

CONNAH, Graham: *African Civilizations. An Archaeological Perspective*. Second Edition. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2001. 340pp. ISBN 0-521-59309-3, £45.00, US\$64.95, paperback edition ISBN 0 521 59690 4, £15.95, US\$22.95.

Questions of the content, methodology and relevance of African history have been around for almost half a century now. Compared with Africa north of the Sahara, Africa lying to the south of the great desert made a later appearance both in written history and as a field for modern research. Answers were first attempted by African and Africanist historians and archaeologists in the 1950s and 1960s. It was clear from the very start that an interdisciplinarity and a combination of techniques was needed to reconstruct the African past. Written sources for African history are rare and unevenly distributed in time and space. They had to be backed up by evidence provided mainly by archaeology and oral traditions. Other academic disciplines have also contributed useful information. Attempts at a recovery of ancient African history has become a continuous interdisciplinary dialogue. In these circumstances, the archaeological evidence for the African past has assumed the very greatest importance.

The book under review is the second edition of a very successful publication first published by the same publishing house in 1987. Its aim was as it is now to present a synthesis of the main archaeological evidence of the achievements of precolonial tropical African societies and thus reassess and refute the still surviving stereotypes of African societies consisting "only of scattered groups of people living in small villages of grass or mud 'huts'" (Preface to the first edition, p. XI). According to the author, "an attempt is made to assess how much archaeology can tell us about two aspects of the development of social complexity in tropical Africa: the growth of cities and the appearance of states....to evaluate the archaeological data and to determine what it has to contribute to the debates on these issues" (Chapter I The Context, p. 3).

The very fact that the book remained in print for over twelve years achieving during that time ten reprints and a Japanese translation is in itself an ample proof of its importance and qualities. However, the new evidence provided by the archaeological field research in the past years and the changing interpretations of the evidence made it necessary to revise and update much of the content and by adding the new evidence, to restructure and rewrite some of the chapters. Also, at least according to the author, both the illustrations and the bibliography have been revised and substantially augmented.

The emergence of the cities and states have been considered to be the principal manifestation of social complexity, of the rise of "complex", "stratified" or "pluralistic" societies, as they have been defined by different authors. Invaluable to any student of African history is no doubt Chapter I entitled The context, reviewing different theories of urbanization and state formation advanced mostly by historians and social anthropologists and the most important works of the extensive theoretical literature on this difficult and complex subject. Much of the evidence used in the extensive literature of state-formation and urbanization theory has been drawn from historical sources combined with data provided by ethnographic and anthropological observations, relatively few attempts have been made to relate such theories to archaeological evidence. There seems to have been less general writing on the archaeological evidence than on explanatory theories and general studies concerned with the archaeology of African cities and states have been scarce. The reason, according to the author, may be the patchy state of our archaeological knowledge of Africa, resulting from the uneven geographical distribution and relatively limited amount of archaeological field research and excavation in Africa, unevenly distributed both in time and space. A serious discrepancy exists between the number of cities and states attested to by historical sources and those revealed by the archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, the geographical pattern indicated by the archaeological

evidence and followed in this book is similar and comparable to the geographical distribution of cities and states derived from historical evidence.

The seven chapters that follow examine both geographically and chronologically the processes of urbanization and state formation, ranging from the cities and states of Kerma, Napata and Meroë on the Middle Nile and the successor states of Christian Nubia in Chapter Two to Aksum and Christian Ethiopia in Chapter Three. These are followed by an examination of the relevant archaeological evidence available for the cities and states of the West African savanna and the West African forest region in Chapters Four and Five respectively. Chapter Six covers the cities of the East African coast, Chapter Seven the Zimbabwe Plateau and adjacent related sites, while Chapter Eight tries to assess the archaeological evidence for the Interlacustrine Region and the Upemba Plateau in the interior of East Central Africa. Chapter Nine attempts to draw some conclusions and find common denominators.

The formation of early states in Africa and the emergence of cities were not aspects of a single process, on the contrary, to quote the author, "the archaeological evidence reveals a remarkable diversity of both urbanism and state formation in tropical Africa's past" (p.17) but "to understand the origins and the development of any civilization, it is necessary to look at the local conditions of its existence: at its subsistence, at its technology, at the social system, at population pressures, at its ideology, and its external trade" (quoted by Connah from Renfrew, C.: *The emergence of civilization*. In: *The encyclopaedia of ancient civilizations*, ed. A. Cotterell. London, Macmillan 1983, p. 17). This approach was adopted by the author and by doing this he managed to fill in a gap and enrich our knowledge of the processes of urbanization and state formation in pre-colonial Africa.

*Viera Pawliková-Vilhanová*