

Aksum and the Northern Horn of Africa

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Rich and varied sources are now available for reconstructing the past in Africa's northern Horn. Results of archaeological investigation are supplemented from inscriptions, coinage, and from accounts by Graeco-Roman historians and visitors (including Byzantine ambassadors), while historical linguistics and studies of oral tradition (some of which was later recorded in writing by Ethiopians themselves) are also informative. Until the mid-20th century, most of the knowledge that was readily available came from sources that focused on external connections; this bias has often also prevailed more recently, but a more local emphasis now sees cultural development in the northern Horn as an essentially indigenous process in which adaptations to diverse external influences were constantly made.

This continuity is apparent in several areas. The region's subsistence economy has long been based on domestic plants and animals that include varieties first domesticated in the Near East and North Africa as well as others that originated in the northern Horn itself. The dates of their local adoption are not yet known, but it is probable that some of these species have been exploited since at least the 2nd millennium BC. It is against this backdrop that may now be viewed the appearance, around the 8th century BC, of societies whose élite sections followed fashions displaying strong affinities with those known in neighbouring areas, most notably in southern Arabia. Among these elements were the first stone inscriptions yet recog-

nised in the Horn of Africa, figurative sculptures and dressed-stone architecture, as well as religious paraphernalia. It is noteworthy, however, that many aspects of the domestic architecture, pottery and other non-élite artefacts continued stylistic and technological traditions that had been established in the region long previously. These conclusions are confirmed by detailed study of the relatively small number of stone inscriptions that have been recovered. Although the script was one that is known to have developed in southern Arabia during earlier times, with few exceptions the Semitic language shows local differences from that employed on the other side of the Red Sea. These observations have led to a re-interpretation that emphasises the indigenous element in the majority population of the northern Horn during the last millennium BC, while noting that – as has often been the case in many regions both before and since – the élite sought to reinforce their position by emphasising exotic foreign accoutrements. This dichotomy, however, was short-lived; the distinctiveness of the élite diminished and greater cultural uniformity seems to have prevailed by about the 6th century. The word DMT, otherwise unknown, occurs in unvocalised inscriptions of this period; it has been interpreted as the name of a unitary kingdom at this time, but doubt has recently been cast on the existence of such a polity.

The last half-millennium BC is poorly understood. It is only for the restricted area where the future capital of Aksum subsequently arose that details of archaeological research have yet been published, and epigraphic evidence also is tantalisingly sparse. Excavations directed by Rodolfo Fattovich

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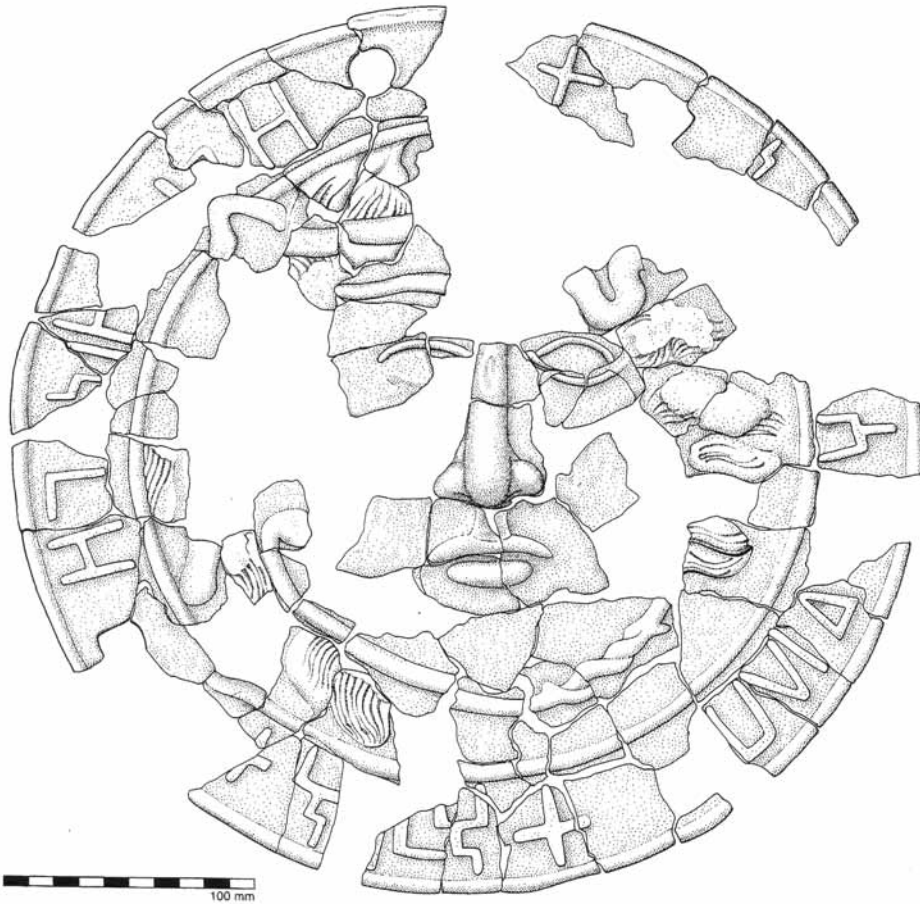


Fig. 1: Cast brass disc formerly attached to the apex of a monolithic stela marking one of the royal tombs at Aksum (3rd-4th century AD).

and Kathryn Bard at Beta Giyorgis hill near Aksum have revealed a community apparently ancestral to that of early Aksum but which continued many aspects of its predecessors' culture. Around the first half of the 1st century AD this community moved its centre from Beta Giyorgis to the location at the foot of the hill where there rapidly arose the more extensive settlement that ever since has been known as Aksum.

Aksum's prosperity increased rapidly, matched by political expansion as it gained authority over the surrounding territory of formerly distinct kingdoms. By the mid-1st century, Aksum was already known as a

trading metropolis trading with the outside world through the port of Adulis on the Red-Sea coast of what is now Eritrea, although this coastal region itself was probably still independent of Aksumite rule. Aksum's access to rich sources of ivory, greatly valued in the Roman Empire, probably contributed to its rapidly growing prosperity. Inscriptions apparently dating from the 2nd and 3rd centuries record the names of kingdoms and their rulers that were subsequently incorporated under Aksumite hegemony. By the late 3rd century, enormous resources were expended on the burials of successive kings of Aksum in tombs marked by huge

monolithic stelae carved in representation of multi-storeyed buildings (**Fig. 1**). Coins were issued in gold, silver and copper-alloy, bearing the names of these same kings.

By the second quarter of the 4th century, under king Ezana, further developments are attested by a series of long inscriptions. These used Greek as well as the Semitic vernacular, Ge'ez, sometimes in parallel texts. Although they provide valuable information in several fields, particular attention has been paid to their record of Aksum's continued territorial expansion and to Ezana's adoption of Christianity. The latter development is also recorded on Aksumite coins and in the records of Graeco-Roman historians and other writers; evidence is also preserved, albeit less directly, in the archaeological record. Initially, the conversion mainly involved those (including the king) who were in regular contact with the expatriate trading community; its spread through the majority of the Aksumite population in and beyond the capital was slow and, it appears, met significant resistance which was not fully overcome until the late 5th century. On the international front, however, its effect was more immediate. Evidence is accumulating that Ezana was not unaware of the political advantages that would accrue to himself and to his kingdom through Aksum's membership of the growing Christian community.

Reflections of the religious change are preserved in the archaeological record of royal and other burials, in religious architecture, in coinage designs and inscriptions, and in pottery decoration. Fifth-century acceleration of its pace is confirmed by Ethiopian historical tradition, where it is attributed to the activities of the 'nine saints', holy men from the Roman (Byzantine) Empire who founded churches and monasteries in areas of Aksumite territory removed from the capital.

Against this background of development and change, it has been sobering to note the essential stability that prevailed in Aksum's

basic economy and in certain aspects of its technology associated with the non-élite elements of its population. Subsistence farming retained many elements from many centuries previously, albeit supplemented by crops introduced from more distant areas that were becoming subject to Aksumite influence, exploitation or control. Production of pottery seems to have remained a non-specialist craft, practitioners of which did not adopt the wheel. Wheel-thrown vessels were imported from the Mediterranean region, the coastlands of the Persian Gulf and, perhaps, the Nile Valley; their forms, but not the method of their production, were imitated locally. Technological transfer from the north is more readily apparent in such fields as stone-quarrying and in the pronounced advances attested in metal-working. Alongside these sophisticated developments, the Aksumites continued to make and use flaked lithic artefacts in their deeply-rooted local tradition. Not only did the export of ivory contribute greatly to the Aksumite kingdom's prosperity, it was also worked locally with considerable skill and sophistication. Variation in the availability and price of ivory in the Roman/Byzantine empires seems to have been directly linked with Aksum's ability to meet the demand.

An episode around the second quarter of the 6th century, when Aksumite forces under king Kaleb embarked on military intervention in southern Arabia following persecution of a Christian community there, has long received scholarly attention. This brought about closer diplomatic contact between Aksum and Constantinople than had prevailed previously, although details of the parties' collaboration remain unclear. It does seem, however, that the episode was followed by a period of steady decline in Aksum's prosperity which resulted, by the early 7th century, in the transfer of the political capital to a more easterly part of Tigray, the precise location of which has not yet been established. Here, the Christian kingdom became more isolated and inward-looking

as the rise of Arabian control of the Red Sea restricted its formerly flourishing contacts with the Mediterranean world. Issue of coinage was discontinued. Virtually no archaeological research has yet been conducted on sites of this period, and knowledge is largely restricted to that provided by churches, both built and rock-hewn, some of which remain in use today. Clearly, however, the processes involved were ones of transformation rather than replacement.

Further to the south, in what is now the Amhara Region of Ethiopia, related developments are now recognised. The earliest rock-hewn features, best known at Lalibela, were not originally churches, although some were subsequently converted to ecclesiastical use. The major florescence of church-creation took place here around the 11th century, coinciding with an apparent hiatus in Tigray. This further southward shift in the centre of Christian authority in the Ethiopian highlands may have coincided with the rise of a ruling dynasty that is recalled in historical tradition as the Zagwe. The rock-hewn churches at Lalibela are traditionally attributed to the reign of the Zagwe king of that name, c.AD 1200; it now seems that several of them had originated earlier, but that it was under king Lalibela that the church-complexes took the form and symbolism that they have retained ever since, as a place of pilgrimage and, increasingly, tourism (**Fig. 2**).

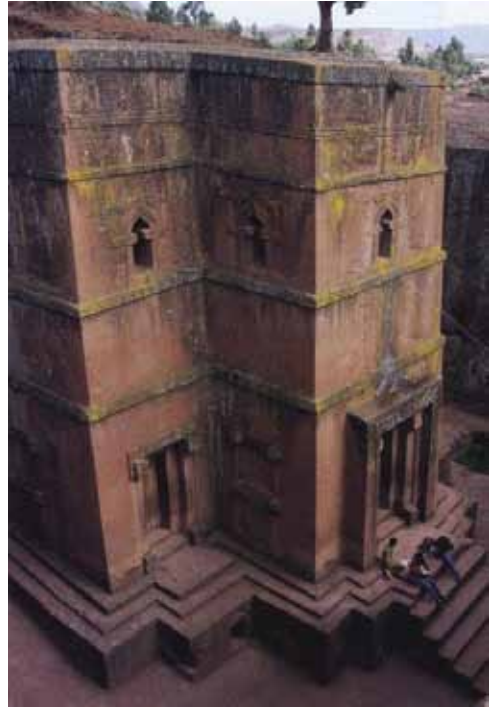


Fig. 2: The rock-hewn church of St George, Lalibela (13th century).

The view of Africa's northern Horn that is offered in my new book (2012), *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the northern Horn, 1000 BC - AD 1300* (James Currey, Woodbridge), is one of strong local continuity in the face of changing circumstances, rather than of the area being the passive recipient of external influences.