

UNDERSTANDING AFRICA

AND THE EVENTS THAT SHAPED ITS DESTINY

ROB MARSH

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To Janette, with love

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Author's note

This work aims to give a readable and accurate account of the events that created the Africa we know today. It is not an academic treatise on the history of Africa over the last eight million years, but an overview of the forces that shaped Africa's destiny through the ages and it is intended to appeal to anyone who has an interest in this vast and amazing continent.

It must be remembered, however, that there is no one 'Africa'. North Africa, West Africa, East Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, for example, are quite different both geographically and culturally. The histories of these diverse regions, though sometimes intertwined, are different too.

For many people the word 'Africa' conjures up images of starvation and poverty, of failed states and civil war, and there is no doubt that, taken as a whole, the continent has been grossly mismanaged over the last fifty years – and continues to be so. Some responsibility for this unfortunate state of affairs must be placed at the feet of the colonial powers who abandoned the continent with such unseemly haste during the latter half of the 20th century, but Africa's leaders, both past and present, also have much for which to answer.

In the midst of so much Afro-pessimism it is easy to forget that the continent has a rich and compelling history filled with impressive civilisations, great leaders and powerful kingdoms.

Rob Marsh

November 2012

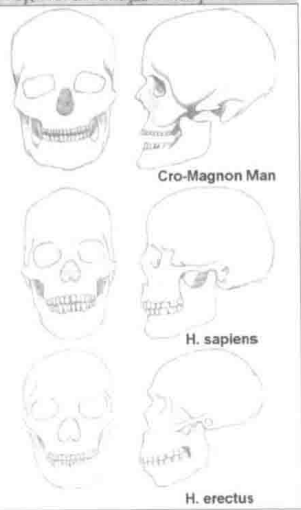
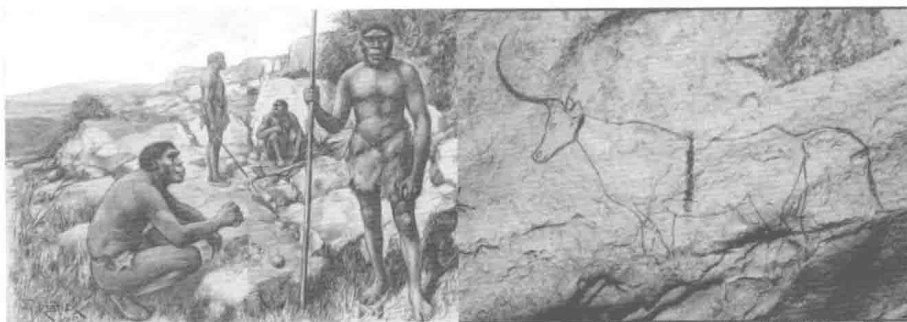
Introduction

Africa is the second largest continent after Asia and covers about one-fifth of the Earth's surface. In ancient times, the northern coastal belt and hinterland that bordered on the Mediterranean Sea was called Libya by the Greeks. It was the Romans who first called the continent Africa, the name being derived either from the Latin *aprica*, which means 'sunny' or on the Greek *aphrike*, which means 'without cold'. During the Roman occupation of North Africa, the Romans also allegedly referred to the settlements inland of the coast as 'the land of Afrigs', the Afrigs being the name they gave to a Berber community that lived to the south of Carthage.

The modern history of Africa is well documented, but many of the pre-colonial societies, particularly those found to the south of the Sahara Desert, were not literate until fairly recent times and this creates a number of problems for anyone wishing to reconstruct the history of the continent. When considering the very ancient past, the challenges are even greater because the anthropological record is sketchy, which means that some of the inferences and conclusions that scientists draw are little more than informed guesswork. It is generally accepted, for example, that modern humans evolved in Africa and there is a considerable body of research to support this assumption, but it must be remembered that the study of evolution is not a perfect science and the physical evidence is limited to say the least.

Modern humans – *Homo sapiens* – have probably existed for between 50 000 and 100 000 years and pre-modern humans, our direct ancestors, for about 100 000 years before that. This means that, in comparison to the history of planet Earth, the entire chronicle of humankind is nothing more than the blink of an eye.

Nevertheless, the African continent has a rich and compelling story to tell; it is a saga that began far back in the dim mists of the ancient past ...



1: PREHISTORY

In the time when our story begins, there was a supercontinent called Pangea. This supercontinent was formed about 270 million years ago and was a colossal landmass covering about one-third of the Earth's surface. It was surrounded by an enormous ocean named Panthalassa. During the Jurassic period about 200 million years ago, Pangea began to separate into two parts – Laurasia to the north and Gondwana to the south.

Over the eons that followed, Laurasia and Gondwana began to break up into the continents we know today. Laurasia separated to form North America, Greenland, Europe and most of Asia north of the Himalaya mountains, and Gondwana split up to form South America, India, Australia, Antarctica and Africa.

It was about 120 million years ago that the section of Gondwana, we now call Africa, began its migration southwards away from the 'mother mass'. Moving at a rate of between two and ten millimetres per year, it took a further 100 million years for the continent to become fully formed. In other words, the Africa that we know today has only existed for about 20 million years.

Although more hominins – ape men – have been found in Africa than anywhere else in the world, very few dinosaurs, particularly those from the Cretaceous period (the last period of the dinosaur era, between 145 million and 65 million years ago), have

been found on this continent. As a result, most of what scientists know about dinosaurs comes from evidence unearthed in North America and Asia and up until fairly recently, it was thought that it was only on Laurasia and Gondwana that dinosaurs evolved differently. However, discoveries made in the Kem Kem region of the Moroccan Sahara in the 1990s by a team of palaeontologists led by Dr Paul Sereno from the University of Chicago, have led to a revision of this theory.

Sereno and his team made two significant discoveries in 1995 when they unearthed the remains of two dinosaurs which they subsequently named *Carcharodontosaurus saharicus*, or 'shark-toothed reptile from the Sahara', and *Deltadromeus agilis*, or 'agile delta runner', which was first unearthed by Gabrielle Lyon, Sereno's wife.

Carcharodontosaurus, which is Africa's answer to *Tyrannosaurus*, possessed a massive skull, 1.6 metres long, containing rows of vicious eight centimetre-long teeth. This creature, which was estimated to be about 14 metres long, was probably the largest and most ferocious predator of its time.

Deltadromeus agilis, by contrast, was a fast-moving carnivore with long, delicate limbs. At the time that *Carcharodontosaurus* and *Deltadromeus* were roaming southern Morocco, the area was a vast floodplain criss-crossed by streams and rivers lined with coniferous trees. Crocodiles would have swum in waterways while *Carcharodontosaurus* and *Deltadromeus* would have hunted along the muddy riverbanks. (We know this because *Deltadromeus* has left behind a number of fossilised three-toed footprints to confirm the fact.)

The significance of these discoveries is twofold. Firstly, the *Carcharodontosaurus* skull found by Sereno solved a century-old mystery surrounding some previously unidentified bones and serrated teeth discovered in Egypt in the early 1900s and destroyed during World War II, and secondly, and perhaps more significantly, they also provided new evidence to suggest that dinosaurs evolved differently on the African continent when compared to similar species found elsewhere in the world. It is