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# A Study of Precolonial Urban Africa

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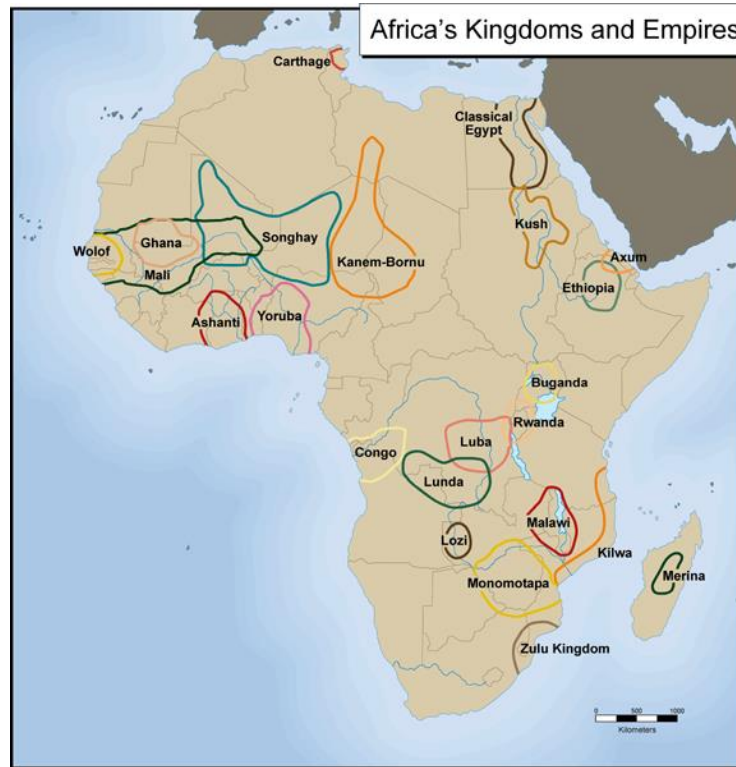
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# *A Study of Precolonial Urban Africa*



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## *Precolonial Urbanization, an Introduction*

Africa has had multiple stages of urban development in its history. Of those, the earliest period is known as the precolonial period. This lasted from approximately 3000 BC until the colonial era began in the sixteenth century. This three thousand year history started with the early African empires of Egypt and Kush. These and other kingdoms throughout West Africa and the Nile River Valley predate Western civilizations like the Roman Empire. These empires and their wealth and power were directly linked to the development and growth of precolonial cities. Throughout the precolonial era there were a plethora of urban centers, with their own distinct patterns and traditions, but many of these are now lost. Due to factors such as the impermanence of building materials used, lack of a written history, and the negative effects of colonialism, it is difficult to learn about precolonial Africa. Much of what we understand of this period has been reconstructed through archaeological interpretation of artifacts and ruins.

To better understand the urban patterns of precolonial Africa, we must ask ourselves, what characteristics constituted a town or city in this era? Several attributes are indicative of an urban conglomeration being considered a city. Cities were centers of population, religion, arts and culture, political and military strength, industry, and commerce. Richard Hull writes that cities were cultural transmitters, radiating their institutions and practices to surrounding areas (Hull, 388). Traditional cities were frequently organized as a collective body under the rule of an elite with political, economic or religious authority. We must also define cities through the functions they perform. According to Richard Hull, “Some urbanologists insist that an urban agglomeration is not a “town” unless a significant portion of its inhabitants devote the greater part of their energies to non-agricultural pursuits” (Hull, 388). This definition is far too narrow, and towns and cities should be defined not just by size or industry, but centers of receiving and

synthesizing culture. Many cities that are known to history received high status, not for their industry, but for their ability to serve as middlemen in commercial and social exchange.

Towns commonly evolved from spiritual centers, transformed into focal points of mercantilism and political activity. Towns and cities also evolved from royal residences, or centers of political authority, which became more stabilized with the additions of markets. Despite these factors, precolonial African cities and towns were, at their root, agrarian. Estimates state that seventy percent of urban male residents commuted to outlying farms and worked in agricultural production (Hull 388). Urban societies therefore tended to develop in regions of high ecological and economic potential, such as the Mediterranean coast, the Nile towns of Nubia, West Africa, and the Sub-Saharan region of Africa.

### *Northern Africa: Carthage*



Figure. 1: Punic ruins in Byrsa

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carthage#/media/File:Maison\\_punique\\_byrsa.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carthage#/media/File:Maison_punique_byrsa.jpg)

The earliest urban developments were in Northern Africa. Binns writes, “The history of [urban] settlements in North Africa was closely linked with the rise and fall of several empires in the region and their associated military and trading activities” (Binns, 5.4.1) Examples of these include Tunis, Tripoli, Algiers, Cairo, and Carthage.

The Phoenicians, an ancient seafaring civilization originally from Tyre (near modern day Lebanon), founded the city and port of Carthage around 814 BC. Carthage was part of a pattern of trading posts along the coast of what is now Morocco. However, evidence such as its Phoenician name, Qart-Hadashti, which translates to “New City,” indicates that from its inception, Carthage was more than just a mere trading post (Miles, 15). The location of Carthage was strategically sound, as it sat between two of the most important Mediterranean trading routes of the 9th century BC. Because of this, some scholars believe Carthage may have been founded as a civic center for smaller regional colonies. In the 5th century BC, these Phoenician settlements and trading posts were taken over by the Carthaginians. During this time, Carthage also expanded its agricultural infrastructure, ramping up production of food and wine to be able to engage in export. The plains outside of Carthage’s walls filled with an urban network of houses, streets, gardens, wells, and public squares, parallel to the shoreline. Within the city walls, the religious and administrative center was its citadel, the Byrsa (Figure 1), and on its highest point was the sacred temple of Eshmoun. Because of its importance in trade, as well as its manufacturing centers for pottery, metalworking, and dye production, the wealth and importance of Carthage grew. Using evidence provided by the series of cemeteries which surrounded the city, it is estimated that at its peak, Carthage had approximately 30,000 inhabitants. Carthage was conquered and destroyed by the Romans during the Punic Wars in the second century BC. Because of this, most of what is known about the city state is from the Greeks and Romans,

however, a small number of surviving inscriptions survive in the ruins of the city. These permit a glimpse into daily life in Carthage, covering such topics as the construction of monuments, religious rituals and the city's tradesmen (Miles 15). After the sack of Carthage in 146 BC, it was rebuilt by the Romans and maintained importance until its final destruction in 698 AD during the Muslim Conquest of North Africa (Binns 5.4.1).

## *Western Africa: Jenne-Jeno/Djenne*



Figure 2: The Great Mosque of Djenne

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Mosque\\_of\\_Djenn%C3%A9#/media/File:Great\\_Mosque\\_of\\_Djenn%C3%A9\\_1.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Mosque_of_Djenn%C3%A9#/media/File:Great_Mosque_of_Djenn%C3%A9_1.jpg)

Precolonial West Africa was ruled by a succession of empires and kingdoms, such as Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. These used cities as a means to centralize their economic and political power to effectively rule their kingdoms and empires. Especially important to the Empires of Mali and Songhai were the trading centers along the Niger river. Djenne was one of these cities.



The educational and religious institutions of Djenne, as well as its architecture became examples for many surrounding communities (Hull, 388). The current Mali town of Djenne was established in the 9th century AD, but is linked to the even older city of Jenne-Jeno, which was founded in 250 BC. The leading experts on Jenne-Jeno, archaeologists Roderick and Susan McIntosh, describe it as “a city without a citadel” (Lange 100). Jenne-Jeno lacked a royal palace, and was not led by a ruler or an army. Instead, a variety of ethnic groups formed a liberal democracy. These groups each had their own specialties, such as farming, fishing, etc., and lived and worked separately as self-governing units, only coming together to trade and make decisions in regard to commercial affairs (Lange 100). This governing system actually continues in modern Djenne, and was well-suited to the environment of the Niger river. Jenne-Jeno declined after 1100, and was abandoned in favor of Djenne in the 14th century. Djenne became a center of religion and education, after Arab traders introduced Islam . This led to the construction of the Great Mosque (Figure 2), which is considered one of the best examples of traditional Sudanese architecture. This architectural style quickly spread across Western Africa, and is still practiced today in and around Djenne. Though the empires of Mali and Songhai fell, and Djenne’s power and influence declined, it is still possible to see their legacies in modern Djenne. The traditional architecture is fragile and regular maintenance and re-plastering is necessary to protect the buildings against the monsoons. After a period of drought in the 1970s and 1980s which led to widespread abandonment and neglect, Djenne is rebuilding. The Netherlands granted \$500,000 to Djenne to rebuild approximately one-eighth of city. Djennenke (the name for the city’s residents) pay nothing, but all repairs must be completed in traditional techniques with traditional materials to maintain the integrity of the city. (Lange 100).



## *Eastern Africa: Meroe*



Figure 3: Pyramids of Meroe - Northern Cemetery

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meroë#/media/File:Archaeological\\_Sites\\_of\\_the\\_Island\\_of\\_Meroe-114973.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meroë#/media/File:Archaeological_Sites_of_the_Island_of_Meroe-114973.jpg)

The earliest kingdom in Africa's interior was that of Kush, contemporaries of the Egyptian pharaohs. Located in the eastern Sudan, near the confluence of the Upper Nile and the Atbara River, the Kushites founded Meroe in the 8th century BC, later making it their capital city in 590 BC. This region was known as Nubia. The pharaohs conquered Nubia during the New Kingdom, and many of their customs and practices were imposed on Kushite society and the ruling classes of Kush adopted Egyptian culture. The Nubian desert ended just outside the fringes of Meroe, changing into fertile forestland. Roman explorers in 61 AD reported, "greener herbage begins near the city and stretches of forest come into view where the tracks of the rhinoceroses and elephants can be seen." (McLaughlin 36) Ancient travelers to Meroe discovered a "typical" African city, not overly expansive with few large stone buildings (Burstein 13). Meroe was connected to other regional urban centers via overland roads and river

tributaries. Much like the cities of Ancient Egypt, Meroe's wealth and fertility was dependent on its proximity to the Nile. While the religious center of Kush remained at the previous capital Napata until 250 BC, important governmental and trade practices were moved to Meroe. Meroe also controlled many of the key trading routes between Sub-Saharan Africa and Egypt. At its peak, it is estimated that Meroe had 10,000 inhabitants (Burstein 13) Much of the information about the Meroites has been lost, and historians must rely on writings of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. What does remain, are ruins of parts of the city. The center of Meroe contained a grand Egyptian style temple, and the royal compound (Burstein 13). Meroe also contained steep stone pyramids, adopted from the Egyptian traditions. However, most of the Meroites lived in mud brick structures arranged along alleyways, many of these are now lost. Meroe prospered until the 3rd century AD, when it began to decline, before eventually being destroyed by an invading army from Axum. After this, its location was forgotten, until its rediscovery in the late 18th century.

### *Sub-Saharan Africa: The Great Zimbabwe*



Figure 4: Overview of Great Zimbabwe

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Zimbabwe#/media/File:Great-Zimbabwe.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Zimbabwe#/media/File:Great-Zimbabwe.jpg)

The Great Zimbabwe was both a political and economic center and, in some form of human settlement, prospered from the 4th to the 18th centuries, a period of 1400 years (Hull 392). By the 15th century it was one of the most significant urban centers south of the Zambezi River, and had an estimated peak of 18,000 inhabitants (Storey 154). It was renowned for its gold production and extensive trading routes, which reached as far as China (Binns 5.4.1). The ruins of Great Zimbabwe were built in stages between 1000 and 1400 AD. The stone built center of the Great Zimbabwe, known as the Great Enclosure (Figure 4), is approximately 1 square kilometers, out of a total area of more than 25 square kilometers. Zimbabwe roughly translates to “Stone Building” and is appropriate, as the site is the most significant example of stone construction in its region. In 1986, the ruins were declared a UNESCO world heritage site, and is protected as one of the largest structures from ancient Sub-Saharan Africa.

### *Summary of Precolonial Urbanization*

After reviewing examples of precolonial African cities, it is necessary to examine how and why they developed. Historians emphasize that urban development occurred in areas where social, economic, and environmental resources were advantageous to settlement. Population pressure, especially in areas such as the Nile River Valley, was also an important factor as the habitable areas were limited. These areas of high potential, combined with populations with technological abilities to produce, store, and transport a food surplus led to urban development. While many of these precolonial cities declined centuries ago, their impact on modern African culture and geography is still evident.

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