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# Aksum, Kingdom of

JACKE PHILLIPS

SOAS, University of London, UK

“Aksum” is the name of both the empire and its capital, in the northern highlands of Ethiopia, that flourished especially in the first six centuries AD. Although its greatest extent is uncertain, the empire encompassed both sides of the southern Red Sea and so controlled all seaborne commerce between Rome/Byzantium and India/Indian Ocean. The origins of the empire lie with the “sudden” emergence of a Pre-Aksumite “kingdom” generally called Damaat (DMT) centered at Yeha some 30 km east of Aksum, which was strongly influenced by the Saba’an civilization in what is now modern Yemen. The monumental ashlar stone temple of c.800 BC still standing at Yeha testifies to its technological prowess, and it is around this time that inscriptions (unvocalized, in the Saba’an script) and large-scale stone sculpture also appeared. Long considered tangible evidence of Saba’an colonization, these features are now seen as having been adopted by the emerging indigenous ruling elite for its own purposes, little more than a elite veneer overlaying the indigenous highland culture that, for the most part, continued without interruption. Damaat likely was only the westernmost of two and possibly more small kingdoms in the region that extended to the Red Sea coast where two ports, Adulis and Avalites, may have already existed, but it is the only name we know. The Pre-Aksumite state(s) initially developed through agriculture and animal husbandry – the land around Yeha as well as Aksum is particularly fertile – but their initial rise to power was based on

control of long-distance caravan routes from further west and south through to the Red Sea. The Napatan kingdom in Upper Nubia also arose to power from obscurity at about the same time.

Sometime in the later 1st millennium BC the capital moved some 30 km west to Aksum, which had already been inhabited since around 800, for unknown reasons as cultural and political development appears to have been seamlessly continuous. Excavations at Aksum and nearby Bieta Giyorgis together provide an extensive record of both elite and non-elite habitation, ritual and burial from the 8th century BC to the 7th century AD. Many of the other major and minor sites known from the Red Sea coast to west of Aksum itself, some 300 km inland, are located along the main transportation route to the Nile valley. Many continued to be occupied or were reoccupied. The other Pre-Aksumite territories east of Damaat may even have continued independently until incorporation into the growing Aksumite state. The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (mid-1st century AD), an eye-witness account of a Greek merchant trader from Egypt, names Aksum and its central role for inland trade for the first time, and also a ruler of Adulis named Zoskales, whose coastal kingdom extended at least into modern Somaliland, possibly north as far as classical Ptolemais Theron on the Sudanese coast, and disputably also into the Ethiopian interior that would include Aksum. It lists ivory, tortoise shell, and rhinoceros horn as products available for purchase at Adulis, together with a long list of raw and finished goods brought from abroad to be offloaded here, including “a little Roman money for the resident foreigners” who probably were merchants. The *Periplus* indicates that by

this time Aksum/Adulis participated in a sea-borne trading network that extended to Rome, India/Sri Lanka, and Tanzania. The key to Aksum's later supremacy lay in its control by the 3rd century AD of the southern Red Sea, through which all traffic in luxury goods funneled between the Mediterranean (Rome/Byzantium) and the Indian Ocean (India/South Arabia/Persian Gulf/East Africa), as well as many of the viable caravan routes from Sudan and Ethiopia farther inland of the capital. Aksum was the first sub-Saharan culture in Africa to mint its own coinage, in gold, silver, bronze, and, uniquely, bi-metallic selectively gilded silver and bronze. These followed the Roman weight-standard in competition with Roman coinage and initially were inscribed in Greek, the commercial and political *lingua franca* already spoken by Zoskales. This was quickly replaced with the indigenous Ge'ez by the end of the 3rd century AD on coinage, although gold coins for international use mostly recovered in southern Arabia and as far as India – although not in the Aksumite homeland itself – remained in Greek. Coin typology also is our main basis for the identities and regnal order of the Aksumite kings named on them, from Endybis (c.270 AD) through Armah (c.625). Earlier kings, and the pagan deities, are known only from other inscriptions, mainly in south Arabia, whilst many kings are known only from their names on their coinage.

Saba'an deities such as the moon-god Almuqeh as well as indigenous gods like the war-god Mahrem were worshipped, until King Ezana was converted to Christianity in the mid-4th century by Frumentius, a Syrian slave later consecrated by the Coptic patriarch as the first bishop of Ethiopia, according to tradition. Ezana's conversion nonetheless clearly is commemorated on his coinage, where he substituted the cross for the symbol of Almuqeh, whilst his subjects' conversion in

a gradual top-down progression is visible in the material cultural record. A wide variety of cross designs began to appear in quantity on everyday objects, especially ceramics. Aksum and its cathedral, traditionally founded by Ezana, became, and still remains, the spiritual center of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church whose Patriarch, until the mid-20th century, was a Copt appointed by the Patriarch in Alexandria. The arrival of the "Nine Saints" from Syria in the mid-6th century and their monastic doctrine facilitated the spread of the Christian faith and Aksumite influence further into Ethiopia, as well as fostering relations with Byzantium, Syria, and Egypt, and with the Christian peoples and sometimes rulers of pre-Islamic Arabia. Many of the monasteries they traditionally founded are still active today, the most famous being Debra Damo, east of Yeha.

The most famous monuments of Aksum are the large *stelae* that likely were erected as elaborate royal grave-markers before conversion to Christianity. Initially roughly cut single stones, *stelae* developed into well-dressed and latterly even decorated monuments in several "*stelae* fields" in the immediate town area; nearly 800 are known. The last and largest, which fell and shattered during erection in the early 4th century, is estimated to weigh some 520 tonnes and stand to a height of 33 m, the largest single block of stone that humans have attempted to erect. Although extensively robbed, one of the two underground built tombs associated with it revealed 10 side-chambers, each previously containing a wide variety of precious and exotic goods that testify to Aksum's connections with the outside world. Construction of this funerary complex seems to broadly coincide with the introduction of Christianity, after which the monumentality is reduced in scale and becomes less visible above ground although tombs still contained numerous grave goods. The last monumental tomb at

Aksum, a double sepulcher traditionally associated with the 6th-century kings Kaleb and Gebre Masqal, had two basilica-plan churches built atop them. Christian churches following the Roman/Byzantine basilica-plan models, both stone-built and rock-hewn, some converted earlier pagan temples, are found throughout the Ethiopian highlands. Monumental stone-built elite structures usually called “palaces” have been excavated in and around Aksum, Matara, and other major sites, all more than one story high and the largest some 120 by 80 m in area. These substantial stone structures were well constructed, even those inhabited by the non-elite that surrounded them. Excavation of several industrial sites, a glass-working kiln, as well as metal-working and ivory-working areas in addition to the products created there, testify to the high technological and artistic sophistication of the Aksumite state.

Aksumite territorial expansion beyond its traditional heartland seems to have developed before the late 3rd century AD, when its own coins and their acceptance abroad reflected the supreme power of the state. That it already was extensive is underlined by the Persian historian/philosopher Mani (d.274), who named Aksum as the third of the four great empires of his day, the others being Persia, “Sileos” (China? India?) and Rome. Although we have little other evidence, its structured feudal social system and its rulers’ worldviews are seen in its lengthy trilingual stone inscriptions, in unvocalized Saba’an, unvocalized or vocalized Ge’ez, and Greek, that remain our main historical documentation. External texts (Classical, Byzantine, Arabian, Indian, Kushitic) of varying length, survival, and reliability have amplified these self-laudatory inscriptions, and they are the ultimate basis of our knowledge of territories and events. Archaeology has added further evidence for foreign connections but Aksum’s material remains, its monumental stone

*stelae*, tombs, and “palaces” and its “small finds” better illustrate non-historical social, economic, and technological developments and conditions. Imperial Roman influence is seen in its stone extraction technology, and imported glass and clay vessels including transport *amphorae*, and indigenous glass and ceramic vessels as well as certain images and a possible “ivory throne” strongly influenced by foreign types.

Monumental 4th-century royal inscriptions both before and after Ezana’s conversion record multiple military campaigns in all directions to regions beyond his territorial control, as well as suppression of revolts by several named vassal peoples within it. Some, such as the “Bega,” “Nuba,” and “Kasu,” are known or equated with others in relatively contemporary sources – these with the Beja, Noba, and Kush – as well as correlated to modern names and territories. The extent and borders of Aksum-controlled and neighboring territories at this time cannot be reliably established, but the inscriptions suggest they encompass most of northern highland Ethiopia and modern Eritrea to the Red Sea, northwards towards Egypt and westward towards the Nile valley and for an unknown distance southwards. One of these states is identified as Habashat, from which the name Abyssinia derives. Ezana erected the vast majority of these monumental inscriptions, and all have been differentially interpreted over the years. The long-held interpretation that he may have dealt the “final death-blow” to the fading Meroitic state in Nubia has now been convincingly questioned on both archaeological and inscriptional grounds. Nonetheless, these inscriptions highlight the degree to which Ezana was willing and able to expand his control, subdue his vassals, and fight his neighbors. Later land-based connections and politics are little recorded thereafter. Kaleb and other 6th-century kings also left inscriptions with titles proclaiming their

control over these same regions and peoples, and an 8th- or 9th-century inscription of the *hatsani* Dana'el records military boasts of uncertain validity and context at a period after Aksum's known heyday.

Territorial expansion across the Red Sea also effectively began in the 3rd century AD, during a period of disunity of several small kingdoms there. An undated and unnamed king (suggested to be the earliest known king GDR, c.200) left an inscribed monument at Adulis (the *Monumentum Adulitanum*) suggested to be either 2nd or 3rd century in which he claimed to rule as far as Leuke Kome, a Nabatean port somewhere near the Gulf of Aqaba. By the mid-4th century King Ezana described himself as "King of Arabia" as well as Aksum in his titulary on several inscriptions he erected at Aksum, and undertook several tribute-gathering campaigns against the Arabian states of Sab'a and Himyar. Our knowledge of subsequent events is largely unclear as few inscriptions are known, but in 525 the other well-documented king, Kaleb, attacked southern Arabia to protect the Christians persecuted by a "Jewish" king. This and later attacks consolidated his control over several Arabian states, and the region became a vassal state under a "viceroy" who was appointed in Aksum and paid tribute to it. Justinian I sent an embassy to both Arabia and Aksum from Byzantium in 530/1 that underlined his interest in events, although Aksum remained an independent entity and a major power in itself at Kaleb's death between 540 and 547. Aksumite control over Arabia fluctuated for at least half a century and, although several subsequent kings were appointed, Kaleb's son Wa'zeb received tribute from only two of these states and his titulary does not name further western regions nearer the Nile listed amongst Kaleb's territories, suggesting his empire already was reduced in scale. Even this seems

to have been lost by c.570 when there is little evidence for royal control of external territories.

The Persians and Arabians gained control of the southern Red Sea and Byzantine influence expanded up through the Nile valley from the late 6th century AD. The loss of Arabia in particular, and thus the Red Sea passage, marked the real end of the Aksumite Empire, which soon collapsed. An archaeological and textual hiatus of several centuries follows, and our only knowledge of this period survives in contemporary external and later texts, although archaeology is beginning to shed some light. Later Muslim tradition records Mohammed's followers fled to Aksum in 614/15 where the king (suggested to be Armah) granted them asylum and refuge at Negash in the Gheralta southeast of Aksum itself, suggesting some control of a still reasonably sized territory if "Aksum" was in fact Aksum; and it may have continued commercial relations with the Red Sea. Armah is the last king of Aksum known to us, but the kingdom likely continued even longer. We have little evidence for the extent of Aksumite territory after this point, only the inscription of Dana'el from around the 8th–early 9th century which may merely repeat earlier titles, and does not call him *negus* (king) but rather *hatsani* (ruler). The possibility of a Chinese connection in the 8th century does suggest some degree of continuing long-distance relationship at that time, if it has been interpreted correctly – and, if so, presumably also with further sites abroad otherwise not recorded, although likely at second hand. The cessation of coinage is telling, but some monetary continuation is indicated in a number of late 7th- to early 10th-century Arabic coins found at the Debra Damo monastery. The approximately 10th-century invasion from the south under Queen Gudit destroyed the city and toppled its *stelae* according to tradition (archaeological evidence disagrees about the

*stelae*). At some unknown point, the center transferred to Kubar, an unknown location possibly south and east of Aksum, probably in the Gheralta area where the tradition of rock-cut tombs associated with later rock-hewn basilica-plan churches and their similar decorative elements indicates strong cultural continuity. This likely continued over to the region around modern Lalibela from sometime within the 9th and early 11th centuries.

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