This Benin bronze plaque portrays a king on horseback flanked by two attendants.
Chapter 1

Witnessing History . . .

These [West African] nations think themselves the foremost men in the world, and nothing will persuade them to the contrary. They imagine that Africa is not only the greatest part of the world but also the happiest and most agreeable.
—Father Cavazzi, 1687

Why do you think Africans impressed the writer as he described them?

Chapter Preview

The ancestral homeland of most African Americans is West Africa. Other regions—Angola and East Africa—were caught up in the great Atlantic slave trade that carried Africans to the New World during a period stretching from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. But West Africa, known to the Arab and European world as the center of trade for gold, salt, ivory and pepper, would become the center for the trading of human beings. Knowing the history of West Africa, therefore, is important for understanding the people who became the first African Americans.

That history is best understood within the larger context of the history and geography of the whole African continent. This chapter begins with a survey of the larger context, emphasizing the aspects of the broader African experience that shaped life in West Africa before the arrival of Europeans in that region. It then explores West Africa’s unique heritage and the facets of its culture that have influenced the lives of African Americans from the Diaspora—the original forced dispersal of Africans from their homeland—to the present.