12.10: Kingdom of Aksum

Learning Objective

• Discuss the characteristics of the Kingdom of Aksum

Key Points

• The Kingdom of Aksum (or Axum; also known as the Aksumite Empire) was a trading nation in the area of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea that existed from approximately 100 to 940 CE.

• The Aksumite Empire at its height extended across most of present-day Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, western Yemen, southern Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. The capital city of the empire was Aksum, now in northern Ethiopia.

• By 350, Aksum conquered the Kingdom of Kush. Around 520, King Kaleb sent an expedition to Yemen against the Jewish Himyarite King Dhu Nuwas, who was persecuting the Christian/Aksumite community in his kingdom. These wars may have been Aksum’s swan-song as a great power, but it is also possible that Ethiopia was affected by the Plague of Justinian.

• Covering parts of what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, Aksum was deeply involved in the trade network between India and the Mediterranean (Rome, later Byzantium). Aksum’s access to both the Red Sea and the Upper Nile enabled its strong navy to profit in trade between various African (Nubia), Arabian (Yemen), and Indian states.

• The Kingdom of Aksum is notable for a number of achievements, such as its own alphabet, the Ge’ez alphabet. Under Emperor Ezana, Aksum adopted Christianity, which gave rise to the present-day Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church.

• There exist different hypotheses as to why the empire collapsed, but historians agree that climate changes must have greatly contributed to the end of Aksum.
Terms

Sabaeans
An ancient people speaking an Old South Arabian language who lived in what is today Yemen, in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. For some time, they were believed to have established the Kingdom of Aksum, but historians today reject this claim.

Agaw
An ethnic group inhabiting Ethiopia and neighboring Eritrea. They speak Agaw languages, which belong to the Cushitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. They are credited with establishing first settlements in the territory that later became the Kingdom of Aksum.

Ge’ez
A script used as an abugida (syllable alphabet) for several languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea. It originated as anabjad (consonant-only alphabet) and was first used to write the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Miaphysitism
A Christological formula of the Oriental Orthodox churches. It holds that in the one person of Jesus Christ, Divinity and Humanity are united in one nature, without separation, without confusion, and without alteration.

Plague of Justinian
A pandemic that afflicted the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, especially its capital, Constantinople, the Sassanid Empire, and port cities around the entire Mediterranean Sea (541–542). One of the greatest plagues in history, this devastating pandemic resulted in the deaths of an estimated 25 to 50 million people. It is generally regarded as the first recorded instance of bubonic plague.

Aksum
The capital of the Kingdom of Aksum.

Introduction
The Kingdom of Aksum (or Axum; also known as the Aksumite Empire) was a trading nation in the area of northern Ethiopia and Eritrea that existed from approximately 100 to 940 CE. It grew from the proto-Aksumite Iron Age period around the 4th century BCE to achieve prominence by the 1st century CE, and was a major agent in the commercial route between the Roman Empire and Ancient India. The Aksumite rulers facilitated trade by minting their own Aksumite currency. The state established its hegemony over the declining Kingdom of Kush and regularly entered the politics of the kingdoms on the Arabian Peninsula, eventually extending its rule over the region with the conquest of the Himyarite Kingdom. The Persian Prophet Mani regarded Axum as the third of the
four greatest powers of his time after Rome and Persia, with China being the fourth.

Origins

Aksum was previously thought to have been founded by Sabaeans, an ancient people speaking an Old South Arabian language who lived in what is today Yemen, in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. However, most scholars now agree that prior to the arrival of Sabaeans, an African settlement by the Agaw people and other Ethiopian groups had already existed in the territory. Sabaean influence is now thought to have been minor, limited to a few localities, and disappearing after a few decades or a century, perhaps representing a trading or military colony.

Empire

The Aksumite Empire at its height extended across most of present-day Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, western Yemen, southern Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. The capital city of the empire was Aksum, now in northern Ethiopia. Today a smaller community, the city of Aksum was once a bustling metropolis and cultural and economic center. By the reign of Endubis in the late 3rd century, the empire had begun minting its own currency. It converted to Christianity in 325 or 328 under King Ezana, and was the first state ever to use the image of the cross on its coins. The kingdom used the name “Ethiopia” as early as the 4th century.

By 350, Aksum conquered the Kingdom of Kush. Around 520, King Kaleb sent an expedition to Yemen against the Jewish Himyarite King Dhu Nuwas, who was persecuting the Christian/Aksumite community in his kingdom. After several years of military and political struggles, Yemen fell under the rule of Aksumite general Abreha, who continued to promote the Christian faith until his death, not long after which Yemen was conquered by the Persians. According to Munro-Hay these wars may have been Aksum’s swan-song as a great power, with an overall weakening of Aksumite authority and over-expenditure in money and manpower. It is also possible that Ethiopia was affected by the Plague of Justinian around this time, a disease thought to be the first recorded instance of bubonic plague.

Trading and Culture

Covering parts of what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, Aksum was deeply involved in the trade network between India and the Mediterranean (Rome, later Byzantium), exporting ivory, tortoise shell, gold, and emeralds, and importing silk and spices. Aksum’s access to both the Red Sea and the Upper Nile enabled its strong navy to profit in trade between various African (Nubia), Arabian (Yemen), and Indian states. The empire traded with Roman traders as well as with Egyptian and Persian merchants.

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Extent of Silk Route/Silk Road. The economically important northern Silk Road and southern Spice (Eastern) trade routes. The sea routes around the horn of Arabia and the Indian sub-continent were Aksum's specialty for nearly a millennium.

The main exports of Aksum were agricultural products. The land was fertile during the time of the Aksumites, and the principal crops were grains such as wheat and barley. The people of Aksum also raised cattle, sheep, and camels. Wild animals were hunted for ivory and rhinoceros horns. The empire was rich with gold and iron deposits, and salt was an abundant and widely traded mineral.

Aksum benefited from a major transformation of the maritime trading system that linked the Roman Empire and India. Starting around 100 BCE, a route from Egypt to India was established, making use of the Red Sea and using monsoon winds to cross the Arabian Sea directly to southern India. Aksum was ideally located to take advantage of the new trading situation. Adulis soon became the main port for the export of African goods, such as ivory, incense, gold, and exotic animals. Slaves were also traded along the same routes. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the Kingdom of Aksum continued to expand their control of the southern Red Sea basin. A caravan route to Egypt, which bypassed the Nile corridor entirely, was established. Aksum succeeded in becoming the principal supplier of African goods to the Roman Empire.

A gold coin of the Aksumite king Ousas, specifically a one third solidus, diameter 17 mm, weight 1.50 gm. The Aksumite Empire was one of the first African polities economically and politically ambitious enough to issue its own coins, which bore legends in Ge’ez and Greek.

The Aksumite Empire is notable for a number of achievements, such as its own alphabet, the Ge’ez alphabet, which was eventually modified to include vowels. Furthermore, in the early times of the empire, giant obelisks to mark emperors’ (and nobles’) tombs (underground grave chambers) were constructed, the most famous of which is the Obelisk of...
Aksum.

Under Emperor Ezana, Aksum adopted Christianity in place of its former polytheistic and Judaic religions. This gave rise to the present day Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (only granted autonomy from the Coptic Church in 1953), and Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church (granted autonomy from the Ethiopian Orthodox church in 1993). Since the schism with orthodoxy following the Council of Chalcedon (451), it has been an important Miaphysite church, and its scriptures and liturgy continue to be in Ge’ez.

The Rome Stele (known also as the Aksum Obelisk) in Aksum (Tigray Region, Ethiopia). The Stelae (hawilt/hawilti in local languages) are perhaps the most identifiable part of the Aksumite legacy. These stone towers served to mark graves and represent a magnificent multi-storied palace. They are decorated with false doors and windows in typical Aksumite design. The Stelae have most of their mass out of the ground, but are stabilized by massive underground counter-weights. The stone was often engraved with a pattern or emblem denoting the king’s or the noble’s rank.

Decline

Eventually, the Islamic Empire took control of the Red Sea and most of the Nile, forcing Aksum into economic isolation. Northwest of Aksum, in modern-day Sudan, the Christian states of Makuria and Alodia lasted until the 13th century.
before becoming Islamic. Aksum, isolated, nonetheless still remained Christian.

After a second golden age in the early 6th century, the empire began to decline, eventually ceasing its production of coins in the early 7th century. Around the same time, the Aksumite population was forced to go farther inland to the highlands for protection, abandoning Aksum as the capital. Arab writers of the time continued to describe Ethiopia (no longer referred to as Aksum) as an extensive and powerful state, although it had lost control of most of the coast and its tributaries. While land was lost in the north, it was gained in the south, and Ethiopia still attracted Arab merchants. The capital was moved to a new location, currently unknown, though it may have been called Ku’bar or Jarmi.

There exist different hypotheses as to why the empire collapsed, but historians agree that climate changes must have greatly contributed to the end of Aksum. As international profits from the exchange network declined, Aksum lost its ability to control its own raw material sources, and that network collapsed. The already persistent environmental pressure of a large population to maintain a high level of regional food production had to be intensified. The result was a wave of soil erosion that began on a local scale circa 650 and attained catastrophic proportions after 700. Presumably, complex socio-economic inputs compounded the problem. These are traditionally reflected in declining maintenance, deterioration and partial abandonment of marginal crop land, shifts to destructive pastoral exploitation, and eventual wholesale and irreversible land degradation. This syndrome was possibly accelerated by an apparent decline in rainfall reliability beginning in 730–760, with the presumed result that an abbreviated modern growing season was reestablished during the 9th century.

Sources

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