

Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-1 African Geography and Climates

Book Title: World Civilizations

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3-1 African Geography and Climates

The African continent rises from the surrounding waters like an inverted saucer, with its coastal lowlands quickly giving way to deserts (in the north, northwest, and southwest), inland plateaus, and highlands and mountains (in the east and southeast) that dominate the vast interior (see [Map 3.1](#)). A coastal strip along the Mediterranean Sea rises sharply to meet the Atlas mountain range, and the enormous Sahara Desert divides the continent into its North African and sub-Saharan components. The coastal areas stretching from modern-day Liberia to Angola are marked by rain forests, which restricted travel to the rivers until recent times.

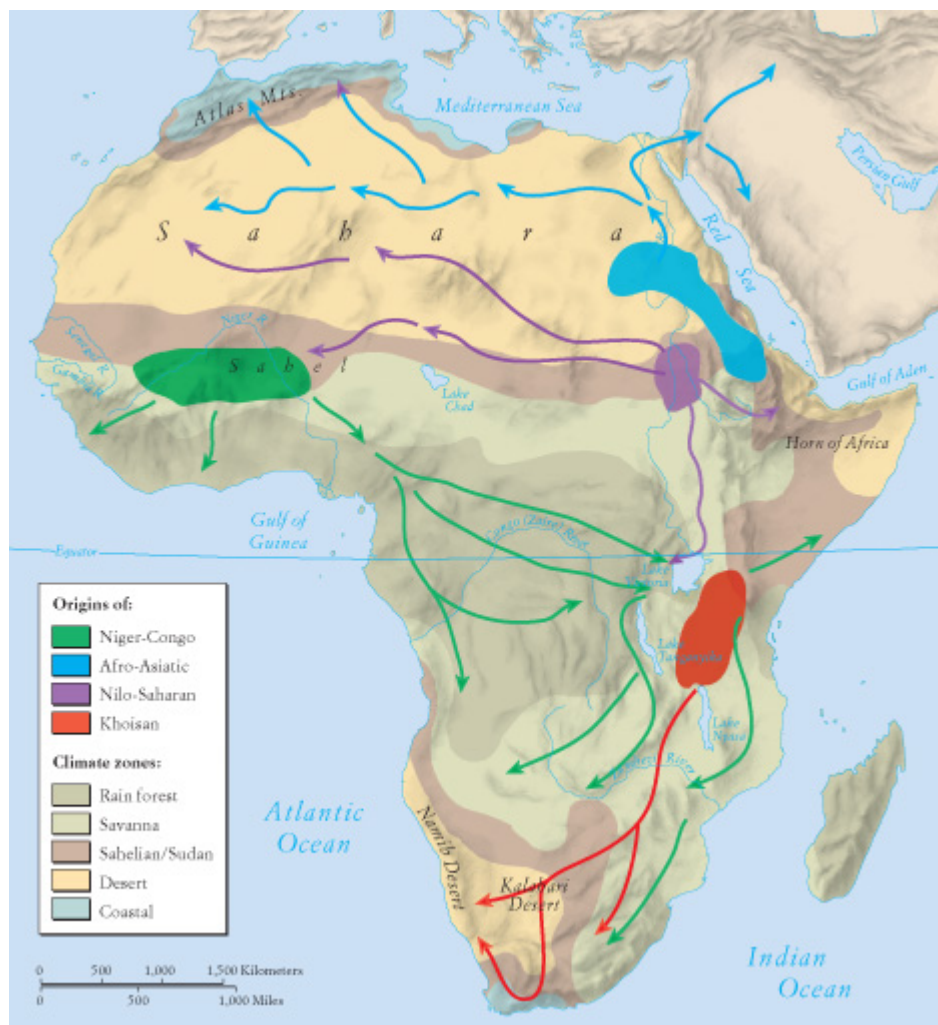
Map 3.1

The African Continent and Egypt

Africa, the second-largest continent, has a highly diverse geography and climate. This map shows the five major subdivisions of climate and vegetation. The enormous Sahara Desert divides the continent into its North African and sub-Saharan components.

Thinking About This Map

While the text mentions three major language families of Africa, what was the fourth one?



Where the great rivers of the eastern interior flow from the high grasslands of the interior to low-lying coasts, tremendous waterfalls and rapids block human travel and transport. The inland plateaus and rolling country could, until recently, be reached only after a dangerous and lengthy overland journey from the eastern coast. Long reaches of the continent's Atlantic coast lack good harbors, and heavy surf makes the open beaches unusable by small craft almost everywhere except the Mediterranean. The coastal lands on the eastern side of the continent—those facing the Indian Ocean—have many excellent natural harbors that have served as places of trade and settlement for at least 2000 years, as we shall see.

Although geography plays a major role, part of the reason for Africa's interior isolation is climate. The continent is divided into five climatic and vegetative zones (Map 3.1). One of these, the desert, is unsuited to sedentary life for any concentrated number of people, and a second part, the Sahel, or Sudan, is frequently afflicted with extreme droughts. Perhaps 55 to 65 percent of the total area falls into one of these categories, in which sustenance for humans was (and is) difficult (see Map 3.1).

The five zones are as follows:

1. The Mediterranean and extreme southern coasts lie outside the tropical zones and enjoy temperate weather and good soil.

2. The Sahel, or the dry, mainly treeless steppes (semiarid grass-covered plains between the desert and the savanna) cross Africa from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans.
3. The deserts, of which the enormous and growing Sahara is the chief but not the only one; the others are the Namib and Kalahari Deserts of the southwest.
4. The rain forest, which extends on either side of the equator in the west and center.
5. The savanna (the grassland regions of the interior plateaus) are mainly south of the Sahara Desert, north of the rain forest in West Africa, and in most of East, Central, and South Africa.

Depending on the climatic zone where they lived, the various peoples of Africa developed different ways of life. For most of its history, the Mediterranean coast has been closely linked to Europe and the Middle East. Egypt was almost a land unto itself in its isolated but benevolent Nile Valley. In the center and west, the rain forest's infestation by the tsetse fly (the cause of sleeping sickness) and the presence of a multitude of other diseases has hindered large-scale development almost to the present time. In the Sahara Desert, nomadic pastoralism and small-scale oasis agriculture were the only possible lifestyles in historical times, and vast areas were left uninhabited. The Sahel steppe land could only support a pastoral economy. Beyond the coastal strip, only the equatorial rain forests and the savannas of the west and the eastern plateaus had reasonably good soil and precipitation sufficient to sustain crop agriculture and village life.

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