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Wenig, Steffen

## In kaiserlichem Auftrag: die Deutsche Aksum-Expedition 1906 unter Enno Littmann.

der Reihe / of the series

**Forschungen zur Archäologie außereuropäischer Kulturen; Bd. 3,2**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/dc6r-c63g>

**Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:**  
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

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Paul B. Henze (†)

## Aksum. From City State to Empire

The great stelae at Aksum are the largest and heaviest cut stone monuments known from anywhere in the ancient world. They were erected over underground tombs of men who ruled during the period before Emperor Ezana accepted Christianity in the early Fourth Century A.D. By that time Aksum had become the center of an empire which controlled the entire region from the shores of the Red Sea to the valley of the Nile as well as portions of South Arabia. It had originated as a city state at the western edge of North Ethiopian civilization which had begun developing more than a thousand years before. Aksum owed its rise and development to trade and agriculture. The surrounding region was forested and fertile, able to support craftsmen and builders who developed a highly distinctive style of architecture skillfully combining stone and wood to create strong attractive buildings. An impressive example of an early palace has been exposed at Dungur east of the present city. After the empire became Christian, the same style of architecture was used for churches. Intact Aksumite buildings have been preserved and continue in use in several locations in northern Ethiopia, notably at the ancient monastery of Debre Damo. Several of the rock-cut churches at Lalibela, far to the south, duplicate Aksumite style in rock.

Stelae represent a very ancient Ethiopian tradition. As religious and funerary monuments they are found far in the south of the country. Small stelae still stand in many places around Aksum and in areas to the east. The practice reached its culmination in the great monuments at Aksum with their detailed representations of cross-beams, windows and doors. The monuments which stand in the Stelae Park (Fig. 1) were cut a few kilometers west of the city at Gobedra. Here the entrance to the quarries is guarded by a twice-life-size

lioness outlined in a cliff. Partially cut stelae can be seen still attached to the rock. When the great monoliths were cut, shaped and separated, they were moved to Aksum, apparently on wooden rollers, along a level route that can still be traced. They were erected by methods that must have required tremendous amounts of manpower, levers, pulleys and highly skilled supervision. Unfortunately no pictures or inscriptions representing these activities have ever been found, but the results – the monuments which still stand today – attest to the high level of technical development that ancient Ethiopians had achieved. But there were limits: the great fallen stela with its beautifully cut designs, apparently crashed while being raised and broke into several pieces which still lie where they fell (Fig. 2).

Rulers of Aksum did not confine their monumental building to stelae. They erected other monuments, cut underground tombs, and left inscriptions in Ge'ez, Greek and Sabaean. Ge'ez, derived from Sabaean and using the same South Arabian alphabet on which modern Ethiopian writing is based, has remained the language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the same way Latin and Greek remained in use among Christians in Europe. It serves as a source of new terms in the modern Semitic languages, Amharic and Tigrinya. Study of inscriptions has enabled archaeologists to reconstruct much of the history of the rise of Aksum. Both before and after Emperor Ezana accepted Christianity, Aksum's rulers issued coins in copper, bronze, silver and gold. Large numbers have been found and studied, for they continue to come to light in plowed fields after rain as well as in places as distant as India, brought there by traders.

What formed the basis of Aksum's trade? The most valuable commodity was ivory. Elephant-hunting in the areas easily accessible



Fig. 1 The great stelae field at Aksum. In the background the new cathedral (photo: P. Henze).

to the Red Sea that began in the time of the ancient Egyptians and continued in Roman times had depleted herds by the beginning of the Christian era. Hunters had to keep going farther inland. Aksum was well situated to become the center of trade in ivory from what is today western Ethiopia and Sudan all the way to the Nile. African animals were apparently also supplied to the Romans and in return Aksumite rulers received wine. Archaeologists have found wine jugs with seals from Roman Gaul at Aksumite sites in recent years.

By the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century the city of Aksum seems to have been in decline. The once fertile agricultural lands around the city were becoming exhausted. Forests had been cut for fuel and construction, the climate seems to have worsened. Nile levels in Egypt from this period provide evidence of erratic rainfall in the Ethiopian highlands. Persian dominance in Yemen hampered Red Sea trade. Meanwhile a new turning point in world history was developing: the rise of Islam. It did not immediately contribute to the decline of the Aksumite Empire. Quite

the contrary. Mohammed, who was born about 570, had favorable associations with Ethiopia. There was an Ethiopian Christian community in Mecca consisting of traders, artisans, and soldiers with whom Mohammed is likely to have had contact. The Koran contains over two hundred words which appear to be derived from Ge'ez.

As Mohammed developed his mission, some of his followers felt endangered and decided to flee. He advised them: „If you were to go to Abyssinia, it would be better for you... for the king there will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country“. The first group of twelve men and five women fled across the Red Sea and reached Aksum in 616. Mohammed's daughter Rakiya and her husband were among them. A second group followed the next year, led by a cousin of the Prophet. Envoys sent by Mohammed's enemies to Aksum to persuade the emperor to send the Muslims back to Arabia were unsuccessful. One of these Muslims is reported to have accompanied the emperor on a military expedition to the Nile. In the sixth year after the Hejira (628)



Fig. 2 The so-called "giant stela" (stela no. 1). Fallen presumably during erection process (photo: P. Henze).

Mohammed himself, now in authority, sent an emissary to Ethiopia to request the return of his followers. The emperor placed two ships at their disposal but only 16 chose to return. The rest, according to Ethiopian tradition, settled at Negash in eastern Tigray where a substantial Muslim community has survived ever since. Mohammed advised his followers to leave the Ethiopians in peace. Trade continued, but as Islam gained strength, the Aksumites gradually lost control of much of the Red Sea during the following two centuries and Islam spread into the coastal regions where it has remained dominant ever since.

Though the city of Aksum declined and the once great empire withered, it remained a live and important feature of Ethiopian cultural and religious life. The Ark of the Covenant was guarded in a special chapel next to the Ethiopian mother church dedicated to St. Mary of Zion. Ethiopian Emperors went to Aksum to be crowned.

Though the existence of Aksum had been known to the Mediterranean world as well as to the Persians, who competed with Aksum for

control of South Arabia, memory of it faded in Europe during the Middle Ages. Only the legend of Prester John survived and no one was sure where his realm was located. The rediscovery of Aksum is as exciting as what is now known of the history itself. Father Francisco Alvarez who came to Ethiopia with the Portuguese in the early 1500s visited Aksum and wrote a good description. Two hundred and fifty years later the Scot, Sir James Bruce, published his famous account of travels in Ethiopia. He included drawings of the monuments and compared the stela with Egyptian obelisks. There is no connection but this notion persisted through the 19<sup>th</sup> century as other Europeans came to northern Ethiopia. One, the Englishman Henry Salt, made accurate etchings of Aksum and other sites that are still admired and reproduced.

It remained for the German philologist Enno Littmann to bring the remarkable monuments at Aksum to the attention of the world. When in 1905 a German mission under Friedrich Rosen was in Addis Ababa to establish friendly relations between the two countries,

the Ethiopian emperor Menelik offered to Germany the possibility of excavations in Aksum. The German team under Enno Littmann worked in Aksum between middle of January and early April 1906. These excavations were unusually fruitful and the four-volume report of them which was published in Berlin on the eve of World War I remains a basic source of information on Aksum and northern Ethiopia to this day. After the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology was founded in 1952 and gained generous French support, Italian and French archaeologists began surveys and excavations at many sites in Tigray and Eritrea, notably at Yeha and Matara. Not until 1972, however, did a new concentrated archaeological effort begin at Aksum by a team from the British Institute in Eastern Africa in Nairobi headed by Neville Chittick. The team's promising work had to be halted in 1974 because of the revolution which brought the Derg to power. Chittick died in 1984. Soon after the fall of the Derg in 1991, David Phillipson resumed his work with impressive results. Meanwhile work on the early phases of settlement in Aksum has been undertaken by the Italian Rodolfo Fattovich and the American Kathryn Bard. The second Littmann Conference which was held in Aksum in early 2006, convened by Wolbert Smidt and Steffen Wenig under the sponsorship of the Goethe Institut Addis Ababa, underscored the fact that a great deal remains to be done.

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