
A SYSTEMS-LEVEL ATLAS

AFRICA

VOLUME II

Civilization Layers & Historical Systems

Human Origins · Classical Civilizations of the Nile, the Sahel & the Stone Plateau · Trans-Saharan & Indian Ocean Networks · The Colonial Disruption

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About This Volume

AFRICA: AN ENCYCLOPEDIC REFERENCE — 2026 EDITION

Volume II of an eight-volume reference work compiled and edited by Marie-Soleil Seshat Landry and published by Landry Industries Inc. under the Marie Landry's Spy Shop imprint, Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada.

Where Volume I established the physical platform of the continent — its geology, climate, and living systems — **Volume II traces the human layers built upon it:** the origin of our species in Africa, the classical civilizations that rose along its rivers and trade corridors, the premodern networks that linked it to Asia and the Mediterranean, and the colonial rupture that reorganised it for external extraction. The governing argument of the series carries through here: that Africa's present condition is the cumulative product of deep, interacting systems, several of which were engineered — the colonial reordering of the continent most explicitly of all.

A NOTE ON METHOD AND CITATION INTEGRITY

As in Volume I, every quantitative, empirical, or contested claim is verified against an identifiable public source at the time of writing (June 2026) and keyed to the numbered *References* at the end of this volume. No source text is reproduced verbatim; all material is restated in original prose. History is treated honestly: where the evidence is genuinely disputed — the precise dating of the earliest stone tools, the size of Great Zimbabwe's population, the human toll of the Congo Free State — the range of scholarly estimate is reported rather than a single convenient figure asserted. Long-settled background (the basic chronology of the Stone Age, the mechanics of monsoon-driven sailing) is presented as established knowledge.

This volume continues the series architecture introduced in Volume I:

I — FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONTINENT (*PUBLISHED*)

II — CIVILIZATION LAYERS & HISTORICAL SYSTEMS (*THIS INSTALLMENT*)

5. Prehistoric Africa and Human Origins · 6. Classical African Civilizations · 7. Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean Networks · 8. Colonial Disruption Systems

III — MODERN STATES AND POLITICAL ARCHITECTURES · IV — ECONOMIC AND RESOURCE SYSTEMS · V — SOCIETY, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND CULTURE

VI — TECHNOLOGY & FUTURE SYSTEMS · VII — GEOPOLITICS & GLOBAL POSITIONING · VIII — FUTURE TRAJECTORIES · APPENDICES A-E

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VOLUME TWO

Civilization Layers & Historical Systems

Humanity began here. So did some of the world's most sophisticated premodern states, and some of its longest trade routes. And here, too, the modern world performed its most violent act of cartographic engineering. This volume reads African history not as a sequence of events but as a stack of systems.

1. Prehistoric Africa and Human Origins
2. Classical African Civilizations

3. Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean Networks
4. Colonial Disruption Systems

CHAPTER FIVE

Prehistoric Africa and Human Origins

Africa is not merely where humans happen to have evolved. It is the reservoir of the species — the place that holds the deepest record in stone, the oldest bones, and the greatest genetic diversity on Earth.

The human story is, for the overwhelming majority of its length, an exclusively African story. Stone tools were being struck on the continent more than three million years before the rise of any city, and our own species emerged and spread across Africa for the better part of three hundred thousand years before a single founding population carried a sliver of that diversity out into the rest of the world. To understand humanity at all is to begin here.

The First Toolmakers

The archaeological record of technology opens in Africa earlier than anyone expected. At Lomekwi 3, on the western shore of Lake Turkana in Kenya, researchers led by Sonia Harmand recovered deliberately flaked stones dated to about 3.3 million years ago — pushing the start of the known archaeological record back by some 700,000 years in a single discovery.^{[4][6]} These “Lomekwian” artefacts predate the genus *HOMO* itself, implying that toolmaking was practised by earlier hominins such as australopithecines or *Kenyanthropus*, and overturning the long-held assumption that tool use and our own genus arose together.^[4]

The better-known Oldowan industry — simple choppers and sharp flakes first identified by Louis and Mary Leakey at Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania — appears around 2.6 million years ago and persisted for the better part of a million years.^[5] A 2023 discovery at Nyayanga, near Lake Victoria, found Oldowan tools alongside butchered hippo remains, evidence that these implements were used to process large animals.^[7] By roughly 1.76 million years ago the more refined Acheulean tradition, defined by its teardrop-shaped handaxes, had emerged — a versatile implement sometimes called a Stone Age multi-tool.^{[5][7]} Tools, as the Leakeys put it, are fossilised behaviour; in Africa that behavioural record runs deeper than anywhere else.

The Emergence of HOMO SAPIENS

As established in Volume I, the picture of where and how our species arose has broadened dramatically. The fossils from Jebel Irhoud in Morocco, re-dated in 2017 to roughly 300,000 years old, are the oldest remains attributed to HOMO SAPIENS, while the East African benchmark at Omo Kibish in Ethiopia has been revised to about 233,000 years.^{[8][9]} Crucially, Jebel Irhoud sits at the continent's far northwestern corner, and its discoverers argued for a *pan-African* model: early forms of our species were already distributed across the continent, evolving as a loosely connected web of populations rather than descending from one localised "cradle."^[8] Africa did not produce humanity at a single point; it produced humanity across its whole expanse.

Out of Africa: Waves of Migration

The peopling of the rest of the planet was not a single clean exodus. Fossil and archaeological evidence points to earlier dispersals beginning perhaps 120,000 years ago, during the humid intervals of the Last Interglacial when green corridors briefly opened across the Sahara and Arabia — the same precession-driven climate machinery described in Volume I.^[1] Early modern human remains in the Levant, at sites such as Misliya, Skhul, and Qafzeh, record these probing excursions, some dated well before 90,000 years ago.

Yet genetics tells a striking secondary truth: essentially all people living outside Africa today descend from a single later dispersal, around 50,000 to 60,000 years ago, which passed through a population bottleneck detectable in the DNA of every non-African population.^{[2][3]} The earlier pioneers, in other words, left little or no genetic trace in living people. A 2025 analysis offered a compelling explanation for why the later wave succeeded where earlier ones petered out: beginning around 70,000 years ago, human ecological flexibility expanded markedly, allowing populations to thrive across habitats from forest to desert — an adaptability that equipped the later migrants to survive the climatically hostile lands beyond Africa.^[3] As they spread, these populations interbred with Neanderthals and Denisovans, whose genetic signatures persist in non-African genomes today.^[1]

DEEP TIME, IN BRIEF

- **~3.3 million years ago:** oldest known stone tools, Lomekwi 3, Kenya — before the genus HOMO.^[4]
- **~2.6 million years ago:** Oldowan industry begins (Olduvai Gorge, Tanzania).^[5]
- **~300,000 years ago:** earliest HOMO SAPIENS fossils (Jebel Irhoud, Morocco).^[8]
- **~120,000 years ago:** earliest dispersals out of Africa (Levant); little surviving genetic trace.^[1]
- **~50,000-60,000 years ago:** the major dispersal from which all non-Africans descend.^[2]
^[3]

Genetic Diversity as Planetary Baseline

One consequence of this long African tenure is decisive for human biology: African populations harbour the greatest genetic diversity of any peoples on Earth. Because only a small founding group ever left, the entire non-African world represents a subset of African variation — a single branch drawn from a far larger tree. Genomic studies reveal deep population structure within Africa long predating the migrations, with some lineages diverging from the ancestors of non-Africans well over 100,000 years ago.^[2] This is not a point of regional pride alone; it is a fact of planetary significance, returned to in Volume VI, where Africa's genomic diversity emerges as a frontier resource for medicine and the study of human disease. The continent is, in the most literal sense, the genetic homeland of every human being alive.

CHAPTER SIX

Classical African Civilizations

Long before European contact, Africa built monumental states, minted its own gold currency, and ran cities of stone and scholarship. The persistent myth of a continent “without history” collapses on contact with the evidence.

Across more than two thousand years, African societies produced complex, literate, wealthy, and architecturally ambitious civilizations — on the Nile, across the Sahel, on the southern plateau, and along the Indian Ocean coast. Each was distinct; together they refute the colonial-era fiction that Africa stood outside the stream of world civilization.

The Nile Valley: Kemet and Nubia

Ancient Egypt — Kemet to its own people — needs little introduction, but its southern neighbour does. Upriver in what is now Sudan lay Nubia, home to the Kingdom of Kush, whose successive capitals at Kerma, Napata, and Meroë anchored a civilization that was Egypt’s peer and, for a time, its ruler. In the eighth century BCE, Kushite kings conquered Egypt and governed it as the 25th Dynasty — the line of “Black Pharaohs” including Piye, Taharqa, and Tantamani — ruling from the Nile’s sources to the Mediterranean for roughly a century.^[10]

After losing Egypt, the Kushites withdrew south and their civilization flourished in relative isolation at Meroë until about 400 CE, developing its own script, its own gods, and a celebrated metallurgical and goldworking tradition.^[10] Their most arresting legacy is architectural: the necropolis at Meroë holds more than 200 pyramids, and by one well-known count Sudan contains roughly 255 ancient pyramids to Egypt’s 118 — more pyramids than Egypt itself.^{[10][11]} Steeper-sided and more slender than their northern counterparts, and built across nearly a millennium from about 700 BCE to 350 CE, they were inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site in 2011.^{[11][12]}

The West African Empires: Ghana, Mali, Songhai

The Sahel — the trade-rich belt between the Sahara and the forests — gave rise to a succession of gold empires. The Kingdom of Ghana (unrelated to the modern state of that name) was the first great power, so associated with the metal that Arab writers called it the land of gold. It was eclipsed by the Empire of Mali, founded by Sundiata Keita around 1240 and enduring, in diminishing form, until the mid-seventeenth century.^[14] Mali’s wealth derived from controlling the trade between West African goldfields and the trans-

Saharan routes north, and its most famous ruler, Mansa Musa (reigned c. 1312–1337), is widely described as perhaps the wealthiest individual in recorded history.^[13]

MANSA MUSA'S PILGRIMAGE, 1324

- Mansa Musa set out on the hajj to Mecca in 1324 with an entourage reported in the tens of thousands and a vast supply of gold.^{[13][14]}
- His lavish spending and gift-giving during a stopover in Cairo is said to have depressed the value of gold in Egypt for years afterward.^{[13][14]}
- The pilgrimage announced Mali's wealth to the Islamic world and to Europe; a Spanish cartographer depicted Musa, gold in hand, on the 1375 Catalan Atlas.^[14]
- On his return he patronised mosques and scholarship at Timbuktu and Gao, seeding the knowledge economy detailed in Chapter Seven.^{[13][15]}

Mali was in turn succeeded by the Songhai Empire, centred on Gao, which grew into the largest of the three West African empires under rulers such as Askia Muhammad before falling in 1591 to a Moroccan invasion equipped with gunpowder weapons.^[14] Across this sequence, the underlying engine was constant: gold flowing north, salt and goods flowing south, and a string of cosmopolitan market cities — Timbuktu, Gao, Djenné — growing rich at the meeting point.

Great Zimbabwe and Southern African Metallurgy

On the plateau between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers, the ancestors of today's Shona built Great Zimbabwe, the largest stone structure in sub-Saharan Africa. Constructed without mortar in skilled dry-stone technique between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, its central ruins cover some 80 hectares, while the state it commanded likely extended across roughly 50,000 square kilometres.^{[16][18]} Population estimates for the city range from about 10,000 to 20,000 at its peak; recent statistical modelling argues for a figure at the lower end.^[18] Its wealth came from cattle, agriculture, and above all the export of gold to the Indian Ocean coast.^[16]

That Great Zimbabwe was plugged into a global economy is proven by the finds within it — Chinese porcelain, Persian glass beads, and Arab coins, reaching it through the Swahili port of Sofala.^[18] It is also a cautionary case in the politics of knowledge: for much of the colonial period, European and settler authorities refused to credit Africans with building it, attributing the ruins to Phoenicians or the biblical Queen of Sheba, and the Rhodesian state actively suppressed the archaeological consensus.^[17] Modern radiocarbon dating and decades of research have settled the question conclusively in favour of indigenous

Shona authorship — a reminder, central to this work's thesis, that narratives about Africa have themselves been engineered.^[17]

The Swahili Coast: A Maritime Trade Civilization

Along the East African seaboard, from roughly the eighth and ninth centuries, a chain of independent city-states flourished — Kilwa, Mombasa, Zanzibar, Malindi, Lamu, and Sofala among them — growing wealthy as intermediaries in Indian Ocean commerce.^{[19][20]} Their civilization was a genuine synthesis: as Arab and Persian merchants settled and intermarried with the Bantu-speaking coastal population, a new culture and language took shape. Swahili (Kiswahili) fuses Bantu grammar with substantial Arabic vocabulary and remains today the national language of Kenya and Tanzania.^[21] Kilwa grew especially powerful by controlling the gold flowing out of Sofala from the Zimbabwe plateau, and even minted its own coinage — a mark of sophisticated, monetised commerce on African terms.^[19] The Swahili world is the bridge to Chapter Seven, where the trade systems that made these cities rich are examined in full.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trans-Saharan and Indian Ocean Networks

Africa was never the isolated continent of colonial imagination. For a thousand years it was a hinge between two of the world's great commercial systems — one crossing the desert, the other crossing the sea.

Long-distance networks integrated Africa into a premodern world economy centuries before European ships arrived: the trans-Saharan caravan routes connecting the Sahel to the Mediterranean, and the monsoon-driven Indian Ocean trade linking the East African coast to Arabia, Persia, India, and China. Both moved not only goods but knowledge, religion, and people.

The Trans-Saharan Routes: Gold, Salt, and Knowledge

The Sahara became crossable as a regular commercial space once the camel was widely adopted in the early centuries CE, transforming a barrier into a sea of sand traversed by caravans. The defining exchange was gold for salt: West African goldfields supplied a metal that was scarce in the north, while the Sahara's salt mines supplied a mineral as precious as gold to societies that needed it to survive. Alongside these moved copper, textiles, enslaved people, and books. The economic gravity of this trade was immense: West African gold underwrote coinage across the Mediterranean world, and Mansa Musa's gold-laden passage through Cairo in 1324 sent ripples as far as Europe, advertising the southern source of the continent's wealth (Chapter Six).

The northern termini of these routes became centres of learning as much as commerce. Timbuktu, at its height from roughly 1400 to 1600, was a flourishing hub of the trans-Saharan gold-and-salt trade and a renowned seat of Islamic scholarship.^[22] Its Sankoré mosque and more than 150 schools drew students and teachers from across the Muslim world; by some accounts, around a quarter of the city's 100,000 residents in the sixteenth century were students.^[22] The Moroccan traveller al-Wazzan — known in Europe as Leo Africanus — observed after visiting in 1510 that, for all the city's wealth, books were the most valuable commodity in its markets.^[22]

THE TIMBUKTU MANUSCRIPTS — A LIVING ARCHIVE

- An estimated 300,000 manuscripts — on law, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and poetry — survive in and around Timbuktu, attesting to a deep written intellectual tradition. ^[23]
- During the 2012–2013 jihadist occupation of northern Mali, militants burned roughly 4,000 manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Institute as they fled. ^{[23][24]}
- In a clandestine rescue, the librarian Abdel Kader Haidara and the SAVAMA association smuggled the contents of some 45 libraries — hundreds of thousands of manuscripts — out of the city to safety in Bamako. ^{[24][23]}
- European treasure-hunters had earlier removed manuscripts to museums abroad, prompting Timbuktu's families to hide their collections for generations — the corpus has survived repeated attempts at its erasure. ^[24]

The Indian Ocean: A Monsoon-Powered World

On the eastern flank, trade ran on the wind. The Indian Ocean monsoon reverses seasonally — blowing from the northeast between roughly November and March, and from the southwest between April and October — a regularity that allowed sailing vessels to cross from East Africa to western India in twenty to thirty days and return months later. ^[21] This predictable rhythm made long-distance maritime commerce reliable, and the East African coast had participated in it since antiquity; the Greek text known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, from the first century CE, already describes the coast's ports.

From this commerce emerged the Swahili-Arab-Persian synthesis of Chapter Six. African exports — gold, ivory, mangrove timber, and enslaved people — flowed outward, while textiles, Chinese porcelain, glazed Persian pottery, glass beads, and spices flowed in. ^{[20][19]} Through the Swahili ports, the gold of the Zimbabwe plateau reached markets as distant as China, and goods from China and Southeast Asia reached the African interior. The continent was a working node in a vast, interconnected Old World system.

Early Globalization Corridors

Taken together, these two networks dissolve the myth of a continent sealed off from the world. For a millennium before the European age of sail, Africa was integrated into a pre-modern global economy — exporting the gold that monetised Mediterranean trade, importing Asian luxuries, hosting universities that drew international scholars, and adopting and adapting Islam across vast regions. The arrival of Portuguese ships on both coasts in the late fifteenth century did not connect an isolated Africa to the world; it inserted European power into trade systems that Africans had been running for centuries — the first move in the disruption that is the subject of Chapter Eight.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Colonial Disruption Systems

In the span of a single human lifetime, an entire continent was drained of people, carved into European possessions, and rewired for extraction. The disruption was not incidental; it was systematic, and its architecture still shapes Africa today.

The encounter between Africa and an industrialising Europe produced three overlapping systems of disruption: the transatlantic slave trade, which removed millions of people; the partition of the continent into colonies after 1885; and the extractive economic and infrastructural order built to serve external markets. This chapter treats them as the interlocking machinery they were.

The Atlantic Slave Trade as an Extractive Algorithm

The transatlantic slave trade was the largest forced migration in human history. According to the comprehensive Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, slaving vessels embarked roughly 12.5 million Africans between the early sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, of whom about 10.7 million survived the Middle Passage to land in the Americas — meaning some 1.8 million people died at sea.^{[29][30]} Portugal and its colony Brazil dominated the traffic; Brazil alone received around 4.86 million captives, while only about 388,000 were carried directly to North America.^[30] Before 1820, four enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic for every European migrant, making Africa the demographic engine that repopulated the post-Columbian Americas.^[29]

The demographic and developmental cost to Africa itself was profound and is taken up again in later volumes: by removing millions of people of working and reproductive age over four centuries, the trade suppressed population growth and distorted economies across vast regions. Older slave trades across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean, smaller in any given year but spanning far longer, compounded the drain. The trade functioned, in effect, as an extractive algorithm operating on human beings — the most violent expression of a logic that would soon be applied to the continent's land and minerals.

The Scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference

In 1870, only about 10 percent of Africa lay under European control. By 1914 that figure had reached roughly 90 percent, leaving only Ethiopia and Liberia independent.^{[25][26]} The decisive instrument was the Berlin West Africa Conference, convened by the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck and held from November 1884 to February 1885. Fourteen nations attended; not a single African was present.^[28] The conference's General Act,

signed in February 1885, did not itself partition the continent but established the rules that accelerated the land-grab — chiefly the principle of “effective occupation,” which required powers to actually occupy territory to claim it, together with free navigation on the Congo and Niger rivers.^[26]

THE PARTITION, IN NUMBERS

- **~10% → ~90%:** share of African land under European control, 1870 to 1914.^[25]
- **Berlin West Africa Conference:** Nov 1884 – Feb 1885; 14 European and other powers; no African representatives.^[28]
- **Two states stayed independent:** Ethiopia and Liberia.^{[25][26]}
- **Adwa, 1896:** Emperor Menelik II’s Ethiopia defeated an invading Italian army — the most significant African victory over a colonial power, securing Ethiopian sovereignty.^[28]

Border Artificiality and Export Asymmetry

The boundaries drawn in European chancelleries paid little heed to the human geographies they cut across. Straight lines ruled over deserts split single peoples between colonies and welded historic rivals into the same administrative unit — and most of these borders were retained at independence, where they continue to generate conflict.^[25] The economic infrastructure built under colonial rule followed the same extractive logic: railways and roads ran from interior mines and plantations to coastal ports, oriented toward shipping raw materials out rather than knitting African regions together. This deliberate *export asymmetry* — economies engineered to face outward toward the metropole rather than inward toward one another — is among the most consequential structural legacies of the period, and a central thread of Volume IV.

Labour Extraction: The Congo Free State

No case exposes the era’s extractive logic more starkly than the Congo Free State, the vast territory — more than 2.6 million square kilometres, over eighty times the size of Belgium — that King Leopold II of Belgium held from 1885 to 1908 as personal property rather than a national colony.^[32] Granted to Leopold under the pretext of a humanitarian mission, it became a regime of forced labour for rubber and ivory enforced by a colonial militia, the Force Publique, whose methods included hostage-taking and the amputation of hands.^[32] The American historian George Washington Williams condemned these practices as “crimes against humanity” as early as 1890, and the later reports of the British consul Roger Casement and the campaigning of E. D. Morel forced the abuses into international view; Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* drew on the same horror.^{[31][32]}

The human toll is genuinely disputed and difficult to fix, in part because the pre-colonial population is itself uncertain; modern estimates of the population decline during Leopold's rule range from about 1.2 million to as many as 10 to 15 million, with the widely cited figure of roughly 10 million representing about half the population.^{[31][32]} International outcry eventually compelled Belgium to annex the territory as the Belgian Congo in 1908.^[31] The Congo Free State was an extreme, but it illustrated the underlying principle of the colonial economy with brutal clarity: maximal extraction of resources and labour at minimal cost to the metropole.

These three systems — demographic removal, political partition, and economic reorientation — together left Africa with artificial borders, externally-facing economies, and infrastructure built to drain rather than develop. That structural inheritance, more than any single event, is what the modern political and economic volumes of this reference set out to explain.

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END OF VOLUME II — CIVILIZATION LAYERS & HISTORICAL SYSTEMS

Volume III — *Modern States and Political Architectures* — continues the reference in the next installment.