INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN PREHISTORY

PROFESSOR: DR. JAMES DENBOW
OFFICE HOURS: T TH 11:30-12:30 and by appointment.

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Course Overview

This course provides an overview of human biological and cultural evolution in Africa from approximately 4 million years ago to the colonial period. The African continent is over three times the size of the United States and current evidence indicates that the ancestors of all humankind evolved there around 4 million years ago. Today there are more than a thousand different languages, belonging to 4 major language families, spoken in Africa; ethnic and ecological diversity are great. For later time periods, data from archaeological excavations will be examined in order to expand upon anthropological and historical accounts to provide a less "Eurocentric" view of the continent and its historical development. No prior knowledge of Africa or of archaeology is assumed.

Prerequisites: None.

Required Textbooks:


Evaluation: This course meets the requirements for substantial writing component classes. The final grade will be based on a map quiz (10%), class attendance and participation (5%), a 10 page research paper (30%), and four short 3 to 5 page essays (10, 15, 15. and 15%). Because lectures will cover material not found in the texts, or bring text materials up to date by discussing new findings, class attendance is important and will be spot checked using “attendance exams.” Please don’t think that you will be able to do well by simply doing the readings for the course. The research paper will be due the last class day.

Course Topics
Week 1: Aug. 26

Introduction

Newman: Chapter 1, Introduction

Week 2: Aug. 31, Sept.2

The African Continent

Reader: Chapter 1, Building a continent
Chapter 3, Missing Links
Chapter 4, Origins and Climate

Newman: Chapter 2, Becoming Human

Film: In search of human origins. vidcass 4127, part 1.

Short paper 1 (Due Sept. 9th)

Everyone these days seems to accept the proposition that “Africa is where humankind originated.” While almost every introductory text on human evolution and/or anthropology talks about Africa in its first chapters, the continent is seldom mentioned after this and few people know much else about the continent. Do you feel this is a correct assessment? What do you think are the reasons for this apparent lack of interest in Africa’s later history in western education? Apart from early hominids, what images does Africa bring to your mind at the beginning of this course? Are these principally images of wild, “natural” Africa - or are they images of human culture and development? How and by whom are such images invented and perpetuated? What are you hoping to gain from a course on African prehistory? What historical topics or periods are you most interested in learning about? Write a short 3 to 5 page essay addressing these questions. No research or prior knowledge is expected for this paper.

Week 3: Sept. 7, 9

Emergence of Humankind: Australopithecines

Reader: Chapter 5, The Real World
Chapter 6, Footsteps
Chapter 7, The Cutting Edge


Weeks 4 & 5: Sept 14, 16, 21, 23.

Middle and Later Stone Age. Rock Art.

Reader: Chapter 8
Chapter 9, Cool systems
Chapter 10, Out of Africa
Chapter 11, On Home Ground
Chapter 12, Word of Mouth
Chapter 13, Ancestral Economics
Chapter 14, The Human Potential
Chapter 15, Climate and Culture

Newman, Chapter 3, Middle Stone Age and Late Stone Age, pp. 28-39.

Film: In search of human origins. vidcass 4127, part 3.

Short paper 2: (Due Sept. 28)

(Part A, 2.5-3 pages) Compare and contrast the "multi-regional" and "out of Africa" hypotheses for the development and expansion of modern humans (Homo sapiens), bringing in evidence from the fossil and cultural record as discussed in class and in your book. Where do you think Neanderthals belong in our human lineage? Defend your answer.

(Part B, 2-3 pages) In the short segment from the last film on Human Origins shown in class, Don Johanson describes western Europe as a "sort of finishing school for modern humans". Critique this evaluation, bringing in information from class lectures dealing with more recent finds from Ethiopia (Homo sapiens idaltu), and sites such as Klassies River Mouth and Blombos Cave in South Africa. These web sites may be useful:

Week 5: Sept 28, 30

Beginnings of permanent settlements

Reader: Chapter 16, The Beginnings of Agriculture
Chapter 17, Renewable Resources
Chapter 18, The Pastoral Scene

Newman: Chapter 4, The Agricultural Transformation

Weeks 6, 7, 8: Oct. 5, 7, 12, 14, 19, 21

The Nile Valley and North Africa

Reader: Chapter 19, The Impact of Iron
Chapter 20, The Nile
Chapter 21, The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea
Chapter 23, Aksum

Newman: Chapter 5, Northern Africa
Chapter 6, Ethiopia and the Horn

Film: Akenaten, heretic king
Film: the Ark of the Covenant

Paper 3: (Due October 21)

Several years ago a man named Martin Bernal wrote a book he called “African Athena.” His publisher changed this title to “Black Athena.” Many of his propositions about the Egyptian roots of so-called “classical civilizations” were
backed by good scholarship, yet they caused quite a stir among some scholars of western civilization. In what ways might the title “African Athena” have been more appropriate to a study of ancient Egypt, North Africa, and the Mediterranean world? What issues, on the other hand, does the title “Black Athena” force us to grapple with? What do you suppose the position of ancient Egyptians themselves might have been on these controversies? Support your discussion with information from your readings and lecture.

**Week 9 and 10: Oct. 26, 28, Nov. 2, 4**

**West Africa**
- Reader: Chapter 23, Cities without Citadels
- Chapter 24, Disease and Affliction
- Chapter 25, Successful Harvests
- Chapter 26, The implications of Trade
- Chapter 27, Outposts and Inroads
- Chapter 28, Merrie Africa

Newman, Chapter 7, Western Africa

*Film: Caravans of Gold, Vidcass 5381, pt.3-4*

**Week 11: Nov. 9, 11**

**Central Africa: Pygmies and Bantu Migrations**

Reader: Chapter 29, Bananas and Cattle

Newman, Chapter 8, Central Africa.

**Weeks 12 and 13: Nov. 16, 18, 23**

**Southern Africa**

Chapter 30, Cattle and Gold

Newman, Chapter 9, Eastern Africa
  Chapter 10. Southern Africa

**Paper 4: (Due Nov. 23)**

Write a 3 to 5 page essay discussing the political and economic factors that led to the development of powerful chiefdoms in on the eastern edge of the Kalahari Desert between AD 500 and 1200. How were these early Chiefdoms similar to the later Great Zimbabwe Kingdom? How were they different?

**Thanksgiving: No Class on Nov. 25**
Week 14: Nov 30, Dec. 3

European Expansion

Reader: Chapter 31, I speak of Africa and Golden Joys
Chapter 32, Portuguese Initiatives
Chapter 33, In Search of Prester John
Chapter 34, Harnessed to Europe
Chapter 35, Nothing Else to Sell
Chapter 36, The Atlantic Slave Trade

Term Papers Due Dec. 3. There is no final exam.