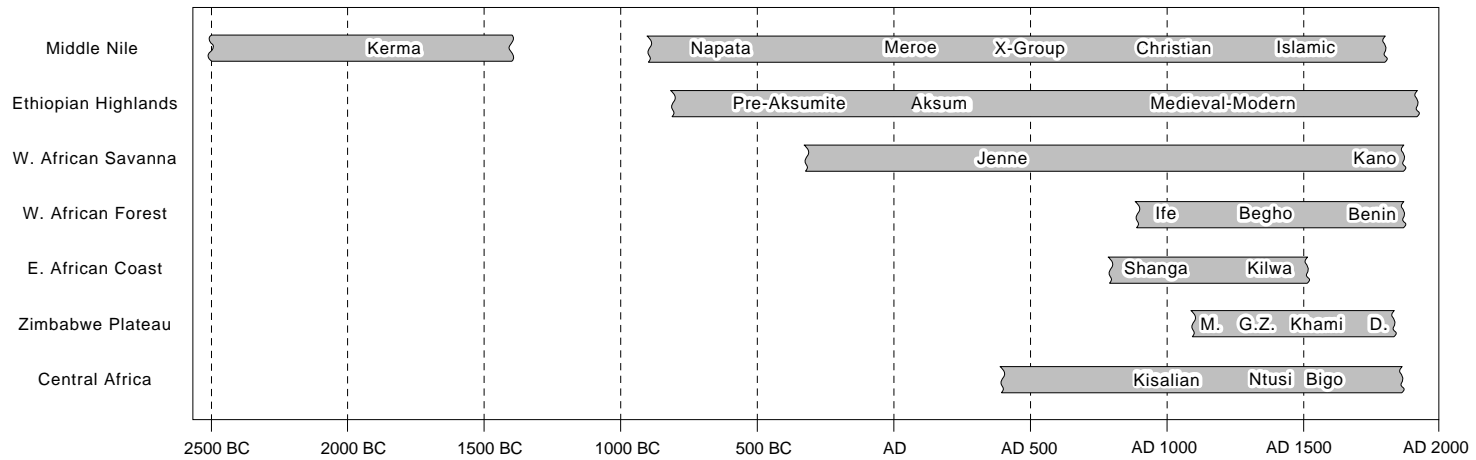
Fig. 1.3 Chronology of urban and state developments discussed in this book. 'M.' = Mapungubwe, 'G.Z.' = Great Zimbabwe, 'D.' = Danangombe (Dhlo Dhlo).

basic subsistence, prevailing technology, social system, population pressures, ideology and external trade. Whatever the many weaknesses of the archaeological evidence for the emergence of cities and states in Africa, that evidence does have the capacity to increase the time-depth of our understanding of these processes and to test and flesh out our knowledge derived from historical sources, where such sources exist. The archaeological evidence reveals a remarkable diversity of both urbanism and state formation in tropical Africa's past, suggesting that a worldwide reappraisal of these aspects of social complexity may be required – a reappraisal that should at last pay proper attention to the physical evidence from previous African civilizations.