Unit 2: 600-1450 AD

Sources: Fage: A History of Africa (all quotes are from this source)

Holt World History

Africa’s early history:

Geography: North Africa, Atlas Mountains, Libyan Desert, Saharan Desert, Subsaharan plateau, Sahel, Ethiopian Plateau, Congo Basin, Shaba Plateau, Okavango Basin, Kalahari Desert, Great Rift Valley, Drakensberg Mountains

Kingdoms: Kush, Aksum (Axum), East Africa, Great Zimbabwe, Swahili States, West Africa, Ghana, Mali, Songhai

Expansion of Islam into North Africa: Umar (after Muhammad and Abu Bakr) expanded into N. Africa

Within 25 years of Muhammad’s death….all of Middle East and North Africa are Muslim.

Four Rightly Guided Caliphs: Abu Bakr-Umar-Uthman-Ali

Dynasties: Abbasids, Ummyads

Tariq’s Muslim army (a Berber general) took the Iberian peninsula….from the rock known as Jabal Tariq (or the Rock of Gibraltar)….

They were the Moors and occupied the area for more than 700 years until 1492 – the end of the Reconquista

The Moors attempted to work their way into France, but lost the Battle of Poitier and the Battle of Tours, therefore establishing their border at the Pyrenees Mountains that separates the Iberian Penisula from Continental Europe. The defeat of the Muslims by the Franks is detailed in the nationalistic epic poem Song of Roland, and can be compared to (in a way) the Battle of Vienna which stops the spread of the Ottoman Turks and signals its slow decay.

Regarding Islamic expansion into Africa.

Egyptian invasion 639 AD

Continued expansion into Northern Africa includes essentially all lands north of 8 degrees North latitude. With such a horizontal expansion (East – West), there was a long supply line that offered significant inroads further south.

During the period of European expansion centuries later, the Islamic cultural domination could not be significantly erased, and Christianity on the African continent has always remained a religion of the minority. Even today only 5 nations can claim adherence to Christian principles in more than a third of its population. Meanwhile, nearly 90% of the population north of the Sahara are Muslim.

“The Arabs …developed a very strong spirit of community based on the concept of kinship. They grouped themselves in tribes, each regarding itself as the children (banu) of the ancestral founder of the tribe, and each governed by an elected leader (sayyid or shaykh) who was responsible to a council of family and clan heads. Although there was some concept of supreme deity, Allah, for practical purposes each tribe had its own god whose presence was symbolized by a rock or some other natural object. Each tribe competed fiercely with every other for possession of the best pastures and for access to the best supplies of water.

Three factors combined to give these warring tribes the important place that Arabs have acquired in world history. The first was the position of the peninsula joining the worlds of Asia and the Indian Ocean with those of Europe, Africa and the Mediterranean. From the most ancient times, major land and sea routes of world trade either crossed Arabia or ran close by its Red Sea and Persian Gulf coasts. Thus with obvious limits to wealth which they could win from their land or their herds, Arabians were constantly attracted to make a living as traders, conducting caravans across their territory or sailing to and fro along and beyond its coasts, or by raiding or levying tribute on the traders. Secondly, the northern half of Arabia abutted onto the Fertile Crescent, rich in agricultural lands in which developed some of the leading early civilizations. Arabs were constantly raiding these lands, and with every increase in their own population they tended to overflow into them as conquerors and settlers. Thus the peoples of the Arabs acquired the arts and tastes for the settled life.

Finally there is a more imponderable factor, which may perhaps be most simply expressed by observing that the Arabs are a “Semitic” people. Although they themselves were initially on the fringes of Semitic civilization in Mesopotamia and Syria, this meant that they were associated with two of the major developments of early intellectual history. The first of these was linguistic. The Semitic languages in general, and perhaps Arabic in particular, developed into remarkably flexible, expressive and poetic systems for communicating ideas, and the most flexible system of writing and so the most stimulating way Arabs expanded out of Arabia into Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt and the Byzantine world, the were unusually equipped to synthexize and take further the intellectual heritage of the civilizations of these lands. But to make the synthesis purposeful and productive, this they did through their own version – itself a synthesis – of the second great Semitic contribution to intellectual development, monotheism, the idea that all humanity was subordinate to the will of one God.

The concept of the universal submission (Islam) of all men to the will of one God, a vital principle for the competitive Arab tribes to accept if they were to unite and make their mark on history, was the core of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad who was born at Mecca about AD 570. Mecca was a significant centre for such a prophet. It was a great caravan centre… and through it passed many Arabs….Jews and Christians who had already proclaimed the principle of one God. Muhammad was to draw considerably on the tradition and experience of these two earlier monotheistic religions.”

All of this suggests geopolitical determinism, the idea that geography determines the politics of a people and all of history is based upon location and geographical features.