

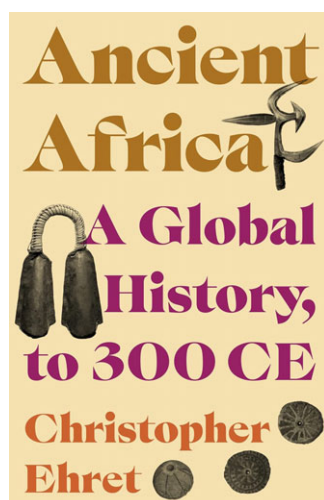
Book Review

Ancient Africa. A Global History, to 300 CE

Ehret (C.) Pp. xii + 210, ills, maps. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Cased. £16.99, US\$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-24409-9

Leslie Ivings

Classical Association of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa
ivingsl188@gmail.com



Christopher Ehret's *Ancient Africa: A Global History, to 300 CE* is a comprehensive and meticulously researched examination of Africa's ancient history, one that challenges longstanding stereotypes and introduces readers to the continent's dynamic cultures, societies, and contributions to global civilisation. Ehret, a renowned historian and linguist, offers an accessible yet scholarly approach that makes *Ancient Africa* a suitable and invaluable resource for students of African history, anthropology, and world history. The book's clarity, detailed content,

and respectful approach to Africa's diverse past render it an excellent choice for student readers seeking a foundational text that captures the richness of African antiquity.

Ehret's primary aim is to dismantle outdated perceptions of Africa as a "dark continent" devoid of historical significance prior to European contact. Instead, he presents ancient Africa as a vibrant land with complex societies, sophisticated trade networks, and influential cultural and technological achievements. He emphasises the contributions of African civilisations to early advancements in agriculture, metallurgy, social organisation, and trade—dispelling the notion that Africa was isolated from other parts of the world. This focus on Africa's interconnectedness with other regions is one of the book's strongest aspects, as it introduces students to the idea of Africa as an integral player in early global history rather than a passive bystander.

For students, Ehret's writing style is both accessible and engaging. While *Ancient Africa* contains a wealth of information, Ehret avoids overly complex language, which is ideal for readers who may be new to the subject. He presents historical details with precision, yet he does so in a way that is easy to follow, making the book suitable for high school, undergraduate, and even graduate

students in need of a clear, concise introduction. One of Ehret's strengths lies in his ability to contextualise dense information and convey it in an organised manner, with chapters structured around specific time periods and regions. This clear organisational structure is especially useful for students, as it allows them to absorb content systematically and better retain the historical narrative.

One of the book's most engaging features for students is its use of linguistic evidence to reconstruct ancient African societies. Ehret, a trained linguist, uses comparative linguistics to trace cultural and technological developments, including the spread of farming and ironworking across different African regions. This unique approach provides a fresh perspective for students accustomed to more traditional historical methodologies. Ehret's linguistic insights add a layer of complexity to his historical narrative, revealing how languages can serve as windows into migration patterns, cultural exchanges, and social structures. However, this approach may pose some challenges for readers unfamiliar with linguistic studies. Ehret does his best to simplify his linguistic analysis, but students may still find some sections challenging. Nevertheless, for those willing to engage with the linguistic evidence, this methodology offers a fascinating glimpse into how historians reconstruct the past in the absence of written records.

The thematic focus on cultural and technological advancements across African regions is another strong point for student readers. Ehret examines diverse societies, including the Nok culture of West Africa, the Kerma and Meroitic kingdoms of Nubia, and early pastoralist communities in East Africa. By highlighting the distinctiveness of each culture while tracing common developments across the continent, Ehret helps students see Africa as a continent with interconnected yet unique societies. For instance, he explains how the development of ironworking independently in West Africa reflects technological innovation, while also exploring how agricultural techniques spread across regions, facilitating trade and population growth. Ehret's comparative approach allows students to appreciate the complexity and diversity of African societies, challenging monolithic views of the continent.

In terms of structure, *Ancient Africa* is organised into thematic chapters that cover various periods and regions, such as the rise of agricultural societies, the emergence of trade routes, and the development of complex political systems. Each chapter is broken down into digestible sections, which is particularly helpful for students who may need to focus on specific topics for their coursework. This structure also makes the book useful as a reference for research papers, as students can easily locate information relevant to specific topics in African history. Ehret's consistent chapter organisation—with summaries of key points and suggested further readings at the end—also makes the book an excellent teaching tool for professors and a user-friendly resource for students.

Ehret's use of maps, charts, and illustrations throughout *Ancient Africa* is another benefit for student readers. These visual aids help students visualise ancient trade routes, geographical

regions, and cultural connections across the continent. For example, maps that trace the movement of Bantu-speaking populations across Africa or the spread of iron technology make complex historical processes easier to understand. Additionally, Ehret includes timelines that highlight key developments in various regions, which is particularly helpful for students trying to grasp the chronological flow of events. The inclusion of visual elements supports comprehension and retention, making *Ancient Africa* accessible for visual learners.

A notable aspect of *Ancient Africa* is its respectful treatment of African sources and traditions. Ehret emphasises the importance of oral histories, archaeological findings, and ethnographic studies as legitimate sources of historical knowledge. For students, this approach is instructive, as it broadens their understanding of what constitutes historical evidence. By including sources outside of traditional written records, Ehret introduces students to a wider range of research methodologies and fosters an appreciation for diverse ways of knowing. This perspective not only enhances students' knowledge of African history but also encourages them to think critically about the types of evidence used in historical scholarship.

However, one minor drawback of the book for a student audience is its occasional reliance on technical language when discussing specific archaeological and linguistic findings. Ehret's background in linguistics and anthropology informs his analysis, but some sections may be challenging for students without prior exposure to these fields. For example, his explanations of linguistic "proto-languages" or of ceramic typologies may require careful reading. Nevertheless, these sections are balanced by Ehret's generally clear writing style and the overall accessibility of the book. Students with a willingness to engage deeply with the text will find these sections manageable, especially given Ehret's skill at simplifying complex ideas.

In addition to its historical content, *Ancient Africa* also addresses broader themes that make it relevant for students in fields beyond history. Ehret's discussions of migration, environmental adaptation, and technological innovation resonate with contemporary issues such as globalisation and cultural diffusion.

For students interested in anthropology, sociology, or environmental studies, these themes provide meaningful connections between the past and present, demonstrating how historical events continue to shape modern societies. By contextualising ancient African history within larger global patterns, Ehret challenges students to view Africa as an integral part of the ancient world—a perspective that counters Eurocentric narratives often found in traditional world history curricula.

In terms of academic resources, *Ancient Africa* includes an extensive bibliography, which is a valuable tool for students conducting research. Ehret's references cover a range of disciplines, from archaeology and linguistics to anthropology, providing students with a solid foundation for further study. Each chapter also concludes with suggested readings, allowing students to deepen their understanding of specific topics. This academic apparatus is a significant benefit for students, as it encourages them to engage with both primary sources and contemporary scholarship, fostering a well-rounded approach to studying African history.

In conclusion, *Ancient Africa* by Christopher Ehret is an exceptional resource for students seeking a comprehensive, nuanced, and accessible introduction to African history before 300 CE. Ehret's ability to convey complex information in a clear and engaging way, combined with his interdisciplinary approach, makes this book an invaluable addition to any student's collection. The use of linguistic evidence, the emphasis on African contributions to global history, and the inclusion of visual aids create a well-rounded narrative that challenges stereotypes and enriches students' understanding of ancient Africa.

Overall, *Ancient Africa* is highly recommended for student readers in history, anthropology, and global studies, offering a balanced and respectful portrayal of Africa's ancient past. For students and educators alike, Ehret's work stands as a meaningful contribution to the study of Africa, highlighting the continent's rightful place within the broader scope of world history

doi:[10.1017/S2058631024001326](https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024001326)