

## Introduction

Although Ethiopian Studies within Western scholarship dates back to the middle of the seventeenth century, the field has long been dominated by philologists and scholars of religion. Their interest in premodern Ethiopian history stemmed largely from their perception of “Ethiopia” as a Christian nation and a reservoir of ancient Jewish and Christian works that had been lost to the West.

As a result, Western historiography traditionally emphasized the geographic and cultural isolation of Ethiopia, depicting it primarily as a Christian realm “cut off from medieval Europe by deserts, distance, and Islam” (Crawford 1958, 3). Recent scholarship has done much to correct such views. Textual, historical, archaeological, and encyclopedic projects have thoroughly revised long-held notions about the realms and peoples of the Ethiopian-Eritrean highland plateau and the Red Sea littoral. In the past decade, significant research conducted by teams from France, Germany, Italy, Ethiopia, and Eritrea has challenged and even overturned presumed scholarly “truths.” This Element is an attempt to present an overview of this new state of scholarship on the various early realms once found in the territories of what are now the State of Eritrea and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in the so-called medieval millennium, which we define as starting from the fourth century CE – the first appearance of Christianity in the region – to 1500 AD, roughly aligning with established Western academic concepts of late antiquity and the Middle Ages. We have consequently decided to put the “Ethiopia” in the title of this Element in quotation marks, first to acknowledge that much of the history covered therein takes place far beyond the borders of the modern nation-states (Ethiopia, Somaliland, Yemen, and Eritrea), and second because we hope that some of the (hi)stories presented in this Element will challenge commonly held notions on how “Ethiopia” has been understood and perceived in the field of Medieval Studies.

While we aim to offer a broad and introductory overview here, the brevity of this Element limits the topics we can cover. Historiography has long favored written sources over material culture, creating a bias toward well-documented Christian kingdoms at the expense of equally significant Muslim and local-religious or “pagan” realms. In fact, many of the people from “Ethiopia” that ventured forth into a wider world between 330 and 1500 CE – pilgrims, merchants, and especially the enslaved – have left us scarce records, making it challenging to reconstruct their histories or lived realities.

In keeping with some of the objectives of the Global Middle Ages Project, we still aim to inculcate “new habits of thinking” about Ethiopian history (Heng 2021, 6). The Element intentionally takes an interdisciplinary approach that strives to equally privilege written, archaeological, visual, and material culture sources to analyze political, economic, social, religious, and artistic issues as part of one mosaic. We also seek to problematize earlier models of periodization by highlighting how actors in various moments of Ethiopian-Eritrean history conceptualized their place in the world differently (Symes 2011, 716). Extending the Global Middle Ages paradigm, we show the occurrence of multiple premodernities in the history of this region, demonstrating the impossibility of accounting for a single and stable historical referent that can answer to the name “Ethiopia.”

We have divided the Element into six sections. The first three sections, written by Yonatan Binyam, broadly cover the history of the ancient Aksumite kingdom. Section 1 presents an overview of Aksum’s relations with its African, South Arabian, and Greco-Roman neighbors as it rose to be a major economic and political force in the ancient world. Section 2 surveys the Christianization of the Aksumite Empire in the fourth century, which further cemented the relations between Aksum and the Roman Empire. Section 3 relates the sixth-century expansions of Aksumite rule into South Arabia.

The subsequent sections, written by Verena Krebs, trace the histories of Christian, Muslim, and local-religious or “pagan” groups inhabiting the area extending from the Red Sea coast to the Ethiopian-Eritrean highland interior between the seventh and the fifteenth centuries. Section 4 surveys the fragmentary history of the post-Aksumite highlands and their connections to the Mediterranean and Red Sea regions. Section 5 traces the emergence of cosmopolitan Muslim and Christian polities tied into Fatimid trade networks stretching from the Maghreb to the Indian Ocean in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Section 6 discusses the interplay of state formation, conquest, and trade in shaping the region’s religious and political landscape until the arrival of the Ottomans and the Portuguese in the Horn of Africa in the sixteenth century.

## 1 The Emergence of the Aksumite Empire in Global Antiquity, Second–Fourth Centuries

As early as the fourth century, the term *Aethiopia* appears as a self-designating ethnonym in the ancient East African kingdom of Aksum, to which medieval and modern states identifying themselves as Ethiopia often trace their

ancestry. Victory inscriptions dating to this century display the name of an Aksumite king and list the people groups under his control in two languages (Greek and Gə‘əz) and three scripts, with Gə‘əz written in both the Classical Ethiopic and the Pseudo-Sabaic scripts.<sup>1</sup> Here are the text and transliterations of three such inscriptions, together with a hybrid translation:<sup>2</sup>

‘zn / ngś / ‘ksm / [w]hmyr / wks / wsb’ / whbšt / wrydn / wslh / wsym / wbg ...  
 (Gə‘əz – RIE 185; DAE 7)

‘zn / mlk / ‘ksmm / wdhmrm / wrydnm / whbštm / wsb’m / wslhm / wsymm /  
 wksm / wbgm ... (Pseudo-Sabaic – RIE 185; DAE 6)

Ἀζανᾶς Βασιλεὺς Ἀξωμιτῶν κα[ὶ] Ὀμηριτῶν καὶ τοῦ Ῥαιδᾶν καὶ Αἰθιοπῶν  
 καὶ Σαβαειτῶν καὶ τοῦ Σιλεῆ καὶ τοῦ Τιαμῶ καὶ Βουγαιιτῶν κ[αὶ] τοῦ  
 Κάσου ... (Greek – RIE 270; DAE 4)

‘Ezana, king of the Aksumites, the Himyarites, the Raeidan, the Habashat/  
 Ethiopians, the Sabaeans, Silei (Salhen), Tiyyamo, the Beja and the Kasu ...

The Greek term *Aethiopia* here translates the term *hbšt* (or *hbšt* in the Pseudo-Sabaic script), the Semitic ethnonym variously used to refer to the people of Aksum, a larger group to which the Aksumites belonged, or subjects of Aksum residing in the Ethiopian-Eritrean highlands (Munro-Hay 1991, 15–16). Confusingly, the label *Aethiopia* is not applied consistently in the source materials dating from the ancient and late antique periods. For example, although the term is given as the equivalent of *hbšt* in the ‘Ezana inscription cited just now, thus ostensibly referring to the Aksumites themselves or kindred groups, other Aksumite inscriptions from that time utilize *Aethiopia* to refer to the Nubian kingdoms located to the northwest of them (e.g. RIE 186).

Contemporaneous Greek and Roman texts mirror this ambivalence in the use of the term. On the one hand, *Aethiopia* frequently refers to Nubia in ancient Greek sources, including those dating to the Hellenistic and Roman periods. On the other hand, Greek authors come to adopt the self-designation of the Aksumites, and they too begin to refer to them as Ethiopians perhaps as early

<sup>1</sup> The use of two different scripts of Gə‘əz (Classical Ethiopic and Pseudo-Sabaic) was a common feature of fourth-century Aksumite inscriptions. In such cases, the same text would appear in Greek, an unvocalized Gə‘əz version utilizing the more cursive *fidāl* script of Classical Ethiopic (written from left to right), as well as a version in the unvocalized *musnad* script of epigraphic South Arabian, this last often also featuring Pseudo-Sabaic elements such as mimation and the use of north-Semitic cognates for Gə‘əz terms (e.g. *mlk* as opposed to *ngs* for “king”). For more, see Hatke 2013, 69; Phillipson 2014, 58.

<sup>2</sup> References to Aksumite inscriptions are here given by their designations according to the two standard catalogues, the *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* (or *DAE*) and the *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Ethiopie des périodes axoumite et pré-axoumite* (or *RIE*). Unless otherwise indicated, numbers listed after *DAE* and *RIE* refer to an inscription and not a page number.

as the fifth century, as indicated in the epitome of Philostorgius's *Ecclesiastical History* (*Phil.* 3.6).<sup>3</sup> To complicate the matter further, in subsequent centuries, interpreters in the Ethiopic literary tradition begin to connect their country with references to Kush in the Hebrew Bible, a term translated as *Aethiopia* in Greek translations of biblical Hebrew texts. Later usages of "Ethiopia" thus flatten the complex topography of the term's usages in earlier periods.<sup>4</sup>

In view of this background, the Aksumite appropriation of the Greek *Aethiopia* in the fourth century appears to have been a politically strategic move (Hatke 2013, 52–53). By identifying themselves as rulers of Ethiopia, the Aksumite kings were utilizing a readily fungible topo/ethnonym within the Greek lingua franca of the day. Through their inscriptions, they styled themselves as ushering in a new "modernity," in the sense of the term proposed by Carol Symes, not as a designation for a certain historical period, but rather as the propagandist declaration of the dawning of a new, more sophisticated age (Symes 2011, 719). Understood in this sense, Aksumite rulers broadcast their reigns as ushering in an unprecedented epoch marked by the unification of vast territories in the Horn of Africa and South Arabia, the maintenance of peace, the building or improving of infrastructures, the regulation of trade networks, and the flow of cultural exchange.

Today, Aksum is a city located in central Tigray, the northernmost region in the modern nation-state of Ethiopia, a region that also demarcates the south-western border of Eritrea. Archaeological data shows that human settlements around this area go back as far as the Late Stone Age, c. 10,000 BCE (Phillipson 2003, 4). Several sites also indicate that settlements bearing striking resemblance to South Arabian cultures are established in areas near Aksum by around 800–700 BCE (Phillipson 2014, 22–40). These settlements are characterized by architecture similar to that found in South Arabia, inscriptions in Gə'əz utilizing modified forms of Sabaean script, and religious symbols bearing close affinities to South Arabian religions (Munro-Hay 1991, 106–202).

Aksum's advantageous location in close proximity to the Nile Valley, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Peninsula contributed to its growth into one of the most influential regional powerhouses in the ancient world. Over the course of centuries after the turn of the first millennium, it gradually emerged as a major political and commercial state, controlling large regions across the Horn of Africa and at times even straddling both sides of the Red Sea. Although it is difficult to pin down with precision exactly when and under what circumstances the rulers of Aksum began to expand the territories under their control,

<sup>3</sup> See Philostorgius 2007, 43.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of the gradual association of the name *Aethiopia* with the Ethiopian-Eritrean highlands over the course of centuries, see Simmons 2022, 14–34.

a range of historical artifacts from written accounts to archaeological remains to epigraphic and numismatic evidence allows for the reconstruction of parts of the historical picture.

### Aksum and International Trade in Antiquity

The earliest documentary witness to Aksum survives in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (or "The Circumnavigation of the Erythraean Sea"), the composition of which can confidently be dated to the middle of the first century (Bowersock 1971, 223). The title of the text is somewhat misleading, since, unlike earlier *periploi* that serve primarily as guides for sailors, the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (hereafter *PES*) is a guide specifically for merchants, providing a description of the various commercial goods bought and sold in the major port cities and emporia along the Erythraean Sea.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, since the ancient designation literally means "Red Sea," the text is sometimes mistakenly viewed as a guide for trade on the Red Sea alone. However, at the time of the text's composition, "Erythraean Sea" referred not only to the Red Sea (which the text calls the Arabian Gulf [ὁ Ἀραβικὸς κόλπος]) but also to the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean (Casson 1989, 94). The international scope of the text's purview, therefore, extends beyond the Red Sea region and provides an invaluable glimpse into the major trading centers active in the first century CE from India to the Mediterranean.

The *PES* mentions Aksum in the context of discussing its major port city, Adulis, which lies a short distance inland from the Gulf of Zula on the East African coast of the Red Sea. The text indicates the significance of a given port in a number of different ways: one, by the number of times the port is mentioned; two, by noting the best seasons of the year to travel to said port; and three, by indicating the regulatory protocols governing trade at that location. In the first case, the *PES* mentions Adulis only a handful of times, in comparison to Barygaza of India, for example, which receives the most mentions at twenty-eight (Casson 1989, 277).

But the *PES* establishes the significance of Adulis as one of the most important centers of trade in the Indian Ocean market, initially by giving instructions about the best times of year to travel there. Out of a total of thirty-seven port cities, Adulis is one of only six cities (including Barygaza) for which

<sup>5</sup> For the standard text and translation of the *Periplus*, see Casson 1989. The text is preserved in a single manuscript dating to the tenth century: Codex Palatinus Graecus 398, fols. 40V–54V, in the Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg. Another manuscript dating to the fourteenth or fifteenth century and currently in the British Museum (B.M. Add. 19391, fols. 9r–i2r) is a direct copy of the Palatine manuscript, "errors and all" (Casson 1989, 5). Casson based his translation and commentary on the critical edition of the text compiled by Hjalmar Frisk in 1927.

the text provides seasonal travel guides, which would have been useful for merchants planning roundtrip voyages (6:3.4–7).<sup>6</sup> More distinguishing still is the description of Adulis as an *emporium nominom* (or “legal emporium”), one of only three port cities that the *PES* designates as such. The text then describes the connection between Adulis and Aksum as follows:

On this part of the coast, opposite Oreine, twenty stades in from the sea is *Adulis* (ἡ Ἀδουλι), a fair-sized village (κώμη σύμμετρος). From Adulis it is a journey of three days to Koloe, an inland city that is the first trading post for ivory, and from there another five days to the metropolis itself, which is called *Axomites* (εἰς αὐτὴν τὴν μητρόπολιν τὸν Ἀξωμίτην λεγόμενον); into it is brought all the ivory from beyond the Nile through what is called Kyeneion, and from there down to Adulis (4:2.4–10).

The (albeit misspelled) reference to Aksum as the metropolis of Adulis indicates that the latter served as the major port for the former, similar to the relations linking Ostia to Rome (Bowersock 2013, 11). The *PES* paints a picture of Adulis as a vibrant trading center giving Aksumites an outlet to sell their goods (especially ivory and obsidian) and to purchase foreign goods of all kinds (e.g. articles of clothing, linens, drinking vessels, glass stones, brass, iron, copper, axes, knives, Roman money for resident foreigners, wine from Laodicea and Italy, olive oil, silverware, and goldware, to name but a few) (6:2.23–35).

The anonymous author describes some of the products (e.g. wine, olive oil) as “limited in quantity,” other products (e.g. silverware and goldware) as goods purchased by the wealthy, and still others (e.g. unadorned clothing) as modest in price. In sum, the emporium available to the Aksumites is portrayed as a market for both the rich and those with modest means, who through Adulis had access to commodities from Italy, Greece, Egypt, Arabia, and India. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder confirms this view of Adulis as a key emporium by describing it as “the biggest port . . . of the Ethiopians” (6.173).

As Lionel Casson has suggested, the designation of Adulis as an *emporium nominon* probably indicates that it was a “legally limited” port, meaning that all trade was regulated by the local governor or a trading office sanctioned by the ruler (Casson 1989, 276). The text also mentions a certain Zoskales, describing him as the king of the regions surrounding Adulis and “a fine person . . . well versed in reading and writing Greek” (5:2.19–21). Since Aksum is given as the metropolis of Adulis, numerous commentators have suggested that the Zoskales mentioned in the *PES* constitutes the first documented king of Aksum. By contrast, since the text

<sup>6</sup> Following Casson’s method for numbering passages in the *PES*, references to the text here indicate the chapter followed by the page number(s), then line number(s) in Frisk’s edition. Thus 6:3.4–7 = chapter 6, page 3, and lines 4–7.

explicitly refers to him as the king of Barbaria and not as king of Aksum, others have suggested that Zoskales was the ruler of a vast region in the Horn centered on Adulis but independent of (or perhaps even governing over) the city of Aksum (Casson 1989, 109–10). As a result of the ambiguities surrounding the connection between Zoskales and Aksum, it is not possible to reconstruct precisely the political extent of Aksumite rule in the Ethiopian-Eritrean highlands during the first century CE.

### Aksumite Expansions in South Arabia

The earliest unambiguous reference to Aksumite expansions across the Horn of Africa and South Arabia appears in a now-lost victory inscription, which was once written on a commemorative throne but today survives only in the sixth-century *Topographica Christiana* of Cosmas Indicopleustes.<sup>7</sup> Cosmas is the medieval moniker given to an otherwise anonymous Nestorian Christian merchant who, in the sixth century, traveled to numerous places along the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean. He also visited Aksum around 518 CE (Hatke 2011, 79–80). He then wrote an annotated geography of the places he had visited some twenty-five years after his travels.

In his account, he relates that he came across a commemorative throne (*diphros* in Greek, as opposed to *thronos*), which had been enshrined “in Adulis . . . the name of the city of the Ethiopians that . . . serves as the port for the people of Aksum” (*Top. Chr.* 2.54). Cosmas’s description of the votive throne is commonly referred to in the literature today as *Monumentum Adulitanum II*, together with *Monumentum Adulitanum I*, the designation for his description of a nearby stele that had been carved from a black rock (most likely basalt). While the marble throne had been erected in front of the basalt stele at the same location in Adulis, and both bore victory inscriptions written in Greek, they were not erected by the same ruler as Cosmas had thought (*Top. Chr.* 2.54.6–18). Instead, they enshrined the accomplishments of two rulers who lived centuries apart.

Cosmas’s surviving transcription of these victory inscriptions demonstrates that the black stele, or *Monumentum Adulitanum I*, was much older and recounted the accomplishments of the Hellenistic ruler Ptolemy III, who reigned in Egypt between 246 and 222 BCE. By contrast, the inscription on the marble throne, or *Monumentum Adulitanum II*, related the victories of an Aksumite king whose reign most likely dates to the late second or early third century CE (Bowersock 2013, 56–57). The name of this Aksumite ruler has been lost, but, based on the territories he claims to have brought under his control, it is clear that he was not the same figure mentioned as Zoskales in the *PES*.

<sup>7</sup> For the text, see Wolska-Conus 1962.



In the inscription, the king boasts that he conquered numerous people groups who lived not only in the Horn region but as far north as the frontiers of Egypt and as far east as South Arabia across the Red Sea. The list of his military accomplishments concludes with the following words:

I was the first and only king of any down to my time to subjugate all these peoples. That is why I express my gratitude to my greatest god, Ares, who also begat me, through whom I brought under my sway all the peoples who are adjacent to my land . . . Having imposed peace on the entire world under me, I went down to Adulis to sacrifice to Zeus, to Ares, and to Poseidon on behalf of those who go under sail. Once I had brought together my forces and united them, I encamped in this place and made this throne as a dedication to Ares in the twenty-seventh year of my reign (*Top. Chr.* 2.63.8–12).

This inscription reveals several important points about the earliest period of Aksumite imperial expansion, as well as Aksum's relations with the other major powers of the ancient Mediterranean world. First, that the inscription was written in Greek indicates the Hellenization of Aksumite culture (at least across the more powerful levels of society), a process that may have begun as early as the third century BCE and definitely continued through to the Roman period, given the dating of the stele to the Ptolemaic period and the Aksumite throne to the second or third century CE. The unknown Aksumite king behind the Adulis throne here signals his command of Greek customs not only by mimicking the language of Ptolemy III as inscribed on the basalt stele but also by invoking Greek gods and describing himself as a son of Ares in terms that would have been widely intelligible to travelers acquainted with Greco-Roman religions and customs.

Second, *Monumentum Adulitanum II* represents the earliest surviving evidence for Aksumite conquests in South Arabia, as presented in the following claims of the unknown Aksumite king: "I sent both a fleet and an army of infantry against the Arabitai and the Kinaidocolpitai who dwell across the Red Sea, and I brought their kings under my rule . . . I made war from Leukê Kômê to the lands of the Sabaeans" (*Top. Chr.* 2.62.4–9). The list of people and place names here indicates that the Aksumites took control of parts of the Arabian Peninsula from the port of Leukê Kômê in the north to the territories of the Sabaeans in the south, or, in modern terms, from the Gulf of 'Aqaba to the northern border of Yemen (Hatke 2013, 41). This account of the Aksumite takeover in South Arabia is corroborated by a fragmentary Greek inscription found at Aksum (i.e. *RIE* 269), which preserves the phrase "and the region across the sea" (καὶ τὸ πέρα τῆς θαλάσσης), similar to the description in *Monumentum Adulitanum II* of the people living "across the Red Sea" (πέραν δὲ τῆς Ἐρυθρας θαλάσσης).