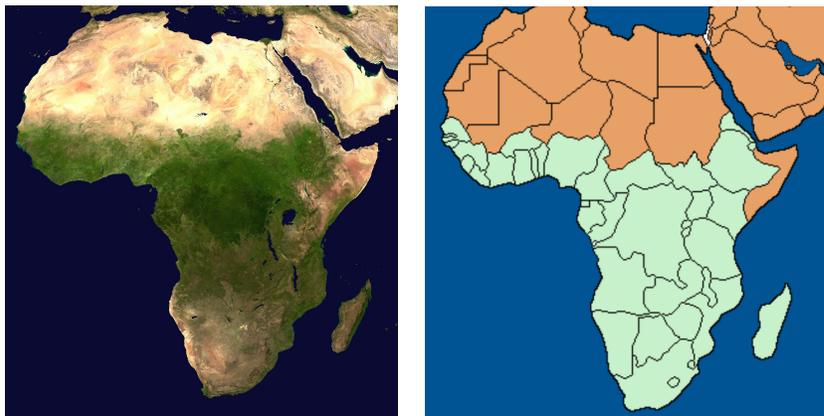


## VI. Africa and the World We Live In

### A. A Focus on *Sub-Saharan* Africa

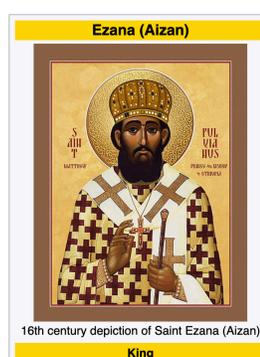
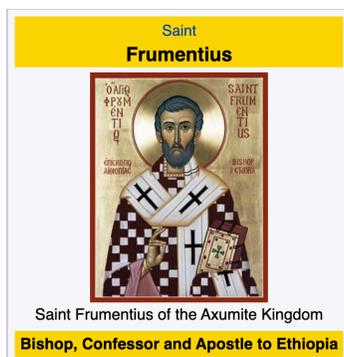
1. Africa is a huge continent, larger than China, the United States, India, and Europe combined! It is also comprised of many dozens of countries. Studying such a culture is challenging, because its many parts constitute a “plethora,” if we don’t have a way of simplifying and integrating the picture.
2. The first step in making the story accessible is to recognize that although Africa is one continent, it is divided into *two* cultural blocks.
3. The cultural blocks are a reflection of the physical geography and the related history of the continent. Northern Africa on the Mediterranean Sea has long been part of Islamic culture, which spread from Arabia (c.622-32 $\pm$ ) in a great wave of jihad across to Iberia (c.711AD $\pm$ ).
4. The Sahara Desert, however, formed an almost impassable barrier for cultural change over the centuries. A caravan trade linked Sub-Saharan Africa (Africa “below” the Sahara) to Northern Africa, but there seemed little reason to engage in jihad in that direction when Europe represented the fundamental challenge to Islamic culture.
5. Thus, far to the South, tribal Africa evolved on its own, detached from the history of world in clusters of people only infrequently and inconsequentially organized into local kingdoms or “empires.” Like South Asia, the cultures of the region never developed to the point of studying history. They were *a-historical*.
6. Then came the Europeans, seeking a way to navigate around the obstacle of **Triumphal Islam** to East Asia and the trading opportunities it represented. Contact with European civilization thus dominated the story of Africa as contact with Triumphal Islam dominated the story of northern Africa.



The physical geography (left) and cultural geography (right) are an almost perfect match. Northern Africa is part of Islamic Culture. Sub-Saharan Africa is its own distinct cultural block.

## B. Where Does the Story Begin?

1. Because Africa was a *tribal* (politically un-integrated) and *a-historical* culture prior to the arrival of Europeans, it has no history of its own.
2. The *story* of Africa begins when the Europeans arrive, and thus its story is the story of a culture dominated from without for almost its entirety.
3. This is similar to South Asia, whose history before modern independence is dominated by the ascendancy of Triumphal Islam, followed by the British Raj.
4. The difference is that although South Asia has a long story of a-historical development that is vaguely understood in outline, including, for instance the invasion of India by Alexander the Great, and the Mauryan Empire that followed, Africa has no such markers in its early story.
5. There are fragments of information, including Bible stories, about a kingdom called “Aksum” in ancient Ethiopia. There are similar fragments about a culture in West Africa, with its capital at Timbuktu. These bits of information do not permit a meaningful story to be constructed.
6. That said, there is *some* information. Aksum produced some fascinating monuments that mark its kings graves and it also had a form of writing, even though it did not record its own history.
7. Among the few anecdotes about Aksum is that a king named Ezana captured some slaves from the Roman world, including a Christian monk named Frumentius, **c.350 AD**. The strange irony of this event as a historical marker, in light of later history and complaints about the outside world enslaving Africa, is that it’s about an African who is taking non-Africans as slaves. The outcome was that Frumentius converted Ezana to Christianity, and Aksum became a Christian kingdom.
8. We know about these events partly because of the ***Ezana Stone***, which is strikingly similar to the more famous Rosetta Stone, because it has three forms of writing on it, including ancient Greek. It records the deeds—especially wars—of Ezana for posterity.
9. After Ezana, an occasional event connects Aksum to other cultures, such as the arrival of Muslims in the early 600s from Arabia, but there is not enough to create a story.



Frumentius (left) was taken as a slave by Aksumites, and became the personal slave of king Ezana (middle) whom he converted to Christianity, as we know in part from the *Ezana Stone*—a stele that records the great events of the kingship of Ezana in three languages, including ancient Greek.