

# Introduction to African History

Lecture 1: Introduction

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Today's class consists of two parts:

I. The (sub-)discipline of African History

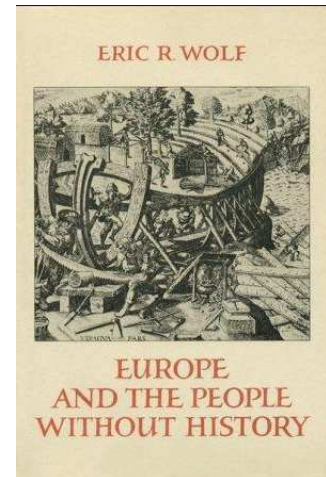
II. The beginnings: deep African History, the Out of Africa hypothesis, records of earliest known realms

# I. The (sub-)discipline of African History

- The legacy of Eurocentric geopolitics in the scientific perceptions of the African continent: Before colonization Africa there was “nothing”, empty maps.
  - > Starts with the slave trade: both apologists and abolitionists in the 18th century supported the idea of Africans as dependent > in 19th and 20th century colonial propaganda: such perceptions remain important in legitimisation to colonize
- Only very late: 1950s and 1960s attention for historical research. Connected to Independence struggles and origin of national histories.
  - > In the 1960s an Oxford University history professor claimed that Africa has no history (Trevor-Roper)

# Increasingly 1980s postcolonial critiques:

- Anthropology vs History: anthropology as the handmaiden of colonialism. Decolonization of anthropology meant acknowledging African History.
  - > Foregrounding of Race in Anthropology; Hamitic myth
  - > unilinear, Eurocentric history (Enlightenment)
  - => decolonization: broken into many subjective histories
- For instance: Eric Wolf, T. Asad: investigating the bases of the fact that Africa has long been denied a history.



# The novelist and his critic: impinging on stereotyping

**Joseph Conrad, 1857-1924**

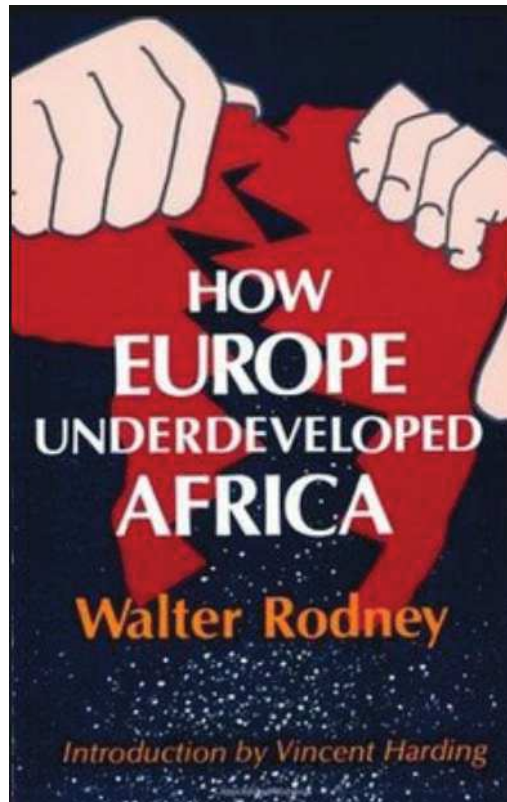


**Chinua Achebe, 1930 - 2013**



[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda ngozi adichie the danger of a single story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)

# What is the importance of African History?



- Iliffe, *Africans*:

*“in an era of civil conflict, famine and draught, economic underdevelopment and mismanagement, corruption and political oppression, the search for Africa’s way forward must begin in its past.”*

While this quote holds truth, we cannot see African history as a byproduct of European interventions. Africa has a long history of internal developments before European interventions. Moreover, Europeans were often the ones to document thriving realms they encountered in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> c.!!!

Perhaps the strongest way to counter the stereotype (Africa has no history) is to retrieve internal developments.



From Olfert Dapper's '*Naukeurige Beschrijvingen der Afrikaensche gewesten*', 1668

'De Stadt Benin'

From the first contacts, Portuguese and Dutch travellers and missionaries came back with accounts of kingdoms, royal courts. During the first centuries of contact traders depended heavily on local rulers and could not travel inland.



... also from Benin ...



**Afro-Portugees luxe tafelsiervat**

Edo/Bini, Koninkrijk Benin (in het huidige Nigeria)

Eerste helft van de 16<sup>de</sup> eeuw

Ivoor, H. 19.2 cm

Ex-verzameling Frans Maria Olbrechts (1899-1958)

In 1974 geschonken door zijn weduwe Margriet Maurissens

MAS (Afrika collectie, AE. 1974.0025.0001)

Foto: MAS (Bart Huysmans, Michel Wuyts)





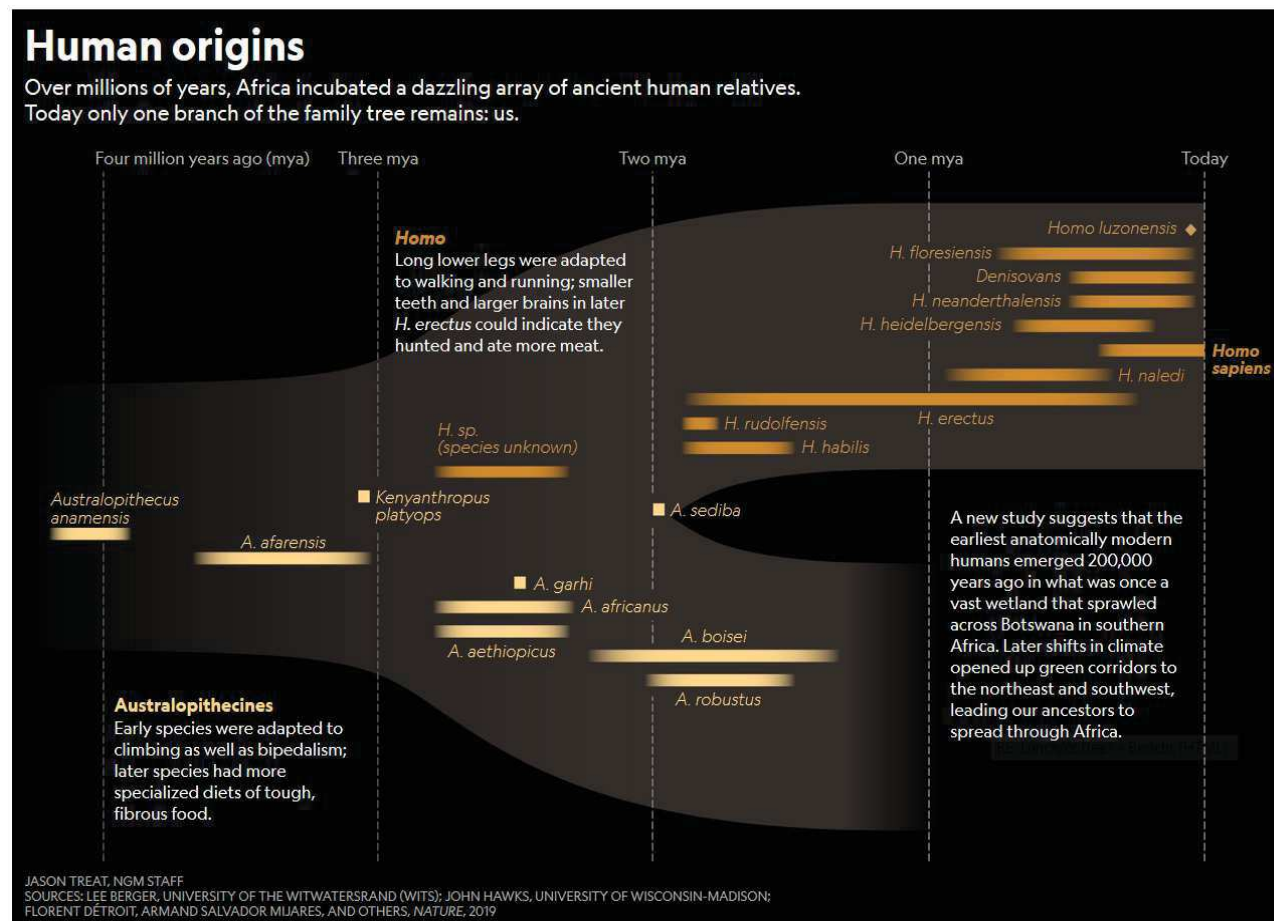
# Sources in African History

- One of the reasons why Africa was “denied” a history was the “absence” of written records prior to 20th century (though there are early written records from the Arabic North, Ethiopia, elites in coastal kingdoms). Most written records in Sub-Saharan Africa from foreign visitors, traders. Careful!
- Oral History! Vansina, Jan. *Oral tradition: A study in historical methodology*. Transaction Publishers, 1973.
- Material and Visual Culture, incl. maps, photographs
- Archaeology
- Linguistics
- Genetics

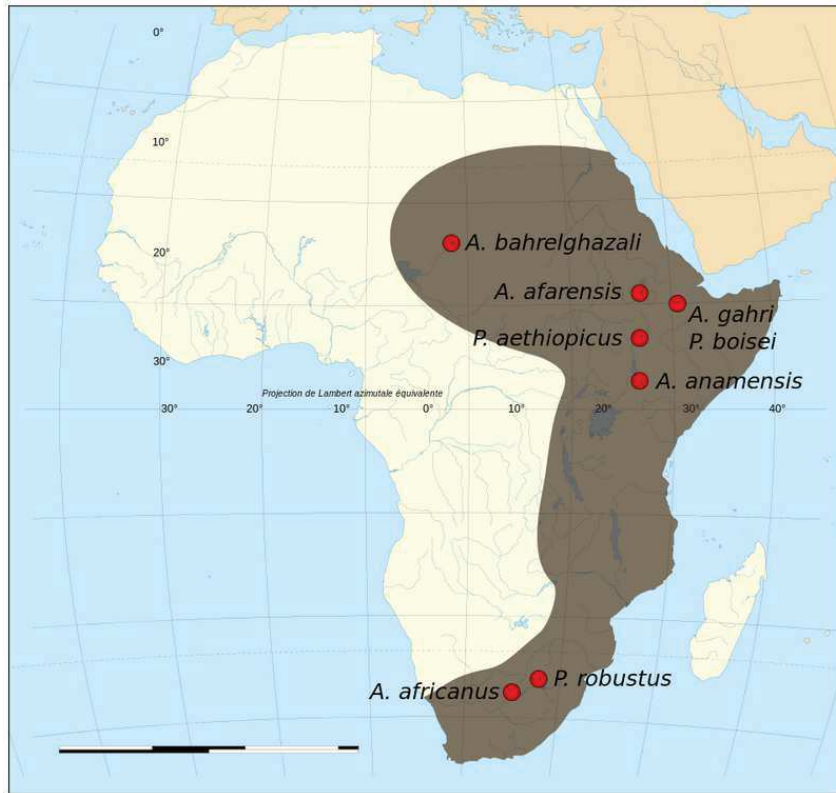
## II. The beginnings

- III.1. Deep African History: the Out of Africa hypothesis and beyond
- III.2. Early civilisations: timeline and cases

## II. 1. The very early beginnings: cradle of humanity: Out of Africa theory

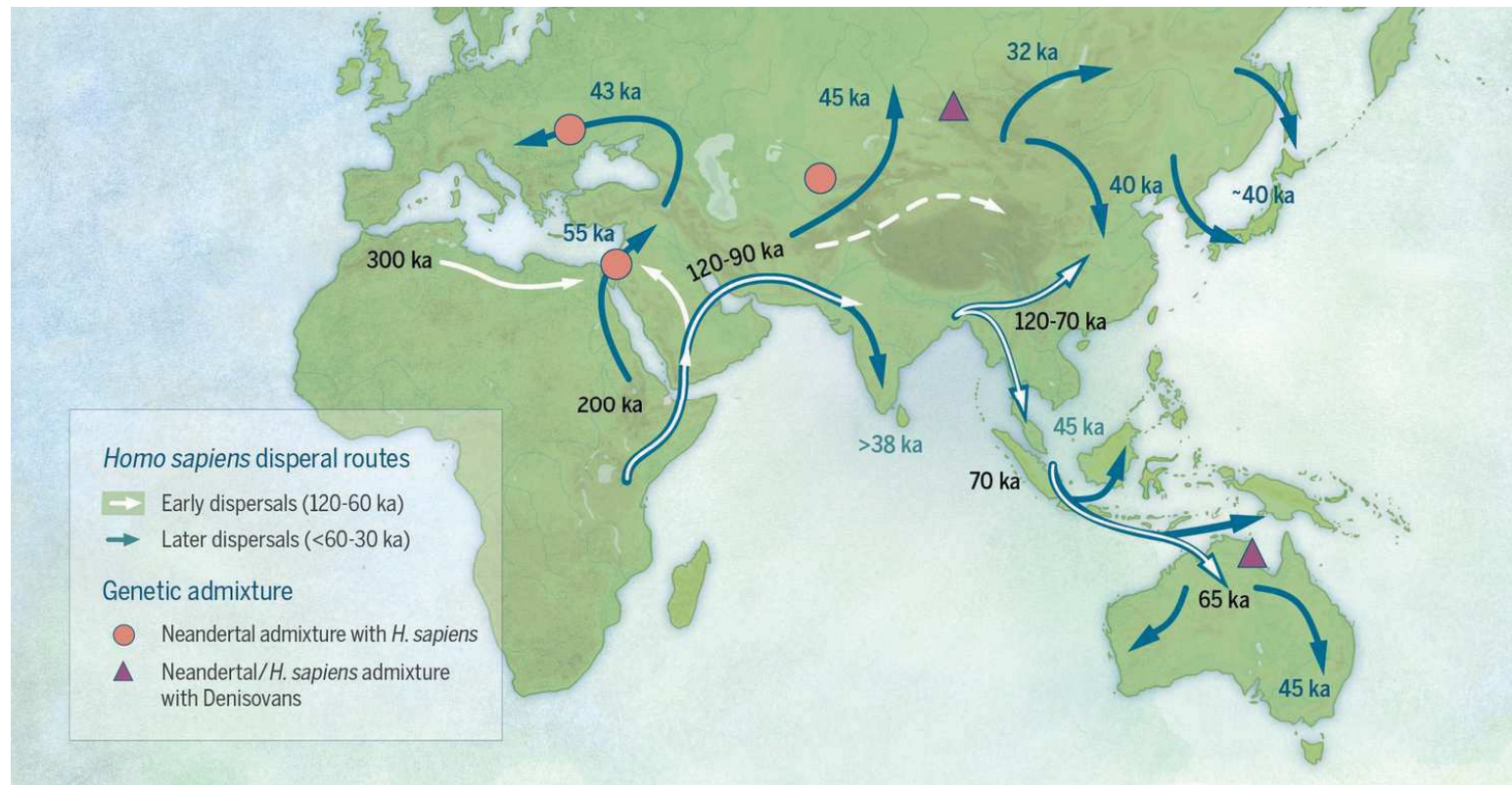


# Australopithecus sites in Eastern Africa



Remains of Lucy,  
Australopithecus Afarensis,  
found in Ethiopia in 1974,  
National Museum Ethiopia.  
Above: reconstruction of Lucy

# The spreading of homo sapiens out of Africa



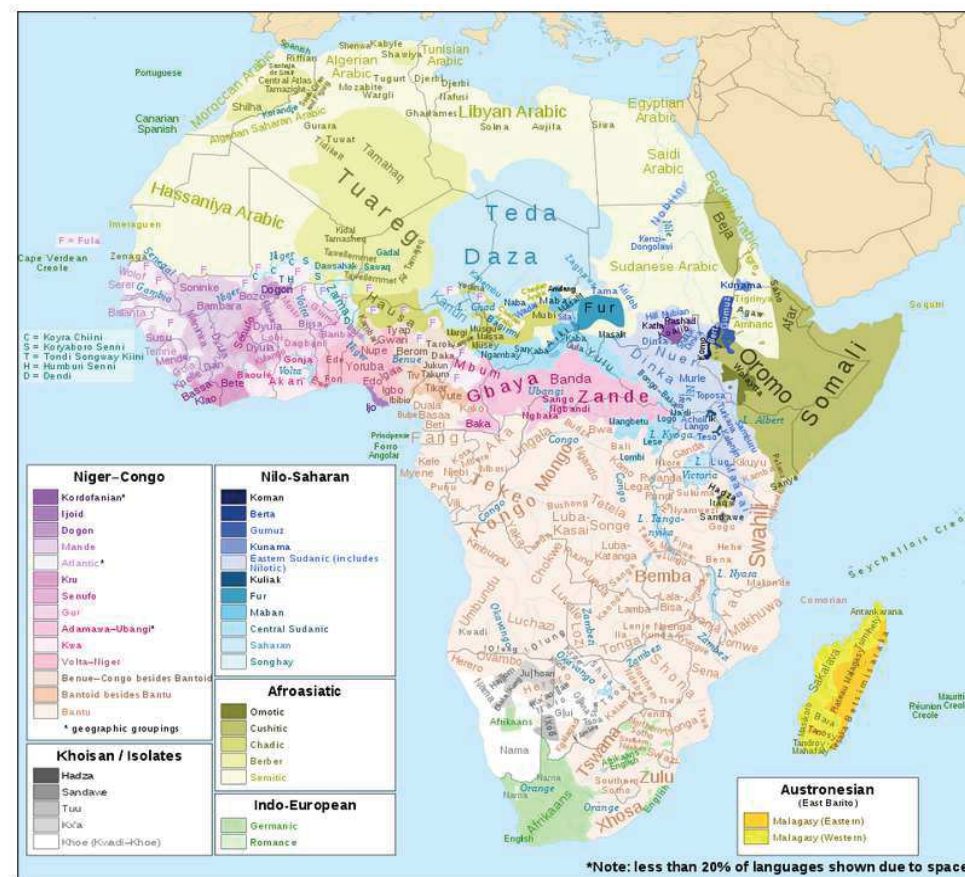
# Homo sapiens' colonisation of Africa???

[this is a huge and very controversial discussion wherein archaeological evidence and linguistic evidence do not always support each other]

Cf. Bantu expansion theory; connected to the spreading of hoe agriculture in Africa; starting at the earliest 1,000 BC (cf. Historical linguistics)

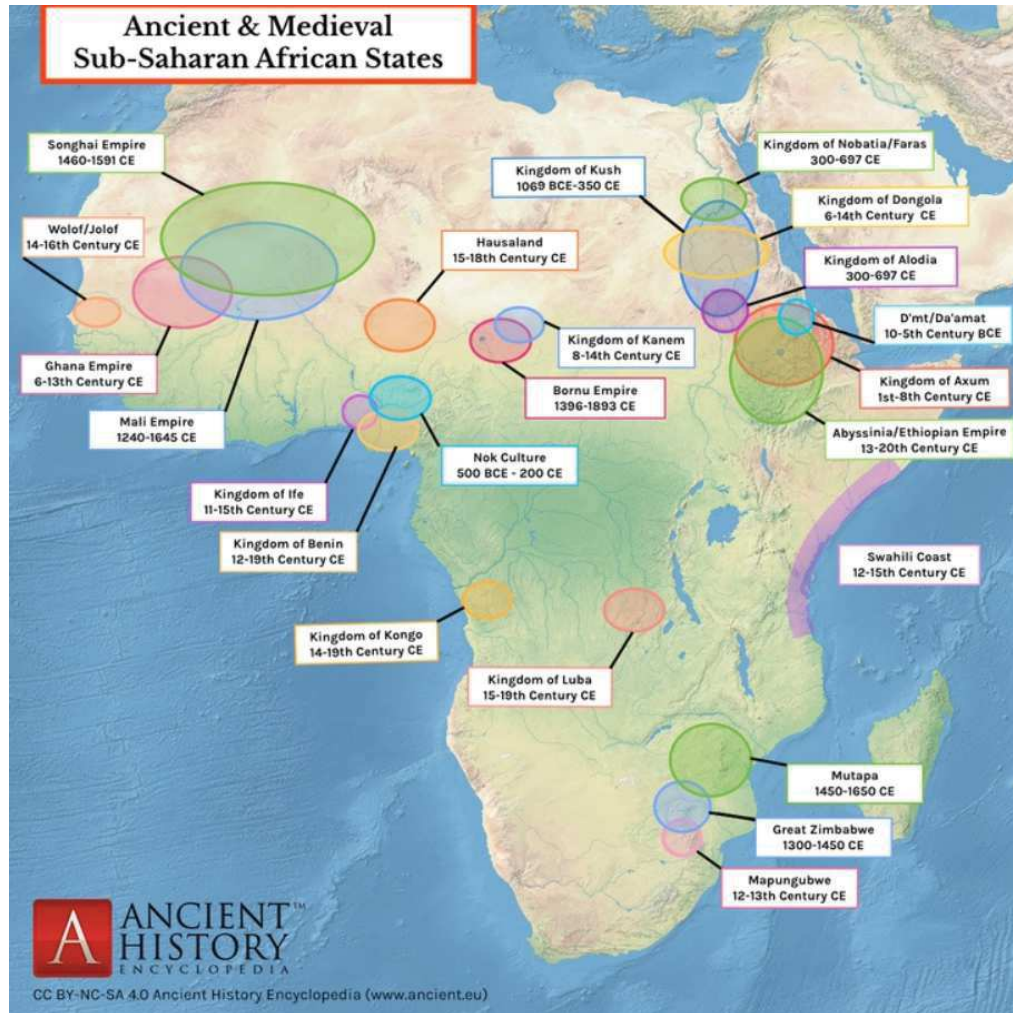


# Results of peopling of African continent: linguistic map



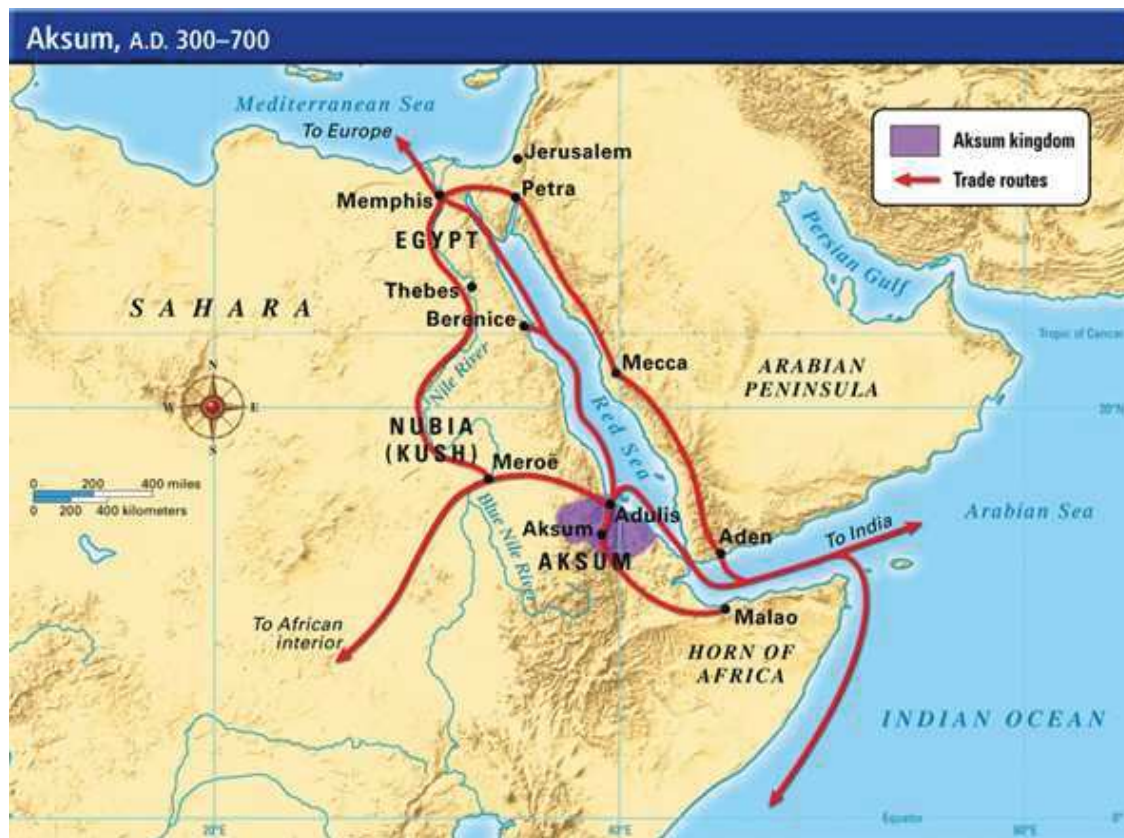


## II.2. Earliest documented civilisations



- A. Eastern African kingdoms connected with Middle East: Kush (Nubia), Axum, Ethiopia
- B. Western African trading realms based on Transsaharan slave trade (Mali, Gana, Songhai,..) and hinterland/coastal realms (Benin, Ashanti)
- C. Swahili coast and hinterland: Great Zimbabwe
- D. Bantu realms along the coast and inland: Kongo, Luba, Zulu empire

# A. Northeast Africa: Contact zone between Egypt, Europe, Middle East and Africa: Kush (Nubia) and Axum



- Egyptian records go back 3,000 BC
- Nubians were trading partners of and even conquered Egypt (no own language)
- Kush dating back to 1500 BC – 550 AD (capitals are moving southward)
- Axum, core area of Ethiopian kingdom (4th c. BC – 10thc AD)





[Facsimile painting depicting Nubian tribute presented to a king.](#) Original New Kingdom, Dynasty 18 (ca. 1353–1327 B.C.). From Thebes, tomb of Huy. Facsimile by Charles K. Wilkinson, ca. 1923–27. Tempera on paper, H. 182 cm (71 5/8 in); W. 524 cm (206 5/16 in). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1930 (30.4.21).

## B. Western African trading realms based on Transsaharan trade + hinterland

The Maghreb or northwest of Africa dominated by Muslim Berber dynasties; Arabic records date back 8th c. AD.

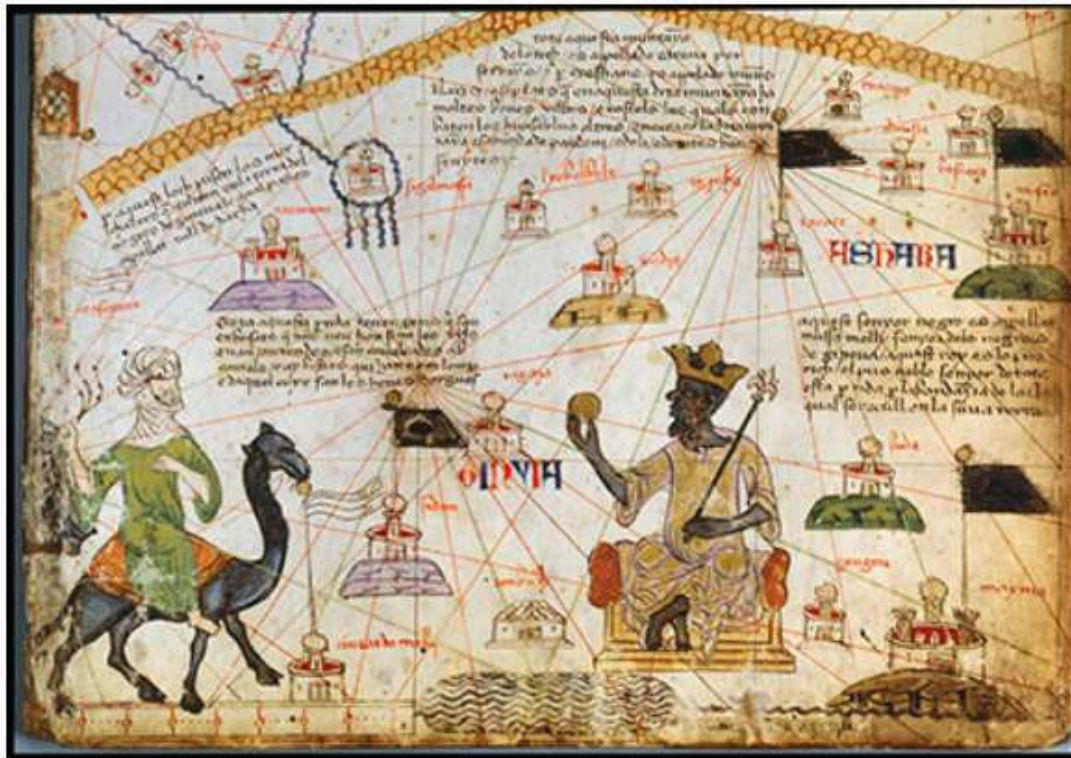
Slaves, salt and gold trade across the Sahara with camels

> Trading realms start forming as of 9th c. and several centuries to come





# The trading realm of Mali



- Catalan atlas of 1375 is credited to Abraham Cresques, a fourteenth century Jewish cartographer from the island of Majorca.
- “This Black lord is called Musse Melly [mansa Musa Keita of Mali, r. 1312-37], lord of the Blacks of Guinea. The king is the richest and most distinguished ruler of this whole region, on account of the great quantity of gold that is found in his land.”
- Above: mosk of Djenné (Wikimedia commons)

# Gulf of Guinea realms: Assante, Ife, Benin



Ife, 11th c.

Benin, 13th c.

Assante dynasty as of 16th c.

Left: Benin bronze relief

Edo people, 16th-17th century

British Museum Af1898,0115.23

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzHDzV1jZ1U>



## C. Swahili coast and hinterland: Great Zimbabwe



Interactions of Arabic north with the Swahili coast start in the 9th century until into the 20th century.

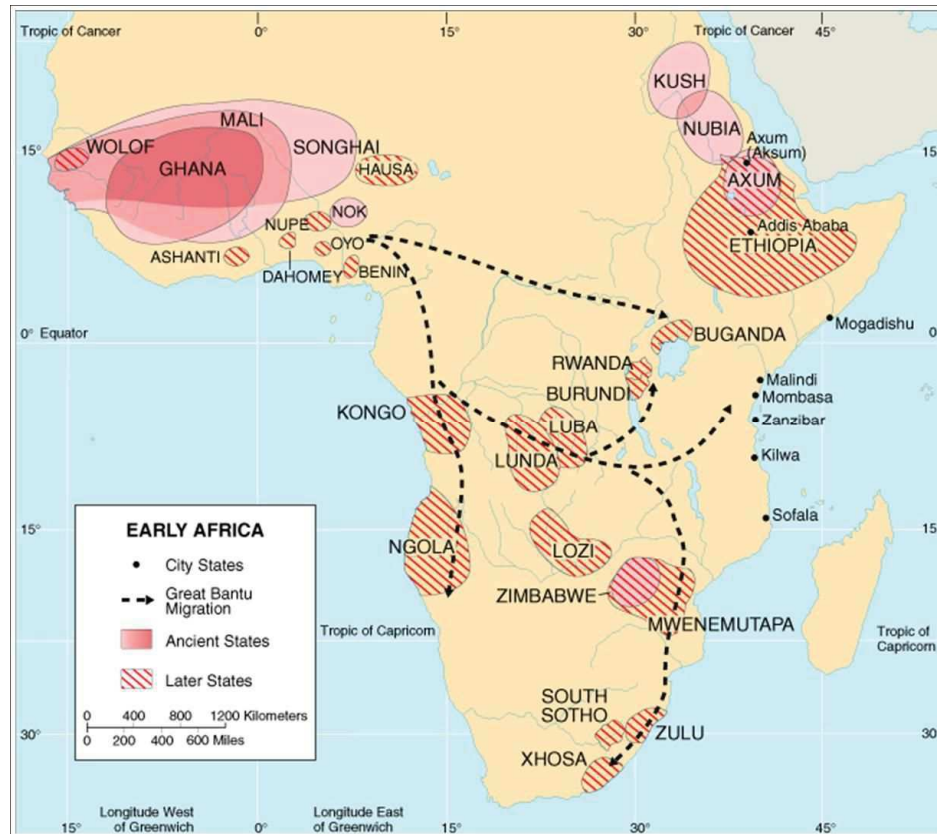
Looking for gold, slaves, ivory



One of the Bantu realms in the hinterland was Great Zimbabwe (blossoming around 13t-14th c.)



## D. Bantu realms along the coast and inland



Several Bantu realms existed at the coasts and inland.

Great Zimbabwe was one of them

The best known probably are the Kongo and the Zulu realms.

For many of the realms inland there are no written records until the colonial era.

# Focus on Ethiopia



Emperor Menelik II on the throne in coronation garb

Public Domain Image

Ethiopian national history: origin claims connected to the Old Testament.

The legend claims that their dynasty starting with Menelik I came forth from King Solomon and Queen of Sheba.

Never colonised!

Last emperor: Haile Selassie (aka Ras Tafari Makonnen)

See docu:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrQB9GHrmCs>

# What to remember from this class:

- Africa has a rich and diverse history
- This history starts with the development of the human species on the continent cf. Out of Africa theory
- Prior to the 15th century several cultural zones had already been developed as a consequence of internal dynamics (four zones)
- African history is by its nature an interdisciplinary occupation, relying on various sources.