Africa includes tropical rain forests, grassy plains called **savannas**, and deserts such as the vast **Sahara**. Deserts, rain forests, the interior plateau, and rivers with **cataracts**, or waterfalls, limited travel and trade. On the other hand, an interior valley and the Mediterranean and Red seas provided overseas trade routes to Asia and Europe. By A.D. 200, camel caravans helped transport goods across the Sahara. Valuable minerals also encouraged trade.

Before 2500 B.C., there were grasslands and savanna in the Sahara. Due to climate change, however, the area slowly dried up and became desert—a process called **desertification**. As a result, people migrated to find new farmland. Between 1000 B.C. and A.D. 1000, people from West Africa moved south and east. They spoke **Bantu** languages. These Bantu peoples merged with existing peoples and brought skills in farming and ironworking.

About 2700 B.C., the civilization of **Nubia**, or Kush, developed on the upper Nile. Egypt controlled Nubia for about 500 years beginning in 1500 B.C. Early Nubian culture was influenced by Egyptian architecture and religion.

Forced to move by Assyrian invaders, the Nubians established a new capital in **Meroë** about 500 B.C. Meroë developed into a successful trade center. Nearby areas were rich in iron ore and timber. Using wood to fuel smelting furnaces, the Nubians made iron tools and weapons, improving their defense. The Nubians also established a new religion and a system of writing. In A.D. 350, Nubia was conquered by an invader from the south, King Ezana of Axum.

While Nubia was thriving along the Nile, Carthage emerged along the Mediterranean in North Africa. Founded by Phoenician traders, Carthage forged a huge empire from 800 B.C. to 146 B.C. At the end of the Third Punic War, however, Rome destroyed Carthage. The Romans then utilized North Africa’s farmlands to provide grain for their armies. They also built roads and cities, and later brought Christianity to the area.

Muslim Arabs took control of North Africa in the 690s. Islam replaced Christianity, and traders later carried the religion to West Africa. Arabic replaced Latin as North Africa’s main language.

**Review Questions**

1. How did the Bantu migrations affect existing cultures?

2. How did Meroë’s resources strengthen Nubia?