

History of Aksum



By Mahider Sisay



LOCATION

- ❖ The location of the kingdom of Aksum has always been described as being at the south of the Red Sea.
 - Aksum covered a better part of the west of the Red Sea, which is in the Horn of Africa. At some duration, it took control of parts of the Arabian Peninsula to the Red Sea (Phillips 4).
 - When speaking on the specific countries, the kingdom of Aksum covered present-day Eritrea, Northern Ethiopia, Yemen, Sudan, and southern Saudi Arabia.
- ❖ Providing access to the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean Seas, made this empire a powerful trading hub.



PAST AKSUM



PRESENT DAY AKSUM

TRADE AND COMMERCE



- ❖ The Aksumite Empire minted their coins to be used as currency in the facilitation of trade.
- ❖ Traders dealt with different commodities such as gold, gems, glass, and salt.
- ❖ Since the Aksumites settled on fertile and supported agricultural highlands, their main exports became agricultural goods
 - Ex. grain farming
- ❖ Traders from different parts such as Persia, Central Africa, Egypt, and India would cover distances to trade their goods in Aksum city (Phillipson 50).



COINAGE

- ❖ Aksum's initial minting of coins was for foreign trade and markets.
 - Coins were given the name of eighteen Aksumite kings from c. 295 until c. 620.
- ❖ Most Aksumite coins were found in the large trade centres with very few in remote villages, where trade would be more through barter and not coinage based.



ADOPTION OF CHRISTIAN RELIGION

- ❖ Aksum's role in international trade led to their culture change as there were people from different cultures entering the region.
 - Ezana was instituted as a king in the 320 A.D. During his era, Aksum changed their religion to Christianity around 327 A.D.
 - During this time, very few states had adopted Christianity across the world.
- ❖ Egyptian traders and missionaries influenced Christianity within the region because they had trade connections; they used the opportunity to impact Aksumites.

AKSUM CROSS

❖ Ethiopian crosses are almost always made from elaborate latticework.

➤ criss-crossed pattern of strips

❖ The intertwined lattice in the cross represents everlasting life.

❖ No two crosses are exactly identical in style.



AKSUM CROSS COMPARABLE TO ANKH





GOVERNANCE

- ❖ Aksum was essentially a federation, held together by the prestige and authority of its *negusa nagast* (king of kings) (Akena 39).
 - Their governance essentially was of the monarch's absolute power
 - Ex. members of the royal family acted as administrators in the palaces and also advisors to courts.
- ❖ Of the few outsiders known to have gained high office, the most famous non-family member to have power as such is Saint Frumentius during the 4th century under king Ezana's reign.
 - He became a secretary and treasurer.

ARTS

❖ Aksumites did not build pyramids as their neighbors, Egypt did.

➤ Aksum is known for its tall towers and stone bases.

➤ They used unique decorative features which had geometric designs such as three-dimensional fragments, incisions, and stamps.

❖ Giant pillars known as obelisks, were erected to mark the tombs of important leaders.





OVERALL EXPERIENCE

- ❖ The kingdom of Aksum had traded as the backbone of its economy. Its strategic position in the ancient trade routes gave it an upper hand in control of the trade.
 - Essentially, what made Aksum so great is the same thing that helped it fall in the end.
 - Ex. Climate changes, trade was no longer controllable on their end.

- ❖ I got a chance to experience Ethiopia's unique and rich artistic heritage.
 - Art was EVERYWHERE money, houses, buildings, religion.



- ❖ Akena, Francis Adyanga. “Ancient Governance in Africa.” *Gender, Democracy, and Institutional Development in Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019. 37-65.
- ❖ Phillips, Jacke. “Aksum, Kingdom of.” *The Encyclopedia of Empire* (2016): 1-5.
- ❖ Phillipson, David W. *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum & the Northern Horn, 1000 BC-1300 AD*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2012.