

Aksum

An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity

Dedicated to the late H. Neville Chittick

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of Antioch. In 269AD, she successfully invaded Egypt; by 270 her interest was turning to Asia Minor. In 271 she proclaimed her son Wahballat as Augustus. In spite of this widespread success, the Roman empire was at last recovering from its unhappy condition under a new emperor, Aurelian, and Palmyrene hegemony lasted only a few years; and in August 272 Palmyra itself fell to the emperor's armies.

The Aksumites mentioned in the (rather suspect) Latin 'Life of Aurelian' attributed to Flavius Vopiscus in the so-called *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* (Magie 1932: 258–61), seem to have been among the foreign envoys present at the celebration of Aurelian's triumph rather than defeated allies of Zenobia being led with the queen in the procession. They are included in a separate section with other representatives from different countries bearing gifts, and not among the captives from peoples against whom Aurelian is known to have conducted campaigns. There is no evidence that Zenobia was able to open any diplomatic relations with Aksum during her brief period of dominance, and none to indicate that she enlisted the support of the Aksumites in her wars.

Persia.

Towards the end of Aksum's period of power, the Persians conquered both Egypt (in 619 AD, holding it until 628) and South Arabia (in 575 and again, after a rebellion in Himyar, in 598), and it may have been this that began to destroy Aksum's trade in the Red Sea rather than the later Arab expansion. There is only a little information about Persian relations with Aksum. John of Ephesus, in his 'Life of Simeon the Bishop', states that when Simeon and his companions had been for seven years in the prison at Nisibis, the king of Ethiopia heard of it and made a successful request, through his ambassadors to king Kawad (d. 531AD), that they should be freed (Brooks 1923: 153). Kosmas mentions that merchants from Adulis and Persia both met in Taprobane (Sri Lanka), and that ivory was exported from Ethiopia to Persia by sea (Wolska-Conus 1973: 348, 354). Also in the sixth century, the emperor Justinian is supposed to have tried to use Aksum against Persia in both an economic war over silk supplies and a military tentative through Aksum's South Arabian possessions (Procopius, ed. Dewing 1914: 192–5). The inference is that Aksum would be ready to act against the Persians because of their community of religion with the Roman/Byzantine empire. After the loss of Aksum's direct influence in South Arabia, and the death of the *negus* Caleb, the historian Procopius (ed. Dewing 1914: 190–1) informs us that the leader of the rebel government in Arabia, Abreha, agreed to pay tribute to Aksum. The Persian conquest would have terminated this arrangement if it still applied to Abreha's successors. It may be supposed, then, that after 575 Aksum had not only lost its tribute, but was also faced with a more or less hostile Persian dependency just across the Red Sea. Already there may have been an increase in the movement of hostile shipping in the sea-lanes on which Aksum depended for its foreign commerce.

A few links with Persia have been suggested at different times. It may be that certain figures, robed and with curly hair, depicted on the monumental staircase of the Apadana at Persepolis, are Ethiopians. They are shown presenting a giraffe, a tusk, and a vase. Some details of their appearance resemble the more-or-less contemporary Ethiopians as known from their statues and throne reliefs from Hawelti (Leroy 1963: 293–5). At a much later date, certain glazed wares, blue-green in colour, found at Aksum and Matara, have been classified, rather vaguely, as Sassanian-Islamic or Gulf wares (Wilding in Munro-Hay 1989; Anfray 1974: 759).

India and Sri Lanka.

Aksum also had trading relations with India and Sri Lanka (Pankhurst 1974). A find of Indian gold coins, issued by the Kushana kings (who ruled in north India and Afghanistan) in the earlier third century, at the monastery of Dabra Damo on the route between Aksum and the coast, confirms the contact from the Ethiopian side (Mordini 1960, 1967). There are also occasional allusions to ships from Adulis sailing to or from the sub-continent. Such instances occur in the accounts of the arrival of the future bishop Frumentius in Ethiopia (Ch. 10: 2), the journey of bishop Moses of Adulis (Desanges 1969) and in the *Christian Topography* of Kosmas Indikopleustes. Kosmas (Wolska-Conus 1973: 348–51) describes how a Roman merchant, Sopatros, who had gone to Taprobane (Sri Lanka) with merchants from Adulis, got the better of a distinguished Persian in the presence of a Sri Lankan king by comparing the gold coins of the Romans with the silver milarision of the Persians. A number of yellow pottery figures, apparently mould-made, were found at Hawelti, near the stelae there; de Contenson suggested that they were of Indian type, but this has not been authoritatively confirmed (de Contenson 1963ii: 45–6, pl. XLVIII).

The Far East.

There is no real evidence for contacts between China and Aksum, but it has been suggested that the Han dynasty records include a reference to the Aksumite kingdom (Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972: 71, 84–5). If, as seems possible, the Han ships were in contact with states beyond India, the kingdom which the chroniclers call Huang-Chi might have been Aksum (Fiaccadori 1984: 283, n. 30). Aksum grew to be an important power in the region of the Red Sea, and the Chinese merchants must, at the very least, have eventually come into contact with someone who knew of Aksum. If Huang-Chi was Aksum the contact is a valuable one for our chronology, since the usurper Wang Mang (1–6 AD) received in return for his gifts a live rhinoceros from the king of Huang Chi, thus attesting the presence of a dominant power group at this early stage, just when the rise of Aksum is postulated. However, Wang Mang's agents could equally well have contacted some other coastally centred pre-Aksumite group, like the Adulitae. Other products of Huang-Chi

country. The crops they farmed were bequeathed to their Aksumite successors, though, as noted above, the identity of the grain ears depicted on the coins is still disputed. It has been identified as a primitive two-row barley (Munro-Hay 1978), and Vavilov (1931: 10), from coins brought from Ethiopia, identified it as a wheat, *triticum turgidum*, subspecies *abyssinicum* Vavilov. But the two coins he illustrates as 'Abyssinian coins' in his fig. 4 are, oddly enough, not Aksumite, but are bronze issues of early to mid 1st century Judaea, one dating to the time of Coponius (6-6AD) or Ambibulus (9-12AD), the other to the time of Agrippa I, c. 42AD. Such coins have not otherwise been found in Ethiopia.

A number of different animals are attested from the Aksumite period in Ethiopia. Inscriptions and literary references to Aksum mention cattle, sheep, camels, and elephants. The latter were apparently not usually trained by the Ethiopians, according to Kosmas (Wolska-Conus 1973: 354; see Pankhurst 1974: 219-220). When the king wanted some for show he had young ones taken to be brought up in captivity. Elephant tusks, adds Kosmas, were sent by ship to India, Persia, Himyar and the Roman empire. The 'pack animals' captured from the Tsarane of Afan (Ch. 11: 5; DAE 10) may have been donkeys or camels; camel bones and teeth were found at Adulis (Paribeni 1907: 451). Yoked (humpless) oxen are modelled in clay standing in the base of bowls found in some of the tombs at Aksum, possibly fashioned for some sort of religious purpose; humped cattle (zebu) figures come from Matara (Anfray 1967: 44-45), from the excavator's second Aksumite period (which he dates to the sixth-eighth centuries). Cattle on the hoof, with iron and salt, were used to barter with western neighbours for gold, according to Kosmas (Wolska-Conus 1968: 360), and most inscriptions tell of the seizure of large numbers of animals as plunder from defeated enemies (Ch. 11: 5). Inscriptions also note that some animals were used for sacrificial purposes, or at least presented to the gods (Ch. 11: 5; DAE 10). One or two pottery figures of birds exist from Aksumite times, and (with a little imagination) we can perhaps identify chickens and pigeons or doves (Chittick 1974: pl. XIIC; Paribeni 1907: fig. 48; Wilding in Munro-Hay 1989). Among wild animals the giraffe, *taurelaphus* (buffalo) and rhinoceros are mentioned by Kosmas (Wolska-Conus 1973: 314-321), the former being sometimes tamed and kept in the palace to amuse the king. The Ethiopian buffalo was wild, in contrast to that of India, where it was used as a beast of burden and supplier of milk. The rhinoceros was called the *aroue harisi*, apparently from Ethiopian words meaning wild beast and plough (Wolska-Conus 1973: 317 n. 2.1). The latter designation apparently referred both to the shape of its snout and the use to which its thick skin was put. Kosmas saw a wild one at a distance, and the stuffed skin of another in the royal palace. The monoceros or unicorn Kosmas admitted not having actually seen, but he did see four brass figures of him set up in the king's palace. The ibex, lion, and perhaps some species of deer or gazelle are depicted in Aksumite art forms (Ch. 13:

3). Two small bronze figures from Aksum are possibly dogs (Chittick 1974: fig. 23). A number of agricultural tools, notably a sickle, also came from tomb finds (Munro-Hay 1989). The pottery and glass beakers and goblets found in the tombs might have been used for the local beer, *sewa*, or the honey wine, *mes* or *tej*, which are mentioned in the ancient inscriptions dealing with the issue of rations. Oil (vegetable) and butter are also mentioned and wines and oils were noted in the lists of imports (see below). Local oils were probably derived from linseed and *nug*, and olive oil was imported. Wine or oil presses, with basins, channels and spouts carved in the rock, are known, which date to Aksumite times (Littmann 1913), but vines are only mentioned by the Portuguese in later centuries (Pankhurst 1961: 213).

3. METAL RESOURCES.

Local exploitation of mineral resources is not well documented, but gold seems to have come from the Sudan (Sasu), some southern Ethiopian regions and possibly Gojjam, Eritrea, and the Beja country, and iron ore, silver, lead and tin are also mentioned, though mostly from Portuguese sources (Connah 1987: 72; Pankhurst 1961: 224-9).

The gold trade from the south is known from the sixth century (Kosmas, ed. Wolska-Conus 1968: 360-1), and reports about Ethiopia's wealth in gold reached ludicrous heights in later times (Pankhurst 1961: 224-7). Kosmas' story about the exchange of gold for iron, salt and cattle is supported by de Almeida's account (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954: 149) of gold obtained in his day from Cafalaria (a general name for the lands extending from the southern kingdom of Enarya east to Malindi and west to Angola), where the Cafres exchanged it for clothing, cows, salt and other goods. Even when Bruce was in Ethiopia, gold from the south was exchanged for similar products, iron and copper, skins and hides, and beads (Pankhurst 1961: 227). Alvares (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: 159-60, 457) was tempted to try his own experiments at gold-washing in Aksum, inspired by reports that much gold was found after storms. His attempts may have been doomed to failure through a misunderstanding; doubtless his informants referred to the finding of small gold objects, such as coins, rather than actual gold in the soil as occurred in Damot or Enarya far to the southwest (Pankhurst 1961: 224-7). Even now the people of Aksum find considerable quantities of ancient coins after the rains have washed the soil away. Some gold has also been reported from Gojjam, much closer to Aksum (Pankhurst 1961: 224; Kirwan 1972: 171; Crawford 1958) and ancient gold workings are claimed in Eritrea (Tringali 1965: 151-2; see also the brief note on material from the Museum of Mankind appended to the account of the Adulis excavations of 1868, Munro-Hay 1989i) and in the Beja territory (Kobishchanov 1979: 134), where there was much activity from the ninth century when the Arabs became interested (Hasan 1973: 50). The greater part of the gold, that from the south, was found by panning or by searching river beds, and was not from mines.

Silver seems not to have been common, but some reports of mines exist from the Portuguese period (Pankhurst 1961: 227-8). Possibly the considerable issues of silver coins, over some 300 years, depended on imported silver, but this seems very unlikely in view of the amounts used and the fact that many silver issues were adorned with gold overlay, scarcely necessary if the metal itself were already a rarity. It seems probable that the Aksumites had local silver sources, possibly including some of those mentioned by the Portuguese in later centuries. Doubtless the exploitation of precious metals was kept as much as possible under state control.

Sources of iron ore were apparently fairly common in Tigray (Pankhurst 1961: 228-9; Fr. Raffaello Francescano in Monneret de Villard 1938: 60). Copper and bronze do not seem to be noted except as an import in the *Periplus* (Huntingford 1980: 21-2), though tin was apparently available in later times (Pankhurst 1961: 229).

4. TRADE, IMPORTS AND EXPORTS.

The vigorous trade which Aksum undertook was an important element in the acquisition of its power and position in the early centuries AD, and was probably the origin of a good part of its wealth. Policing of the trade-routes was therefore of vital importance, and it is mentioned in the anonymous *Monumentum Adulitanum* inscription (Ch. 11: 5) that the land route to Egypt, and the defence of the Red Sea coasts on both the African and the Arabian sides, were objects of vigilance to the Aksumite monarchy. Apart from long-distance land and sea routes, internal transport must have depended on some sort of state maintenance of at least the main roads in reasonable condition for porters or pack-animals; a practical move also useful for military purposes. We have no reports about Aksumite bridges, though the Portuguese later built some of which vestiges are still visible today. Ethiopian rivers are scarcely navigable, though some of the lakes are. Lake Tsana, which the Aksumites must have reached, is well-known for its reed boats, which rather resemble ancient Egyptian types. However, the river valleys, when dry, can also supply relatively easy passage from place to place. We have several accounts of the trade of the Aksumite kingdom, both internal and external, and archaeological work has confirmed many of the chief categories of goods being handled. The earliest account of the trade of Ethiopia, that of Pliny, (ed. Rackham 1948: 467) mentions the goods brought to Adulis by the 'Trogodites and Ethiopians'. These exports were all animal (or human) products of the region and are listed as ivory, rhinoceros horn, hippopotamus hides, tortoise shell, monkeys, and slaves.

The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* includes a brief chapter on Aksum, and as this information is of the first importance for any analysis of Aksumite economic affairs it is here quoted in full (Huntingford 1980: 20-21; for a more recent translation see Casson 1989: 51ff);

"After Ptolemais of the Huntig, at a distance of about 3000 stades, there is the customary mart of Adouli, lying in a deep bay that runs southwards;

in front of it is an island called Oreine, which is about 200 stades out in the sea from the inmost part of the bay, lying along the mainland on both sides, where ships entering anchor on account of attacks from the mainland. For at one time they used to anchor right inside the bay at the Island called Of Didoros along the mainland where there was a crossing on foot, by means of which the Barbaroi living there attacked the island. And opposite Oreine on the mainland, twenty stades from the sea, is Adouli, a village of moderate size, from which to Koloe, an inland city and the first ivory market, it is a journey of three days; and from this, another five days to the metropolis called the Axomite, to which is brought all the ivory from beyond the Nile through the district called Kueneion, and thence to Adouli. For the whole quantity of elephant and rhinoceros which is killed grazes in the interior, though occasionally they are seen by the sea round about Adouli. Out to sea beyond this mart, on the right, lie several small sandy islands called Alalaio, where there is tortoiseshell, which is brought to the mart by the Ikhthuophagoi.

And at a distance of nearly 800 stades there is another very deep bay, at the mouth of which on the right hand is a great sandbank, in the depths of which is found deposited the opsan stone, which occurs in this place only. Zoskales rules these parts, from the Moskhophagoi to the other Barbaria, mean [in his way] of life and with an eye on the main chance, but otherwise high-minded, and skilled in Greek letters.

To these places are imported:

Barbaric unfulled cloth made in Egypt, Arsinoitic robes, spurious coloured cloaks, linen, fringed mantles, several sorts of glassware, imitation murrine ware made in Diospolis, orokhalkos, which they use for ornaments and for cutting [to serve] as money, material called 'copper cooked in honey' for cooking-pots and for cutting into armlets and anklets for women, iron used for spears both for hunting elephants and other animals and for war, axes, adzes, swords, big round drinking cups of bronze, a little money for foreigners who live there, Ladikean and Italian wine, but not much. For the king are imported: silver and gold objects made in the design of the country, cloaks of cloth, unlined garments, not of much value.

Likewise from the inner parts of Ariake: Indian iron and steel, the broader Indian cloth called monakhe, cloth called sagmatogenai, belts, garments called gaunakai, mallow-cloth, a little muslin, coloured lac. The exports from these places are: ivory, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn. The greater part is brought from Egypt to the mart between the month of January and the month of September, that is, from Tubi to Thoth. The best time for the trade from Egypt is about the month of September"

The exports of Aksum came from all over its area of hegemony. Along the route Adulis-Koloe-Aksum-Kueneion, starting from the latter (suggested to be the Sinaar region of the modern Sudan, Schoff 1912: 61, but possibly

meaning the somewhat closer regions over the Takaze/Atbara river), came, according to the *Periplus* (Huntingford 1980), ivory from the country beyond the Nile. A tusk was found at Adulis (Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972: 74/5), eloquent witness to this part of Aksum's trade network. From the Blemmyes (Beja), says Kosmas, came emeralds (beryls), taken into India by Ethiopian merchants (Wolska-Conus 1973: 352-3); Olympiodorus (Kirwan 1966: 123) notes that the Beja/Blemmyes controlled the emerald supply by the early fifth century, when he was permitted to visit them, and Epiphanius (ed. Blake, de Vis 1934), writing at the end of the century, confirmed that the Ethiopians obtained emeralds from the Blemmye country. From islands in the Red Sea came tortoise-shell, and obsidian from near the shore (see above), and from Sasu (perhaps the gold-bearing Fazugli region some 200km. south-south-west of Lake Tsana, in modern Sudan) came gold, which was exchanged for salt, iron and meat (Wolska-Conus 1968: 360). Products from the animal life of the Ethiopian region figure high, as in Pliny's account, and include monkeys and other live animals, ivory and rhinoceros horn and hippopotamus hides. Aromatics, spices and other vegetable products either local or transhipped, such as incense resins, cassia, and sugar-cane (Kosmas, ed. Wolska-Conus 1968: 358), also formed part of the Aksumite trade in the exotic. Frankincense trees even now grow in the region to the south-east of Aksum, and Strabo, in the first century BC already notes that the Sabaeans engaged in the traffic of aromatics, 'both the local kinds and those from *Aethiopia*; to get the latter they sail across the straits in leathern boats' (Page 1930: 349). Human life was also part of the trading wealth of the state, and slaves, noted by both Pliny and Kosmas, may have figured prominently among the exports (Connah 1987: 72, 89).

Salt, which was of sufficient importance to figure in sixth-century internal trade (Kosmas, ed. Wolska-Conus 1968), later became one of Ethiopia's currency goods; most of it probably came from the low-lying Danakil region east of the highlands. In later times it was transported in blocks called *amole* (or *gayla* in Tigrinya). The products of local industries or of agriculture and stock-raising, do not seem to have figured among the exported goods, though in later times hides and leather became an important export. The Muslim *hadith* mention that leather goods from Mecca were much in demand in Ethiopia (Guillaume 1955: 150-51). The local manufactured goods would most likely have been solely for the internal markets, and probably not of the necessary quality to be taken on long trade voyages. The contrary was true of the products of the Roman empire and India, which were much desired and appreciated by the élite of Aksum, if we can interpret from the lists of imports, and the finds in tombs and domestic buildings. Iron, though long known in Ethiopia and neighbouring Sudan, was still an important import, both as raw material and in the form of tools and weapons. Articles specially made to order in precious metals, a varied selection of glass vessels, various fabrics and made-up garments, and some wines, oils, and spices are men-

tioned as imports by the *Periplus*, Kosmas, and others. Even some coin, in the form of either brass pieces or Roman coined money, was imported for trading purposes, apparently long before the decision was taken to facilitate trading exchanges by the issue of the local coinage.

A good deal of the imported material mentioned in the sources has turned up at Aksumite sites, particularly in such tomb deposits as that found in the Tomb of the Brick Arches at Aksum itself. Here was found glass in quantity, of high quality (more was found in a tomb in the Gudit Stelae Field, including two sets of goblets and beakers), iron, bronze, gold, silver, bone and ivory, ceramics, wood and leather. A good deal of this was probably of local manufacture, but some of the metalwork and the glass was certainly imported. From other parts of Aksum and from other Aksumite sites came amphorae in which wine or oils were imported, some of the luxury glass vessels from the Roman world, foreign glazed wares, perhaps from the region of the Persian Gulf, and occasional gold Roman or Indian coins. The presence of such items is testimony to the success of the Aksumites in developing the potential of their trade from both the interior and overseas trans-shipments into a rich source of revenue. Agriculture, however, probably remained the dominant form of economic activity almost everywhere in the country, except in a few special circumstances, and more or less uniform farming would have reduced the need for much internal traffic in bulky agricultural products (even if there had been the roads and transport facilities to carry them on any but the main routes). Cattle, of course, could be driven for sale as required, as illustrated by the Sasu gold trade where cattle on the hoof formed part of the trade-goods (Kosmas, ed. Wolska-Conus 1968). Certain locally manufactured goods, like pottery, may have been partly made by specialists in certain places where there was a large demand, but in country areas were perhaps not the work of such specialists. Most towns were probably rather regional markets than trade centres, importing local agricultural produce for their maintenance and distributing some craft products, and acting as local administrative or religious centres. But a few may have been financed to some extent by trade, such as Koloe, the ivory market, and of course Adulis itself. Apart from limited inter-regional movement of goods, the foreign trade, though rich, seems to have been chiefly in luxuries for the few, and it is unlikely that the metalwork, glass, cloth and so on brought to Adulis found a mass-market in Aksumite Ethiopia, any more than the ivory and so forth from Africa met with a very wide distribution outside.

No information is available about the system of taxation employed by the Aksumite rulers, but doubtless a good deal of the state's income depended on the categories noted above; population, land and its yield, livestock and trade. Land and population would have formed two basic and permanent taxable factors, relatively easy to administer, and later land-charters show that there was a well-kept record of land ownership (Huntingford 1965)