

## The Saylor Foundation's "The Spread of Humans—West Africa"

In the previous unit, we looked at the evolution of humans and the development of hunter-gatherer societies in Africa. We know—from remains found as far north as Egypt and as far south as the tip of the South African cape—that hunter-gatherers used to occupy almost the whole of the African continent. However, we also know that hunter-gatherer societies began to be replaced by farmers and pastoralists some time before the historical record began.

In the centuries before about 4500 years ago, Africa was in a relatively wet climatic phase. As a result, the area that we now know as the Sahara Desert was a vast grassland dotted with lakes. This made it perfect for the development of early pastoralist and farming techniques. Around 4500–3500 years ago, however, the weather shifted to the current dry climate in Africa, and these groups of farmers and herders began to move away from the Sahara. Some moved to the Nile River valley where, as we will see, they formed the early populations of societies that would develop into Egypt (Kemet) and the Nubian states. Others, however, moved into West Africa, and particularly the Niger River valley, where they encountered a thin layer of people who already lived there, largely in small hunter-gatherer groups.

The immigrants and the preexisting populations intermixed and exchanged ideas and technologies in the West African savanna region that we know as the Sahel. While today we think of the Sahel as a region of ecological crisis, drought, and weak states, it was historically a trading crossroads. It was the scene of important social, economic, and political changes, and its population by herders and farmers enabled the great empires such as Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and Sokoto, which we will cover later.

Environmentally, the West African savanna is a narrow ecological zone with only one commodity (but a very vital one)—salt, which was produced on the northern edge of the savanna, along the Sahara Desert, and was in high demand both within the savanna and in the forests to the south. This led to the creation of a network through which salt was traded for forest foods and commodities. Since the savanna was dry, the Senegal and Niger Rivers provided both important trading networks and excellent population zones. Some of the earliest cities in the world developed along the bend of the Niger. Here, cities such as Jenné-Jeno arose on an "island" between two branches of the Niger in the third century BCE. Urbanization and trade were supported by local rice cultivation.

Pastoralism and agriculture allowed population densities to rise in the West African forest zone at a somewhat later date than in the Sahel. This forest zone is another thin zone like the savanna. It has a very different but equally difficult and important ecology. Dense vegetation and the prevalence of human and animal diseases limited population growth and productivity. However, unlike in the savannas, the forest zone had excellent food resources, especially yams and fat-producing oil palms, and a higher level of rainfall. Although we don't have written sources for the early history of the forest zone, we know that the surplus of food there made it an area of exceptional state formation

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and urbanization along a largely African model, which developed quite differently from that of the savanna.

The earliest densely populated site found at the edge of the forest zone is in the region known today as Nok. Significant populations lived in Nok as long ago as 550 BCE. The first known forest-zone state was Igbo-Ukwu, in a region inhabited by the Igbo people in present-day eastern Nigeria. Iron reached there by the first centuries AD (around 2000 years ago), but only by around 1000 years ago is there compelling evidence of social stratification, with wealthy elites and ritual power. One piece of evidence of this is an excavated grave of a powerful “noble,” or “priest-king.” However, this may be an isolated and early example of state formation.

Another early state in the forest zone was Benin City (in Nigeria), which archaeology shows to have been occupied in the thirteenth century. We know something of Benin City from sixteenth-century European mariners, who spoke of its exceptional art—especially bronzes—and called its capital “spacious and well laid out, with thirty 120-foot wide avenues intersected by shorter narrow streets forming a grid. The houses ... were washed and polished until they gleam.” They also told of the ritual sacrifice of forty-one young women, and of the extensive city walls and earthworks—evidence both of strong centralized authority and of people’s attempts to separate themselves from nature.