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Aksumite civilization, its connections and descendants

The ancient kingdom of Aksum was centred in the northern highlands of the Horn of Africa, today divided between the nations of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its florescence was during the first seven centuries AD, but its formative processes may be traced significantly earlier and its cultural influence extended much later. In this paper, I interpret my topic broadly, and do not restrict myself to archaeology in the narrowly defined sense with which that word is often (mis)understood. I offer an outline account of ancient Aksum, its rise and demise, together with an assessment of its contribution to later phases of Ethiopian civilisation. However, Aksum – like other states – did not exist in isolation; and I also evaluate the connections which, at various times, it maintained with neighbouring peoples.

Sources for the study of Aksum and its successors

Sufficient mention was made of the Aksumite kingdom in Roman, Byzantine and other ancient writings that its existence was never completely forgotten in the outside world. Its former capital, Aksum, has retained its ecclesiastical eminence right up to the present time, and has featured on European printed maps ever since it was visited by Portuguese early in the sixteenth century. Significant interest in Aksum's archaeology began some two hundred years later, but the first major field research was conducted by a German expedition in 1906 (Littmann et al. 1913; see also Wenig 2006-). Subsequently, research has been conducted by scholars from many countries, including Ethiopia itself (e.g. Tekle 2008). However, a comprehensive evaluation of the Aksumite kingdom and its place in the ancient world requires that archaeological evidence be considered alongside that from numerous other sources, including epigraphy, numismatics and the historical records – both written and oral – of several different traditions and societies.

Any reconstruction of the past is inevitably constrained by the source-materials that are available. Their interpretation must take account of the ways in which they have reached us. It might appear that archaeological materials from demonstrably undisturbed contexts have pride of place in this regard, but even these are subject to the vaguaries of preservation and to the archaeologists' skill in recovery and bias in interpretation. Inscriptions preserve only what the writer or instigator wished either to have recorded or to be seen by a particular readership; most were thus originally propaganda and should be interpreted accordingly. Legends on coinage likewise reflect the views – or at least the prejudices – of those responsible for its issue, although they were intended for a much less narrowly defined readership. Later in this paper, some examples from Aksumite Ethiopia will make these points clear.

Written documents and literature on less permanent materials present additional uncertainties. In most instances, the oldest version extant today was produced long after the period to which it ostensibly relates. This may be because it was copied from an earlier version since lost, in which case the possibilities of accidental error, emendation in the light of changed circumstances, explanatory additions – not necessarily correct – or deliberate falsification need to be taken into account. It thus cannot necessarily be assumed that all passages in a text originated contemporaneously. Alternatively, the work may initially have been compiled a significant time after the period concerned, in which case circumstances of composition and sources of information need to be considered. Perhaps information was first handed down orally and subsequently committed to writing, in which case evaluation must apply different criteria for each stage of transmission. It may well be that a document surviving today combines materials that originated in diverse times and circumstances, each component of which will require appropriate interpretation. These points may seem obvious, but it is alarming how rarely they are taken fully into account, particularly by scholars whose primary expertise lies elsewhere.

These considerations lead to a factor of prime importance to the topic here considered, especial-

ly when we come to compare Aksumite Ethiopia during the centuries immediately prior to the rise of Islam with contemporaneous situations in neighbouring regions. Aksum, as I shall describe, was strongly and profoundly Christian, and that part of the Ethiopian highlands has remained strongly and profoundly Christian ever since (see Colour-Fig. 3). By contrast, on the other side of the Red Sea, the highlands of southern Arabia have been equally committed to Islam since at least the end of the seventh century. Again, Christianity was introduced to the Nubian Nile Valley in the sixth century; its eclipse began in the thirteenth and was virtually total by the eighteenth. These different situations have had their effect on the local historiographies, particularly on the ways in which records have been preserved and transmitted. One can still see their reflections in the ways the past is presented in national museums, tourism policies and history textbooks.

A clear example relevant to Aksum is provided by the work known as *Kebra Negast* [= the Glory of Kings] which purports to present a history of Aksum from before the Queen of Sheba's time through to the sixth century AD (Bezold 1905; Budge 1922). The oldest surviving manuscripts of this work contain a colophon indicating that it was compiled by a priest at Aksum early in the fourteenth century. Some features are, indeed, best explained by accepting that the *Kebra Negast* was put into its present form some seven centuries ago; but the conclusions of recent commentators, such as Munro-Hay (2001), that it is entirely a late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century composition, like claims that the colophon is 'falsified' (Heldman 2007: 96), are wholly unwarranted. In fact, it contains much material that must have been transmitted – whether orally or in writing – from much earlier times, preserving in admittedly mangled form a world-view based in sixth-century Aksum (Shahid 1976; Fowden 1993: 118-9, 131-6; Johnson 1995).

As already noted, the ancient kingdom of Aksum occupied territory that is currently divided between the modern nations of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Fig. 1). Where, in discussion of early history, I use the term 'Aksumite Ethiopia' as a convenient shorthand, this should not be interpreted as implying disrespect or disapproval for Eritrea's separate independence. Indeed, very substantial territories of both nations were never under Aksumite suzerainty. Conversely, there were also times – discussed below – when Aksumite rule extended to parts of Arabia, so some sort of geographical clarification is indeed necessary.

Let us now turn, very briefly, to consider how and why the Aksumite kingdom arose. The evidence at our disposal is mainly archaeological; there is only a small number of relevant inscriptions (Bernand et al. 1991-2000), but they feature with undue prominence in several academic accounts. It is still sometimes stated in more popular writings that the kingdom began as a South Arabian – or, more specifically, Sabaean – colony. This supposition, symptomatic of undue emphasis on inscriptions and other élite aspects of past societies, is effectively disproved by recent research. While such emphasis on the élite is understandable – even inescapable – in epigraphy and the study of written sources, archaeology has the potential to provide a broader view.

The inhabitants of the northern Horn during the first half of the last millennium BC, formerly lumped together under the strangely inappropriate label 'Pre-Aksumite', were demonstrably diverse; and aspects of their basic material culture – like their cultivation and herding economy – may be traced back locally into far earlier times (e.g. L. Phillipson & Sulas 2005). It was only the élite elements of this population who, at least initially, embraced such things as writing and monumental architecture for which a southern Arabian origin may be regarded as proven. Colonisation was early, its practitioners few, and its duration brief. The idea of a single, politically unitary, colony – or, indeed, of a single 'Pre-Aksumite' state of whatever status – can no longer be upheld (D. Phillipson & Schmidt 2009). This demonstrates an early incidence of what will be a recurring theme of this paper: that features which may ultimately have been derived from elsewhere were readily adopted by societies living in the northern Horn, and thenceforth transmitted within that essentially indigenous context. It was within such a context that there may first be discerned, during the fourth century BC at Beta Giyorgis hill near Aksum, the apparently localised culture from which Aksumite civilisation subsequently arose (Fattovich & Bard 2001). Elsewhere in the northern Horn, developments at this time remain poorly known, although ongoing research in northeastern Tigray (D'Andrea et al. 2008) is clearly relevant.

Overseas connections

The external links of the northern Horn during the millennium preceding the rise of Aksum now require careful consideration. The indigenous element has, in the past, been seriously underestimated; sites are now being recognised whose culture was almost wholly local, foreign elements having minimal – if any – presence (e.g. D. Phillipson 2000: 267-379, 474-5;

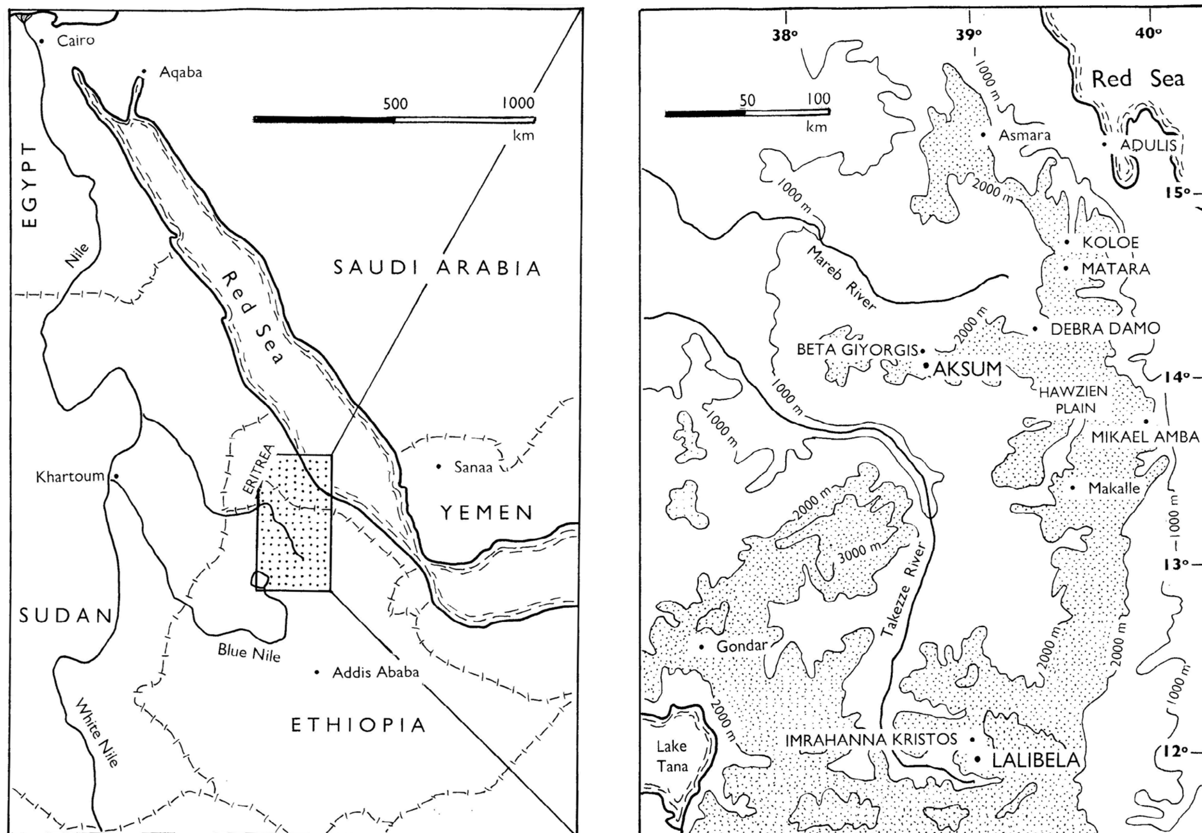

Fig. 1: Maps of the northern Horn of Africa and adjacent regions.

Phillips 2004; Schmidt et al. 2008). At other sites, as I have indicated, cultural developments derived from southern Arabia – although less pervasive than once claimed – were nonetheless significant (e.g. Robin & de Maigret 1998).

Prior to the fourth century BC, Arabian connections were probably stronger than those with the Nile Valley. In fact, throughout the timespan of pharaonic Egypt, it is remarkable how little its cultural influence is attested in the Horn. Egyptian records, mainly of the Eighteenth Dynasty but also extending earlier, make mention of expeditions which went by water to a place or region called 'Punt' in search of exotic produce and raw materials. Trade with Punt is known exclusively from Egyptian propaganda, although materials which may have been obtained by these means have been identified at Egyptian sites, and the port where voyages to Punt were based has recently been identified near the northern end of the Red Sea (Fattovich 2008 and references). Even if the name 'Punt' always applied to a single defined location – which I doubt –, most current opinion places it in the general area of the Red Sea's western coast and its hinterland in Sudan and northern Eritrea rather than further to the south (Fattovich 1996; Kitchen 2004); it thus has only marginal relevance to the principal topic of this paper.

From the fourth and/or third centuries BC, links between the Nile Valley and the highlands of the northern Horn show signs of modest development, but were still surprisingly weak (but cf. Fattovich et al. 1998). To this general period belong a number of artefacts found in northern Ethiopia but undoubtedly of Egyptian or Sudanese origin. Most remarkable is the Ptolemaic *cippus* given to James Bruce (1790, 1: 417-20, 3: 496) in 1770/1 by the then Ethiopian king who stated that it had been found at Aksum; it is now on display – with a label which makes no mention of its reported provenance – in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh (Sternberg-el Hotabi 1994). Perhaps somewhat later are bronze bowls from a cache in eastern Tigray (Phillips 1995). As noted above, it is only at Beta Giyorgis near Aksum that settlement and burial sites of the last four centuries BC have been excavated and reported in detail. Here, although demonstrably imported artefacts are rare in comparison with locally manufactured ones, there is evidence for a re-alignment of foreign contacts, with eastern links largely replaced by westerly ones (cf. Manzo 2005). Even occasional items originating in the central and western Mediterranean basin seem to have found their way to Beta Giyorgis (ibid.), presumably by a Nile-Valley rather than a Red-Sea route. The latter connection was, however, re-esta-

blished by the time Aksum itself rose to prominence in about the first century AD.

Before we proceed further, two general points need to be emphasised. For thousands of years, sub-Saharan Africa has been exploited by the outside world as a source of raw materials. In the opposite direction, manufactured goods have often found their way to Africa in exchange. The archaeologist in Ethiopia may find it comparatively easy to recognise, for example, an Egyptian amulet or a fragment of a Mediterranean amphora, not only because it is totally foreign in the context where it has been found, but also because it is an item that is well known and has received extensive study elsewhere. The sources of raw materials, on the other hand, are usually difficult to determine: we are not yet able readily to ascertain where the gold of a Roman coin was mined, or where lived the elephant whose ivory was used to embellish the throne of an Egyptian pharaoh. A further problem arises from the inconsistent geographical terminology used by ancient authors: the name 'Ethiopia', for example, was sometimes used generally to refer to any part of Africa south of Aswan, sometimes specifically to Nubia, and only very occasionally to the land which now bears that designation, while areas of the Horn of Africa were often regarded as parts of India (Dihle 1964; Mayerson 1993).

Aksumite civilisation

The first historical mention of Aksum by name occurs in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Casson 1989), for the original composition of which a date in the mid-first century AD is now widely accepted. Several points emerge from this text which should immediately attract our attention. The author of the *Periplus* was primarily concerned with maritime trade through the port of Adulis, but Aksum itself was located far inland, several days' journey southwest of Koloe in the Eritrean highlands. A reason for this situation is provided, though not made explicit, in the text itself: Koloe was where ivory was brought together for transport to the coast and subsequent export (see also D. Phillipson 1990). Archaeological excavation has not only confirmed that ivory was indeed a major factor in the Aksumite economy, but has also revealed that it was worked locally with technological expertise and artistic sophistication (D. Phillipson 2000: 116-25; L. Phillipson 2000a). Availability of ivory was probably a major factor why this then-remote place, reasonably but not exceptionally watered and fertile, located far from the port on which much of its later prosperity depended, should have been the scene of cultural developments that led to the rise of a major civilisation.

During the first three centuries AD, Aksum's prosperity rapidly grew. At the beginning of this period, its centre was moved down from Beta Giyorgis hill to the sheltered plain where arose the conurbation that ever since has been known as Aksum (Fattovich et al. 2000; D. Phillipson 2003). Here there developed a conglomeration of monumental features extending over a substantial area; it may be misleading to refer to it as a city, despite its extent. There is absolutely no evidence that it was ever walled or defended. It was probably not even clearly defined, being rather the central place within a huge area of settlement where varying activities – religious, administrative, domestic, industrial, agricultural, and funerary – were carried out (cf. Michels 2005: 103-53). For all these reasons, I prefer – like the author of the *Periplus* – to call ancient Aksum a metropolis rather than a city. Inscriptions dated to the first two centuries AD contain mentions of Aksumite kings; by at least the mid-third century, these potentates had accrued unprecedented wealth, prestige, and control over resources. This may have been due, at least in part, to consolidation and the incorporation of polities that had previously enjoyed some degree of autonomy.

It was at this time, probably in the third quarter of the third century, that Aksum began to issue its own coinage, in gold, silver and copper (Fig. 2; Hahn 1983; Munro-Hay & Juel-Jensen 1995). Although in some aspects unique, other features – notably the weight of the gold issues – were based on those prevailing in the Roman Empire, which confirms the view that the gold coins were mainly intended for international circulation, and the others for more local use. It was not long before this distinction was reflected also in the designs of the coins and in the languages of their inscriptions.

In a prominent focal position at the centre of Aksum, a huge artificial terrace became the royal burial ground. It was dominated, as it still is today, by the series of monolithic stelae, the largest of which – two of them weighing over 150 tonnes and the largest as much as 520 tonnes – were elaborately carved in imitation of multi-storeyed buildings (Fig. 3). Window frames and apertures, false doors, horizontal wooden beams and the projecting ends – known as 'monkey-heads' – of transverse ties were all depicted in low-relief carving. Dating from the late third and early fourth centuries AD, these stelae marked elaborate tombs, apparently created in sequence from east to west, each larger and more grandiose than its predecessor. One of the twin tombs marked by

Fig. 2: Aksumite coins (all are to scale, the gold coin being 14 mm in diameter): upper left – gold, King Endybis (late third century); upper right – silver, King Ousanas (early fourth century); lower left – copper, King Gersem (c. 600); lower right – copper, King Armah (early seventh century).

the largest stela, apparently the last in the sequence and now dated to the mid-fourth century, has been largely excavated. It was an elaborate built structure, subsequently buried, with ten sidechambers leading off a central passage; its interior stone-built walls, like the incorporated brick arches, had been coated with a coarse gritty render to give the impression that the whole structure had been carved from solid rock. It is remarkable that, although Aksumite society at this time is known to have been literate, no inscriptions have been found associated with any of these tombs or stelae to indicate the names of those who were buried there (D. Phillipson 2000: 27-30, 135-224, 2002).

Several quarries are known in the vicinity of Aksum. That from which the largest blocks were extracted was located some 4 km to the west of the site where the stelae were erected. The levelled route along which they were dragged may still be traced, and the probable means by which they were set up has been reconstructed (D. Phillipson 2000: 229-66).

At the edge of the central stelae field a remarkable tomb has been located and excavated. Approached down a stepped adit, it comprises a series of rock-hewn chambers entered through and separated by a series of brick arches which have given the sepulchre its name (Munro-Hay 1989: 55-60). It is the only élite Aksumite tomb yet known which has escaped comprehensive robbing and survived essentially intact. The tomb was found to contain a wealth of well-preserved pottery, together with a few pieces of fine glassware. Particular emphasis should be given to the finely carved ivory which included numerous pieces that must be interpreted as coming from an elaborate chair or throne (Fig. 4). There was also a quantity of fine metalwork which gives an insight on the expertise that was available in ancient Aksum during the second half of the fourth century AD (D. Phillipson 2000: 31-133).

Fig. 3: Aksum: the upper part of Stela 3, carved in representation of a multi-storeyed building with windows, horizontal beams and 'monkey-heads'. The recess at the apex originally housed a metal plaque, held in place by iron pins which still survive.

The contents of the 'Tomb of the Brick Arches' include numerous items that attest to Aksumite technological skill, but remarkably few for which a foreign origin is indicated. In this context it is, however, pertinent to note a very large iron spearhead, 70

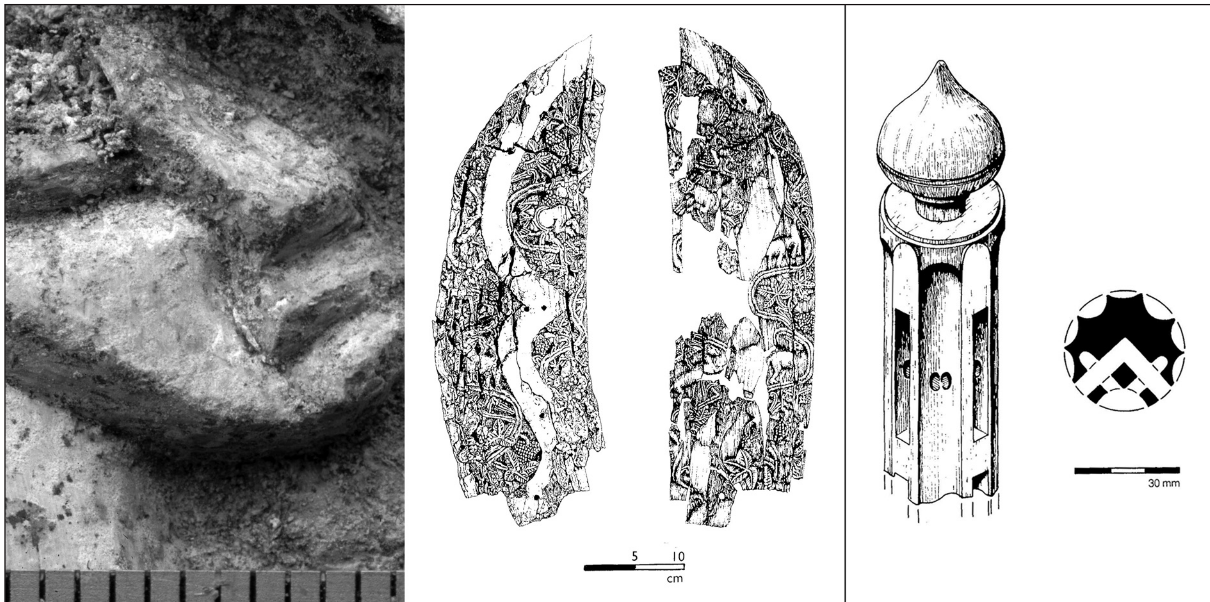

Fig. 4: Aksum: components of the ivory throne from the fourth-century 'Tomb of the Brick Arches'.

cm in overall length and with a strange bulge near the point; it is too thin to have been a serviceable weapon and presumably served a symbolic or ceremonial purpose. Not dissimilar spearheads have been recovered from a tumulus at El Hobagi near Meroe (Lenoble et al. 1994). A closer parallel is depicted on a unique Aksumite gold coin now in Munich (Munro-Hay 1995; Hahn 1996). Instead of the usual right-facing portrait bust, the Aksumite king (named in the unvocalised Ge'ez inscription as MHDYS, whose reign is best dated to the second quarter of the fifth century) is shown standing, carrying a small round shield and a spear with a very large head. Although unfortunately damaged by one of the three piercings to which the coin has been subjected, the spearhead appears remarkably similar to that excavated from the Tomb of the Brick Arches. The difference in age between the tomb and the coin could be as little as fifty but not more than one hundred years. Before leaving this topic, it is appropriate to note the eye-witness description, preserved in the writings of John Malalas, of an early-sixth-century Aksumite king carrying a spear and a small round shield (both depicted on MHDYS' coin), while standing on a wheeled platform drawn by four elephants (Jeffreys et al. 1986: 268).

There is evidence that, for some part of the third and/or early fourth centuries, Aksumite rule may have extended over parts of southern Arabia (Robin 1988-9; Munro-Hay 1991: 55). Whatever the nature of their political relationship, the two areas clearly maintained very close links. The end of the coinages generally described as Sabaean and Himyaritic (Munro-Hay 2003) may closely have coincided with the start of the Aksumite series. The latter development clearly accompanied a major and rapid increase in Aksum's prosperity. Royal tombs and the stelae that marked them achieved unprecedented grandeur. Imported luxuries and their imitations, as well as locally obtained raw materials – notably gold and ivory – became increasingly plentiful, although their use was largely restricted to the élite. Foreign trade was mainly conducted via the Red Sea, as is most clearly represented for somewhat later times by the presence at sixth- and seventh-century Aksumite sites of numerous ribbed amphorae that originated near Ayla in modern Jordan (Melkawi et al. 1994; Tomber 2008: 88-93). The wreck of a ship loaded with such amphorae has recently been recorded off the Eritrean coast (Pedersen 2008). On the other hand, although clear evidence of commerce via the Nile Valley is scarce, the mountainous regions southwest of Aksum may have been an important source of gold, and the Sudanese lowlands of ivory. The closest parallels for the stone-quarrying techniques employed at Aksum are nonetheless with Roman Egypt and with contemporaneous Nubian sites, but the monuments for the construction of which the quarried stone was used show little if any affinity with those regions (Peacock & Maxfield 1997; D. Phillipson 2000: 229-66).

It is pertinent to note that, alongside these impressive and rapid developments in stone-quarrying and building, metallurgy and coinage, ivory carving and international trade, the Aksumites continued numerous other elements of their culture from earlier times. The farming economy, vernacular architecture, domestic pottery and stone-tool technology, for

example, all show signs of strong continuity from many centuries previously (L. Phillipson 2000b, 2002; L. Phillipson & Sulas 2005). Lithics (Fig. 5) are a particularly informative source of information about many aspects of past societies, all too often ignored in studies on Aksumite and related sites (L. Phillipson 2009).

Aksumite Christianity

Another link with the outside world concerned religion: it was in the third or fourth decade of the fourth century that the kings of Aksum formally adopted Christianity. The evidence for this is widespread and varied, being attested in Ethiopian tradition, in Alexandrian and Byzantine historical texts (e.g. Rufinus of Aquileia *in* Amidon 1997: 19-20), on coins and on stone inscriptions from Aksum itself (D. Phillipson 2009a: 29-32; more detailed treatment in preparation). A highly significant element in the circumstances surrounding this event has, however, only very rarely attracted attention: it was part of a trend to monotheism which, as well as Aksum itself, affected much of Arabia at this time (Bowersock 1997; Gajda 2002a). This important point has largely been obscured by the divergent cultural trajectories of the two regions, to which I have already alluded.

The period between the fourth and the seventh centuries saw Aksum's florescence under Christian rule. In considering the archaeological evidence, the first point to emphasise is that, if we omit the coins and the stone inscriptions which are discussed in greater detail below, the soil of Aksum has yielded remarkable little indication of the adoption of Christianity. Around the middle of the fourth century, there seems to have been a significant change in the outward trappings of the royal burial tradition. The largest of the stelae, 33 m high and 520 tonnes in weight, probably fell and broke during the attempt to erect it; later royal tombs and their markers were significantly different in form, although retaining certain stylistic features. The tomb marked by the largest stela was, it transpired, that of the last of the kings of Aksum to be buried according to the pre-Christian tradition. I will not speculate on the possible links – real or imagined – between these developments. The point I wish to stress is that explicit evidence for Aksumite Christianity was largely restricted to areas under direct royal control until some 150-200 years after the recorded conversion (D. Phillipson 2009a: 31). Church buildings of the earlier period have not yet been positively identified.

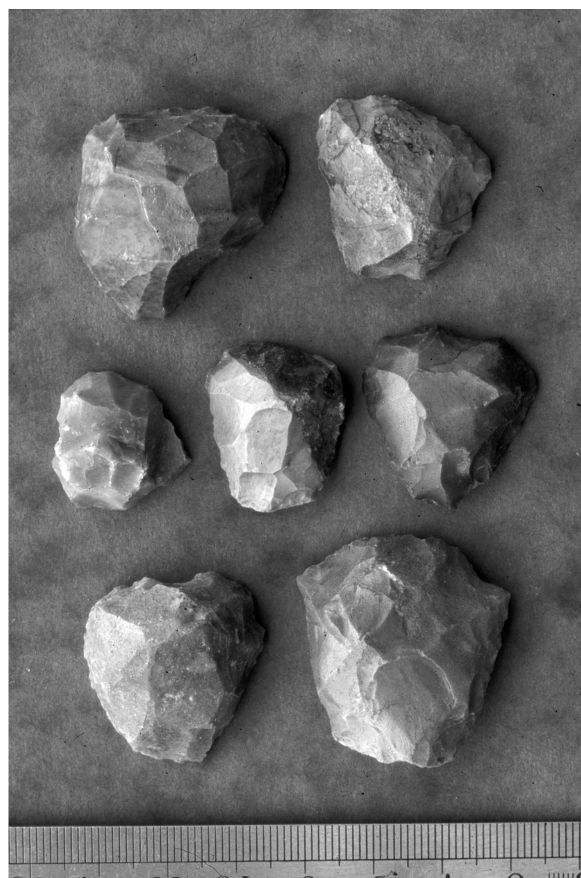

Fig. 5: Aksum: highly standardised flaked stone tools were produced and used as late as the mid-first millennium AD (scale in millimetres).

Let us now look at this conversion in rather closer detail. Both the coins and the stone inscriptions leave us in no doubt that the Aksumite king who first adopted Christianity was called Ezana or Aizanas; this is confirmed by a letter of AD 356 from the Roman Emperor Constantius II, the text of which is preserved among the writings of Saint Athanasius (Szymusiak 1958). The coins of the pre-Christian kings of Aksum all bore the crescent-and-disc symbol above the king's portrait (Fig. 2, upper left) and this practice was initially followed by Ezana, presumably before his conversion. On later coins, from Ezana onwards, this symbol was replaced by the Christian cross. However, there are also some coins of Ezana and his immediate predecessor which have no religious symbol; these – significantly – are exclusively in silver and copper, not in gold. Detailed study of the dies for Ezana's gold coins has shown that the Christian issues followed directly on from the pagan ones (Juel-Jensen 1998). Similar studies have not yet been undertaken for the silver and copper coins, but it is generally and reasonably assumed that those with no religious symbol intervened chronologically between the other two issues.

The stone inscriptions tell a remarkably similar story. The exploits of Ezana are recorded at Aksum in no fewer than eleven texts, some in Greek and others in Ge'ez (Bernand et al. 1991-2000, 1: 241-71, 363-72; also Uhlig 2001). Details must await discussion elsewhere, but two points require emphasis. First, some inscriptions are couched in polytheistic and others in monotheistic terms. Secondly, while the latter phraseology is present in both Greek and Ge'ez versions, it is significantly more explicitly Christian in the Greek.

A fourth-century movement towards monotheism was common both to much of Arabia and to the northern Horn (Hoyland 2001: 146-50; Gajda 2002b). Whereas the kings of Aksum formally adopted Christianity, to the east of the Red Sea the situation is less clear, with both Christian and non-Christian (the latter sometimes recalled as specifically Jewish) monotheisms being recorded but not always clearly differentiated. Indeed, the term 'Jewish' was sometimes employed by mid-first millennium writers (e.g. Cyril of Scythopolis *in* Price & Binns 1991: 137) simply to designate non-Christian or non-Islamic monotheists. The Aksumite king's Christianity seems to have been more openly publicised to a Greek-reading public – resident foreigners and/or users of internationally circulating currency – than to his local subjects, among whom scepticism or opposition may initially have prevailed. Only gradually did Christianity gain acceptance through the Aksumite population beyond the capital's royal, élite and foreign – largely mercantile – communities (D. Phillipson 2009a: 184-5). The desire for this wider acceptance is tellingly indicated in the reverse type of common coins dated to the late fourth and/or the early fifth centuries: the Christian cross is surrounded by the Greek inscription ΤΟΥΤΟ ΑΡΕCΗ ΤΗ ΧωΡΑ = may this be pleasing in the countryside. The significance of the word ΧωΡΑ has generally escaped notice: in fourth- and fifth-century Greek, it carried the clear implication of rural as opposed to urban (Lampe 1961). Coins of this type are usually of copper, occasionally in debased silver, but never in gold. They were clearly intended primarily for local circulation, although reduced-size copies have been recorded from hoards in Egypt and Palestine (Milne 1926; Noeske 1998; Hahn 1999).

Archaeological evidence for the wider adoption of Christianity is most commonly provided by domestic pottery on which crosses became an increasingly frequent element of decoration, often as additions scratched into the clay before or after firing (D. Phillipson 2000: fig. 282). By the sixth century, at both Aksum and, in Eritrea, at Matara and Adulis – as well as, probably, elsewhere – remains of church buildings may also be recognised (D. Phillipson 2009a: 40-50 and references). At least two churches at Adulis were adorned with marble screens, imported in prefabricated form from the vicinity of Constantinople, to discussion of which I shall return. Further significant features of the sixth century at Aksum are the subterranean tombs traditionally attributed to King Kaleb and his son Gabra Masqal. Over these were built twin churches (see below), the plans of which may still be traced (Littmann et al. 1913, 2: Abb. 278; D. Phillipson 2009a: 40-2).

Expansion of Aksumite Christianity in the fifth/sixth centuries is also recalled in Ethiopian traditional history, where it is attributed to the activities of the 'nine saints' – missionaries from the 'Roman' [that is, Byzantine] Empire to whose activities are attributed the foundation of monasteries and churches in several areas beyond the capital (Sergew 1972: 115-21; also Munro-Hay 2005). Pride of place in this connection goes to the mountain-top monastery church of Debra Damo, which still stands and which traces its foundation to one of the 'nine saints' – Za Mikael Aregawi – in the reign of the Aksumite King Gabra Masqal.

On a wider front, trends through this period had both local and international aspects. The ivory trade continued to flourish. The scale at which ivory was reaching the Roman Empire by the turn of the fourth century is indicated both by the price determined in Diocletian's edict (Lauffer 1971), and by the surviving artefacts to which dates between the fourth and sixth centuries are attributed. It seems that Aksum, at least after the extinction of the North African elephant, was a major supplier of ivory to the circum-Mediterranean world and, indirectly, further afield (Cutler 1999; D. Phillipson 2009b). The sizes of some Byzantine ivory artefacts, notably pyxides and consular dyptiches, strongly suggest that the material used came from African elephants. Further indications, in addition to the archaeological evidence from Aksum itself, are provided in sixth-century Byzantine chronicles which record large protected herds of elephants seen within Aksumite territory (Nonnosus *in* Freese 1920, 1: 17-19). Another writer at the same period recorded that Ethiopia exported ivory to India, Persia, southern Arabia and the Roman [Byzantine] empire (Cosmas Indicopleustes *in* Wolska-Conus 1968-73, 3: 354). The plentiful supply of elephant ivory reaching the Mediterranean basin at this time is also reflected in northern European areas beyond direct Roman or Byzantine control (Hills 2001). As I shall explain,

large-scale trade in ivory did not survive the seventh-century decline of Aksum.

Among imports from the Byzantine world were the marble components of chancel screens recovered from Adulis on the coast of Eritrea (Heldman 1994; Peacock & Blue 2007: 119-24); similar screens, produced in the vicinity of Constantinople, were widely traded in the circum-Mediterranean region and incorporated into churches in – for example – Libya and Palestine (Crowfoot 1941: 46-52; Reynolds 2003: 31-2 and passim). In Ethiopia, they were replicated in wood for several centuries afterwards (D. Phillipson 2009a: 44-6, 193-4).

Politically, Aksum's Christianity – or at least that of its early-sixth-century king Kaleb – attracted the attention of the Byzantine emperors Justin I and Justinian I who encouraged Aksumite military involvement in southern Arabia, both to support the beleaguered Christian community there and – less overtly – to weaken Persian control over trade in silk and other oriental commodities. A detailed consideration of these events (see Vasiliev 1950: 283-97; Munro-Hay 1991: 84-94) need not concern us here; the different ways in which they are presented in Ethiopian, Arabian, Byzantine, Syrian and Persian historical records provide eloquent testimony of the sources' respective biases.

The decline of Aksum

Events during the late sixth and early seventh centuries had far-reaching implications. Following the Aksumite state's over-extension under Kaleb and his immediate successors, economic strains became apparent. There is evidence that the Aksum area suffered environmental deterioration, as a result of prolonged population pressure and over-exploitation (Butzer 1981). A minor decrease in rainfall, attested elsewhere in northeast Africa at this time (Bard et al. 2000), may have tipped the balance. The coinage was increasingly debased, although the distinction was maintained between Greek-inscribed, internationally-circulating gold and Ge'ez-inscribed base-metal issues for local use, the latter employing types which emphasised both Christian faith and deteriorating circumstances (Munro-Hay & Juel-Jensen 1995: 212-71; West 1999).

Around the beginning of the seventh century, Aksum apparently received visits by refugees from southern Arabia; these are mainly recorded in Arabic writings of significantly later date (Sergew 1972: 181-203; Munro-Hay 1991: 260-2) and the details should be interpreted accordingly. Despite this proviso, it is noteworthy that the records praise the reception that Aksum and its ruler accorded these refugees, who included a wife and followers of the Prophet Mohammed. They also, incidentally, record the magnificence of the church of Mary at Aksum and the paintings with which it was then adorned (Sergew 1972: 186). This ties in neatly with the recent demonstration (Mercier 2000) that the art of manuscript illumination dates back, within Ethiopia, to Late Aksumite times. The claim (Guillaume 1967: 657-8) that the Aksumite king in the mid-seventh century became a convert to Islam is more problematic, since there is no evidence for this in non-Muslim Ethiopian tradition or in the coinage.

A short while afterwards, major changes took place. Aksum, following the trends noted above, ceased to be the capital. Major buildings and monuments were abandoned or put to different, lower-status, uses (e.g. Munro-Hay 1989: 332). For some time, the focus of the state's economy and development had been shifting to the highlands of eastern Tigray. Now, the political centre seems to have followed, although the precise location of the new capital cannot yet be identified (Munro-Hay 1991: 95-9). The shift may be linked to economic change: with growing Arabian control of the Red Sea, Christian Ethiopia's principal external trade routes rapidly became inoperable (Sutton 1989). The state fell back on the exploitation of its own resources which were now concentrated in the more densely populated eastern part of its territory. Issue of Aksumite coinage ceased: first the internationally circulating gold, followed shortly afterwards by the silver and copper denominations (Munro-Hay & Juel-Jensen 1995: 230-81). Significantly, there was a marked reduction in the quantity of elephant ivory reaching the Mediterranean world at this time (D. Phillipson 2009b).

Eastern Tigray

Subsequent developments in eastern Tigray show strong continuity with ancient Aksum. Very little archaeological research has yet been undertaken there on sites of this period, and such knowledge as we have is largely based on the substantial number of ancient churches – both built and rock-hewn – that survive there (Lepage & Mercier 2005; D. Phillipson 2009a: 51-74, 87-107).

First, it is necessary to stress the importance of the large church of Za Mika'el Aregawi (Fig. 6) at the mountain-top monastery of Debra Damo, noted above. Tradition states that it was founded by King Gabra Masqal, son of Kaleb, in the sixth century. Its

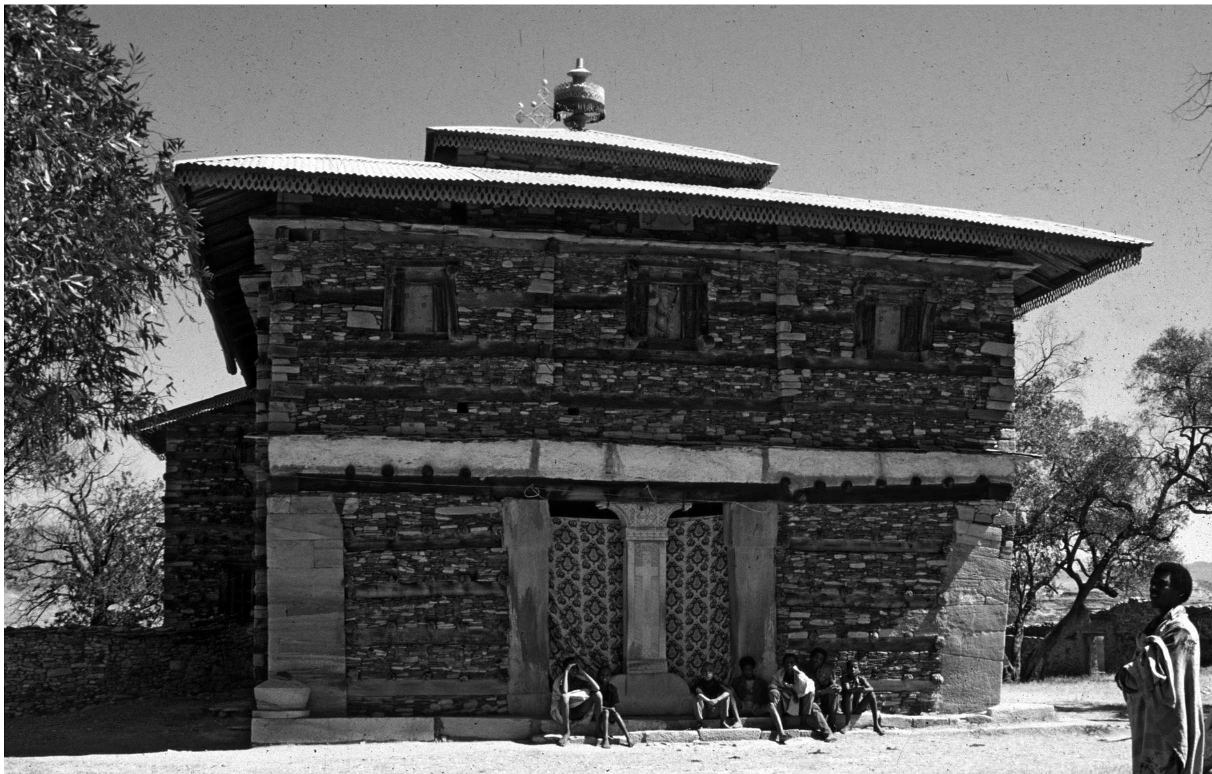

Fig. 6: The mountain-top monastery church at Debra Damo in northern Tigray appears to have originated in the sixth century.

original plan very strongly resembles those of the churches built over the tombs of Kaleb and Gabra Masqal at Aksum (D. Phillipson 2009a: 63-4). Despite the fact that these Aksum churches were funerary, whereas that at Debra Damo initially was not, it seems highly probable that they are contemporaneous. The traditions which independently link the origins of both buildings with the same sixth-century monarch are thus strengthened.

In the Hawzien Plain of eastern Tigray, some distance to the south of Debra Damo, three low rocky outcrops contain rock-cut churches of a very distinctive type (Lepage 1972). It seems that they were first created to serve a funerary and/or reliquary purpose, following a tradition which extends back into Aksumite times between the fourth and the seventh centuries; indeed, it is possible that these monuments themselves, notably those at Degum, are of Late Aksumite origin (D. Phillipson 2009a: 88-92.

Next, if my dating is correct, comes a second localised group of much larger and more elaborate rock-hewn churches in a restricted area immediately to the east of the Hawzien Plain; I have termed them 'Tigray cross-in-square' churches (Buxton 1971; D. Phillipson 2009a: 92-8). In all three cases, their western parts have been carved free of the surrounding rock, creating external features as well as interior ones (Fig. 7). The eastern parts, however, extend into the rock of the mountain, so that only their interiors have been carved. This, of course, in each case includes the sanctuary, together with chambers on either side which are larger and more elaborate than is usual elsewhere. In at least one instance these 'lateral sanctuaries' served as burial places (Lepage 1997).

There are several other early churches, both built and rock-hewn, in the mountains surrounding the Hawzien Plain. With one possible exception, they seem not to have been funerary. The built ones – two of which incorporate rock-hewn elements – are exceptionally small, lie mainly in the east, and retain architectural features reminiscent of Debra Damo. They range greatly in sophistication and richness of decoration, presumably having served communities of varied prosperity (D. Phillipson 2009a: 98-106 and references).

Despite their variety, the eastern Tigray rock-hewn churches share several common characteristics. All were excavated from hard sandstone so that, despite their age, they are still in most cases well preserved. Door- and window-frames were not carved, but constructed from timber in the Aksumite style and set into the rock. These particular wooden features are likewise seen in the ancient Tigray built churches, the walls of which are also Aksumite in

Fig. 7: The rock-hewn 'Tigray cross-in-square' church of Mikael Amba, seen from the west. Its eastern part extends into the solid rock of the mountain..

style, with wooden 'monkey-heads' and horizontal beams.

When the estimated ages of these eastern Tigray churches are plotted together, a significant pattern emerges: all appear to be older than the late tenth century. Indeed, between about AD 1000 and 1100 there seems to have been a hiatus, during which few if any churches were carved or constructed in eastern Tigray (D. Phillipson 2009a: fig. 277). From the twelfth century onwards, the process was resumed, but with major differences: churches were now mostly rock-hewn, set in high – often mountain-top – locations as befitted their often monastic status (Lepage & Mercier 2005: 107-11). Most of them, unlike their predecessors, were elaborately decorated with mural paintings.

Amhara region

Let us now transfer our attention southward and compare the earliest churches in Amhara region with those in Tigray. So far as the rock-hewn churches are concerned, the picture in Amhara is dominated by the closely set group at Lalibela. They contrast with those in Tigray by being carved, not from hard sandstone, but from soft volcanic rock. As a result, it was much easier to show fine detail, but the churches have been more readily susceptible to weathering and other damage.

Because the Lalibela churches form two tight complexes (Monti della Corte 1940: Bianchi-Barriviera 1962-3), it is possible in several places to demonstrate their relative chronology on other than purely stylistic grounds. Ecclesiastical tradition unequivocally attributes all the Lalibela churches to the reign of the king whose name the place now bears (cf. Mengistu 2004); historians are agreed that King Lalibela reigned at the end of the twelfth century and the beginning of the thirteenth. I am convinced, however, that the churches' creation spanned a much longer period, but I argue that this conclusion is not incompatible with the ecclesiastical tradition (D. Phillipson 2009a: 177-81).

Five successive developmental stages may now be recognised at Lalibela (D. Phillipson 2009a: 177-9). It seems that the most ancient examples did not begin as churches at all, but as defensive features of some sort, protected by massive above-ground stone-built walls, entered by an elaborately protected route, and linked to one another by an underground tunnel (D. Phillipson 2009a: fig. 228). Architectural features in the Aksumite style are markedly absent. Although these earliest features may readily be discerned, they have been subjected to major modification on several subsequent occasions, one of which involved the

excavation of extensions – stylistically very different – which now serve as the sanctuaries and which presumably mark their conversion to ecclesiastical use (e.g. Fig. 8). It is only at this third stage that Aksumite-style features may first be recognised.

In the fourth stage, a major and very striking change took place. This is the stage to which belong the great 'monolithic' basilican churches for which Lalibela is justly famous (D. Phillipson 2009a: 137-43, 153-65). Architectural features of Aksumite origin now predominate but, in contrast with the practice in Tigray, door- and window-frames are not wooden inserts but were carved integrally from the rock, and horizontal wooden beams – but not 'monkey-heads' – are represented on their walls (Fig. 9).

To the final stage at Lalibela may be attributed the remarkable sub-complex incorporating the churches of Mikael and Golgotha, where King Lalibela himself is traditionally believed to have been buried. These churches were excavated below features associated with one of the 'monolithic' basilicas and, being so deep in the rock, necessitated major alterations to the drainage system.

When one seeks to fit this five-stage relative chronology with an absolute time-scale, it seems clear that the most recent stage – to which King Lalibela's burial place is firmly attributed – should be attributed to the period of his reign in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries (*contra* Gervers 2003). It follows that the first four stages must be earlier than this (*contra* Lepage 2002). With the great 'monolithic' basilicas attributed to the eleventh and possibly early twelfth centuries, the non-ecclesiastical defensive features are pushed back well before that, perhaps as far as the eighth century. I argue that it was, however, under King Lalibela that the whole set of churches received its present form and symbolic significance.

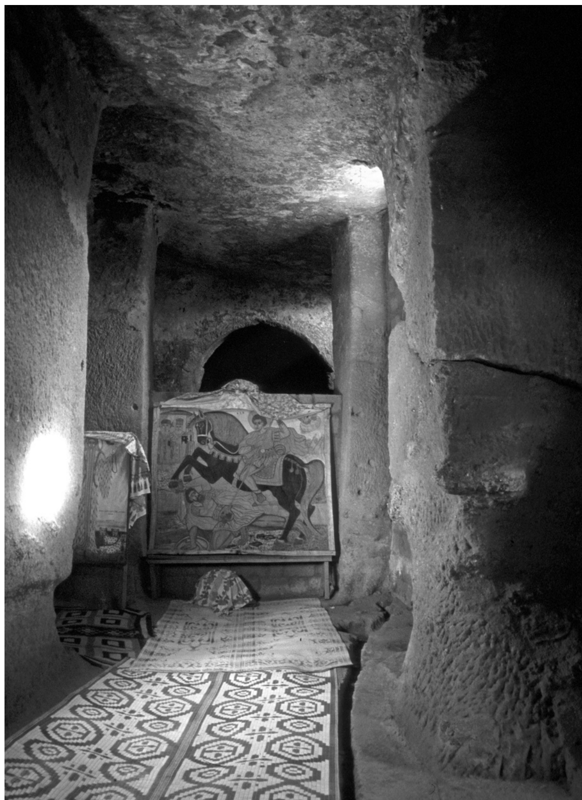

Fig. 8: The rock-hewn church of Beta Merkurios at Lalibela was converted from non-ecclesiastical use. This is indicated by the architectural form of the sanctuary which, in contrast with the rest of the hypogeum, incorporates arches.

Fig. 9: The 'monolithic' basilica Beta Emmanuel at Lalibela. Note the representation of horizontal beams and the form of the doorway, both closely paralleled by the Aksumite stela shown in Fig. 3.

There are other ancient churches – built as well as rock-hewn – in this part of Amhara region which supplement and support the argument outlined above. Among the built ones, that of Imrahanna Kristos (Fig. 10), standing in a huge cave to the north of Lalibela, is particularly significant (Balicka-Witakowska & Gervers 2001; Girma et al. 2001; D. Phillipson 2009a: 74-80). It is a totally homogeneous design and construction, with no evidence for subsequent modification, incorporating many elements of Aksumite architecture, with wall and ceiling decora-

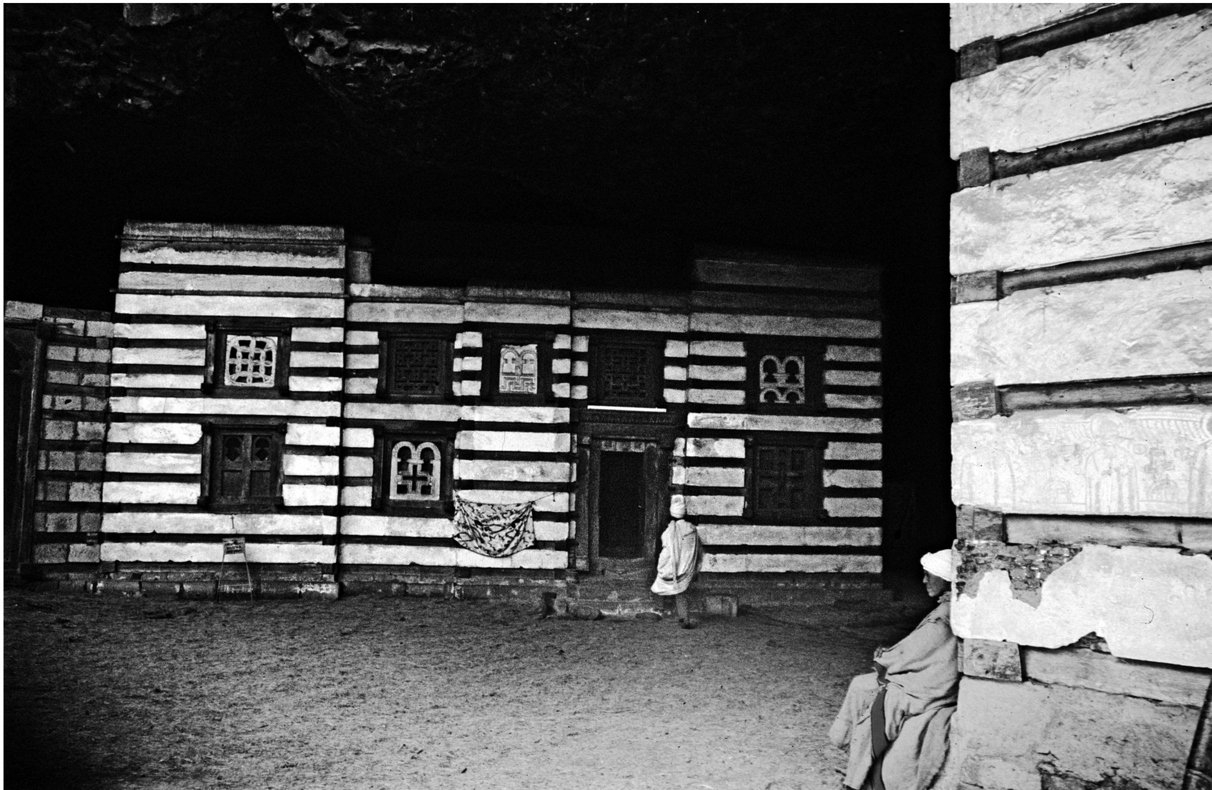

Fig. 10: The church of Imrahanna Kristos, built in a huge cave 12 km north of Lalibela. The structure of the walls is identical to that represented in rock-hewn churches at Lalibela and elsewhere (e.g. Fig. 9).

tion in which some Egyptian influences may perhaps be detected. Tradition indicates that it was erected at the instigation of one of King Lalibela's predecessors, the priest-king from whom the church has taken its name; the early twelfth-century date conventionally ascribed to him may be somewhat too recent (cf. Godet 1988; Andersen 2000).

Now let us look at the overall picture that emerges from my study of the ancient built and rock-hewn churches of Amhara region (D. Phillipson 2009a: 74-85, 107-18, 123-81). The earliest rock-hewn features – created at Lalibela in about the eighth century – were not initially churches, being only subsequently converted to that use. There is some evidence, which requires further investigation, for the creation of churches in Amhara region during the ninth and tenth centuries. Their great florescence, however, came in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries, when Imrahanna Kristos was built and the great 'monolithic' basilicas at Lalibela were excavated. Rather later, the church-complexes at the latter place were extended, including creation of the burial-place for King Lalibela himself, and the site took the aspect and symbolism that has ensured its eminence as a place of pilgrimage ever since.

This picture offers a major contrast with that proposed above for eastern Tigray. Churches were being created in Tigray for hundreds of years before they are attested in Amhara. The architecture of the two regions may only be paralleled in very general ways. In Tigray, Aksumite elements were noticeable throughout, but in Amhara they were initially absent. In the eleventh century, there was a marked hiatus in church-creation in Tigray, but a major florescence in Amhara, with Aksumite features being strongly – even self-consciously – emphasised. What does all this mean in terms of the broader history of Ethiopia?

Concluding remarks: Aksum and its successors

In the first part of this paper I sought to trace the most fundamental features of Aksumite civilisation back to significantly earlier times. From at least the seventh century BC, and probably long before, the peoples of the northern Ethiopian highlands have received visitors and cultural influences from overseas; these have sometimes proved short-lived, on other occasions they have been absorbed and become an integral part of local culture and tradition. Innovations have ranged from the commercial and the technological to the literary and the religious.

Here, I have been primarily concerned with the last category, for Christianity itself was introduced from overseas at a time when Ethiopia was part of an international community held together by commercial, political and religious links. In Aksum, the new religion combined with older elements to form a deeply embedded local tradition to which – even today – the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is proud to trace its origin.

This situation, however, did not last. By the seventh century AD, Aksum itself was in rapid decline and the political capital was transferred to the southeast. That part of the Aksumite state, in what is now eastern Tigray, continued to prosper after the old capital in the west had declined (Lepage & Mercier 2005: 32-7). Eventually, the southward shift of authority proceeded further; at a date that has long been shrouded in uncertainty, political power passed to a group based in an area that is now part of Amhara region (cf. Sergew 1972: 239-64; Tekeste 2006).

An explanation is thus available for two features which I have emphasised in the churches of this period: the eleventh-century hiatus in the eastern Tigray sequence coinciding with the first major florescence of church-creation in Amhara, and the pronounced emphasis on Aksumite style that marked this period in the latter region. It makes excellent sense if these features are viewed in the context of the transfer of political authority to a more southerly centre, and the strong desire by the new rulers to emphasise their Aksumite antecedents as a prop to their legitimacy.

These, and later, developments lie outside the range of the present paper: let me merely observe, for the sake of completeness, that the excavation of rock-hewn churches subsequently spread even further to the south, and that in both Tigray and Amhara region, the tradition continues – perhaps having been revived – in the twenty-first century. Overall, there has been far more cultural continuity in the northern highlands of Ethiopia than has generally been recognised. Political, religious and economic history are inextricably intertwined – nowhere to a greater extent than in Ethiopia.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In diesem Artikel wird die Geschichte des Aufstiegs, der Blüte und des Niederganges des antiken Aksum basierend auf einem Vergleich zwischen archäologischen und relevanten historischen Quellen dargestellt. Dabei wird auch die Kontinuität zu den Nachfolgern des Reiches von Aksum herausgestellt. Im ersten Teil werden die signifikanten Züge der Aksumitischen Zivilisation bis in die früheste greifbare Zeit zurückverfolgt. Mindestens seit dem 7. Jh. v. Chr. wird die Kultur des äthiopischen Hochlandes durch Besucher und Kontakte aus anderen Regionen, auch jenseits des Roten Meeres, beeinflusst. Einige dieser Einflüsse drangen so tief in die lokale Kultur ein, dass sie Teil der eigenen Tradition wurden. Innovationen sind in allen Bereichen der Kultur belegt, so in Handelsgütern und der Technologie, aber auch in der Literatur und Religion. Besonderer Fokus wurde hier auf das Christentum gelegt, das ebenfalls aus Übersee eingeführt wurde.
In Akusm formte die neue Religion zusammen mit älteren Elementen eine tief eingebettete lokale Tradition, die heute in der Orthodoxen Äthiopischen Kirche zu finden ist.

Im 7. Jh. n. Chr. kam es zu einem raschen Niedergang von Aksum, der in der Verlegung der politischen Hauptstadt in den Südosten (heute östliches Tigray) gipfelte. Das politische Schwergewicht verschob sich danach zu einer Gruppe, die noch weiter im Süden in der heutigen Amhara-Region beheimatet war.

Hier bietet sich eine Erklärung für zwei Erscheinungen an, die in den Kirchen dieser Zeit auftritt: Der Hiatus im 11. Jh. im östlichen Tigray trifft zusammen mit der ersten Blüte des Kirchenbaus in Amhara und der Betonung des Aksumitischen Stils, der diese Periode in dieser Region beherrscht. Es ist plausibel, diese Erscheinungen im Zusammenhang im Kontext der Verlegung der politischen Autorität in den Süden sowie dem Bestreben der neuen Herrscher, aus legitimatorischen Gründen ihre Bindung zu Aksumitischen Vorfahren darzustellen, zu sehen.

Gesellschaft zur Förderung von Museen in Äthiopien e.V.

Society for the Promotion of Museums in Ethiopia

Vor über 100 Jahren dokumentierte die »Deutsche Aksum-Expedition« unter der Leitung von Enno Littmann im Jahre 1906 die reichen Schätze Tigrays und besonders der Stadt Aksum. Es begann eine intensive kulturelle Zusammenarbeit zwischen Deutschland und Äthiopien. Seit dieser Zeit gibt es vielfältige Bestrebungen und Unternehmungen im Rahmen deutscher Kulturpolitik, mit Äthiopien bei der Bewahrung seines reichhaltigen Kulturerbes zu kooperieren.

Die **Gesellschaft zur Förderung von Museen in Äthiopien e.V.** wurde 2009 mit dem Ziel gegründet, im Sinne eines modernen Cultural Heritage Management die Bewahrung des Kulturerbes der Menschheit in Äthiopien zu unterstützen.

In enger Zusammenarbeit mit den zuständigen Behörden in Äthiopien soll durch konzeptionelle und technische Kooperation sowie durch Öffentlichkeitsarbeit mit dem Bau, der Einrichtung und dem Betrieb eines Museums mit einem -den lokalen Gegebenheiten und Erfordernissen angepassten- Konzept in Wuqro/Tigray begonnen werden.

Wenn es die Kapazitäten des Vereins erlauben, setzen wir uns für die Unterstützung weiterer Museen in Äthiopien ein und werden auch andere Projekte zum Erhalt des kulturellen Erbes in Äthiopien fördern.

Weitere Informationen zu Zielen und aktuellen Projekten der Gesellschaft zur Förderung von Museen in Äthiopien e.V. finden Sie auf unserer Website oder können über nebenstehende Kontaktmöglichkeiten angefordert werden.
Ihre aktive Unterstützung unserer Arbeiten in Form einer Vereinsmitgliedschaft und/oder Spende ist ein wichtiger Beitrag dazu, die Vorhaben in Äthiopien umzusetzen.

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