THE AFRICAN CITY

A History

BILL FREUND

New Approaches to African History

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The African City

This unique book tries in a short format to give the reader a comprehensive picture of cities in Africa from early origins to the present. It is comprehensive both in terms of time coverage, from before the Pharaohs to the present moment, and in that it tries to consider cities from the entire continent, not just sub-Saharan Africa. Apart from factual information and rich description material culled from many sources, it looks at many issues, from why urban life emerged in the first place to how present-day African cities cope in difficult times. Instead of seeing towns and cities as somehow extraneous to the real Africa, it views them as an inherent part of developing Africa – indigenous, colonial, and post-colonial – and emphasizes the extent to which the future of African society and African culture will likely be played out mostly in cities. Different positions and debates amongst scholars on African cities receive considerable attention. The book is written to appeal to students of history but equally to geographers, planners, sociologists, and development specialists interested in urban problems.

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New Approaches to African History

New Approaches to African History is designed to introduce students to current findings and new ideas in African history. Although each book treats a particular case and is able to stand alone, the format allows the studies to be used as modules in general courses on African history and world history. The cases represent a wide range of topics. Each volume summarizes the state of knowledge on a particular subject for a student who is new to the field. However, the aim is not merely to present views of the literature, it is also to introduce debates on historiographical or substantive issues. As such, a particular volume may argue for a particular point of view. The aim of the series is to stimulate debate, to challenge students and general readers. The series is not committed to any particular school of thought.

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The African City

A History

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Preface

Urbanisation is one of the most important social processes observed and written about over time. From a variety of beginnings, cities have evolved into sites where more and more complex activities take place. At a certain point historically, the city may look parasitic on the productive countryside, where the balance between human beings and nature is so much better sustained. However, further along the line the city itself becomes the logical home for multitudes of social and economic activities that are fundamental to the material life of mankind. And with that, the balance between city and countryside changes.

Cities attract friends and enemies. The city on the hill is a symbol of wisdom and balance, of the good life, and of democratic politics. The metropolis – Smoketown, Shackland – is the site of alienation and oppression where modernity becomes a prison for men and women. On the whole, this book will try to avoid these kinds of moral judgements, not that they may not lack validity within particular discourses and for particular individuals or types of individuals. Given the author's special interests, much attention will be paid to economic and social processes and where the city fits into them. The city evolves distinctive cultural forms, some of them largely appropriate only to urban life, and I shall try to do some justice to these cultural forms. It also becomes in need of a distinctive politics that fits the dense interstices of urban living. These will take a more important form as our narrative proceeds and urban politics acquires this distinctiveness.

This work is a synthesis not only of monographic work but of syntheses. There have been not only numerous excellent studies of

urban life and urban history situated in Africa, but even some excellent general works on some aspects of urban society. The ambition here is to create a larger picture of African cities developed historically from the proverbial beginning. This is, I believe, a path that has not been trodden. Why do it? One reason for this is that while particular towns and cities that fit particular historical purposes and political or economic ends may come and go, the urban tradition is one of accretion and agglomeration, not one of entirely distinct stages. Cities inevitably carry baggage from their individual and collective pasts that have to be understood. Another reason is to confront the rural bias that affects much African studies, particularly in the English language scholarly tradition. Mahmood Mamdani has provided for us a framework for colonial politics in Africa that divides rule between the potentially democratic world of the citizen and the autocratic world of the subject – and native authority (*Citizen and Subject*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). On the whole, the city was the more likely residence of the citizen and the concept of individual citizenship, so standard in the colonial metropoles, potentially threatened the form of colonial rule in Africa. Rural studies, peasant studies, have easily represented themselves as the true Africa. By contrast, this book insists not only that the urban has a historic place in Africa of some importance – even if it is not necessarily the home of citizen democracy – but that this importance has grown and grown and that the future of Africa is likely to be increasingly urban. African studies have to situate themselves in part on an urban foundation. In the last two chapters, I draw a distinction between modernist interpretations of the city and postmodern approaches. I will have to admit to my prejudices being very largely modernist myself, but I can see the strength of some postmodern insights and try to bring those to bear on the discussion in those chapters.

Africa is also a good place to study cities because African cities are so varied. We can find one-industry towns as well as diverse urban economies, fragile and nascent urban development traceable from the historical record and the work of archaeologists as well as some of the Third World metropolises that rightly exercise the minds of development experts. Nice as it might be to be an expert on everywhere, this scholar has his special interests and areas in which he has a strong background. In recent years, I have written quite a lot on the political economy of Durban, the South African city in which I live. This has extended itself as well into participation in a comparative project

involving the French city of Marseilles and the Ivorian city of Abidjan. It enabled me to reacquaint myself with the magnetic appeal of the West African city. My memories include impressions of living in Zaria and Dar es Salaam as well as more fleeting time passed in many other cities from Cairo to Tananarive, from Asmara to Dakar.

In this book, I have tried to do justice to very different parts of the African continent in putting forward a continental portrait. With some misgiving about his own limitations, this has meant the author has discarded the usual idea of sub-Saharan Africa and integrated Africa north of the Sahara, notably Egypt, into this portrait. My hope is that this may help in the task of deracialising the way readers look at this enormous continent and stressing the human variety that can be found in historic and contemporary Africa. Having worked with French colleagues and plunged into the relevant literature in French, a literature which has long been much more sympathetic to the urban in Africa in general, I have tried frequently to use examples from Francophone countries and material written in French in order to make them more available to readers without French.

I need to thank especially Martin Klein for his faith in my ability to carry through this ambitious project as well as a number of anonymous readers whose criticism contained useful suggestions that allowed me to take this study forward. One of these who revealed her identity was Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch. Although there are some differences in how we analyse African cities, there are many parallels in our thinking, manifest in her superb review article on African urban history for the 1991 *African Studies Review*. Indeed, had she completed her proposed two-volume study of African cities, this book would have had far less justification. I would like to thank also two distinguished urban scholars in South Africa, Alan Mabin and Sue Parnell, for wading through my first draft. I must thank also the reader for the final version of the manuscript whose concerns have pushed me towards a slightly more didactic text which will hopefully assist student readers particularly.

The initial phase of gathering ideas and working towards a proposal was made possible by my time as a Guest Researcher at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, Sweden, in 1999. Of the many helpful people there, I would like to single out the director of the then urban studies programme, my late and much missed Norwegian friend Mariken Vaa. The last phase has involved coming to the School of Oriental & African Studies of the University of London as a British Academy Visiting Professor, where I was the guest of Henry Bernstein and the Department

of Development Studies. For this I must thank Henry, SOAS, and the Academy. I also have tried out parts of this book as seminar papers in a number of settings, notably the African Studies Centre at the University of Bayreuth (Germany); the annual meeting of the African Studies Association of Australasia and Oceania (at Perth, Australia); at WISER, the Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa; and at a conference held by the Netherlands Institute on War Documentation in Amsterdam. In the last case, the paper I gave will be published in a modified form in the Netherlands. I am very thankful in each case for the practical assistance provided. Thanks also to Tom Leighton for Egyptian references and to the Frankl-Bertrams for making research work in London seem like research done at home.

I would like especially to thank Helen Hills at Cambridge University Library for her help in obtaining the images that appear as Figures 1, 2, and 3; the assistance of Marie-Paule Blasini for her help in obtaining the image that appears as Figure 4; and Georges Gottleib, for his help in obtaining the image that appears as Figure 8. Thanks are also due to Dr. and Mrs. Sifrin and the University of the Witwatersrand in connection with Figures 8 and 9, the Gerard Sekoto reproductions; and to the Johannesburg Art Gallery for imaging these paintings.

Apart from the acknowledgements to photographers, I would like also to thank the following for help with regard to photographs: Eric Crahan, Olivier Graefe, Jeremy Grest, Rem Koolhaas, and Brigitte Lachartre. Thanks also to Frank Sokolic, my talented mapmaker, and to Mary Cadette, my very helpful project manager at Techbooks.

CHAPTER 1

Urban Life Emerges in Africa

In the preface and, by implication, in the title of this chapter, I have suggested that cities evolve; I accept an essentially evolutionary model in my analysis of what follows. It is possible to argue rather that there are or were uniquely African kinds of cities or towns, before the incorporation of Africa into world-systems with wide economic networks and defining urban cultural structures, as a cultural statement about Africanness. However, the assumption here is that there are several reasons why urban life emerges anywhere: environmental, ritual, political, and economic, all of which will be examined in more detail. This would be true for any major area in the world and up to a point may come together in very different and quite unique combinations. This volume will emphasise that the evolutionary model needs to be modified to an important extent by the incorporation of earlier elements into later urban development, just as forms of rural settlement may be carried into urban ways of living. Old cities are inevitably accretions with layers that survive from their past, cultural if not physical. The division of this African urban history into chapters that look at the impact of incorporation into the beginnings of a world-economy, at colonialism and at the post-colonial situation, tries to give character to evolutionary change, but it does not mean to suggest that there are no continuities from one phase to another.

Africa is an ideal setting for studying the beginnings of urbanisation. In many regions of the African continent, the rise of new towns belongs to the relatively recent historical record, while a considerable number of archaeological excavations have been aimed at trying to discern the

nature of urban life in the past, at just how, when, and why it developed. This chapter considers the information available on the character of early urbanisation and highlights what we are able to surmise about towns and cities at different phases of their development. It will involve making some mighty leaps in terms of distance between times and places.

This chapter will not proceed chronologically; its first pages will move northwards in space and focus on different early *types* of urban settlements, settlements with little evidence of influence from outside Africa. Such types are far from being mutually exclusive, but the examples given are meant to highlight particular aspects more clearly. On a time frame, we will go back as far as five thousand years ago to the Old Kingdom of Egypt – but, where such settlements show little evidence of influence from the increasingly commercialised global networks in touch with the West, some of my examples are from a relatively recent date, including the first example I will be giving.

As one of the authors cited below, anthropologist John Peel, has written about the large Yoruba urban settlements of south-western Nigeria, particularly as they may have been before the nineteenth century, they often seem to defy simple categorisation on a rural-to-urban continuum. The link between urban places discussed has to be understood as *conceptual* rather than *linear* in order to do justice to the structure of ideas that follow in the next pages. Thus we will often interrogate why and to what extent these places are urban. We shall move through a number of descriptive sequences before taking stock by looking at the types of urban structures as a whole. It is important to stress that if they fail to meet certain contemporary criteria of what a city should be like, such settlements should not be dismissed but rather embraced with interest for their unique configurations and contribution to the cultural development of mankind.

In the second half of the chapter, the narrative will come closer to following a conventional order in time, and major outside influences assimilated into African experience – Greek, Punic, Roman, and Islamic, as well as earlier sub-global world-systems – will be taken on board. Here the urban becomes incontestable: the economy became more varied and involved intensified specialisation. Urban life had to be sustained by systematic agricultural surplus from outside in part determining urban-rural relationships. A definite and distinct urban culture within the system emerged. Whether by incorporation,
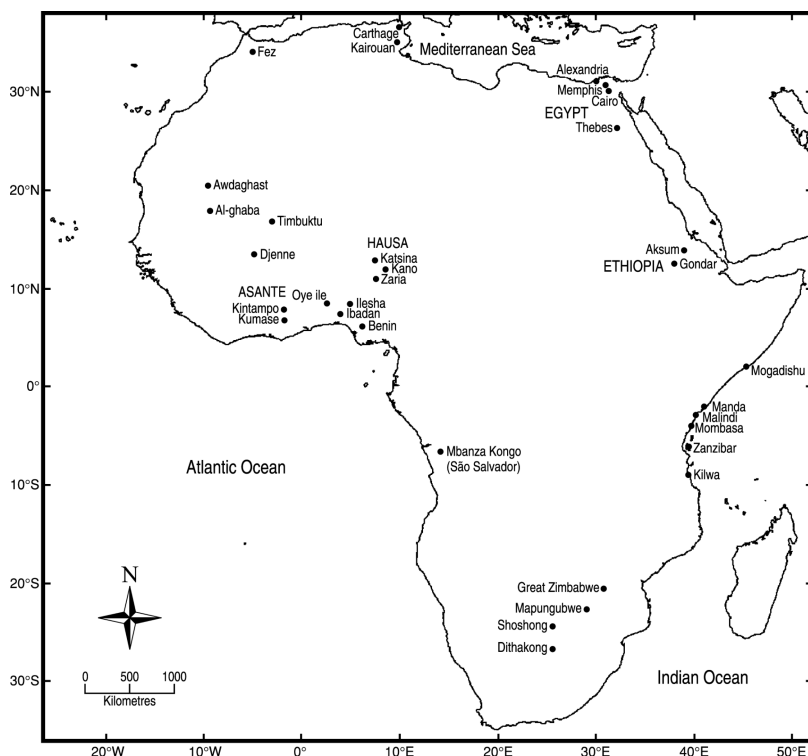
MAP 1. Old African towns and cities.

conquest, or other means of change, this did represent an evolution-
ary shift in North Africa in the first three cases and far more widely in
the fourth. The characteristic urban features of these systems will be
highlighted in the descriptions of the second half of the chapter.

We shall in fact begin at a fairly late point on the time frame. In
southern Africa – at the western edge of where Bantu-speaking agri-
culturalists settled in what is today Botswana – there have for sev-
eral centuries been surprisingly large human agglomerations. Con-
temporary social scientists who specialise in the study of this area have
called them "agro-towns." These agro-towns may have contained ten
to twenty thousand people before the coming of colonial rule, although
the evidence also suggests that they expanded very substantially in the
context of the insecure and unstable conditions of the nineteenth cen-
tury. Shoshong, capital of the Ngwato state in the nineteenth century,
may have attracted thirty thousand people, although they were rarely

all present in the town at once. Kanye, Serowe, and Molepolole in present-day Botswana are surviving examples of this phenomenon.

Europeans were astonished at the size of Dithakong, the most southerly such town. When they encountered it at the start of the nineteenth century, it was as large as the colonial capital of Cape Town. Although the agro-towns were invariably the core of important Tswana chiefships, it is striking to note that further to the east, in somewhat wetter country, closely related Sotho speakers showed little sign of taking to such large settlements. Nor did they exist in the time equivalent of the European Middle Ages when Tswana speakers apparently first settled in Botswana. It was only somewhat later, after a period of desiccation and retreat eastwards followed by resettlement after the year 1500, that this kind of unusual settlement pattern emerged.

There is no straightforward explanation for why this happened. The agro-towns are certainly emblematic of the power of chiefs gathering together a variety of people under their sway. In fact, the structure of the towns resembled a series of villages based on descent and affiliation to a chief or elder; a distinct feature was the space for the *kgotla*, a communal and ceremonial meeting ground that virtually defines what community means to the Tswana. But Tswana chiefs were not immeasurably powerful, nor was this the only way a chief in Africa could gain submission. Up to a point, defense may have been a factor in the gathering of large numbers of people. The sheer size of the agglomerated population in open country could represent a formidable deterrent to an invading band of some sort. Similarly, concentration was certainly related to ecological choices. Good water supplies, the presence of a remarkable hill, were typically features of the large settlement. In no way, however, could the Tswana economy be said to be so rich as to have supported urbanisation in the sense of a surplus that could sustain many non–food producers. Family members, and notably the women, had to scatter widely to farm and to gather foodstuffs. Young men spent most of their time living at cattle posts which were maintained at a long distance from the town, often on land which was too dry to support agriculture.

Concentration created problems and, as a result, until the changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which lent commercial and administrative purposes to towns that they had never before enjoyed, they died after a time. In the words of Neal Parsons, the size of Tswana towns accelerated the course of a cycle, exactly like that known to villages, where the town had to be moved and the population shifted,

often with considerable frequency. Tswana urbanisation promoted a "cycle of depletion of local grasslands, cultivable soils, wood and water supplies."[1] In particular, Parsons believes that the efflorescence and subsequent disappearance of the Tswana town closely correlated to the depletion of wood resources in its vicinity. Thus Shoshong died to be replaced by Phalatswe – Old Palapye – at the close of the 1880s. Dithakong had long disappeared by then. The agro-town structure did not lend itself without outside stimulus to the emergence of economic activities that were specifically urban in character. However, we need to respect as one facet of human evolution this rare but not unique kind of preference for a herding and farming people to choose to live and develop their sense of community in settlements the size of large towns.

If we look for analogies in southern Africa, for a pattern with which to configure Tswana urbanisation, there is one possibility that stretches back much further in time. Over a period of some centuries, stone construction of an impressive nature took place at relatively permanent settlements in south-central Africa, mainly in modern Zimbabwe – which derives its modern name from what seems to be a Shona word for such settlements (*madzimbahwe*, chiefs' residences) – but extending into the territory of Botswana. Less architecturally impressive stone construction in fact was undertaken extensively all over the South African Highveld, continuing into recent times. Most of this construction is accompanied by the traces of relatively small settlements, villages, but not all. Some clearly mark fairly large communities. The oldest site associated with this pattern is at Mapungubwe, in the Limpopo Province of South Africa near to the river of that name. Mapungubwe is a hill site with some impressive graves and beautiful art objects that can be associated with the beginnings of a gold trade to the coast more than a thousand years ago. The residence of a royal family or clan atop the hill is a remarkable feature. But as an urban community it seems to have been quite small and limited.

Further north are the ruins of what we call Great Zimbabwe, not far from the modern town of Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Here there are esthetically awesome remains – a beautiful circular tower, high walls sometimes shaped to allow for step construction, ornate walling patterns

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[1] Neil Parsons, "Settlement in East-Central Botswana c.1820–1900" in R. Renee Hitchcock & Mary Smith, eds., *Settlement in Botswana: The Historical Development of a Human Landscape* (Marshalltown: Heinemann, 1982), 120.

representing impressive man-hours of labour, construction above the valley site on a hill that earlier archaeologists dubbed the Acropolis, where daily requirements would have to have been brought laboriously by porters. There is much that we shall never know about these ruins, but there are some points concerning Zimbabwe on which scholars seem to agree. One is that the valley contained a dense community of mud- and wood-constructed homes – many plastered in their heyday – where people once lived. Up to fifteen thousand of them may have been resident at once on a site of seven hundred hectares.[2] David Beach has imagined this as "a great mass of packed huts that spread across the valley in between the marshes and up the hillsides on terraces . . . basically a mid thirteenth to fourteenth century construction."[3] The stone remains were certainly not houses. The walls, of little use for defense, may at most have served to block off activities, perhaps sacred activities, from the mass of the population.

We will never know exactly what purpose the different structures served. The archaeologist Tom Huffman has made a series of creative suggestions based on his study of the sacred iconography of Venda-speaking people who live south of the frontier in South Africa and who may maintain more of the older culture of Great Zimbabwe than the people who live closer to the ruins today. At the least, they suggest an added element we need to consider, the importance of the sacral: urban sites can serve as ideal placements for ceremonies and activities that link men to ancestors and to gods in a way that knits together a "community." The sacred element has clearly sometimes been of real significance in explaining the roots of urban agglomeration and may have been the main element here. If Huffman is right, sacred activities associated with a powerful chiefly dynasty, or dynasties, were more important than any economic impulse in bringing together this large community, which was comparable to the big Tswana agro-towns in size.

Historians feel confident that Great Zimbabwe was the centre of a state that traded gold with the Indian Ocean coast, and that it was a city in effect linked by an umbilical cord to Kilwa, which controlled this trade at its height, and which was the most impressive urban community that developed on the coast of East Africa before the coming

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[2] Thomas Huffman, *Snakes and Crocodiles: Power and Symbolism in Ancient Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1996), 125.

[3] D. N. Beach, *Zimbabwe Before 1900* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 25.

of Europeans. We shall look at Kilwa later in the chapter. But though there are traces of long-distance trade in the ruins of Great Zimbabwe (Indian beads, a Persian bowl, Chinese porcelain), they have an extraneous quality – shards of pottery and coins rather than the unveiling of a real merchant quarter or any site that indicates intensive commercial activity. The decline of this remarkable settlement may have to do with shifts in the gold trade, although this is not a settled point amongst scholars. Nor is it really clear how the gold trade impacted on the strengthening of political power in the region.

Scholars have generally concluded that the large population concentration at Great Zimbabwe, despite all the human effort that went into the moulding of its stones, was not sustainable after a time, just as with the Tswana agro-towns. The valley in which the ruins are situated seems to have become agriculturally barren through intensive cultivation and/or climate change. It was abandoned by around 1450, perhaps after two hundred years of settlement, and no community of any size was thereafter reestablished there. Whatever environmental reason there may have been for settling this site initially – if one existed – it was an evanescent one.

There are numerous other similar ruins in the region, notably further west in increasingly dry parts of Matabeleland and into northern Botswana, but the stonework there was not so extensive or impressive and the scale of settlement smaller. Beach suggests that they were cultural outliers, perhaps established by fragmenting branches of chiefly families, with less and less wealth or link to overseas trade. This seems even truer of the Shona chieftaincy capitals described by Portuguese visitors from the sixteenth century, generally further north. The Mutapa dynasty frequently built stockaded towns with little or no stoneworks and more emphasis on defense; this was the ruling power that profited from the gold trade in its later centuries of existence. Great Zimbabwe was perhaps a kind of urban experiment that failed rather than evolving along a path of greater complexity and sophistication. Perhaps the Tswana agro-town idea was influenced by this *type* of larger settlement in some way and represents its only later successor.

São Salvador and Gondar

Within a century or so of the end of Great Zimbabwe, contact with Europeans was a factor in the making of other impressive urban sites

in the African interior. However, the urban character of these sites remained incomplete. One example was Mbanza Kongo, the capital of a large and powerful state south of the Congo River within modern Angola which traded – especially for slaves – with the Portuguese from the fifteenth century. The Portuguese were very interested in the Kongo kingdom as an ally and made determined efforts to assimilate it to a European model, in particular to Christianise it. The royal family patronised a literate Christian culture for generations, and willingly took on some forms of European statehood in the eyes of their trading partners. The capital, impressively sited on a mountainous plateau, attracted mainly retainers of the royal house but also became the site for a set of Christian buildings, constructed from stone under the direction of Europeans at first – but for some time with cadres of Africans who had mastered relevant building techniques – and housing monks and priests. It probably reached its apogee in the middle of the seventeenth century.

To Europeans, it was the passably noble city of São Salvador. Facing the plaza, accompanying a cathedral and palace, was a small walled town inhabited by the Portuguese. To Africans, Mbanza Kongo remained a place where narrow paths ran between walled compounds with enough space for livestock and garden farming but with room for agriculture as town and countryside merged into one another. Even the palace was not inhabited for very long; it was probably inconvenient and dirty compared to the typical large compound structure. Royal patronage remained so much the basis for economic activity that private property in particular locations seems never to have developed. There was little space for even rudimentary urban civil society, yet the aura of sacred power associated with this site long outlived the secular decline of the kingdom after the end of the seventeenth century, and the physical locale retained a cultural importance as a remnant of its urban glory long after the political significance of Mbanza Kongo had faded. "Mbanza" has long had, perhaps even before the creation of this town, an association with urbanity and civility in the Kikongo language, distinguishing it from village life. Yet beside the remarkable stone facades that spelt civilisation to Europeans, an African community with different associations had actually breathed life into São Salvador and made it a vital place shared by people. Thus the eighteenth-century city, which remained of considerable regional sacred and even political importance, with population concentrations at times as large as in

the past, continued to be identified with the old stone buildings, even whilst they fell increasingly into ruins.

Thousands of kilometres from Mbanza Kongo, another Portuguese-influenced stone city was rising on the Ethiopian plateau – Gondar. The emperor Fasilidas, who reigned in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, despite the expulsion of the Jesuits and the restoration of Coptic Orthodoxy as the church of Ethiopia, was responsible for authorising the construction of palaces and churches at this town one hundred kilometres or so north of Lake Tana. By contrast with Mbanza Kongo, this construction process continued over several generations. This was an apparently flagrant departure from Ethiopian history, where no permanently constructed capital had existed for a thousand years.

The Ethiopian highlands have been the home of an indigenous class society of lords and peasants for many centuries; however, although trading settlements have undoubtedly existed for a very long time, urbanisation was a weak force. What happens if one does look back a further one thousand years from the time of Fasilidas? Parallel to the existence of the late Roman Empire, a kingdom which converted to Christianity and where a Semitic language ancestral to present linguistic uses was dominant, focussed on the city of Aksum. Aksum remained of great importance for many centuries and reemerged as a Christian centre and market town in medieval and later times. However, the archaeologist David Phillipson has recently concluded that whereas "Aksum was of a size and importance to merit the term 'city' . . . there is no evidence that Aksum was a city as that term is sometimes understood. Its structures, as presently known, comprised large buildings of unknown purpose, but clear elite associations, as well as funerary and other monuments, and religious buildings."[4] So far as we know, ordinary folk lived at some distance from this sacred core near to cultivable fields. Aksum lacked defensive walls. The commercial life of the Aksumite state must have been considerable (it minted coinage), but perhaps not much of it went on within this early African city; its political and sacred role doubtless reflected yet older Ethiopian traditions that have been discerned only vaguely so far by archaeologists.

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[4] David Phillipson, "Aksumite Urbanism" in David Anderson & Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa's Urban Past* (Oxford & Portsmouth, NH: James Currey & Heinemann, 2000), 61.

Thereafter, later Ethiopian rulers travelled constantly with their courts in order to keep control of their subjects; they did not try to contain unruly subordinates within a town's wall. Ethiopian Christianity focussed particularly on monasteries rather than urban cathedrals. Before Gondar was constructed, the court would often consist of hundreds of tents housing camp followers. Not only was this understood as a means for the court to impress its authority on key regions, it had as well an environmental logic. The weight of this kind of crude natural exploitation of foodstuffs, timber, and other products fell only seasonally on particular localities if the court moved about, and in absentia, the region was allowed to recover. Less impressive buildings by far marked the existence of regional market centres and towns which have attracted relatively little attention from historians of Ethiopia.

Gondar itself was important for its association with royalty and, through royalty, with the church, rather than for particularly significant commercial activities. A sacred iconography detailed this importance. Donald Crummey's recent study records no less than eleven important royal churches in the vicinity. He has also recently insisted that the change initiated by permanent construction in Gondar was less dramatic than meets the European eye. Seventeenth-century "Gondar was above all a winter residence, a place where the court, and its ever-widening circles of minions and dependents, passed the season of the rains."[5] The ambulant nature of the state continued after the rise of permanent construction in Gondar into the nineteenth century through a period of royal weakness. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the commercial pace of life was picking up and Gondar was acquiring more economic importance (unlike Mbanza Kongo). Surviving documentation indicates the growing frequency of house sales and purchases; wealthy people began to have a stake in the permanent prosperity of Gondar independent of the fate of the enfeebled royal dynasty. This pattern of commercialisation, which began to transform older population agglomerations everywhere in nineteenth-century Africa, if they survived its convulsions, will emerge more clearly in the following chapter. Gondar and Mbanza Kongo are in some respects another *type* of early town compared to south-central African agro-towns and the walled remains of Zimbabwe, although their respective evolutions diverged.

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[5] Donald Crummey, *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000), 74.

Cities Develop in Egypt

The slow emergence of urbanism, of full-blown city life, is also to some degree observable at a yet much greater distance in time from us, in ancient Egypt. Through much of its very long history, particularly before the New Kingdom (1540–1070 BC), the Nile Valley knew population concentrations to some extent, but only extremely slowly were cities in the full sense of the word "invented." Indeed, for long, such concentrations, to the extent that we can guess from the size of the locations, may not have been much bigger than the urban sites we have been considering above elsewhere in Africa. Ancient Egypt lacked money; exchange took the form of distribution in kind. Domestic architecture, according to archaeologists, seems to have consisted to a very large extent on facilities for hoarding grain, for milling, and for brewing. There is thus an evident logic in the Egyptian domestication of the cat as a means of dealing with the scourge of rodents. Domestic architecture was normally constructed of mud and one storey high, ideally built around a courtyard. Given the difficulties of producing a surplus, it is likely that urban households normally required and had access to agricultural land nearby. And distribution in turn was handled by the temples in the name of the gods. Traders were generally economic agents who operated in the name of officials and/or temple priests.

With time, houses became grander. Large villas had columned halls while courtyards contained pools of water. Distinct spaces for cooking were established as kitchens and limited forms of furniture for storage and sitting were carved from wood. For the wealthy, bed rests were supplemented with wooden beds. The roof level was often used as pavilion space for relaxation as well as storage reached by stairways while Thebes contained houses of more than one storey. Small windows were carved into walls so as not to let in dust.

The great monuments of Egypt that define its renown are associated with worship and with a state intimately connected to worship, where the natural and supernatural were tightly linked. Much was directly produced in order to support the activities of the afterlife. Secular residences, even of the powerful, seem to have been smaller and their grandest spaces reserved for public ceremonials. Much of what we know about the lives of ordinary men and women comes from archaeological excavations of the homes of those who worked on