

History

African history is a vast and epic tale. What follows is intended as a general overview that offers a taste of the world-shaking events that have shaped the continent's past. The history of Africa is also, however, the fascinating sum total of the stories of the 49 countries and countless cultures covered in this book. You'll find more localised and detailed coverage in each individual country chapter.

HUMAN ORIGINS & MIGRATIONS

Africa has seen pretty much everything – from proto-bacteria to dinosaurs and, finally, around five to 10 million years ago, a special kind of ape called *Australopithecines* that branched off (or rather let go of the branch) and walked on two legs down a separate evolutionary track. This radical move led to the development of various hairy, dim-witted hominids (early men) – *Homo habilis* around 2.4 million years ago, *Homo erectus* some 1.8 million years ago and finally *Homo sapiens* (modern humans) around 200,000 years ago. Around 50,000 years later, somewhere in Tanzania or Ethiopia, a woman was born who has become known as 'mitochondrial Eve'. Every single human alive today is descended from her: at a deep genetic level, we're all Africans.

The break from Africa into the wider world occurred around 100,000 years ago, when perhaps as few as 50 people migrated out of North Africa, along the shores of the Mediterranean, and into the Middle East. From this small beginning came a population that would one day cover almost every landmass on the globe.

The first moves away from the nomadic hunter-gatherer way of life came between 14,000 BC and 9500 BC, a time when rainfall was high and the Sahara and North Africa became verdant. By 2500 BC the rains began to fail and the sandy barrier between North and West Africa became the Sahara we know today. People began to move southwest into the rainforests of Central Africa, most notably a group of people speaking the same family of languages. Known as the Bantu, the group's population grew as it discovered iron-smelting technology and developed new agricultural techniques. By 100 BC, Bantu peoples had reached East Africa; by AD 300 they were living in southern Africa, and the age of the African empires had begun.

AFRICAN EMPIRES

Victorian missionaries liked to think they were bringing the beacon of 'civilisation' to the 'backward' Africa, but the truth is that Africans were developing commercial empires and complex urban societies while Europeans were still running after wildlife with clubs.

TIMELINE

200,000 years ago

The first 'humans' (*Homo sapiens*) begin to definitively diverge from other similar species (such as *Homo erectus*, which persists for millennia) in Africa, marking the continent as the birthplace of humanity.

From 5000 BC

Rains become infrequent and the Sahara begins the millennia-long process of becoming a desert. Africa is sparsely populated, but the drying climate prompts people to settle around waterholes, to rely on agriculture and to move south.

146 BC

After a century-long struggle for Mediterranean supremacy, Carthage falls to the Romans, who utterly destroy the city. Its people are sold into slavery and the site is symbolically sprinkled with salt and damned forever.

For a highly readable account of millennia of African history, from Africa's human origins to the Rwandan genocide (no small task), pick up a copy of John Reader's *Africa – A Biography of the Continent* (2005).

Pyramids of Power

Arguably the greatest of the African empires was the first: ancient Egypt. Formed through an amalgamation of already organised states in the Nile Delta around 3100 BC, Egypt achieved an amazing degree of cultural and social sophistication. The Pharaohs, kings imbued with the power of gods, sat at the top of a highly stratified social hierarchy, and the annual flooding of the Nile kept the lands of the Pharaohs fertile and fed their legions of slaves and artisans, who in turn worked to produce some of the most amazing public buildings ever constructed. Many of these, like the Pyramids of Giza, are still standing today. During the good times, which lasted nearly 3000 years, Egyptians discovered the principles of mathematics and astronomy, invented a written language and mined gold. Ancient Egypt was eventually overrun by the Nubian Empire, then by the Assyrians, Persians, Alexander the Great and finally the Romans.

Phoenician & Roman North Africa

Established in Tunisia by the Phoenicians, a seafaring people with their origins in Tyre in modern Lebanon, the city-state of Carthage filled the power vacuum left by the decline of ancient Egypt. By the 6th century BC, Carthage was an empire in its own right and controlled much of the Mediterranean sea trade. Back on land, scholars were busy inventing the Phoenician alphabet, from which Greek, Hebrew and Latin are all thought to derive. It all came to an abrupt end with the arrival of the Romans, who razed Carthage and enslaved its population in 146 BC.

The Romans built some of Africa's most beautiful ancient cities in what are now Libya, Algeria and Morocco, and African-born Septimius Severus (r AD 193–211), went on to become Emperor of Rome. But the Romans, like the Carthaginians before them and the Byzantines who came after, had their control over Africa effectively restricted to the Mediterranean coastal strip. It was swept away by the Arabs who arrived in North Africa, bearing Islam, around AD 670.

The Kingdom of Sheba

Aksum was the first truly African indigenous state – no conquerors from elsewhere arrived to start this legendary kingdom, which controlled much of Sudan and southern Arabia at the height of its powers. Aksum's heart was the hilly, fertile landscape of northern Ethiopia. The Aksumites traded with Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean and Arabia, developed a written language, produced gold coins and built imposing stone buildings. In the third century AD, the Aksumite king converted to Christianity, founding the Ethiopian Orthodox church. Legend has it that Ethiopia was the home of the fabled Queen of Sheba and the last resting place of the mysterious Ark of the Covenant.

Respected African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr has spent a lifetime refuting perceptions of Africa's precolonial backwardness. The result is the compelling *Wonders of the African World* (1999).

100 BC

The Bantu people arrive in East Africa from the west and northwest. They will later continue into southern Africa, completing what is arguably the most enduringly influential mass movement of peoples in Africa's history.

AD 670

Islam sweeps across North Africa, where it remains the dominant religion today. A century later, it arrived on the East African coast and first crossed the Sahara into West Africa around AD 900.

Around AD 1000

The city of Timbuktu is founded as a seasonal encampment for Tuareg nomads where the Niger River meets the Sahara; it would later become a centre of scholarship and be home to 100,000 people.