





# Classical Era Variations

## Africa and the Americas

500 B.C.E.—1200 C.E.



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“In a [Maya] community called Xolep, there was no paper or pencils where I taught. I started by drawing figures in the dirt. We then taught letters by forming them with sticks. One day students brought flower petals to shape the letters. . . . When we were able to gather enough money for notebooks, we gave them to the students and asked them to report the next day to the tree where we were holding school. . . . They proudly filed under the teaching tree, notebooks tucked under their arms, feeling that they were now officially students.”<sup>1</sup>

This incident, reported in 1999 by a participant in an independent schools movement among the Maya of southern Mexico, was a tiny part of an ongoing revival of Maya culture. Despite the collapse of their famous classical civilization more than a thousand years ago, Maya language and folkways have persisted among some 6 million people currently living in Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. And despite five centuries of repression, exploitation, and neglect at the hands of Spanish colonizers and the independent governments that followed, they were now in the midst of what one writer called “a new time of the Maya.”<sup>2</sup> They were writing their own histories, celebrating their own culture, creating their own organizations, and teaching their children to read. The most dramatic expression of this recent Maya revival was an armed uprising, begun in early 1994 and led by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Growing out of long-term social and economic grievances against local landowners and an unresponsive government, that rebellion stunned Mexico and focused global attention on the poverty and misery of the country’s indigenous Maya people. Once

**The Maya Temple of the Great Jaguar in Tikal:** Located in the Maya city of Tikal in present-day Guatemala, this temple was constructed in the eighth century C.E. and excavated by archeologists in the late nineteenth century. It served as the tomb of the Tikal ruler Jasaw Chan K’awiil I (682–734). Some 144 feet tall, it was topped by a three-room temple complex and a huge roofcomb showing the ruler on his throne. Carved on a wooden beam inside the temple is an image of the ruler protected by a huge jaguar along with illustrations of his military victories. (Peter M. Wilson/Alamy)

again, some 1,500 years after the high point of their classical civilization, the Maya were making history.

FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE CLASSICAL ERA EVOKES most vividly the civilizations of Eurasia—especially the Greeks and the Romans, the Persians and the Chinese, and the Indians of South Asia—yet those were not the only classical-era civilizations. During this period, the Mesoamerican Maya and the Peruvian Moche thrived, as did several civilizations in Africa, including Meroë, Axum, and the Niger River valley. Furthermore, those peoples who did not organize themselves around cities or states likewise had histories of note and alternative ways of constructing their societies, although they are often neglected in favor of civilizations. This chapter explores the histories of the varied peoples of Africa and the Americas during the classical era. On occasion, those histories will extend some centuries beyond the chronological boundaries of the classical age in Eurasia, because patterns of historical development around the world did not always coincide precisely.

At the broadest level, however, human cultures evolved in quite similar fashion around the world. All, of course, were part of that grand process of human migration that initially peopled the planet. Beginning in Africa, that vast movement of humankind subsequently encompassed Eurasia, Australia, the Americas, and Oceania. Almost everywhere, gathering and hunting long remained the sole basis for sustaining life and society. Then, on the three supercontinents—Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas—the momentous turn of the Agricultural Revolution took place independently and in several distinct areas of each landmass. That revolutionary transformation of human life subsequently generated, in particularly rich agricultural environments of all three regions, those more complex societies that we know as civilizations, which featured cities, states, monumental architecture, and great social inequality. In these ways, the historical trajectory of the human journey on the earth has a certain unity and similarity across quite distinct continental regions. At the beginning of the Common Era, that trajectory had generated a total world population of about 250 million people, substantially less than the current population of the United States alone. By contemporary standards, it was still a sparsely populated planet.

The world's human population was distributed very unevenly across the three giant continents, as the Snapshot indicates. If these estimates are even reasonably accurate, then during the classical era Eurasia was home to more than 80 percent of the world's people, Africa about 11 percent, and the Americas between 5 and 7 percent. That unevenness in population distribution is part of the reason why world historians focus more attention on Eurasia than on Africa or the Americas. Here lies one of the major differences among the continents.

There were other differences as well. The absence of most animals capable of domestication meant that no pastoral societies developed in the Americas, and no draft animals were available to pull plows or carts or to carry heavy loads for long distances. Africa lacked wild sheep, goats, chickens, horses, and camels, but its proximity to Eurasia meant that these animals, once domesticated, became widely available

## Snapshot Continental Population in the Classical Era<sup>3</sup>

(Note: Population figures for such early times are merely estimates and are often controversial among scholars. Percentages do not always total 100 percent due to rounding.)

	Eurasia	Africa	North America	Central/South America	Australia/Oceania	Total World
Area (in square miles and as percentage of world total)						
	21,049,000 (41%)	11,608,000 (22%)	9,365,000 (18%)	6,880,000 (13%)	2,968,000 (6%)	51,870,000
Population (in millions and as percentage of world total)						
<b>400 B.C.E.</b>	127 (83%)	17 (11%)	1 (0.7%)	7 (5%)	1 (0.7%)	153
<b>10 C.E.</b>	213 (85%)	26 (10%)	2 (0.8%)	10 (4%)	1 (0.4%)	252
<b>200 C.E.</b>	215 (84%)	30 (12%)	2 (0.8%)	9 (4%)	1 (0.4%)	257
<b>600 C.E.</b>	167 (80%)	24 (12%)	2 (1%)	14 (7%)	1 (0.5%)	208
<b>1000 C.E.</b>	195 (77%)	39 (15%)	2 (0.8%)	16 (6%)	1 (0.4%)	253

to African peoples. Metallurgy in the Americas was likewise far less developed than in the Eastern Hemisphere, where iron tools and weapons played such an important role in economic and military life. In the Americas, writing was limited to the Mesoamerican region and was most highly developed among the Maya, whereas in Africa it was confined to the northern and northeastern parts of the continent during the classical era. In Eurasia, by contrast, writing emerged elaborately in many regions. Classical-era civilizations in Africa and the Americas were fewer in number and generally smaller than those of Eurasia, and larger numbers of their people lived in communities that did not feature cities and states.

To illustrate the historical developments of the classical era beyond Eurasia, this chapter focuses on three regions in Africa and three in the Americas. To what extent did these histories parallel those of Eurasia? In what ways did they forge new or different paths?

## The African Northeast

When historians refer to Africa during the classical era, they are speaking generally of a geographic concept, a continental landmass, and not a cultural identity. Certainly no one living on the continent at that time thought of himself or herself as

an African. Like Eurasia or the Americas, Africa hosted numerous separate societies, cultures, and civilizations with vast differences among them as well as some interaction between them.

Many of these differences grew out of the continent's environmental variations. Small regions of Mediterranean climate in the northern and southern extremes, large deserts (the Sahara and the Kalahari), even larger regions of savanna grasslands, tropical rain forest in the continent's center, highlands and mountains in eastern Africa—all of these features, combined with the continent's enormous size, ensured variation and difference among Africa's many peoples. Africa did, however, have one distinctive environmental feature: bisected by the equator, it was the most tropical of the world's three supercontinents. Persistent warm temperatures caused the rapid decomposition of vegetable matter called humus, resulting in poorer and less fertile soils and a less productive agriculture than in the more temperate Eurasia. Those climatic conditions also spawned numerous disease-carrying insects and parasites, which have long created serious health problems in many parts of the continent. It was within these environmental constraints that African peoples made their histories.

A further geographic feature shaped African history—its proximity to Eurasia, which allowed parts of Africa to interact with Eurasian civilizations. During the classical era, North Africa was incorporated into the Roman Empire and used to produce wheat and olives on large estates with slave labor. Christianity spread widely, giving rise to some of the early Church's most famous martyrs and to one of its most important theologians, Saint Augustine (354–430 C.E.). The Christian faith found an even more permanent foothold in the lands now known as Ethiopia.

Arabia was another point of contact with the larger world for African peoples. The arrival of the domesticated camel, probably from Arabia, generated a nomadic pastoral way of life among some of the Berber peoples of the western Sahara during the first three centuries C.E. A little later, camels also made possible trans-Saharan commerce, which linked interior West Africa to the world of Mediterranean civilization. Over many centuries, the East African coast was a port of call for Egyptian, Roman, and Arab merchants, and that region subsequently became an integral part of Indian Ocean trading networks.

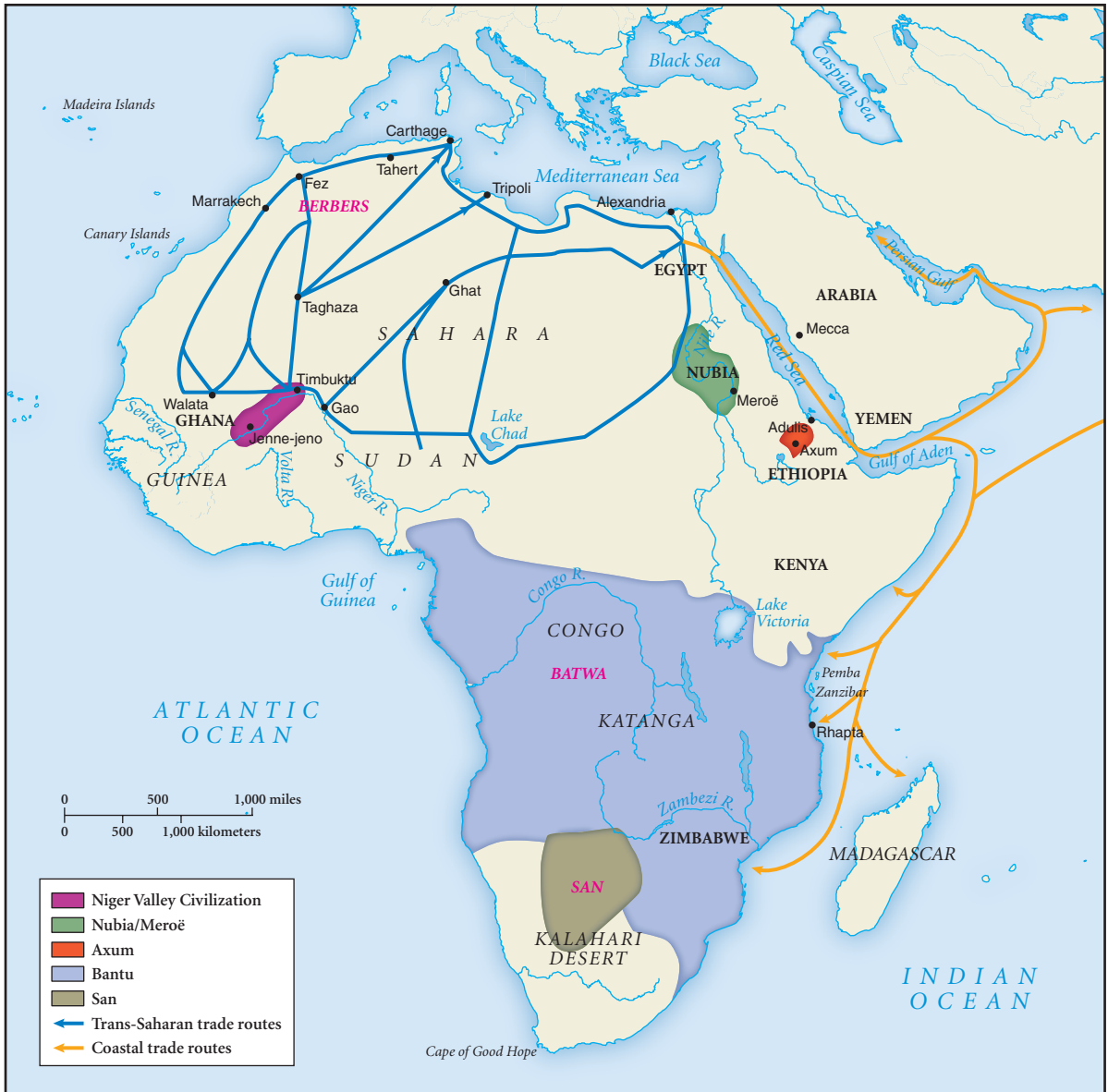
Both the external connections and, more important, the internal development of African societies generated various patterns of historical change during the classical era. Three regions—northeastern Africa, the Niger River basin in West Africa, and the vast world of Bantu-speaking Africa south of the equator—serve to illustrate these differences and the many social and cultural experiments spawned by the peoples of this continent.

### *Meroë: Continuing a Nile Valley Civilization*

#### ■ Connection

How did the history of Meroë and Axum reflect interaction with neighboring civilizations?

In the Nile Valley south of Egypt lay the lands of Nubian civilization, almost as old as Egypt itself. Over many centuries, Nubians both traded and fought with Egypt, alternately conquering and being conquered by their northern neighbor. While borrowing heavily from Egypt, Nubia remained a distinct and separate civilization



**Map 7.1** Africa in the Classical Era

During the classical era, older African civilizations such as Egypt and Nubia persisted and changed, while new civilizations emerged in Axum and the Niger River valley. South of the equator, Bantu-speaking peoples spread rapidly, creating many new societies and identities.

(see Chapter 3). By the classical era, as Egypt fell under foreign control, Nubian civilization came to center on the southern city of Meroë, where it flourished between 300 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. (see Map 7.1).

Politically, the Kingdom of Meroë was governed by an all-powerful and sacred monarch, a position occasionally conferred on women. In accordance with ancient



### A Bracelet from Meroë

This gold bracelet, dating to about 100 B.C.E., illustrates the skill of Meroë's craftsmen as well as the kingdom's reputation as one of the wealthiest states of the ancient world. (Bracelet with image of Hathor, Nubian, Meroitic Period, about 100 B.C.E. Object Place: Sudan, Nubia, Gebel Barkal, Pyramid 8, Gold, enamel. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition, 20.333. Photograph © 2008 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

traditions, rulers were buried along with a number of human sacrificial victims. The city of Meroë and other urban centers housed a wide variety of economic specialties—merchants, weavers, potters, and masons, as well as servants, laborers, and slaves. The smelting of iron and the manufacture of iron tools and weapons were especially prominent industries. The rural areas surrounding Meroë were populated by peoples who practiced some combination of herding and farming and paid periodic tribute to the ruler. Rainfall-based agriculture was possible in Meroë, and consequently farmers were less dependent on irrigation. This meant that the rural population

did not need to concentrate so heavily along the Nile and was less directly controlled from the capital than was the case in Egypt, where state authorities were required to supervise an irrigation system serving a dense population along the river.

The wealth and military power of Meroë derived in part from extensive long-distance trading connections, to the north via the Nile and to the east and west by means of camel caravans. Its iron weapons and cotton cloth, as well as its access to gold, ivory, tortoiseshells, and ostrich feathers, gave Meroë a reputation for great riches in the classical world of northeastern Africa and the Mediterranean. The discovery in Meroë of a statue of the Roman emperor Augustus, probably seized during a raid on Roman Egypt, testifies to contact with the Mediterranean world. Culturally, Meroë seemed to move away from the heavy Egyptian influence of earlier times. A local lion god, Apedemek, grew more prominent than Egyptian deities such as Isis and Osiris, while the use of Egyptian-style writing declined as a new and still undeciphered Meroitic script took its place.

In the centuries following 100 C.E., the Kingdom of Meroë declined, in part because of deforestation caused by the need for wood to make charcoal for smelting iron. The effective end of the Meroë phase of Nubian civilization came with the kingdom's conquest in the 340s C.E. by the neighboring and rising state of Axum. In the centuries that followed, three separate Nubian states emerged, and Coptic (Egyptian) Christianity penetrated the region. For almost a thousand years, Nubia was a Christian civilization, using Greek as a liturgical language and constructing churches in Coptic or Byzantine fashion. After 1300 or so, political division, Arab immigration, and the penetration of Islam eroded this Christian civilization, and Nubia became part of the growing world of Islam.

### *Axum: The Making of a Christian Kingdom*

If Meroë and Nubia represented the continuation of an old African civilization, Axum marked the emergence of a new one. (For various accounts about or from



Axum, see Documents: Axum and the World, pp. 307–15.) Axum lay in the Horn of Africa, in what is now Eritrea and northern Ethiopia (see Map 7.1). Its economic foundation was a highly productive agriculture that used a plow-based farming system, unlike most of the rest of Africa, which relied on the hoe or digging stick. Axum's agriculture generated substantial amounts of wheat, barley, millet, and teff, a highly nutritious grain unique to that region. By 50 C.E. or so, a substantial state had emerged, stimulated by its participation in Red Sea and Indian Ocean commerce. At Adulis, then the largest port on the East African coast, a wide range of merchants sought the products of the African interior—animal hides, rhinoceros horn, ivory, obsidian, tortoiseshells, and slaves. Taxes on this trade provided a major source of revenue for the Axumite state and the complex society that grew up within it.

The interior capital city, also known as Axum, was a center of monumental building and royal patronage for the arts. The most famous buildings were huge stone obelisks, which most likely marked royal graves. Some of them were more than 100 feet tall and at the time were the largest structures in the world hewn from a single piece of rock. The language used at court, in the towns, and for commerce was Geez, written in a script derived from South Arabia. The Axumite state exercised a measure of control over the mostly Agaw-speaking people of the country through a loose administrative structure focusing on the collection of tribute payments. To the Romans, Axum was the third major empire within the world they knew, following their own and the Persian Empire.

Through its connections to Red Sea trade and the Roman world, particularly Egypt, Axum was introduced to Christianity in the fourth century C.E. Its monarch at the time, King Ezana, adopted the new religion about the same time as Constantine did in the Roman Empire. Supported by royal authority, Christianity took root in Axum, linking that kingdom religiously to Egypt, where a distinctive Christian church known as Coptic was already well established. Although Egypt subsequently became largely Islamic, reducing its Christian community to a small minority, Christianity maintained a dominant position in the mountainous terrain of highland Ethiopia and in the early twenty-first century still represents the faith of perhaps half of the country's population.

During the fourth through the sixth century C.E., Axum mounted a campaign of imperial expansion that took its forces into the Kingdom of Meroë and across the Red Sea into Yemen in South Arabia. By 571, the traditional date for the birth of Muhammad, an Axumite army, including a number of African war elephants, had reached the gates of Mecca, but it was a fairly short-lived imperial

#### The Columns of Axum

Dating to the time when Axum first encountered Christianity (300–500 C.E.), this column, measuring some seventy-nine feet tall, probably served as a funeral monument for the kingdom's ancient rulers. (Antonello Langellotto/TIPS Images)





venture. The next several centuries were ones of decline for the Axumite state, owing partly to environmental changes, such as soil exhaustion, erosion, and deforestation, brought about by intensive farming. Equally important was the rise of Islam, which altered trade routes and diminished the revenue available to the Axumite state. Its last coins were struck in the early seventh century. When the state revived several centuries later, it was centered farther south on the Ethiopian plateau. There emerged the Christian church and the state that present-day Ethiopia has inherited, but the link to ancient Axum was long remembered and revered.

With their long-distance trading connections, urban centers, centralized states, complex societies, monumental architecture, written languages, and imperial ambitions, both Meroë and Axum paralleled on a smaller scale the major features of the classical civilizations of Eurasia. Furthermore, both were in direct contact with the world of Mediterranean civilizations. Elsewhere in Africa during the classical era, quite different histories unfolded.

## Along the Niger River: Cities without States

In the middle stretches of the Niger River in West Africa, the classical era witnessed the emergence of a remarkable urbanization (see Map 7.1). A prolonged dry period during the five centuries after 500 B.C.E. brought growing numbers of people from the southern Sahara into the fertile floodplain of the middle Niger in search of more reliable access to water. Accompanying them were their domesticated cattle, sheep, and goats; their agricultural skills; and their ironworking technology. Over the centuries of the classical era and beyond (roughly 300 B.C.E.–900 C.E.), the peoples of this region created a distinctive city-based civilization. The most fully studied of the urban clusters that grew up along the middle Niger was the city of Jenne-jeno, which at its high point probably housed more than 40,000 people.

Among the most distinctive features of the Niger Valley civilization was the apparent absence of a corresponding state structure. Unlike the cities of Egypt, China, the Roman Empire, or Axum, these middle Niger urban centers were not encompassed within some larger imperial system. Nor were they like the city-states of ancient Mesopotamia, in which each city had its own centralized political structure, embodied in a monarch and his accompanying bureaucracy. According to a leading historian of the region, they were “cities without citadels,” complex urban centers that apparently operated without the coercive authority of a state, for archeologists have found in their remains few signs of despotic power, widespread warfare, or deep social inequalities.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, these urban centers resemble the early cities of the Indus Valley civilization, where likewise little archeological evidence of centralized state structures has been found (see Chapter 3).

In place of such hierarchical organization, Jenne-jeno and other cities of the region emerged as clusters of economically specialized settlements surrounding a larger central town. The earliest and most prestigious of these specialized occupations

### Description

How does the experience of the Niger Valley challenge conventional notions of “civilization”?

was iron smithing. Working with fire and earth (ore) to produce this highly useful metal, the smiths of the Niger Valley were both feared and revered. Archeologist Roderick McIntosh, a leading figure in the excavation of Jenne-jeno, argued that “their knowledge of the transforming arts—earth to metal, insubstantial fire to the mass of iron—was the key to a secret, occult realm of immense power and immense danger.”<sup>5</sup>

Other specializations followed. Villages of cotton weavers, potters, leather workers, and griots (praise-singers who preserved and recited the oral traditions of their societies) grew up around the central towns. Gradually these urban artisan communities became occupational castes, whose members passed their jobs and skills to their children and could marry only within their own group. In the surrounding rural areas, as in all urban-based civilizations, farmers tilled the soil and raised their animals, but specialization also occurred in farming as various ethnic groups focused on fishing, rice cultivation, or some other agricultural pursuit. At least for a time, these middle Niger cities represented an African alternative to an oppressive state, which in many parts of the world accompanied an increasingly complex urban economy and society. A series of distinct and specialized economic groups shared authority and voluntarily used the services of one another, while maintaining their own identities through physical separation.

Accompanying this unique urbanization, and no doubt stimulating it, was a growing network of indigenous West African commerce. The middle Niger floodplain supported a rich agriculture and had clay for pottery, but it lacked stone, iron ore, salt, and fuel. This scarcity of resources was the basis for long-distance commerce, which operated by boat along the Niger River and overland by donkey to the north and south. Iron ore from more than 50 miles away, copper from mines 200 miles distant, gold from even more distant sources, stones and salt from the Sahara—all of these items have been found in Jenne-jeno, in return no doubt for grain, fish, smoked meats, iron implements, and other staples. Jenne-jeno itself was an important transshipment point in this commerce, in which goods were transferred from boat to donkey or vice versa. By the 500s C.E., there is evidence of an even wider commerce and at least indirect contact, from Mauritania in the west to present-day Mali and Burkina-Faso in the east.

In the second millennium C.E., new historical patterns developed in West Africa (see Chapter 8). A number of large-scale states or empires emerged in the region—Ghana, Mali, and Songhay, among the most well known. At least partially responsible for this development was the flourishing of a camel-borne trans-Saharan commerce, previously but a trickle across the great desert. As West Africa became more firmly connected to North Africa and the Mediterranean, Islam penetrated the region, marking a gradual but major cultural transformation. All of this awaited West Africa in the postclassical era, submerging, but not completely eliminating, the decentralized city life of the Niger Valley.

## South of the Equator: The World of Bantu Africa

Farther south on the African continent, patterns of historical change differed from those that gave rise to the small civilizations of Nubia/Meroë, Axum, and the Niger River valley. In this vast region, and particularly south of the equator, the most significant development of the classical era involved the accelerating movement of Bantu-speaking peoples into the enormous subcontinent. It was a process that had begun many centuries earlier from a homeland region in what is now southeastern Nigeria and the Cameroons. In the long run, that movement of peoples generated some 400 distinct but closely related languages, known collectively as Bantu. By the first century C.E., agricultural peoples speaking Bantu languages had largely occupied the forest regions of equatorial Africa, and at least a few of them had probably reached the East African coast. In the several centuries that followed, they established themselves quite rapidly in most of eastern and southern Africa (see Map 7.1), introducing immense economic and cultural changes to a huge region of the continent.

Bantu expansion was not a conquest or invasion such as that of Alexander the Great; nor was it a massive and self-conscious migration like that of Europeans to the Americas. Rather, it was a slow movement of peoples, perhaps a few extended families at a time, but taken as a whole, it brought to Africa south of the equator a measure of cultural and linguistic commonality, marking it as a distinct region of the continent.

### *Cultural Encounters*

#### ■ Connection

In what ways did the arrival of Bantu-speaking peoples stimulate cross-cultural interaction?

That movement of peoples also generated numerous cross-cultural encounters, as the Bantu-speaking newcomers interacted with already-established societies, changing both of them in the process. Among those encounters, none was more significant than that between the agricultural Bantu and the gathering and hunting peoples who earlier occupied Africa south of the equator. This was part of a long-term global phenomenon in which farmers largely replaced foragers as the dominant people on the planet (see Chapter 2).

In this encounter, Bantu-speaking farmers had various advantages. One was numerical, as agriculture generated a more productive economy, enabling larger numbers to live in a smaller area than was possible with a gathering and hunting way of life. Another advantage was disease, for the farmers brought with them both parasitic and infectious diseases—malaria, for example—to which foraging people had little immunity. A third advantage was iron, so useful for tools and weapons, which Bantu migrants brought to many of their interactions with peoples still operating with stone-age technology. Thus, during the classical era, gathering and hunting peoples were displaced, absorbed, or largely eliminated in most parts of Africa south of the equator—but not everywhere.

In the Kalahari region of southwestern Africa and a few places in East Africa, gathering and hunting peoples such as the San (see Chapter 1) survived into modern times. Furthermore, many of the Bantu languages of southern Africa retain to



this day the distinctive “clicks” that they borrowed from the now-vanished gathering and hunting peoples who long preceded them in the region.

In the rain forest region of Central Africa, the foraging Batwa (Pygmy) people, at least some of them, became “forest specialists” who produced honey, wild game, elephant products, animal skins, and medicinal barks and plants, all of which entered regional trading networks in exchange for the agricultural products of their Bantu neighbors. They also adopted Bantu languages, while maintaining a nonagricultural lifestyle and a separate identity. For their part, the Bantu farmers regarded their Batwa



neighbors as first-comers to the region and therefore closest to the ancestral and territorial spirits that determined the fertility of the land and people. Thus, as forest-dwelling and Bantu-speaking farmers grew in numbers and created chiefdoms, those chiefs appropriated the Batwa title of “owners of the land” for themselves, claimed Batwa ancestry, and portrayed the Batwa as the original “civilizers” of the earth.<sup>6</sup>

In other ways as well, Bantu cultures changed as they encountered different peoples. In the drier environment of East Africa, the yam-based agriculture of the West African Bantu homeland was unable to support their growing numbers, so Bantu farmers increasingly adopted grains as well as domesticated sheep and cattle from the already-established people of the region. Their agriculture also was enriched by acquiring a variety of food crops from Southeast Asia—coconuts, sugarcane, and especially bananas—which were brought to East Africa by Indonesian sailors and immigrants early in the first millennium C.E. Bantu farmers then spread this agricultural package and their acquired ironworking technology throughout the vast area of eastern and southern Africa, probably reaching present-day South Africa by 400 C.E. They also brought a common set of cultural and social practices, which diffused widely across Bantu Africa. One prominent historian described these practices as encompassing,

in religion, the centrality of ancestor observances; in philosophy, the problem of evil understood as the consequence of individual malice or of the failure to honor one’s ancestors; in music, an emphasis on polyrhythmic performance with drums as the key instrument; in dance, a new form of expression in which a variety of prescribed body movements took preference over footwork; and in agriculture, the pre-eminence of women as the workers and innovators.<sup>7</sup>

All of this became part of the common culture of Bantu-speaking Africa.

#### **Khoikhoi of South Africa**

The Khoikhoi people of South Africa, several of whom are shown here in an 1886 photograph, were originally gatherers and hunters who adopted cattle and sheep raising from outsiders, perhaps from early Bantu-speaking immigrants to the region, but did not practice agriculture. Living in southern Africa for most of the last two millennia, they illustrate the interaction and selective cultural borrowing that took place among the various peoples of the region. (Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis)

## *Society and Religion*

In the thousand years or so (500–1500 C.E.) that followed their initial colonization of Africa south of the equator, agricultural Bantu-speaking peoples also created a wide variety of quite distinct societies and cultures. Some—in present-day Kenya, for example—organized themselves without any formal political specialists at all. Instead they made decisions, resolved conflicts, and maintained order by using kinship structures or lineage principles supplemented by age grades, which joined men of a particular generation together across various lineages (see Document 2.2, pp. 309–10). Elsewhere, lineage heads who acquired a measure of personal wealth or who proved skillful at mediating between the local spirits and the people might evolve into chiefs with a modest political authority. In several areas, such as the region around Lake Victoria or present-day Zimbabwe, larger and more substantial kingdoms evolved. Along the East African coast after 1000 C.E., dozens of rival city-states linked the African interior with the commerce of the Indian Ocean basin (see Chapter 8). The kind of society that developed in any particular area depended on a host of local factors, including population density, trading opportunities, and interaction among culturally different peoples.

In terms of religion, Bantu practice in general placed less emphasis on a High or Creator God, who was viewed as remote and largely uninvolved in ordinary life, and focused instead on ancestral or nature spirits. The power of dead ancestors might be accessed through rituals of sacrifice, especially that of cattle. Supernatural power deriving from ancient heroes, ancestors, or nature spirits also resided in charms, which could be activated by proper rituals and used to control the rains, defend the village, achieve success in hunting, or identify witches. Belief in witches was widespread, reflecting the idea that evil or misfortune was the work of malicious people. Diviners, skilled in penetrating the world of the supernatural, used dreams, visions, charms, or trances to identify the source of misfortune and to prescribe remedies. Was a particular illness the product of broken taboos, a dishonored ancestor, an unhappy nature spirit, or a witch? Was a remedy to be found in a cleansing ceremony, a sacrifice to an ancestor, the activation of a charm, or the elimination of a witch?<sup>8</sup> Such issues constantly confronted the people of Bantu Africa.

Unlike the major monotheistic religions, with their “once and for all” revelations from God through the Christian Bible or the Muslim Quran, Bantu religious practice was predicated on the notion of “continuous revelation”—the possibility of constantly receiving new messages from the world beyond. Moreover, unlike Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, Bantu religions were geographically confined, intended to explain, predict, and control local affairs, with no missionary impulse or inclination toward universality.

## **Civilizations of Mesoamerica**

Westward across the Atlantic Ocean lay the altogether separate world of the Americas. Although geography permitted some interaction between African and Eurasian

peoples, the Atlantic and Pacific oceans ensured that the cultures and societies of the Western Hemisphere had long operated in a world apart from their Afro-Eurasian counterparts. Nor were the cultures of the Americas stimulated by the kind of fruitful interaction among their own peoples that played such an important role in the Eastern Hemisphere. Nothing similar to the contact between Egypt and Mesopotamia, or Persia and the Greeks, or the extensive communication along the Silk Road trading network enriched the two major centers of civilization in the Americas—Mesoamerica and the Andes—which had little if any direct contact with each other. Furthermore, the remarkable achievements of early American civilizations and cultures occurred without the large domesticated animals or ironworking technologies that were so important throughout the Eastern Hemisphere.

Accounts of pre-Columbian American societies often focus primarily on the Aztec and Inca empires (see Chapter 13), yet these impressive creations, flourishing in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, were but the latest in a long line of civilizations that preceded them in Mesoamerica and the Andes respectively. Although these two regions housed the vast majority of the population of the Americas, the peoples of North America, the Amazon River basin, and elsewhere were the centers of their own worlds and made their own histories. It is the period preceding the Aztecs and Incas that represents the classical era in the history of the Americas.

Stretching from central Mexico to northern Central America, the area known as Mesoamerica was, geographically speaking, one of “extraordinary diversity compressed into a relatively small space.”<sup>9</sup> That environment ranged from steamy lowland rain forests to cold and windy highland plateaus, cut by numerous mountains and valleys and generating many microclimates. Such conditions contributed to substantial linguistic and ethnic diversity and to many distinct and competing cities, chiefdoms, and states.

Despite this diversity, Mesoamerica, like Bantu Africa, was also a distinct region, bound together by elements of a common culture. Its many peoples shared an intensive agricultural technology devoted to raising maize, beans, chili peppers, and squash; they prepared maize in a distinctive and highly nutritious fashion; they based their economies on market exchange; they practiced religions featuring a similar pantheon of deities, belief in a cosmic cycle of creation and destruction, human sacrifice, and monumental ceremonial centers; they employed a common ritual calendar of 260 days and hieroglyphic writing; and they interacted frequently among themselves. During the first millennium B.C.E., for example, the various small states and chiefdoms of the region, particularly the Olmec, exchanged a number of luxury goods used to display social status and for ritual purposes—jade, serpentine, obsidian tools, ceramic pottery, shell ornaments, stingray spines, and turtle shells. As a result, aspects of Olmec culture, such as artistic styles, temple pyramids, the calendar system, and rituals involving human sacrifice, spread widely throughout Mesoamerica and influenced many of the civilizations that followed.

Classical Civilizations of Mesoamerica





## *The Maya: Writing and Warfare*

### ■ Comparison

With what Eurasian civilizations might the Maya be compared?

Among the Mesoamerican civilizations, none has attracted more attention than that of the Maya, the major classical civilization of Mesoamerica. Scholars have traced the beginnings of the Maya people to ceremonial centers constructed as early as 2000 B.C.E. in present-day Guatemala and the Yucatán region of Mexico, but it was during the classical phase of Maya civilization, between 250 and 900 C.E., that their most notable cultural achievements emerged. Their intellectuals, probably priests, developed a mathematical system that included the concept of zero and place notation and was capable of complex calculations. They combined this mathematical ability with careful observation of the night skies to plot the cycles of planets, to predict eclipses of the sun and the moon, to construct elaborate calendars, and to calculate accurately the length of the solar year. The distinctive art of the Maya elite, featured in *Visual Sources: Art and the Maya Elite*, pages 216–23, was likewise impressive to later observers.

Accompanying these intellectual and artistic achievements was the creation of the most elaborate writing system in the Americas, which used both pictographs and phonetic or syllabic elements. Carved on stone and written on bark paper or deerskin books, Mayan writing recorded historical events, masses of astronomical data, and religious or mythological texts. Temples, pyramids, palaces, and public plazas abounded, graced with painted murals and endless stone carving. It is not surprising that early scholars viewed Maya civilization as a peaceful society led by gentle stargazing priest-kings devoted to temple building and intellectual pursuits.

The economic foundations for these cultural achievements were embedded in an “almost totally engineered landscape.”<sup>10</sup> The Maya drained swamps, terraced hillsides, flattened ridgetops, and constructed an elaborate water management system. Much of this underpinned a flourishing agriculture, which supported a very rapidly growing and dense population by 750 C.E. This agriculture sustained substantial elite classes of nobles, priests, merchants, architects, and sculptors, as well as specialized artisans producing pottery, tools, and cotton textiles. And it was sufficiently productive to free a large labor force for work on the many public structures that continue to amaze contemporary visitors.

We now know that these many achievements took place within a highly fragmented political system of city-states, local lords, and regional kingdoms with no central authority, with frequent warfare, and with the extensive capture and sacrifice of prisoners (see *Visual Source 7.2*, p. 319). The larger political units of Maya civilization were densely populated urban and ceremonial centers, ruled by powerful kings, who were divine rulers or “state shamans” able to mediate between humankind and the supernatural. One of these cities, Tikal, contained perhaps 50,000 people, with another 50,000 or so in the surrounding countryside, by 750 C.E.<sup>11</sup> (See the chapter opening photo, p. 280, of a temple from Tikal.) Some of these city-states were clearly imperialistic, but none succeeded in creating a unified Maya empire. Various centers of Maya civilization rose and fell; fluctuating alliances among them alternated with periods of sporadic warfare; ruling families intermarried; the elite classes sought

luxury goods from far away—jade, gold, shells, feathers from exotic birds, cacao—to bolster their authority and status. In its political dimensions, classical Maya civilization more closely resembled the competing city-states of ancient Mesopotamia or classical Greece than the imperial structures of Rome, Persia, or China.

But that imposing civilization collapsed with a completeness and rapidity rare in world history. In less than a century following the onset of a long-term drought in 840, the population of the low-lying southern heartland of the Maya dropped by 85 percent or more as famine, epidemic, and fratricidal warfare reaped a horrific toll. It was a catastrophe from which there was no recovery. Elements of Maya culture survived in scattered settlements, but the great cities were deserted, and large-scale construction and artistic work ceased. The last date inscribed in stone corresponds to 909 C.E. As a complex civilization, the Maya had passed into history.

Explaining this remarkable demise has long kept scholars guessing. It seems clear that neither foreign invasion nor internal rebellion played a major role, as they had in the collapse of the Roman and Chinese empires. One recent account focuses on ecological and political factors.<sup>12</sup> Extremely rapid population growth after 600 C.E. pushed total Maya numbers to perhaps 5 million or more and soon outstripped available resources, resulting in deforestation and the erosion of hillsides. Under such conditions, climate change in the form of prolonged droughts in the 800s may well have triggered the collapse, while political disunity and endemic rivalries prevented a coordinated and effective response to the emerging catastrophe. Maya warfare in fact became more frequent as competition for increasingly scarce land for cultivation became sharper. Whatever the precise explanation, the Maya collapse, like that of the Romans and others, illustrates the fragility of civilizations, whether they are embodied in large empires or organized in a more decentralized fashion.

### *Teotihuacán: The Americas' Greatest City*

At roughly the same time as the Maya flourished in the southern regions of Mesoamerica, the giant city of Teotihuacán, to the north in the Valley of Mexico, was also thriving. Begun around 150 B.C.E. and apparently built to a plan rather than evolving haphazardly, the city came to occupy about eight square miles and by 550 C.E. had a population variously estimated between 100,000 and 200,000. It was by far the largest urban complex in the Americas at the time and one of the six largest in the world. Beyond this, much about Teotihuacán is unknown, such as its original name, the language of its people, the kind of government that ordered its life, and the precise function of its many deities.

Physically, the city was enormously impressive, replete with broad avenues, spacious plazas, huge marketplaces, temples, palaces, apartment complexes, slums, waterways, reservoirs, drainage systems, and colorful murals. Along the main north/south boulevard, now known as the Street of the Dead, were the grand homes of the elite, the headquarters of state authorities, many temples, and two giant pyramids. One of them, the Pyramid of the Sun, had been constructed over an ancient tunnel leading to a cave and may well have been regarded as the site of creation itself, the birthplace

#### ■ Connection

In what ways did Teotihuacán shape the history of Mesoamerica?

of the sun and the moon. At the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, archeologists have found the remains of some 200 people, their hands and arms tied behind them; they were the apparently unwilling sacrificial victims meant to accompany into the after-life the high-ranking persons buried there.

Off the main avenues in a gridlike pattern of streets lay thousands of residential apartment compounds, home to the city's commoners, each with its own kitchen area, sleeping quarters, courtyards, and shrines. In these compounds, perhaps in groups of related families or lineages, lived many of the farmers who tilled the lands outside the city. Thousands of Maya specialists—masons, leather workers, potters, construction laborers, merchants, civil servants—also made their homes in these apartments. So too did skilled makers of obsidian blades, who plied their trade in hundreds of separate workshops, generating products that were in great demand throughout Mesoamerica. At least two small sections of the city were reserved exclusively for foreigners.

#### A Mural of Teotihuacán

This mural depicts the paradise of Tlaloc, the god of the rain, which was available only to those who had died through drowning, storms, or lightning. Fish and human figures swim and play in the river, while others cavort on the land in what seems to be a fertile and happy place. The dating of such murals is uncertain, but most were apparently created between 450 and 650 C.E. (Richard Seaman)

Buildings, both public and private, were decorated with mural paintings, sculptures, and carvings. Many of these works of art display abstract geometric and stylized images. Others depict gods and goddesses, arrayed in various forms—feathered serpents, starfish, jaguars, flowers, and warriors. One set of murals shows happy people cavorting in a paradise of irrigated fields, playing games, singing, and chasing butterflies, which were thought to represent the souls of the dead. Another portrays dancing warriors carrying elaborate curved knives, to which were attached bleeding human hearts.

The art of Teotihuacán, unlike that of the Maya, has revealed few images of self-glorifying rulers or individuals. Nor did the city have a tradition of written public inscriptions as the Maya did, although a number of glyphs or characters suggest at least a limited form of writing. One scholar has suggested that “the rulers of Teotihuacán might have intentionally avoided the personality cult of the dynastic art and writing” so characteristic of the Maya.<sup>13</sup> Some have argued that those rulers may have constituted an oligarchy or council of high-ranking elites rather than a single monarch.

However it was governed, Teotihuacán cast a huge shadow over Mesoamerica, particularly from 300 to 600 C.E., although scholars disagree as to precisely how its power and influence were exercised. A core region of perhaps 10,000 square miles was administered directly from the city itself, while





tribute was no doubt exacted from other areas within its broader sphere of influence. At a greater distance, the power of Teotihuacán's armies gave it a presence in the Maya heartland more than 600 miles to the east. At least one Maya city, Kaminalijuyu in the southern highlands, was completely taken over by the Teotihuacán military and organized as a colony. In Tikal, a major lowland Maya city, in the year 378 C.E., agents of Teotihuacán apparently engineered a coup that placed a collaborator on the throne and turned the city for a time into an ally or a satellite. Elsewhere—in the Zapotec capital of Monte Alban, for example—murals show unarmed persons from Teotihuacán engaged in what seems to be more equal diplomatic relationships.

At least some of this political and military activity was no doubt designed to obtain, either by trade or by tribute, valued commodities from afar—food products, cacao beans, tropical bird feathers, honey, salt, medicinal herbs. The presence in Teotihuacán of foreigners, perhaps merchants, from the Gulf Coast and Maya lowlands, as well as much pottery from those regions, provides further evidence of long-distance trade. Moreover, the sheer size and prestige of Teotihuacán surely persuaded many, all across Mesoamerica, to imitate the architectural and artistic styles of the city. Thus, according to a leading scholar, “Teotihuacán meant something of surpassing importance far beyond its core area.”<sup>14</sup> Almost a thousand years after its still-mysterious collapse around 650 C.E., the peoples of the Aztec Empire dubbed the great metropolis as Teotihuacán, the “city of the gods.”

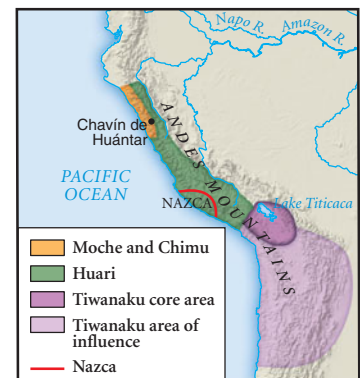
## Civilizations of the Andes

Yet another center of civilization in the Americas lay in the dramatic landscape of the Andes. Bleak deserts along the coast supported human habitation only because they were cut by dozens of rivers flowing down from the mountains, offering the possibility of irrigation and cultivation. The offshore waters of the Pacific Ocean also provided an enormously rich marine environment with an endless supply of sea-birds and fish. The Andes themselves, a towering mountain chain with many highland valleys, afforded numerous distinct ecological niches, depending on altitude. On its steep slopes, people carved out huge staircase terrace systems, which remain impressive in the twenty-first century.

The most well known of the civilizations to take shape in this environment was that of the Incas, which encompassed practically the entire region, some 2,500 miles in length, in the fifteenth century. Yet the Incas represented only the most recent and the largest in a long history of civilizations in the area.

The coastal region of central Peru had in fact generated one of the world's First Civilizations, known as Norte Chico, dating back to around 3000 B.C.E. (see Chapter 3). The classical era in Andean civilization, roughly 1000 B.C.E. to 1000 C.E., provides an opportunity to look briefly at several of the cultures that followed Norte Chico and preceded the Inca civilization. Because none of them had developed writing, historians are largely dependent on archeology for an understanding of these civilizations.

Classical Civilizations of the Andes



## *Chavín: A Pan-Andean Religious Movement*

### ■ Connection

What kind of influence did Chavín exert in the Andes region?

In both the coastal and highland regions of Peru, archeologists have uncovered numerous local ceremonial centers or temple complexes, dating to between 2000 and 1000 B.C.E. Often constructed in a characteristic U shape, they were associated with small-scale irrigation projects and suggest the growing authority of religious leaders. Human trophy heads indicate raiding, warfare, and violence among these local centers. Then around 900 B.C.E., one of them, located in the Andean highlands at a village called Chavín de Huántar, became the focus of a religious movement that soon swept through both coastal and highland Peru.

Chavín de Huántar enjoyed a strategic location, high in the Andes and situated on trade routes to both the coastal region to the west and the Amazon rain forest to the east. By perhaps 750 B.C.E., it had become a small town of 2,000 to 3,000 people, with clear distinctions between an elite class, who lived in stone houses, and ordinary people, with adobe dwellings. An elaborate temple complex included numerous galleries, hidden passageways, staircases, ventilation shafts, drainage canals, and distinctive carvings. Little is known about the rituals or beliefs that animated Chavín's religious practice, but the artwork suggests that it drew on ideas from both the desert coastal region and the rain forests. Major deities were represented as jaguars, crocodiles, and snakes, all of them native to the Amazon basin. Shamans or priests likely made use of the San Pedro cactus, native to the Andes Mountains, employing its hallucinogenic properties to penetrate the supernatural world. Some of the fantastic artwork of this civilization—its jaguar-human images, for example—may well reflect the visions of these religious leaders.

Over the next several centuries, this blended religious movement proved attractive across much of Peru and beyond, as Chavín-style architecture, sculpture, pottery, religious images, and painted textiles were widely imitated within the region. Chavín itself became a pilgrimage site and perhaps a training center for initiates from distant centers. At locations three weeks or more away by llama caravan, temples were remodeled to resemble that of Chavín, although in many cases with locally inspired variations.<sup>15</sup> Much of the spread of Chavín religious imagery and practice paralleled the trade routes that linked highland and coastal Peru. Although there is some evidence for violence and warfare, no Chavín “empire” emerged. Instead, a widespread religious cult, traveling on the back of a trading network, provided for the first time and for several centuries a measure of economic and cultural integration to much of the Peruvian Andes.

## *Moche: A Regional Andean Civilization*

### ■ Description

What features of Moche life characterize it as a civilization?

By 200 B.C.E., the pan-Andes Chavín cult had faded, replaced by a number of regional civilizations. Among them, the Moche civilization clearly stands out. Dominating a 250-mile stretch of Peru's northern coast and incorporating thirteen river valleys, the Moche people flourished between about 100 and 800 C.E. Their

economy was rooted in a complex irrigation system, requiring constant maintenance, which funneled runoff from the Andes into fields of maize, beans, and squash and acres of cotton, all fertilized by rich bird droppings called guano. Moche fishermen also harvested millions of anchovies from the bountiful Pacific.

Politically, Moche was governed by warrior-priests, some of whom lived atop huge pyramids. The largest of these structures, dubbed the Pyramid of the Sun, had been constructed from 143 million sun-dried bricks. Their shaman-rulers, often under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, conducted ancient rituals that mediated between the world of humankind and that of the gods. They also presided over the ritual sacrifice of human victims, drawn from their many prisoners of war, which became central to the politico-religious life of the Moche. Images on Moche pottery show a ruler attired in a magnificent feather headdress and seated on a pyramid, while a parade of naked prisoners marches past him. Other scenes of decapitation and dismemberment indicate the fate that awaited those destined for sacrifice. For these rulers, the Moche world was apparently one of war, ritual, and diplomacy.

The immense wealth of this warrior-priest elite and the exquisite artistry of Moche craftsmen are reflected in the elaborate burials accorded the rulers. At one site, Peruvian archeologists uncovered the final resting place of three such individuals, whom they named the Lords of Sipan. Laid in adobe burial chambers, one above the other, each was decked out in his ceremonial regalia—elaborate gold masks, necklaces, and headdresses; turquoise and gold bead bracelets; cotton tunics covered with copper plates; a gold rattle showing a Moche warrior smashing a prisoner with his war club; and a copper knife. In 2005, in another remarkable discovery dating to about 450 C.E., archeologists found the burial place of a very high-status woman, who was in her late twenties and heavily tattooed. She had been laid to rest with hundreds of funeral objects, including gold sewing needles; weaving tools; much gold, silver, and copper jewelry; and a female sacrificial victim lying beside her. Even more suggestive were two elaborate war clubs and twenty-three spear throwers. Was she perhaps a warrior, a priest, or a ruler?

The most accessible aspect of Moche life and much of what scholars know about the Moche world derive from the superb skill of their craftspeople, such as metalworkers, potters, weavers, and painters. Face masks, figures of animals, small earrings, and other jewelry items, many plated in gold, display amazing technical abilities and a striking artistic sensibility. On their ceramic pottery are naturalistic portraits of noble lords and rulers and images from the life of common people, including the blind and the sick. Battle scenes show warriors confronting their enemies with raised clubs. Erotic encounters between men and women and gods making love to humans likewise represent common themes, as do grotesque images of their many gods and goddesses. Much of this, of course, reflects the culture of the Moche elite. We know much less about the daily life of the farmers, fishermen, weavers, traders, construction workers, and servants whose labor made that elite culture possible.

These cultural achievements, however, rested on fragile environmental foundations, for the region was subject to drought, earthquakes, and occasional torrential





### The Lord of Sipan

The Moche ruler in the center of the grave, dating to about 290 C.E., was about forty years old when he died and, at five feet five inches, was quite tall for the time. Except for early signs of arthritis, he was in good health and seems to have performed little physical labor during his life. Accompanying him in death were the four individuals shown here, plus three young women, a priest, a guard, a dog, and considerable food and drink. (Kevin Schaffer/Corbis)

rains associated with El Niño episodes (dramatic changes in weather patterns caused by periodic warming of Pacific Ocean currents). Scholars believe that during the sixth century C.E. some combination of these forces caused extended ecological disruption, which seriously undermined Moche civilization. In these circumstances, the Moche were vulnerable to aggressive neighbors and possibly to internal social tensions as well. By the end of the eighth century C.E., that civilization had passed into history.<sup>16</sup>

The Chavín and Moche civilizations were but two of the many that grew up in the Andes region before the Incas consolidated the entire area into a single empire. The Nazca, for example, on the arid southern coast of Peru, have become famous for their underground irrigation canals, polychrome pottery, and textiles, but especially for their gigantic and mysterious lines in the desert in the form of monkeys, birds, spiders, whales, and various abstract designs. In the interior, a series of larger states emerged. One of them was centered on Tiwanaku, a city of monumental buildings and perhaps 40,000 to 50,000 people that flourished during much of the first millennium C.E. The Huari and Chimú kingdoms were further examples of this Andean civilization, to which the Incas gave a final and spectacular expression before all of the Americas was swallowed up in European empires from across the sea.

## North America in the Classical Era: From Chaco to Cahokia

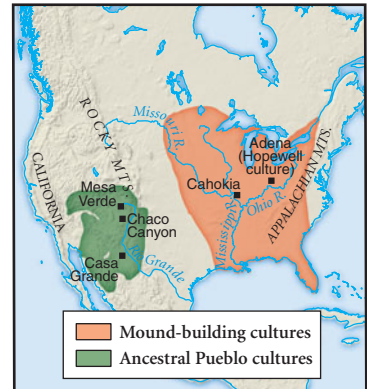
The peoples of the Americas in the pre-Columbian era might be divided into three large groupings. The most prominent and well known are those of the Mesoamerican and Andean regions, where cities, states, and dense populations created civilizations broadly similar to those of classical Eurasia. Elsewhere, gathering and hunting peoples carried on the most ancient of human adaptations to the environment. Arctic and subarctic cultures; the bison hunters of the Great Plains; the complex and settled communities of the Pacific coast, such as the Chumash (see Chapter 1); nomadic bands living in the arid regions of southern South America—all of these represent the persistence of gathering and hunting peoples in substantial regions of the Americas.

Even larger areas—the eastern woodlands of the United States, Central America, the Amazon basin, the Caribbean islands—were populated by peoples sometimes defined as “semi-sedentary.”<sup>17</sup> These were agricultural societies, although less intensive and productive than those of Mesoamerica or the Andes and supporting usually much smaller populations. Nor did they generate large urban centers or inclusive empires.

These peoples who lived beyond the direct reach of the major civilizations also made their own histories, changing in response to their unique environments, their interactions with outsiders, and their own visions of the world. The Anasazi of the southwestern United States, now called the Ancestral Pueblo, and the mound-building cultures of the eastern woodlands provide two illustrations from North America during the classical era.

### *Pit Houses and Great Houses: The Ancestral Pueblo*

The southwestern region of North America, an arid land cut by mountain ranges and large basins, first acquired maize from its place of origin in Mesoamerica during the second millennium B.C.E., but it took roughly 2,000 years for that crop, later supplemented by beans and squash, to become the basis of a settled agricultural way of living. In a desert region, farming was risky, and maize had to be gradually adapted to the local environment. Not until around 600 to 800 C.E. did permanent village life take hold widely. People then lived in pit houses with floors sunk several feet below ground level. Some settlements had only a few such homes, whereas others contained twenty-five or more. By 900 C.E., many of these villages also included kivas, much larger pit structures used for ceremonial purposes, which symbolized the widespread belief that humankind emerged into this world from another world below. Individual settlements were linked to one another in local trading networks and sometimes in wider webs of exchange that brought them buffalo hides, copper, turquoise, seashells, macaw feathers, and coiled baskets from quite distant locations.



North America in the Classical Era

#### ■ Comparison

In what ways were the histories of the Ancestral Pueblo and the Mound Builders similar to each other, and how did they differ?



### Pueblo Bonito

Called Pueblo Bonito (“pretty village”) by the Spanish, this great house of the Ancestral Pueblo people was at its high point in the eleventh century C.E. The circular structures, known as kivas, were probably ceremonial sites. Their prominence, and the absence of major trash collections, have persuaded some scholars that Pueblo Bonito was more of a ritual center than a residential town. (Courtesy, Chaco Canyon National Historic Park)

These processes of change—growing dependence on agriculture, increasing population, more intensive patterns of exchange—gave rise to larger settlements and adjacent aboveground structures known as pueblos. The most spectacular of these took shape in Chaco canyon in what is now northwestern New Mexico. There, between 860 and 1130 C.E., five major pueblos emerged. This Chaco Phenomenon encompassed 25,000 square miles and linked some seventy outlying settlements to the main centers. The population was not large, perhaps as few as 5,000 people, although experts continue to debate the issue. The largest of these towns, or “great houses,” Pueblo Bonito, stood five stories high and contained more than 600 rooms and many kivas. Hundreds of miles of roads, up to forty feet wide, radiated out from Chaco, likewise prompting much debate among scholars. Without wheeled carts or large domesticated animals, such an elaborate road system seems unnecessary for ordinary trade or travel. Did the roads represent, as some scholars speculate, a “sacred landscape which gave order to the world,” joining its outlying communities to a “Middle Place,” an entrance perhaps to the underworld?<sup>18</sup>

Among the Chaco elite were highly skilled astronomers, who constructed an observatory of three large rock slabs situated so as to throw a beam of light across



a spiral rock carving behind it at the summer solstice. By the eleventh century, Chaco also had become a dominant center for the production of turquoise ornaments, which became a major item of regional commerce, extending as far south as Mesoamerica. Not all was sweetness and light, however. Warfare, internal conflict, and occasional cannibalism (a matter of much controversy among scholars) apparently increased in frequency as an extended period of drought in the half century following 1130 brought this flourishing culture to a rather abrupt end. By 1200, the great houses had been abandoned and their inhabitants scattered in small communities that later became the Pueblo peoples of more recent times.

### *The Mound Builders of the Eastern Woodlands*

Unlike the Chaco region in the southwest, the eastern woodlands of North America and especially the Mississippi River valley hosted an independent Agricultural Revolution. By 2000 B.C.E., many of its peoples had domesticated local plant species, including sunflowers, sumpweed, goosefoot, some gourds and squashes, and a form of artichoke. These few plants, however, were not sufficient to support a fully settled agricultural village life; rather they supplemented diets derived from gathering and hunting without fundamentally changing that ancient way of life. Such peoples created societies distinguished by arrays of large earthen mounds, found all over the United States east of the Mississippi, prompting archeologists to dub them the Mound Builders.<sup>19</sup> The earliest of them date to around 2000 B.C.E., but the most elaborate and widespread of these mound-building cultures took shape between 200 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. and is known to scholars as the Hopewell culture, after an archeological site in Ohio.

Several features of the Hopewell culture have intrigued archeologists. Particularly significant are the striking burial mounds and geometric earthworks, sometimes covering areas equivalent to several city blocks, and the wide variety of artifacts found within them—smoking pipes, human figurines, mica mirrors, flint blades, fabrics, and jewelry of all kinds. The mounds themselves were no doubt the focus of elaborate burial rituals, but some of them were aligned with the moon with such precision as to allow the prediction of lunar eclipses. Developed most elaborately in the Ohio River valley, Hopewell-style earthworks, artifacts, and ceremonial pottery have also been found throughout the eastern woodlands region of North America. Hopewell centers in Ohio contained mica from the Appalachian Mountains, volcanic glass from Yellowstone, conch shells and sharks' teeth from the Gulf of Mexico, and copper from the Great Lakes. All of this suggests an enormous "Hopewell Interaction Sphere," linking this huge region in a loose network of exchange, as well as a measure of cultural borrowing of religious ideas and practices within this immense area.<sup>20</sup>

The next and most spectacular phase in the history of these mound-building peoples took shape as corn-based agriculture, derived ultimately but indirectly from Mexico, gained ground in the Mississippi valley after 800 C.E., allowing larger



populations and more complex societies to emerge. The dominant center was Cahokia, near present-day St. Louis, Missouri, which flourished from about 900 to 1250 C.E. Its central mound, a terraced pyramid of four levels, measured 1,000 feet long by 700 feet wide, rose more than 100 feet above the ground, and occupied fifteen acres. It was the largest structure north of Mexico, the focal point of a community numbering 10,000 or more people, and the center of a widespread trading network (see an artist's reconstruction of Cahokia on p. 66).

Cahokia emerged and flourished at about the same time as did the great houses of Chaco canyon, but its urban presence was far larger than that of its southwestern counterpart. Both were made possible by the arrival of corn-based agriculture, originating in Mesoamerica, though direct contact with Mexico is much more apparent in Chaco. Finally, Cahokia emerged as the climax of a long history of mound-building cultures in the eastern woodlands, whereas Chaco was more of a “start-up” culture, emerging quite quickly “with a relatively shallow history.”<sup>21</sup>

Evidence from burials and from later Spanish observers suggests that Cahokia and other centers of this Mississippi culture were stratified societies with a clear elite and with rulers able to mobilize the labor required to build such enormous structures. One high-status male was buried on a platform of 20,000 shell beads, accompanied by 800 arrowheads, sheets of copper and mica, and a number of sacrificed men and women nearby.<sup>22</sup> Well after Cahokia had declined and was abandoned, sixteenth-century Spanish and French explorers encountered another such chiefdom among the Natchez people, located in southwestern Mississippi. Paramount chiefs, known as Great Suns, dressed in knee-length fur coats and lived luxuriously in deerskin-covered homes. An elite class of “principal men” or “honored peoples” clearly occupied a different status from commoners, sometimes referred to as “stinkards.” These sharp class distinctions were blunted by the requirement that upper-class people, including the Great Suns, had to marry “stinkards.”

The military capacity of these Mississippi chiefdoms greatly impressed European observers, as this Spanish account indicates:

The next day the cacique [paramount chief] arrived with 200 canoes filled with men, having weapons... the warriors standing erect from bow to stern, holding bows and arrows... [F]rom under the canopy where the chief man was, the course was directed and orders issued to the rest... [W]hat with the awnings, the plumes, the shields, the pennons, and the number of people in the fleet, it appeared like a famous armada of galleys.<sup>23</sup>

Here then in the eastern woodlands of North America were peoples who independently generated a modest Agricultural Revolution, assimilated corn and beans from distant sources, developed increasingly complex societies, and created monumental structures, new technologies, and artistic traditions. In doing so, they gave rise to a regional cultural complex that enveloped much of the United States east of the Mississippi in a network of ceremonial, economic, and cultural exchange.



## Reflections: Deciding What's Important: Balance in World History

Among the perennial problems that teachers and writers of world history confront is sorting through the vast record of times past and choosing what to include and what to leave out. A related issue involves the extent to which particular peoples or civilizations will be treated. Should the Persians get as much space as the Greeks? Does Africa merit equal treatment with Eurasia? Where do the Americas fit in the larger human story? What, in short, are the criteria for deciding what is important in telling the story of the human venture?

One standard might be duration. Should ways of living that have endured for longer periods of time receive greater attention than those of lesser length? If historians followed only this criterion, then the Paleolithic era of gathering and hunting should occupy 90 percent or more of any world history text. On the other hand, perhaps change is more important than continuity. If so, then something new merits more space than something old. Thus we pay attention to both agriculture and civilizations because they represent significant turning points in human experience. Population provides yet another principle for determining inclusion. That, of course, is the reason that Eurasia, with about 80 percent of the world's population during the classical era, is addressed in three chapters of this book, whereas Africa and the Americas together receive only one chapter. There is also the related issue of influence. Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam spread more widely and shaped the lives of more people than did the religions of the Maya or the Bantu-speaking peoples of Africa. Do the major religions therefore deserve more extended treatment? Still another factor involves the availability of evidence. In this respect, classical-era Eurasia generated far more written records than either Africa or the Americas did, and therefore its history has been investigated far more thoroughly.

A final possible criterion involves the location of the historian and his or her audience. The recent development of world history as a field of study has sought vigorously to counteract a Eurocentric telling of the human story. Still, is there anything inherently wrong with an account of world history that is centered on one's own people? When I taught history in an Ethiopian high school in the mid-1960s, I was guided by an Afrocentric curriculum, which focused first on Ethiopian history, then on Africa as a whole, and finally on the larger world. Might a world historian from the Middle East, for example, legitimately strike a somewhat different balance in the treatment of various civilizations than someone writing for a largely Western audience or for Chinese readers?

Any account of the world's past will mix and match these criteria in various and contested ways. Among scholars, there exists neither a consensus about this question nor any formula to ensure a "proper" balance. You may want to consider whether the balance struck in this chapter, this section, and the book as a whole is appropriate or somehow out of line.

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## Second Thoughts

### What's the Significance?

To assess your mastery of the material in this chapter, visit the **Student Center** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

Meroë	Maya civilization	Chaco Phenomenon
Axum	Teotihuacán	Mound Builders/Cahokia
Niger Valley civilization	Chavín	
Bantu expansion	Moche	

### Big Picture Questions

1. “The histories of Africa and the Americas during the classical era largely resemble those of Eurasia.” Do you agree with this statement? Explain why or why not.
2. “The particular cultures and societies of Africa and of the Americas discussed in this chapter developed largely in isolation from one another.” What evidence would support this statement, and what might challenge it?
3. What generated change in the histories of Africa and the Americas during the classical era?

### Next Steps: For Further Study

For Web sites and additional documents related to this chapter, see **Make History** at [bedfordstmartins.com/strayer](http://bedfordstmartins.com/strayer).

- Richard E. W. Adams, *Ancient Civilizations of the New World* (1997). A broad survey based on current scholarship of the Americas before Columbus.
- Christopher Ehret, *The Civilizations of Africa* (2002). A recent overview of African history before 1800 by a prominent scholar.
- Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient North America* (2005). A prominent archeologist's account of North American history.
- Eric Gilbert and Jonathan T. Reynolds, *Africa in World History* (2004). An accessible account of African history set in a global context.
- Guy Gugliotta, “The Maya: Glory and Ruin,” *National Geographic* (August 2007). A beautifully illustrated account of the rise and fall of Maya civilization.
- Kairn A. Klieman, *“The Pygmies Were Our Compass”: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* (2003). A scholarly examination of the Pygmies (Batwa) of the Congo River basin and their interaction with Bantu-speaking peoples.
- Charles Mann, *1491* (2005). A thoughtful journalist's account, delightfully written, of the controversies surrounding the history of the Americas before 1492.
- “Ancient Africa's Black Kingdoms,” <http://www.homestead.com/wysinger/ancientafrica.html>. A Web site exploring the history of Nubia.
- “Maya Adventures,” <http://www.smm.org/sln/ma>. A collection of text and pictures about the Maya, past and present.
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# Documents

## Considering the Evidence: Axum and the World



In the world of ancient African history, Axum has occupied a unique position in several ways. (See Map 7.1, p. 285, and pp. 286–88.) It is one of the few places in Africa, outside of Egypt, for which considerable documentary evidence exists. Some of the written sources—royal inscriptions and coins, for example—derive from within Axum itself, while others come from Greco-Roman and Christian visitors. Furthermore, after the rise of Islam, Axum—and its Ethiopian successor state—was the major surviving outpost of a Christian tradition, which had earlier spread widely across north and northeast Africa. Finally, Axum demonstrated an impressive cultural and religious continuity. Even after the decline of the Axumite empire by the eighth century C.E., the city of Axum remained a major pilgrimage site for Christians, while Ethiopian kings into the twentieth century were crowned there.<sup>24</sup> The documents that follow offer a series of windows on this classical-era African kingdom.

### Document 7.1

## A Guidebook to the World of Indian Ocean Commerce

The earliest documentary reference to Axum was composed during the first century C.E. in an anonymous text known as *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*. Likely written by a sea captain from Roman-controlled Egypt, the *Periplus* offers a guide to the places and conditions that merchants might encounter as they traversed the Red Sea and the East African coast while on their way to India.

- According to this text, why is the Axumite port of Adulis significant?
- What evidence does the *Periplus* provide about Axum's cultural and economic ties to the larger world?
- Based on the list of imports and exports, how would you describe Axum's role in the international commerce of the first century C.E.?
- How might Axum's participation in long-distance trade have stimulated and sustained its growth as an empire?



## *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* First Century C.E.

**B**elow Ptolemais of the Hunts<sup>o</sup> . . . there is Adulis, a port established by law, lying at the inner end of a bay that runs in toward the south. Before the harbor lies the so-called Mountain Island, about two hundred stadia<sup>o</sup> sea-ward from the very head of the bay, with the shores of the mainland close to it on both sides. Ships bound for this port now anchor here because of attacks from the land. They used formerly to anchor at the very head of the bay, by an island called Diodorus, close to the shore, which could be reached on foot from the land; by which means the barbarous natives attacked the island. Opposite Mountain Island, on the mainland twenty stadia from shore, lies Adulis, a fair-sized village, from which there is a three-days' journey to Coloe, an inland town and the first market for ivory. From that place to the city of the people called Axumites there is a five days' journey more; to that place all the ivory is brought from the country beyond the Nile through the district called Cyeneum, and thence to Adulis. Practically the whole number of elephants and rhinoceros that are killed live in the places inland, although at rare intervals they are hunted on the seacoast even near Adulis. Before the harbor of that market-town, out at sea on the right hand, there lie a great many little sandy islands called Alalaei, yielding tortoise-shell, which is brought to market there by the Fish-Eaters.

And about eight hundred stadia beyond there is another very deep bay, with a great mound of sand piled up at the right of the entrance; at the bottom of which the opsian<sup>o</sup> stone is found, and this is the only place where it is produced. These places . . . are

governed by Zoscales,<sup>o</sup> who is miserly in his ways and always striving for more, but otherwise upright, and acquainted with Greek literature.

There are imported into these places undressed cloth made in Egypt for the Berbers; robes from Arsinoe; cloaks of poor quality dyed in colors; double-fringed linen mantles; many articles of flint glass, and others of murrhine, made in Diospolis;<sup>o</sup> and brass, which is used for ornament and in cut pieces instead of coin; sheets of soft copper, used for cooking utensils and cut up for bracelets and anklets for the women; iron, which is made into spears used against the elephants and other wild beasts, and in their wars. Besides these, small axes are imported, and adzes and swords; copper drinking-cups, round and large; a little coin<sup>o</sup> for those coming to the market [probably foreign merchants living in Adulis]; wine of Laodicea and Italy, not much; olive oil, not much; for the king, gold and silver plate made after the fashion of the country, and for clothing, military cloaks, and thin coats of skin, of no great value. Likewise from the district of Ariaca<sup>o</sup> across this sea, there are imported Indian iron, and steel, and Indian cotton cloth; the broad cloth called *monache* and that called *sagimtogene*, and girdles, and coats of skin and mallow-colored cloth, and a few muslins, and colored lac.<sup>o</sup> There are exported from these places ivory, and tortoise-shell and rhinoceros-horn. The most from Egypt is brought to this market from the month of January, to September, that is, from Tybi to Thoth; but seasonably they put to sea about the month of September.

<sup>o</sup>**Ptolemais of the Hunts:** near modern Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

<sup>o</sup>**stadia:** 1 stadium = 1/8 mile.

<sup>o</sup>**opsian:** obsidian.

Source: Wilfred H. Schoff, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1912), Sections 4–6.

<sup>o</sup>**Zoscales:** an Axumite ruler.

<sup>o</sup>**Diospolis:** Thebes.

<sup>o</sup>**coin:** Roman money.

<sup>o</sup>**Ariaca:** an area in western India.

<sup>o</sup>**lac:** a resinous secretion of an insect, used in the form of shellac.

## Document 7.2

### The Making of an Axumite Empire

At its high point in the mid-fourth century C.E., Axum ruled an empire stretching from Meroë in the upper Nile Valley, across most of what is now Eritrea and Ethiopia, and incorporating parts of southern Arabia on the opposite side of the Red Sea. Document 7.2 comes from an Axumite inscription written in Greek on a stone throne adorned with figures of the Greek gods Hercules and Mercury. Commissioned by an unknown Axumite monarch, the inscription dates probably from the second or third century C.E. It was copied and then published in the sixth century by Cosmas, a Greek merchant born in Alexandria, Egypt, who had become a monk. This text describes some of the conquests that generated the Axumite Empire.

- What internal evidence from the document itself dates it prior to Axum's acceptance of Christianity?
- How would you describe the point of view from which the document was written?
- What techniques of imperial control does the document reveal?
- How might you account for the obvious Greek influence that is apparent in the inscription?
- How would you describe the religious or ideological underpinnings of this empire? Why might the Axumite ruler who commissioned this inscription single out Ares, Zeus, and Poseidon for special attention?

### *Inscription on a Stone Throne*

Second or Third Century C.E.

Having after this with a strong hand compelled the nations bordering on my kingdom to live in peace, I made war upon the following nations, and by force of arms reduced them to subjection. I warred first with the nation of Gaze [Axum, probably in an internal struggle for power], then with Agame and Sigye, and having conquered them, I exacted the half of all that they possessed. I next reduced Aua and Tiamo, called Tziam, and the Gambela, and the tribes near them, and Zingabene and Angabe and Tiama

and Athagus and Kalaa, and the Semenoi—a people who lived beyond the Nile on mountains difficult of access and covered with snow, where the year is all winter with hailstorms, frosts and snows into which a man sinks knee-deep. I passed the river to attack these nations, and reduced them. I next subdued Lazine and Zaa and Gabala, tribes which inhabit mountains with steep declivities abounding with hot springs, the Atalmo and Bega, and all the tribes in the same quarter along with them.<sup>o</sup>

Source: J. W. McCrindle, trans. and ed., *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1897), 59–66.

<sup>o</sup>(Note that scholars are often unable to precisely locate the people or places mentioned in the text.)

I proceeded next against the Tangaldae, who adjoin the borders of Egypt; and having reduced them I made a footpath giving access by land into Egypt from that part of my dominions. Next I reduced Annine and Metine—tribes inhabiting precipitous mountains. My arms were next directed against the Sesea nation. These had retired to a high mountain difficult of access; but I blockaded the mountain on every side, and compelled them to come down and surrender. I then selected for myself the best of their young men and their women, with their sons and daughters and all besides that they possessed. The tribes of Rhausi I next brought to submission: a barbarous race spread over wide waterless plains in the interior of the frankincense country. [Advancing thence toward the sea,] I encountered the Solate, whom I subdued, and left with instructions to guard the coast.

All these nations, protected though they were by mountains all but impregnable, I conquered, after engagements in which I was myself present. Upon their submission I restored their territories to them, subject to the payment of tribute. Many other tribes besides these submitted of their own accord, and became likewise tributary. And I sent a fleet and land forces against the Arabitae and Cinaedocolpitae who dwelt on the other side of the Red Sea [southern Arabia], and having reduced the sovereigns of

both, I imposed on them a land tribute and charged them to make traveling safe both by sea and by land. I thus subdued the whole coast from Leuce Come to the country of the Sabaeans.

I first and alone of the kings of my race made these conquests. For this success I now offer my thanks to my mighty god, Ares,<sup>o</sup> who begat me, and by whose aid I reduced all the nations bordering on my own country, on the east to the country of frankincense, and on the west to Ethiopia and Sasu. Of these expeditions, some were conducted by myself in person, and ended in victory, and the others I entrusted to my officers. Having thus brought all the world under my authority to peace, I came down to Adulis and offered sacrifice to Zeus,<sup>o</sup> and to Ares, and to Poseidon,<sup>o</sup> whom I entreated to befriend all who go down to the sea in ships.<sup>o</sup> Here also I reunited all my forces, and setting down this Chair [throne] in this place, I consecrated it to Ares in the twenty-seventh year of my reign.

<sup>o</sup>**Ares:** the Greek god of warfare and slaughter.

<sup>o</sup>**Zeus:** the chief god of the Greek pantheon.

<sup>o</sup>**Poseidon:** the Greek god of the sea.

<sup>o</sup>(Note that many Axumite deities derived from southern Arabia but came to be identified with the gods of the Greek pantheon.)

### Document 7.3

## The Coming of Christianity to Axum

The introduction of Christianity in the mid-fourth century represented a major change in the cultural history of Axum. It meant that Axum would be more closely aligned to Christian Egypt and Byzantium than to South Arabia, from which many of its earlier cultural traditions had derived. Document 7.3 relates the story of the coming of Christianity to Axum. It was written by Rufinus (345–410 C.E.), a Christian monk and writer who was born in Italy but spent much of his life in Jerusalem, where he heard this story from those who had taken part in it. Note that Greco-Roman writers of this time used “India” to refer vaguely to East Africa and Southern Arabia as well as the south Asian peninsula.

- According to this document, by what means was Christianity introduced to Axum? What do you think was the relative importance of Frumentius and Aedesius, as opposed to Roman merchants living in Axum?
- Why do you think the Axumite royal family was so receptive to this foreign religion? How might the story differ if told from the ruling family's perspective?
- How does the fact that this document was written by outsiders shape the emphasis of the story?

RUFINUS

## *On the Evangelization of Abyssinia*

Late Fourth Century C.E.

One Metrodorus, a philosopher, is said to have penetrated to further India [the Red Sea area including Axum] in order to view places and see the world. Inspired by his example, one Meropius, a philosopher [and a Christian merchant] of Tyre,<sup>o</sup> wished to visit India with a similar object, taking with him two small boys who were related to him and whom he was educating in humane studies. The younger of these was called Aedesius, the other Frumentius. When, having seen and taken note of what his soul fed upon, the philosopher had begun to return, the ship on which he traveled put in for water or some other necessary at a certain port. It is the custom of the barbarians of these parts that, if ever the neighboring tribes report that their treaty with the Romans is broken, all Romans found among them should be massacred. The philosopher's ship was boarded; all with himself were put to the sword.

The boys were found studying under a tree and preparing their lessons, and, preserved by the mercy of the barbarians, were taken to the king [of Axum]. He made one of them, Aedesius, his cupbearer.

<sup>o</sup>Tyre: a city in Lebanon.

Source: Quoted in A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, *A History of Abyssinia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 26–27.

Frumentius, whom he had perceived to be sagacious and prudent, he made his treasurer and secretary. Thereafter they were held in great honor and affection by the king. The king died, leaving his wife with an infant son [Ezana] as heir of the bereaved kingdom. He gave the young men liberty to do what they pleased but the queen besought them with tears, since she had no more faithful subjects in the whole kingdom, to share with her the cares of governing the kingdom until her son should grow up, especially Frumentius, whose ability was equal to guiding the kingdom, for the other, though loyal and honest of heart, was simple.

While they lived there and Frumentius held the reins of government in his hands, God stirred up his heart and he began to search out with care those of the Roman merchants who were Christians and to give them great influence and to urge them to establish in various places conventicles to which they might resort for prayer in the Roman manner. He himself, moreover, did the same and so encouraged the others, attracting them with his favor and his benefits, providing them with whatever was needed, supplying sites for buildings and other necessities, and in every way promoting the growth of the seed of Christianity in the country. When the prince [Ezana] for whom they exercised the regency had grown up, they completed and faithfully delivered over their trust, and, though the queen and her son



sought greatly to detain them and begged them to remain, returned to the Roman Empire.

Aedesius hastened to Tyre to revisit his parents and relatives. Frumentius went to Alexandria, saying that it was not right to hide the work of God. He laid the whole affair before the bishop and urged him to look for some worthy man to send as bishop over the many Christians already congregated and the churches built on barbarian soil. Then Athanasius (for he had recently assumed the episcopate), having carefully weighed and considered Frumentius' words and deeds, declared in a council of the priests: "What other man shall we find in whom the Spirit

of God is as in thee, who can accomplish these things?" And he consecrated him and bade him return in the grace of God whence he had come. And when he had arrived in India [Axum] as bishop, such grace is said to have been given to him by God that apostolic miracles were wrought by him and a countless number of barbarians were converted by him to the faith. From which time Christian peoples and churches have been created in the parts of India, and the priesthood has begun. These facts I know not from vulgar report but from the mouth of Aedesius himself, who had been Frumentius' companion and was later made a priest in Tyre.

### Document 7.4

## A Byzantine View of an Axumite Monarch

In the sixth century, Axum became embroiled in the larger conflict between the Byzantine and Persian empires, then the superpowers of the region. In this epic struggle the Persians found an ally in the Himyarite kingdom of Arabia, several of whose leaders had converted to Judaism and were actively persecuting Christians. In 530–531, the Byzantine emperor Justinian sent an emissary to King Kaleb of Axum, appealing for his aid in attacking this threat to their common Christian faith. That emissary, named Julian, subsequently made a report to Justinian that contained a description of the court of the Axumite ruler and his now Christian court.

- Why do you think King Kaleb was so eager join Byzantium in its struggle against Persia and its Arab Himyarite ally? Consider both religious and strategic reasons.
- What evidence in the document suggests that the Byzantine authorities considered King Kaleb an equal? What evidence might suggest that they saw him as a subordinate?
- What did Julian find especially striking about King Kaleb's appearance and behavior?

## JULIAN

*Report to the Byzantine Emperor on Axum*

530–531

In the same year, the Romans and Persians broke their peace. The Persian war was renewed because of the embassy of the... Himyarite Arabs to the Romans. The Romans sent the Magistríanos Julian from Alexandria down the Nile River and through the Indian Ocean with sacral letters to [Kaleb], the king of the Ethiopians. King [Kaleb] received him with great joy, since [Kaleb] longed after the Roman Emperor's friendship.

On his return (to Constantinople), this same Julian reported that King [Kaleb] was naked when he received him but had round his kidneys a loin-cloth of linen and gold thread. On his belly he wore linen with precious pearls; his bracelets had five spikes, and he wore gold armlets by his hands. He had a linen-and-gold cloth turban round his head, with four cords hanging down from both its straps.

He stood on (a carriage drawn by) four standing elephants which had a yoke and four wheels. Like

any stately carriage, it was ornamented with golden petals, just as are the carriages of provincial governors. While he stood upon it, he held in his hands a small gilded shield and two gold javelins. His counselors were all armed, and sang musical tunes.

When the Roman ambassador was brought in and had performed the prostration, he was ordered to rise by the king and was led before him. [Kaleb] accepted the Emperor's sacral letters and tenderly kissed the seal which had the Emperor's image. He also accepted Julian's gifts and greatly rejoiced.

When he read the letter, he found that it was urgent for him to arm himself against the Persian king, devastate Persian territory near him [in South Arabia], and in the future no longer make covenants with the Persian. Rather, the letter arranged that the land of the [Himyarites] would conduct its business with Egyptian Alexandria by way of the Nile River.

In the sight of the envoy, King [Kaleb] immediately began to campaign: he set war in motion against the Persians and sent out his Saracens [Arabs]. He himself also went off against Persian territory and pillaged all of it in that area. After conquering, King [Kaleb] gave Julian a kiss of peace on the head and sent him off with a large retinue and many gifts.

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Source: Theophanes, *Chronographia*, Annus mundi 6064. Unpublished translation by Dr. Harry Turtledove. In *Ancient African Civilizations: Kush and Axum*, edited by Stanley Burstein (Princeton: Markus Weiner, 1998), 125–26.

## Document 7.5

*Axum and the Gold Trade*

The foundations of the Axumite state lay not only in its military conquests and its adoption of a new religion but also in its economic ties to the larger world. Among these ties was its reputation as a major source of gold for the Roman Empire. Document 7.5 describes the distinctive fashion in which Axumite traders obtained the gold from the African peoples living on the margins of the Axumite state. The author, Cosmas (see Document 7.2, pp. 309–10), was involved in this trade.

- How would you define the pattern of exchange described in this document? Was it state-directed trade, private enterprise, or both? To what problems of cross-cultural interaction was it a response?

- Who, if anyone, had the upper hand in this trade? Was it conducted between politically equal parties?
- What purposes did this trade serve for the people who mined and “sold” the gold?
- Beyond the peaceful trade for gold described here, what other purposes did this region serve for Axum?

## COSMAS

### *The Christian Topography* Sixth Century C.E.

The country known as that of Sasu is itself near the ocean, just as the ocean is near the frankincense country,<sup>o</sup> in which there are many gold mines. The King of the Axumites accordingly, every other year, through the governor of Agau, sends thither special agents to bargain for the gold, and these are accompanied by many other traders—upwards, say, of five hundred—bound on the same errand as themselves. They take along with them to the mining district oxen, lumps of salt, and iron, and when they reach its neighborhood, they make a halt at a certain spot and form an encampment, which they fence round with a great hedge of thorns. Within this they live, and having slaughtered the oxen, cut them in pieces, and lay the pieces on the top of the thorns, along with the lumps of salt and the iron. Then come the natives bringing gold in nuggets like peas, and lay one or two or more of these upon what pleases them—the pieces of flesh or the salt or the iron, and then they retire to some distance off. Then the owner of the meat approaches, and if he is satisfied he takes the gold away, and upon seeing this, its owner comes and takes the flesh or the salt or the iron. If, however, he is not satisfied, he leaves the gold, when the native, seeing that he has not taken it, comes and either puts down more gold,

or takes up what he had laid down, and goes away. Such is the mode in which business is transacted with the people of that country, because their language is different and interpreters are hardly to be found.

The time they stay in that country is five days more or less, according as the natives, more or less readily coming forward, buy up all their wares. On the journey homeward they all agree to travel well-armed, since some of the tribes through whose country they must pass might threaten to attack them from a desire to rob them of their gold. The space of six months is taken up with this trading expedition, including both the going and the returning. In going they march very slowly, chiefly because of the cattle, but in returning they quicken their pace lest on the way they should be overtaken by winter and its rains. For the sources of the river Nile lie somewhere in these parts, and in winter, on account of the heavy rains, the numerous rivers which they generate obstruct the path of the traveler. The people there have their winter at the time we have our summer... and during the three months the rain falls in torrents, and makes a multitude of rivers all of which flow into the Nile.

The facts which I have just recorded fell partly under my own observation and partly were told me by traders who had been to those parts...

For most of the slaves which are now found in the hands of merchants who resort to these parts are taken from the tribes of which we speak. As for the Semenai, where... there are snows and ice, it is to that country the King of the Axumites expatriates anyone whom he has sentenced to be banished.

<sup>o</sup>frankincense country: probably what is now Somalia.

Source: J. W. McCrindle, trans. and ed., *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1897), 52–54, 67.

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## Using the Evidence: Axum and the World

1. **Assessing sources:** How does each of these documents reflect the distinctive perspective of its author? What different perspectives can you notice between those documents written from within Axum and those written by outsiders? How did the particular social role that each author represents (missionary, monarch, merchant) affect his view of Axum?
2. **Considering external influences:** Based on these documents, how would you describe Axum's various relationships with the world beyond its borders? How did its geographical location shape those relationships? (See Map 7.1, p. 285.) In what ways did those external connections influence Axum's historical development? From another perspective, how did Axum actively assimilate foreign influences or deliberately take advantage of opportunities that came from outside?
3. **Explaining the rise and significance of Axum:** How might you account for the flourishing of Axum during its classical era? What was the religious and military significance of Axum within the region?
4. **Comparing civilizations:** In what ways might Axum be viewed as a smaller-scale version of the classical civilizations of Eurasia? In what ways did it differ from them?
5. **Seeking further evidence:** What else would you like to know about Axum? If you could uncover one additional document, what would you want it to reveal?



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# Visual Sources

## Considering the Evidence: Art and the Maya Elite



The ancient Maya world,” writes a major scholar of the region, “was a world of Maya art.”<sup>25</sup> In magnificent architecture, carvings, pottery, ceramic figures, wall paintings, and illustrated books, Maya culture was suffused by a distinctive style of artistic expression, more complex, subtle, extensive, and innovative than any other in the Americas. Commissioned by Maya rulers, that art centered on life at court, depicting kings, nobles, warriors, and wealthy merchants together with the women, musicians, and artists who served them as well as the many deities who populated the Maya universe. Far more than in China, India, or Europe, historians rely on art and archeology for their insights into Maya civilization. While the Maya had writing, their literature was less extensive than that of classical-era Eurasian cultures and much of it was tragically destroyed during the early decades of Spanish rule. The images that follow provide a window into the life of the Maya elite during its classical era (see the map on p. 293).

Visual Source 7.1 shows a royal couple from the Maya city of Yaxchilan in the year 724 C.E. with the king Shield Jaguar, on the left, and his primary wife, Lady Xok, on the right. In helping him dress for a war-related ceremony or sacrifice, Lady Xok offers her husband his helmet, the head of a jaguar, an animal that was widely associated with strength, bravery, aggression, warfare, and high social status. The T-shaped frame at the center top, which contains a number of Maya glyphs (written symbols), indicates a doorway and thus sets the action in an interior space. The king is wearing cotton body armor and carrying a knife, while his wife is clad in a *huipil*, a blouse similar to those still worn by Maya women in southern Mexico.

- What elements of their dress and decoration serve to mark their high status?
- What aspects of the physical appearance of this couple might represent ideal male and female characteristics in Maya culture? Pay attention to their hair, foreheads, and noses, as well as to the attitude suggested by their faces.
- What might you infer about the relationship of Shield Jaguar and Lady Xok from this carving? Notice the relatively equal size of the two figures and the gesture that Shield Jaguar makes with his left hand. Keep in mind that the carving comes from a temple in Yaxchilan dedicated to Lady Xok.



**Visual Source 7.1** Shield Jaguar and Lady Xok: A Royal Couple of Yaxchilan (Museo Nacional de Antropología—INAH, Mexico)



Warfare was frequent among Maya cities and thus a common theme in their court art. Fought with spear throwers, lances, clubs, axes, swords, and shields, Maya wars were depicted as chaotic affairs aimed at the capture of individual prisoners, who were destined for sacrifice or slavery. Those prisoners were often named in the glyphs that accompanied the portrayal of battles along with the inscription “He is seized/roped.”

Visual Source 7.2, a reconstructed image, comes from a Maya archeological site in southern Mexico called Bonampak, well known for its vivid murals. Depicting events that took place in 792 C.E., this mural shows King Chan Muwan of Bonampak (in the center) holding a staff and receiving nine prisoners of war from his victorious noble warriors. To the king’s right are two allies from the nearby city of Yaxchilan, followed by the king’s wife, his mother, and a servant-musician playing a conch. To the king’s left are six more high-ranking warriors from Bonampak, while lower-level warriors guard each side of the door at the bottom.

The prisoners hold center stage in the mural. Notice in particular the dead captive sprawling below the king’s staff as a severed head lies on a bed of leaves below him. The four small images at the top indicate constellations, showing the favorable position of the sky for this occasion. The turtle on the far right, for example, depicts the constellation Gemini, while the three stars on its back represent what we know as Orion’s belt.

- What can you infer about Maya warfare and court practice from this mural?
- What do the various postures of the captives suggest?
- Notice that a number of the captives have blood dripping from their fingers. What does this indicate? What might be happening to the prisoner at the far left?
- What status distinctions can you observe among the figures in the mural? Notice the jaguar skins worn by the king and three other warriors.
- What meaning might you attach to the presence of the king’s wife and mother at this event?

The bleeding and ultimately the sacrifice of the captives in Visual Source 7.2 was only part of a more pervasive practice of bloodletting that permeated Maya religious and court life. Significant occasions—giving birth, getting married, dying, planting crops, dedicating buildings, and many more—were sanctified with human blood, the most valued and holy substance in the world. Behind this practice lay the Maya belief in the mutual relationship of humans and their gods. Two of the major scholars in this field explain: “The earth and its creatures were created through a sacrificial act of the gods, and human beings, in turn, were required to strengthen and nourish the gods.”<sup>26</sup> The means of



**Visual Source 7.2** The Presentation of Captives (Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library)

doing so was blood. The massive loss of blood often triggered a trancelike state that the Maya experienced as mystical union with their gods or ancestors. The lancets used to draw blood—usually from the tongue in women and often from the penis in men—were invested with sacred power.

Kings and their wives were central to this bloodletting ritual, as Visual Source 7.3 so vividly shows. Here we meet again Shield Jaguar and Lady Xok, depicted also in Visual Source 7.1. The date of this carving is October 28,

**Visual Source 7.3** A Bloodletting Ritual  
(© Justin Kerr, K2887)



709 C.E. The king is holding a large torch, suggesting that the ritual occurs at night, while his kneeling wife draws a thorn-studded rope through her perforated tongue. The rope falls into a basket of bloody paper, which will later be burned with the resulting smoke nourishing the gods. Shield Jaguar too will soon let his own blood flow, for the glyphs accompanying this carving declare that “he is letting blood” and “she is letting blood.”

- What details can you notice in the exquisitely carved work?
- What significance might you attribute to the fact that the couple is performing this ritual together?
- Why do you think Lady Xok is kneeling?
- Notice the shrunken head in Shield Jaguar’s headdress. How would you assess its significance? How might it enhance his status?
- To what extent is this pervasive bloodletting a uniquely mesoamerican religious practice? What roles do blood and sacrifice play in other religious traditions?



Among the most well-known and intriguing features of Maya life was a ball game in which teams of players, often two on a side, sought to control a rubber ball, using only their thighs, torsos, and upper arms to make it hit a marker or ring. Deeply rooted in Maya mythology, the game was played both before and after the classical Maya era on ball courts found throughout the Maya territory as well as elsewhere in Mesoamerica. On one level, the game was sport, often played simply for entertainment and recreation. But it also reflected and symbolized the prevalence of warfare among Maya cities. As one recent account put it: “[T]he game re-enacted the paradigms for war and sacrifice, where the skillful and blessed triumph and the weak and undeserving are vanquished.”<sup>27</sup> The ball game was yet another occasion for the shedding of blood, as losing players, often war captives, were killed, sometimes bound in ball-like fashion and rolled down the steps of the court to their death. Thus the larger mythic context of the ball game was the eternal struggle of life and death, so central to Maya religious thinking.

Visual Source 7.4, a rollout of a vase dating from the seventh or eighth century C.E., depicts the ball game in action. The two players on each side echo the Hero Twins of Maya mythology, famous ball players who triumphed over the lords of the underworld in an extended game and who were later transformed triumphantly into the sun and moon. The glyphs accompanying this image named two kings of adjacent cities, suggesting that the game may have been played on occasion as a substitute for warfare between rival cities.

- What might the elaborate dress of the players suggest about the function of the game and the status of its players?



Visual Source 7.4 The Ball Game (© Justin Kerr, K2803)

- Notice the deer headdress on the player at the far left and the vulture image on the corresponding player at the far right. What do the headdresses suggest about the larger mythic context in which the game was understood?
- Notice the heavy protective padding around the waist as well as the wrappings around one knee, foot, and upper arm of the two lead players. What was the purpose of such padding? Keep in mind that the rubber ball, shown here in an exaggerated form, was roughly the size of a modern volleyball but weighed perhaps seven or eight pounds.



**Visual Source 7.5** An Embracing Couple (© Dumbarton Oaks, Pre-Columbian Collection, Washington, D.C.)

- How might you compare this ancient Maya ball game to contemporary athletic contests? Consider the larger social meaning of the game as well as its more obvious features.

Certainly not all was war, sacrifice, and bloodletting among the Maya. Visual Source 7.5, a ceramic figurine from the late classical era, illustrates a more playful and explicitly sexual side to Maya art.

- How might you describe what is transpiring between this older man and the much younger woman? Notice the position of their hands, the woman's knee, and the expression of their faces.

As was frequently the case among the Maya, artistic expression had a mythic significance. Here the young woman probably represents the moon goddess, associated with sexuality, fertility, night, death, and frequent change of lovers, reflecting the changing cycles of the moon. In an effort to spy out her infidelities, her husband/lover, the aged sun god in Maya mythology, took on the form of a deer as represented in his headdress.

- What might this image and its mythological context tell us about Maya views of sexuality?

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## Using the Evidence: Art and the Maya Elite

1. **Considering art as evidence:** What can you learn from these visual sources about the values, preoccupations, and outlook of the Maya elite? What are the strengths and limitations of art as a source of evidence? What other kinds of evidence would you want to discover to further your understanding of the Maya elite?
2. **Assessing gender roles:** In what ways are women and men depicted in these visual sources? What might this suggest about their respective roles in the elite circles of Maya society?
3. **Making comparisons:** How might you compare the life of the Maya elite depicted in these visual sources with that of the Roman elite of Pompeii shown in the Visual Sources section of Chapter 6 (pp. 272–79)? For a second comparison, consider the similarities and differences of Maya and Axumite civilizations.
4. **Considering the values of the historian:** What feelings or judgments do these visual sources evoke in you? Which of your values might get in the way of a sympathetic understanding of the Maya elite?