The Spread of Civilizations and the Movement of Peoples

Far up the Nile, above the sixth cataract, beyond the borders of ancient Egypt, even beyond the land of the Nubians, who themselves had created dynasties that ruled for a while as the pharaohs of Egypt, there was a kingdom in the highlands of Ethiopia called Axum. The influences of the great civilizations like Egypt often reach far beyond their borders, and from Egypt in the 4th century C.E., Christianity had spread by way of missionary activity and trade up the Nile. The local population of Axum had mixed with peoples that came from Eritrea and had migrated from southern Arabia. Axum had challenged and then defeated the Nubian kingdom of Meroë, and by the third century C.E., it was flourishing—in part because of its commerce. Axum’s port city of Adulis on the Red Sea, famous for trade in gold, ivory, jewelry, and textiles, welcomed Byzantine, Persian, Italian, and Indian traders from the Mediterranean and the Arabian seas.

At the court of King Ezana, the ruler of Axum, the products of Egypt, the Middle East, India and Arabia were all available and the influences of these diverse cultures could be felt. Axum had been a rival of the kingdom of Meroë, whose men had served in Egypt’s armies and whose rulers had sometimes become the pharaohs of Egypt, but by the 2nd century C.E., Axum had become a power in its own right, its power extending from Sudan to Yemen.

Here legend joins history. Around 350 C.E. King Ezana converted to Christianity. A Byzantine historian claimed that a Greek merchant ship returning from India was captured on the African coast and its Christian merchant and crew killed. Two young boys survived and were taken as servants to the court of Axum. One of them, Frumentius, eventually became the tutor to young Prince Ezana, heir to the throne. The bond between Frumentius and the prince was strong and his influence grew. Frumentius sponsored increasing contacts with the world of Christianity. His efforts eventually led to his appointment as bishop of Ethiopia by the Christian authorities in Alexandria, and his most important convert was the king.

Axum, the forerunner of modern Ethiopia, became a Christian kingdom in the heart of Africa. The people of Axum developed a flourishing Christian
society with impressive churches, monasteries, large stone commemorative columns, and a distinctive Semitic written language called “Ge’ez,” which was used for ceremonial life, although Greek was also understood at the royal palace. The Bible was translated, and the Axumites sought to establish their ties to the biblical past by claiming that the queen of Sheba, the mysterious and beautiful monarch who had married King Solomon, was really a ruler of Axum, and that when she returned to her country she had with her Solomon’s son, David, who later became Menelik I, the first ruler of Ethiopia. Later with the spread of Islam in the 8th century, Christian Ethiopia became relatively isolated from contacts with the rest of the Christian world, but it fiercely maintained its religion and its independence. Frumentius became a Christian saint and is remembered as the Apostle of Ethiopia and “the Father of Peace.”
The story of Axum highlights the themes of cultural diffusion, migrations, and cross-cultural trade, all of which have played central roles in world history and in the contact between the centers of civilization and the rest of the world. The movements of peoples, goods, ideas, and cultural patterns have all shaped the patterns of world history. We have concentrated thus far on the centers of civilization and their internal developments in the classical societies of the Old World and the emerging civilizations in the Americas. In this chapter we explore the connections between the established centers and the rest of the world’s peoples. The major civilizations have been expansive, and their innovations and cultures have influenced their neighbors and sometimes peoples who lived far away. Although scholars still debate the issue, many believe that important early breakthroughs, such as agriculture, the domestication of animals, pottery, and metallurgy, were not repeatedly reinvented across the globe but rather were spread by contacts and migration. For example, agriculture may have been “invented” more than once, but most people learned about it by contact with those who already practiced it.
How do cultures spread? At times, as with Rome, conquest has been the means of imposing ideas, language, and institutions. Roman culture and law were carried to the far ends of the empire by the conquering Roman legions. In other places, long-distance traders have carried ideas as well as goods, and as in the case of Axum, sometimes missionary activity and local trade have been the channels through which peoples learned of one another’s ways. Thus the ship, the caravan, ideas, and the sword have all been instruments of cultural diffusion.

The history of Rome after the empire was invaded demonstrates another possibility, for it is not always conquerors who spread their culture; sometimes it is the conquered. In late Rome, as in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and China, the “barbarian” conquerors absorbed the culture of a defeated civilization and adopted its ways. The result was a new fusion of cultural elements. In other places, trade or missionary activity spread civilization. In this chapter, for example, our discussion of early Japanese society will demonstrate the peaceful spread of Chinese culture and its transformation in Japan, a process in which Buddhism played a major role.

This chapter examines five areas of the world—sub-Saharan Africa, central Asia, northern Europe, Japan, and the Pacific islands—which at the time their cultures took shape were not civilization centers. Nevertheless, the peoples of these areas were influenced by developments or innovations in those centers or, in the case of the Pacific islands, by earlier cultural developments on the Asian mainland. Central Asia provides its own special case, as a seedbed for major nomadic societies that interacted with civilizations through trade, migration, and invasion. In each case, we will see how ideas, techniques, and material objects were adapted to new environments and different social circumstances so that the spread of civilization and the contact of cultures usually were creative processes, not simply a matter of copying.

It may at first seem strange to discuss peoples as different as the Polynesians, the Germanic tribes, the Slavs, the Japanese, and the early sub-Saharan Africans together. But the processes of migration, cultural spread, and cultural development are the basis for our discussion. Moreover, unlike earlier chapters, in which the chronological limits have been fairly precise, our discussion here ranges more broadly over time, because the pace and rhythm of cultural spread varied greatly in these widely separated parts of the world. The story of how these peoples began to develop their distinctive cultures, often in contact with centers of civilization, should be our focus, rather than a limited time frame. Finally, this chapter also introduces some peoples whose role in world history later became particularly important.

**The Spread of Civilization in Africa**

- Africa, the continent where the earliest humans developed and the home of Egypt’s remarkable civilization, experienced climatic changes, such as the drying of the Sahara between 7000 and 3000 B.C.E., and foreign influences, such as the introduction of the horse around 1000 B.C.E. and of iron around 500 B.C.E. These developments set in motion a series of cultural changes. The migration of Bantu-speaking peoples from West Africa across the continent often was accompanied by the introduction of iron and agriculture. Kingdoms such as Axum in Ethiopia and Ghana in the western Sudan represented the growth of African civilizations.

Africa is a vast continent, almost 12 million square miles, which is about three times the size of the United States. Most of it lies in the tropics, and although we often think of Africa in terms of its rain forests, less than 10 percent of the continent is covered by tropical forests. Much of the African surface is covered by savannas, or open grasslands, and by arid plains and deserts. Large rivers—the Congo, the Nile, the Zambezi, and the Niger—begin in the interior of the continent and flow to the sea over great falls and cataracts that mark the passage from plateau to coast. These falls have historically made movement from the coast to the interior difficult, but the great river systems have also provided the African interior with communication routes.

Africa was the scene of human beginnings. Even before the appearance of *Homo sapiens* (the ancestors of modern human beings) about 300,000 years ago, other hominid species, such as *Homo erectus*, had moved outward from Africa to Asia and Europe. In Chapter 2 we discussed the remarkable civilization of Egypt in the Nile valley and its extension to the upper Nile kingdoms of Kush and Ethiopia. In this chapter, we will examine the spread of elements of civilization to other areas of Africa.

Despite the false image of Africa as the dark and isolated continent, it was often in contact with other areas of the world. Technology, crops, ideas, and material goods from Asia and Europe stimulated social and cultural innovations. Moreover, the contacts were not always in one direction; there is much evidence that not only early humans but also certain languages, crops, and political and cultural influences spread outward to Europe and Asia from Africa.

Climatic change altered the appearance of the African continent and seems to have set a whole series of historical processes in motion. That change centers
on the Sahara, which during the Late Stone Age (6000–500 B.C.E.) received 10 to 50 times as much rain as it does today (Map 9.1). Archeological evidence indicates that several peoples inhabited the area of the Sahara during this period, including the ancestors of the modern-day Berbers and Tuaregs of north Africa, who speak languages related to ancient Egyptian, and the ancestors of the Negro peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, some of whom also spoke these Afro-Asiatic languages. About 9000 years ago, these conditions began to change as temperatures in the Sahara rose and rainfall became erratic. By about 3000 B.C.E., much of the area was desert. This process continues today (Figure 9.2).

As the Sahara became less habitable, the populations moved north toward the Mediterranean coast and south into the area of the dry sahel, or fringe, and especially onto the grassy savannas suitable for agriculture and grazing that stretch across Africa from the mouth of the Senegal River on the west coast to Lake Chad and the upper Nile valley. This broad region, the Sudan, became a center of cultural development after about 300 B.C.E. The movement of peoples into the Sudan and toward the Nile valley and the Mediterranean set the stage for major developments in the later history of Africa.

**Agriculture, Livestock, and Iron**

Agriculture may have developed independently in Africa, but many scholars believe that the spread of agriculture and iron throughout Africa is evidence of the continent’s links to centers of civilization in the Near East and the Mediterranean world. The drying of the Sahara had pushed many peoples to the south into sub-Saharan Africa. These were the ancestors of the Negro peoples. They settled at first in scattered hunting-and-gathering bands, although fishers lived near lakes and rivers. Agriculture seems to have reached these peoples from the Near East because the first domesticated crops were millet and sorghum, whose origins are not African but west Asian. The route of agricultural distribution may have gone through Egypt or Ethiopia, which long had contacts across the Red Sea with the Arabian peninsula. There is evidence of agriculture before 3000 B.C.E. Also, in Africa, unlike other areas, herding may have preceded cultivation. These developments may be the result of climatic change, a long wet period from 12,000 to 7500 years ago when North Africa received much more moisture than before.

Once the idea of planting spread, Africans began to develop their own crops, such as certain varieties of rice, and continued to be receptive to new imports. African crops were domesticated in a band that extends from Ethiopia across the southern Sudan to west Africa. Later, other crops such as bananas were introduced from southeast Asia. In the 16th century C.E., American crops, such as maize and manioc, spread throughout Africa.

Livestock also came from outside Africa. Cattle, goats, and domestic sheep were introduced from Asia.
Horses apparently were introduced to Africa from west Asia by the Hyksos invaders of Egypt (1780–1560 B.C.E.) and then spread across the Sudan to west Africa. Rock paintings in the Sahara show the use of horses and chariots to traverse the desert, and by 300–200 B.C.E., trade routes extended across the desert. Horses became the symbol of kingly authority and a basis of military power in some states that developed large cavalry regiments. One observer claimed that in the 14th century B.C.E., the later west African empire of Mali could field 10,000 riders. The obvious power and utility of the horse might have led to even wider use, but as with other new technologies and cultural elements, the physical environment was a limiting factor. The horse was widely adopted in the west African grasslands, but in humid tropical forests and brush where the tsetse fly thrived, raising livestock became almost impossible. The tsetse fly carried “sleeping sickness,” or trypanosomiasis, to which horses, cattle, and humans are susceptible. Cavalry campaigns were impossible in the rainy season, when the range of the flies increased. This tiny but tenacious foe brought African cavalries to a halt.

Environment created both limits and opportunities, but the balance between them was sometimes changed by new elements. The introduction of the camel from Asia about the 1st century C.E. was an important innovation. Its ability to thrive in harsh desert conditions and to carry large loads cheaply made it an effective and efficient means of transportation. The camel transformed the desert from a barrier into a still difficult but more accessible route of trade and communication.

Livestock provided a living to peoples in the arid portions of the savanna belt and the Sahara and allowed a transhumant, or seasonally moving, way of life to flourish in certain inhospitable regions. In some areas, it appears that livestock and agriculture arrived about the same time.

Ironworking also came from west Asia, although by routes somewhat different from those of agriculture. In most of Africa, societies moved directly from a technology of stone to iron without passing through the intermediate stage of copper or bronze, although some early copperworking sites have been found in west Africa. Iron had been worked in the Near East and Anatolia for at least a thousand years before it began to penetrate into sub-Saharan Africa. The Phoenicians carried the knowledge of iron smelting to their colonies, such as Carthage in north Africa, by the 8th century B.C.E., and from there to their trading ports along the coast of Morocco. By sea down the coast or by land across the Sahara, this knowledge penetrated into the forests and savannas of west Africa during the last millennium B.C.E., or at roughly the same time that ironmaking was reaching western Europe. Evidence of ironmaking has been found in Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali, and iron implements seem to have slowly replaced stone ones at several sites.

This technological shift caused profound changes in the complexity of African societies. Iron represented power. In west Africa, the blacksmith who made tools and weapons had an important place in society, often with special religious powers and functions. Those who knew the secrets of ironmaking gained ritual and sometimes political power.

Ironmaking seems to have traveled from the Red Sea into Ethiopia and east Africa and down the Nile from Egypt into the Sudan, where large African states such as Meroë were in close contact with dynastic Egypt. By the 1st century C.E., iron was known in sub-Saharan Africa, and within about a thousand years, it had reached the southern end of the continent. Iron tools and weapons increased the efficiency of both agriculture and war. In the later stages of this story, after about 1200 C.E., the adoption of agriculture and the use of iron tools and weapons were roughly simultaneous.
Unlike the peoples of the Americas, for whom metallurgy was a very late and limited development, Africans had iron from an early date, developing ingenious furnaces to produce the high heat (1100 degrees Fahrenheit) needed for production. The Nok culture, which flourished in northern Nigeria from around 800 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., was characterized by the use of iron as well as impressive sculptures. It was probably the cultural tradition on which later artistic traditions in that region drew. Bronzeworking was also known to Africans, and by 1000 C.E. remarkably lifelike bronze sculptures were cast at the city-state of Ife in Nigeria by the Yoruba people (see Figure 9.3). Ife became a kind of cultural and ritual capital in the region, a recognition of its historical importance and cultural leadership.

FIGURE 9.3 Remarkable bronze figures were cast at Ife (Nigeria) by Yoruba artisans.

The Bantu Dispersal

The spread of agriculture and later of iron was accompanied by a great movement of people, who may have carried these innovations. These Bantu peoples probably originated in eastern Nigeria in west Africa. Their migration may have been set in motion by an increase in population caused by a movement into their homelands of peoples fleeing the drying of the Sahara (Map 9.2). They spoke proto-Bantu (Bantu means “the people”), which is the parent tongue of many related languages still spoken throughout sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, about 90 percent of the languages south of a line from the Bight of Benin on the west coast to Somalia on the east coast are part of the Bantu family.

Why and how these peoples spread out into central and southern Africa remains a mystery, but archeologists believe that at some stages their iron weapons allowed them to conquer hunting-and-gathering societies, which still used stone implements. Still, the process is uncertain, and peaceful migration—or simply rapid demographic growth—may have also caused the Bantu expansion.

The migrations moved first to the central Sudan and then into the forests of west and central Africa. The rivers, especially the Congo basin, provided the means of movement. The migration was long, gradual, and intermittent. Moving outward from central Africa, Bantu peoples arrived at the east coast, where they met cattle-raising peoples of a different linguistic tradition. By the 12th century, the Bantu speakers pushed south of the Zambezi River into modern Zimbabwe and eventually into south Africa.

From the study of the related Bantu languages, it is possible to learn something about the original culture of the proto-Bantu speakers. The early Bantu depended on agriculture and fishing. They grew sorghum and raised goats and perhaps cattle. Later they also raised bananas, which came to Africa from southeast Asia. They were village dwellers who organized their societies around kinship ties. Leadership of the villages probably was in the hands of a council of elders. The spirits of the natural world played a large role in the lives of these peoples. They looked to their ancestors to help deal with those spirits, and they depended on village religious specialists to deal with calamity and to combat witchcraft, which they feared greatly.

People’s lives and societies changed during the course of the migrations. Long-distance trade in pottery, metals, canoes, and crafts developed in some regions. In many places ritual forms of kingship reinforced by elaborate ceremonies replaced older systems of authority based on age or kinship. Cultural life flourished in forms as diverse as great oral
epics, polyphonic music, and sophisticated wood sculpture. These societies gave birth to wisdom, too. Consider this poem of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria about children:

A child is like a rare bird.
A child is like precious coral.
A child is precious like brass.
You cannot buy a child on the market.
Not for all the money in the world.
The child you can buy for money is a slave... A child is the beginning and end of happiness.
One must not rejoice too soon over a child.
Only the one who is buried by his child,
Is the one who has truly born a child.


In about a thousand years the Bantu-speaking peoples expanded over much of the continent, spreading their languages and cultures among the existing populations, absorbing those original peoples and being absorbed by them. By the 13th century C.E., cattle-raising, iron-using Bantu peoples had approached the southern end of the continent. Winter rains prevented sorghum from growing beyond that point, and their progress stopped. Earlier inhabitants, the Khoisan speakers, remained farther to the south. By that time, Africa’s major features were in place. A few purely hunting peoples remained, such as the Pygmies of central Africa, but their way of life was different from that of most Africans. Agricultural and herding societies with ironworking knowledge could be found throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Although pockets of peoples still speaking non-Bantu languages existed, such as the Khoi-Khoi and San of southern Africa, and in east Africa the influence of Ethiopian culture was still strong, Bantu languages predominated in southern and central Africa and marked the trail of one of the world’s great migrations.

Africa, Civilization, and the Wider World

The development of Egyptian civilization paralleled developments in the Fertile Crescent, but many aspects of Egyptian life, such as ideas about religion and kingship, strongly resembled those of other African societies. There is much debate on whether the Egyptian idea of the king as a divine being with special powers over natural phenomena (an idea also found in some west African kingdoms) came from the common origins of both or whether these concepts spread from Egypt to other areas of Africa. There are other striking parallels, such as brother-sister marriage among rulers and certain rituals when a ruler takes office, that seem to tie the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa to Egypt. Whatever the African origins of Egyptian civilization, there is no doubt of extensive contact between Egypt and peoples living southward along the Nile valley in the Sudan and northern Ethiopia.

Axum: A Christian Kingdom We discussed the Egyptian contacts with Kush in Chapter 2 and the fact that the Kushites and their capitals were influenced by Egyptian culture. For a short period, from 751 B.C.E. until the invasion of Egypt by the Assyrians in 666 B.C.E., the kings of Meroë also ruled as pharaohs of Egypt. Meroë had the mineral ores and fuels needed to produce iron on a large scale. That technology, and its extensive trade with Egypt and the Mediterranean, allowed Meroë to flourish. But Meroë was not alone. Other town-based societies also existed in the region of the Sudan and Ethiopia.

The kingdom of Axum surpassed Meroë in importance around the 1st century C.E. Axum introduces another cultural stream into the history of Africa. It
**Myths of Origin**

Legends and myths have long fascinated anthropologists, literary scholars, and folklorists because they offer an opportunity to see how various peoples have explained the universe and themselves within it. Noted French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss believed that all myths were built around certain basic structures of human thought and that those structures could be revealed by the comparative study of myths. He also argued that for some cultures, such as those of South American Indians, myths with their essentially recurring structures were the primary means of explaining life, while in other cultures, such as those of western Europe and China, a sense of change and history came to predominate in these explanations. Recent scholarship has begun to question the separation of myth and history and has begun to look at the possible historical context and content of myths.

In this chapter, we have examined several peoples whose origins are shrouded in mystery and about whom many questions remain unanswered. The following excerpts provide these peoples’ explanations of their own origins or those of their world.

**A Bantu Myth of Migration**

A series of origin epics and tales among the Luba peoples, who lived in central Africa to the east of the Kongo kingdom, were collected in the 20th century. The concept of splitting off from an existing village and settling in new territory is part of many African origin myths.

In the country of the east, on the right bank of the Luialaba River, there once was a man and a woman. Their names mean respectively “he who builds many houses,” and “she who makes much pottery.” They lived in ignorance of each other. Guided by the sound of chopping, the man discovered the woman, who was preparing firewood. They lived for a long time under the same roof, sleeping in separate beds. The copulation of a pair of jackals gave them the idea of sleeping together. They brought forth twins of opposite sex, who became inseparable companions. One day the twins found a locality that was exceptionally rich in fish. They finally obtained permission from their parents to leave the village and devote themselves entirely to fishing. In their turn, they brought forth twins, who lived in the same incestuous manner, far from their parents. This new generation took up trapping. So pairs of twins, moving each generation a little farther westward, populated the country.

**A Germanic Myth: The Birth of the Gods**

This tale from the rich Norse mythology deals with the birth of the gods. Drawn from the songs and sagas of the Germanic peoples, these stories were part of an oral literature until about the 12th century, when they were committed to writing.

In the beginning of the ages there lived a cow, whose breath was sweet and whose milk was bitter. The cow was called Audhumla and she lived by herself in a frosty, misty plain, where there was nothing to be seen but heaps of snow and ice. A giant named Ymir came out of the dark north and lay down on the ice near Audhumla. “You must let me drink of your milk,” said the giant to the cow; and though her milk was bitter, he liked it well. The cow saw a few grains of salt sprinkled over the ice, so she licked the salt and breathed with her sweet breath. Then long golden locks rose out of the ice, and the southern day shone on them, making them bright and glittering. The giant frowned but the cow continued to lick the salt, and after three licks an entire man arose—a hero strong and beautiful.

When the giant looked full in the face of that beautiful man, he hated him with all his heart and he took a terrible oath that he would never cease fighting until either he or Bur, the hero, should lie dead on the ground. He kept this vow.

Afterwards when the sons of the hero began to grow up, the giant and his sons fought against them too, and were very near conquering them many times. There was one of the sons of these heroes, called Odin, who after many combats did at last slay the great old giant Ymir, and pierced his body with a keen spear. The blood poured forth in a torrent and drowned all the hideous brood, except for one who fled.

After this, Odin gathered around him his sons, brothers, and cousins and spoke to them thus: “Heroes, we have won a great victory; our enemies are dead, or have fled. We cannot stay any longer here where there is nothing evil for us to fight against.” The heroes looked around them at the words of Odin. They spoke out with one voice, “It is well spoken, Odin; we will follow you.” “Southward,” answered Odin, “heat lies, and northward night. From the dim east the sun begins his journey westward home.”

“Westward home!” they shouted all.

Odin rode in the midst of them, and they all paid to him reverence and homage as to a king and father. On his right hand rode Thor, Odin’s strong, warlike, eldest son. On his left hand rode Baldur, the most beautiful of his children. After him came Tyr, the Brave; the silent Vidar; and many more mighty lords and heroes; and then came a shell chariot, in which sat Frigga, the wife of Odin, with all her daughters, friends, and maids.

**The Birth of Japan**

According to Japanese legend, the Lord of Heaven sent two young gods, Izanagi and his consort, Izanami, to subdue
chaos and create beauty after the earth had been created. Descending on a carriage of clouds, Izanagi took the divine spear given to him by the Lord of Heaven and, stirring the fog, created a beautiful island in the midst of the sea. But the island was too small for goodness to grow. Izanagi and Izanami were married and built a shrine.

When Izanagi and his wife came out of the shrine, they stood transfixed. Before them stretched the long, curving shore of a vast island, and on the far horizon were the shapes of others. In great joy the two set out to view their new domains. From island to island they went, marveling at each new land; and when they had traveled them all, they found that there were eight, and to them they gave these names in the order of their birth; first the island of Shikoku, followed by Kyushu, Oki and Sado which [each] were born as twins, Tsushima, and finally Iki. Together they were called the country of the eight great islands, and as time passed they became known as Japan.

More and more islands appeared, and every day Izanagi traveled the land and sea watching over them. Sometimes Izanami went with him, but serving in the shrine took much of her time and she found the long journeys exhausting.

“My dear husband, there is nothing I wish to do more than to live here with you in peace and contentment. But now that so many islands have been born I pray that we too may bear children for our help and delight.”

Her prayers were answered and in the years that followed many children were born to them. The first was the Sea Spirit, the next a Mountain Spirit, and then in succession, the spirits of fields, trees, rivers, and all natural things. Under their care and guidance the islands grew more and more verdant and beautiful. Soon the seasons were born, and the breaths of the winds and rains brought their changing cycles to the mountains and fields. Everywhere the forests grew thick and dense, and in the groves flocks of birds gathered and sang. Crops and harvests multiplied and flowers and bushes bloomed in profusion.

Izanagi and his wife lived in utmost contentment among their family, and when a daughter was born to them, who was the goddess of the Sun, their joy was unbounded. She was the most beautiful and radiant being . . . . Everywhere she went she filled the darkest air with light and brilliance. Her they named Amaterasu.


A Polynesian Creation Story

In this tale from Tahiti, Tangaroa, the ancestor of all the gods and the creator of Havaiki, the birthplace of the land, the gods, and chiefs, and humanity, creates the world. This version of the story was collected in Tahiti in 1822.

For a long time Tangaroa lived within his shell. It was round like an egg and in the lasting darkness it revolved in the void. There was no sun, there was no moon, there was no land nor mountain, all was moving in the void. There was no man, no fowl, no dog, no living thing; there was no water, salt or fresh.

At the end of a great time Tangaroa flicked his shell, and it cracked and fell apart. Then, Tangaroa stepped forth and stood upon that shell and called:

“Who is above there? Who is below there?”
No voice replied. He called again:

“Who is in front there? Who is behind there?”
Still no voice answered. Only Tangaroa’s voice was heard; there was no other.

Then Tangaroa said, “O rock, crawl here!”
But no rock was to crawl to him.
He therefore said, “O sand, crawl here!”
There was no sand to crawl to him. And Tangaroa became angry because he was not obeyed. He therefore overturned his shell and raised it up to form a dome for the sky, and he named it Rumia, that is, Overturned.

After a time great Tangaroa, wearied from confinement, stepped out from another shell that covered him; and he took this shell for rock and sand. But his anger was not finished, and so he took his backbone for a mountain range and his ribs for the ridges that ascend. He took his innards for the broad floating clouds and his flesh for the fatness of the earth, and his arms and legs for the strength of the earth. . . . Of his feathers he made trees and shrubs and plants to clothe the land.

And the blood of Tangaroa became hot, and it floated away to make the redness of the sky, and also rainbows. All that is red is made from Tangaroa’s blood.

Tangaroa called forth gods. It was only later that he called forth man [people], when Tu was with him.

As Tangaroa had shells, so everything has a shell. The sky is a shell, which is endless space, where the gods placed the sun, the moon, the constellations, and the other stars.

The land is a shell to the stones and the water, and to the plants that spring from it. The shell of a man is woman, since it is from her that he comes forth. And a woman’s shell is woman, since it is from here that she comes forth.

No one can name the shells of all the things that are in the world.


Questions Do myths seem to encode history, or are they an alternative way to explain the past? What are the roles of men and women in the myths recorded here and what do they indicate about these early societies? Do the origin myths of the civilizations such as China, Greece, and Rome differ greatly from those recorded here?
seems to have received strong influences and settlers from the Arabian peninsula. It also traded with Alexandrian Egypt and eventually with Rome, Byzantium, and India. Those contacts led to a fusion of cultural elements. By about 200 C.E., Axum was involved in military and political affairs across the Red Sea on the Arabian peninsula. By the mid-3rd century C.E., Axum had defeated Meroë and emerged as the dominant power in the horn of Africa. The history of Axum underlines the cross-fertilization of cultures across the Red Sea.

All this indicates considerable influence and contact between this African kingdom and the outside world well before the arrival of Islam. The civilization of Axum became the basis for much of the distinctive culture of Christian Ethiopia in the centuries that followed. Here, as along the Mediterranean coast of Africa, where Phoenician, Greek, and Roman settlements were established, or up the Nile valley, the ideas, techniques, and material goods from the Mediterranean and western Asia mixed with African peoples and practices.

**Golden Ghana: A Trading State**

An area of grassy savanna extends across the Sudan into West Africa, and the defeated leaders of Meroë apparently moved westward into the Sudan and reestablished themselves at Darfur and Kordofan in the 4th century C.E. Their influence may have extended even farther west. Several accounts and myths associated with royal families and ancient kingdoms in west Africa point to Egypt, Arabia, and even Persia as the original home of the founders. But in west Africa there is also evidence of long-term contact with the Mediterranean world directly across the Sahara. These long-distance external influences were paralleled by an extended period of internal development among the peoples of west Africa such as the Yoruba, Mande, and Fulbe.

The peoples of the savanna took advantage of their location to serve as intermediaries between the southern gold-producing forest zone in the region of the Niger and Senegal river valleys and the markets of north Africa. Trading salt for gold to the peoples of the forest and then sending the gold north along established caravan routes that crossed the Sahara, several states like Gao and Ghana took form before the 8th century C.E. as intermediaries in the trans-Sahara trade (Map 9.3).

Trans-Sahara commerce was the basis for the growth of the empire of Ghana, which lay squarely on the trade route. This was a trading state created by the west African Soninke peoples. Early Arab chroniclers wrote that in Ghana, 20 kings had ruled before the time of Muhammad, which was a way of saying that the kingdom was an ancient one. When Arab visitors began to write about Ghana and other Sudanic states in the 9th century C.E., these states were already well-established kingdoms. Their position was a result of their advantageous geographic position and a joint heritage of internal development and external influences and trade. The external influences increased with the arrival of Islam. In 985 C.E., the king of Gao converted to Islam and set in motion a series of conversions among the elite of the west African states. Conversion of the masses proceeded more slowly.

The ancient kingdom of Ghana (not to be confused with the modern nation of Ghana) lay mostly within the boundaries of the present-day Republic of Mali. It traded for salt, cloth, and manufactured goods from north Africa and the Mediterranean in return for
gold. Ghana’s power depended on its location and control over subject states and provinces, especially gold-producing regions in the forest zones to the south. In 1067 C.E., al-Bakri, a scholar from Muslim Spain, described Ghana’s splendor and power.

The Court of Appeals is held in a domed pavilion around which stand ten horses covered with gold-embroidered materials. Behind the king stand ten pages holding shields and swords decorated with gold and on his right are the sons of vassal kings of his country wearing splendid garments and their hair plaited with gold. SOURCE: The Horizon History of Africa (American Heritage Publishers, 1971) p. 182.

At that time, the capital of Ghana, Kumbi Saleh, appears to have been divided into two cities about 6 miles apart. One was occupied by the king and his court, surrounded by the dwellings of the people. This city also contained buildings for worship and shrines to the local deities. The other was inhabited by long-distance Muslim traders, religious leaders, and scholars. Its mosques and houses were built in the style of the mud-walled architecture of north Africa. Together, the population of these cities may have reached 20,000.

Tax revenues from the gold and salt trades increased the kingdom’s wealth. Historian al-Bakri reported that Ghana could field an army of 200,000 men. Even if we allow for exaggeration, it should be noted that the Normans invaded England at about this time with fewer than 5000 men. Al-Bakri’s account describes the existence of a powerful and well-organized kingdom dominated by the royal family and a group of elite retainers, whose strength rested on control of the trade and on the tribute collected from neighboring peoples.

The image of Ghana in contemporary Arab sources was one of fabled wealth. The account of al-Bakri stated that the king had a monopoly on all gold nuggets found, but the people could gather as much gold dust as they wanted for trade. His description of a royal audience noted that doors of the chamber were guarded by “dogs of excellent breed, who never leave the king’s seat; they wear collars of gold and silver, ornamented with the same metals.” The king was known as Kaya-Maghan, or “the king of Gold.”

Although a certain amount of fantasy was mixed in these accounts, Ghana obviously was a powerful kingdom. Its influence eventually spread into the Sahara,
IN DEPTH

Language as a Historical Source

Historians constantly search for new ways to understand the past. For much of the early history of the world, we must depend on the archeological record. Cultures leave their traces not only in pottery, weapons, temples, and mummies but also in language, written or not. Language is a guide to the thought patterns of a people and to their society and institutions. Moreover, language is a guide to its speakers’ historical relationships to others. The study of both preliterate and literate societies. The Bantu migration is a case in point.

The early study of languages was motivated by recognition of the close relationship between thought and language and the relationship between the structure of thought and language and the overall culture of a people. Early students of language, such as the French thinker Condillac, who wrote in the mid-18th century, believed that “each language expresses the character of the people that speak it.” However, linguistic insights sometimes were influenced by cultural bias. Some later linguists shared the opinion of the learned Wilhelm von Humboldt, who wrote in his essay “On Language” (1836) that some languages were “more perfect” and better suited to the “mental cultivation of mankind.” Not surprisingly, he believed that the Indo-European languages like his own German best fit that definition. By the 20th century and major trading towns were brought under its control. The Berber and Tuareg tribes of the Sahara had converted to Islam in the 7th century, and by the 11th century a new movement, whose followers were called the Almoravids, had begun to sweep across the western desert, Morocco, and Spain. One branch of this movement, under Abu Bakr ibn Umar (d. 1087), launched a series of campaigns in the western Sudan. The Almoravids controlled the gold trade across the Sahara and began to move toward its sources. Ghana was conquered in 1076, and a new fusion of Sudanic and Saharan peoples took place.

Although Ghana continued to exist, its power was weakened, and other states emerged to challenge its leadership. The growth of Islam weakened the kingdom and may have deepened division between its elite and the common people. Former provinces broke away, and a period of political instability and fragmentation followed, during which new states emerged among the Soninke, Fulbe, and Malinke peoples. The power of Ghana ended, but its tradition of trade and military power and the fusion of African and Islamic traditions continued among the successor states. Eventually, a new kingdom, Mali, emerged from this struggle. In many ways Mali was the heir to the power in the region, and it ruled a territory that extended from the bend of the Niger River to the Atlantic coast, which included much of the ancient kingdom of Ghana.

“The study of languages can tell us much about the values, social structure, and material life of peoples in the past.”

The great migration of the Indo-European peoples from central Asia into India and western Europe, the movement of the Bantu peoples throughout southern Africa, and the spread of the Polynesians across the Pacific are among the world’s greatest migrations. Much of what can be said in all three cases—and in the study of the early settlement of the Americas—is based on a study of the vocabulary, structure, and spread of languages.

The study of language as a historical record is based on some fundamental ideas. Languages change over time, as any reading of Chaucer or Shakespeare immediately reveals. As they change, they may diverge from related languages. Languages with strong similarities in structure and vocabulary that cannot be explained by borrowing or contacts are considered part of the same family, and it is assumed that sometime in the past an original language was the parent of all the languages in that family. As groups of people separated, their language changed and diverged. Further separation resulted in further divergence, so that over time a large number of related languages could result from the original language. The proto-Indo-European language was the parent of Sanskrit, Persian, and Latin, but Latin later split into French, Italian, Rumanian, Portuguese, and other related languages. By looking at structural and vocabulary similarities, we can establish linguistic subgroups and their relationship to each other as well as to the parent language. The study of the 300 to 600 (experts disagree) Bantu languages spoken today by more than 400 million people across much of the African continent is a case in point. From the comparative study of their vocabulary, we can tell much about their original cultures, but how can language be used to chart their history?

It can be assumed that the more diversity between languages, the more time has elapsed since their separation from each other. For a while, some linguists thought that if
they could establish the rate at which linguistic changes took place, they could calculate the time that had elapsed since one language and its speakers separated from another. On the basis of 100 or 200 basic words, they attempted to calculate the percentage of change or loss from one language to another. This technique, called glottochronology, is no longer popular because it is clear that languages do not change at a constant rate of speed, and such change depends on many factors. Still, rates of change in written languages can be studied, and when used in conjunction with archeology, language can provide further historical evidence.

It is simple enough to see that the similarity of words in languages (barring random coincidence or words borrowed directly from a foreign language) can indicate a common origin. Mother in English, mater in Latin, and mata in Hindi all point to their common Indo-European origin. The word for eye in Tahiti was mata, in Hawaii maka, and among the New Zealand Maori mata; these similarities point to their common heritage as Polynesian languages. Despite the similar sounds involved in these two sets, the meanings indicate that we are dealing with two different language families.

Although historical linguistics has developed various methods for establishing these relationships, explaining the divergence or the reason for the separation of the peoples that speak the languages is another story. Without the help of archeology, oral traditions, or written records, historical linguistics cannot describe the course of change.

The study of languages can tell us much about the values, social structure, and material life of peoples in the past. A language with 12 adjectives to describe the color of the sea between the speaker and the horizon, or another language that has 20 ways of describing the color of a llama’s coat, indicates the importance of those things to the people involved. A language that has no word for private property or nobility probably lacked those concepts. The grammar and pronunciation of a language can be independent of the physical world of its speakers, but the vocabulary cannot. It reflects what people knew and thought about. It can be assumed that if all the languages that split off from a parent tongue have the same word for iron, dog, cattle, or canoe, then the original speakers must have had these things. This kind of reasoning lies behind much of what we can say about the early Polynesians, the Bantu, and the Indo-Europeans. For example, by studying the distribution of words in various Polynesian languages, linguists have argued that even though we do not know the original home of the Polynesians, the original speakers of the parent language were inhabitants of some mountainous tropical island or islands in the western Pacific, and they grew taro, yams, bananas, and sugar cane before their expansion and dispersal.

Putting the linguistic evidence together with the historical record is challenging. When that record is available, as in the case of Aztec and Roman expansion, we can see that language change and spread sometimes are the result of intentional policy rather than undirected change.

Historical linguistics also concerns itself with variations and subdivisions within languages, or dialects, and with their geographic distribution. What is the difference between a dialect and a language? Linguists argue on this point, but some unknown skeptic once said, “A language is a dialect with an army behind it.” That comment should focus our attention on the social and historical reasons for the predominance of some languages. It also underlines the necessary relationship between linguistics and other methods of knowing the past as tools that should be used together whenever possible.

**Questions** In what ways are language and literacy expressions of social or political power? What are some ways in which changes in our own language indicate broad historical changes? Is there a problem in using language as historical evidence because spoken language often differs from written language?

---

**Nomadic Societies and Indo-European Migrations**

As agriculture had developed in several key centers, herding economies, relying on domesticated animals, took shape in other areas, including central Asia. Some of these peoples later pushed into Europe. Beyond the boundaries of the Hellenistic kingdoms in the Middle East and southern Europe, and to the north of the expanding Roman Empire, lived a mixture of peoples mostly of Indo-European origin. The major groups included Celts, Germans, and Slavs, all of whom developed some agriculture by the classical period. Political organization in northern Europe developed some significant features but—outside of Rome’s boundaries—lagged behind the kingdoms of sub-Saharan Africa.

In the vast expanse of territory that stretched from the steppes of the Ukraine across the center of Asia to the northern borders of China lived a variety of nomadic, herding peoples whose way of life revolved around their animals. These were peoples who practiced pastoralism, moving their herds seasonally, and living...
in close relation to their animals (Figure 9.5). Whether these pastoral nomads tended camels in the Sahara, or reindeer on the tundra of northern Russia, or sheep and horses in central Asia, their way of life had many similarities. They tended to live in small clans that could come together as tribes, migrating year after year in regular patterns to feed and water their flocks or herds, influenced by climate, rainfall, and distance. Wealth and status were often directly measured by the size and quality of the herd or by military prowess, for the nomadic way of life was hard and it placed great value on the virtues of courage and strength.

These were societies that jealously guarded their pastures or water holes but made hospitality a virtue, a necessity for travelers in the vast expenses of the deserts or plains where the nomads lived. The loyalties of extended families were essential, and the ability to lead often combined a dynamic or charismatic personality, personal courage, and the support of kinsmen. Women often had more varied roles than was true in the settled civilizations, including service in marketing goods. The arts of the nomads often made use of the products of their herds or flocks—woolen carpets, leather tents, tools made of horn—and incorporated their animals in their decorative designs.

Nomadic peoples had long lived in a relation of both attraction and rejection with the centers of civilization. They raided the sedentary populations of towns and villages, drawn by their surplus food and richer material culture, but were sometimes also employed by the settled societies that sought to exploit the military prowess of the nomads. Nomads also facilitated long-distance trade, including the traffic along the Silk Road from western China to the Middle East. The civilizations of China, Byzantium, Persia, and Rome all lived in a close and ambiguous relation with the nomads on their borders. Sometimes the nomads captured or destroyed empires and civilizations and created their own successor states, as the Hyksos did in Egypt in the 2nd millennium BCE or the Aryans did in India in the 1st millennium BCE. But, while the nomads could conquer the centers of civilization as the Mongols, Hittites, and Turks were later to do, they usually had to adopt the institutions, social arrangements, and economic practices of the settled peoples whose accomplishments in technology, science, or the arts usually outstripped what the nomads with their more limited resources and populations could do. Most of history has been lived and made by the sedentary agrarian peoples and the city dwellers they supported, but the dynamic interplay with...
the nomads has often affected the course of civilized history and sometimes dominated it.

While various peoples like the Turks and Mongols lived this way of life, the first nomadic peoples about whom we know a good deal are the Indo-European tribes of the mid-2nd millennium B.C.E. For more than a thousand years thereafter, these horse nomads threatened the early civilizations of the Middle East and the Indus plains. Some Indo-European peoples, such as the Hittites and Hyksos, also established their own empires and centers of civilization, while others, such as the early Greeks, settled in the lands to which they migrated. As late as the last centuries B.C.E., these settled groups still struggled to fight off the incursions of later Indo-European migrants such as the Scythians, who invaded Europe and Asia Minor, or the Aryans who menaced Harappan civilization in India. Another group that became important in the age of the classic civilizations were the Hsiung-nu (later known in Europe as the Huns). They devastated China beginning in the 4th century B.C.E. and then centuries later toppled the Gupta Empire in India and smashed into the crumbling Roman Empire.

The original homeland of the Indo-Europeans was probably the area of the Dnieper River north of the Black and Caspian seas. Linguistic evidence indicates that they were herdsmen and farmers. Although they first used their horses to pull chariots and carts, eventually they became riders. By about 3000 B.C.E. Indo-European peoples had moved into Anatolia and were moving eastward toward India. From the ancient homeland also came the populations that occupied Europe.

**The Celts and the Germans**

Celtic peoples spoke an Indo-European language. The **Celts** formed Europe’s first culture, which stretched from Spain northward and into the British Isles. They were organized in small regional kingdoms with fierce warrior leaders, and they mixed agricultural and hunting economies. They had no cities and no writing, and their most impressive buildings were crude stone forts and arrays of stone set up to honor the gods of nature (Figure 9.6). The Romans considered the Celtic peoples barbarians. As Rome expanded its
empire into Gaul, Spain, and Britain, various Celtic peoples came under Roman influence. A population of Romanized Celts developed in villages and towns across western Europe.

Germanic peoples populated much of the northwestern portion of the European continent. Their culture and institutions in many ways resembled those of the Celts (whom they had in some regions displaced). Certainly, to Roman observers, the Germanic tribes north of the empire’s boundaries were undistinguished barbarians, pure and simple. As the Roman historian Tacitus wrote, “Who, indeed, would leave Asia, Africa, or Italy to seek Germany, with its desert scenery, its harsh climate, its sullen manners and aspect?” He might have added “and its warlike people,” for by Tacitus’ time the Romans had already developed a wary respect for the German warriors.

Tacitus had other comments on the Germans, although at times he emphasized their virtues as a way of criticizing what he considered Rome’s moral degeneracy. The strength and bravery of the German warriors impressed him. He pointed out that warriors were pledged to support their chiefs and that the chiefs led by example and tried to outdo their men in battle. The size of a chief’s retinue was a measure of his power and distinction, and men strove to gain a place in such a following.

Women, the elderly, and slaves did agriculture and all household tasks. Women were thought to have an element of holiness and the gift of prophecy. Their advice was sought and respected. Men and women married rather late, and usually a bride-price was paid to the woman. This included oxen, a horse, and arms, which symbolized the union of the couple and their shared responsibilities. Women were supposed to pass these gifts on to their children. Strong matrilineal ties existed, and the relationship between a man and his sisters’ sons was particularly strong. The married state was respected, adultery was rare, and infanticide was not practiced. In a criticism of the Rome of his day, Tacitus said, “Good morality is more effective in Germany than good laws are elsewhere.”

But Tacitus also commented on the rude material life of the Germans, their lack of cities, their simple dwellings, their lack of writing, and their constant fighting. Judgments of this sort accurately reflected the fact that the peoples of northwestern Europe had not formulated a civilization. However, they overlooked several important achievements and changes among some groups, such as the Germanic tribes, that accelerated during the final centuries of the classical era. Like the Celts, the Germanic peoples typically mixed agriculture and hunting, and they also herded cattle in a nomadic pattern. Among many Germans, however, agriculture steadily improved in the 1st centuries C.E. There were also marked improvements in iron use and the manufacture of cloth and other items. Some of these improvements resulted from knowledge of Roman skills, which spread beyond the empire’s boundaries.

Political cohesion among some German groups improved by the 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. Like many traditionally nomadic peoples, the Germans had long been organized in decentralized tribes of a few thousand members each, and even the tribes were loosely organized, with individual family groups settling most disputes. A tribe might have a king or an assembly of warrior chiefs; in either case, vigorous discussion of any policy issue among all fighting men was essential. Group loyalty and a certain amount of political equality were important parts of this tradition and would affect European institutions in the centuries after the classical era. After about 200 C.E., some German tribes merged into larger units as they learned to copy Roman military structure somewhat and were forced by Roman pressure to improve their organizational ability. The power of individual kings increased as they ruled large confederations of tribes.

Thus, even apart from the Germans who filtered into the Roman Empire or joined its armies, integrating portions of Roman civilization directly, there were important changes in the Germanic lands during the classical era, with improvements in agriculture, trade, manufacture, and politics. However, Germanic culture seems to have changed little outside Rome’s boundaries. The German religion, like that of the Bantu, was animistic, worshiping the spirits of nature. Horses were the most common sacrifice.

The Germans made their first clear mark in world history as growing bands began to move southward into the Roman Empire, ultimately probing into Italy, Spain, and north Africa (Map 9.4). Their movement, the Völkerwanderungen, resulted from population growth in their own lands, the nomadic tradition, Rome’s attractiveness and growing weakness, and invasions by Asian groups on the eastern flanks of the Germanic region. German pressure within the Roman Empire played a major role in toppling it.

Growing cohesion among some Germanic groups had an influence beyond the pressures on Rome. It helped prepare larger areas of Europe for the gradual development of civilization in the centuries after Rome’s fall. This new civilization reflected many Roman legacies and a strong Christian influence, but it also built on some Germanic elements. Even as Rome fell, in fact, a new Germanic center was taking shape in Scandinavia that would have wide influence in the following centuries. Far from Roman influence, Scandinavian populations were growing, and political confederations were being formed by the 5th century. This would soon lead to invasions and trade throughout much of the Mediterranean world.
The Slavs in Eastern Europe

While developments among various Germanic peoples held the stage in northwestern Europe, a somewhat similar pattern of precivilizational advance emerged in various parts of eastern Europe, with some influence from the Hellenistic kingdoms and then the eastern portions of the Roman Empire. As early as 3000 B.C.E., agriculture had been established in the southern part of what is now Russia, spreading from the Middle East. Bronze tools were also introduced, and then a wave of Indo-European invasions, about 1000 B.C.E., brought iron. Several new invasions from central Asia followed, and a loosely organized Scythian state controlled the region from the 7th to the 3rd centuries B.C.E. The Scyths were nomadic warriors, but agriculture continued to flourish in the plain north of the Black Sea. Scythian rule was followed by an invasion by a people known as the Sarmatians, some of whose descendants live in the central Caucasus region of Russia today. Under both Scythians and Sarmatians, Greek and Persian trade and cultural influence, including artistic styles, spread into this region.

By the final centuries of the classical era, Slavic peoples were increasingly migrating into Russia and other parts of eastern Europe. Some Slavs had been in this region before, and the origin of these people is disputed. What is known is that the Slavic people were an Indo-European group, that they had become increasingly noticeable in Russia and the Balkans by the time of the early Roman Empire, and that they would ultimately dominate much of eastern Europe from the Balkans northward. Slavic political organization may have been a bit less developed than Germanic, but by the 5th century C.E. some regional kingdoms had been formed, notably in Bulgaria. Agriculture and manufacturing, including skilled ironwork, gained ground steadily, and (in advance of the Germanic northwest) some trading cities had been formed.

As with the Germans to the west, it would be premature to refer to a civilization of eastern Europe beyond the Mediterranean zone at the time of Rome’s fall, and the Slavic peoples were severely disrupted by invasions from central Asia as the Huns and others cut across their lands. Nevertheless, an increasingly prosperous agricultural economy and rudiments of political organization beyond the tribal level characterized parts of the Slavic world toward the end of the classical era and presaged more important developments.
VISUALIZING THE PAST

Varieties of Human Adaptation and the Potential for Civilization

Perhaps the best way to understand and compare various human adaptations to environmental conditions is to relate them to the two extreme types of adaptation that ecologists call the niche and the holding patterns. In the first instance, the human group works its way into the environment in which it lives, rather than transforming that environment. Like the plants and animals with which they share a particular ecosystem, these peoples simply occupy one of many niches available in the overall ecosystem. Their activities have a minimal impact on the other niches or the life forms that occupy them. In the most extreme manifestations of the niche pattern, exhibited by rainforest peoples of Central and South America, southeast Asia, and Africa, small human groups, forest farmers, hunt game and gather fruits and vegetables in the jungle without altering the forest environment. These peoples move continuously through large areas of the forest, ingeniously tapping the many sources of plant and animal food.

Before the Industrial Revolution, sedentary wet-rice agriculture, which depended on elaborate irrigation systems, was the most developed form of the holding approach to ecological adaptation. Peoples who practice this approach extensively transform the natural environments in which they live. Wet-rice farmers, for example, clear forests, haul away stones, and plow grasses and weeds to prepare large tracts of land for cultivation. They dig ditches to carry water to the rice fields, which are surrounded by dikes to hold the water in during the growing season. In addition, they clear fields and forests to support domesticated animals. Thus, the original vegetation and animal life are supplanted by domesticated plants and livestock. The domesticated plants are arranged in patterns determined by human needs rather than natural processes. They are protected from wild animals by fences and shelters, and wild plants are removed. Areas near the rice fields are also transformed by the construction of human dwellings, shrines, and granaries, which are combined to form villages and sometimes grow into cities.

Between the niche pattern and the holding pattern, several intermediate forms of human adaptation have developed. One of the most important of these in terms of the numbers of humans supported by it is dry farming of grain crops such as wheat, rye, barley, and millet. Although the environment is not as extensively transformed by dry farming as by wet-rice agriculture, both involve building permanent villages, raising livestock, and building systems of food storage and transportation.

Shifting cultivation (or slash and burn farming), concentrated in the rain forests of both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, is an adaptation that is much closer to the niche pattern than either form of sedentary agriculture. Shifting cultivators burn off the jungle undergrowth but leave the large trees and the cover they provide to protect the fragile tropical soils. Using the ashes created by their fires as a natural fertilizer, shifting farmers cultivate the area cleared on the forest floor. The foods grown in this manner form the staples of their diet, which are supplemented by meat, wild berries, and other forest plants. After working a particular clearing for a year or two, shifting farmers move to another patch in the forest, where they again begin the burning-cultivating sequence.

Pastoral nomadism is a second major alternative between hunting and gathering and sedentary agriculture. Although nomadic groups differ in the kinds of animals they herd and whether they ride horses or camels or work their herds on foot, their pattern of adaptation to their natural environment is similar. Like the shifting cultivators, nomads do not seek to transform their natural environments in major ways. In the steppe and savanna grasslands where they live in the winter and spring, they introduce large herds of domesticated livestock. Their herds harvest the plant cover in these areas. The nomads also set up temporary camps of tents or wagons near their herds. When the hot, dry summer arrives, the nomads break camp and move with their herds to river-

The Spread of Chinese Civilization to Japan

The transmission of key elements in Chinese culture to the offshore islands that came to make up Japan is one of the most important examples of the spread of civilization from a central core area to neighboring or overseas peoples. In the first centuries C.E., the peoples of Japan imported a wide range of ideas, techniques of production, institutional models, and material objects from the Chinese mainland. After adapting these imports to the sophisticated culture they had already developed, the Japanese used what they had borrowed from China to build a civilization of their own. New patterns of rice growing and handicraft production enhanced the economic base of the Yamato clan chieftains, who, beginning in the 3rd century C.E., extended their control over the most populous regions of the main Japanese island of Honshu.
The Japanese developed a unique civilization from a blend of their own culture and a selective importation and conscious refashioning of Chinese influences. Not conquering armies, but merchants and traveling monks—and eventually Japanese students who studied in China—were the most important agents by which elements of Chinese culture were transmitted across the sea. Especially in the early centuries of borrowing, from the 1st to the 5th centuries C.E., interchange between China and Japan was largely indirect. It was mediated by the peoples and kingdoms of Korea, who had adapted key aspects of Chinese civilization to their own cultures somewhat earlier than the Japanese.

In contrast to the Vietnamese, who were ruled by the Chinese for nearly a millennium, and the peoples of south China, who were eventually absorbed by Chinese civilization, the Japanese initiated and controlled the process of cultural borrowing from China. Despite a willingness to acknowledge the cultural superiority of the Chinese Middle Kingdom, the Japanese retained political independence throughout the centuries of intense borrowing. Consequently, they could be more

Questions Which forms of human adaptation are the most likely to produce civilizations as we have defined them in Chapter 1, and why? Which are the least likely, and why? In which areas will it be possible to build highly centralized political systems with considerable state control of local populations, and why? Which ecological zones are likely to produce highly autonomous, independent-minded social groups? Are such areas likely to shape societies in which women have higher or lower status and more or less critical social roles than in areas dominated by wet-rice agriculture or dry farming? What would a people gain by choosing the holding pattern and developing a civilization? What might they lose by giving up a nomadic or shifting-cultivating way of life?
selective in their adoption of Chinese ideas than most of the other peoples influenced by China.

**Natural Setting and the Peopling of the Islands**

The four main islands that make up the homeland of the Japanese people rise abruptly and dramatically from the Pacific Ocean along the northeast coast of Asia (Map 9.5). Formed by volcanic eruptions that still occur periodically, the islands are dominated by mountains and rugged hills. Only a small portion of their surface area is level and extensive enough for the cultivation of wet rice, which from prehistoric times has been the staple of the Japanese diet. Thus, from the time of the earliest settlements, the Japanese have occupied mainly the coastal plains, especially in the south central portions of the largest island, Honshu, which remain the most heavily populated areas of the islands today.

Though poor in natural resources, the islands are difficult to match in their combination of temperate climate and subtle natural beauty that instilled in the Japanese people a refined aesthetic sensibility and sensitivity to the natural world reflected in their religion, art, and architecture. At the same time, the islands’ limited resource base nurtured a disciplined, hard-working population that was regulated by strict legal codes and ruled through much of the islands’ history by warrior elites.

Archeological evidence suggests that as early as 5000 B.C.E., the ancestors of the Japanese people had begun to migrate to the islands. Drawn from numerous east Asian ethnic groups, the migrants came in small bands and periodically in larger waves over many centuries. One of these waves of migrants produced the **Jomon culture** in the 3rd millennium B.C.E. The Jomon were a hunting-and-gathering people who lived in pits dug in the ground. They produced a distinctive pottery whose cordlike decoration gave the people their name.

Most of the new settlers crossed to the islands from the Korean peninsula and Manchuria (Map 9.6). Because they were isolated from political upheavals and social transformations occurring on the mainland, by the first centuries C.E. the diverse migrant streams had blended into a homogenous population with a distinctive Japanese language, culture, and physical appearance. By then they had driven the Ainu, who had settled the islands before them, into northern Honshu and Hokkaido. Over the past two millennia, the Japanese have gradually displaced or absorbed nearly all the remaining Ainu, building a strong sense of cultural and ethnic identity.
Indigenous Culture and Society

Long before Chinese cultural influences began to shape Japanese historical development, the indigenous peoples of the islands had taken significant steps toward creating a civilization of their own. In the last centuries B.C.E., migrants from the mainland introduced wet-rice agriculture and ironworking into Japan. In this period, which is known as the Yayoi epoch, the Japanese also produced wheel-turned pottery and very sophisticated bronzeware, including elaborately decorated bells that were sometimes 4 or 5 feet high.

Until the early 5th century C.E., most of the Japanese population was divided into hundreds of clans, each dominated by a small warrior aristocracy. The clan elites drew their support from the peasantry, which made up over 90 percent of the population of the islands. They were also served by slaves, who like their counterparts in China were only a small minority of the Japanese people. Early visitors from the mainland noted the rigid social distinctions, including different sorts of tattoos and other body markings, that separated the warrior elite from the mass of the people. They also remarked on the strong position of women in early Japanese culture, in marked contrast to their clear subordination in China. Early Japanese households appear to have been matriarchal—that is, dominated by childbearing women. Women also played key roles as shamans, who were central to Japanese religious ceremonies and worship, as leaders of some of the clans, and later as empresses.

The importance of women in early Japanese culture is also indicated by their legends about the creation of the world. The sun goddess, Amaterasu, played a central role, and her worship became the central element in the Shinto religion developed by the island peoples. Shinto devotees worshiped many gods and spirits associated with the natural world. Some of these deities were identified with objects, such as huge trees or mountains such as the famous Mount Fuji. Others were linked to animals that were believed to possess special powers. Gods and spirits were believed to be capable of doing good or evil to humans. To ensure that they brought blessings rather than misfortune, the Japanese made offerings of food and prayers to the gods and nature spirits at special shrines that were built of unfinished wood and were notable for their simple lines and lack of ornamentation. They gave rise to a unique Shinto style of Japanese architecture, which persists to the present day and has had a great impact on architecture in the modern world (Figure 9.7).
In the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., when one of the clans, the Yamato, gained power over the others, an imperial cult developed around the sun goddess and Shinto worship. A central shrine was established at Ise near the Honshu political heartland of early Japanese history, and the priest-chief heads of the Yamato clan claimed descent from the sun goddess herself. Building on this powerful source of legitimacy, the Yamato brought most of the lowland plains of the southern islands under their control through alliances and conquest. By the late 4th century C.E., their sway also extended to southern Korea. This overseas extension of the Yamato domains brought intensified contacts with Chinese civilization, then about to enter one of its most illustrious phases. The combination of these contacts and the Yamatos’ successful campaigns to unify the Japanese people led to profound transformations in Japanese society and culture in the centuries that followed.

The Chinese Model and the Remaking of Japan

The introduction of the Chinese script in the 4th century C.E. was a major turning point in Japanese cultural development. Writing with the Chinese characters, which were adapted only with great difficulty to the Japanese language, made it possible for the Yamato to begin to build a real bureaucracy and thus more firmly establish their control over vassal clan heads and the peasantry. The use of the Chinese written language also meant that the Japanese could learn from Chinese texts on all manner of subjects, from science and philosophy to art and religion. These works, as well as Chinese scribes to make additional copies and interpret them, were imported from the 5th century onward. Later, Japanese students and scholars who were fluent in Chinese were sent to China to acquire new learning firsthand.

From the mid-6th century, the Buddhist religion became a pivotal factor in the transmission of Chinese influence to Japan. In the period of chaos that followed the fall of the Han dynasty in the early 3rd century C.E., Buddhism was widely adopted by the distressed populace of China and the rulers of the warring kingdoms that succeeded the Han. The pervasive influence of the religion in China in this era and the powerful position of Buddhist monks at the courts of Chinese rulers gave great impetus to its spread to Korea and Japan. In the mid-6th century, a Korean ruler sent Buddhist images and scriptures as presents to the Japanese emperor and urged him to adopt the religion and convert his subjects to it. After considerable debate and even open strife among the families serving the imperial household over the advantages and dangers of introducing Buddhism into Japan, it was officially adopted as the religion of the Yamato domains in the late 580s (Figure 9.8).

From that time onward, Japanese rulers tried to propagate the new religion among their subjects. Warrior aristocrats and peasants converted to the new beliefs, but without giving up their long-standing reverence for Shinto spirits and deities. Thus, Shintōism and Buddhism developed side by side as twin pillars of state and society in Japan. The Japanese elite supported the efforts of Buddhist monks to spread their faith, and the monks in turn served as advisors to the emperor and regional lords. In their teachings of Buddhism, the monks stressed scriptural passages and Buddhist ethical prescriptions that supported rule by a strong monarch and a centralized state.

Although converts from aristocratic Japanese families studied the complex beliefs of Buddhist philosophy and practiced its highly developed meditation techniques, to the illiterate mass of the Japanese people Buddhism was little more than a magical cult. Bud-
dhist monks provided colorful rituals that enriched the peasants’ monotonous lives and charms to ward off sickness or evil spirits, but the common people knew little of Buddhist teachings beyond highly mythologized versions of the Buddha’s life.

Political and Social Change

Beginning in the early 7th century, the Yamato rulers styled themselves the “emperors of the rising sun” in official letters to (one imagines) the somewhat dismayed Chinese “emperors of the setting sun.” Inspired by Chinese examples, they established councils and government departments and tried to introduce genuine bureaucratic control at the local level. At Nara and later Heian (Kyoto), the Japanese emperors laid out courts and capital cities patterned after the ancient imperial centers of China. The Yamato rulers strove to build a peasant conscript army and impose legal codes and a landholding system similar to those in China.

In the centuries after the introduction of Buddhism, Chinese influences were felt in virtually all spheres of Japanese society. Alongside the traditional warrior elite, a class of monks and scholars developed that for several centuries exercised power at the imperial court. Trade with China and Korea and improved communication within Japan enriched existing merchant groups and led to their emergence as a distinct class. New tools and techniques imported from the mainland increased the output of Japanese farmers and made possible a great expansion of the islands’ previously marginal mining industry.

The introduction into Japan of the patriarchal and patrilineal family, which had long been dominant in China, presented a major challenge to traditional Japanese approaches to gender roles and relationships. For several centuries, the position of women within the family remained strong, and the ideal of wives and lovers who were accomplished in literature and the arts was preserved by the courtly elites at the imperial capitals of Nara and Heian. But the adoption of Chinese law codes eroded the control that Japanese women had over their own children and eventually reduced their overall social status. These changes were reflected in the spread of polygamy among the Japanese aristocracy. From the early 9th century, the changes were even more evident in the elite’s refusal to allow women from the imperial family to rule in their own right, as they had periodically in the early centuries of Japanese history. Japanese women, like those in China and India, were increasingly subordinated to their fathers and husbands. As in China and India, entry into religious orders or successful careers as courtesans were nearly the only alternatives to careers as subordinated wives and mothers.

Chinese Influence and Japanese Resistance

Contacts with China and innovations based on the Chinese model were pushed, from the 4th century C.E. onward, by those at the top of Japanese society. Japanese rulers and their chief advisors were motivated mainly by the desire to increase the power of the state to control the warrior nobles and to extract resources from the peasantry. Buddhist ethics and Confucian legal codes enhanced the rulers’ legitimacy. Chinese rituals gave a new dignity and luster to court routines, and the growth of a Chinese-style bureaucracy provided the means for creating the first genuine state in Japanese history. Because the Japanese remained politically independent from China, their rulers could convincingly argue that the adoption of Chinese ways was voluntary and carefully controlled. Only imports that would strengthen the Japanese state or contribute to the well-being of the Japanese populace need be accepted. Chinese ideas and institutions could be reworked to suit conditions in Japan and fit the needs of the Japanese people. Selective borrowing from their ancient and advanced Chinese neighbors, the innovators argued, allowed the Japanese to become fully civilized without destroying their own culture and identity.

Because Japanese rulers lacked the resources of the Chinese emperors and worked with a society that differed greatly in scale and organization, many of their efforts to imitate Chinese patterns failed. The bloated bureaucracies that resulted from the imitation of China were a growing burden for the peasants who had to support them. Efforts to establish local control and reorganize landholding along Chinese lines foundered because of the opposition of regional lords and their retainers. The warrior elite also frustrated the attempt to make soldiers of the peasantry. Conscripts in Japan in this era were little more than forced laborers. Many of the imported Chinese legal injunctions bore little relation to social conditions in Japan and were not enforced. The impressive capital cities laid out by the emperors’ architects remained half-built and underpopulated, even at the height of the early dynasties’ power.

Japan could not simply be made in China’s image. From the outset, the introduction of writing, Buddhism, and other imports from China had given rise to concerns about preserving Japan’s own culture. At times, as in the 580s and the mid-7th century, controversy over foreign influences became a central element in violent struggles between the aristocratic families closest to the throne. But until the 8th century each struggle was won by the forces favoring continuing imports from abroad and the further transformation of Japan along Chinese lines.
The Scattered Societies of Polynesia

Peoples from Asia migrated across the vast expanse of the Pacific, occupying many of the islands. Masters of navigation, they adapted to a variety of environments. On the island groups of Polynesia, such as Hawaii and New Zealand, these peoples created complex societies based on agriculture and maritime resources, mostly in isolation from the rest of humankind.

The peoples of the far Pacific, who had left the Asian mainland before the rise of classical China and India, were unaffected by the spread of Chinese and Indian civilization. They had brought with them the cultural features of late Neolithic Asia, and in isolation they had developed these features on the islands of the vast Pacific.

Certainly one of the great epics of human achievement for which we have only fragmentary evidence is the peopling of the islands of the Pacific Ocean. The image of the prows of their great outrigger canoes cutting through the waves of the vast Pacific Ocean to reach uninhabited islands grips our imagination. The distance across the Pacific from southeast Asia to Central America is some 12,000 miles, and the waters of that ocean are dotted with thousands of islands (Map 9.7). These islands vary in size from tiny atolls formed by coral reefs, to large “high” islands with volcanic peaks and lush valleys, to the great continent of Australia. Most of these islands lie in the tropics, although some, like New Zealand, do not. They are inhabited by a variety of peoples whose physical appearance, language, and culture are quite different but whose origins for the most part seem to be in Asia.

The remarkable story of the Polynesians can serve as a case study of the spread of culture by long-distance maritime migration in the Pacific. Here we are not dealing with the spread from a great center of civilization but with the migration of peoples and their adaptation to new challenges in isolation.

Between roughly 1500 B.C.E. and 1000 C.E., almost all the major islands west of New Guinea were visited, and many were settled, by the ancestors of the peoples we call Polynesians. They left no written records, so we must depend on the evidence of archeology and linguistics, their own oral traditions, and the observations of Europeans who first contacted them to reconstruct the history of their societies.

Linguistic evidence is a starting point. The Polynesians speak about 30 related languages from a family of languages called Austronesian, which is also found in the Philippines, Indonesia, and southeast Asia. The Austronesians were clearly peoples from Asia, but they were not the first migrants in the Pacific. By the time of their expansion about 4000 years ago, New Guinea and Australia had already long been settled (probably since 38,000 B.C.E.) by dark-skinned peoples who spoke languages unrelated to Austronesian. New DNA analyses may provide other clues. Recent studies indicate that the pre-Chinese peoples of Taiwan are the closest relatives to the Polynesian peoples of New Zealand.

The Great Migration

Groups of these Austronesians, speaking a language ancestral to the Polynesian languages, began to expand eastward from Melanesia to Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa. By the time of this expansion, these peoples practiced agriculture, growing yams, taro (a tuber), and other crops; raised dogs, pigs, and chickens; and had already developed a variety of complex fishing techniques. Archeologists can identify their scattered settlements by a distinctive type of pottery called Lapita, with stamped decorations, and by polished stone adzes, fishhooks, and other implements.

From Tonga and Samoa these peoples began to spread eastward to Polynesia proper. Polynesia includes the islands contained in a rough imaginary triangle whose points lie at Hawaii to the north, New Zealand to the south, and...
Easter Island far to the east. Another group of these peoples seems to have moved westward, eventually settling on the island of Madagascar off the African coast.

On the widely dispersed islands of the Pacific, each culture and language began to adapt and evolve differently and thus to diverge from the ancestral Polynesian forms. Some constants in the shared heritage of the ancestral Polynesian culture remained, however. For example, in the 18th century, English explorer Captain James Cook was surprised to find that the words he had learned from the Tahitians were understandable to the Hawaiians, although almost 2500 miles separated those two island groups. Also, a Tahitian named Tupia served Captain Cook effectively as a translator when he contacted the Maori of New Zealand.

Basic principles of economy and social organization could also be found throughout Polynesia, especially on the larger islands. From small groups of original colonists, island populations grew in size and density. By the late 18th century, the island populations totaled 700,000. Although potterymaking was abandoned or forgotten, in many places agriculture became increasingly complex and intensive. Stratified societies with powerful chiefdoms based on lineage characterized many Polynesian islands, and in some places, such as Hawaii, they became extremely hierarchical. Chiefs were able to mobilize their followers for ceremonial and public architecture, or for wars and inter-island raiding. Ritual and religion oriented many aspects of life and served as the basis of the chiefs’ power.

### The Voyagers of the Pacific

How did these ancient Polynesians discover and occupy the islands of the vast Pacific? The Polynesians knew how to make a variety of seaworthy vessels, but for long-distance voyaging, they used great double canoes, or pahi (Figure 9.9). These vessels usually carried a platform between the two hulls on which shelter could be given to people, animals, and plants. With large triangular sails, these vessels, some of which were 60 to 100 feet long, were capable of long voyages at sea and could travel more than 120 miles a day in good weather. They could sail windward, against the winds and tides of the Pacific, which tend to move from east to west.

Naturally, navigation was a problem. Some scholars have held that the voyages were accidental—boats were blown off course, which led to the occupation of new islands—but Polynesian traditions and the continuing ability of some Pacific islanders to navigate long distances by observing the stars, wave patterns, and other techniques support the idea that voyages of colonization were planned. Moreover, sometimes they were two-way. For example, Hawaiian traditions commemorate the arrival of Tahitian chiefs who made voyages to and from Hawaii for about 200 years (1100–1300 C.E.). In 1976, to establish the possibility of such voyaging, the Hokulé, a reconstructed double canoe based on traditional proportions and using only traditional navigational techniques, was sailed from Hawaii to Tahiti in about 35 days.

Much of the Polynesians’ voyaging seems to have been sporadic, as groups pushed by war, population pressure, famine, or a spirit of exploration followed a chief or navigator into the unknown. In the 18th century, when the Europeans arrived, such long-range voyaging was rarely practiced. By that time, however, the Polynesians had explored and colonized almost every habitable island in the vast Pacific.
Ancient Hawaii

We can use the widely separated large islands of New Zealand and Hawaii as examples of Polynesian societies that developed in isolation in response to particular environmental conditions. Hawaii includes eight major islands in a chain about 300 miles long. The volcanic nature of the islands and the tropical climate created an environment of great beauty and majesty that impressed the early inhabitants. The islands probably were settled in at least two migratory waves beginning about 300 C.E. There, early Polynesian culture was adapted and elaborated in isolation over a long period of time. The islands had good soil, and the population grew large, reaching about 200,000 people by the time of European contact in the 1700s. Towns and cities were absent, and houses, here as elsewhere in Polynesia, were scattered along the coast and in valleys leading to the higher interior. A number of chiefly families competed for control of the islands. It was not until after European contact that King Kamehameha I united all the islands under his control in 1810.

Of all the Polynesian societies, Hawaii became the most hierarchical. The high chiefs, or ali‘i, claimed descent from the gods. In some cases, marriage to their sisters ensured the purity of the chiefly family. Their power, authority, and sacredness, or mana, came from their lineages and enabled them to extract labor or tribute from their subjects or even take their land. Feathered capes and helmets as well as tattoos distinguished the chiefs. The ali‘i were revered and feared. A Hawaiian proverb held that “The chief is a shark that swims on land.” A class of lesser nobility and subchiefs of their relatives supported the rule of the ali‘i.

Society rested on the commoners. Hawaiian society was intensely agricultural, and the community’s control of land was a central aspect of social and political relations. Within the hierarchy, commoners were viewed almost as a separate people or at least as a people lacking in lineage. Their lives were constrained and limited by a complex set of kapu (tapu in Tahiti), or taboos, which forbade certain activities and regulated social discourse. It was kapu for women to eat certain foods, to enter the house of a chief, to eat together with men, to view certain ceremonies limited to the chiefs, or even to cast a shadow on a chief. Violations could lead to death. The number of kapu surrounding a chief was a measure of his status and his sanctity, as much a sign of his position in his society as material goods might be in our society.

Many aspects of life were ritualized. The many gods were honored at ceremonial centers whose precincts were sacred. Ritual feasting and hula, or dancing, accompanied many ceremonies. Human and other sacrifices were offered to Ku, the god of war, and to the other deities. Lono, the god of fertility and agri-cultural rebirth, held special importance to the Hawaiians. The great Makahiki festival of thanksgiving, which lasted for four months and at which the chiefs received their tribute from the commoners, was celebrated in honor of the annual return of Lono. During this time war was kapu, hulas were danced, and sexual activity was engaged in frequently in the hope of stimulating fertility. In fact, lovemaking was an art and a preoccupation of the Hawaiians, with important religious, kinship, and political meanings.

Of the various Polynesian societies, Hawaii can be seen as the most successful in terms of its political and social complexity, economic foundations, art and material culture, and religion. With a Neolithic technology, the Hawaiians created a complex culture on their islands. Although they lacked a written language, their legends and oral histories, which could trace the genealogies of chiefly families back to the original canoes of the first migrants, were remarkable achievements that formed and preserved their culture.

The New Zealand Landfall and the Development of Maori Culture

Perhaps as early as the 8th century C.E., the crews of canoes or rafts from the Society Islands and other parts of eastern Polynesia had sailed thousands of miles to the southwest and by chance discovered the two large islands that today make up New Zealand. Over the centuries additional bands of seafarers reached the islands, where they embarked on a struggle to survive in an environment that was colder and harsher than their home islands in Polynesia. Their success is evidenced by the large numbers of Maori—perhaps as many as 200,000 people descended from the Polynesian seafarers—who lived in the islands when the Europeans first came to stay in the late 18th century.

The “land of the long white clouds,” or Aotearoa as the Polynesians referred to the mist-covered islands of New Zealand, had few edible plants beyond berries and fern roots. There were no native land mammals except bats and various kinds of moa, or large, wingless birds, soon overhunted to extinction. Fishing and the introduction by later migrants of many of the staple crops of Polynesia, including the sweet potato, taro, and yam, filled the dietary gap left by the disappearance of the moa.

The moderate climate and rich soils of the north island rendered it more suitable for settlement than the cold and desolate south island, which stretched beneath the 40th parallel toward the South Pole. Consequently, Maori tribes numbering in the thousands warred over control of the forests and croplands on the north island. Long before the arrival of the Europeans, tribal territories with clearly defined boundaries had been established throughout most of the north island.
Maori Culture and Society Each Maori tribe was divided into subgroups called hapu, the primary unit of identity and community. The Maori lived in extended families in large, elaborately carved wooden houses. All the land the Maori farmed for their subsistence was owned by the hapu village and allotted by a communal council to each of the extended families for their support.

Each hapu was led by a male chief, who was not a specialized political leader but rather a particularly skillful warrior. Chieftainships were hereditary, although weak leaders were soon displaced by more able warriors. Despite the magical aura associated with the hapu and tribal chieftains, their actual power was limited by village and tribal councils made up of the free men of a given group. Virtually all hapu communities also included slaves, usually prisoners of war or their descendants.

Although they had a strong voice within the family, women were clearly subordinated to men. Male dominance was evidenced by the monopoly they enjoyed with regard to positions of leadership and to highly prestigious activities such as making war and woodcarving.

Maori society could not support full-time specialists, but many kinds of religious and craft experts were recognized. Priests were of several kinds, varying according to social status and functions. The most esteemed were the chiefs, who were also trained as priests. The chief-priest presided over communal ceremonies and knew the special prayers to protect the tribe or hapu. The Maori world was alive with spirits, gods, and goddesses who intervened constantly in human affairs. At the other end of the social scale were shamans, who specialized in healing and served as the mediums by which gods and spirits made their desires known to humans.

A War-Oriented Society In addition to priests, Maori society had a wide variety of experts, ranging from those who built canoes, to woodcarvers and tattoo specialists. The most important experts, however, were those with skills relating to making war. Maori society was obsessed with war. During the appropriate season, tribes and hapus fought regularly with their neighbors or distant confederations. Young men proved their worth as warriors, and leaders could not long maintain their positions without demonstrating their martial prowess. Much of the time and energy of Maori men was devoted to planning campaigns against neighboring tribes or building the intricate hilltop fortresses found throughout the north island. Although the loss of life in Maori wars was low by European standards, their combats were fierce. Hand-to-hand fighting with spears and exquisitely carved war clubs was the preferred mode of combat. Successful ambushes and surprise attacks were highly admired.

The priest-leader of a hapu or tribe would cut out the heart of the first enemy killed in battle and offer it to the gods of his people. Enemy casualties sometimes were eaten, and enemy prisoners were enslaved.

On the Threshold of Civilization Polynesian sea-farers had accomplished much in the harsh but beautiful environment of their New Zealand landfall. Mainly on the basis of imported crops, they had developed a fairly steady and productive agricultural system. Although they did not work metals, their material culture was quite impressive. In woodworking and decoration, in particular, they surpassed the Polynesian societies from which their ancestors had come. They had also developed a wonderfully rich oral tradition, which placed a premium on oratorical skills and produced a complex and fascinating collection of myths and legends. Though divided and politically decentralized, the Maori had developed closely knit and well-organized communities within the hapu and the tribe. Their isolation and limited resources prevented the Maori from achieving the full occupational specialization that, as we have seen, was critical to the advance to true civilization elsewhere. Isolation limited Maori technological advances and their resistance to disease. These limits rendered them vulnerable to peoples such as the Europeans, who had more sophisticated tools and weapons and transmitted diseases that decimated the tribes of New Zealand. Although their skills in war and their adaptability allowed the Maori to survive in the long run, they could do little to prevent the disintegration of their culture and the destruction of much of the world they had known before the coming of the Europeans.

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

The Emerging Cultures

Two important features were shared by the societies that formed on the fringes of the major core of world civilizations during the classical period and slightly beyond. First, as they adopted or imported agriculture, they were able to form more structured political units and develop a more complex social hierarchy. Second, each of the emerging societies exhibited important characteristics from its own past. These characteristics carried forward into the history of these regions, even as other influences were encountered.

Most of the fringe societies obviously participated in a new range of contacts, either through migration into greater interaction with an established civilization or, as with Japan, through deliberate imitation. Nomadic peoples more generally also enhanced contacts, bringing new influences through trade, migration, or invasion.
The four emerging areas also displayed one vital difference in addition to particular distinctions in art, language, and the like. Three of the areas—northern and eastern Europe, Japan, and sub-Saharan Africa—were in contact with more established civilization centers, at least to some extent. Polynesia stood apart by its early separation from Asia. This resulted in an impressive set of independent achievements as Polynesian society advanced and spread, but also in important constraints, most obviously in technology. In other words, the availability of outside influence can explain important differences between societies.

Further development of contacts with more established centers for the Japanese, the Slavs, Celts, and Germans, and the Sudanic kingdoms of Africa depended on changes in the classical civilizations themselves. The decline of the great classical empires after the 2nd century C.E., then the new influences that helped reestablish vigorous societies in the same areas, had a vital spillover effect in northern Europe and Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa. This fact returns us to the classical centers, as they declined but also brought forth dynamic new forces capable of transforming wide stretches of the Old World.

Further Readings

The general process of cultural migration and the problems of interpreting archeological and linguistic evidence are among the subjects addressed in Pat Manning’s Migration and World History (2004) and Irving Rouse’s Migrations in Prehistory (1986), which includes excellent chapters on the Japanese and the Polynesians. Manning’s Migration in Modern World History, 1500–2000, a CD-ROM (2000), is an invaluable resource for migration generally as well as for later eras.


Conrad Schirokauer’s A Brief History of Japanese Civilization (1993) emphasizes Japan’s cultural traditions. The fullest, but somewhat dated, account of early Japanese cultural development available in English is included in G. B. Sansom, A History of Japan to 1334 (1961). Useful introductions to the early period can also be found in Mikiso Hane, Pre-Modern Japan: An Historical Survey (1990); E. O. Reischauer and Alfred M. Craig, Japan: Story of a Nation (1989); and (especially for political developments) John W. Hall, Japan from Prehistory to Modern Times (1970). The best introductions to society and culture in the early period are provided by G. B. Sansom, Japan: A Short Cultural History (1986); and H. Paul Varley, Japanese Culture: A Short History (2000).


On the Web

exceptional coverage of Eurasian nomads. An excellent survey of the inner working of nomadic societies, past and present, that includes portraits of two such societies in the western Sahara and in western Tibet can be found at http://hsc.csu.edu.au/pta/gtansw/publications/archive/nomads.html. Links to the art of nomadic peoples are provided at http://www.utexas.edu/students/husa/origins/nomadart.html.

African and other horse and camel nomads are the subject of analysis at http://depts.washington.edu/uwech/silkroad/exhibit/trade/horcamae.html and http://whc.unesco.org/exhibits/afr_rev/africa-c.htm. However, nomads were not always dependent on animal transport, as is suggested by the “sea nomads” of southeast Asia (http://www.unesco.org/csi/act/thailand/moken_e.htm).


The view of the society and culture of early Japan offered at http://www.japan-guide.com/e/e2131.html features a narrative loaded with links that further illuminate virtually all the subjects addressed in this chapter, including Jomon culture, Yamato, and the coming of Buddhism to Japan. Other links to ancient Japanese culture are offered at http://guide.stanford.edu/site/pre_modern_394.html and http://www.archaeolink.com/ancient_japan.htm. One of these links, to Shinto at http://www.religioustolerance.org/shinto.htm, provides clear illustrations of Shinto practice and tradition.

An introduction to the peopling of the Pacific is provided at http://www.hawaii.edu/cpis/region.html. A comprehensive guide to Internet sources on the peoples and peopling of the Pacific is provided at http://www.cwis.org/wwwvl/indig-vl.html#pacific. Insight into the life of one of the best-known leaders of a Pacific people, the Hawaiian King Kamehameha, may be found at http://www.hsbe.edu/pauahi/history.php and also http://coe-dmha.org/Liaison/Vol_2No_3/Lia03.htm, which offers an account of the “The Law of the Splintered Paddle,” the Hawaiian contribution to international humanitarian law.

Bantu language migration and the multiethnic character of Africa can be explored at http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/CIVAFRCA/IRONAGE.HTM and http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/cultural/oldworld/africa/bantu.html. The Web offers a brief history of Axum (http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/CIVAFRCA/AXUM.HTM), accounts of this and other Nubian kingdoms (http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/nubia1.html), and images of their cities and monuments (http://www.hp.uab.edu/image_archive/um/umn.html). How the trans-Saharan trade was captured by the state of Ghana and how it flourished before its conquest by the Almoravids is discussed at http://www.mrdowling.com/609-trade.html.