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Graham Connah. *African Civilizations: An Archaeological Perspective.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xv + 340 pp. $33.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-59690-9; $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-59309-0.

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Graham Connah's *African Civilizations* was first published in 1987 and soon became an indispensable source for students of African archaeology and history. Within the narrow compass of a short book, Connah provided an authoritative and dispassionate analysis of tropical Africa's little known pre-European states that was remarkable both for its exposition of a complex archaeological and historical record, and for its multidisciplinary perspective. Now, fourteen years later, he provides us with a second edition, which updates his original account.

Connah analyzes the evidence for emerging social complexity in tropical Africa over the past 4,000 years, taking advantage of archaeology's unique ability to chronicle culture change over long periods of time. He begins the book with a brief essay on the uses and limitations of the discipline and a summary of the great diversity of environments in which tropical African states developed. Then he embarks on a series of what he calls "case studies," working his way from north to south. (Egypt is not described in these pages, on the reasonable grounds that its civilization was part of the eastern Mediterranean world.) While all of Connah's examples come from different environments, his choice of states was determined in part by the available archaeological evidence. As he is careful to point out, none of the ancient states in tropical Africa are adequately documented, for the archaeological record is, at best, sparse.

The journey southward begins in Nubia, which enjoyed a complex relationship with its most powerful neighbor to the north. Here Connah introduces the format which he follows throughout the book to make comparative analysis easier–a description of the local environment, an overview of available sources of information, then summaries of subsistence, technology, trade, social structure, and other major topics. In the case of Nubia, he sees the emergence of civilization as the result of complex interactions between both local and external factors. These interactions led to the Nubians making their own decisions and plotting their own course over many centuries. Meroe is seen as an African civilization that drew its inspiration from Kerma downstream, the latter a society with deep roots among cattle herding peoples.

>From Nubia, we move on to the Ethiopian highlands for a particularly useful summary of the Axumite civilization. Axum is little known outside the scholarly world. More's the pity, for it provides a compelling instance of complex webs of interconnectedness that linked northeast Africa with the Red Sea and Indian Ocean worlds. The Axumites lived in a highland environment, but acquired technological and other knowledge from the wider world as they wished. Connah stresses the importance of the control of agricultural land as a major factor in the rise of the state in the highlands, a theme he returns to again and again later in the book. He also places the recent and important researches of David Phillipson at Axum itself into a broader context.

The Saharan Sahel played a vital role in the appearance of civilization south of the desert and in West Africa. In recent years, a minor explosion of research in countries like Mali had revolutionized knowledge of early states in the Niger region. Chapter 4 describes these recent advances–the all-important researches of Roderick and Susan McIntosh at Jenn=-Jenno and other sites in the Niger Delta, which have made it clear that social complexity and states developed south of the Sahara long before the camel and Arab traders established contacts with the far north. Again, this social complexity was based on a sound agricultural base, whose existence was poorly documented until recently.

Connah is at his best when describing the forest states of West Africa, where he himself did pioneering work in Benin. Again, he favors indigenous development in diverse environments endowed with abundant food resources. Here, ironworking technology was all-important, sophisticated enough to allow people to take full advantage of the forest and to foster economic spe-

cialization. Population pressure, external trade with the desert and the coast, and an ideology of kingship all played important roles in these elaborate states. The remarkable Igbo-Ukwo burial and Connah's own researches in the depths of a Benin well testify to the long history of civilization in the forest.

>From the forest we journey to the stone towns of the East African coast, for many years considered to be the product of an outward-looking civilization created by external inspiration and the demands of the Indian Ocean trade. Once again, recent researches both along the coast and in the hinterland have shown how the coastal states had deep indigenous roots, slowly being documented from sites dating to the first millennium A.D. Excavations on the Comoro Islands and Madagascar have documented a varied coastal subsistence economy based on fishing, domestic animals, and both African and Southeast Asian food crops like Asian rice, coconuts, and bananas. This economy was well developed by the tenth century A.D., providing the basis for the accelerating complexity of later coastal society as it came under pervasive Islamic influence. Here, as in Nubia, Connah attributes the emergence of states to a mix of local and outside factors.

The southernmost tentacles of the East African coastal trade extended beyond Madagascar to the mouth of the Zambezi River, and to the settlement in modern-day Mozambique that the Portuguese called Sofala. From here, trade routes extended far onto the interior plateau, to the cattle kingdoms between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers. Connah rightly stresses that the archaeology of Great Zimbabwe itself has dominated most discussions of these polities, and shows how an understanding of them can only be achieved by examining them on a wider canvas. He draws attention to the tsetse fly-free environment of the plateau, to its suitability for slash-and-burn agriculture, and its riches in copper and gold. To be sure there were important constraints, among them irregular rainfall, the only moderate fertility of many soils, and the movements of the tsetse belts. But the diversity of the subsistence economy provided some protection against bad rainfall years. Wealth came from cattle on the hoof, and, more importantly, from control of trade in gold, ivory, and other commodities that were staples of the Indian Ocean trade. With a basically sound and productive agricultural base and the rewards of the trade, a small elite could control scattered rural populations by virtue of their wealth and their spiritual ties to the ancestors. The debate over the rise of the Zimbabwean state has ebbed and flowed for generations, pitting those who favor trade and the acquisition of wealth against archaeologists convinced that social and ideological factors played a major role. Connah downplays the religious basis of ancient Shona civilization and tends to favor trade as the major basis for chiefly authority, which is hardly surprising since he is an archaeologist more comfortable with material remains and trade is documented by such artifacts. One suspects that the spiritual and rainmaking abilities of the rulers of Great Zimbabwe and other such centers were far more important than one might suspect from the archaeological evidence alone, but to prove this is another matter. The Zimbabwe discussion only touches lightly on the collapse of the state, which Connah attributes to environmental degradation. No question but that the complex dynamics of cattle herding played a major role here, and one would like to have seen more discussion of an issue much debated in the more specialized literature.

Some years ago, Connah himself investigated an important saltworking site at Kibiro in northern Uganda, which may be one reason why he now moves north back into East Africa, to the Upemba Depression and the Interlacustrine Region. This is a welcome decision, for we are treated to a careful synthesis of little known African states that were not in contact with the outside world until the second millennium A.D. Once again, states developed in areas where local population growth occurred in areas of exceptional fertility where broadly based agricultural and herding economies flourished. Connah laments the poor visibility of the archaeological record, but develops a thesis that increasing social complexity developed early in the second millennium A.D., long before outside contact. Here, as in the south, a small elite controlled large numbers of people through their monopolies on minerals and trade, and by virtue of their spiritual authority. Salt, iron, and copper were all-important commodities in these regions for many centuries.

African Civilizations is, quite simply, the best account of the archaeology of early states in the continent available anywhere. Connah is that rarity of rarities, a specialist who writes clearly and well. He is unashamedly an archaeologist, and conservative in his use of ethnographic and historical data, as well as the material evidence. There is nothing wrong in this, but the strongly environmental slant of his synthesis may not sit well with scholars who are following the latest researches into what one might loosely call the "social archaeology" of early states. It remains to deploy the full force of what we know about the dynamics of African societies from anthropology and ethnohistory to the problems discussed in this book. Anyone interested in Connah's thesis would be well advised to read the essays in Susan McIntosh's

edited volume *Beyond Chiefdoms*, which receives only passing mention in these pages.[1] The essays there add a new dimension to the entire problem of African states. As this new generation of research unfolds, Connah's admirable and often elegant synthesis sets the standard. And for people without African expertise, it is without rival.

Note

[1]. Susan McIntosh, ed., *Beyond Chiefdoms: Pathways to Complexity in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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