Chapter 1
The context

Africa is huge; it is so big that you can put the United States and Australia into it and still have a bit 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 5,000 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 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 only an impressionistic picture of the very large number of differing environments in the African continent. In reality the major zones merge into one another, resulting in an even greater variety of conditions that have been further complicated by climatic variation through time.

For at least 2 million years, human beings have been learning how to get the best out of the kaleidoscope of African environments. Those environments have not determined what men and women could do, nor could the latter ignore the environments in which they have lived. Instead there has been a dynamic relationship between the two, in which people have sought to turn to their advantage the opportunities offered by each environment and to come to terms with its constraints. First as hunters, gatherers, and fishers who gradually intensified their exploitation of available resources, then as pastoralists and cultivators, and eventually as city-dwellers, artisans, and traders, men and women have continued to interact with their environment, retaining a remarkable variety of strategies for doing so.

Archaeology is a major source of information about Africa's past. Documentary sources for African history are limited: their coverage often chronologically patchy and geographically fragmented. For large areas of Africa, particularly tropical Africa, their time depth is restricted to the last century or two. A uniform divide between prehistory and history does not exist on the African continent: some peoples and places, such as Pharaonic Egypt and Aksumite Ethiopia, developed writing several millennia ago; others, such as Benin City and Zimbabwe, lacked a written record until recent times; still others, such as Borno and Kongo, had contemporary accounts for a short period in the past, after which there is virtual silence. In addition, many of the

documentary sources that do exist are based on the observations of outsiders who did not always understand what they observed or were prejudiced in their assessments. Such documentary evidence that does exist is often invaluable, but Africanist historians have also given considerable attention to oral sources of history. However, 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 and architectural history (Garlake 2002) and linguistics (Blench 2006) have contributed useful information, as have ethnographic and anthropological investigations. In addition, other disciplines have been of assistance, such as investigations of animals and plants in the past, including genetics (van der Veen 1999; Blench and MacDonald 2000). Relevant research has also included ethnoarchaeological studies, in which archaeology is employed to examine contemporary societies in order to test interpretations applied to societies in the past.

Archaeologists have spent a lot of time over the last few decades arguing about the nature of archaeology (Renfrew and Bahn 2008). Basically the subject is concerned with the study of the physical evidence of past human activities, in order to reconstruct those activities or at least *construct* what we think they might have been. This, 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. Its greatest advantage is that it enables us to examine things that were actually made and used by people in the past and allows us 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 almost always reflects 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 many of 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 lower and middle Nile, in North Africa, and in the Ethiopian Highlands we have the remains of cities often built of stone or earth, which have clear indications of centralized authority, so that archaeological investigations have added greatly to what is known from documentary sources. In contrast, archaeology has contributed much less information for Central Africa, where urban settlements were constructed

mainly of grass, wood, and other organic materials and occupied by people who did not express their identity in more permanent building materials and did not create written records. Unfortunately, however, archaeological evidence has another drawback: it results from human endeavour, and archaeologists (just like other people) tend to vary in the 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 difficult to do so in the tangled undergrowth of the rainforest. 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, African archaeological distribution maps tend to show the distribution of archaeological research, rather than that of archaeological evidence.

Despite these problems, archaeology has powerful research potential. 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 they, increasingly along with geneticists, linguists, and others, who can throw much light on when and how and why human societies changed in the way that they did. This book, for instance, attempts to assess how much archaeology can tell us about two aspects of the development of social complexity in the African continent: 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 have their own ideas and have developed a number of explanatory theories, 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 sophisticated research designs than has sometimes been the case in the past.

For most of the time that human beings have been in Africa, they scavenged, collected, hunted, and fished for their food, and there were few of them, widely scattered across the landscape. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence (Phillipson 2005) suggests that from about 200,000 years ago people were adapting to virtually all the varied African environments. Subsequently, it is likely that the size of some groups increased and that overall population levels rose. This probably led to pressure on food resources, which during the period between about 18,000 and about 7,000 years ago caused intensified exploitation strategies, such as the harvesting of grass seeds, the use of specialized fishing equipment, and possibly the management of wild animals. These changes 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 they then led to the development of food production, which occurred in the northern half of Africa by about the sixth

millennium BC. Thus Africans have been farmers for less than half of 1 percent of their history, but the development of farming has had a major accelerating effect on the evolution of human culture and on social organization. The domestication of sorghum, millet, teff, African rice, wheat, barley, yam, and a host of other plants, plus the domestication of cattle, sheep, and goats, resulted in larger human populations, greater densities of population, and a growth in human sedentism. The development of food production in Africa arose from both indigenous experimentation and influences from South-West Asia. The evidence indicates that much of the plant domestication was an African achievement and that some cattle were probably domesticated in Africa, unlike sheep and goats whose domestication apparently resulted from Asiatic initiatives. It is in the context of African farming that most subsequent cultural changes in the continent must be seen.

One of the most important of these changes was the adoption of iron metallurgy, which in most of Africa took place from about the middle of the first millennium BC or somewhat earlier and greatly improved the efficiency of tools and weapons. Copper and copper-alloy metallurgy pre-dated iron metallurgy but was mainly practised in the lower and middle Nile Valley and North Africa. So great was the impact of the adoption of iron 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 and to overlook other matters. The period has been called 'the African Iron Age', terminology that is difficult to apply chronologically and that distracts attention from other important changes that were occurring in some African societies. It seems that over the last 5,000 years or more there was a rapid growth of interaction between human 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 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 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 within hierarchical societies gained control of crucial resources, which became the basis of their political domination of the rest of the population in their region. It could have been in some such manner that there emerged in parts of Africa the cities and states that were the principal manifestations of social complexity and that form the subject of this

book. These developments first took place in the lower and middle Nile Valley and in Africa north of the Sahara, but they also occurred in tropical Africa, particularly during the last two millennia. This book is an archaeologist's attempt to explain how and why this came to be the case.

In retrospect, many of the earlier attempts at such explanation now seem simplistic and even naïve, a range of theories from each of which its proponents claimed understanding could be gained. There was almost a competition to produce a theory that would explain everything. More recently this somewhat mechanistic, formulaic approach has been replaced by treating the subject as one aspect of cultural evolution, seen not as a step-like series of changes, as was once thought, but as a process varying in tempo and pattern from region to region and characterized by socioeconomic multicausality (Feinman and Manzanilla 2000). Nevertheless, some scholars considering the origins of cities and states as global phenomena still saw them as components of what they called 'the emergence of civilization', generally concentrating on West Asia, Pakistan–India, China, and Central and South America, with Egypt the only part of Africa given attention (Daniel 1968). The reason for this was the essentially nineteenth-century concept of 'civilization', which to Gordon Childe and many of his generation, principally trained in Greek and Roman classical history, implied the existence of writing (Childe 1957: 37). This was a Eurocentric view, in which civilization was defined by the extent to which other societies conformed to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European ideals. The use of the word 'civilization' in the title of this book is therefore intended to be provocative, to remind readers that Africa had its own 'civilizations'. However, after Childe the concept of civilization continued to attract prescriptive definition, although this became broader as time went on (e.g., Kluckhohn 1960: 400; Renfrew 1972: 11; Redman 1978: 218–20). In general it was thought that civilization implied cities, and vice versa, and this led to a debate about the definition of the word 'city', in which a list of ten criteria by Childe became influential (Childe 1950: 3, 9–16). The latter reflected the circumstances of city development and state formation in South-West Asia and, like Childe's definition of civilization, were of limited value in other parts of the world. As with the word 'civilization', subsequent attempts to define the term 'city' became increasingly generalized (e.g., Sjoberg 1960; Mumford 1961: 85; Redman 1978: 215–16). Nigerian geographer Akin Mabogunje reviewed 'the functional specialization theory of urbanization', pointing out that it was essential that functional specialization take place under three 'limiting conditions': the existence of a food surplus to feed the specialists, the existence of a small group of people able to exercise power over the food producers and ensure peaceful conditions, and the existence of traders and merchants to provide raw materials for the specialists (Mabogunje 1968: 35).

He defined urbanization as simply 'the process whereby human beings congregate in relatively large number at one particular spot of the earth's surface' (Mabogunje 1968: 33). The 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 (Mabogunje 1968: 37). However, by 1981 Adams would comment: '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 cities develop, how did states emerge? It has been these questions that have increasingly attracted attention, resulting in a large literature. Investigations have concentrated on what has 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 'pluralistic societies'. There has been much discussion of 'the anthropology of political evolution' (e.g., Claessen and Skalník 1978; Cohen and Service 1978; Claessen and van de Velde 1987; Eisenstadt et al. 1988; Claessen and Oosten 1996), but the 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. For example, much attention had been given to the role of 'chiefdoms' and the ways in which they could have developed into states; Flannery (1999) drawing on ethnohistorical sources from Africa, Madagascar, Inner Asia, and Hawaii to examine the interaction of 'process' and 'agency' in such changes. Nevertheless, it has been difficult to relate such theories to archaeological evidence, although Jonathan Haas (1982) attempted to do this, and Roland Fletcher (1995) constructed a theory of urbanization on a similar basis. In addition, Trigger (2003), Maisels (2010), Lull and Micó (2011), and Smith (2012) have adopted a comparative approach in which more attention has been given to the archaeological aspects of complex societies.

Haas presented a state-formation theory that could 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 ways in which scholars have attempted to explain the emergence of such societies. He grouped these explanations into two schools of thought (Haas 1982: 15): the 'conflict' school (e.g., Fried 1967) and the 'integration' school (e.g., Service 1975). Instead, Haas suggested a theory 'introducing major integration elements into a broadened conflict model' (Haas 1982: 129). Examining the main theories for the emergence of state

societies, he identified three groups (Haas 1982: 132–52): (1) warfare theories (e.g., Carneiro 1970); (2) trade theories, either interregional (e.g., Rathje 1971) or intraregional (e.g., 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'. He observed, 'This differential access is based on *control over the production or procurement* of the resources in question' (Haas 1982: 150–1; emphasis in original). It is that control, according to Haas, that gives rulers power. Subsequently, Flannery and Marcus (2012) have also emphasized the creation of inequality as an important factor in state formation. In addition, others have recognized the importance of power in the development of social complexity (e.g., Earle 1997; Maisels 2010). Haas understood power to be the capacity to oblige somebody else to do something that she or he would not otherwise do, through the application, threat, or promise of sanctions (Haas 1982: 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 (Haas 1982: 159–71). 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' (Haas 1982: 172).

Although Haas attempted to relate some of the anthropological ideas about state formation to archaeological data, he made little mention of African states, drawing 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 that arose so early or in such isolation that there can be no question of their being influenced by other states, as might have been the case with what have been called 'secondary' states. Thus, Haas ignored the archaeological evidence from 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 theoretical work has gone into attempting to understand 'pristine' state formation when most states were inevitably 'secondary' in their origins. Barbara Price (1978: 161) commented on the limited theoretical treatment of the secondary state, and Renfrew referred to the idea of a division into 'pristine' and 'secondary' 'civilizations' as 'unacceptably diffusionist' (Renfrew 1983: 17). Renfrew thought that 'to understand the origins and development of any civilization', it is necessary to look at its local conditions: at subsistence, technology, social system, population pressures, ideology, and external trade. Yoffee (2005) also

argued for a broader treatment of social change in the past. This is the approach adopted in this book, because although state formation theory and urbanization theory are important, it is also important to examine the archaeological evidence for the conditions that gave rise to states and cities, as Pauketat (2007) has insisted.

Anthropologists and historians have advanced various hypotheses to explain the development of states in Africa. Historian John Lonsdale reviewed the historiography of the subject (Lonsdale 1981) and identified the following hypotheses: (1) imposition by an autonomous will, (2) conquest, (3) demographic pressure, (4) a managerial basis of power, (5) long-distance trade, and (6) drought. These hypotheses were not seen as mutually exclusive; Lonsdale accepted 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 subsequently become apparent. First, state formation was a very slow process: '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 the latter, Tainter 1988; Yoffee and Cowgill 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).

Physical evidence is needed to test the theories concerning urbanization and state formation, but so limited is our knowledge of the later archaeology of Africa that ethnohistorical and historical evidence also need to be considered. The danger here is that we might 'allow the ethnographic present and the historically constructed past to exercise tyranny over our perception of past human behaviour' (Fletcher 1995: 212). Because of an uneven geographical distribution of excavations and other field researches, there have been relatively few general archaeological studies concerned with the origins and development of cities and states in Africa, and older contributions are of limited value. However, an early contribution to the general archaeological literature was Peter Garlake's *The Kingdoms of Africa* (Garlake 1978a), which was noteworthy for the author'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.

Although it gave little attention to archaeological evidence, there was also Richard Hull's book *African Cities and Towns before the European Conquest* (1976). Relevant to the present discussion were parts of the book concerning the origins of cities and towns and their decline and disappearance. Hull identified five main urban types, assuming that major function explained origin but emphasizing that most cities and towns served a combination of such functions. The types were: spiritual and ceremonial centres, commercial centres, centres of governance, centres of refuge, and 'cities of vision' (Hull 1976: 120–1). Hull also outlined what he saw as the prerequisites for the growth of cities and towns in Africa: government had to be sufficiently developed to exert control over the agricultural surplus; leaders had to have enough power to demand labour from their people for the construction of public works; specialist craftsmen had to be present; and government had to have an ideological power base (Hull 1976: 2). For decline and disappearance, Hull suggested four main causes: environmental deterioration, collapse of political superstructure, revolt of peripheral cities against the mother city, and external military invasion (Hull 1976: 114–16).

Other publications relevant to the archaeology of cities and states in Africa include: Augustin Holl, *West African Early Towns* (2006); David Phillipson, *African Archaeology* (2005); Thurstan Shaw et al., *The Archaeology of Africa* (1993); and Joseph Vogel, *Encyclopedia of Precolonial Africa* (1997). Another source is *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology* (2013), edited by Peter Mitchell and Paul Lane. Chapter 48 in that book, by J. Cameron Monroe (2013: 703–22), entitled 'The archaeology of the precolonial state in Africa', provides a useful summary. Parts of *The Civilizations of Africa* by Christopher Ehret (2002) are also relevant, as are some of the papers in *African Archaeology* edited by Ann Brower Stahl (2005b). Furthermore, three essays of my own consider specific aspects of the subject (Connah 2000a; 2000b; 2008). In addition, there are historical studies: Roland Oliver, *The African Experience* (1993); John Iliffe, *Africans* (1995); John Reader, *Africa* (1997); and Anderson and Rathbone, *Africa's Urban Past* (2000).

When examining the archaeological evidence, a discrepancy becomes apparent. According to historical sources, there was a greater number of cities and states in Africa than the archaeological literature indicates. Fage and Verity's *An Atlas of African History* (1978) shows numerous cities and states in 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 never been found? Or what about the sixteenth-century state of Kongo with its capital Mbanza Kongo, 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.

These examples illustrate the two main reasons for the patchy state of archaeological knowledge on this subject. First, there is the problem of the archaeological visibility of the sites (Connah 2008). At the one extreme, a long-established, partly stone-built, commercial centre like Kilwa (Chittick 1974), 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). The second of the main reasons for the patchy state of archaeological knowledge is the uneven distribution in space and time of archaeological field research in Africa. Comparatively large amounts of excavation and fieldwork have been carried out, for instance, on settlement sites of the last three millennia along the Sudanese Nile, but, in contrast, relatively little such work has been done, for example, on the Mozambique coast. These two problems of archaeological visibility and uneven field research frequently compound one another. Clearly, only the most intensive field investigations will reveal sites of low archaeological visibility.

A consequence of the patchy state of archaeological knowledge concerning cities and states in Africa is that any discussion of the relevant archaeological evidence might give a distorted picture. However, Chandler and Fox (1974) produced a series of maps of African cities at intervals between AD 1000 and 1850 mainly based on historical sources. Although the distribution of cities does not necessarily indicate the distribution of states, these maps do reflect the geographical distribution of cities and states indicated by the archaeological evidence. Thus they show that the main areas of urban development were: in the Maghreb of North Africa, along the lower Nile in Egypt, on the middle Nile in the Sudan, in West Africa along the southern edge of the Sahara, in the West African rainforest west of the lower Niger River, and on the Ethiopian Plateau. They also record urban centres on the East African coast, on the Zimbabwe Plateau, around the lower Congo, and in the Lake Victoria area. So the archaeological evidence does produce a geographical pattern comparable to that derived from historical and ethnohistorical evidence. It is this that has prompted the choice of subject matter for most of the substantive chapters of this book.

Some of the implicit assumptions in this book require examination. For instance, how are the terms 'city' and 'state' to be understood in this specific context? Some authors have written of 'cities' in Africa (Hull 1976) and 'kingdoms' (Garlake 1978a) or 'states' (Fage and Verity 1978). Others have accepted the existence of the West African 'empires' of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and Kanem-Borno. The question is whether such terms accurately describe African realities or merely reflect the influence of European historiography. Studies of more recent African societies by anthropologists and ethnographers suggest that larger settlements in Africa occurred in a variety of forms,