

HARVARD AFRICAN STUDIES I

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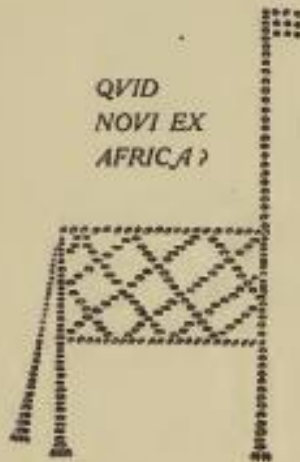
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INTRODUCTION TO THE HARVARD AFRICAN STUDIES

THE scientific study of the origins of primitive society and of the ruder cultures has in the past fifty years come to assume a high importance. Already the slowly gathered results of the work of the archaeologist, the ethnographer, and the physical anthropologist are in various ways, direct as well as indirect, profoundly influencing popular opinion. Sometimes consciously, more often unconsciously, our views on many vital questions are being modified by conclusions reached by specialists in these fields of research. Their discoveries and conclusions are such as cannot today be ignored by any of the men on whose activities intellectual and moral progress depends. This is especially true of the social workers, the economists, the historians, and those merchants, missionaries, and administrators who are confronted with the problems which invariably arise as soon as civilized nations are brought into contact with savage or barbarous races.

Yet many intelligent men, especially among those who delight to style themselves "practical", are entirely unconscious of the deep importance of this new knowledge. Such men, even though they may appreciate certain types of learning, regard the time spent in the investigation of prehistoric or ancient civilizations, or of the wearisome and often repellent details of modern savagery, as time wasted. The man of limited mental horizon and defective imagination is apt to ask himself what antiquity has to do with us of today, or what good is gained by costly and sometimes perilous expeditions sent to remote parts of the earth for the purpose of recording the habits of foul or dangerous barbarians. The answer to such questions is fairly simple. Sound knowledge is, of course, desirable for its own sake — as Aristotle long ago observed, all men "naturally" desire it: at least all men whom it is worth while to call civilized. But beyond this lies the fact that man needs to know the truth about himself — as much of it, that is, as he can grasp — if he is to make the most of himself. It is only by the painstaking collection of the details of old civilizations, by the patient working out of the rude racial and cultural beginnings which led up to the ancient civilizations, and by studying races yet in their childhood, that the modern investigator can comprehend the nature of the remote past from which we of today have sprung, and from which we are separated by a wide gulf of time and change.

Only thus can we grow to understand the laws — or some of the laws — by which that progress has been governed.

As a field sure to yield valuable results to the student of early or primitive man, Africa holds a rank second to no other. Its vast extent, its amazing diversity, and the wide physical and cultural differences among its countless inhabitants, all conspire to make this great continent an inexhaustible source of archaeological and ethnographic interest. The need for scientific research in Africa is in proportion to the complexity and number of the problems presented by so great a field.

With our present knowledge, it appears probable that the eastern and middle portions of the great Eurasiatic land mass were the special centers of the development of the anthropoid precursors of man in his earlier stages; and it is probable that most of the pre-history of man, even of a later day, took place in these regions. But it is well nigh certain that North Africa was the route by which many of these prehistoric types of humanity reached Europe; and it also included centers of exceedingly interesting autochthonous development. At the present day the problems offered by the existence of backward culture races, which nevertheless are distinctly culture races, and which are of pure African development — races such as the Berbers and Abyssinians — has an immediate practical bearing upon many of the larger problems of a coordinated world civilization. Moreover, to the study of man's history and pre-history, consideration of what the African soil reveals is essential.

The first dawn of history broke over the valley of the Nile at approximately the same time that it broke over the valley of the Euphrates. The Nile people may have dwelt for an immensely long period in an undeveloped condition in Africa; or they, or a vitally important constituent part of them, may have come more recently from Asia. But in either event the cultural development was purely of the soil — was purely autochthonous. The problems to be investigated are just as important whether they show that the initial impetus was given from Asia, or whether they show that the impetus sprang from conditions which, after an immensely slow development in Africa, finally saw a rapid culmination in the very place where they had developed.

All kinds of problems await the archaeological explorer and investigator in Africa. They range from the existence of a blond element in the Berber stock, and the existence of a possibly similar element among the ancient Libyan invaders of Egypt, to the questions raised by the strange architecture of the cities southwest of the Sahara, such as Timbuktû. They include the ethnic changes due to infiltration, among the agricultural East African and Middle African negroes, of a northern pastoral type with very distinct physical and cultural characteristics. Isolated finds of stone implements in Somaliland, on the Upper Nile, in the Congo basin, and along the Zambesi, suggest still other archaeological questions

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regarding the early history of man in Africa. The tasks which await the ethnologist are of no less importance. The problems which at the present day are presented by the primitive tribes still existing in Africa are legion, be they those concerning low savages such as the Pigmies of the great central forests, or those concerning the relatively advanced Berbers and Abyssinians. They include the difficult but important problems of ethnic drift and change, of the small linguistic "islands" with which Africa abounds, and of great racial migrations.

To American scholars the investigation of African humanity, ancient and modern, ought to appeal with especial force, not only on the general grounds indicated above, but for the particular reason that in this country the future of the white and black races is inextricably mingled. Roughly one tenth of the population of the United States is of African origin. All serious students of the Negro Problem in America ought to welcome material from which the past of the black race can be better understood, and its future advance furthered with an intelligence based on accurate knowledge. With this in mind, I am glad that the Publication Committee of the Harvard African Studies have decided to throw the series open to papers dealing with the scientific aspects of the Negro Problem in America.

America has not done her full share in the productive scholarship of the world. Investigation and study of the kind exemplified in this volume, and extensive field work of an exploratory character are essential to the understanding of the past and present of man. We are to be congratulated that American scholars and explorers are now doing such work as this. The series of which this is the initial volume represents the first serious attempt by Americans to contribute to the real study of Africa; and it deserves a most cordial welcome.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.

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August 10, 1916.