

# Aksumite its prime times to the present day

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AKSUMITE CIVILIZATION AND ITS LEGACY Aksum was an Ancient African civilization that existed between 100-940 A. D.

(9) Origin Kingdom of Aksum was originally confined to the territory of present day Eritrea and Northern Ethiopia.

Its first capital city was Mazaber and was built by Ityopis, Son of Cush. (10) The capital of the empire later moved to town of Aksum and remained there throughout. Aksum, however, was at the western part of the future (expanded) Aksumite kingdom which included the Red Sea Coast and even extended in its prime times to the present day Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Somalia. The choice of Aksum as empire's capital in the beginning was due to its economically strategic location. Aksum lies at the center of important interior trade routes.

Some of these trade routes include: The route connecting Nile and Adulis, the route connecting to Cataracts eventually leading to Egypt, the Southern route to Somali Coast and the route that runs towards Agaw lands and Sasu which was known for its gold trade. Besides the trade, Aksum and its surrounding environment had favorable climate for agriculture. It had fertile soils and access to water resources throughout the year due to the abundant rainfall.

(2) Another town of the empire worth of mentioning is Adulis. Adulis, the chief of Aksumite port on Red Sea played an important role in the kingdom's international trade.

Language and Religion Original inhabitants of Aksum were speakers of a language that resembled a Semitic dialect of South Arabian language. The alphabets used in writing were modified versions of South Arabian script and contained

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only consonants. The direction of writing was from left to right unlike the South Arabian one.

The new and different script containing vowels was first depicted in the Great inscription of King Ezana. The syllabism used in these scripts became the basis for subsequent Ethiopic script. King Ezana's great inscription was written by a language of Semitic origin called Geez. It was the official language of Aksumite civilization and it is still used as liturgical language of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church. Initially Aksumites were Polytheists.

They practiced religions related to religions in South Arabia. The use of crescent disc shaped symbol in coinage verified these. The resources from fourth century indicate that the Aksumite kingdom adopted a new religion, Christianity. This is recorded in inscriptions of King Ezana and his coins. King Ezana's inscription indicates reference to phrases such as Holy Father, Son, Holy Ghost (Holy Trinity in Christian belief) not previous gods.

(2) In the coinage of Ezana's reign the previous crescent shaped disc symbol was replaced by Cross, the symbol of Christian faith.

King Ezana was converted to Christianity by the teachings of Frumentius. It is believed that Frumentius taught the king while he was young and later the emperor made Christianity the official religion of the kingdom. After the adoption of Christianity as official religion of Aksum, Frumentius was anointed as the first archbishop of the church.

He is accepted as the Father of Ethiopian Orthodox Church and revered with the name Kasate Birhan Aba Selama (The Light Bearer). (6) In

(4) it is proposed that King Ezana adopted Christianity with the ambition of unifying his kingdom under one religion and with the ambition of trading with Christian Romans. These are, however, unlikely reasons for the adoption of Christianity by King Ezana. It is obvious that religion is a tool frequently used by rulers to consolidate power and eliminate disobedience. But in the case of Aksumites, they were not diversified in religion before the adoption of Christianity. They were all polytheists worshipping common gods. There is no plausible reason to assume that a new religion (Christianity) can unify Aksumites if they were already a homogenous society in terms of religion.

Moreover King Ezana's conversion to Christianity might have gained him a new trading ally, Roman Empire. But if this (getting new trade ally) in fact was Ezana's main motive of converting to Christianity, by this logic, on the other hand, he could have lost South Arabia, the main trading partner of his kingdom. King Ezana adopted Christianity most probably because he believed that what Frumentius taught was correct. He converted neither for the sake of strengthening his political power nor for the sake of friendship with Roman Empire.

In fact when the Christian church divided on the issue of doctrine at Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, the Aksumite church sided with Oriental Orthodoxy rejecting the teaching of Roman counterpart.

Economy As mentioned in Monumentum Adulitanum inscription, the land route to Egypt and the defense of the Red Sea Coasts on both the African and the Arabian sides were objects of vigilance to the Aksumite kingdom.

(2) Aksum kingdom occupied a strategic location in Red Sea Coastal line thus obtaining major proportion of its wealth from international trade.

The Periplus of Eritrean Sea, the first century travel note written by Egypt Merchant, accounts for Aksum's practice of exporting Ivory and importing cloth and glassware from Egypt. Another early document by Pliny points out that Aksum exported mainly animal or human resources. These include rhinoceros's horn, hippopotamus hides, tortoise shells, monkeys and slaves.

(2) Salt was also a prominent good in internal trade of the kingdom.

Salt was brought from Eastern Danakil region in the forms of blocks locally called Amole. Taxation from citizens and foreign traders who uses the route (port) was another source of income for the kingdom. Tax is generally paid in kind or Money. Agriculture was the source of income and food for the majority peasant population of Aksum. The fertile land abundant rainfall helped in twice a year cultivation of some crops. Some of the coins of Aksum depict a drawing of crop (most likely wheat stalk) emphasizing the importance of agriculture to the kingdom. Animal husbandry was also part of the economy. Cattle, sheep, camels, elephants, etc.

were used for various purposes such as ploughing, food, transportation, ivory, etc. In pre-Christian Aksum some animals were sacrificed for deities.

Coinage Aksum was the first Sub-Saharan civilization to mint its own coinage.

The coins were struck in gold, silver and bronze. (1) As indicated in (2) the necessity for such currency stands in a direct ratio to the complexity of the society which has developed. That is the ability to issue its own currency is an

indicator of Aksum kingdom's wealth/ status. Another significance of Aksum coinage is that, as an archaeological objects they are sources of some important information about the kingdom.

For instance, the complete list of kings of Aksum kingdom is made from the texts and drawings on the coinage of the kingdom.<sup>(5)</sup> Coins before the reign of King Ezana have a drawing of crescent shaped disc. Whereas the coins during King Ezana's reign depict a drawing of cross. By examining these two coinage alone, one can arguably speculate that it was during King Ezana's reign that the Aksumites converted to Christianity from polytheism. At the late stage the Aksum coinage was used as a propaganda tool by rulers.<sup>(2)</sup>

Coinage of each King appeared with a motto on a reverse side. For instance a bronze coin by King Ezana or his successor had a Greek motto TOYTOAPECH meaning ' May this please the people.

' Other mottoes used by Fifth Century Kings include religious themes such as ' By the grace of God', 'Christ is with us', etc. King Kaleb's motto reads ' Son of Tazena'. The wording of this motto sounds that King Kaleb wanted to affirm his legitimate succession to the throne.

(2)

Monumental Architecture One piece of monumental architecture that features Aksum civilization is the stelae. Stelae are tall stone towers used to mark the location of graves of the nobles. The notable stelae of Aksum includes the Great stelae (108 feet), The king Ezana stele and the Obelisk of Aksum. The Obelisk was discovered by Italian soldiers in 1935's conquest of Ethiopia. The soldiers brought the 160 ton stele as a loot to Rome in three pieces and

reassembled it. The UN condemned Italy's action and ordered the return of Obelisk to Ethiopia. However it was finally in 2007 the obelisk returned to Aksum.(8) The designs of the obelisk represent a multi-storey palace with fake windows and fake doors.

**Decline of the Civilization** Various factors are attributed to the downfall of Aksumite civilization. These include external and internal conflicts, exploitation of resources and natural climate factors. In 6th century the trade route of Red Sea and Nile was controlled by the new Islamic empire. This isolated Aksum from its international trade, a major blow to the kingdom's prestigious economy.(2) After weakening its economy the kingdom gradually stopped producing coins.

It also further moved its territory inland for a protection from external aggressors. Domestic rivals probably took advantage and waged attack on already declining kingdom. It is believed that a Jewish Queen Yodit Gudit defeated the empire and burned its churches and literature.

Another tale is that a Queen from South ended the empire in 10th century.

Aksum in legends and old literature As depicted in Ethiopian book of Kibre Negest( Glory of the Kings) and Bible, Queen of Sheba travelled to Jerusalem to visit King Solomon. According to Kibre Negest She slept with King Solomon and conceived a son who upon the birth named as Menelik. When Menelik grew up he went to Jerusalem to see his father, King Solomon, and returned home with the Arc of the Covenant, the sacred biblical tablet containing the Ten

Commandments. (7) Since then The Arc of Covenant is believed to be kept inside the church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum.

Najashi is an Abyssinian(Aksumite) king who is mentioned in Islam scriptures (Quran). He welcomed and protected the Muslim emigrants who fled the persecution of pagan Mecca.