

The Kingdom of Axum

A Kingdom Lost to Time



Introduction



- From the 1st to the 10th centuries CE, the kingdom emerged as a major trading hub, building a trading network that linked the ancient world together.
- By dominating the Red Sea From Rome to India, Aksum welcomed visitors into its capital city, a metropolis that at once time held 20,000 people and whose streets were decorated with grand stelae monuments which were inscribed with Ge'ez script and, later, Greek.
- Its merging of coastal trades and cultures would eventually lead the kingdom to convert to Christianity, where its royal family would claim to be the descendants of the Queen of Sheba's son, King Menelik.
- Eventually would lose power around the 7th century and would decline into a dark age for three more centuries before disappearing in 960 AD.
- 3rd century Persian prophet Mani: "There are four great kingdoms on earth: the first is the Kingdom of Babylon and Persia; the second is the Kingdom of Rome; the third is the Kingdom of the Aksumites; the fourth is the kingdom of the Chinese" (Libertarianism.org, 2021)

Model of the Ta'akha Maryam palace

Location



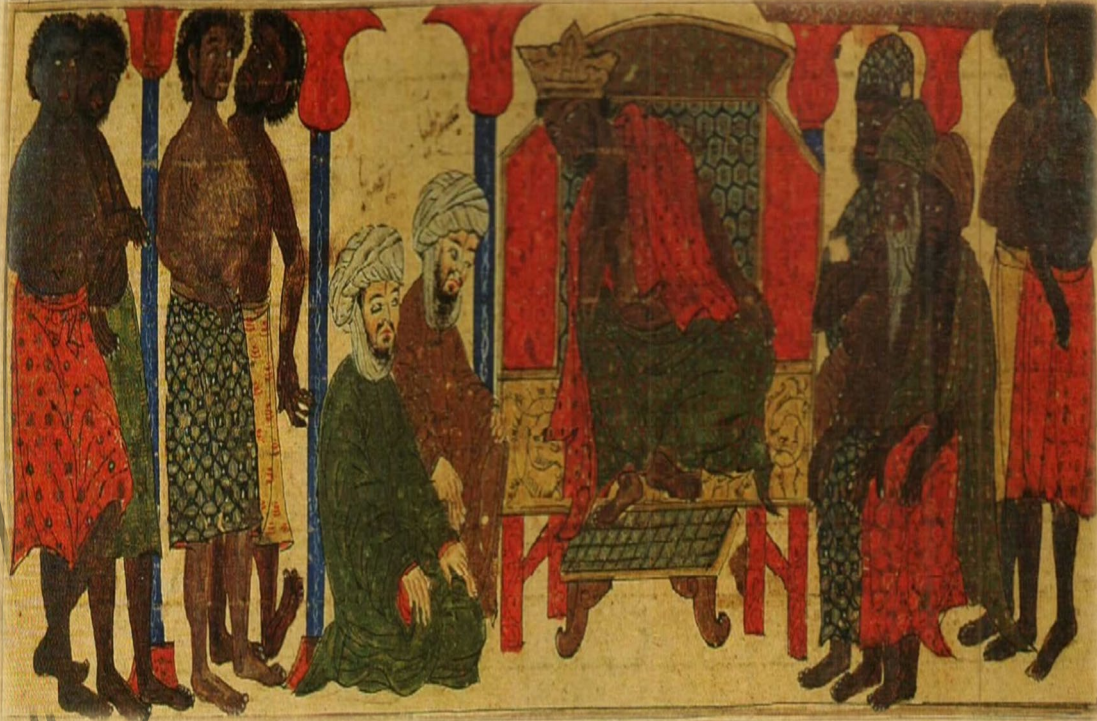
Ruins of the Dungur palace in Axum.

- Established in the highlands of Tigray region, the Kingdom of Aksum (or, sometimes referred to as Aksumite Empire or Axsum) spanned across Northern Ethiopia, Eritrea, eastern Sudan, and southern Saudi Arabia during the height of its power and expansion across the Horn of Africa.
- With its volcanic soil and elevations across the region, the land soon became the prime location for an Agricultural Revolution, producing a variety of trade and goods. This including herding livestock, wheat, barley teff, and nsete—or “false bananas”.
- Sitting right in the Horn of Africa and in control of the Red Sea coast, the Tigray highland would soon be home to a flourishing civilization.



The Kingdom of Aksum in the 6th Century

Government



14th century illustration showing the king of Aksum declining the request from the Muslims.

- Seated at the highest rank in the Kingdom, the Aksumite king was the embodiment of the state and almost divine-like (Khan Academy).
- In pre-Christian times, it was believed these kings were descendants of Mahrem, a tribal war god that was close to the Greek God Ares. (Ezana, 2005)
- Kings would come to call themselves Negusa Negast or 'king of kings.'
- King Ezana I would respond to Kush's attack by sacking its capital, breaking the kingdom into three different states, and taking control of the region in the vacuum of power.
- Kaleb I would extend Aksum's power further by conquering the Himyarite Kingdom in Yemen.

Christianity

- ▶ Prior to its conversion to Christianity, Aksumites practiced a polytheistic religion that originated in southern Arabia that focuses on the honoring of ancestors and deities. They worshiped gods such as Astar, Beher, Meder or Medr, and Mahrem—the god of war, upheaval, and monarchy and the most favored gods.
- ▶ The conversion to Christianity happened during King Ezana I's reign.
- ▶ Frumentius became Aksum's first bishop in 303 AD and would become Ezana I's childhood teacher, guiding him to adopt the religion in 324 AD. Frumentius would travel to Alexandria to receive an official title and the kingdom would adopt Coptic Egyptian Christianity.
- ▶ The most important church was the Church of Maryam Tzion which, according to Ethiopian texts, houses the Ark of the Covenant—these texts would also state that later Ethiopian rulers were direct descendants of King Solomon and Queen Makeda—the Queen of Sheba—through their son King Menelik. (Lemoore, 2021)



The Ezana Stone is an ancient stele still standing in modern day Axum, the center of the ancient Kingdom of Aksum. This stone monument, dating back to the 4th century, documents the conversion of King Ezana to Christianity and his conquest of Meroë and other areas.

Ge'ez script



- Ge'ez script or Ethiopic: a script developed in the region from Semitic script but which would develop into its own unique script, which included vowels and consonants and would be read from left to right.
- Though Ge-ez script is still used to this day, Aksum also used Greek as it entered the Greco-Roman cultural sphere; evidence of this can be found on structures with Greek written into its stone face. (Cartwright, 2019)

Ge'ez prayer scroll meant to dispel evil spirits

Trade and Economy

- ▶ The city of Axum rested on a plateau 6,000ft above sea level; this position gave it the perfect vantage point as a crossroads of trading routes that ran in every direction.
- ▶ The city could be reached by Egypt, Rome, from beyond to the Nile River, the shores of the Gulf of Aden to Zeila on the northern coast of Somaliland (modern Somalia and Djibouti), India, and even into the Three Kingdoms of China.
- ▶ Desired goods the likes of tortoise shells, rhinoceros horns, frankincense, myrrh, emeralds, salt, live animals, and enslaved people were imported through the city and in exchange Aksum would provide textiles, iron, steel, weapons, glassware, jewelry, spices, olive oil, and wine.
- ▶ As its power grew, Aksum would begin minting its own coins in the 3rd century, during the reign of King Endubis, and were the first to do so in sub-Saharan Africa. (Cartwright, 2019)
- ▶ A symbol of power for Aksumite Kings was the use of coins. In the ancient world, images on coins were often representations of states, gods/goddess, or sacred animals, but Aksum Kings took the unusual step of depicting their King's on each side of their coins.



Aksumite currency depicting King Endubis



Silver coin of King Ezana



Coins of King Endubis

Material Culture



- ▶ What we know of Aksum's culture, political landscape, and government can be best gleaned from the archaeological ruins left behind it of its more high ranking urban structure.
- ▶ Common objects used by every day or country-dwelling people are harder to come by.
- ▶ Pottery, glass, metalworks, and even coinage can give us clues on what those who dwelled with in Aksum might have been doing or what they thought about.
- ▶ This style of potter is called 'Classical Aksumite' and noted for its vast use of color and lightly impressed designs. The most common colors are hues of orange and red, as well as black and grey; brown hues are less common and might have begun in the fifth century. The rarest color of all these is a purple painted rare, though this style may have originated from the Nile Valley.
- ▶ Most pottery, however, seemed to have been used for food storage, serving, drinking, and cooking. Others were made for hygiene, cosmetics, and ritual purposes.



Pottery



An Axumite man's head



A glass jar



An Axumite jar spout



An Axumite stamp or seal

Architecture



The monastery of Debre Damo

- ▶ As the city expanded, so did its nobility and monuments. Elaborate grave markers known as steles covered the plains and hills outside the city; made of stone and timber, they varied heights, though some were found to be 78ft tall and others even 108ft tall.
- ▶ Other stone structures, such as palaces and buildings used by Aksum's elites, could be found, carved from granite, clay, and wood.
- ▶ When Christianity arrived, churches and monasteries lined the streets rather than monuments.



The King Ezana's Stela



Axumite Menhir in Balaw Kalaw

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