

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-2a The Bantu Expansion into Subequatorial Africa

Book Title: World Civilizations

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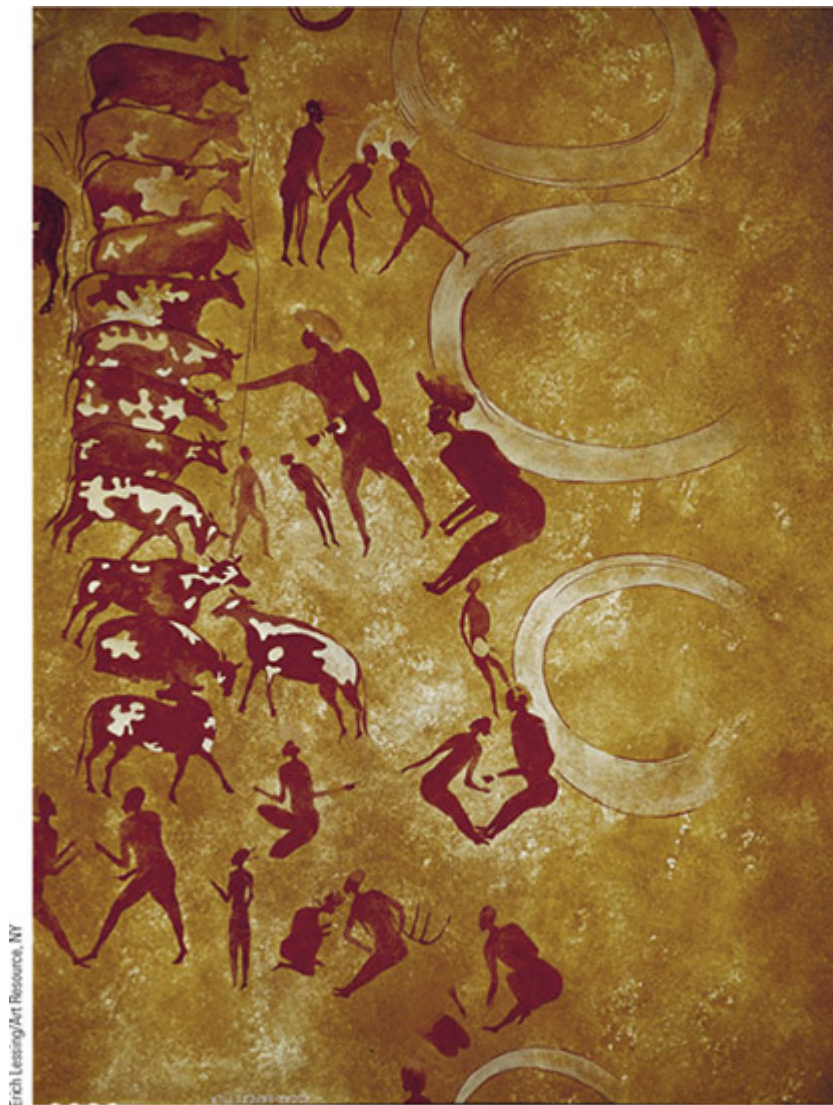
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With the spread of desert conditions, the ancient Niger-Congoans also moved southward into the savannas of West Africa. Furthermore, as skilled boat builders, they could easily navigate the numerous rivers and streams of the rain forest. With the use of polished stone axes, they cleared openings in the forest and continued living in large communities and cultivating their yam gardens. One subgroup in particular, the [Bantu speakers \(People who speak one of the member languages of the Bantu language family \(see Bantu\).\)](#), profited from these technologies to begin a steady expansion south and east from the general region of present-day Nigeria and Cameroon in West Africa, through the rain forest of the Congo basin. About 1000 B.C.E. they emerged from the forest into the drier savannas that lay to the south of the river basin and to the west of Lake Victoria. Around this time they acquired iron technology and learned to breed livestock and grow grain crops (most likely from Nilo-Saharans), which did better than yams in the grasslands. These innovations helped them enlarge their numbers, primarily through natural increase and the absorption of other peoples. By these means they succeeded in establishing a series of small kingdoms that stretched across eastern, central, and southern Africa; by 400 C.E. they had reached the southern tip of the continent in present-day South Africa.

The bulk of the Bantu-speaking inhabitants of central, eastern, and southern Africa are thought to be the descendants of these migrants. Because the Bantu had no written language and built few monuments that have survived, most of what we know about this process has been inferred from archaeological and linguistic research. Only when they reached the Indian Ocean and built the port cities of the Swahili coast do we learn more than that they had created kingdoms dependent on agriculture and trade in the interior. Some of these states and kingdoms existed when the Portuguese arrived in the 1500s, and accounts of Portuguese travelers yield valuable information that supplements what archaeological and linguistic data provide. We cover these developments in [Chapter 17](#).

Saharan Rock Painting.

This rock art from Tassili n'Ager in the central Sahara shows women and children tending cattle. The white ovals represent their huts. This indicates that cattle pastoralism originated in what is now desert.



Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

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