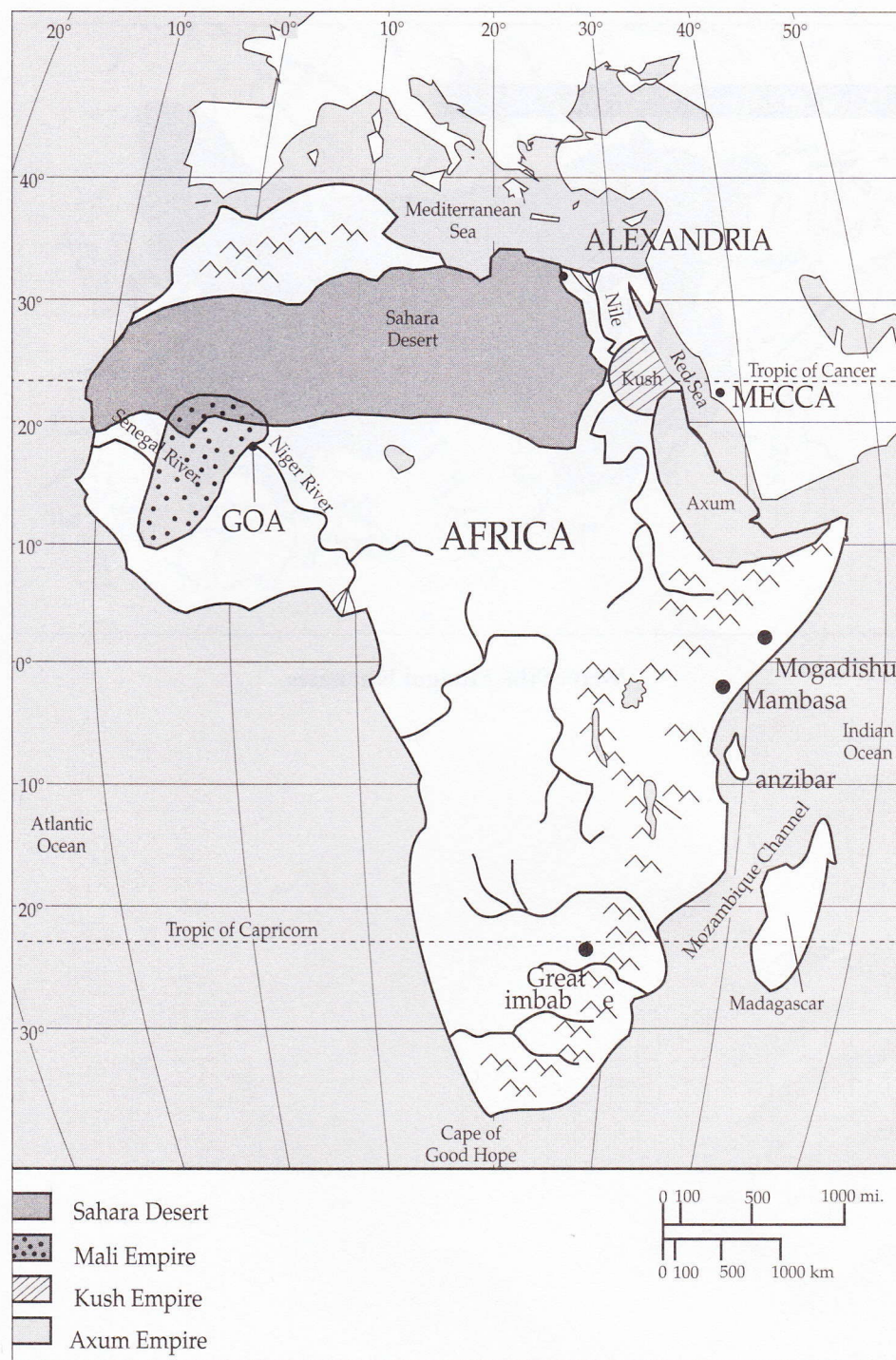


E. Developments in Africa



African Empires and Trade Cities

The most significant early civilizations in Africa for AP purposes were Egypt and Carthage, both of which were discussed in the previous chapter. Both of these civilizations were located in North Africa along the Mediterranean, north of the

Sahara Desert. But there were other civilizations in Africa too. Some of them existed long before 600 C.E., but we've included them in this section (rather than in the previous chapter) so that you can study them as a group.

Interaction Kush, Axum, and the Swahili Coast

The Kush and Axum civilizations developed to the south of Egypt in the upper reaches of the Nile River. **Kush** developed at about the same time as ancient Egypt, and at one point around 750 B.C.E. actually conquered it. Less than a hundred years later, however, Kush retreated southward back to its capital at Meroe, where it became a center for ironworks and trade.

After the Kush decline around 200 C.E., another empire, **Axum**, rose to greatness to the south (in modern-day Ethiopia). Although Axum never conquered any other civilization, it traded with them frequently, especially ivory and gold. In the fourth century, Axum converted to Christianity, and in the seventh century, many converted to Islam. These conversions illustrate that the people of Axum were in constant contact with the empires of the Mediterranean world. And that contact has had a long-standing impact. Ethiopia's large Christian community in present times is a direct result of the Axum conversion.

Remember that this entire period is dominated by interactions. In addition to interaction with the Mediterranean world through the Red Sea, the eastern coast of Africa was linked to India and Southeast Asia through the shipping lanes of the Indian Ocean trade. The east coast of Africa was populated by Bantu-speaking peoples who settled into lives of farmers, merchants, and fishermen. This area is known as the Swahili Coast, from the Arabic word for "coasters" or traders, and indeed the Swahili language is a mix of the original Bantu language supplemented by Arabic. Trade with the Muslims began in the early tenth century as Swahili traders brought gold, slaves, ivory, and other exotic products to the coast.

The incredible wealth generated by this trade resulted in the growth of powerful kingdoms and trading cities along the coast in advantageous locations. Like wealthy trading cities throughout the world, they became cultural and political centers. By the fifteenth century, what had previously been mud and wooden outposts had become impressive coral and stone mosques, public buildings, and fortified cities with trade goods from all over the world.

To facilitate political and economic relationships, the ruling elites and merchant classes of the eastern African kingdoms converted to Islam, but maintained many of their own cultural traditions. Eventually, Islam spread throughout most of East Africa.

The Other Side of the Sand: Ghana, Mali, and Songhai

Kush and Axum were in eastern Africa, along the Nile River and near the Red Sea. Therefore, they had easy access to other cultures. The cultures of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, however, were in west Africa, south of the Sahara.

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When the Muslim Empire spread across North Africa in the seventh and eighth centuries, these African kingdoms began trading with the larger Mediterranean economy. Islamic traders penetrated the unforgiving Sahara desert and reached the fertile wealthy interior of Africa, called sub-Saharan (beneath the Sahara), while African traders pushed northward toward Carthage and Tripoli. Previously, the desert had acted as one gigantic “don’t-want-to-deal-with-it” barrier, so people typically didn’t. Increasingly, however, caravans of traders were willing to do what they had to do to get to the riches on the other side of the sand. At first, the west Africans were in search of salt, which they had little of but which existed in the Sahara. When they encountered the Islamic traders along the salt road, they started trading for a lot more than just salt. The consequence was an explosion of trade.

Why were the Islamic traders so interested in trading with west African kingdoms? Because in Ghana (about 800–1000 C.E.) and Mali (about 1200–1450 C.E.), there was tons, and we mean tons, of gold. A little sand in your eyes was probably worth some gold in your hand. So the Islamic traders kept coming.

The constant trade brought more than just Islamic goods to Ghana and Mali; it brought Islam. For Ghana the result was devastating. The empire was subjected to a Holy War led by an Islamic group intent on converting (or else killing) them. While Ghana was able to defeat the Islamic forces, their empire fell into decline. By the time the Mali came to power, the region had converted to Islam anyway, this time in a more peaceful transition.

One of the greatest Mali rulers, **Mansa Musa**, built a capital at Timbuktu and expanded the kingdom well beyond the bounds of Ghana. In 1324, Musa made a pilgrimage to Mecca (remember the Five Pillars of Islam?) complete with an entourage of hundreds of gold-carrying servants and camels. The journey was so extravagant and so long and so impressive to everyone who saw it, that Musa became an overnight international sensation. Had the entertainment industry been fully established during that time, you can bet that Access Hollywood and US Weekly would have been all over the Musa moment.

But the largest empire in west Africa was formed in the mid-fifteenth century, when Songhai ruler Sonni Ali conquered the entire region and established the Songhai Empire. The Songhai Empire lasted until around 1600 C.E., and during its reign, Timbuktu became a major cultural center, complete with a university that drew scholars from around the Islamic world.

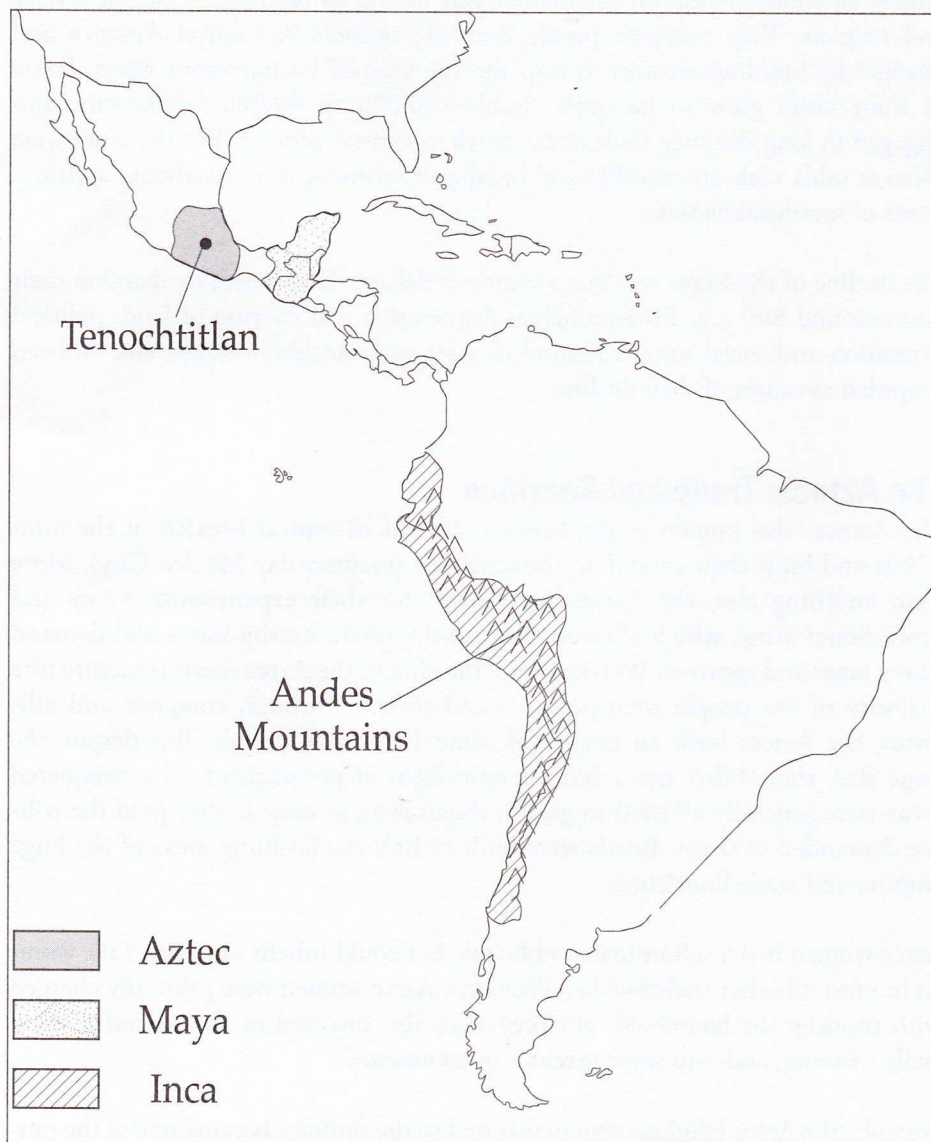
The Arts in Africa

Oral literature was an important part of life in most African communities. History and stories were passed from one generation to the next, not through written texts, but through storytelling. But the storytelling wasn’t just grandpa sitting next to the fire. It was a production akin to a dramatic performance. The stories were told the same way for so many generations that people knew the lines. Everyone was able to participate in the storytelling by reciting responses at the appropriate times. Think about what it’s like to watch Star Wars with a room full of

people—parents, grandparents, kids—who’ve already seen it; that will give you a good sense of what oral literature meant to those cultures.

Early sub-Saharan African cultures are also known for their sculptures, particularly out of pottery and bronze. The **Benin** culture (near present-day Nigeria) mastered a bronze sculpting technique. They made clay molds around a wax carving, melted the wax, filled the mold with melted bronze, and, after breaking the clay mold, revealed some of the most beautiful early bronze work created by any civilization.

F. Developments in the Americas



The American Civilizations