Myths of History: A Hackett Series

Seven Myths of Africa in World History

by David Northrup

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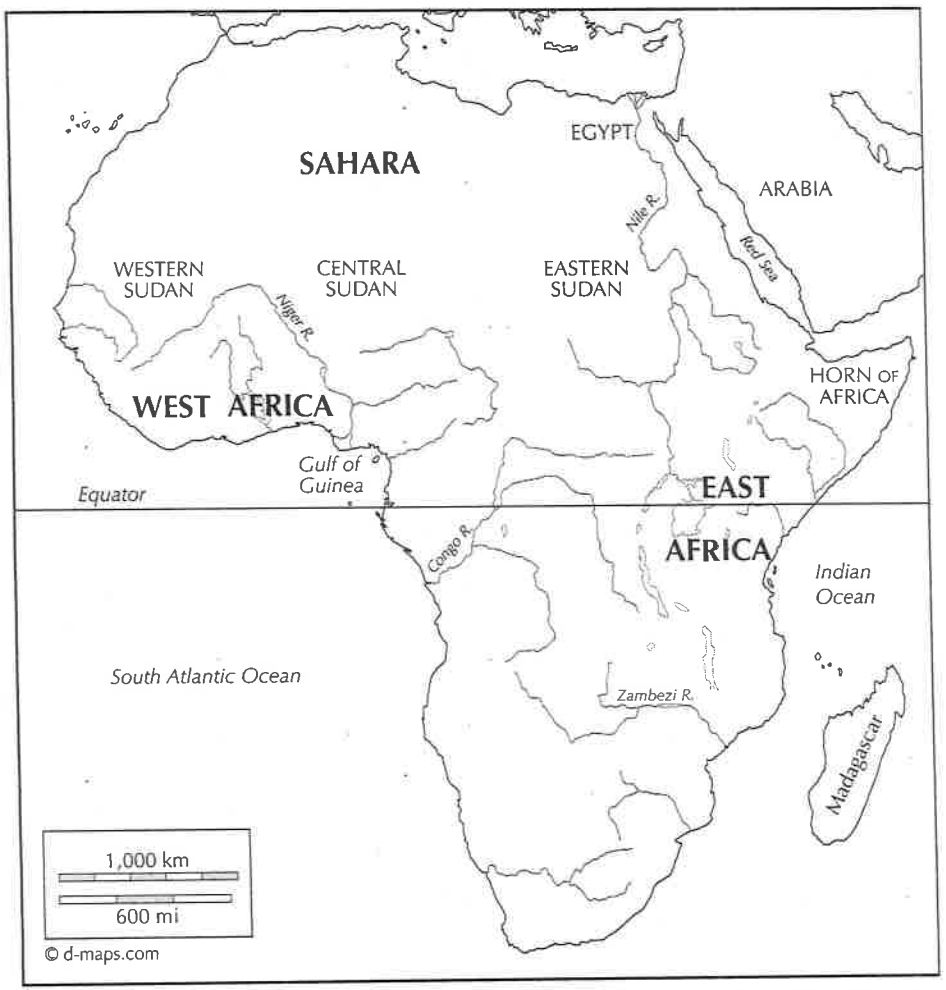


African Geography and Regions.

1. No History in Africa? Can the Oldest Humans Have the Shortest History?

> What we properly understand by Africa is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History.[1]
>
> *—Georg Hegel, German philosopher, 1830s*

> Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none, or very little: there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is largely darkness. . . . And darkness is not a subject for history.[2]
>
> *—Hugh Trevor-Roper, professor of history, Oxford University, 1963*

In the 1830s, the hugely influential German philosopher Georg Hegel presented a view of Africans that was both extraordinary in its negativity and lasting in its influence. "The Negro," he asserted, "exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state," a being lacking morality, religion, a sense of individuality, or any other higher human trait. For these reasons, he argued, Africa has no history worth considering. Thirteen decades later, in 1963, Hegel's views were echoed in a celebrated public lecture by another distinguished European intellectual, Hugh Trevor-Roper, the Regius Professor of History at Oxford University. Africa below the Sahara, Trevor-Roper declared, contains only "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe," and thus whatever history Africans had was not worth teaching, aside from the history of Europeans in Africa.[3] Such remarkably negative views have not entirely disappeared despite the successful efforts of modern historians to replace willful ignorance and blatant prejudice with proven evidence. Indeed, it is now possible to argue that Africa's history is not only distinguished but also considerably longer than that of any other continent and thus provides great insight into the remarkable story of human development.

Several assumptions besides ignorance and prejudice underlie the notion of an unchanging, unprogressive Africa. One of these is the belief that true history is based on written records, especially records that focus on the deeds of great men. This belief holds that before there was writing there was only "prehistory," the domain of

1. Georg Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover, 1956), 99.
2. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Rise of Christian Europe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1965), 9.
3. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 93; Trevor-Roper, *Rise of Christian Europe*, 9.

archaeologists and folklorists. Another assumption is that meaningful history began in urban civilizations. The belief that history is impossible without written records is unsupported but still pervasive. While African history includes the deeds of many great men and women known from written records, recent African historians make use of many other kinds of evidence to reconstruct broader social and cultural themes. The rich history that scholars of Africa have crafted from different kinds of evidence and disciplines has led historians of other continents to imitate their approach.

Evidence for early African life in the different parts of the giant continent takes many forms. Africans deliberately left behind many kinds of evidence, including monumental stone buildings, art, oral traditions, and written records. Other evidence comes from accidental leavings, including physical remains, occupation sites, and even the plants and animals used by humans. Generations of archaeologists have skillfully located, excavated, and dated such evidence to reconstruct changes in Africans' lives and activities. Additional evidence about the movement of people in Africa comes from languages, which also provide important clues about the origins of beliefs, institutions, ways of life, and technologies, such as the invention of iron smelting. Although archaeologists were the first to discover evidence of human physical evolution in Africa, this once contentious subject has been irrefutably proven by the study of human genetic evidence (DNA) both within Africa and elsewhere in the world. Recent genetic evidence has also enabled historians to trace the movement and interaction of people within the African continent and how people from Africa spread across the face of the planet. These resources supply compelling evidence of African historical events dating to long before the appearance of writing in any part of the world.

The respectability of African history has made great progress, but disparaging statements like those by Hegel and Trevor-Roper about the history of Africa remain common. The present author's experiences suggest that large numbers of otherwise well-informed people still believe that African history is lacking—or at least not worth knowing. In gatherings of educated people, when I have disclosed that I was a professor of African history, I have regularly been greeted with blank stares or eyebrows raised in disbelief that someone could specialize in so meager a subject. Some folks, perhaps thinking they had misunderstood, ask me questions about African American history. The least guarded ask openly what there could possibly be to teach. At a major conference on Atlantic history, more than one of the eminent historians attending stated openly, "Oh, I don't know anything about Africa," as if one of the four Atlantic continents was not worth bothering to study. Such willful ignorance by academics claiming expertise in a region that ought to include Africa seems inexcusable, but it is not uncommon, despite the fact that two different eight-volume surveys of the African past were published in the 1980s.[4] For those with limited time to spare

4. J. D. Fage and Roland Oliver, eds., *The Cambridge History of Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975–1986); UNESCO, *General History of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981–1989).

shorter introductions to African history are common. Ignorance of the African past may have become inexcusable, but old habits of thought die hard.

Not only does Africa have a history, but also what is known and knowable about the African past has been expanding at a rapid rate. The history of Africa neither exhibits, as the German philosopher opined, "the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state," nor does it consist, as the Oxford professor asserted, of "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe." During the first half of modern humans' existence the development of ethical standards, religious beliefs, esthetic and artistic sensibilities, music, dance, and literature took place exclusively in Africa. As Professor Roland Oliver, a pioneer in the teaching of African history in London, used to tell his students, the advantage of studying African history was that "you got to start at the beginning." An author in the first volume of the recent *Cambridge World History* begins with the simple factual statement, "Before about 48,000 BCE human history was African history."[5] Even today there is genetic evidence of African ancestry in the bodies of every human being. Willful ignorance cannot be refuted, but the demonstrable truth is that African history is as knowable as the history of humans anywhere else on earth.

It is true that the pace of change in sub-Saharan Africa was often slow and in some African societies glacially slow. Hagel and Trevor-Roper believed in the attractive proposition that progressive change was the crowning achievement of humans, and it alone was worthy of historical explanation. In the twenty-first century, we are beginning to realize that the speed of recent change has brought frightening risks as well as benefits. The extraordinary increase in human population from one billion in the early nineteenth century to seven billion in 2012 has put unsustainable demands on the planet, especially in light of rapidly increasing per capita energy use. Even optimists concede that the notion of bigger and better deserves only two cheers (not three). Maybe it would take a different historical experience, in which continuity and sustainability were more notable, to merit three cheers.

Handprints: Deliberate Evidence

The range of evidence that historians use for reconstructing the African past can be divided into two categories. The first type is evidence Africans have intentionally left, which we can call *handprints*. Some of the oldest forms of intentional evidence are quite literally handprints, painted on the walls of caves along with other representations of people, animals, and symbols. The oldest known cave art in Africa comes from southern Africa, where paintings on rock dating to about 25,000 BCE clearly depict a rhinoceros, an antelope, and a zebra, animals that could have been hunted for their meat. More

5. Christopher Ehret, "Early Humans: Tools, Language, and Culture," in *The Cambridge World History*, vol. 1, *Introducing World History, to 10,000 BCE*, ed. David Christian (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 339.

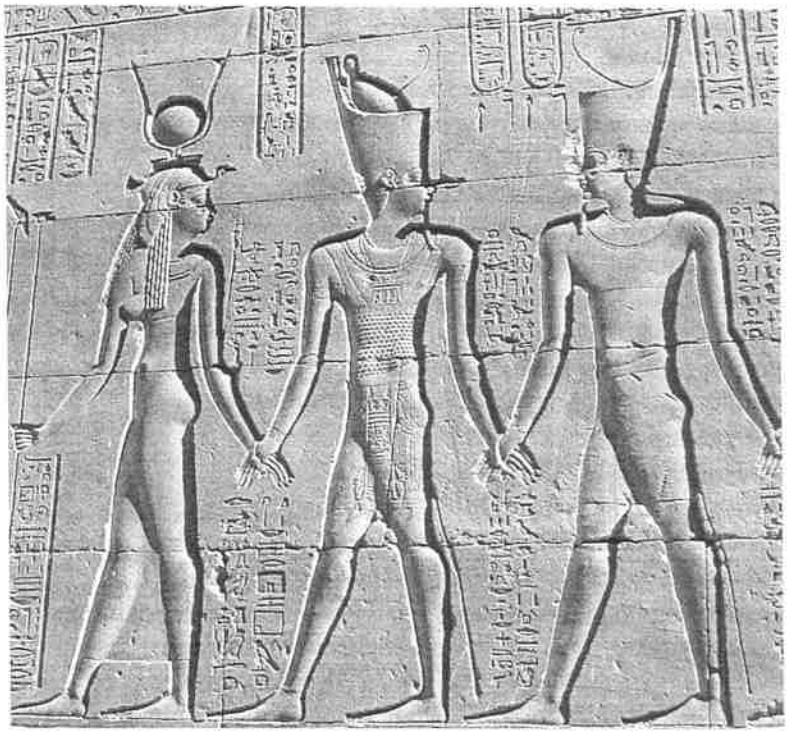
mysterious in the same cave is a painting of a cat-like creature with human-looking rear legs, a reminder that evidence is not always self-explanatory. Studies of analogous images in the recent rock drawings of the Khoisan-speaking people of southern Africa, suggest that they represent mystical trances or dreams rather than realistic depictions. Interpreting these drawings and other evidence is not an exact science.[6]

Drawings of chariots incised into exposed rock faces in mountains in the central Sahara also are surprising as well as puzzling. The date of the drawings must fall during the two millennia after about 1700 BCE when such horse-drawn two-wheeled vehicles were in use in Egypt, but their significance is debated. Some take the chariot drawings as evidence of trans-Saharan trade, although they are too lightly built to carry goods. Another explanation is hinted at by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who writes that the Libyan people known as Garamantes were great chariot users and that some young men from the neighboring Nasamonians crossed the Sahara in a southwesterly direction until they reached a great river and a land inhabited by black people. If the great river was the Niger, it is possible that the rock drawings confirm this fifth-century BCE crossing of the Sahara or other subsequent crossings. However, this evidence is incomplete. Archaeologist Timothy Insoll argues that the absence of trade goods from Roman times in West Africa (except for one blue bead) negates the suggestion of a trade route across the Sahara in antiquity, though he readily concedes that the tomb of a tall women in the central Sahara has yielded a number of items of fifth-century (CE) Roman origin. Insoll also points out that the chariots in the drawings were built for speed and were incapable of carrying trade goods. Not until about the ninth century when camels came into use did the volume of trade grow to significant proportions.[7]

In addition to visual depictions, oral transmissions of history, literature, and beliefs are another form of handprints, though they might better be called voiceprints. Oral traditions in Africa include myths of origin, folk tales, lists of rulers and their accomplishments, and heroic epics. While varying in historical content and reliability, oral traditions can provide insights into how events were seen and interpreted. A well-known example is the *Epic of Sundiata*, the mid-thirteenth-century CE founder of the Mali Empire in the Western Sudan, who is described as a magician with supernatural powers, even though he was (also) a Muslim. Just as the Greek epics and the teachings of Confucius, the Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad were transmitted orally before they

6. For southern African rock art, see Peter Garlake, *Early Art and Architecture of Africa*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29–49, and Peter Mitchell, *The Archaeology of Southern Africa*, Cambridge World Archaeology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132–34, 192–226.

7. For illustrations of Saharan rock art, see Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1966), 43–57. For other evidence and interpretation, see Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 114, 301–4, and Timothy Insoll, *The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 209–12.



Egyptian divine figures and hieroglyphs incised in stone at the Temple of Horus at Edfu, Egypt. Though built in the Ptolemaic period (273–57 BCE), the temple replicates older styles. The central figure wears the Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. The male on the right wears the Red Crown of Lower Egypt and the woman on the left wears a headdress representing the solar disk between cow horns. Photo courtesy of N. R. Northrup.

were written down, so too were African historical traditions passed down orally before being reduced to print (in many cases within the last century).[8]

It is a small step (but an important one) from composing a text in the mind and reciting it to preserving it in writing. Once symbols were devised to represent sounds or words, the familiar handprint known as handwriting provided a way of preserving texts on papyrus and paper or carved into stone or other surfaces. It was a notable invention. The ancient Egyptians, the first in Africa to use the process, attributed the invention of writing to their god Thoth. In use before 3000 BCE, Egyptian writing had two early forms. Hieroglyphs were formal and artistic, using some five hundred symbols, many of which are easily recognized as different animals or human body parts, such as an eye or hand. Beautifully colored inscriptions using hieroglyphs

8. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Peter Schmidt, "Oral History, Oral Traditions, and Archaeology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African Archaeology*, ed. Peter Mitchell and Paul Lane (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 37–47; D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, trans. G. D. Pickett (London: Longman, 1985).

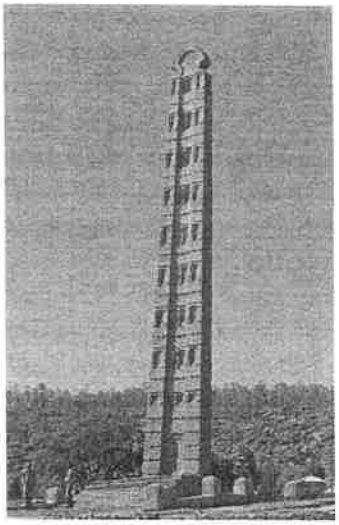
recounted the names and deeds of the pharaohs. Another sign of the supernatural aura of writing is that many early texts concern death and the afterlife. Egyptian scribes also used a more stylized form of cursive writing using ink on papyrus that could be written much more quickly than hieroglyphs. In both forms of writing the symbols stood for sounds. By the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (2050–1780 BCE) there are written literary works as well as the compilation in hieroglyphs of ritual incantations for the deceased known as *The Book of the Dead.*

Writing in ancient Africa was not confined to Egypt. From the second century BCE, writers in the Kingdom of Meroë (south of Egypt) used an alphabetic script that was influenced by Egyptian hieroglyphs. Although the script was deciphered in 1909, the language written in this Meroitic script is unknown. In the Horn of Africa, the state of Aksum, precursor to medieval Ethiopia, also developed a system of writing before the fourth century CE, which was partly borrowed from South Arabia and has remained in use (with modifications) up to this day. As Chapter 2 details, the most famous work written in it, the *Kebra Nagast* (Glory of Kings), probably dating to the thirteenth century, tells a story of supposed connections between medieval Ethiopian rulers and ancient Israel. It is written in the ancient language Ge'ez.[9]

Africans who produced written records during later centuries increasingly used languages and systems of writing that had originated outside the continent. The Egyptian city of Alexandria, named for its founder Alexander the Great, became home to the greatest library in the ancient Mediterranean world with tens or hundreds of thousands of papyrus scrolls, mostly written in Greek. After Egypt and the rest of North Africa became part of the Roman Empire, the region's writers grew famous for their contributions to literature, thought, and Christian theology, in both Greek and Latin. The incorporation of North Africa into the Islamic Empire of the Arabs in the seventh century and the movement of non-African and African Muslims below the Sahara and down the Indian Ocean coast of Africa resulted in a great many texts written in Arabic that are essential to African history. Some oral traditions in African languages were first written in Arabic script, for example, the *Kano Chronicle*, an account of the reigns of the rulers of an important Hausa city-state that goes back to the tenth century.

Writers of African origin became so numerous and will be cited so regularly in the following chapters that it would be tedious to attempt to list them here. Instead, let's mention two of Moroccan descent who authored wide-ranging and important accounts of sub-Saharan Africa between 1330 and 1550. The first was Ibn Battuta, born in the Moroccan city of Tangier in 1304, who recorded detailed descriptions of his travels in West and East Africa as well as in India and Arabia. His original Arabic texts, which have been translated into many other languages, provide significant

9. For texts see Constance Hilliard, ed., *Intellectual Traditions of Pre-Colonial Africa* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998); *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, trans. Raymond O. Faulkner (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005); Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians: A History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 24–25.



Known as the Rome Stele (or the Aksum Obelisk), this 160-foot tall granite structure has symbolic doors carved into its base and windows into the upper stories. It was removed from Ethiopia by the Italian military as war booty in 1937 and erected in Rome. After much negotiation, it was restored to Ethiopia in 2005. Source: Photo by Ondřej Žváček, 2009. Wikimedia Commons.

information about fourteenth-century life. The second, best known as Leo Africanus, was born in Muslim Spain about 1494 and originally named Hasan. He and his Berber parents soon returned to the city of Fez in their native Morocco, where he received a good education and about 1510 accompanied an uncle on a diplomatic mission across the Sahara as far as the city of Timbuktu. After visiting Cairo, Constantinople, and Mecca, Hasan was captured by a Spanish ship in 1518 and later presented to Pope Leo X. After instructing his youthful charge in Christianity, Pope Leo baptized him and conferred his own name on him. Thereafter known as Leo Africanus (Leo the African), he was put to work writing out what he knew of African history and geography. His substantial tome, published in Italian in 1550 and in English in 1600, became Christian Europe's most relied-upon source for Muslim lands on both sides of the Sahara.[10]

The most visible and enduring handprints in the landscape of Africa are stone buildings. In places where suitable rock is abundant, Africans have long erected monumental architecture, certainly for their own immediate purposes but also to remind future generations of their greatness. The most famous of these are the pyramids and temples of Egypt that go back to nearly 2600 BCE. Other notable examples are found in lands to the south of Egypt. The Kushitic kingdoms of Nubia, further up the Nile in what is now northern Sudan, erected pyramids of a different style, as well as temples, during the first millennium BCE. Still further south in Aksum (northern Ethiopia) there are rich examples of stone monuments, especially tall slender shafts known as stelae erected in the fourth century CE. Several are still standing, but the biggest one, the largest object ever carved from a single block of stone and weighing over five hundred tons, lies broken on the ground, perhaps having fallen while being hoisted into place. Other examples of skilled stone carving come from the early thirteenth century, when the Christian ruler of Ethiopia named Lalibela sponsored an extensive church building project. The churches are stylistically diverse, but each was hollowed out of "living" rock, that is, rock lying in its natural site.

10. N. Levtzion and J. F. P. Hopkins, eds., *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2000); Said Hamdun and Noël King, *Ibn Battuta in Black Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1994); Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa*, 3 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1896).

Of the many other stone buildings erected along the Indian Ocean coast of eastern Africa the most spectacular was the palace of the ruler of the city-state of Kilwa. Built of coral covered with lime plaster sometime around 1300, the extensive palace contained public and private quarters and courtyards, a pool, warehouses, and pavilions with barrel vaulted roofs and domes. Ibn Battuta, who visited Kilwa in the 1330s, judged it to be "among the most beautiful cities [of the world] and elegantly built" and said the mostly Muslim population of the city were devout and had extremely black skins. Kilwa's wealth came from its role as middleman in the trade in gold between the Zimbabwe kingdom and states around the Indian Ocean. The inland kingdom's capital city, known as Great Zimbabwe, had the largest complex of ancient stone structures in Africa south of the Nile River valley. The most monumental structures, built between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, are still substantially intact. They include the Great Enclosure, an oval structure the size of a football stadium, whose stone walls are over thirty-two feet high and sixteen feet thick. Inside the Great Enclosure is the Conical Tower (thirty feet high and eighteen feet in diameter). Both structures were built of layered granite stones without mortar.

Although all of these structures have been known to the outside world for many centuries, the belief in African inferiority was so strong that Europeans ascribed non-African origins to them. Ancient Egypt's magnificent structures were said to be sited on the African continent only incidentally, the product of a civilization that was Mediterranean, not African. Meroë's temples and pyramids were simply derivative of Egyptian influences. The monumental structures of Aksum and Ethiopia were dismissed as being of Arabian origin. The cities of the Swahili Coast were attributed to Arab and Persian origins, despite Ibn Battuta's eyewitness testimony that the inhabitants were not merely dark skinned but "extremely black." These tales of outside influences may have a grain of truth in them, but giving the outsiders all the credit and denying local Africans any credit is about as credible as saying the scientific breakthroughs of Copernicus, Galileo, and Isaac Newton were due to Asians because the numerals they used had first been devised in India. Great Zimbabwe posed a special challenge to such racist interpretations, not only because of its size and inland location but also because the structures and extensive artifacts showed no foreign influences. Nineteenth-century Europeans who saw Great Zimbabwe proclaimed its existence a "mystery" and speculated without any evidence that its builders were Phoenicians, Israelites, or other outsiders. The explanations shifted after archaeological excavations proved Great Zimbabwe was of local African origin. The site that had previously inspired wonder and whose carved stone birds had been looted as treasure then came to be disparaged, in terms Hegel and Trevor-Roper would have applauded, as "products of an infantile mind."[11]

11. The stone structures south of ancient Egypt are described and illustrated in Garlake, *Early Art*, 51–88, 117–120; his statement about Zimbabwe is at 23. The quotations from Ibn Battuta are from Hamdun and King, *Ibn Battuta*, 22.

Some of the monumental structures of eastern and northeastern Africa considered above were associated with the burials of important persons, whether as tombs, as in the case of pyramids, or monuments, or as in the case of the stelae of Aksum. As the ancient Egyptians had sadly learned, spectacular tombs had the unintended consequence of alerting thieves to the location of rich treasures interred with the departed rulers. As a result, survivors came to place memorials in a different place from the actual burial site so as to protect the graves and grave goods from looters. Nearly all the Egyptian treasures displayed in museums today come from tombs that escaped being robbed in antiquity, which is ironic because, while the monuments were meant to be enduring tributes to the lives of the departed, the grave goods were not intended to delight later generations, but were meant for the departed to enjoy in the afterlife.

In parts of Africa that lacked stone for building, the memorials erected to the memory of illustrious people are long gone because they were made of less enduring materials. Even so, chance discoveries of rich grave goods testify to similar burial practices. One of the oldest and most impressive of these is a site from the ninth century near the village of Igbo-Ukwu in southeastern Nigeria. The corpse was interred seated on a wooden throne dressed in rich garments that were decorated with more than 100,000 glass beads, along with copper armlets, anklets, and amulets beautifully fashioned by local artisans. Other grave goods included ivory tusks, a crown, a ceremonial staff, a fan, and a flywhisk. It is now beginning to be understood that the Igbo-Ukwu grave and accompanying site are part of a complex of rich burials widespread in West Africa, some of which have been destroyed by modern looters.[12]