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Reconnecting Aksumite Antiquity: A study on the use of material collections and digital technologies in heritage outreach strategies for the World Heritage Site Aksum

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Reconnecting Aksumite Antiquity:

A study on the use of Material Collections in Heritage Outreach Strategies

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Chapter I: Introduction

In 1974 one of the leading archaeological researchers in the Horn of Africa referred to it as 'the last great civilization of antiquity to be revealed to modern science' (Munro-Hay 1989, 1). Fifty years later, however, those words still stand for the World Heritage Site Aksum. Instead, they ring truer than ever, as the archaeological site of Aksum faces numerous threats. The archaeological materials representing one of Africa's most impressive antique civilisations, likewise, are scattered across museums in North America, Europa and Africa, and are ill-categorised, documented, researched or are not made available. Management of the World Heritage Site itself has consistently fallen short; the latest reports by the World Heritage Committee (WHC) repeats its own decade long prompts to ameliorate a plethora of perceived neglects and hazards (ICOMOS 2010, 2013, 2016). These can range from basic visitor and interpretation facilities to the regulation of critical urban encroachment and engaging in immediate mitigation of flood-risks and the destabilization of the site's stelae. Compounding concerns of mismanagement, lack of public awareness, and a distinct lack of integration of ancient Aksum into historical narratives of global antiquity, is the consistent political instability which has plagued Ethiopia for decades. Despite its archaeological significance, the archaeological site Aksum and its associated material collections currently sit neglected, unable to be explored and largely invisible to the world heritage community. Indeed, Aksum remains largely to be revealed to modern science.

Acknowledging these issues, this thesis contributes to the study of Aksumite archaeology and researches strategies for increased public awareness of the threatened Aksumite heritage through a two-fold research aim. First, by creating a comprehensive overview of the mostly overlooked Aksumite material collections, widely dispersed due to Ethiopia's colonial history. And second, based on these findings, this research will propose a strategy to generate public outreach for Aksumite heritage incorporating and utilising the impressive materiality of ancient Aksum through innovative digital technologies that are employed to make the Aksumite heritage more visible, accessible and interactive.

Research Aims, Limitations and Questions

Research aims

The overarching aim of this research is constructing a first step towards a more holistic archaeological research paradigm for Aksum's archaeological site and materials. This aim will be addressed through a two-fold approach:

1) by focussing on creating the circumstances for heightened visibility and accessibility of Aksum's archaeological data and materials, by creating an overview of museum and institutional collections of Aksumite archaeological materials.

And 2), utilising the findings made in the historic and archaeological research of this thesis, and

specifically the results of aim 1, this study proposes a public outreach strategy for ancient Aksum's archaeological heritage through the use of innovative digital technologies that allow archaeological materials, objects and even entire monument to be accessible, viewable and available for interaction as 'digital surrogates' in digital spaces. This outreach strategy will be based on a theoretical framework of 'heritage' as the product of processes based on interaction and personal attachment.

To fulfil the first aim, this thesis will provide an overview of Aksum's material collections through researching the history of archaeology at Aksum and investigating museum or other collections which appear from that research and other indicators to have been involved in excavating or collecting materials from Aksum. An overview that is important because it currently does not exist. As will become clear throughout this study, any research on Aksumite archaeology, material studies and collections research faces significant under documentation and dispersal of sources. Vital archaeological reports, findings and sources throughout the history of archaeological research at Aksum, have been published in a variety of languages in a multitude of journals and catalogues, some of whose focus lies on entirely different subjects than the study of the northern Horn (Phillipson 2012, 4).

This lack and dispersal of sources is reflected in Aksum's material collections. Apart from a handful of sporadic publications on specific collections, no clear overview of museums, archives and other cultural institutions keeping Aksumite artefacts currently exists. In large part this is due to the colonial history of Ethiopia and Aksum as a specific focus of colonial conquest. As will be made clear in this thesis, however, aside from Ethiopia's colonial context, many excavated objects from the 1950's onwards have regularly become untraceable or even genuinely lost due simply to mismanagement or inadequate documentation of their whereabouts (Zazzaro 2013).

The second aim of this thesis is to propose a public outreach strategy, mainly seeking to incorporate insights from the use of digital technologies in archaeology and heritage studies. 'Digital technologies' is here employed as an umbrella term for any digital means that can facilitate interaction with archaeological sites or materials. As will be addressed in the methodology section, interaction with archaeological sites, monuments, or materials, which this research broadly refers to as 'heritage' is understood to be fundamental for the interpretation of past cultures and the creation of both personal and communal meaning and attachment in the present.

The merit of focussing on digital outreach strategies is that it circumvents issues of inaccessibility currently plaguing Aksumite heritage as will be demonstrated extensively in this thesis, while maximizing the potential for generating awareness. The author will argue that this strategy has the potential to create more favourable conditions for research on ancient Aksum through public interest, ultimately benefiting the study of Aksum's archaeological past and its conservation both on-site and for material collections. As will be elaborated on in the methodology section of this introduction, this

strategy builds on the theoretical concepts of 'heritage making' employed in heritage and museum studies.

Limitations

Due to the lack of previous similar investigation or reports, this study relies almost completely on its own research in identifying those museums through historical accounts, published archaeological reports, and investigation of online digitalised archives. While an analytical approach is employed in its investigation through thorough literary investigation, tracing a collection of objects can incidentally rely on nothing more than a 'lucky hit' in the search engine, due to the obscure, incomplete and inadequately categorised or digitalised nature of sources and archives.

Another limitation regarding this research' aims is that it cannot acquire all the data necessary to present an indisputably complete overview Aksum's material collections. Thus, though aiming to be comprehensive, significant collections of Aksumite heritage can be unknowingly left out of scope of this research. Yet, underlining these limitations, is likewise the need for an attempt at creating new research frameworks through introducing innovative strategies and potential new data, which might prove a starting point for future additional studies or research questions simply by presenting the existence of certain objects or collections.

Research Questions

Central to this study is the following research question:
How can digital surrogates and digital spaces be employed in outreach strategies to raise awareness and conservation efforts for heritage under threat, specifically focussing on the World Heritage site and material collections of ancient Aksum?
To be able to answer this question in a structured manner, two separate questions can be asked which have helped design the necessary thesis structure and will guide the research towards its conclusion:
1) What is the state of research for the heritage of Aksum, and how have its archaeological site and materials developed to that point?
2) How can archaeological material collection research be employed in heritage outreach strategy based on digital technologies and outreach, by looking at theories of heritage making?

Methodology & Thesis Structure

As has been stated above, this research seeks to propose a strategy that aims to effectively raise public awareness on the state of archaeological research and material collections of the archaeological culture associated with the World Heritage site Aksum. Here introduced will be the methodology, theoretical frameworks and structure through which the questions raised by this thesis will be answered.

Methodology

The first aim of this thesis it the creation of a currently non-existent overview of the material collections containing Aksumite archaeological artefacts. Creation of this overview relies on data gathering through archaeological reports and web-based investigative research.

Secondly, using these findings, this research will propose a recommendation on how to address the state of Aksumite heritage through an outreach strategy based on digital innovations and notions of accessibility, visibility and interaction. These three factors are identified in New Museology as vital in processes of 'heritage making'; processes through which personal attachment and meaning is created in a subject-object relationship. This process is reliant on deeply personal interpretation of space, visual input and information processes and lays at the heart of what is deemed valuable heritage in any personal or communal sense. Considering the issues relating to the physical spaces in which Aksumite heritage is or can be portrayed, this research proposes the digital space as an alternative to effect potential short and long-term benefits in education on and awareness of Aksum, as well as promote future research and efforts on enhancing Aksum's conservation.

The main theoretical framework used to support this view is founded in New Museology. New Museology is a paradigm of museum and heritage studies that first appeared in the late 1980's. Essential to New Museology is the observation that objects placed in museums as such do not constitute the concept of 'heritage', rather it is the subject interacting with objects that engages in meaning making processes, by questioning, discussing, engaging, viewing and relating to objects in a curated or participatory context (Smith 2006, MacDonald 2006, Silberman 2015). New Museology thereby reflects the awareness of the museum's role in shaping and facilitating political or societal dialogue. The effectiveness of specifically digital outreach strategies propagated in this thesis is firmly rooted in the same notions of heritage, interaction and imagery as employed in original studies in New Museology, but translated to digital spaces; its objects instead being faithful replications, or 'digital surrogates' (Meehan 2022). Research in Museology as well as heritage studies over the last two decades has increasingly shown that an object's digital surrogate, portrayed in digital spaces is able to trigger the same processes of meaning making as their physical counterparts (Terras et al 2021, Hanes and Stone 2019, Raptis et al 2019). Utilising this observation on facilitating interaction with heritage through digital strategies thus holds great potential for cultural heritage.

The exploitation of this potential has already proven effective and has shown to be a highly relevant solution for facilitating interaction with cultural heritage. In recent years, digital spaces have been increasingly designed to supplement or substitute physical heritage spaces through the introduction of digital collections, online tours and exhibitions or dedicated social media blog and vlog series (Burness 2016, Budge 2017, Dudley 2010, Gil-Fuenteteja and Economou 2019, Hindmarch, Terras and Robson 2019, 244, Taylor 2009, Meehan 2022, Terras 2011). Such efforts have become more successful and relevant than ever due to the covid-19 pandemic, with museums increasingly seeking the digital medium to showcase otherwise unfeatured collections and stories, and consciously creating a dedicated following and a digital environment in which people, experts and objects are able to interact. It has even led to the world's largest museums – the Louvre, the British Museum, the Smithsonian, and many more - to replicate entire galleries online in the absence of the accessibility of

their physical counterparts. Online exhibitions employ digital capabilities that not only faithfully replicate but enhance or even transcend the boundaries of exclusively physical subject-object dialogue, such as 3D-modelling or mixed- and virtual-reality. Elaborating on this in Chapter VI, it is useful to briefly give an example of this. The Louvre, for instance, has launched a virtual reality experience of the Mona Lisa, which adds a dimension of visual context and interactivity in an educational framework, impossible to achieve in the physical spaces of the museum or the Mona Lisa itself (Louvre Museum 2021).

Furthermore, it allows all potential visitors to visit these digital spaces anywhere and anytime. Employment of digital spaces through the replication of heritage, has thus become an increasingly effective tool to facilitate interaction with heritage, where traditionally they pertained exclusively to either museum exhibitions or the defined spaces of a heritage site.

Mobilising engaging and educational content to respond to viewer's needs, museums and cultural institutions have managed to create large and loyal followings on multiple platforms. Educational or conservation projects using 3D rendered or photogrammetric models instead of physical objects, have allowed users to question and interact with material heritage in meaningful ways. Isolated digital media strategies have been tried and proven to be effective for fostering interest in particular heritage sites, as well as being able to trigger processes of heritage and meaning making. Online exposure to and interaction with heritage sites has been linked to increased interest, awareness and even increased heritage tourism (Falk and Hagsten 2021). Successful strategies in this regard have been shown to offer further potential for sustainable heritage tourism and much needed conservation efforts. This makes its potential for Aksum both clear and interesting, and arguably for heritage under threat at large. As this study will thus argue and further elaborate, building on these theoretical observations, the strategic use and employment of digital surrogates and spaces thus holds an as of yet unexplored potential specifically for facilitating interaction with, and creating awareness of otherwise inaccessible or invisible heritage under threat. This study will thus present the case of Aksum, seeking to portray its rich archaeological legacy, investigate its material collections, and subsequently argue for their incorporation in an outreach strategy/awareness campaign, focusing on their incorporation as digital surrogates in digital spaces to maximize the benefits of exposure.

Not only does the successful use of digital outreach strategies offer the potential to make heritage more visible, accessible and interactive, it furthermore offers the important potential to exposition objects in accessible digital spaces, when otherwise such objects might not even be considered for exposition in traditional galleries. This particular, as will be shown, would prove to be a tremendous solution for the many Aksumite objects currently stored in museum depots. Not only that, the creation of digital surrogates in this particular context of mismanaged heritage or heritage under threat, offers a faithful replication of an object, of which it is not unthinkable to be lost.

Thesis Structure

In order to tackle this complex subject and methodically structure the aim of this research through the presented two-fold approach, a clear overview is presented here of the chapter structure, content and sub-questions that these chapters will answer. This will be as follows:

Chapter II of this research will construct a concise, mostly chronological, overview of ancient Aksum's relevance, significance and history through the most recent archaeological works as well as historical sources using an interdisciplinary approach. The success of the proposed media outreach strategy through Aksum's neglected material collections firmly rests in the ability to present Aksum as embedded in a clear historical and archaeological context that as such can be understood, interpreted and interacted with. However, a principal notion of what the ancient archaeological culture of 'Aksum' represents in a historical or archaeological sense yet enjoys no broad consensus. Its scholars current and past are largely divided on the extent of ancient Aksum's influence, political power, cultural impact, first emergence as an autonomous state and even the basic chronology of its origin and demise. Assertions of Aksumite decline for example, can vary considerably, sometimes being as much as centuries apart. Ancient Aksumite culture and heritage, aside from suffering from neglect, consequently, becomes hard to understand and appreciate by a potential wider audience. This chapter will thus seek to present a comprehensible account of Aksumite archaeology, offering an interpretation of Aksum's development trajectory, the development of its monumentality and offering a context for interpreting its archaeological objects.

Chapter III will present an analysis of the history of archaeology at Aksum. This chapter will be essential in understanding the foundation of the practice of archaeology at Aksum, the subsequent impact on its current state of research, its lack of incorporation in the appreciation of globalized antiquity, and lastly the onset of collecting Aksumite materials. This chapter, however, does not merely seek to establish, but offer a thorough overview of the interactions between Western powers and the Northwestern Horn of Africa, mainly Ethiopia.

Chapter IV will concern Aksum's material collections and will aim to produce a broad overview of the museums and institutions currently in possession of Aksumite artefacts. Since, again, no such oversight exists outside of sporadic studies focusing on single collections, which mainly serve to affirm their poor state of conservation and current management practices employed. The sources this chapter will rely on are such conservation and collection reports, as well as the previous chapter's research on Aksumite archaeology and collecting practices from the 19th century to the present; essentially tracing mentioned materials from excavations to their modern whereabouts as far as available sources allow. Aside from tracing the institutional collections of Aksumite materials based on historical accounts and archaeological reports, the findings of this analysis are mostly sought to be verified through consulting online collections and archives.

Chapter V will so, this research will provide an up-to-date and critical account and understanding of the current state of Aksumite material collections and heritage, from which a comprehensive action-plan aimed at largely digital public outreach can be produced and justified. The research will finally present its findings in a concluding chapter.

Chapter VI In the following fourth chapter a discussion will be presented that will concern outreach strategies in order to incorporate Aksumite history and archaeology in a broader public understanding of the ancient world and how knowledge of Aksumite material culture can facilitate this process.

Employed in this outreach strategy are insights from research in digitalisation strategies for heritage and insights in subject-object relationships from New Museology. This study is an exploratory study that seeks to research theoretic frameworks in which innovative digital technologies are effectively used to create community outreach for archaeological heritage using material collections. Methods that, while being the subject of heritage-based research in a museum or archaeological site context, remain largely unused in the case of heritage under threat, which theoretically might stand to gain the most from the successful employment of digital spaces.

Relevance & Contribution

Relevance

The perceived relevance and contributions of this research are multi-faceted. First, this research ties into larger academic discussions, Most notably the decolonisation of archaeology and the notion of 'global antiquity'. African Antiquity, however, is often a neglected subject and as such has failed to be fully integrated into this research agenda. Recent efforts have sought to integrate African history in world history, yet in the case of Aksum this has not proven consistent. Aksum not only 'serves' that purpose but is exemplary of the fact that African antiquity played a unique role in it. The Red Sea region, most notably the Eritrean and Ethiopian coast, present a crucial interface for connections in the ancient world that is currently poorly understood. Studies on Aksumite state development have much to offer in terms of anthropological understandings of ancient states (Harrower and D'Andrea 2014, 515). The eventual recommendation on public outreach this research will produce is argued on the basis that archaeology and its practice should mainly serve to gain knowledge of the past which can help enlighten our global understanding of world history. In this sense, archaeology supports public knowledge and is in turn supported by the public through its perceived benefit. In this particular case, Aksum can be deemed representative of a world culture which has not yet been incorporated in our broader understanding and as such has much to offer in our contemporary historical conception of the role of the Red Sea in ancient trade and African antiquity on a larger scale.

Third, this research seeks to invite a multidisciplinary approach to the study of Aksumite archaeology, and employ insights and innovations from a variety of related fields in order to propose a workable recommendation for the valorisation of Aksumite heritage. The World Heritage site Aksum has been the topic of a multitude of studies seeking to research its roads to development: From analysis and

recommendations on the development of its local tourism industry, archaeological reports arguing for immediate conservation efforts, to official ICOMOS reports observing the inadequacy of the site's heritage management (ICOMOS 2010, 2013, 2016). Thus far, however, such research has been confined to the scope of the specific discipline from which research interest has emanated. Be it archaeology, tourism-, museum- or conservation studies. Though these studies each contribute significantly to the knowledge on Aksum, the state of its conservation, and material collections, its results and conclusions have often caused for reports largely identifying already existing issues pertaining to the Aksumite material heritage and archaeological site, without aiming to effectively strategize a comprehensive recommendation for the advancement of Aksumite heritage management or public awareness. Thereby largely perpetuating the issue of diffuse research traditions and clusters as has been described by Phillipson (Phillipson 2012). This thesis therefore embraces interdisciplinarity and holistic research frameworks.

Exploring the use of digital surrogates in the particular context of Aksum offers a case study to exemplify the its use for raising awareness on neglected heritage which is simultaneously under threat. The solutions and theoretical insights discussed in this thesis, it is hoped, can stimulate similar research in similar archaeological topics in which findings here can be used as a blueprint.

Contributions

Second, this research aims to combine studies on Aksum's archaeological site and material collections. Current research on Aksum is focussed to an overwhelming extent on the archaeological sites pertaining to the ancient culture while excavated materials are scarcely considered. The bulk of archaeological research on ancient Aksum is focussed on the site's impressive monumentality, while archaeological materials are rarely considered the subject of research. Currently, however, Aksum is suffering from political upheavals in the Horn of Africa, which render the site inaccessible. Inaccessibility and lack of data or overview of the Aksumite material collections thus must be addressed. Fulfilling the aim of this research relies on an understanding of the state of Aksum's material collections, their historical and archaeological context, and of the current management circumstances concerning the archaeological site itself.

Through its aims, this research thus seeks to present a yet non-existent overview of Aksumite material culture in collections, propose ways of improving Aksumite material heritage management through generating and employing new methods of public exposure to Aksumite material culture, and finally to create space for future related studies on Aksumite material heritage. The resulting proposal for a comprehensive action plan and strategy for Aksum is thus two-fold: allowing for future holistic approaches to research on ancient Aksumite archaeology, including both archaeological sites and materials, as well as raising public awareness of Aksum's ancient history and current archaeology and state of conservation.

Chapter II: The History of Aksum

Introduction

In the first century B.C., major political changes were transpiring in the north-western Horn of Africa. Having previously been a divided landscape of competing petty kingdoms and chiefdoms, intricately connected to Arabia, North Africa and inland Africa through trade and cultural ties, there now emerged a dominant power from the highland region of Ethiopia. This, broadly, is the understanding of the emergent kingdom of Aksum, named after its capital on the Tigrayan plateau. Yet, since the inception of archaeological investigations at Aksum, fundamental questions remain without scholarly consensus: What *exactly* was Aksum? Was the ancient site the capital of an empire, or a kingdom? Was the state of Aksum the successor to previous kingdoms, or a sudden centralisation of power? Did the Aksumites indeed rule the North-western Horn of Africa for a millennium since its founding, or merely half of that? Such questions serve to exemplify only partially the dichotomy in current discussions enveloping studies on the Aksumite past and the complexity of its research. While some consensus exists on the general outline of Aksumite history and chronology, many facets remain obscured by lack of adequate research and data. Debates mostly centre on the very early or later periods in the Aksumite timeline, but are by no means exclusive to them. This is illustrated by the periodization of king Ezana, Aksum's most cited and famous ruler. While he is largely said to have led Aksum to prosperity in the fourth century, there is reason to believe that he in fact reigned a full century later (Munro-Hay 1988).

In discussing the development trajectory of ancient Aksum, archaeologists have discerned three main phases of development. These are: The Early Aksumite- (1st to $4^{th}/5^{th}$ century A.D.), Middle Aksumite- ($4^{th}/5^{th}$ to $7^{th}/8^{th}$ century) and Late Aksumite phase ($7^{th}/8^{th}$ to $9^{th}/10^{th}$), with the Middle phase arguably encompassing Aksum's most substantial period of political and commercial power (Munro-Hay 1990; Philipson 2012; Bard et al 1997; 2014, Fattovich 2010; 2019, Michels 2005). The dating and division, and even naming of these phases, is subjected to fierce academic debate. An example of such debates is the often used yet problematic term defining the period immediately preceding the Early Aksumite phase: the pre-Aksumite phase. The millennium preceding the Early Aksumite phase, as a whole, is loosely referred to as 'pre-Aksumite', on the basis of ostensible cultural influences from South-Arabia. These recognisable influences are mainly considered to be derived from migrants from the Kingdom of Saba with the pre-Aksumite cultures thus often, becoming synonymous with 'Sabaean' or 'Ethio-Sabaean' culture. While such assumptions have proven questionable already, some archaeologists have also contended it dismisses an array of distinct archaeological cultures and developments in the region in favour of a misguided sense of uniformity (Bard et al 1997, Philipson 2009, Schmidt 2009; 306-307).

While an already arduous debate, the pre-Aksumite label has most recently come to be scrutinized through the addition of a fourth discernible phase of development: The Proto-Aksumite phase (360 BC

(?)–120/40 BC); its finds and chronology wholly based on the 1993-2003 excavations at Beta Giyorgis hill (Bard et al 2014; 285-287), which lies directly north of the plain on which Aksum was eventually founded (see fig. 1). The archaeological sites excavated at Beta Giyorgis, while set in the 'pre-Aksumite' phase of the first millennium B.C., can be distinctly referred to as 'proto-Aksumite'. Clear cultural similarities in the use of funerary stelae and pottery styles, as well as an obvious geographic link, make Beta Giyorgis a self-evident precursor to the development of Aksum. While the adoption of a proto-Aksumite phase would sensibly render usage of the already problematic pre-Aksumite obsolete, there is currently no sufficiently conclusive data to justify separating the proto-Aksumite culture from the pre-Aksumite cultures completely. This thesis, not being able to present such data itself, is forced to rely on the deeply embedded notion of pre-Aksumite, whilst acknowledging proto-Aksumite. Therefore both pre- and proto-Aksumite will be used in this thesis, albeit with a clear distinction. Though pre-Aksumite will refer to archaeological cultures of the first millennium at large, proto-Aksumite will strictly refer to the developments at Beta Giyorgis.

Against the backdrop of such intense academic debate, this chapter seeks to present a very broad, comprehensive and chronological account of ancient Aksum's development trajectory, its rise to regional hegemony, and attest to Aksum and Ethiopia's integration in an increasingly globalised world of politics, commerce and religious affairs. This narrative account will start by a brief discussion of the region's earliest archaeological data and include discussions on Aksum's 'pre-Aksumite' phase. As will become clear, Aksum's rise to regional dominance in a complex landscape of highly competitive political entities is both sudden and complete, and can only be understood through the context from which it emerged. The archaeological data here analysed and presented is mainly focussed on the monumental context. It will, however, also include lesser researched archaeological objects and materials wherever possible to present an account of Aksumite archaeology as complete as possible. Due to the fragmentary and scarce nature of archaeological data, this chapter will also base itself on available historical sources. These are mainly translations from ancient Ge'ez by Sergew Hable Sellassie (1972) and translated Greek or Latin sources by various authors. From this chapter will emerge a thorough understanding of Aksum's historical relevance and archaeological significance which can be referenced in later chapters.

Land of the Gods

Set in the Ethiopian highlands, bordering the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, the geographic area that would eventually be dominated by the kings of Aksum, commonly referred to as the Northwestern Horn of Africa, encompasses an extremely diverse territory. Its highest peaks reach 4620m, while its lowest points descends to about 110m below sea level. It contained forests, salty plains and snowy mountainscapes; fertile grasslands and bleak desert. A single military campaign memorized in the *Momentum Adulitanum*, an inscription on an historical monument of which only its

copy exists (Wolska-Conus 1968, 372-8), describes how the Aksumites managed to equip themselves through all these circumstances successfully. This being perhaps their key success in their ability to rule a vast territory.

Temperatures in the region could vary considerably, but environmental studies show the Ethiopian highlands of Tigray (alt. 1000-2500m), the center of Aksumite power, offered a comparatively moderate climate with both fertile soil and regular seasons of rainfall (Bard et al, 2000). This allowed the region's earliest settlers to practice both self-sustaining agriculture and herding; a lifestyle which is reflected in the region's earliest rock art (Fattovich 2010, Hagos 2010). The eventual development of complex state entities in the Northern Horn can be in part attributed to this favourable geography and its proximity to major, but also minor water bodies connecting it to other regions, such as the Red Sea, Blue Nile and Marab and Tekeze rivers (see fig. 1) (Philipson 2021, Fattovich, 2010, Munro-Hay 1991; 32, 62-63, Sellassie 1972).

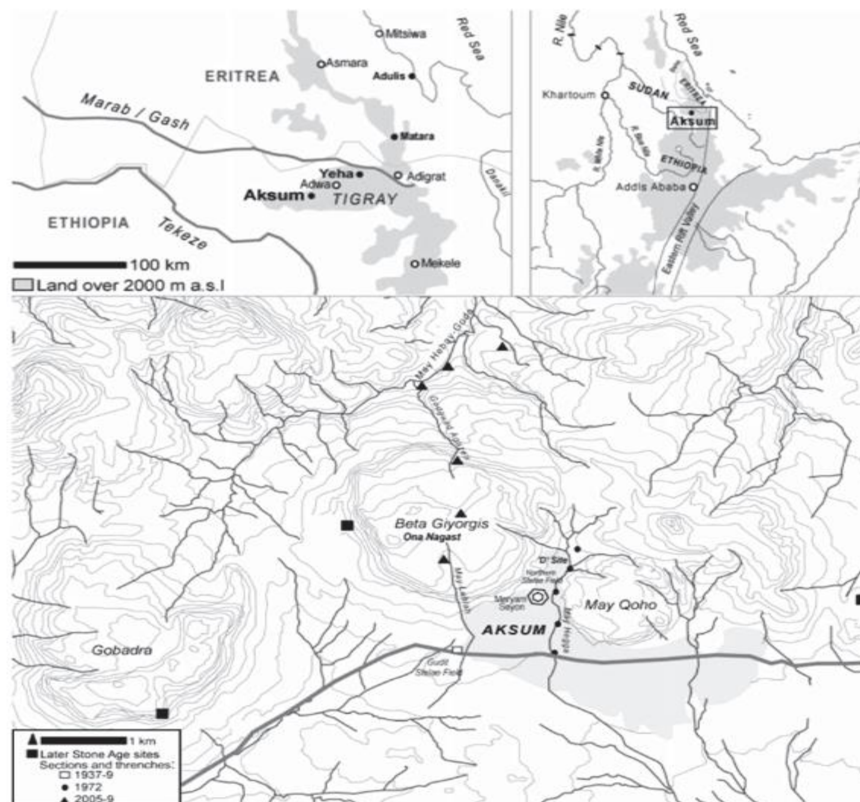


Fig. 1: Map showing the main geographical features of Aksum and extended regions (Sulas 2014, 130).

Direct evidence for the habitation of the Ethiopian highlands can be traced back millennia, mainly through the study of rock art of the Early Stone Age (Fattovich 2010). Comparing distribution of lithic tools and assemblages between the Sudanese lowlands and Ethiopian highlands shows various similarities in knapping strategies and agro-pastoralist practices, which points to a steady flow of migration into Ethiopia from the fifth millennium B.C. (Philipson, L. 2017). Migrations into the Ethiopian highlands from the lowlands are further attested through the trade in obsidian and similarities in the later development of monumental stelae (Philipson, L. 2009, Munro-Hay; 63; Zarins

1988). At Kassala in Southeastern Sudan, about 300 kilometers from Aksum, initial signs of societal complexity in the northwestern Horn of Africa appear in the second millennium B.C. Key features that allow for their identification are the settlement patterns, administrative devices such as clay seals and stamps and standardized features in both pottery and architecture (Fattovich, 1997, 2010).

The first historic sources to mention the development of complex societies in the Horn of Africa, come from the monuments of Egypt and the tombs of the ancient pharaohs. Depictions and reliefs speak of the lands to the south of Egypt following the Nile (Nibbi 1976, 50). From the third millennium B.C. these lands would be referred to as the land of 'PWNT' (Punt); or 'Land of the Gods'. Some discussion exists on the exact geographic reference of Punt, with some arguing for an Arabian context, but Clark (1988) and Munro-Hay (1991, 62) have argued it did apply to the Ethiopian side of the Red Sea, although more to the north of the Tigray plateau. As Phillips suggests, however, on the basis of other Egyptian geographical names, Punt very likely included the Eritrean coastline and later Aksumite region (see fig 2.) (Phillips 1997). Later Greek sources too place the 'incense lands', with which PWNT was associated, firmly on the Ethiopian extremities (Wolska-Conus 1968, 356). Historically, however, both regions have been important producers of incense and PWNT might indeed refer to either or both regions. This observation is furthermore relevant, because it partially explains early commercial and cultural integration of both sides of the Red Sea, as well as mutual recurring strategic interest in controlling both sides of the Red Sea by any regional power, as will become clear throughout this chapter.

The expeditions recorded in these Egyptian sources, the oldest of which we know dating to the reign of Sahure (2743-2731 B.C.), point first and foremost to the early economic integration of Egypt and the Horn of Africa. It is feasible to assume that the expeditions arose from prior productive trading relations, and contacts with the Puntites might go as far back as Egyptian history itself, as the commodities concerned related to vital aspects of Egyptian society. Among these were gold, lapis lazuli, malachite, silver, wild animals, ivory, cinnamon wood, khesit wood, myrrh, resin, frankincense and incense. In particular the latter two goods were considered of great importance to the Egyptians, prominently featuring in the reliefs at Deir el-Bahri and mentioned in every expedition report, as the burning of incense was considered essential for the performance of religious rituals (Sellassie, 1972, 23). It has even been argued that the name PWNT, meaning 'Land of the Gods', is derived from the region's association with this vital supply of religiously used resources to the Egyptians (Munro-Hay 1991, Philips 1997, Sellassie 1972; 17-25).

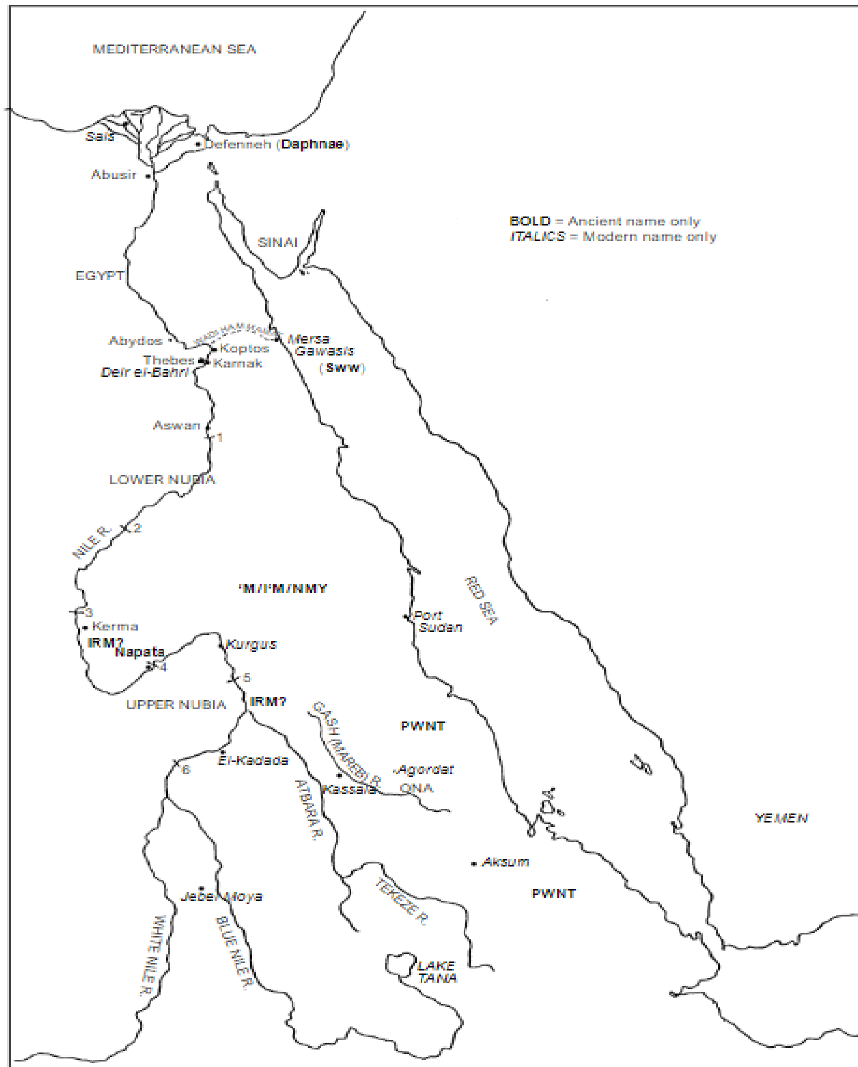


Fig. 2: Map showing the estimated geographic location of 'PWNT' between the Red Sea and Upper Nile Valley (Phillips 1997, 424).

At this stage in time, there is no archaeological evidence to suggest any lasting or somehow centralised authority controlling even partly the Puntite region had developed before the first millennium B.C. Yet, there are clues to suggest that some political organisation and competition did exist, or was caused by the Egyptian demand for goods. Reliefs showing the large-scale expedition to Punt launched by Hatshepsut III (1473-1458 B.C.) at her mortuary temple in Deir el-Bahri identify and even name a Puntite 'king' Perahu and 'queen' Ati. While the scene has sparked some discussion, it seems in line with the nature of Egyptian propaganda to portray powerful foreign rulers, that paid tribute to the Pharaohs (Phillips 1997, 429). Nevertheless, the scene does reflect contemporary developments to some extent.

Around the time of Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt, three main archaeological discernible cultures were established south of Kassala in Sudan that would influence the development of pre-Aksumite culture: the Gash Group along the Gash river; the Jebel Mokram Group, and the Ancient Ona cultures between the Gash river and Eritrean coast. In particular the Gash Group is notable for its erection of

flat stone slabs, pointed monoliths and stone pillars up to 1.1m at Mahal Teglinos understood to be funerary stele. Mahal Teglinos showcases some of the earliest marked funerary practices in the region, which are reminiscent of similar funerary practices at Aksum more than a millennium later. Gash Group settlement patterns, administrative devices, monumentalised graves, evidence of funerary rites and increasingly standardised pottery point to social complexity, with a community controlled by a small group of its members (Fattovich 1993b, Capuano et al 1994).

Despite such developments, archaeological finds are consistent with the interpretation of a society at a chiefdom level of social complexity, with no definitive signs of elaborate societal stratification, and no sign of kingship as reliefs at Hatshepsut's tomb might suggest. What does become evident from this period is that the north-western Horn of Africa was becoming 'an interface' between two trade networks: north-south across the Nile Valley and east-west across the Red Sea. The start of this development might go as far back as the fourth millennium B.C., incorporating both Egyptian and Arabian cultural influences as would become most evident during the Horn's strongly debated 'pre-Aksumite' phase (Fattovich 2012, 3-5; Munro-Hay 1991, 63)

The Pre-Aksumite Phase and The First Polities

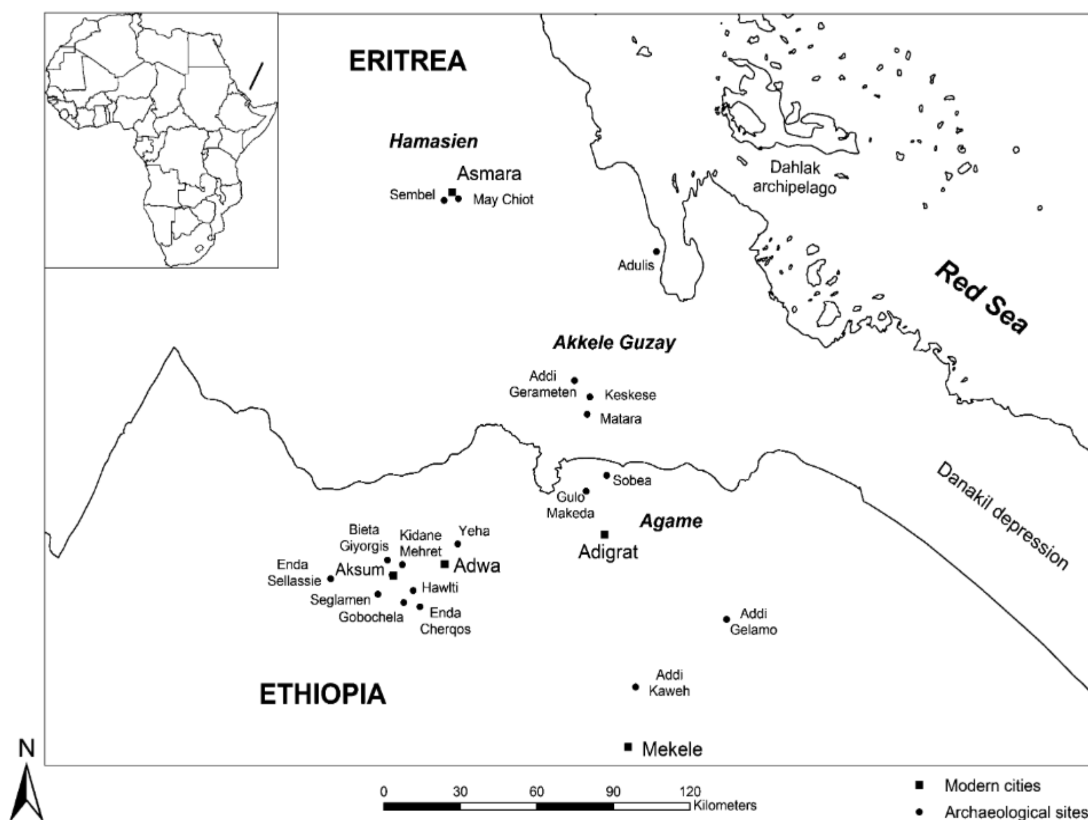


Fig. 4: Map of the Northern Horn pre-Aksumite sites and settlements (Note differences in spelling for Beta Giyorgis, Kaskase and Enda Cerqos.) (Schmidt 2009, 307).

The backdrop of economic development and intensification of trade networks in the Horn of Africa before the first millennium B.C., made the way for the eventual accumulation of regional power and trade control by centralizing political authorities (Sellassie 1972). Though the sites excavated from this

period and the monumentalised temples, tombs and stelae are surprisingly many, the complexity of reconstructing this period is striking (Huntingford 1989).

Fig. 3: Example of a Pre-Aksumite site (likely temple ruins) at little researched Qohaito (Saliko 2015).

From the start of the first millennium B.C. developments can be identified which have led researchers to designate the start of the millennium as the start of a distinct 'pre-Aksumite' phase in the Ethiopian highlands and Eritrean lowlands. As discussed in this chapter's introduction, the usage of the term 'pre-Aksumite' is easily confused by the overlapping development of a 'proto-Aksumite' culture at Beta Giyorgis hill (360 BC – 120/40 BC) immediately to the north of ancient Aksum, which can be understood to be Aksum's direct predecessor (Sulas et al 2009, 4). What constitutes the defining archaeological factor justifying their reference as pre-Aksumite cultures is challenging as well. Using this single denomination for a wide array of archaeological sites over an extended period of time, does in fact do little to recognise the array of cultural influences in the region up to this point (see: Fattovich 2012) Archaeological investigations at later Aksumite sites in the region such as Gula Makeda (D'Andrea et al. 2008), Matara (Anfray 1966, 1974, 2012; Negussie 1994) and Adulis (Paribeni 1907; Anfray 1974; Peacock and Blue 2007; Zazzaro and Manzo 2012), have all shown through ceramic assemblages that regional differences existed in the Aksumite territory from the first millennium B.C. to the first millennium A.D. (Fattovich 2010).

Pre-Aksumite culture(s), however, can be understood as being underlined by a broad cultural framework for a period that is characterised by influences from the Arabian peninsula. Merchants and/or migrants from the kingdom of Saba on the opposite side of the Red Sea expanded their

influence to incorporate the Horn of Africa and even spread as far as the Somalian coast (Prioletta et al 2021). Starting from the first millennium B.C. their purported arrival is attested by an array of changes in the archaeological assemblages and monumental structures that start appearing in the north-western Horn of Africa. These structures exhibit a clear break with previous developments and exert strong south-Arabian architectural and religious influence (Bard et al 1997, Philipson 2012, 17). Furthermore, the region steps into history with the simultaneous adoption of the Sabaean script. Used for dedications and monumental inscriptions, the adoption of the Sabaean writing system is considered one of the most significant achievements characterising pre-Aksumite culture, as well as one of the main arguments supporting the theory that these sudden changes were influenced by migrations from Sabaean Arabia (Mokthar 1991, 193; Fattovich 1990).

Fig. 4: An altar bearing Sabaean inscriptions excavated at pre-Aksumite Melazo (Sellassie 1972, 61).

Munro Hay (1991, 35) and Fattovich (1988) note that the pre-Aksumite cultural area extended from Adulis to the vicinity of Aksum, as evidenced by the 'Sabaean' sites surrounding it, with the Aksum/Yeha region traditionally being identified as the centre of power (Phillipson 2012, Schneider 1973; 389). This is largely because settlements such as Hawlti, Yeha, Matara and Kaskase, host the most prominently Sabaean-influenced monumental structures and inscriptions found (Sellassie 1972, 58-61; Benoist et al 2016, 25). Newly erected monuments here featured typical Southern Arabian architectural designs: Elevated stone platforms, square mudbrick architecture and large pylons lining entryways (Fattovich 1990). A temple, dedicated to the Arabian god Almouqah via inscription, found at Hawlti-Melazo, supports the view of an Arabian cultural presence and possible Arabian migrant contractors or even workers being responsible for its creation (Contenson 1963).

Fig. 5: The great temple of Yeha (Savin n.d.).

The building of monumental temples has become a main argument for Sabaean or Arabian influences, because there are multiple examples within Ethiopia that strongly resemble Arabian counterparts. Perhaps the most significant of these structures is the great temple at Yeha. Built around the seventh century B.C., it is the oldest surviving archaeological structure known in Ethiopia and exemplifies a high degree of skill and craftsmanship (Anfray 1992, 344; Sellassie 1972, 14; Philipson 2000). The structure, which stood at an estimated 14m in height, closely resembles architectural features found in the South-Arabian sanctuaries of Marib (Anfray 1992, 344), as well as those in Saba and Sirweh (Japp et al 2011). A telling signature of Arabian influence in its architecture is the use of smooth bricks for its construction, as well as the six pillared-pylon entrance, of which only the sockets currently remain (see fig. 5 for reconstruction). Its exterior wall contained a double denticular frieze, containing further decorative similarities to structures in Marib and Saba (Japp et al 2011). A second monumental work, erected in timber, is also known from Yeha, which directly resembles a similar structure found in Sirweh, Yemen (Japp et al 2011). Here too was left an inscription dedicating the masonry to the Sabaean gods Attar and Almouqah (Ibid., 211).

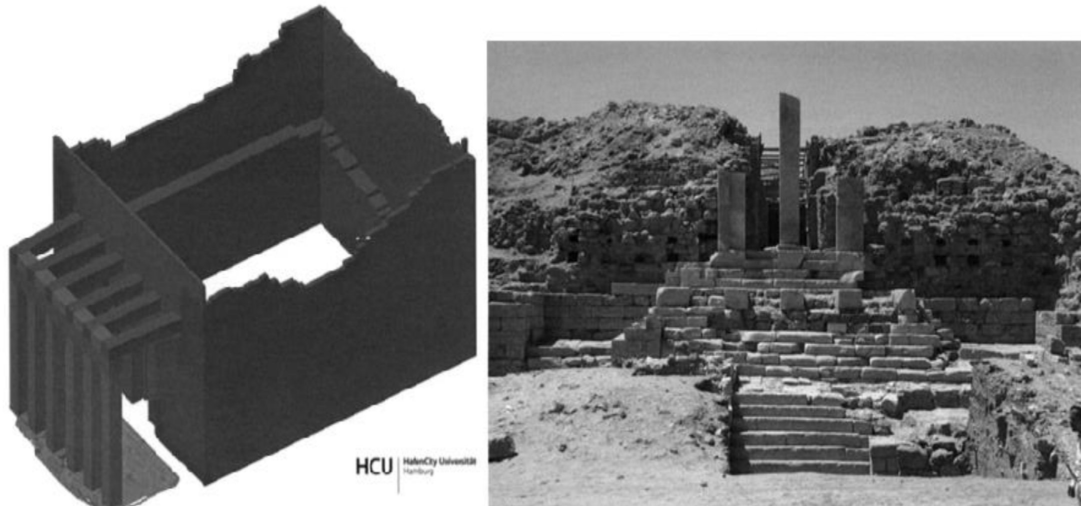


Fig. 6: Reconstruction of the six pillared pylon in front of the entrance at the temple in Yeha (left) and front façade of the five pillared building in Sirweh, Yemen (right) (Japp et al 2011).

Aside from the development of monumental architecture, the pre-Aksumite period is associated with an increase in growing settlement and societal complexity. Though population size likely remained fairly constant, there is evidence for a grade of urbanisation associated with these monumental structures (Bard et al 2000). Some sites, such as Kidana Mohrat, have revealed 'peasant villages' in close vicinity to Sabaean architecture (Phillipson 2000, Contenson 1961, Michels 2005, D'Andrea et al. 2008). At Matara as well, a dense urban sprawl was uncovered as part of a very limited survey covering merely 5 ha (Philipson 2012, 121).

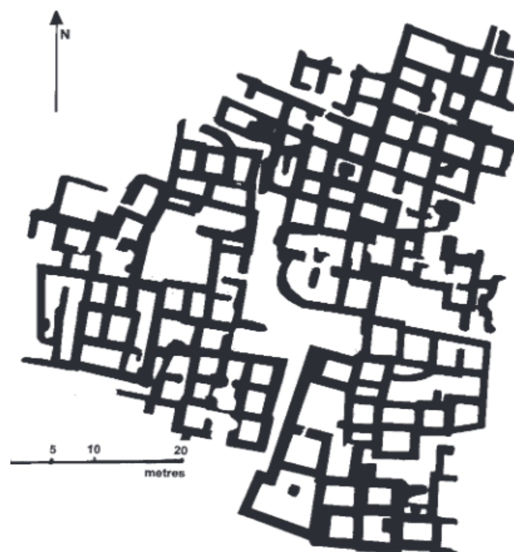


Fig. 7: Plan of dense urban sprawl partly excavated in Matara (Anfray 1974)

The ensuing Sabaean or 'Ethio-Sabaean' cultural period from the turn of the millennium, however, is projected over large parts of the north-western Horn of Africa on the basis of select evidence in elite monumental structures and epigraphy notably restricted in spread and location (Philipson 2012, 22-25). While migrations from South-Arabia are generally accepted to have occurred and influenced local developments, archaeologists have long debated the extent of influence as well as the motives

underlining their movement and the scenarios in which such cultural influence took place. Initially, many researchers concluded a mass-migration or colonisation- style migration theory, which held that the first complex polities to emerge in the North-western Horn were directly caused by Sabaean migrants that founded them (Harrower and D'Andrea, 2014; (Japp et al, 2011). These views were argued to a varying extent of cultural and political influence by some of the most prominent archaeologists studying the region up to the 1960's (Bent 1893, 136-150; Anfray 1967; Conti Rossini 1928; de Contenson 1981; Fattovich, 341), after which viewpoints were being formulated that allowed for more nuance. It has even been proposed the matter of migrations was in fact the other way around, with pre-Aksumite polities influencing Saba instead (Pirenne 1987). Similarly, Joseph Michels noted that it might have been Ethiopian merchants who themselves imported Arabian culture and architectural features (Michels 2005, 13).

Research over the past decades followed this trend and has gradually shifted their focus from Sabaean cultural domination to processes of interaction with pronounced roles for the local elite in selectively adopting new Sabaean cultural elements (Phillips 2004, Curtis 2008, Manzo, 2009, Fattovich 2010). Recent research has emphasised the agency of native populations even more, by arguing for a deliberate strategy by local African elites to appropriate methods of power projection, instead of assuming these influences necessarily point to Arabian (elite) migrants (Harrower and D'Andrea 2014, 517-519).). The onset of the first millennium B.C. is thus often described as having sparked dramatic and sudden changes, but outside of emerging monumental contexts, there is nonetheless clear evidence for the cultural continuation of earlier practices (Pillipson 2012, 17; D'Andrea et al). It would suffice for this research to assume that the regions were part of a shared cultural network of exchange that intensified over time with cultural competition and acculturation marking the archaeological record (Munro-Hay 1991, 66).

Fig. 8: Partial side and front view of the throne of Hawelti (Sellassie 1972, 61) .

Some particular objects from the pre-Aksumite period, as found by the author of this thesis, can also be argued to clearly contest the strict Sabaean view as professed above. Though not usually taken into consideration, these objects clearly argue for more nuanced perceptions. The so-called 'throne of Hawelti' (see fig. 8), after the site of its excavation, is one such example. The throne is not in fact an actual throne, but should rather be interpreted as a niche in which religious objects can be placed for worship. Such a *naos*, featuring identical designs, were frequently used by the Egyptians on their merchant ships (Manzo 2009). Sellassie likewise notes stylistic resemblance to Egyptian counterparts between the engravings on both sides' bas reliefs, while the inscriptions are not in hieroglyphics, but instead use Sabaean script (Sellassie 1972, 33). The throne of Hawelti therefore shows the select adoption of cultural elements within a pre-Aksumite context.

Two similarly interesting objects, an inscribed altar and sphinx, were uncovered by Davico in Eritrea in 1942 (Davico 1946). Using palaeographic dating methods, these objects were estimated to have been made during the 6th or 5th century B.C. (Pirenne 1952). The sphinx design being almost synonymous with ancient Egyptian cultural expressions, the inscriptions on both the sphinx and altar were again in Sabaean. It should be noted, however, that this example of select cultural adoption can be contested, since as Anfray has pointed out, the sphinx also featured in South-Arabian religious expression (Anfray 1965, 10). Nonetheless, these few artefacts outside of the usually referenced monumental context already demonstrate the feasibility of acculturation strategies to at least a certain extent.

The Kingdom of DM'T

In light of all these developments, it is worthwhile to discuss the emergence of a 'first state' in the Horn of Africa. Like all previously described pre-Aksumite developments, this state itself is

traditionally understood to have been a product of Sabaean influences as well, being known exclusively through Sabaean writings associated with aforementioned monumental contexts. This pre-Aksumite society on the Tigrayan plateau, centred on the Aksum/Yeha region, seems to have attained state level around the second half of the first millennium B.C. (Munro-Hay 1991, 63). The onset, longevity and impact of this initial 'state' has been contested. Some scholars favouring a reign of a 150 years between the 8th and 6th centuries, while some date its downfall a whole two centuries later (Benoist et al 2016, 25-26). The direct evidence supporting its existence is mostly epigraphic. Excavations at or surrounding Yeha, Melazo and Hawlti, mostly in the vicinity of monumental structures, have yielded inscriptions referencing a 'kingdom' called 'DM'T' (daamat or damot). Dating of these inscriptions is uncertain, with some arguing for an early date around the 7th century B.C. (Drewes 1959, 84), while others propose a later 5th century (Pirenne 1955, 141). Sites associated with DM'T through either architectural developments or inscriptions are: Yeha, Kaskasse, Abba Pentelewon, Enda Cerqos, Matara and Melazo. The monumental developments at Yeha, about 50 km west of Aksum, make many scholars assume that this was likely a political capital (Anfray 1990, 17–63; Bard et al 1997, 2000; Fattovich 1990b, 2012; Finneran 2007, 109–146; Phillipson 2009b, 2012, 19–41; Sellassie 1972, 58-60).

Fig. 9: Statue of a seated woman on an inscribed podium, mentioning DM'T in Sabaean (Welegebriel Asfaw 2019, 133)

A general lack of data on this period has led, and still leads, to many claims regarding this proposed state entity's geography, political structure and organisation, and has allowed researchers to both overstate and downplay the possible connection of DM'T to later political developments in the region (Philipson 2009, 263). While this view is no longer in fashion, the kingdom of DM'T has in some more dated views been proposed as the direct political precursor to the later Aksumite state, given its centre of power lay close to the Aksumite plain and some chronologies of DM'T overlap with earliest

datings of Aksum (Cerulli 1960; Conti Rossini 1928, 109–110; Ullendorff 1973). When it comes to DM'T's relation to the development of an Aksumite state, however, nothing can be claimed or refuted with any degree of certainty. Downplaying the probable extent to which DM'T was an actual and influential state entity is nonetheless becoming an increasingly tenuous position to argue, as new finds attesting to its existence continue to be discovered. As recently as 2016 a new pre-Aksumite site at Adi Akawh, just outside Wukro, was discovered with finds of monumentalised inscriptions referencing the kingdom of DM'T (Welegebriel Asfaw 2019).

While undeniably fascinating and tantalizing, it is unlikely that DM'T was directly related to the development of an Aksumite state. On the contrary. Yeha continued to be a major ceremonial centre in the late pre-Aksumite period, but the gradual appearance of monumental buildings and an elite cemetery at Beta Giyorgis has led Kathryn Bard to argued that the development of proto-Aksumite culture there has a relation to DM'T's demise (Bard et al 2000). DM'T does however illustrate very well how more politically sophisticated and competitive the northwestern Horn of Africa had become during the first millennium B.C. As will be argued here, however, it is likely that the development of Aksum emanated from a different cultural origin from distinct developments at Beta Giyorgis.

The Rise of Aksum, City of Monuments

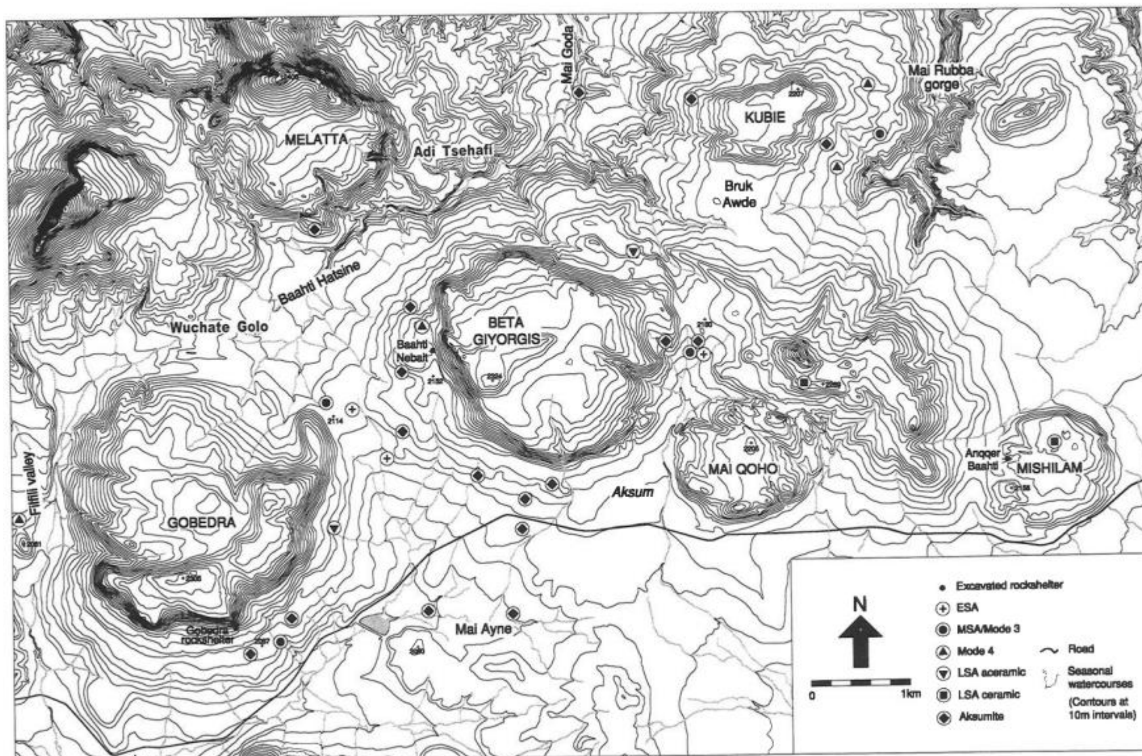


Fig. 10: Map showing the Aksumite plain, Beta Giyorgis hill and surroundings (Phillipson 2000).

Aksum: pre- or proto-Aksumite?

Answering the question of why Aksum was founded and how it developed to become the capital of a kingdom extending throughout the north-western Horn, has proven the most difficult aspect of reconstructing its history, exemplified by the wide range of very different theories and understandings.

No clear view on the motivation for its founding has been proposed as of yet, since the material culture found at Aksum has mainly been used to describe its cultural, not political development (Fattovich 2019). As mentioned, DM'T and its associated pre-Aksumite settlements have been argued to be predecessors to the Aksumite state, which would eventually consolidate its power in Aksum proper. As attested, no direct evidence currently supports this theory (D'Andrea et al 2008), and, as will be detailed below, distinct ideological patterns further make this unlikely. Nonetheless the seemingly sudden founding of Aksum can only be understood as connected to a period of long-term development, and seems to fit into intensification of trade networks, development of complex polities and cultural interconnectedness in the region. Most archaeological evidence seems to suggest that Aksum developed at the same time as the Aksumite state fully emerged, thus pointing to an earlier polity being directly responsible for its deliberate founding as a new, monumentalised capital. The founding of Aksum has thus been directly related to both the proto-Aksumite period at Beta Giyorgis and the development of pre-Aksumite state entities, such as DM'T. Some studies have sought to incorporate more rural contexts in the understanding of the development of an Aksumite polity, but current interpretations of Aksumite origins are mostly focussed on the urban centres at Aksum itself and Yeha, which boast the most monumentalised contexts (D'Andrea et al 2008).

There are no particularly useful historical accounts relating to the founding of the city, as virtually all of them are legendary or ecclesiastical accounts written centuries after Aksum had declined (Sellassie 1972, Munro-Hay 1991). Munro-Hay seems mostly to have argued for Aksum as a political and military power and people, namely the Agaze, who gradually managed to control the largest part of Ethiopia, Eritrea and even Yemen by subordinating local chiefs or kings through a tributary system. The existence of such local lords holding a certain amount of autonomy is evidenced in Aksumite historical sources, mostly boastful kings listing their fiefs, and official sources mentioning rebellions in such territories (Munro-Hay 1991, 33-37; Sellassie 1972). Aside from rare inscriptions suggesting campaigns or a treaty system, there's not much evidence to suggest Aksum was particularly military-minded, and the main clues for Aksumite regional hegemony are the spread of inscriptions and its typical architecture and funerary monuments (Fattovich 2019).

The earliest evidence of archaeological developments which shows direct precedent to the development of Aksum, appears at Beta Giyorgis, the hill to its north, around 400 B.C. Although this site had been occupied in the first millennium B.C. during its pre-Aksumite phase, there is no indication it was inhabited before that (Fattovich and Bard, 1997). On this elevated plateau, recent excavations have studied the settlement at Ona Nagast (ON) with its related cemetery at Ona Enda Aboi Zegwé (OAZ) c. 500m apart (see fig. 10) (Bard et al 1997). Excavations at the cemetery yielded a sizeable stone platform dated to the proto-Aksumite period, featuring numerous rock hewn stelae up to 8 metres in height, possibly up to 300 total. The excavation further found several rock-cut tombs, with some of the later ones featuring multiple underground chambers (Bard et al 1997, 2014). The

massive platform, as well as the large number of similarly designed stelae suggests a central authority that could direct such labour, as well as a hierarchy with social elite for whom elaborate funerary monuments would be built. This is further emphasized by the excavation of certain devices which point to the practice of centralised administration, such as stamps, seals and tokens (Fattovich 2010).

The excavated stelae in particular resemble practices which can be understood to be direct precursors to the practices found in Aksumite times (Bard et al 1997). Crucially, this style of funerary and religious architecture implies an ideological break between the main identifiers of pre- and proto-Aksumite cultures. As Rodolfo Fattovich explained, proto-Aksumite culture at Beta Giyorgis put architectural emphasis "on platforms with stelae and pit graves for the funerary cult of the elite rather than on monumental cult temples of the gods", which are found at typical pre-Aksumite sites such as Yeha (Fattovich et al 2000). Further demonstrating this, is the observation that the Sabaean temples of the first millennium B.C. would steadily be replaced by the emergent stelae culture of the (proto-)Aksumites at the end of the first millennium B.C., suggesting a distinct and dominant Aksumite culture emerging (Fattovich and Bard 1994). The stelae found at Beta Giyorgis feature strong commonalities with the stelae at Kassala in the lowlands of the Atbara Valley (Fattovich 1989a). This might hint at cultural connections or migrations from the Sudanese-Eritrean lowlands to the Ethiopian highlands, causing a cultural influx that would challenge pre-Aksumite cultures.

Fig. 11: Ruins of large structure at Beta Giyorgis, resembling palace architecture at Aksum (Gebeyaw 2019)

The suggested 'ideological break' is furthermore attested in the ceramic assemblages which shifted from Sabaean pre-Aksumite cultures to distinct proto-Aksumite wares after the 4th century B.C (Fattovich and Bard 1997, 4-5; Bard et al. 2002; Fattovich 1987). These are distinguished by red-

orange ware, black-topped ware, red-slip ware, dark red slip ware, black polished ware, cream ware and brown ware (Bard et al 2000, 2014).

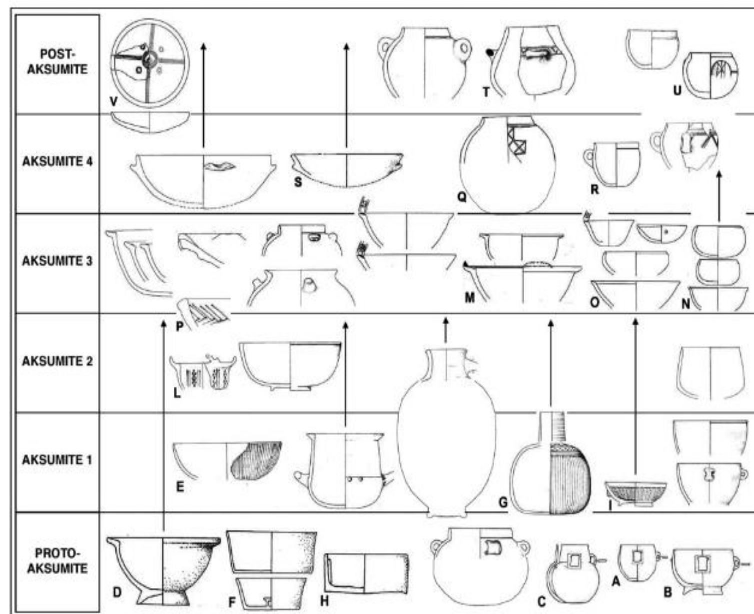


Fig. 12: Ceramic sequence as based on excavations at Beta Giyorgis, showcasing development and continuation from proto- to post- Aksumite times (Bard et al 2014, 293).

The Rise of Aksum

Besides Aksum's cultural-political origins, there are likewise a multitude of interesting theories to explain its subsequent success, given the particular location where it was founded in the seemingly remote highlands. Researchers have proposed several resource-based explanations to explain Aksum's site-location and success. Gold deposits may have been one of the reasons for rapid population growth and development of Aksum during the first century B.C. Several archaeological structures have been identified as tools of ore-processing, and the presence of gold in Aksum is well attested in archaeological and historical data (Philipson, L. 2006; 33-34; Sernicola and Philipson 2011, 191). The presence of gold around Aksum is evidenced from early Egyptian sources to those of later Portuguese explorers such as 16th century ambassador and explorer Francisco Alvarez:

> 'Further, there (is a store of) three precious things, which are gold, silver, and precious stones. And there are those who say that (once) at Aksum it rained gold and precious stones and silver for eight days and eight nights.' (Beckingham 1961, 523).

Another theory would suggest its proximity to a wide arrange of water sources, exposure to regular rainfall and access to river ways made Aksum an attractive location to exercise control over them. At Aksum, two large basins exist which have been dug to catch rainwater. The importance of these basins Mai Shum and Mai Qoho are emphasized by their monumentalisation; both featuring elaborate staircases built into the slopes leading up to them. In the early twentieth century they were still used by locals (Philipson 1997, 156). Indeed, the name 'Aksum' itself is possibly derived from a combination of the Cushitic word *ak* and the Semitic *shum*, meaning so much as 'Chieftain's Water', possibly

relating its initial political power over these artificial springs and other water supplies (Munro-Hay 1991, 104; Philipson 1997). Notably, such theories counter traditional notions of state development as related to irrigation systems and agricultural surplus, but would explain why no traces of such systems have been found around Aksum (Harrower and D'Andrea 2014, 515; Sulas, Madella and French 2009).

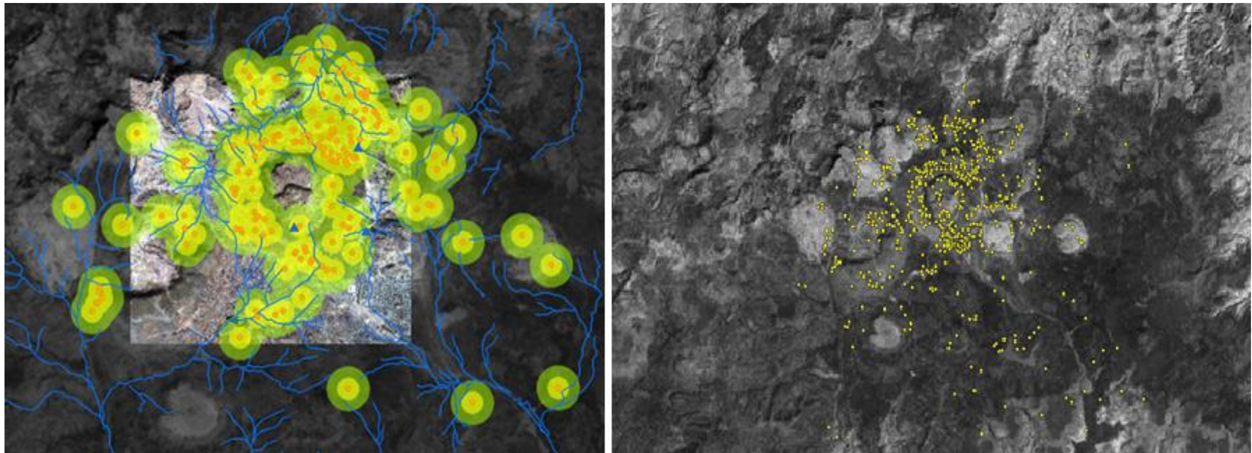


Fig. 13: Relation of archaeological sites to water bodies, ranging from hamlets to large villages, surrounding Aksum. The archaeological map of the area of Aksum (scale 1:50,000). (L'Orientale n.d.)

While these theories offer great insight into Aksum's early development, the most probable factor relating to its founding, as well as the earlier settlement at Beta Giyorgis, is their combination, underlined by Aksum's incredibly beneficial relation to trade on both small and large scales of connectivity. Although the site itself was situated quite distant from the Red Sea, as shown in fig. 26, Aksum lies at the hub of a network of rivers that facilitated transport and communication in virtually all directions (Sernicola and Philipson, 192). It was perfectly positioned to exploit the inland trading routes to the south/south-west, those leading to the Sudanese lowlands and Nile Valley further north-west, and the routes leading to the East African coast (Munro-Hay 1991, 33). From its position, it was also able to exercise control over supplies of ivory from more inland African sources, which we know from historical accounts became one of its main export products (Philipson 2000, 53). Increased demand and the possibility to control such luxury goods, may have been the reason why Beta Giyorgis was settled more inland around the 4th century B.C. Starting from the mid-first millennium BC, the region was increasingly directly involved in an exchange circuit that included the northern Horn of Africa, the Nile Valley, the Mediterranean, southern Arabia, and, by the first/second centuries AD, the western coastal regions of India. The prominent role the proto-Aksumite polity came to play in multi-regional long-distance exchange, would eventually allow it to exert and consolidate its economic and political leadership over the Tigrayan plateau and beyond, leading to the eventual foundation of a monumentalised political capital at the foot of Beta Giyorgis hill. From the 1st century B.C./ first century A.D., a settlement begins to develop at Aksum proper (Sernicola and Philipson 2011, Munro Hay 1991).

City of Monuments

The city that developed in the Ethiopian highlands, as will be shown, can rightly be called a city of monuments. A city of kings. Many questions remain, however, on the residential nature of Aksum and the degree to which it became an urban centre. Looking at settlement patterns and data for the wider region, what is evident is that the development of Aksum is associated with steady population growth in the first centuries A.D. Aksum itself quickly growing into the region's largest settlement (Bard et al 2000). Any meaningful conclusion as to the question of Aksumite urbanism outside of its monumental context, however, is severely hampered by the lack of data through excavation (Philipson 2012; 121). Other Aksumite sites, such as Wakarida and Matara, have yielded intriguing examples of urban infrastructure, such as what appears to be an underground drainage channel (Gajda et al 2015, 184). At Aksum, however, there is little to no evidence for urban housing, as these structures were likely not made of stone (Philipson 2000; 57). From the Egyptian records and depictions to the medieval chronicles of Ethiopia's kings, even photographs by the Deutsche Aksum Expedition (DAE) of 1906, domestic housing in the highland region seemed to have consisted overwhelmingly of wooden huts. These structures would have been made mostly of materials that are not preserved in the highland climate. The exact manner of urban housing and the size of the Aksumite settlement, therefore, remains a matter of debate, and its impressive monuments remain the focus of study.

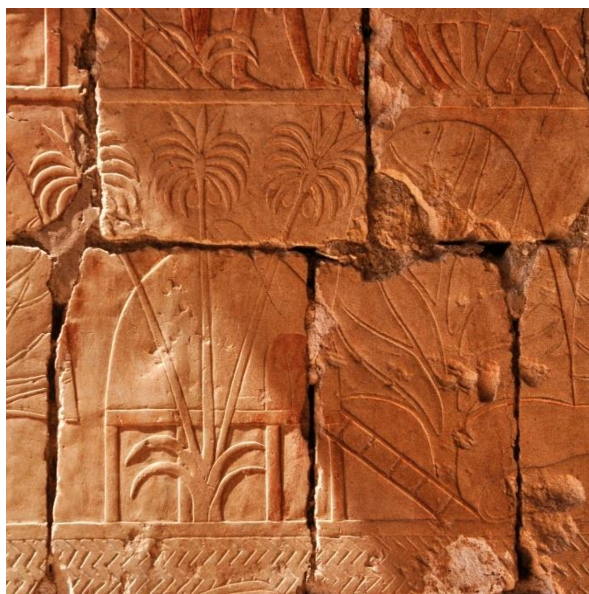


Fig. 14: Egyptian relief showing traditional hut domestic structure from the Land of PWNT (Bernhard 1976).

The same goes for Aksum's estimated population size, although some observations can be made. According to several estimates, the ancient city likely comprised anywhere between 70 to 110 hectares, included substantial areas reserved for elite residences and funerary monuments (Philipson 2000, 57). Though survey data done in 2005 by Michels has suggested a total population of 45.000 inhabitants, these findings have been challenged as serious under-estimates by more recent surveys (L. Phillipson 2009b). When comparing data and structural evidence from Aksum with contemporary settlements in the wider region, the term metropolis seems more appropriate than city. Aksum seems

to have been a political religious and commercial centre, focussed on elite residency and funerary monuments, but not necessarily an urban one (Hagos 2010; Philipson 2000, 61).

There is furthermore no clear evidence pertaining to any defensive structures, such as walls or guard towers surrounding the Aksumite city or other settlements (Munro-Hay 1991; 107, Philipson 2000), although some recently observed (and largely destroyed) structures have been noted by Tekle Hagos (2010). Kobischanov too, made mention of walls. These were not for defence purposes, however, but rather served as outer walls typical of large structures demarcating its territory (Kobischanov 1979; Munro-Hay 1991, 107).

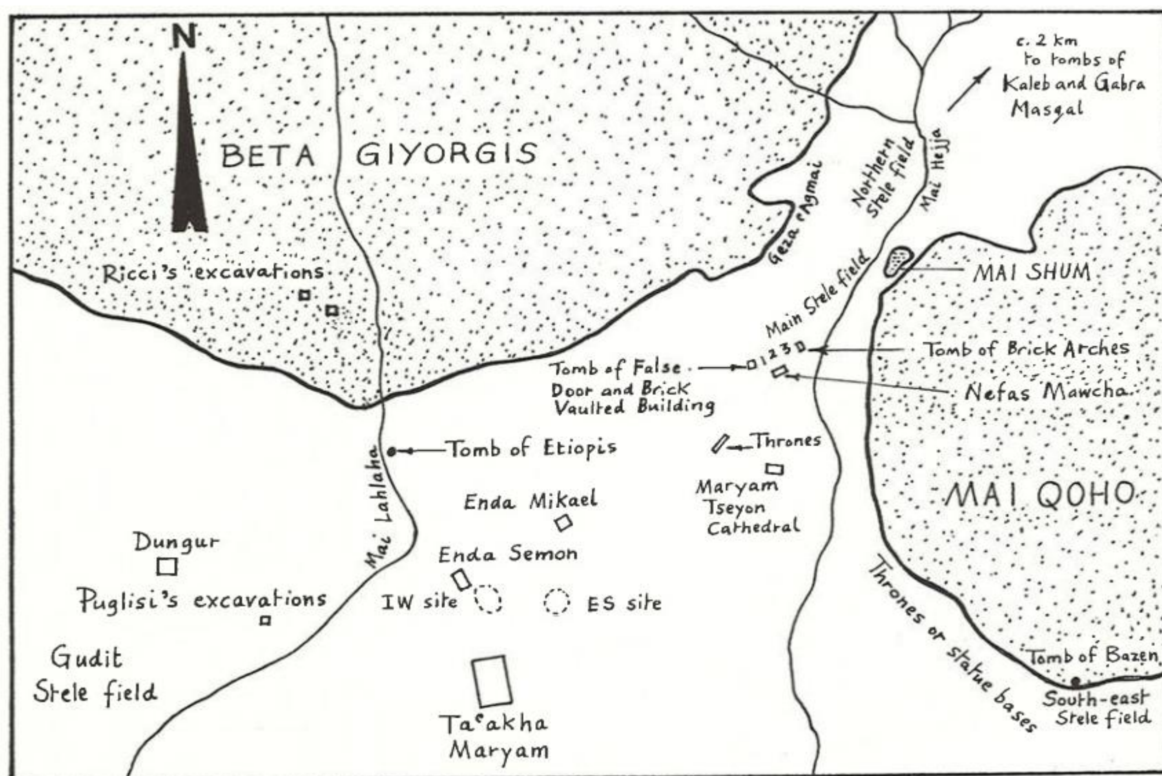


Fig. 15: Map showing the main Aksumite sites within Aksum and its immediate vicinity (Munro-Hay 1991)

Palaces of Aksum

When it comes to large scale elite structures, however, Aksum is laden with impressive examples. Including: palaces, underground tomb complexes, massive stelae fields and large statues. Perhaps the most striking of these structures must have been the many palaces that are found across Aksum. Several of such elite structures have been found to the southwest of the main stele field and to the extreme west of Aksum and excavated during the DAE. Most of the palaces that were excavated then are currently invisible or destroyed due to later construction or developments (Philipson 1997, 93). Attempts at reconstructing Aksumite palace structures, such as Dungur, Enda Mikael and Enda Semon have been attempted by Matthews and Buxton, as largely based on excavated foundations of similar structures already uncovered in 1906 by the DAE (Matthews and Buxton 1971). These large structures are deemed to have been built in a relatively late phase of Aksum's development, only from the late third to sixth centuries (Munro-Hay 1989, 158). Nothing is clear about the resident or related functions

of these structures. Anfray, however, has suggested that the westernmost palace at Dungur presents us with the administrative infrastructure of Aksumite kings, from which its dominion was most likely ruled for a period of time (Anfray 2012).

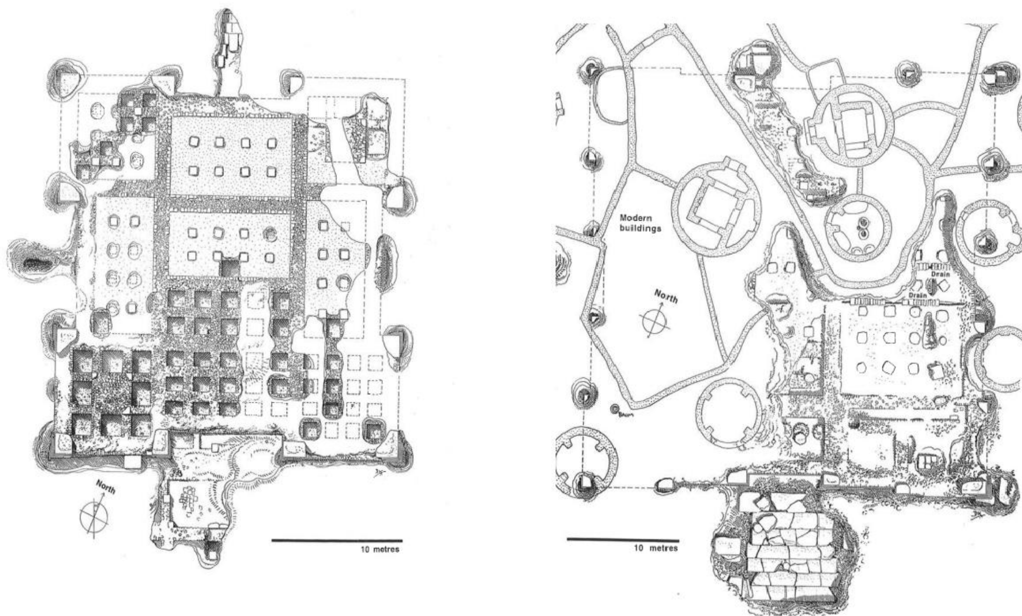


Fig. 16: Plan of the Enda Mikael (left) and Enda Semon palace foundations as recorded by DAE. (Philipson 1997; 95, 100)

Though virtually no above ground remnants of the palaces remain, some general features in architectural style can be distinguished that are visible in large structures throughout Aksumite settlements (Gajda et al 2015). The stone structures are found to have been of a rectangular shape, often with an open space or courtyard at their centre. They were multi- storeyed, featuring pillars and a prevalent mode of construction using wooden beams (see fig. 21) (Philipson 2003, 7-8). Typical of Aksumite architecture were massive ashlar and granite blocks used for the structural foundations and as cornerstones, mud-mortared stone walls, and towers on each of its corners (Munro-Hay 1989, 162). Aside from archaeological evidence for this structural lay-out of the Aksumite palaces, one historic description of Aksum's 'four-towered palace of the king of Ethiopia' by sixth century writer Cosmas Indicopleustes remains (Wolska-Conus 1968).

Prestigious buildings at Aksum are often found to have been built on a high foundation, plinth, or large stone base and platforms, surrounded by large monumentalised staircase leading up to the entrances. This is virtually always what currently remains of the palaces (Munro-Hay 1991, 118; Philipson 1997, 2012, 124). The roofs of these palaces were likely covered using straw and branches, as evidenced by fragments of pottery house models found during BIEA excavations (see fig. 17). It seems this was done to substitute the brick and mortar method otherwise used, since these would have disintegrated over time due to periodic rainfall. That this consideration guided structural design choices is further attested by construction methods of the palace walls visible in their remains. Each

succeeding storey was made thinner, as to create a small incline in the outer walls that would make water flow downwards (Munro-Hay 1989, Anfray 1972).

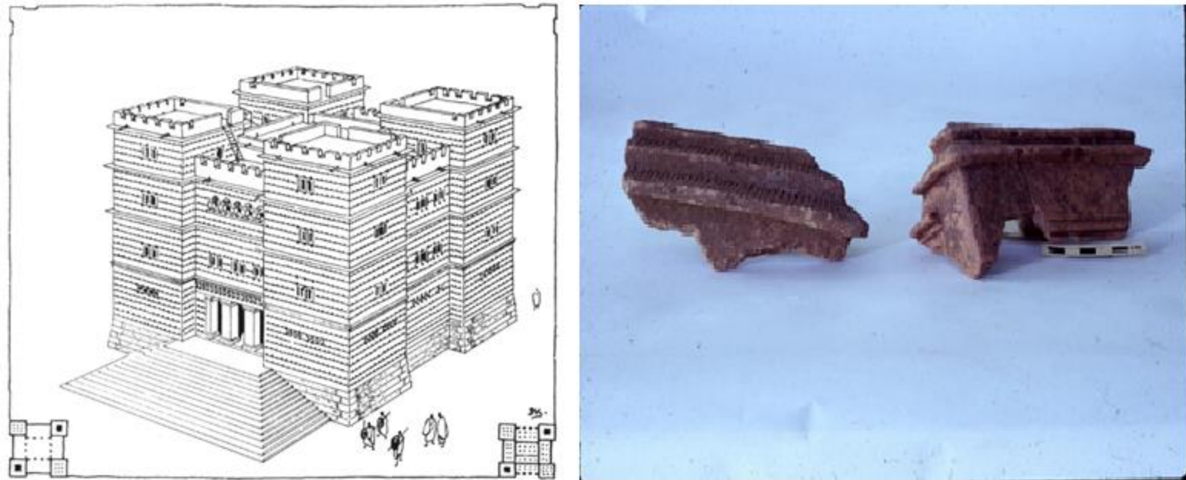


Fig. 17: Reconstruction of palace as based on Ende Mikael reconstruction by Krencker (Buxton and Matthews 1971, 56). The roof design, however, is improbable, as shown by ceramic reproductions of Aksumite structures (JSTOR 1997). [1]

Clearly, the Ta'akha Maryam palace was the largest building of Aksum. Excavated in the south-western outskirts of the city, it measured 80 by 120 meters and was multi-storeyed using the same described building techniques as the Ende Mikael and Enda Semon. It boasted monumentalised staircases and pillars to decorate its several entrances (Philipson 2003, 7-8). Separating the structure from other known palaces in Aksum, however, is the large open courtyards featured in its design (see fig. 18). The outline of the structure was made clearly visible by the DAE, exposing large elevated platforms, staircases and granite blocks shaping the foundation of the structure. Moreover, the rooms facing the courtyard areas were lined with columns placed on bases featuring a 'stepped' design. Many of these bases were still found *in situ*, revealing the massive scale and level of decoration of the palace (Philipson 1997, 109-117).

[1] JSTOR 1997 refers to the Axum Archive hosted on JSTOR, with the most recent material dating to 1997. See bibliography for full entry and database referal.

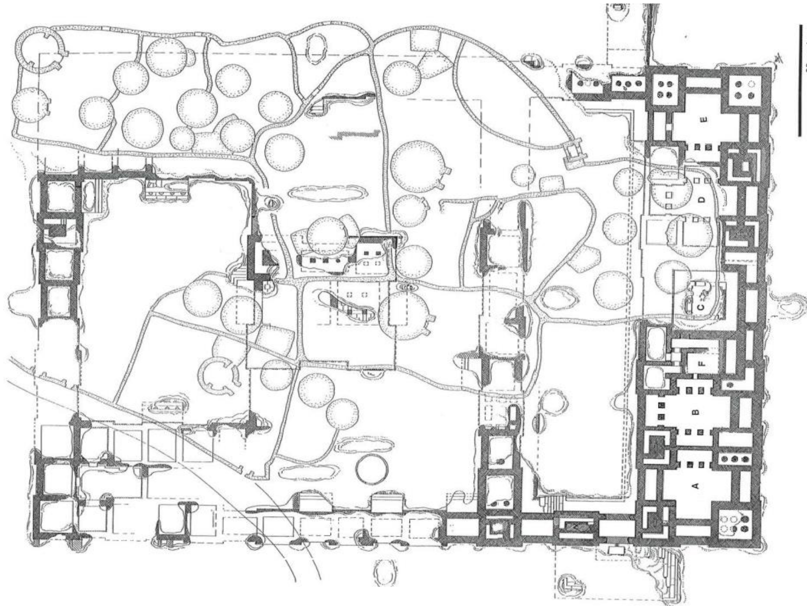


Fig. 18: Plan of the palace ruins of Ta'aka Maryam, excavated by the DAE in 1906 (Philipson 1997, 106-107).

Aside from the sample of described monumental structures, it is clear that more palace-like structures (albeit with different functions) existed, and many original buildings have been dismantled, repurposed or integrated in later developments. The current Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion, for instance is believed to be the site for a much older church built by Ezana in the fourth century A.D., of which the original structures' remains are still clearly visible. The church sits on an elevated plateau with a monumentalised staircase, clearly resembling the elevated plateaus found in other monumental structures from the Aksumite period. The church further contains a number of decorative elements of previous Aksumite structures, repurposed as building blocks (see fig. 19) (Philipson 1997, 123-125).

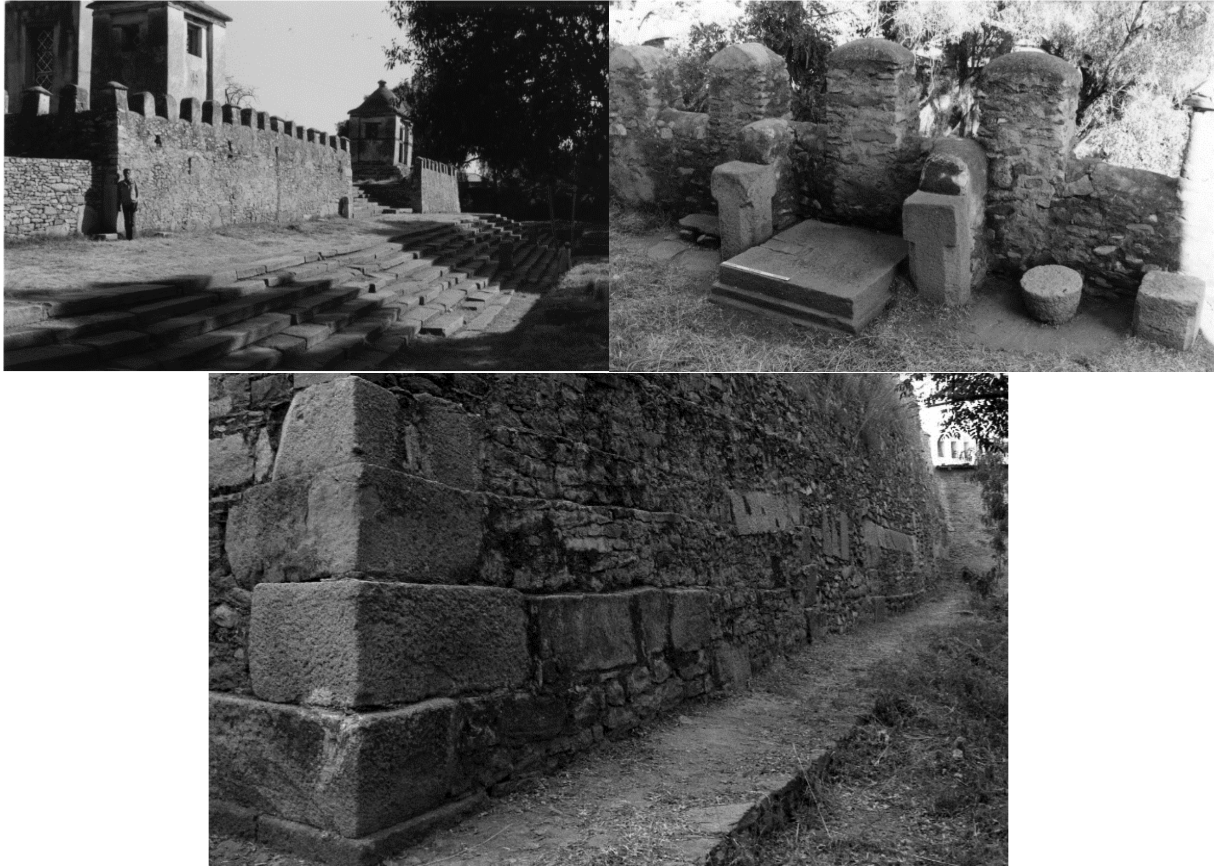


Fig. 19: Monumentalised Aksumite staircase (left), stone base and pillars (right) and large blocks on the podium corner (bottom) appropriated by the 17th century Cathedral (JSTOR 1997).

The stelae of Aksum

The towering stelae of Aksum are perhaps its most famous and iconic monuments, being the product of centuries-long cultural developments that are visible in the highland landscape from pre-Aksumite times up to the development of the main stelae field in Aksum's ancient centre (Munro-Hay 1989, 1991; 134-142). Four main stelae sites can be discerned in and around ancient Aksum: the main stelae field, the northern stelae field, the south-east stelae field and the Gudit stelae field (see fig. 15).The dates for the erection of the stelae in the prominent main stelae field, ranges from the first to fourth centuries A.D. (Munro-Hay 1989, 150-152, 158).

The production, quarrying and the logistics involved in creating and placing the stelae in Aksum serve as an excellent example showcasing Aksumite organisational capacity, as the monoliths from which the stelae were hewn were quarried from Wuchate Golo, several kilometres to the west of the city, and dragged into the centre where they were manufactured into stylised monuments from a single stone (Philipson 2000, 254). The very largest stele at Aksum, stele 1, is viewed to be the epitome of the stele building tradition in ancient Aksum, yet it probably never stood upright. At 33m tall, it is assumed that its installation was mismanaged, which made it collapse instantly. Its remains decorating the main stele field to this day, its broken ruins lay as they fell and mark the end of massive stelae erection at Aksum. All in all, some 140 stelae have been found and excavated at or directly around Aksum (Philipson 1994).

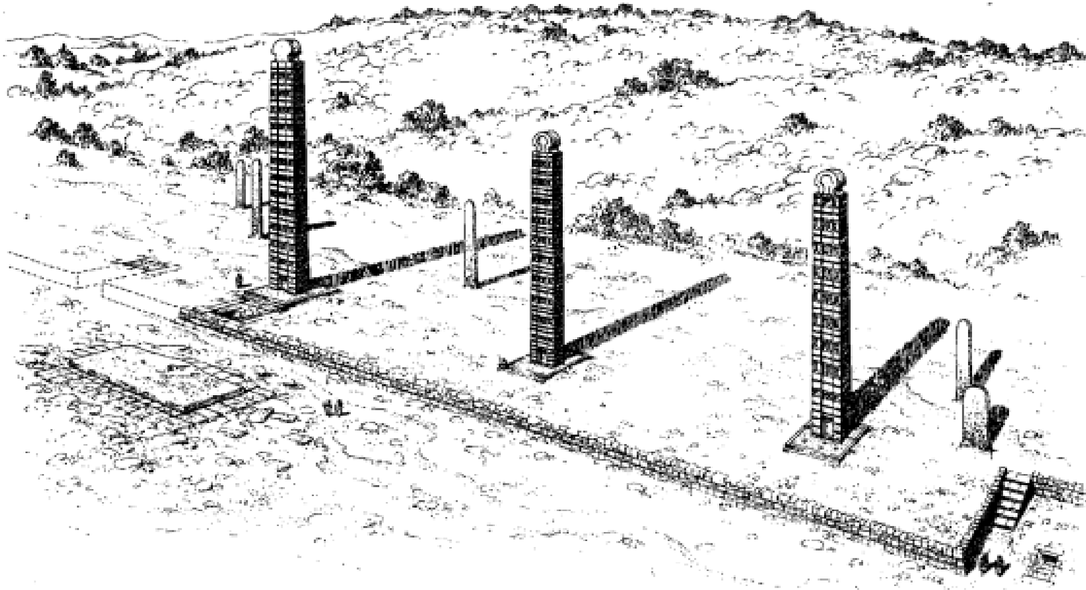


Fig. 20: Drawing reconstructing the original position of stele 1, 2 and 3 in the main stelae field. Nefas Mawcha can be seen in front of stele 1 (left) (Philipson 1995).

The stelae of the main stelae field in Aksum's centre, served mainly to mark the tombs found directly underneath or around them. A tradition which has been observed at proto-Aksumite Beta Giyorgis as well. Interestingly, the main stelae field seems to have already been used prior to the erection of stelae there. In fact the massive raised platform on which the lined stelae still stand, was probably made in earlier times, even resembling similarly built platforms found at Ona Nagast on Beta Giyorgis hill (Philipson 1994, Munro-Hay 1989, 152). Excavations by Chittick in 1974 and observations by Anfray in that same year, have made it likely that 'lesser' stelae in Aksum or Aksumite sites might have belonged to non-royal, yet affluent Aksumites. The main stelae field in the centre of Aksum, however, was clearly reserved for its rulers, and is likewise the site of some of the most elaborate tombs excavated at Aksum, such as the Tomb of the False Door. Most of which are now covered by more recent building developments (Philipson 2012, 149).

By the time Aksum's largest stelae were erected, a clear religious function was probably associated with them. By the fourth century AD, several main design characteristics point to an established religious significance. Munro-Hay has noted that many of the base plates of the stelae have carved 'cups' in them, which he compared to the Greek kylix, a decorated bowl in which sacrificial wine could be ceremonially poured (Munro-Hay 1989, 1991, 137-139). Other stelae bear evidence of religious symbols or markings. For instance, the stele at Matara is decorated with the sun and crescent, which have deep religious connotations (Ullendorf 1951). It has also been noted, on account of their shape, that the holes at the top of many stelae might have been later additions to Christianise the otherwise pagan monuments towering above the metropolis, by attaching a cross to the top (van Beek 1967). This would suggest that religious connotation of the stelae would have naturally evolved over time as the Aksumites converted to Christianity.

Although no definitive proof can be given, it has sometimes been assumed that typical stelae designs found at Aksum mimic the prevalent multi-story designs as featured in the palace architecture. They can in fact be regarded as imitations of the characteristic timber wall techniques often found in Aksumite architecture. Using this technique, the end of the wooden beams supporting the walls and window frames would have stuck out of the exterior wall; decorative elements clearly visible in the stelae, that serve no other function than added visualization (see fig x). The stele would probably resemble the tower-like structures on each end of the palace structures and even show false windows and a false door at its base (Philipson 2012, 143; Buxton and Matthews 1974, 56).

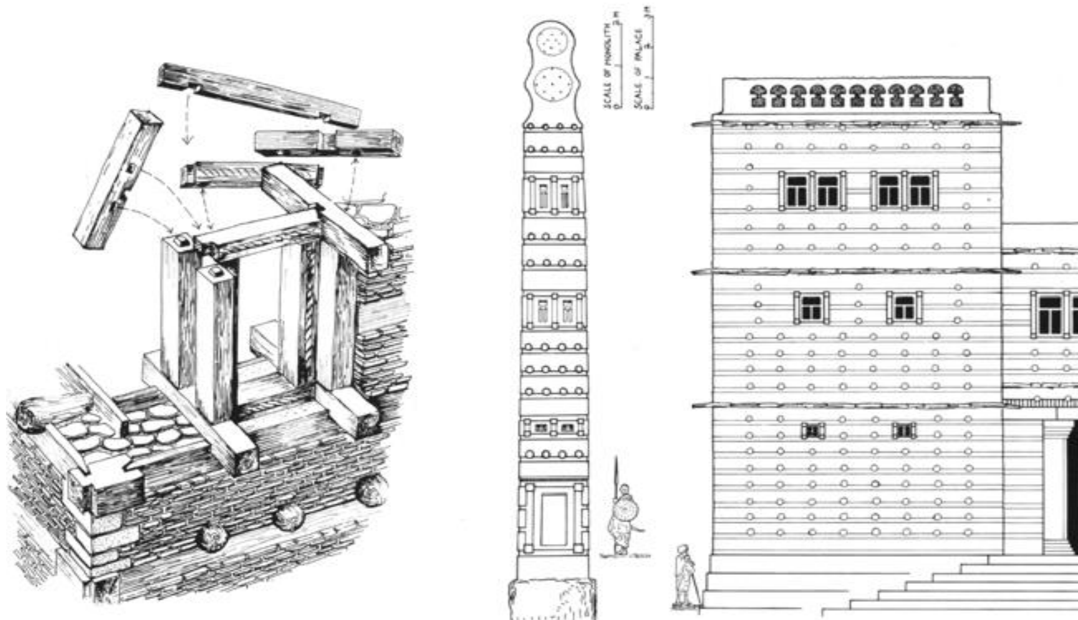


Fig. 21: Reconstruction of ancient Aksumite wall-building techniques, including a window frame (left) . Reconstruction of palace façade as based on Ende Mikael reconstruction by Krencker (right) (Buxton and Matthews 1971, 56).

As has been observed above regarding the adaptability of symbolism in stelae design to incorporate contemporary religious beliefs, so too could other design choices in the stelae reflect popular or personal preferences of the time. This pragmatic attitude to stelae design has made for a wide variety of stelae shapes, designs and sizes throughout the Aksumite territories. And though the Aksumite stelae are clearly associated with tombs and burial sites, functionality could likewise be as diverse. Kosmas Indikopleustes, a 6th century Byzantine ambassador to Aksum, for instance, recorded an intriguing description of a stele at Adulis which seemingly served to display an inscription:

> ‘[…]behind this throne stood another basalt stone monument, about three cubits high and square in shape, a sort of stele whose summit, ending in the center in a point and dropping slightly on each side, is in the image of the letter lambda, but the whole is square. Now crumbled, this stele lies behind the throne, its lower part broken and lost; the whole monument and the throne are covered with Greek characters.’ (Wolska-Conus 1968, 364-366).

When Kosmas visited Adulis the stele was already broken, but he was still able to comment on Greek characters and inscriptions which decorated the rather small monument. The choice to incorporate Greek influences in stelae are known from other finds and comes in multiple forms. From the Greek characters noted by Kosmas, to 'stele 7' at Aksum, which actually shows an Ionic capital. Rather than portraying Greek influence, this example of stelae design variety instead showcases the remarkable flexibility of Aksum's stelae building tradition. Besides his mention of Greek characters, the description by Kosmas is also interesting for its mention of a 'throne' which stood in front of the stele. The remnants of similar throne-like structures pose an equally interesting, yet poorly understood, phenomenon of striking monumentality all throughout Aksum and its kingdom.

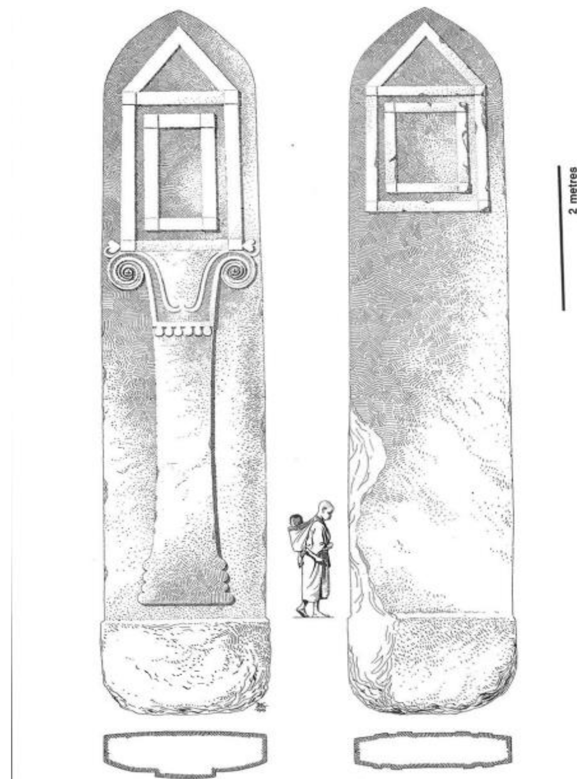


Fig. 22: Stele 7 showing Greek-influenced Ionic capital (Philipson 1997)

Thrones

One of the most intriguing remnants found at Aksum are the many ruined inscribed 'thrones', highly decorative monuments commemorating the deeds and exploits of Aksum's many kings. What now often remains is the base on which these would have stood, recognisable by the fitted sockets in which stones could be fit, comparable to bases of stelae. The monuments would largely have consisted of three stone slabs fitted on an elevated surface with grooves precisely cut to the size of the sides and back. This becomes apparent from the peculiar stones which still can be found in rows at Aksum.

Fig. 23: Pictures of the throne bases at Aksum, still scattered throughout the city (Phillipson 1995).

The thrones can vary in design, with some thrones apparently offering dual seats; others being surrounded by sockets used for pillars, as well as clear differences in size. Some of these thrones have their elevated foundations largely intact, and their symbolic meaning becomes tangible through the locations they are found in. The so called 'Bishop' and 'King's' throne for instance, are placed opposite to the 17th century Church of our Lady Mary of Zion (Philipson 1997, 123-125). There were originally ten of these throne bases identified by the DAE (Ibid., 2), yet they can be found all across Aksum's major archaeological sites and along the main roads connecting them. It is evident, that not all remaining throne bases remain *in situ* (Ibid., 123-125). Some decorated elements of thrones, such as the top part of the throne-back, have been found used as *spoilia* featuring in later structures, such as the aforementioned church (Ibid.).

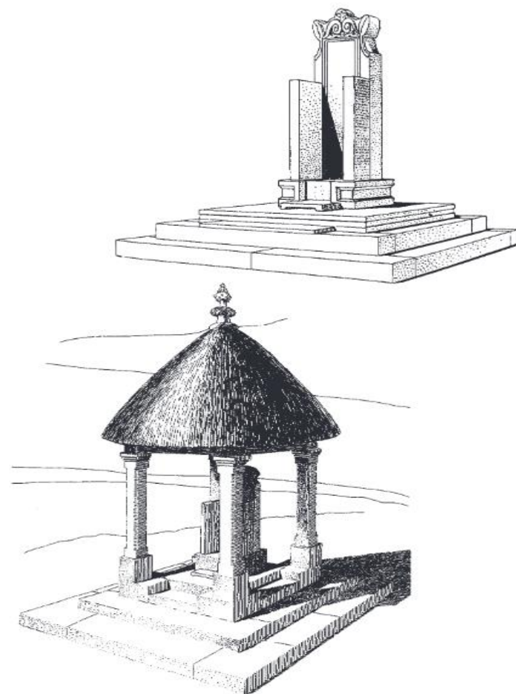


Fig. 24: Reconstruction of Aksumite thrones, the foundations of which are still found scattered across the city (Philipson 1997).

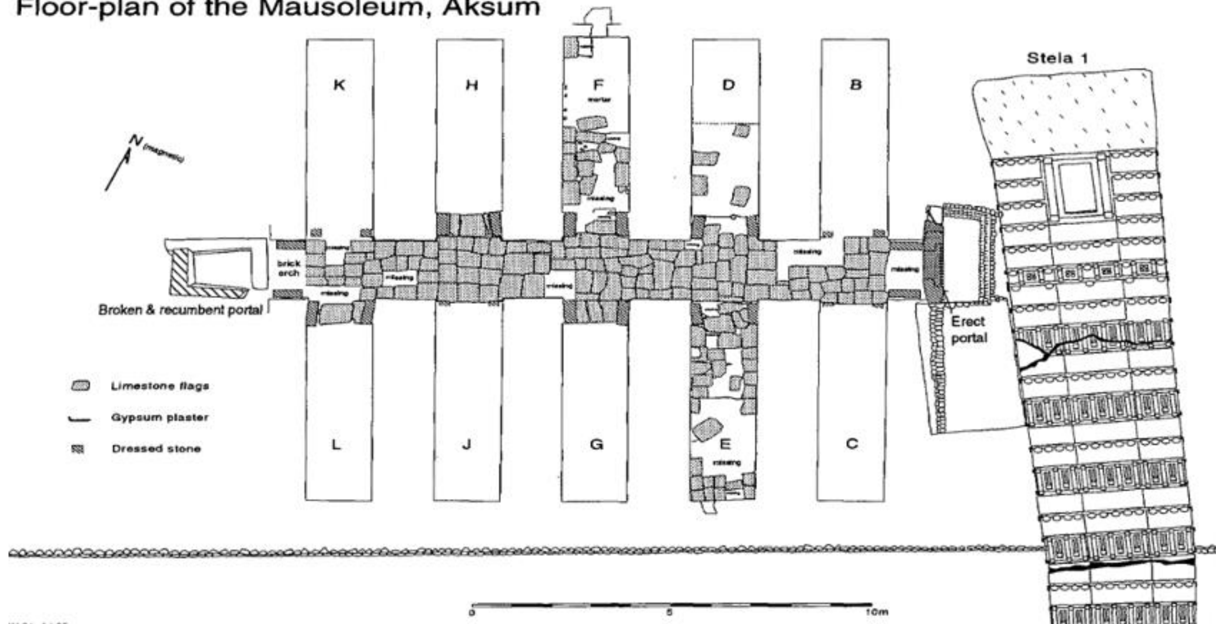


Fig. 25: Floor plan of the 'Mausoleum' tomb structure (Phillipson 1995).

The Tombs of Aksum

Many tombs can be found throughout Aksum. The tombs that have been excavated are mostly located in the main stelae field and are associated with stele 1, 2 and 3. In 1954 during excavations in the southeast of the stelae park, an adit was uncovered that leads to what would later be called 'The Tomb of the Brick Arches', after its defining feature. Chittick excavated it further in 1974 and some of its chambers were excavated (Munro-Hay 1989). Later excavations by the BIAE under supervision of Philipson published extensive reports on the general structure and finds in the tomb (Philipson 2000). The chambers were robbed in at least four different phases, but still a multitude of objects of great value to Aksumite archaeology were uncovered. Among these finds were many ceramic jars and bowls, as well as 423 pieces of ivory with 386 coming from a single chamber and 50 pieces being part of more elaborate furniture made of ivory (Philipson 2000, 116-117). Other uses included plaques, cylindrical boxes, lids, handles and figurines. One of these figurines, dubbed the 'Venus of Aksum' (see fig. 26), is remarkable for its design and apparent craftsmanship. Several other tomb structures have been excavated at Aksum, among which the Tomb of the False Door and the Tombs of Kaleb and Gebre Meskel 2km to the north of Aksum. Lying underneath stele 1, which probably marked its entrance, is the Mausoleum. This elaborate tomb structure was probably used to inter a large part of a royal family (see fig. 25) (Phillipson 1995).

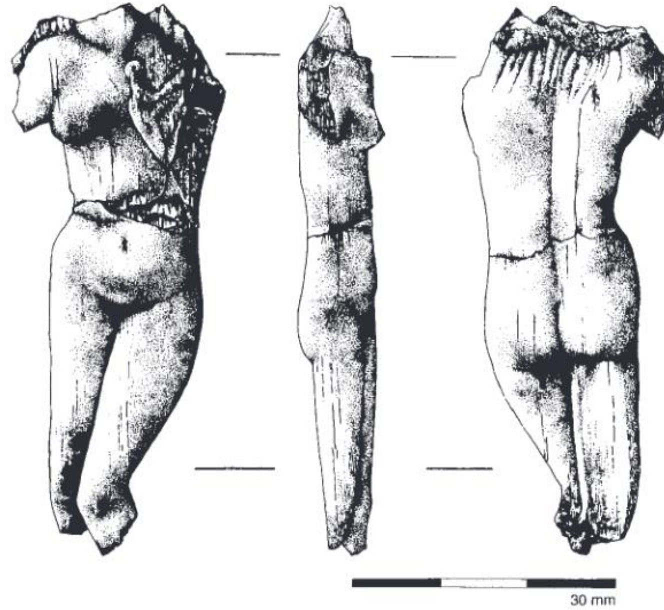


Fig. 26: Ivory figurine found in Tomb of the Brick Arches (Philipson 2000).

Stones and statues

Several other noteworthy monuments remain in Aksum, though not much can be said about them. Two stone markers, found at what was clearly the entrance to the city in both the southeast and the north, highlight the integration of Aksum in what can be called an ancient global trading network. This becomes apparent from the multilingual nature of the public inscriptions on these 'Ezana Stones', engraved in Greek, Ge'ez and Sabaean. Both stone markers carry identical inscriptions, recording the achievements in conquest of king Ezana. Aksumite golden coins too bore Greek inscriptions and were specifically minted to facilitate exchange with the Mediterranean traders (Munro-Hay 1995, 67). The Ezana Stones should be understood in the same vein; as markers of the prestige and grandeur of the Aksumite kings. To be understood by all who would come across their image or territories.

Fig. 27: Current display of the ‘Ezana stone’ inscribed in three languages.[2]

Many other massive, monumentalised base-plates of unknown origin still litter the city and continue to be found. In an intriguing find made in 1906, the DAE uncovered the base of what could only have been a giant statue (see fig. 19). Reference to statues in Aksum comes from the Greek traveller Cosmas Indicopleustes, who mentioned the lush gardens of palaces, decorated with statues of bronze, iron and even gold. Finds of statues from the Aksumite period have, however, been very rare. Excavations at Hawelti in 1959 have yielded some famous late pre-Aksumite examples (Contenson 1962). No further research on these finds has been published. But no clear record on the whereabouts of the statue base excavated in 1906 remains either, so that besides a fascinating picture and observation, not much can be written. The absence of such monuments, and the highly disorganised and scattered nature of other monuments of Aksum, can perhaps be attributed to the demise of Aksum in the tenth century. The alleged sack of Aksum in that period by the legendary queen Gudit, though not widely supported as an actual historic event, probably alludes to some reality in which monuments were torn down.

[2] Aksum, iscrizione di re ezana, in greco, sabeo e ge'ez, 330-350 dc ca. 10 - Ezana Stone - Wikipedia

Fig. 28: Base of a giant statue uncovered in Aksum during the DAE (Philipson, 1997; 136).

Aksumite Kings and Traders

What emerges from the study of Aksum's impressive monumentalization is th picture of a wealthy capital of an affluent trading kingdom. The success of this kingdom, however, should be understood not in regional, but global terms. In this section, research will be shown to argue for a more integrated and comprehensive view of Aksum's presence in the global networks of antiquity. The significance of these trading networks and the prominent role Aksum came to play in them, can only be understood by considering the longevity of these contacts. Contacts between the Mediterranean, Red Sea and Indian Ocean had existed during Hellenistic times (Cobb 2015) and even before, with legendary mentions of 'Aethiopians' occurring in Herodotus' *Histories* and even Homer's *Illiad*. It was the consolidation of a single power in the Mediterranean that accelerated the commercial contacts with Ethiopia tremendously and put Aksum firmly in the Mediterranean consciousness. Here discussed will be the relation of Aksum with the larger Eurasian and African world of antiquity in terms of trade, politics, and inevitably, religion.

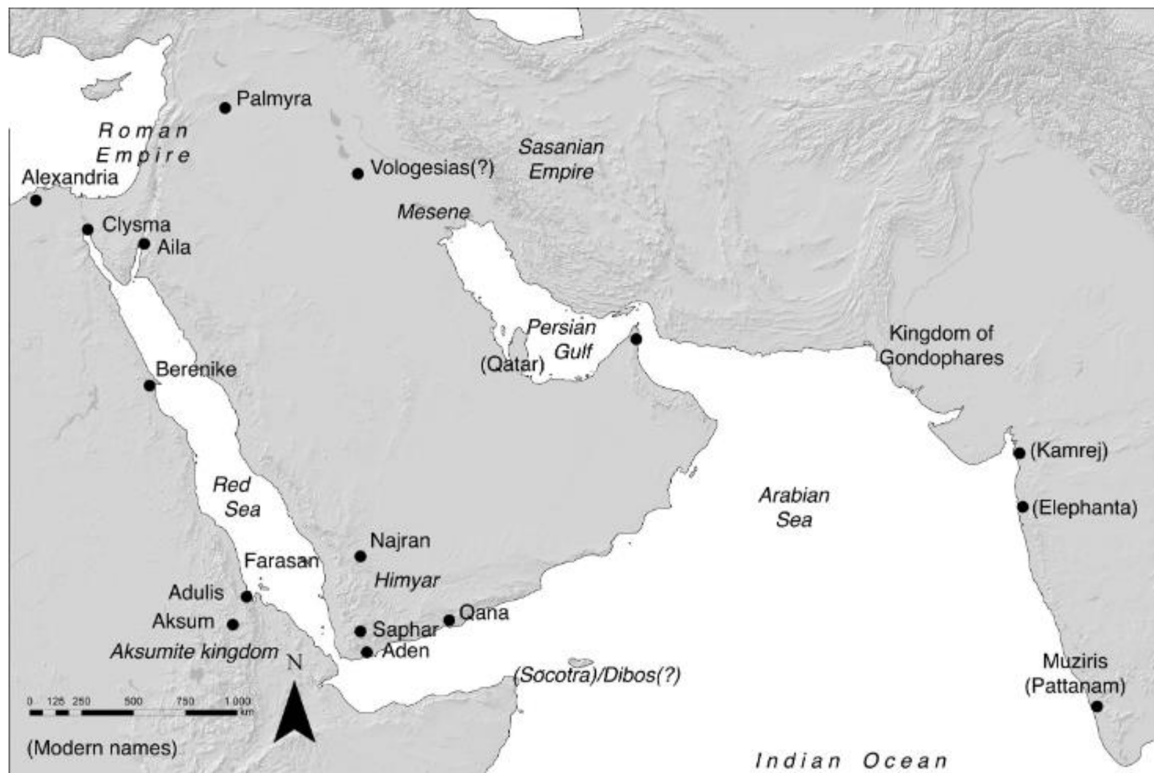


Fig. 29: Trade ports of Late Antiquity (Seland 2012, 73).

Early (Mediterranean) Connections

After the Romans had become the leading power in Egypt and appropriated its existent trading network through the Nile Valley and Red Sea, they came into contact with the Horn of Africa. According to Sellassie, the names India and Ethiopia, were interchangeable for the Romans (Sellassie 1972, 85). This seems unlikely, however, as the Romans had solid geographical knowledge of India and the Indian Ocean; its settlements and trade goods, and idem for Ethiopia and the Red Sea. In fact, geographical knowledge of Ethiopia can be traced back to the second half of the first millennium in ancient Greece. Fascination with Egypt and Ethiopia as the known limit of the world evoked a rich tradition of ancient sources informing us on their worldview. It is telling that one of Europe's first literary works, the *Illiad*, alludes many times to Ethiopia and its inclusion into the lore of the ancient world. It was Menelaos, the Spartan king who boasted about his explorations:

> 'I reached the Ethiopians, Sidonians, Erembians, Libya too, where lambs no sooner spring from the womb than they grow horns.' (Homer, Odyssey, IV. 94, transl. Robert Fagles).

Though the reference by Homer to Ethiopians is generally undefined, it becomes apparent they are considered a people on the southern edge of the world. This is more accurately confirmed by Herodotus (485-425 B.C.), who grants a myriad of interesting observations regarding Ethiopia's geography and people. Herodotus placed Ethiopia in Libya, which was then the general name for the African continent. From the perspective of Greece he placed it 'above' Egypt and between the desert of Libya Interior on the west, and India on its east,

separated from it by the Erythraean Sea (which was then the Red Sea) (Herodotus Book VII. 69). Though Herodotus claims Ethiopia extended across the sea as well (hence some confusion regarding its geographical distinction) he does not confuse Ethiopians and Indians for the same people, and even gives a distinctive description of their appearance:

> 'The Ethiopians from the East are straight-haired, but those from Libya have hair more thick and woolly than that of any other man.' (Herodotus VII. 70)

Apart from a description of its people, Herodotus remarks in a detailed manner on landscape features of Ethiopia, for example on the Nile in Ethiopia. Curiously enough, the source of the Nile, according to modern European historic accounts, would only be explored in the 18th century. Herodotus, however, was already able to write accurately that:

> […] the Nile flows from melting snow; whereas it flows out of Libya through the midst of the Ethiopians, and so comes out into Egypt.' (Herodotus II. 22)

Though the following anecdote is somewhat unrelated, it is here given to illustrate that much previous knowledge of and contacts between sub-Saharan Africans and Europeans might be obscured to us. In a remarkable description, which is the foundation of much speculation in historical literature regarding the extent of geographical knowledge on Africa in Mediterranean antiquity, Herodotus gives us an account of the circumnavigation of the continent by Phoenician sailors in service of the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho around 600 B.C.:

> 'The Phoenicians therefore set forth from the Erythraean Sea and sailed through the Southern Sea; and when autumn came, they would pull to shore and sow the land, wherever in Libya they might happen to be as they sailed […] so that after two years elapsed, in the third year they turned through the Pillars of Heracles and arrived again in Egypt.' (Herodotus IV.42)

Kings and Traders

Though it is evident that a somewhat accurately defined Ethiopia featured in the ancient worldview, more direct Mediterranean interest in 'Aethiopia' becomes apparent during the first century A.D. From around this time, an increasing body of texts and literature attest to the growing complexity of Ethio-Mediterranean relations. Most importantly for this thesis, we find mention of the now dominant power in the region: Aksum. The earliest sources outside of Ethiopia[3] which mention an Aksumite state are the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea), a Greek navigational guide dated to the first century A.D (Casson 1989), and Ptolemy's *Geography* (Stevenson 1932). Their writings coincide with the earliest monumental developments at Aksum proper, at the site which would later

[3] Mediterranean and later Arabian sources are crucial in reconstructing the development of the Aksumite kingdom, as available Ethiopian sources are usually fragmentary inscriptions that lack ethnographic or cultural self-description.

become the Stele Park (Munro-Hay 1991, 69). These sources offer great information on the political administration of the Aksumite kingdom, its relation to adjacent regions, but most importantly the foundation of the power of Aksumite kings: trade. Aksum itself played an important role in controlling resources for export, mainly ivory. It is in particular this resource that is repeatedly mentioned in ancient sources discussing the base of Aksumite trading wealth. A sixth century Byzantine ambassador would note a field of elephants on his way to Aksum from Adulis, guessing their numbers were 5000 at least (Freese 1920, 19) Adding weight to the idea that Aksum successfully developed in the Ethiopian highlands because of its favourable position regarding inland African supplies of ivory. The *Periplus* itself mainly describes the Aksumite territories in relation to the availability of ivory:

> 'On this part of the coast, opposite Oreine, 20 stades in from the sea is Adulis, a fair sized village. 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 calles axomites [Aksum]; into it is brought all the ivory from beyond the Nile through what is called Kyeneion, and from there down to Adulis.' (Casson (transl.) 1989, 51-52)

Confirming the importance of Aksum's strategic position to exploit the ivory resources of inland Africa, the writer of the *Periplus* further observes:

> The mass of elephants and rhinoceros that are slaughtered all inhabit the upland regions, although on rare occasions they are also seen along the shore around Adulis itself.' (Casson (transl.) 1989, 51-52)

Mention is furthermore made of Aksumite access to ivory in Ptolemy and many later sources. But while Aksum provided the resources, Adulis was its main connection to global trade. As a port for trade, Adulis already boasted a position as the Horn's most important for close to two millennia, being an essential harbour for exchange with the Arabian cultures in pre-Aksumite times (Zazzaro, Cocca and Manzo 2014; Manzo 2010; Peacock and Blue 2007; Munro-Hay 1989, 159). Finds of pottery sherds dating from the 2nd Millennium B.C. and from the Ethiopian-Eritrean regions in Mersa Gawasis, a pharaonic site, suggests that Adulis was involved in much earlier Red Sea trading networks (Zazzaro et al 2012). Such is already evidenced by the pre-Aksumite adoption of Arabian cultural elements from at least the 8th century B.C. (Curtis 2010, Schmidt 2009; 315). Adulis appears in historical texts as on par with port cities like Berenike and Myos Hormos (Zazzaro 2012). From the 1st century A.D., Adulis had become a trading port of international significance (Peacock and Blue 2007, 36). Trade from Adulis was largely shipped to Aksum by a caravan route. Recent GIS path analysis research over an area of 196 square kilometres by Harrower has even reported to be highly consistent with trade routes described in the *Periplus* (Harrower and D'Andrea 2014). These routes needed to be safeguarded from bandits and brigandry continuously. Exercising control over these routes and

guaranteeing safe passage for caravans and merchants would have been a vital justification of the Aksumite king's rule (Zazzaro 2013, 6). This would have been equally imported for shipping lanes. Underwater finds of 'Ayla-Aksumite' sherds attest to the possibility Aksumite shipwrecks in the Red Sea, though these have not been definitively found or excavated (Lane 2012).

Aside from Aksum's exports, imports were just as well an important aspect of participation in global trading networks. Excavations of burial sites, such as the Tomb of the Brick Arches in the 90's by the BIEA have greatly contributed to the picture of materials imported by the Aksumites. The most common find in burial contexts appears to have been Roman glassware (Philipson 2000). Previously, most glassware was deemed to be imported from the Mediterranean (Philipson 2012, 161). The most common household glasswares and beads are now thought to have been made in Aksum, while more extravagant pieces were imported from the Mediterranean region as luxury items, as evidenced by them mainly being found in tombs (Japp 2011, 370-372). Several sites have yielded evidence for glass production at Aksum and at Ona Nagast, where fragments of raw glass were excavated. It is currently unknown whether glass production in its entirety unfolded at Aksum, or whether the industry developed around the reparation of broken imported glass, or remaking objects from existing, imported glass (Philipson 2012, 162; Manzo 2005). The development of styles and influence by the Mediterranean remains as of yet uncertain, as early glassware finds remain unpublished. Yet, it seems some Mediterranean types were copied locally, most notably at Beta Giyorgis. Taste on the basis of typological study seems highly homogenous throughout Aksumite sites, suggesting more localised production (Japp 2011). Notable here is that while reconsiderations are fairly recent, already in 1941 Puglisi reported finding intentionally pulverized glass in the west of Aksum (122-6).

Pottery found at Aksum seems to have predominantly been made by hand using local methods. While the most sizeable amounts of pottery suggest local production, ceramic vessels made using the pottery wheel seem all to have been imported (Philipson 2012, 159). In the case of pottery types too, a distinct influence likely attributable to Mediterranean or Arabian influences is recognisable. Pre-Aksumite contexts rarely contain shallow ceramic bowls or plates, while in later periods in which contact with the Mediterranean was well-established, these become more common. Perhaps coinciding with the introduction of new foodstuffs or ways of consuming. These contacts must have already influenced how pottery was produced locally since the first century CE (Japp 2011, 369). Still, in the Aksumite territories there appears to be a large variety of regional productions and pottery types. There is as of yet no clear understanding or explanation for the local distinctions in Aksumite pottery productions or the varieties in use of colour, etc. No attempt seems to have been made to regulate their production (Philipson 2012). Some pots feature inscriptions, such as one proclaiming the name of the owner, as well as its demand any breakage be compensated. A unique peak into the daily life at Aksum (Philipson 2012, 160). Quality and refinement of ceramic vessels seemed mainly to depend on the aesthetic sense and financial status of its owner (Ibid., 159).

The excavations of Aksumite tombs furthermore yielded large amounts of carved ivory, which as mentioned in the *Periplus* was an important commodity for export to the Aksumites. Before these excavations, worked ivory, had, however, not been attested clearly in the archaeological record of Aksum (Philipson 2000, 53). As Sellassie notes, however, a whole tusk of ivory was found in 1961 during excavations at Adulis (1972, 72-75).

Some objects, such as ivory, glassware and bronze/metal objects are more often found in Aksumite territories compared to South-Arabia. If found, these are mainly centred in the harbour regions, while the finds penetrate inland Africa (Japp 2011). One item found while excavating the Tomb of the Brick Arches may even originate from China (Philipson 2000, 53). While such trade relations are somewhat assumed to have existed, evidence is very rare indeed. Sellassie subscribes to the idea proposed by Herrmann in 1913 that a Han dynasty chronicle mentioning the Huang-Chi, trading in the same items as mentioned by the *Periplus*; gold, ivory, rhinoceros, tortoise-shells, refers to the Agazians; or the Aksumites (Sellassie 1972, 85).

Craftsmanship is likewise exemplified by the high degree of metalworking at Aksum. The quantity of metalwork objects found in Aksum and Aksumite tombs leaves little doubt that a large portion was locally produced (Philipson 2012, 165).

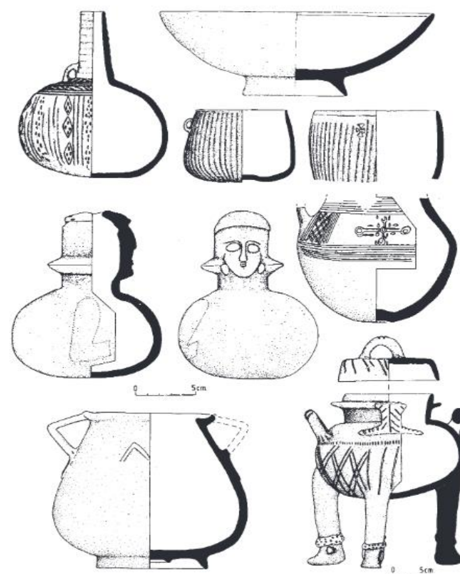


Fig. 30: Selection of typical Aksumite ceramic wares (Wilding and Munro-Hay 1989).

Though not attested in the archaeological record, perishable goods such as incense and myrrh continued to be an important product of export for the Aksumites. It is noted in the Christian Topography of Kosmas Indikopleustes that peoples originating from outside of Aksum's borders in 'barbaria', supplied its port city with products such as frankincense, cassia and sugar cane (Topographie Chrétienne II.49.6-8).

A fourth century novel by Heliodorus, the '*Aethiopica*', furthermore reveals perceptions of Ethiopians and their associations with trade. The novel, which features a lost princess of Ethiopia who in a series of adventures make her way home and is named heir to the throne, seems mainly to revel in describing the context in which the story is set (Sandy 1982). The *Aethiopica*, interestingly, describes 'the Ethiopian ambassador' in Egypt. (II. 33.) In another scene, the protagonist browses 'Ethiopian' spices in the marketplace, before being approached by 'a man of Ethiopian complexion' who claimed to be selling superior merchandise before revealing his true intention. While such fictional descriptions serve the purpose of the writer, they often subconsciously reveal the conventions of contemporary times (Bartsch 1989, 5-7, 171). We might therefore assume that to Heliodorus, Ethiopian spice merchants were not an uncommon sight.

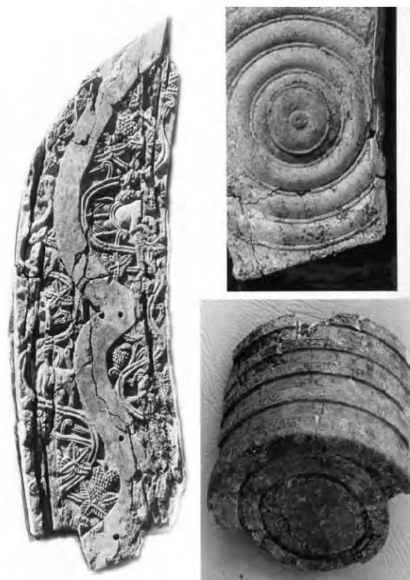


Fig. 31: Worked ivory, Tomb of the Brick Arches (Phillipson 2000, 2012; 170).

Aksumite Coinage travelled throughout this system, and has been found at multiple sites and probably used in conjunction with Roman coins, as evidenced by coin hoard in al-Madhariba (Munro-Hay 1966). The usage of Aksumite coins and the consistency of imported materials furthermore suggests the reliability of Aksum as a trading partner (Japp 2011, 380). Its gold coins, in this sense, are of particular interest, since rarely any have been found inside Aksumite territory itself. Strongly suggesting they served particular international use in trade (Hahn 1994, Nawartmal 1999, Metlich 2006). The minting of coins, especially considering their design, materials and specific usage, resembles the ambitions and political outlook of progressive economic strategy, as well as the power and prestige associated with the ability to mint coins over a prolonged period of time. This required control over a steady supply of costly metals (Munro-Hay 1991, 3).

The prestige of minting coinage and can be deduced by finds of Roman coins discovered at Aksumite Matara, which had been made into earrings (Sellassie 1972, 82-83) The accomplishment such stable trade relations represent should not be taken for granted, as safeguarding these bustling trade routes

and ports required vigilant policing, regular campaigning and upkeep of trading infrastructure (Munro-Hay 1991). The *Monumentum Adulitanum* mentions the subjugation of the Arabites and Kinaidokolpitas, who were then commanded to guarantee 'the security of communications on land and sea'. It likewise noted the construction of a new road 'going from the lands of my empire to Egypt' (Wolska-Conus 1968, 374)[4].

As stated before, the kings of Aksum were reliant on control of these trade routes and resources for their political power and wealth. This required them to be effective military rulers, campaigning regularly against forces which would disrupt the safety of their trade routes, but also against different peoples within the Aksumite kingdom. Kingship evidently was the most prevalent political role in the Ethiopian highlands, and is the only type of rulership attested to in Egyptian, Sabaean, Ethio-Sabaean or Aksumite sources on the region. While the rule of the king at Aksum seems absolute, it also seems clear that the Aksumite kings relied on a tributary system in holding control over their overall territory, which contained territories controlled by lesser rulers. Such a system is implied by the title of *negus nagast* for the king of Aksum, meaning literally 'king of kings'. It likewise mirrors the 'pre-Aksumite' political context from which the kingdom of Aksum emerged, with a high diversity of regional cultures and peoples competing for command over regions and resources (Munro-Hay 1991). Opportunistic behaviour of tributary kings required the Aksumites to campaign regularly against revolting kings in periods of relative weakness or following a succession. The resulting campaigns against revolt, in fact make up the bulk of Aksumite inscriptions and near always refer to disobedient kings in terms of people or territories, with 'king of Aksum' usually listed as a separate title (Sellassie 1972). An example of such campaigns against peoples within the Aksumite territories features in the *Monumentum Adulitanum*, as copied by Byzantine ambassador Kosmas Indikopleustes. It reads:

> 'I entered valiantly into battle and subdued the following peoples; I fought the Gaze, then the Agame and the Siguene, and having conquered them I reserved for myself half of their lands and their peoples […] Then I fought the Annine and the Metine…' (Wolska-Conus 1968, 372-378).

Similar inscriptions memorising campaigns inform us on the Aksumite control over South-Arabia, which equally was part of the pre-Aksumite network of exchange. Several inscriptions note the rule over the Himyarites, Saba and the Homerites among others, which through the names of the kings inscribed has allowed for a rudimentary timeline of Aksumite rule in South-Arabia. Broadly, from the second to third century, and a second restorative period initiated by Tazéna from 486 to the seventh century (Sellassie 1972, 123).

Apart from the inscriptions, the pronounced military role and obligations of Aksumite kings can be discerned from coinage and deducted from some clues in Aksumite monumental architecture. The

[4] All translations from this source are translated to English by the author.

‘stele of the lances’ is, for example, one of the remaining stele showing weaponry; boasting two spears on one side and a shield on the other. These exact regalia are noted as part of the king’s procession during a Byzantine embassy sent by Justinian I, as recorded by John Malalas:

> ‘The emperor of the Indians stood on high holding a small gilt shield and two spears, also gilt, in his hands, His whole senate stood likewise at arms, with flute-players providing music.’ (Malalas XVIII. 56)

Spears can be found depicted on coinage as well and iron for spears has even been noted as an import product by the *Periplus*. Furthermore, the lack of iron and the use of non-iron spears by Ethiopians was already noted by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. (Herodotus VII. 70). Arabian sources recounting military encounters with the Aksumites, also remark on the proficiency of Aksumite warriors in the use of spears or javelins, further testifying to its preferred usage. Ibn Ishaq, an 8th century Arab historian, remarked: ‘throw a javelin as the Abyssinians do, and seldom miss the mark.’ (Guillaume 1955; 371). The excavation led by Phillipson also found iron objects in the Tomb of the Brick Arches, many of which were iron spearheads and small swords.

Fig. 32: Example of a small iron sword (top) and spearhead (bottom) in the BIAE repository, Nairobi (JSTOR 1997).

Given the fact that the relation between Aksumite state power and its ability to secure trading goods was strong, it is perhaps appropriate that reconstructing Aksum’s chronology and regal power is largely based on coinage. Coinage holds a number of clues regarding the state structure and the power Aksum’s kings had or at least desired to portray. Coins indicate their reign was associated by nothing but their person; as shown by regal portraits on both the obverse and reverse. After the conversion, the cross appeared on coins as well (Munro-Hay 1984; Munro-Hay 1991, 150). The Aksumite kings are

shown richly decorated with a fixed set of regalia: a crown or tiara on one side and what can be described as a headband on the reverse; perhaps signifying roles as the *negus nagast* and king of Aksum respectively (Munro-Hay 1991, 151). Again, the account given by Malalas corresponds closely to the depictions:

> 'Around his head was wound a gold-threaded linen turban with four cords on either side and a gold collar around his neck. He stood on top of four elephants which had a yoke and four discs, and upon them something like a tall carriage covered with gold leaf, just as the chariots of the provincial governors are covered.' (Malalas XVIII. 56)

A Kingdom between Empires

It becomes evident from several inscriptions and written accounts that the kingdom of Aksum was powerful enough to influence geopolitical events by sending gold, arms and even armies (Sellassie 1972, 67). In fact, request for military aid against the Persians was the purpose of the Byzantine embassy to Aksum, who having just won a campaign against the 'Amerite Indians', immediately declared war on them (Malalas XVIII. 56). It is assumed that Roman-Aksumite relations were nothing but peaceful (as suggested by Munro-Hay 1991, 56-57) since no evidence directly points to conflict between the two powers. However, over an extended period of time, both powers bordered closely one another; inviting political tension as is impossible to avoid. Several instances shows them to have been lucrative trade partners, as well as geopolitical adversaries in a shared arena of influence. The Romans, for instance, during an expedition led by Gaius Aelius Gallus tried to include Arabia in its sphere of influence, even besieging the old city of Marib as early as 25.B.C. A city which has been noted as a major source of cultural influence in the pre-Aksumite period earlier in this chapter. Further evidence for tensions between the Romans and Aksumites is indirect, but leaves little doubt mutual suspicion existed. As an example, Roman concern with Aksumite trade power becomes apparent from an inscription by Procopius. Describing ships passing through the Red Sea and noting the manner by which Aksumite ships were built without iron nails, Procopius wrote this was:

> […] because the Indians and Aethiopians possess neither iron nor any other material suitable for such purposes. Furthermore they are not even able to buy any of these things from the Romans since this is explicitly forbidden to all by law.' (Procopius).

Since Aksumite shipbuilding is known to have been done using rope, the concern for Aksumites acquiring iron might have to do with its associated military use for weaponry. Respect for the Aksumite military is already implied by the seeking of its assistance against the Muslims by the Byzantines. There is one poorly understood occasion during the revolt of Roman's eastern trading hub of Palmyra (270-273), where it is unclear if Aksum's military was involved in other political conflicts concerning the Roman Empire. The *Monumentum Adulitanum* claims the reigning Aksumite king controlled the Arabian coast as far as Leuke-Kome, a port city opposite Berenike founded by Ptolemy

Euergetes II. A remarkable territorial extension in itself, it furthermore holds significance for the relation of trade with the Roman empire, as Leuke-Kome borders Roman *Arabia* and was a main trading hub for Arabian and Indian goods headed for Palmyra through Petra (Galikowski 2018, 281-283). As historian Richard Stoneman notes: From Leuke-Kome, caravans as big as armies transported goods into the lands of the empire (Stoneman 1994, 35). A curious remark in the *Historia Augusta*, written shortly after the re-unification of the Empire by Aurelian, includes Aksumites as part of the triumph in Rome:

> '[the captives] were led forth, and also eight hundred pairs of gladiators besides the captives from the barbarian tribes. There were Blemmyes, Exomitae[5], Arabs from Arabia Felix, Indians, Bactrians, Iberians, Saracens, and Persians, all bearing their gifts.' (*Historia Augusta*)

There is uncertainty on how to interpret this passage. Sellassie argues it shows Aksumites came to Palmyra's aid and were captured and included in the procession after its defeat. Munro-Hay argues the opposite, with the Aksumites instead participating in the triumph as ambassadors. Interestingly enough, the participants listed represent peoples and powers to Rome's eastern borders exclusively. It can therefore be argued that their participation with a triumph over rebellious Palmyra refers to their relation with that important city, and re-establishment of Rome's dominion in the east to the surrounding relevant powers. Of which Aksum, as argued above, was likely one. What is important as well, From the Elephantine as the border set in the south by Diocletianus (Munro-Hay 1991, 56). Either way, the incident shows the involvement of the kingdom of Aksum in a larger geopolitical playing field encompassing both it and Rome.

Resulting from these extensive contacts with the Mediterranean, the Aksumites under king Ezana converted to Christianity in the fourth century. Through its commerce, it is likely that Christianity arrived in Aksum much earlier than the fourth century (Seland 2014). In an episode recorded by x, Frumentius and his companion. The murder of the ship's crew leaves the unambiguous impression that a lapse in Ethio-Roman relations occurred that warranted such an action. Its adoption of Christianity not only illustrates intense cultural contacts with the Mediterranean but would in turn further envelop Aksum in the religious and political affairs of the Roman and later Byzantine world. The Byzantines, seeking to counter the rise of Persia in the east in the seventh century, regarded Aksumite power as essential to form an effective alliance on the basis of their shared religion (Ruffini 1998, 71-73). The conversion would not only draw Aksum into political affairs, however, but naturally also ecclesiastical affairs of religious dogma. Rome sought to influence Aksum through its position as the centre of Christianity. One such occasion is found in a letter to Ezana and his brother Sezana by Roman emperor Constantius II around 356 AD, preserved in the *Apologia ad Constantium Imperatorum* by

[5] Latinised form of Aksumites, as written in the original.

Athanasius. This renowned patriarch of Alexandria had been banished for his heretical thinking by the Roman church. The subject of the letter concerned an ecclesiastical matter. In which Constantius commanded the bishop Frumentius, who had been appointed by Athanasius, be sent to Alexandria to align his teachings with the those of the Roman bishops (Szymusiak 1958).

The Transformation of the Aksumite Empire

The ultimate downfall of the Aksumite kingdom occurred after shifts in the power balance along the Red Sea. The process through which this happened is complex and not of great importance here. It is clear however that Aksum's position in the globalised trading network of Late Antiquity made it prosperous and powerful, yet left it vulnerable to the regional fluctuations within its network. In the 7th century, the expansionist ambitions of the newly forged Muslim empire spread its influence across the Red Sea as a unified Arabia now challenged the Aksumite power base and trade. Even though the Aksumite polity remained independent, it suffered great economic losses and significance due to its severing with the arteries of commerce. The Arabic expansion encompassed Aksum and cut it off from their traditional sources of power; a process which was complete around 700 AD (Munro-Hay 1991). An explanation as to Aksum's longevity, ironically, can be found in its remoteness from expansionist powers, such as Rome and Persia, both of whom would eventually find Aksum in the periphery of their spheres of influence (Ibid.). The Islamic Caliphates thus posed a, geographically speaking, more direct adversary.

Remarkably, however, Aksum, despite being a Christian kingdom close to the Arab heartlands, was never conquered or militarily challenged by the Arabs. This is explained by a particular event which again speaks to the documented importance of Aksum and its integration into world history. When in the 7th century, Islam was spreading through the words of the prophet Mohammed, some of his followers were still prosecuted by threatened leaders. They therefore fled across the Red Sea. According to the Qur'an, they were allowed to stay in the Dahlak archipelago just of the coast where Adulis was situated under the protection of the Aksumite king. This led the Aksumite king becoming a highly respected figure in the Islamic canon and ensured that the Aksumites were not included in the Arab conquests. Instead, the Aksumite king, Ella Saham, was canonized as a Muslim saint and later sent an embassy to Mohammed himself. On his death, Mohammed even offered a special prayer for him (Ahmed 1996). These friendly relations and the good treatment of the Muslim refugees by the Aksumite king, ensured future relations were relatively peaceful. It also inspired a whole literary genre of Arab writers praising the virtues of the Ethiopians (Ibid.). Aksumites thus have the unique position of standing at the cradle of both Christianity and Islam.

We know comparatively little of the relations Aksum had with its more immediate neighbours due to lack of historical and archaeological material. One of the most pivotal events in Aksumite history, is deemed to be the conversion of king Ezana to Christianity around 330 A.D., making Aksum one of the

earliest Christian states in the world. The Aksumite until the approximately the seventh century (Philipson 2000, 61-63; Munro-Hay 1991, 4-5).

Despite such peaceful and positive historical reports, the rise of Islam would mean a shift in power which the Aksumites did not survive. The end of the 9th century introduced a period of isolation to the Ethiopian region, which cut it off from its contacts with the Mediterranean world (Sellassie 1972). Responding to these changes, in the late first Millennium A.D. the capital of the Aksumite state might have moved as the balance of power had shifted. Fragmentation of the kingdom followed as the territory of Aksum decreased dramatically in size (Fattovich 2010). The final blow came in a poorly understood event, in which the legendary queen Gudit invaded and destroyed Aksum. Though the account is largely deemed fictitious, there are clear signs that the capital of Aksum was subject to some form of destruction (Munro-Hay 1991). Nevertheless, by the tenth century at the latest, the Aksumite state and power of Late Antiquity, had crumbled and disappeared.

Conclusion

What has become clear though the archaeological and historical research presented in this study, is the complexity of Aksum as a state and the landscape in which it developed. There is a myriad of different explanations as to how the so contentiously named pre-Aksumite period led into the direct development of a proto-Aksumite polity at Beta Giyorgis. Interestingly, Aksum seems to have been the deliberately founded capital of an existing state that had its capital elsewhere in a highly contested and competitive landscape. From an early age the Horn of Africa along the coast of modern-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, saw close connection with the neighboring Arabian Peninsula and the kingdoms that developed there, such as Saba. Though arguments have long existed over the influence of migrants from Arabia on the development of pre-Aksumite and early Aksumite culture, it can be argued that Aksum's cultural origin was actually rooted in migrations from an adjacent highland zone in Sudan, given sharp ideological differences evident in the monumental structures at Aksum when compared to the 'Sabaean' temple structures eminent of the pre-Aksumite period structures. In any case it seems reasonable to assume, given its sudden rise, this explains the attraction of DM'T as a candidate for such an early kingdom, although no direct evidence aside from the poorly understood mention of its existence can be given.

While many questions and matters of research still remain on the development of Aksum, it is evident that Aksum was a significant player in a vast network of trade and cultural connections, spanning the Mediterranean to the coasts of south-east Asia. Spurred on by the stability and height of demand from the Roman Empire through Egypt, the Ethiopians became a strong focal point for trade further east over the Indian Ocean. The deliberate founding of Aksum in a highly strategic position, controlling access to the highland's waterways, inland trading routes and supply routes of important products such as ivory, becomes immediately clear in this respect. As do the periodic conquests in the Arabian Peninsula by the Aksumite kings, since it allowed Aksum to essentially monopolize trade in myrrh and

incense, which grew there in abundance. This particular desire for control over trade goods can be retrospectively assumed to be the reason for the Arabian presence on the Ethiopian side of the Red Sea.

The lords of Aksum, seemingly dominating political affairs in the kingdom, held direct control over a sizeable territory covering the Horn of Africa with its influence potentially reaching further. Possibly organized in a system which allowed for regional lords to conduct affairs, evidence suggests the Aksumites were able to control their territory through military subjugation and economic dominance. Becoming a centralized point of authority, Aksum housed the elaborate tombs and funeral monuments of ancient kings, filled with exotic wares from as far as China. It became the monumental center of an empire which boasted elaborate churches, palaces, and unique monuments such as the throne structures, showcasing the brilliant expressions of a powerful, wealthy, and unique material culture.

Chapter III: History of Aksumite Archaeology

Introduction

The end of the 9th century introduced a period of isolation to the Ethiopian region, which cut it off from its contacts with the Mediterranean world (Sellassie 1972). As Edward Gibbon once noted poetically: 'encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.' (Gibbon, x). The centuries of previous contact would create lasting cultural memory, however, not just for Europeans, but the now Christian Ethiopians as well. The re-establishment of connections with the European Mediterranean would this time not lead Aksum to become capital of a mighty kingdom, but instead see it reduced to an archaeological curiosity on the fringe of antiquity. And eventually, it would turn Ethiopia into a colonial dominion. The long period of rekindling the Ethio-European contacts has profoundly impacted the state of Aksumite heritage, its current poor site conservation and management, and its disconnection to contemporary understandings of the ancient world.

The redevelopment of relations between the north-western Horn of Africa and Europe from the 13th century, is here discerned into three main phases, each characterised by specific developments, histories and attitudes that can be traced to the present. The first phase (1122-1776) was one of mutual exploration, guided by religious curiosity and initiated to a large extent by Ethiopian scholars who sought out the Mediterranean religious centres. Legends, politics and desire for access to foreign markets, in turn drove European powers to search for a Christian king in 'Asia' that would help them in their struggle against Islamic hegemony. Though initially celebrated, relations deteriorated rapidly in the 17th century, when European disillusion and Ethiopian frustration made for the eventual banishment of Catholics from Ethiopia, and a lasting image of the 'otherness' that Ethiopia represented. The second phase saw renewed efforts by globalising European powers to explore the Ethiopian interior. Curiosity, however, grew into colonial ambition from the late 19th century, culminating in Ethiopia becoming an Italian colony in 1936. This complex second phase saw destructive conflict go hand in hand with the first large scale and professionally conducted excavation in Aksum. The third phase (1945-) is what might be called the modern phase, starting from the end of the second world war and leading into the present. It is in this phase that archaeological institutions, museums, regulations and regular excavations are introduced in Ethiopia. Characteristic of this phase, and of the present, is recurring political instability which has significantly challenged Ethiopia and Aksum's accessibility to researchers, as well as the integrity of its archaeological monuments. This issue is of particular importance in understanding the current lack of study on Aksumite archaeology, but as will be argued, fits into a larger trajectory of developments.

This chapter thus seeks to establish an historic narrative of archaeology at Aksum and prominent Aksumite sites, based on Ethio-European relations. Sources consulted here are both primary and secondary historical accounts, as well as archaeological reports and drawings, Though available

sources traditionally reflect European perspectives, this chapter aims to offer a balance between the Ethiopian and European perspective.

As has been explained in the introduction, in doing so, this chapter will construct an historical framework on which the collection research in Chapter IV is based. This can be done because this chapter provides an overview of the main actors in collecting, excavating and displacing Aksumite archaeological materials. It also portrays an array of historic events from which further investigations can be made.

The larger aims of this chapter are furthermore two-fold: Giving the context of archaeology at Aksum through discussing the state of research and the actual campaigns that took place. Giving a chronological account of all archaeological excavations, however, is a mammoth and extremely complex task, that cannot be accomplished within the scope of this thesis. Secondly, this chapter aims to present research on how the kingdom of Aksum has been incorporated in historical studies, the problem nature of which is often referred to in this thesis.

Phase One: and Parallel Explorations (1122 – 1776)

The relations between the Ethiopians and Europeans in antiquity, were complex and based on a long trajectory of geographical inquiry and cultural, religious and political contacts. For the Europeans, however, this knowledge had largely disappeared in the 11th century AD. Instead, their 're-discovery' of Ethiopia was part of a larger expansion of Christianity, sparked by an intriguing mixture of religious geography and geopolitical events. These factors all culminated in the creation of a legendary figure: Prester John of Asia (Salvadore 2011, de Rachewiltz 1971; 7). The powerful rhetoric of wealth and expectations surrounding the figure of Prester John, in part initiated explorations that would lead the Europeans across the oceans to Asia and India, reach America by accident, and finally initiate the exploration of sub-Sahara Africa (Kurt 2013, de Rachewiltz 1971, Taylor 2014, Brewer 2015). Expectations of Prester John impacted the context in which Europeans sought to re-establish contacts with Ethiopia dramatically. Indeed, the first European source describing the ruins of Aksum at least five hundred years after its demise, was written in a book aimed at dispelling mistruths about the Ethiopian 'realm of Prester John'.

Prester John and Ethiopia

The assumed starting point to the legend of Prester John was in 1122, when a man claiming to be a high priest or patriarch from India arrived at the papal court in Rome. Hosted by an intrigued and bewildered audience, he relayed fanciful stories of a Christian community in the Indies, and their willingness to ally themselves with the Catholics in their crusading struggle against the Muslim Caliphates who controlled the Holy Land and its routes to the east. After this encounter, rumours and stories began to spread about a powerful Christian monarch in the east. It was in 1165 that a letter began to circulate, addressed to Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos. Calling for the Europeans to

meet him in his mythical realm in the Indies, it was signed by one ‘Prester John’ (Kurt 2013; Knobler 2016; 29).

While the Indian patriarch and Prester John’s letter proved to be frauds and forgeries, the name Prester John quickly became founded in a confused sense of historic reality and mythical perception of far east ‘India’ (Joseph Clara 2019). As a matter of fact, Europeans were somewhat aware of Christian communities throughout Asia. When in 489, following the Council of Ephesus, Nestor and his followers were condemned and banished from the city for believing in the monophyte nature of Jesus, they ventured into Persia and travelled beyond its dominion. Nestorian Christians eventually settled as far as Mongolia, where they managed to convert several tribes in the 11th century. Though the rise of the Islamic Caliphates cut the Europeans of from the east, rumours of Eastern Christianity reached Europeans. These stories, however, became blended with conceptions of the east as described in the bible. Biblical lore dominated the European worldview at the time (de Rachewiltz 1971, 7). As summarily stated in the Book of Ezekiel: ‘The glory of the God of Israel came by way of the East’ (Lester 2009, 32). Ironically, it was the attraction of this powerful myth of the east, that inspired geographic and scientific discussions which came to deconstruct it (de Rachewiltz 1971, Taylor, 2014, Joseph Clara 2019).

From the late 13th century, stories and tales of Prester John had materialized regularly and European traders and ambassadors, such as Marco Polo and Willem van Rubroeck, had reportedly ventured deep into Mongol Asia. Though indeed they found powerful rulers there willing to ally themselves as was predicted, the pious image of Prester John was incompatible with that of the ‘heathen’ and ‘cruel’ rulers which they encountered in Central Asia (Kurt 2013). Around 1330, the French Dominican missionary Jordanus de Sévérac related his findings from a mission which, so he claimed, took him all the way to India. Prester John, it appeared to him, did not reside there either. Sévérac, however, became the first known source to note Africa as an alternative option for John’s whereabouts. More accurately, he would write that Prester John was to be found in Ethiopia (Slessarev 1959, 82-90).

The identification of Ethiopia as the priest-king’s realm was no sudden guess. During the crusades of the 11th and 12th century, European forces had on two occasions managed to wrest control of Jerusalem from the Fatimid Caliphate to establish the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099-1187, 1192-1291). As temporary rulers of the Holy Land, the Europeans encountered a community of Ethiopian clergymen and scholars in the city, who had come there for religious study or pilgrimage for centuries, seeking out the major centres of organised Christianity. They may occasionally even have visited religious sites in Italy, as they were shown to be knowledgeable about them (Salvadore 2018). In Jerusalem, the Ethiopians related stories of their home country to the Europeans, which were poorly understood, but peaked the crusaders’ interest (Kurt, 2013). Following these encounters, a papal letter was sent to Prester John in Ethiopia in 1177 and papal missionary bulls in 1245 and 1253 were accompanied by a

letter. Interestingly, this letter in the quest for Prester John was not addressed to him, but was instead addressed to the 'Imperator Aethiopiae Illustri' (Rainieri 2003, 27; Kurt 2013, 301).

It was from the late 13th century that it would be the Ethiopians who initiated a phase of explorations to Europe that would rekindle their lost relations. In Ethiopia, Yagbe Seyon completed the political consolidation of Highland Ethiopia and was crowned founder of the Solomonic dynasty in 1285. (A dynasty that would last until 1974.) The consolidation of power at home led the Ethiopian court to become interested in foreign explorations. Possibly aware of European aspirations in the east, Yagbe's successor, king Wedem Arad, sent envoys to establish contacts and form alliances with the kings of Europe. For the Ethiopians were similarly interested in setting up military alliances against their common Muslim enemies, which were threatening Ethiopia at the time. Possibly as early as 1306, (although this event is contested (Krebs 2019),) the first in a series of Ethiopian delegations arrived in Venice (Salvadore 2011). This occasion seems to have finally sparked conviction and enthusiasm throughout Europe that the Ethiopian realms were those of Prester John. A trader based in Genoa proclaimed that, indeed, Prester John must reside in this region of the world (Beckingham, 1980). From the early 14th century, Prester John can be found on maps depicted as a king, located more exactly in the Horn of Africa. More curiously, a 14th century Venetian merchant's itinerary is even found describing an Ethiopian city which he deems to have been holy. He goes on to call this city 'Chaxum' (Crawford 1958, 28).

The following two centuries saw a critical acceleration of knowledge and exploratory efforts from both Europeans and Ethiopians. Italian merchants and envoys had reportedly made it to the Horn of Africa several times in the fourteenth century and in 1430, when a Napolitan named Pietro had found his way to Ethiopia and met there a people who 'were virtuous and wise.' (Crawford 1958; 5, Kurt, 2013; 303). Several other 14th and 15th century Italian travel reports exist (see Crawford 1958), though they seem to have been more interested in trade relations, not the myths of Prester John (see Crawford 1958). It is here that a divergence of sorts in understanding Ethiopia comes into view related to respective disparity in available information between different parts of Europe. The interest was still very much alive in other regions, as evidenced by a letter sent out by the king of Aragon to his consular in Alexandria in 1391:

> 'From the King of Aragon: Dear cousin count. According to what the priest Pons de Perellons, our majordomo, has said to us when he was here, there is a mendicant friar who was many years with Prester John, and tells many marvels of those parts, and as we desire to hear him, we ask you, dear cousin, that you send him to us immediately, without fail…' (Garretson 1993; 38-39).

Meanwhile, Ethiopian envoys had arrived in Venice a second time, which dramatically increased Europe's knowledge of Ethiopia, its culture and political organisation. The envoys, notably, were led

by an Italian merchant employed by the Ethiopian monarch, who claimed they were sent by 'Jacobus Prestozane'. It is around 1450 that a remarkable Catalan map appears which shows an African royal firmly placed in Ethiopia, with his name written underneath his seat: 'Preste Iohan'.

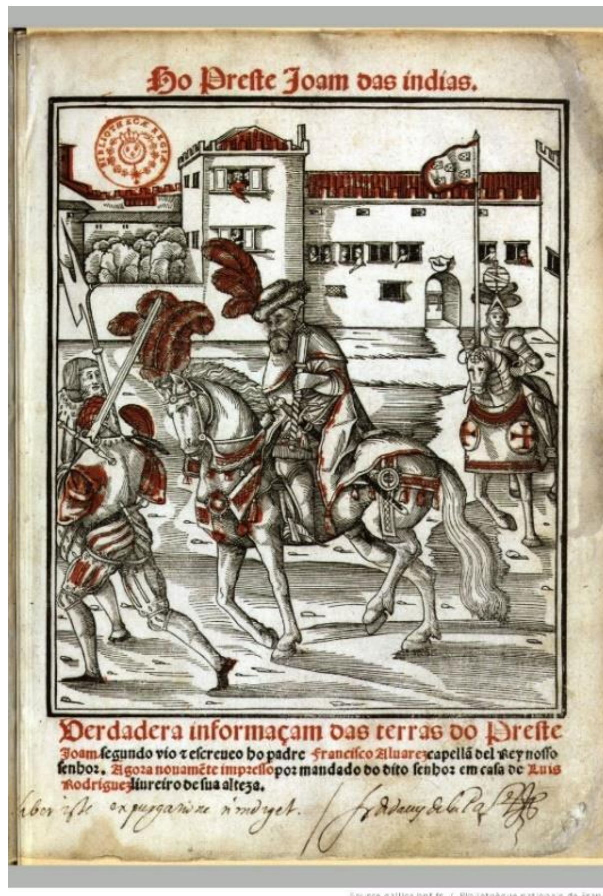
Fig. 33: The 1450 Carta Catalana in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria showing Prester John in Ethiopia (Biblioteca Estense Universitaria. (n.d.).

The European re-discovery of Aksum

Ethiopian contacts and exchange with Western monarchs became somewhat established around the late fourteenth century and religious interaction drew them closer. In 1427 Ethiopian envoys finally reached the king of Aragon, apparently with the intent of discussing royal marriage (Salvadore 2011, 613; Garretson 1993, 43). Incidental reports of well respected 'black Christians', mainly scholars, are not uncommon at this point, and are found in Rome, Venice and Bologna, where it seems the Ethiopians enjoyed extended stays studying European Christian art and texts (Salvadore 2017, 2018; Kurt, 2013). Their status as virtuous Christian men of learning becomes equally clear. In 1444 a delegation of Ethiopian monks reached Firenze to partake in an ecumenical council, summoned by the pope himself. And by 1540 well-documented examples are available of Ethiopian scholarly involvement in European ecclesiastical affairs through the life of Tasfa Seyon and Yohannes (Salvadore and Delorenzi 2021). In 1564, Yohannes even became the second African Roman Catholic bishop to be appointed by the pope (Salvadore 2018). By then growing knowledge of a Christian king in Africa, had inspired the Portuguese to initiate their explorations of the continent, circumnavigating it in 1488, and finally arriving at the Prester's court in the Horn of Africa itself (Salvadore 2011, 598).

The Portuguese, it must be stated, only arrived in the court of 'Prester John' under the direct guidance of Ethiopian ambassador Matteus, who had arrived himself in Portuguese controlled Goa in 1512 for the purpose of seeking an alliance against the growing Muslim power in the Horn of Africa. The arrival of the resulting Portuguese delegation to Ethiopia in 1520 is the first well-documented arrival

of Europeans in Ethiopia that finally produced the Christian alliance against Islam sought after for centuries. More importantly for this research, however, during his six years stay at the Ethiopian court, accompanying missionary Francisco Alvares would produce the first descriptions of Aksum from a European perspective since a millennium. In 1540, ‘A True Relation of the Lands of Prester John of the Indies’ was published (Beckingham 1961).


Ho Preste Joam das indias.

Verdadera informaçam das terras do Preste Joam segundo vio e escreueo ho padre Francisco Aluarez capellã del Rey nosso senhor. Agora nouamẽte impresso por mandado do dito senhor em casa de Luis Rodriguez liureiro de sua alteza.

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Fig. 34: Image of cover of *Verdadeira Informação das Terras do Preste João das Indias.* (1540)

Although it is complicated to identify most of the monuments described by Alvares to contemporary ruins with any certainty, some of his descriptions stand out. Alvares references the stelae, various churches and wrote of the ‘houses’ (tombs) of Kaleb and Gaba Masqal, two Aksumite kings. He described the contents of these tombs a still rich in treasure through a rather curious anecdote:

> ‘And there is the house of Kaleb and his son Gabra Masqal, built in the heart of the ground, with stone pillars; it may be seen from the outside to this day. But inside, they say, it is filled with gold and jewels. There are those who say, 'We have seen with our own eyes when jewels came out through holes when they pushed in grass wet with saliva.'’ (Alvarez 1540; 524)

Alvares would go on to describe Aksum in a summation of numbers. He had found there ‘seventy-two springs’ and ‘fifty-eight stone obelisks’ as well as ‘many churches, some of which had fallen into

ruin.' (Alvarez 1540, 522). In between other observations, Alvares when referring the stelae, curiously notes that each bore a specific function and colour (Ibid., 523). While this 'function' can be understood to refer to religious ceremony or procession as briefly discussed in Chapter II, never has there been any mention made of colour decorating the stelae.

From the understanding of Aksum's main stelae field described in Chapter II, Alvares' description unmistakeably mirror the ancient site, with 'houses at the foot of the great obelisk, which is broken' (Ibid., 523). It is clear from his rich and elaborate descriptions that Alvarez was impressed by what he found in Aksum. It is not clear, however, what he at that time believed the scope, significance or age of the observed monuments to be. Rather, he seems to have associated its relative age with that of the contemporary Ethiopian monarchy.

Competing Christians/ the disappointment of Prester John

Alvares' reports on the enigmatic ruins found at Aksum would serve as an inspiration to later explorers' interest in Ethiopia, being used in practice as an unofficial guide to the region. It would, however, equally play an unexpected role in the eventual breaking down of newly established relations. Over the decades of intensifying contact in the political and religious spheres, it became increasingly apparent to the two parties that their respective traditions of Christianity, European Catholicism and Ethiopian Orthodoxy, were considerably different. The Orthodox roots and belief in the Monophysite nature of Jesus Christ that had influenced Ethiopian relations with the Mediterranean powers in antiquity, would do so yet again.

The Portuguese king John III (1521- 1557) had become a champion of the counter-reformation and the Catholic faith. The 'heresies' of Ethiopian Christianity became public with the publication by Alvarez and were becoming widely known (Ramos 2006; 117). Religious wars in Europe during the 16th and 17th century increased the papal call for heterodoxy and Ethiopian Monophysitism became unacceptable to radicalising Catholics believing in the dual nature of Christ (Ramos 2006; 122). Adding to that, the Portuguese powers couldn't help but feel that Prester John turned out to be somewhat disappointing; the Ethiopian kings were indeed potent allies, but not as powerful as the Europeans imagined or the infamous 'letter' described, nor as Christian.

Though the unifying threat of Islam ensured pragmatist attitudes, frustration ensued when the mythical alliance with Prester John meant largely Portuguese forces having to come to the aid of a faltering Ethiopian monarchy (Kurt 2013). But from the Ethiopian perspective, Portuguese aggressive preaching on the 'true faith' had likewise become problematic. Many Ethiopian elites converted to Catholicism, including the emperor himself in 1621. His Catholic court introduced a set of new laws that aimed to uproot Ethiopian Christianity. In 1626 the emperor went as far as pledging allegiance to the pope, breaking centuries of religious alignment with the Coptic church. Mass would be held in Latin, celebrations scrapped or rescheduled, and the calendar became Gregorian (Salvadore 2018). The

arrival of a large group of fathers arrived from Portugal that same year, marked a turning point for the Ethiopian traditionalists. They eventually regained the upper hand when the Catholic emperor died and his son Fasiladas ascended. Not only would the catholic laws be nullified, but the Jesuits would also quickly lose royal favour and be forbidden to preach, were expelled and in some cases even killed. (Ibid.)

At this point, the proposed relation between Prester John, the fabled king of Christendom, and Ethiopia had begun to fade. In some cases their relation was outright denied. Disillusioned Europeans instead came to emphasize not the 'virtue', but the 'otherness' of Ethiopian Christianity and Ethiopia as a whole. Similarly, the Ethiopians got more than they bargained for, and interest in further missions to Europe died down after the Portuguese expulsion. The Ottoman expansion in Northern Africa and the Middle East further strategically undermined contacts between the two Christian spheres, but by this point a mutual sense of distrust had developed. By the second half of the 17th century, exchange and contact between Ethiopia and Europe had dwindled and waned yet again (Salvadore 2018). Though this time, the Europeans would not forget about Ethiopia for too long.

Phase Two: The Age of Colonists & Collectors (1776 – 1945)

The initial rekindling of European Ethiopian relations thus ended abruptly. Europeans and the Portuguese in particular became far more interested in their lucrative discoveries in the further east and American west. Despite the political upheavels, however, individual scholarly interest in Ethiopia remained present in Europe. In time a tradition of research started developing that would evolve in the first archaeological inquiries into the north-western Horn of Africa.

The start of European research on Ethiopia

The study of ancient texts in the 17th and 18th century, including some in Sabaean, lead to the start of a more genuine European historical research of Ethiopia, beginning with the 1681 publication of the *Historia Aethiopica* by Ludolf (Fattovich 2019, 250). Ethiopia, which Ludolf's title professes to have been 'vulgarly, though erroneously, called the Empire of Prester John', provides many insights into the European historical awareness on the ancient Aksumite kingdom. But exactly when Europeans began to comprehend Aksum as an influential ancient kingdom, contemporary to the Roman Empire, is not clearly understood with no historiography yet existing. Ludolf's work, however, shows he directly related his present-day Ethiopia with that of ancient sources. He even seems to reconcile Homeric notions of an Ethiopia split into Asia and Africa with more reliable historic sources at his disposal, noting that the ancients did not so strictly discern between Africa and Asia on account of the Arabian Gulf or Red Sea (Ludolf 1681, 159-160).

What is mentioned of Aksum, is it being the older seat of the current kingdom. Significantly, Ludolf writes that the kings held their court at 'Axuma, the metropolis of Tigra'. The specific usage of the term 'metropolís' to describe Aksum might suggest Ludolf borrowed its appellation from the *Periplus* (Ludolf 1681, 75). Ludolf, shows a clear awareness of ancient sources which discussed the Aksumite

kingdom, yet seems unable to have drawn any conclusions on its ancient nature. An Ethiopian king list from the medieval period, noting kings of ancient Aksum, for instance, is understood to represent kings of the Solomonic dynasty. While Ludolf's account proves invaluable for understanding European perceptions on ancient Aksum, it is clear he was unable to accurately frame it historically.

Yet over the decades, interest in Ethiopia began to shift from potentially housing a Christian kingdom of wealth and high expectations, to that of a Christian kingdom, possibly of Late Antiquity. An interest that prompted visits to Ethiopia itself. From the 18th century, various foreign travellers began visiting the ruins and remains of ancient Aksum described in Alvares' text, which had by then been translated into many European languages (Beckingham 1961). The subsequent European expeditions to Ethiopia, in turn further stimulated European interest in the region through the publications of scenic drawings and illustrations of objects (Munro-Hay 1989, 27).

Nevertheless, just as the lens of Christian heterodoxy had prevented the Portuguese from fostering honest knowledge and understanding of Ethiopian culture and tradition, early archaeological studies of Ethiopia and Aksum seem to have been challenged by the somewhat simultaneous and much larger enthusiasm for Ethiopia's northern neighbour: ancient Egpyt. Initiated by the many scholars and researchers accompanying Napoleon on his Egyptian Expedition in 1798, the descriptions of ancient structures and the deciphering of the hieroglyphic script in 1822, sparked what has been called an 'Egyptomania' (Fritze 2016). In light of archaeology's first great discoveries in Egypt, European scholars ventured evermore southwards in hopes of discovering more ancient ruins or Egyptian artefacts to collect. It is in this context of 'Egyptomania', that the European explorations of Ethiopia would eventually be resumed. A sense of disappointment relative to European expectations was looming yet again.

A large factor in the proposed cultural relation between ancient Egypt and Ethiopia was deduced from the extension of the most defining feature of ancient Egypt's landscape into that of Ethiopia: the Nile. Initial explorations into Ethiopia were in part to find the source of the Nile itself. The Scotsman James Bruce (1730-1794) set out to do just that and his travels eventually took him to the source of the Blue Nile at lake Tana, Ethiopia. Bruce's venture into Ethiopia was largely informed through the previous Portuguese reports, which were then still the main source of information on the country's interior. (This remained the case for the 19th century British explorers. See: Markham 1868). The reports of Bruce's travels provided elaborate and detailed accounts of Ethiopia, its history and people, and take the reader to many ancient sites, including Aksum itself. Far from just descriptions, however, on his return Bruce provided the polite society of London with the first prints of Aksum's stelae described by Alvares (Bruce 1790, 329).

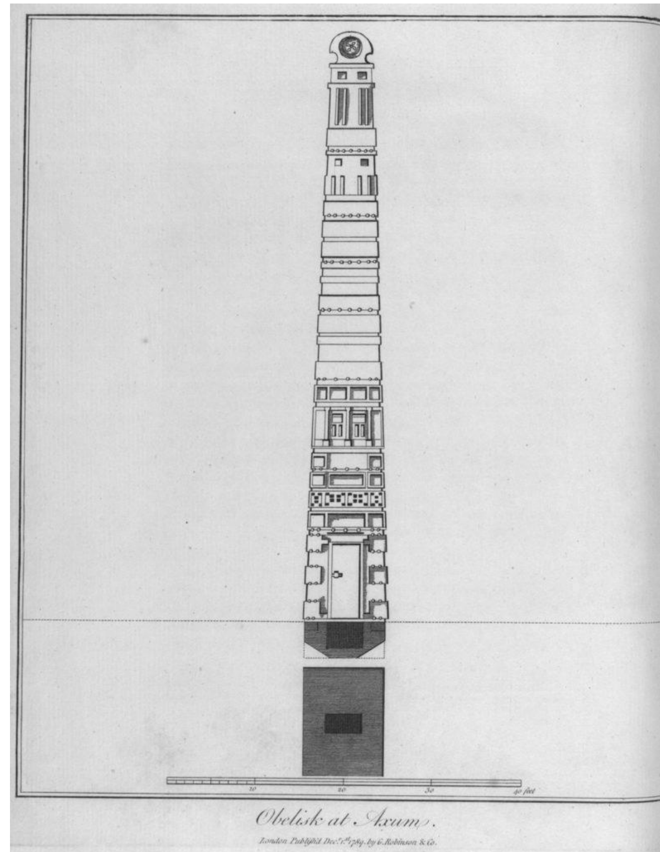


Fig. 35: ‘Obelisk at Axum’ as drawn by and published in Bruce (1790, 321)

Bruce presents his readers with an interesting inquiry into Ethiopian history. He expressed at times an earnest interest in the Ethiopian culture and legacy, but in other moments an unreasonable desire to reduce the Aksumite artefacts he found to Egyptian origin. Emblematic of the prevailing sentiments of his time, he even related the Aksumite stelae in its centre to Ptolemy Euergetes, a third century B.C. ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt (Munro-Hay 1991, 24-25). The only apparent reason for this being that Ptolemy had also founded the Red Sea port of Leuke-Kome, some 1600 kilometres away. He furthermore claims some Egyptian statues were still to be found, as well as the pedestals ‘whereon the figures of the sphinx had been placed’ (Ibid. 25-27). These sphinx pedestals he describes, might refer to the throne bases discussed earlier in chapter II. His particular suspicion was perhaps based on the shape of the socket outlines. Apparently given to him for inspection, he also drew a sketch of an Egyptian ‘Cippus of Horus’. After his particular account, however, this object, which he claims would have to be situated in Aksum, has never been rediscovered (van de Walle 1953).

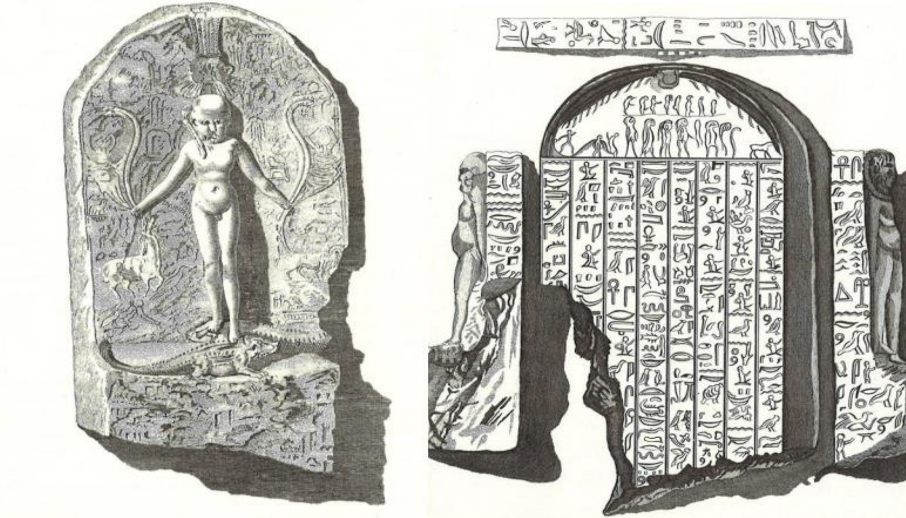


Fig. 36: **'**Cippus of Horus' sketches by James Bruce (1790).

Though not to be read without skepticism, Bruce's accounts of Aksum were of great influence to future European explorers and contemporary scholars alike (Munro-Hay 1991, 25-27). For various reasons. Apprehensive to trust a Scotsmans' reports, it would be an Englishman that endeavored to replicate Bruce's journey and outdo his discoveries (Salt 1814). In his writing, it becomes obvious Henry Salt (1780-1827) sought to disregard or question Bruce's character and descriptions, and equally to trump his understanding of the region and people of Ethiopia. On one apparent occasion, Salt notes being told that the then Emperor, upon his meeting with Bruce, came to fancy and desire his watch. When asked for it, he unsympathetically notes that Bruce had bluntly replied to the emperor: 'is it the custom in this kingdom for a king to beg?' (Salt 1814, 404).

More importantly, however, Salt drew sketches of a collection of objects he found in and around Aksum. The sudden drift to catalogue such objects of interest should be seen in light of museums being established in Europe. Enlightenment thought proposed to make these collections public, which resulted in the 18th century establishment of such institutes as the Louvre (1793) and British Museum (1753) (Sloan 2003, 13). Much prestige was associated with hosting unique collections. Since initial foreign collections were mostly based on Egyptian antiquities, this sheds light on the constant categorisation of the objects then found by Europeans in Ethiopia as 'Egyptian' (MacDonald 2006, 82).

Fig. 37: Ezana Inscription as drawn by Henry Salt (Salt 1814)

While some of the objects Salt writes about are now missing, some objects can actually still be seen in Aksum today, such as the two stone carved waterspouts as shown in figure x. Likewise, it is Salt who makes the first mention of one of the Ezana stones, the two multi-lingual stone markers described in chapter II (see fig. 37). The broken top of the stele of the lances, currently built into the cathedral of Maryam Tseyon, was first recorded and drawn by Salt as well (Munro-Hay 1991, 13). Salt furthermore embellished his travel reports with romanticized paintings of Aksum's monuments and landscapes. It is the recording of such detailed illustrations and landscapes that set Salt apart from Bruce, and ultimately made his account a well-read travelogue on Ethiopian curiosities. His writings, though being more detailed and precise than those by Bruce, suffer the same need to categorize Aksum's material as ancient Egyptian.

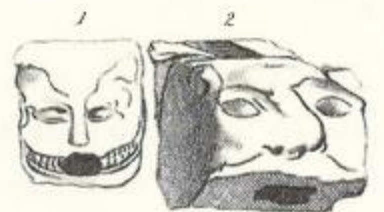


Fig. 38: Photograph depicting waterspout in Aksum (Philipson 1997, 166) and waterspouts as drawn by (Salt 1814)

In his turn sponsored by the French crown, Théophile Lefebvre ventured to 'Abyssinia'. Inspired by the works of his predecessors, his journey would last from 1839 to 1843 (Lefebvre 1845). His expedi-

tion featured early descriptive archaeology at Adulis, which had been mentioned by Salt and later German geographer Eduard Rüppel as the place where ancient metal objects and columns of marble could be found (Zazzaro 2013, 11). On Lefebvre's visit an array of finds and monuments were described, with as much as three types of columns and the remains of three separate churches reportedly found at the site (Peacock and Blue 2007, 36). An important source of information, as explorers half a century later would note the site of Adulis as nearly unrecognizable from Lefebvre's descriptions (Bent 1896, Sündstrom 1907). Archaeologists today are likewise struck by the complete lack of visible remains at the site (Peacock and Blue 2007; Zazzaro 2012).

Colonists and Collectors

The European explorations of Ethiopia, however, would not be immune to ideologies of the time. Far from focusing merely on archaeology, in his report, Lefebvre exposes a distinct socio-cultural shift in Ethio-European relations. This observable shift in attitudes towards Ethiopians is related to changing patterns of hegemony, that would lead Europeans to develop conceptual racism to an extent that allowed Ethiopians, despite their Christianity, to become a target of European colonialism and civilizing ideology (Salvadore 2011, 595). Lefebvre exposed this attitude clearly. Noting in his work, for instance, that for Ethiopia being cut off from Europe meant that its subsequent 'isolation' had 'corroborated his [Ethiopia's] inherent weakness'.[6] A few pages later, commenting on Ethiopian society in general, Lefebvre elaborates that '…its present state shows more decrepitude than any temporary illness.' (Lefebvre 1845, 68-69). Such remarks embody the confirmation of Ethiopia's 'otherness' in the century's colonial spirit. An otherness that was based on the earlier Portuguese stigmatization of Ethiopian Christianity, as Alvares' report remained an important source of information. The skeptical attitude towards the legitimacy of the Ethiopian Church and its teachings described in Alvares' work, kept European distrust alive, and made Europeans openly question whether the Ethiopians were truly Christian. Lefebvre echoes these conceptions, stating that Ethiopian Christianity was '*absolutement*' not comparable to European traditions, but instead rather more akin to Judaism. (Lefebvre 1845, 8).

Interwoven with these developments and a watershed moment in the history of archaeology at Aksum was the British Expedition to Abyssinia of 1868. In a bid to modernize his country, Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros II had sought to establish friendly contacts with the British, who had by then expanded their influence over Egypt. Emperor Tewodros sent a letter to Queen Victoria in 1862, seeking to strengthen relations. His request, however, was left unanswered. The British though it better not to rattle their Egyptian power base, as the Egyptians viewed Ethiopia as a rival in the Red Sea sphere of influence (Pankhurst 1999). Displeased, Tewodros interpreted the silence as a wrongdoing by the British and other Europeans already present at his court, whom he suspected had a personal reason to sabotage him. Defiantly, Tewodros imprisoned them in his capital fortress at Maqdala (Pankhurst 1999).

[6] Lefebvre is here translated by the author. The original text read: 'son isolement a cooroboré sa faiblesse organique'.

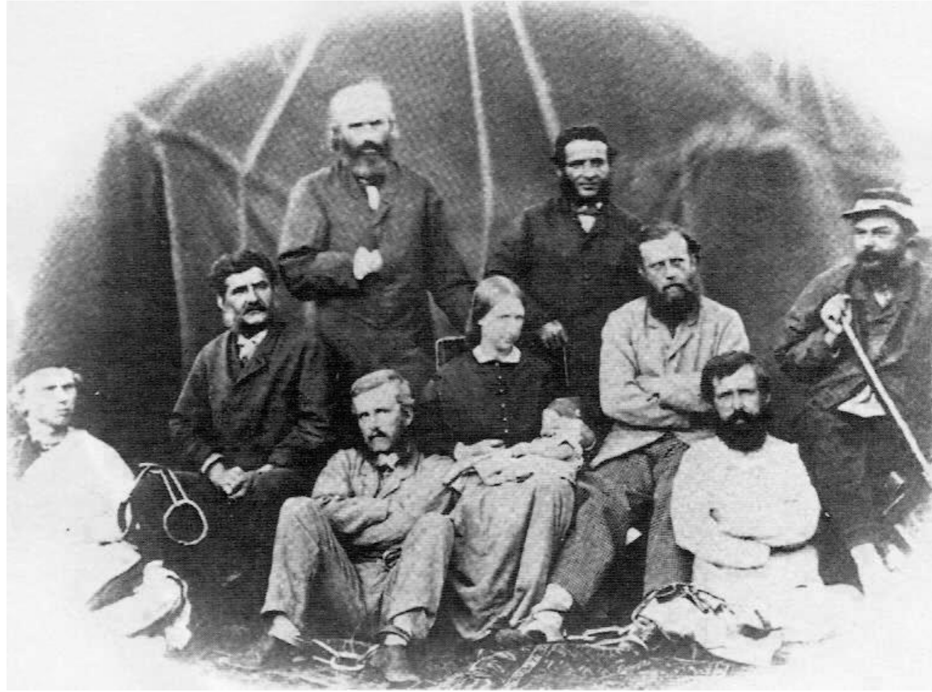


Fig. **39**: The Prisoners of Tewodros II at Maqdala.

Upon hearing this news, the British responded by sending an army southward to Ethiopia and sieging Maqdala. Under the adopted motto ‘never give way to barbarians’, the fortress was quickly surrounded and shelled by British artillery (Peters 2015). In the end, Tewodros, faced by superior British firepower, refused to surrender and took his own life. Since the British would not spend further resources occupying Ethiopia, the emperor’s extensive treasury was then pillaged, and the fortress destroyed entirely (Pankhurst 1999).

The expedition launched what was at least the second largest displacement of artefacts in Ethiopia. As it was from the capital fortress at Maqdala, where Tewodros had begun to centralize both his administration and the country’s wealth. Clements Markham, a British geographer and observer of the events, notes a thousand fine manuscript were taken (Markham 1868, 359). Another American observer notes how the treasures of Maqdala were laid out across the British camp in a confused manner, dotting the road to it for a further two miles (Stanley 1874, 459). Describing what happened next, Sir Richard Holmes notes his acquisition of several precious artefacts, bought from British soldiers he observed hauling them around. One of these, a golden crown, was bought on the spot for four pounds, while a pile of ancient manuscripts offered to him were promptly refused as they were deemed ‘too heavy to carry’.[7] The extent and scope of looting that occurred in 1868 holds ramifications for the state of Ethiopian cultural heritage to this day, with many looted objects remaining in the possession of several British museums despite requests for repatriation (Pankhurst 1999). Private donations of Ethiopian artefacts to cultural institutions still occur regularly in England,

[7] British Museum, Original Papers, XCIV, Registered no. 51.

where descendants of those present at Maqdala come into possession of artefacts that were taken by soldiers and observers then.

The context of these unfortunate events notwithstanding, genuine and accumulating interest also led the British seemed keen to conduct and record archaeological research (relative to the standards of the time) at certain sites in Ethiopa. For this reason, an officially appointed archaeologist of the British Museum was sent with the expedition, while simultaneously launching one of the first recorded excavations at Adulis (Zazzaro 2013). The ruins of Adulis, which were explored on a sub-mission by a party of British soldiers, seems to have evoked a particular sense of wonder, and inspired officers to draw artistic renderings of captivating landscapes. A recurring subject in the drawings of Adulis, are the ruins of a 'Byzantine' church, which were then still visible there (see fig. 40). This will be further discussed below.

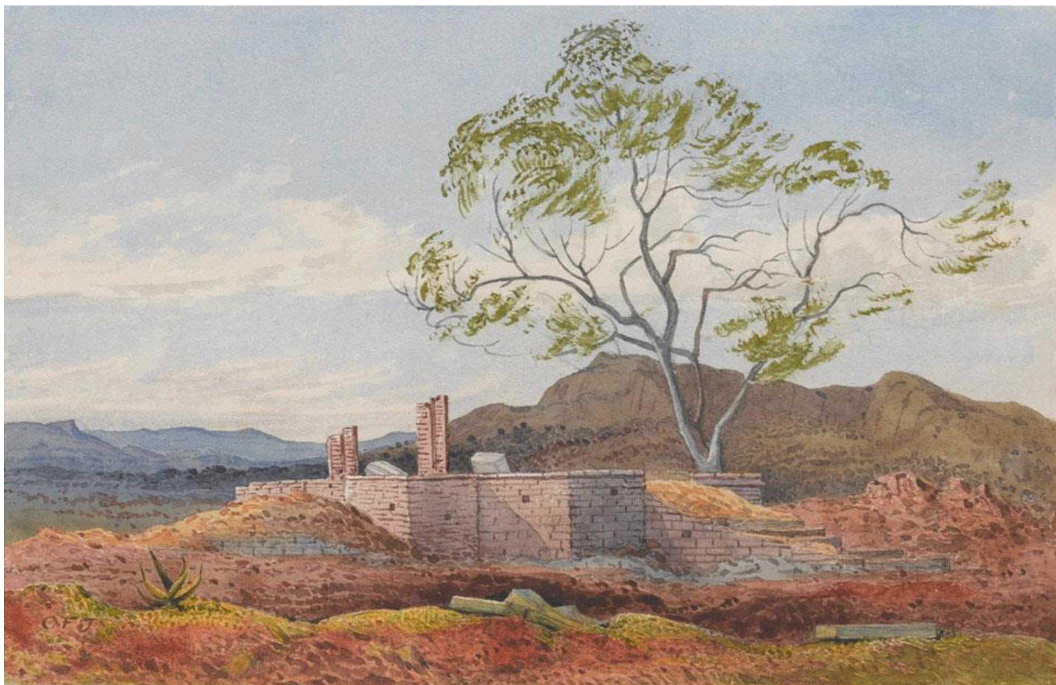


Fig. 40: Ruins at 'Agoole' (presumably Adulis), Tigray. By Captain Cornelius Francis James, Bombay Staff Corps, 1868 (James 1868).

Archaeology and Colonialism in Ethiopia

Despite the expedition dealing a heavy blow to the political power of Ethiopia, the end of the nineteenth century saw the Ethiopian monarchy expanding its borders in virtually all directions. The military subjugation and inclusion of multiple ethnic and religious groups and its positioning as the dominant hegemony in the Horn of Africa has even prompted the question whether the Ethiopian Empire itself was a colonial power or not, with nationalist authors within the Abyssinian Empire describing its authorities as racist and oppressive (Jalata 2010, 21; Zahorik 2017). From a larger African perspective at that time, however, Ethiopia had become a symbol not of colonial oppression, but of colonial resistance. After the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, it was the only African nation not to be subdued by a European colonial power. What solidified its reputation, however, was its

victory in the First Italo-Ethiopian War of 1895-1896 at the battle of Adwa, which had routed colonial attempts by Italy.

The Italians by 1885, had come to steadily colonise and control Eritrea, until reaching its borders with Ethiopia. Seeking long-term friendly relations, as well as a settlement on Italian Eritrea's borders, the Wuchala Treaty was signed in 1890. Owing to the confusion of having the Treaty written in both Amharic and Italian, the Italians believed Ethiopia would *de facto* become its protectorate. But when the Ethiopians firmly denounced the Italians for this misguided interpretation, the Italians sought to forcefully establish their foothold in Ethiopia. It was in this context of imminent aggression that an Ethiopian official warily observed: 'from a black snake's bite you may recover, but when a white snake bites, you will never cure.' (James 2005). Despite initial victories of the Italian invasion army, king Menelik II led his combined forces into battle at Adwa, where the Italians were soundly defeated and driven back. The subsequent treaty of Addis Ababa in 1896 was an embarrassing blow to the Italians and would ensure Ethiopian independence for the next decades. The victory at Adwa thus became a source of hope and symbol of resistance for colonial Africa (Bekerie 1997, Zahorik 2017).

The 20th century would see an escalation in the expansion of European colonial interests in Ethiopia, as well as studies on its archaeology. The study of ancient Ethiopia was greatly accelerated in the 19th century through German, Swedish and French studies on palaeography and Sabaean texts and inscriptions (Conti Rossini 1928, 21). Despite their control over the Eritrean territories, Ethiopian studies were largely abandoned in Italy after the 17th century. Italian scholars thus lacked access to the most recent studies on the area, which were written in several different languages. The revival of Ethiopian studies in Italy came only with the explorations during the 1870-1896 years, with the arrival of Italian scholars such as Paribeni and Conti Rossini, who would come to write some of the foundational studies on Aksumite antiquity (Conti Rossini 1928, 24-25). While the context in which they came to be leading researchers in African antiquity is problematic to say the least, their expertise would lead to radical changes in the understanding of Aksumite antiquity. Conti Rossini (1872-1947) especially became very influential for his understanding of Ethiopian culture in both past and present, studying poems, songs and texts in Ge'ez, Tigré and Harari (Fallon 2006). The Italians, however, who since 1885 were the only European power to control at least partly Abyssinian provinces, were unable to mount any systematic or precise archaeological excavations in those provinces. It was only when the German expedition to Aksum (DAE) was launched in 1906 on behalf of the German government, Italian apprehension to be outdone in the region and prevent encroachment into Italian territory, launched its first large-scale excavation of Adulis under Paribeni (Conti Rossini 1928, 27).

The combination of archaeology and colonialism have left a deep impression on the interpretation of ancient Aksum's cultural significance. Thus far the previous archaeological investigations by the British Expedition, as well as descriptions by Bruce, Lefebvre, Salt and others, had already attested to

the archaeological interest of Adulis and previously unknown surrounding sites (Peacock and Blue 2007, 32; Zazzaro 2013, 11). Perhaps most significantly for the Italians, however, it had already been speculated by Lefebvre and his team that the remains of a structure there featuring marble columns, resembled a strikingly Byzantine design (Lefebvre 1845, 436-440). This was of particular interest to the Italian authorities, who had come to understand the Red Sea region as being heavily influenced by the involvement and presence of the Romans in Egypt and Arabia. Particularly the usage of Greek as a mediating language on coins and certain public inscriptions in cosmopolitan Aksum, was interpreted to be a sign of Mediterranean cultural dominance by European researchers. Potentially uncovering a Byzantine structure would provide further proof supporting the region as flourishing during the Greco-Roman period, which in turn would serve to justify the expansion of colonial occupation in the region (Zazzaro 2013, 13). It is no coincidence that Adulis was the subject of such investigations, since as shown in Chapter II, it is often mentioned in ancient sources as a port where Greeks and Romans would trade.

The translation of Tigrayan texts by Swedish scholars further led to a mission to Eritrea by the Swede Richard Sundström, who became involved in the Paribeni excavation at Adulis (Sundström 1907). Significantly, Sundström managed to identify what he referred to as a 'palace'. The structure largely corresponds to those described by the Deutsche Aksum Expedition (DAE), featuring a central courtyard, large, elevated stone foundations and what appears to be a monumental staircase (see fig. 41). Sundström's account is hard to verify, yet he insisted to have found structures and objects now untraceable. His precise descriptions of the palace architecture are noteworthy, because of his association with the DAE. The DAE was responsible for the excavation and elaborate documentation of multiple palace structures in Aksum. Not only did Sündstrom's descriptions match DAE observations quite strikingly, he was also the only person to have ever described them (Peacock and Blue 2007). Not being permitted by the Italian Colonial authorities to continue his work due to 'unprofessional conduct', Sundström was sent away shortly after his discovery (Conti Rossini 1928, 22).

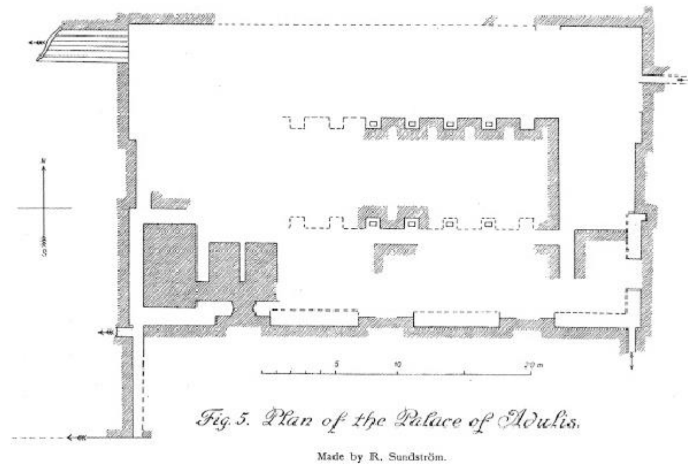


Fig. 41: Plan of the 'palace' as excavated by Sundström in Adulis (Peacock and Blue 2007, 39)

More significant for the study of Aksumite archaeology, as the Italians had feared, was the aforementioned Deutsche Aksum Expedition under Enno Littman in 1906. The DAE was commissioned by the Ethiopian emperor, seeking to aggrandise Ethiopian culture through its religious and cultural history, embodied by the ruins of Aksum, of which the stelae are the most obvious (Dewel 2017, 515). Being the largest and single most important expedition for modern Aksumite archaeology, the DAE was responsible for the excavations revealing most of what is now visible at the archaeological site of Aksum (Munro-Hay 1991, 25-27). The outset of the DAE tremendously increased information and knowledge about the ancient monuments in Aksum. The findings of the expedition, mainly aimed at clearing structures for future planning, have been extensively relied on in the previous chapter for an account of Aksum's monumental architecture through the later publication of Phillipson (1997) and as such its findings will not be discussed in detail here.

Italian Ethiopia and Aksumite heritage

Progression of the 20th century unfortunately saw archaeology become mobilised in the construction of national identities in increasingly violent political thinking. Eventually, this would leave Aksumite heritage vulnerable to the exploits of colonial powers. The rise of Fascism in Italy was fuelled by rhetoric of a return to the great Roman past, professed and exploited by Benito Mussolini. A mission that would be openly embraced by Italian archaeologists. The renowned Conti Rossini, anxiously awaiting Italy's return to glory, would write at the time that 'soon, through the great Italian spirit declared at the dawn of a new prosperous century, things will change' (Conti Rossini 1928, 28). Paribeni, the lead Itlian excavator at Adulis, expressed a more pronounced role for archaeology in Mussolini's expansionist ambitions in Africa. Commenting on the state of the Eritrean territories from the conviction that it was once a Roman possession, he would write that: 'the restitution of their past might be helpful for the future glory of the Italian nation.' (Paribeni 1907, 572).

Under Mussolini, the Italian ambitions culminated in the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-1937). Aside from territorial gain, the war in Ethiopia likewise offered Mussolini the opportunity to distract

his people from the failings of his regime, while gaining prestige as a conqueror. The choice to invade Ethiopia was a calculated move, motivated in part by the symbolic desire to resurrect notions of ancient Rome through the conquest of Aksum, and undo the shameful defeat at Adwa (Bekerie 1997; Mallet 2015, 65). Aksum itself, though not of main strategic concern, was made one of three prime military targets (Mallet 2015, 219). The delicate European balance of power in 1935 meant that France and Britain would not protest Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, since both were relying on Italian forces as an important counterbalance against a quickly emerging Nazi-Germany (Strang 2013, 13). The Italians were finally left to deal with Ethiopia as they wished.

Beyond the ramifications for archaeology in Ethiopia and at Aksum, the Second Italo-Ethiopian War would prove to be both destructive and cruel beyond measure for the Ethiopian people. Executions were carried out indiscriminately and gas bombs terrorised both military and civilian targets alike, as hundreds of thousands of Italian troops were sent across the Ethiopian-Eritrean border by Mussolini (Strang 2013, Grip and Hart 2009, González-Ruibal 2010). Though it took Mussolini significantly more manpower than expected, the myth of Adwa was brutally and consciously shattered (Mallet 2015, 218-220; McClellan 1996).

After their victory, the Italians were keen to establish their presence in the landscape. Along the borders of their controlled territory, they installed stone markers carrying Italian inscriptions and referencing Rome and Fascist symbols borrowed from antiquity (see fig. 42). A sense of the ancient past was evoked in the justification of Ethiopia's colonisation, deliberately creating a false sense of continuity with the ancient past through visible landmarks. After having held out as an independent nation for many decades, Ethiopia had now finally been reduced to a colonial dominion (Zahorik 2017, Bekerie 1997).

Fig. 42: West African Frontier Force soldiers removing Italian stonework marking the border with Sudan.[8]

Far from merely adding landmarks, however, the Italian occupiers were just as eager to remove them. Mussolini, seeking to embellish his stature by supplying Rome with foreign booty as ancient Rome's emperors had done, brought stele 2, the second largest stele to have stood in Aksum, to his capital in 1937 (Hagos 2014, Pankhurst 1999). It was re-erected there in 1938 on the Piazza di Porta Capena in Rome, as part of Mussolini's staged triumph celebrating the fifteenth year since his rise to power. It would, however, be kept well into the 21st century (Pankhurst 1999, Phillipson 1996). Its final return only occurred in 2008, despite many earlier promises and attempted agreements between the Ethiopian and Italian government. Italian officials sabotaged the return, on one occasion stating its removal would 'distress the Italian people' and suggesting it be better kept by 'the people of Italy' as a 'token of friendship' between the two nations (Hagos 2014, Pankhurst 1999; 237). When, in preparation of its return, the sele's original base was searched for in excavation, it was easily recognized by the wealth of Italian beer bottles found in the site's refill (Philipson 1997, 2). A seemingly common phenomenon in excavating Fascist Italian sites in Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2010, 558-560).

The Italian occupation as a whole left a great mark on Aksumite heritage, as the city of Aksum was structurally robbed to an immense extent for multiple years. The dramatic case of stele 2 presents just one of many incidents. Not just Mussolini, but virtually all of colonial Italy's officials, had taken it to themselves to decorate their villas in Italy with loot from Ethiopia. The first viceroy, Pietro Badoglio,

[8] The West African Frontier Force in East Africa, 1941 E2003 - Second Italo-Ethiopian War - Wikipedia

having built his villa with money taken from the Bank of Abyssinia, shipped at least 300 precious items to it using military aircrafts. Similar incidents occurred with the second viceroy and the Minister of Italian Africa himself, each taking reported truck-loads full of artefacts to their personal estates in the Italian countryside. All of the artefacts that disappeared in this period remain largely unaccounted for to this day (Pankhurst 1999, 235; Sbacchi 1985, 45-60). It is thus that this second phase in archaeology at Aksum comes to be defined by both thrilling archaeological discoveries, as well as the extensive looting and displacement of artefacts and entire monuments at the will of colonists and collectors coming in from Europe.

Phase Three: Present Aksumite Archaeology (1941 – present)

This part of the chapter aims to present critical observations relating to the current practice of archaeology at Aksum. Most significant studies since the 1940's, however, have been cited before. Discussing all recent excavations at Aksum would require a challenging presentation of many well and poorly documented excavations based on the above-described national research traditions. An endeavour that would be complex and outside of the scope of this research and should be a research project in and of itself. Instead what will be discussed here are the broad outlines of the current factors impacting Aksumite archaeology, that in this research is identified as phase three: the time period roughly from the end of the Second World War up until the present.

Discerning the main trends, a context is given in which the archaeological excavations from the 1940's onwards, referenced in Chapter II, the objects discussed in Chapter IV and the state of Aksumite heritage in Chapter V can be understood. This phase is complex and hard to reconstruct in the same way that can be done for the previously identified phases, due to lack of source organisation, accessibility and especially historiographic research. As mentioned previously, faithfully reconstructing all archaeological excavations and reproduce their reports will have to fall into the scope of a separate, dedicated research project.

The eventual progression of the Second World War and the defeat of Italian forces in Africa, saw the independence of Ethiopia restored under the Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Sellassie in 1941. The period that ensued after 1941, can be discerned by the steady development of consistent archaeological practice and its associated professional institutions in the country. Further characterising this phase of present Aksumite archaeology are three important phenomena that have shaped its development trajectory, and continue to do so in unfortunate manners.

The first identified characteristic of phase three is the involvement in Aksumite archaeology of mainly foreign institutions and research centres. This is chiefly caused by the rather late establishment of any official archaeological institute in Ethiopia (1952), that prevented any large-scale excavations or research to be led by local authorities. Countries responsible for excavations beside Ethiopia are

mainly Britain, the USA, France and notably Italy. Introducing these contexts of collaboration is useful for understanding data presented in the next chapter.

While much research has been done by the combined effort of many national agencies, a major current issue in research on ancient Aksum has been the result of this. The disunited approach that has characterised excavations from the 1950's has led, as has been observed by lead Aksumite archaeologist D.W. Phillipson, to the perpetuated issue of diffuse research traditions and clustered research agendas (Phillipson 2012, 5-6). This uncoordinated nature of archaeology in Ethiopia and the region of Aksum, has led to uneven employment of dating methods; inaccessible articles in a variety of languages published in obscure journals, and other peculiar circumstances, such as archaeological sites being discovered twice in the span of just two decades (Phillipson 2009, 262).

The second characteristic of this period, and compounding the observed existent , are the lamentable interludes confronting archaeology at Aksum, caused by the outbreak of armed conflict in the region. The recurrence of war and political instability in Ethiopia, has prevented the sustained efforts of archaeological excavation at Aksum, and has instead dissuaded many archaeologists from working in the region over extended periods of time due to its inaccessibility (These periods include roughly: The Derg Era 1974-1991; Ethiopian-Eritrean War 1998-2000; Tigray War 2020-present). Survey data in 1974 for instance, was adversely affected by the Communist Revolution and introduction of the Derg Era in Ethiopia by that year and caused one of the most significant studies in decades to be called off early (Michels 2005, Munro-Hay 1991). Aksum's inaccessibility between 1970-1991, made studies limited to epigraphic materials recorded decades or even centuries earlier (Phillipson 2009, 261).

The third phenomenon here identified followed the independence of Eritrea in 2000. Resulting from yet another war, the official split between Eritrea and Ethiopia now underlines an apparent need for two separate archaeological traditions. Especially in Eritrea, recent findings are used to mobilise a sense of Eritrean history and downplay the importance of Aksum as a controlling capital of an ancient empire, based in Ethiopia (Ministry of Information of Eritrea 2011). This is especially problematic, since the important coastal region of the ancient Aksumite kingdom is now Eritrean, whereas Aksum itself remains part of contemporary Ethiopia. Apparent attempts by researchers in Eritrea to promote ideas of distinguishable archaeological cultures between the two regions in their publications (Curtis 2010, Schmidt 2009; 315) has caused a strong response. Recognizing a desire by Eritreans to establish a distinct archaeological canon in light of their still recent independence from Ethiopia, Fattovich once responded to observations that 'such an extreme approach may please some Eritrean intellectuals and politicians and those who worship at the altar of political correctness' (Fattovich 2008, 347).

Being a product of these tension, whilst simultaneously guaranteeing its endurance, the persistence and deep-rootedness of political tensions are made visible in the Tigray War, that involves both the Eritrean and Ethiopian government. The conflict has sparked a fierce war of propaganda on both sides,

in which ancient history is not left out, instead becoming a focus of it (Ministry of Information of Eritrea 2022). Not only does this current conflict emphasize the destructive interruption of the development of archaeology at Aksum, it furthermore poses a critical threat to the site of Aksum itself, which has been the centre stage for bombardments and executions in multiple stages of the war (BBC News 2021a, 2021b). Such conflict, lack of ongoing research and lack of potential for research in the foreseeable future, will undoubtedly dismay many potential archaeologists to study the ancient kingdom, when research is already in a fragile state. Though the Tigray War has seen a resolution twice, each attempt at peace has ultimately proven insufficient so fat. Since the start of the conflict, scant archaeological reporting has taken place and the status of Aksum's archaeological heritage remains largely unconfirmed. Lacking the ability to further and/or meaningfully comment on this situation, this thesis will instead refer to its understanding of Aksum's conservation in the present on its study of Aksumite heritage management in Chapter V.

Conclusion

The trading system survived the transition from Rome to Constantinople as the seat of Mediterranean empire, but finally fell after the rapid Islamic Expansion. Disconnected from its fellow Christian powers, Aksum's kingdom fell into pieces and isolation. A tumultuous period of power shifts finally saw gradual, periodic political consolidation; long enough to start seeking formal engagement with the Christian kingdoms of Europe who had by then become aware of Christians in Africa through their crusading efforts in the eastern Mediterranean. The ensuing political and cultural engagements from as early as the fragile first contacts in the 14th century, would prove fundamental and lasting for future developing relations over the centuries. Headed in their quest to find a mythicized figure 'Prester John' who would aid the crusaders against Islam, the eventual European locating of him in Ethiopia led it to be subjected to projections of high expectations of Catholic piety, and images of wealth and power. Upon learning of the true state of Ethiopia's military capabilities and branch of Christianity, European excitement turned to disillusionment. By reducing Ethiopian Orthodoxy to strange and other, first by the 16th century Portuguese and successively, yet consistently, by other European explorers such as Lefebvre, a sense of distrust towards the Ethiopians was permeated in the European psyche. Similarly for the Ethiopians for that matter.

Building on these observations, the eventual emerging interest of Europeans in Aksum and Ethiopia as potential sites of material collecting and archaeology, was founded on misguided preconceptions of what these prospects would yield to Europeans. Instead of an honest archaeological inquiry, explorers came to find further offshoots of the enigmatic Egyptian civilization amidst the 18th – 19th century phase of 'Egyptomania'. Accounts of the explorers such as Henry Salt led to the fundamental misconception of civilization in the Northwestern Horn of Africa as uninteresting or developed largely due to external cultural influences. Greek, found in multilingual inscriptions and on coins throughout the Aksumite territories, gradually through the 19th century came to be seen as proof of Mediterranean

supremacy, and led to short sighted conclusion that church complexes along the Eritrean coast must be Byzantine, and reduced Adulis to a colony founded by the Ptolemies. Ignoring those coastal settlements involvement in supra-regional trade networks over millennia. Mixed with religious misconceptions, this attitude let to the significance of Aksumite civilization being dismissed before it was ever considered.

Caused by, yet also enhancing these phenomena, Ethiopia came into conflict with the rise of European colonialism. After holding out for many decades, Ethiopia was finally submitted to Italian Fascism. The impact of this period and the earlier colonial intrusions by the British on Aksumite heritage cannot be overstated and is felt to this day. Where Ethiopia was once sought out by the European powers as a potential ally against a common threat, it would now be stripped of its most prized possessions. Golden artefacts, thousands of manuscripts, even entire monuments would be shipped off by British and later Italian forces. Episodes of unchecked looting under an indifferent colonial system saw many artefacts of Aksumite brilliance being shipped off to the obscure private collections of British officers, Italian colonial administrators or simply disappear without a trace recorded.

Ironically, the significance of Aksumite antiquity would in the end be implicitly recognized by the Italian colonial regime. Yet purely for selfish reasons. Conjuring the image of a powerful Aksumite kingdom which was a rival to ancient Rome, its monuments were seized as the booty of empire. The conscious kidnapping of cultural symbols, not the least of which was the displacement of stele 2, sought to prove to Italians, and Mussolini himself in particular, that the grandeur of Rome had not faded, but indeed returned. Fascist stonework, heavily borrowing from Roman epigraphy and symbolism, would come to be placed visibly in the landscape, and Italian archaeologists published on ancient Aksum as being part of the Roman system, through which they explicitly justified occupation.

The scale of these displacements is confirmed through this research's tracking and description of material artefacts currently in possession of museums throughout Europe and North America. Many considerable collections currently not being part of any research project or effort, or having been sufficiently catalogued, speaks to the lamentable state of material conservation and public awareness of Aksumite archaeology. The above summarized and detailed narrative of attitudes towards Ethiopians by Western powers, from the early medieval period to the 1950's, is able to argue and explain broadly a wide array of contemporary issues relating to the archaeological heritage of Aksum. It has placed the devastation of Aksum's material heritage in the context of a developing colonial attitude from Western powers, intensifying through the 19th and 20th century, while at the same time rooting the understanding of looting, symbolic placement, or misplacement of objects firmly within the protracted history of relations between the Horn of Africa and the Mediterranean powers.

Chapter IV: Aksumite Material in Museum Collections

Introduction

Having discussed the history of Aksum and the history of archaeology at the site, context has been given to its collecting history from a European perspective. From the inception of collecting Aksumite heritage, it has suffered from lack of documentation and collection organisation. Yet, following this context, material collections can be traced by identifying the specific researchers and national institutes of those countries involved in archaeology ay Aksum. Of the institutions knowingly in possession of Aksumite collections, many questions remain over their size, provenance and importance, and many are mistakenly labelled as being Egyptian or Sudanese cultures. Furthermore, virtually none of these collections are as of now systematically investigated or verified or made available to the public. Specifically lack of digitalisation is a limitation posed to this chapter, as it relies on digitalisation of museum catalogues to reconstruct an overview of Aksumite museum collections. It should also be noted that only a fraction of the artefacts listed as 'Aksumite' in the British Museum, for instance, are adequately digitalised, meaning no picture or sufficient description is offered to identify objects. It is beyond the scope of this research to provide detailed accounts of the inventory of these collections based on artefact types or materials. Instead, a global overview will be provided, focussing mostly on the unique or telling pieces each collection holds against the historic backdrop provided. This overview will be made per country, subdivided further by institutions. Though the main concern here is Aksumite artefacts, what can strictly be considered as 'pre-Aksumite' is also discussed here because of the argued relevance of the pre-Aksumite period. Materials that are related to archaeology or research at Aksum, such as photographic archives, will also be noted for the purpose of this research's outreach strategy in Chapter VI.

It should be noted that several museums can either be linked to Aksumite collections or are somewhat likely to have them. An already obscured initial provenance, paired with a large diffusion of art markets, have made for the rather unexpected acquisition of artefacts in seemingly incidental museum collections. The Museo Africano in Madrid for instance, has a collection of Christian art with several objects being listed as Ethiopian, such as crosses of wood and bronze and manuscripts. These types of objects are often described in the historic episodes of artefact looting in Ethiopia, yet not provided with history of acquisition, provenance or even dated by the Museo Africano.[9] Objects such as these were among the most prominently featured in the Maqdala looting episode. Aksumite collection research is not only complicated by the diverse international communities in possession of its artefacts, but also the fact that the formerly Aksumite territories presently are split in Ethiopian and Eritrean territories, which has likewise caused a split in collections (Zazzaro 2013, 31).

[9] For general overview of this collection, see: Museo Africano. (n.d.). Arte Cristiano. Retrieved from https://www.museoafricano.es/arte-cristiano

For clarity and organisational purposes, all media and database entries are listed in appendices, not in the bibliography. This is to ensure accessible overview of the databases as they are referred to in this research. The British Museum and BIEA are sorted in separate bibliographies due to the amount of entries referred to.

British Collections

The British collections are connected to the colonial history in Eastern Africa and the British Expedition to Abyssinia. The activities of the British forces there, both recorded and unrecorded, made for the large-scale displacement of objects both small and sizeable. The British Museum hosts an array of Aksumite or pre-Aksumite collections accumulated over an extended period of time following these events. These collections in the case of the British Museum have been catalogued according to provenance in their digital catalogue. Hence, these collections shall be discussed separately yet under the shared designation of British Museum. It should be mentioned again, as noted in Chapter III, that many artefacts looted during the British Expedition to Abyssinia likely remain in private possession.

The British Museum (Theodore Bent)

An intriguing collection in the British Museum is a set of inscriptions collected by Theodore Bent, a British of the late 19th century, likely during his travels in Ethiopia. The collection was donated to the museum by Bent's wife after his passing ('block' in Appendix A).[10] The provenance and object description causes for some confusion relating to discussions on South-Arabian influences in the north-western Horn of Africa, during the discussed pre-Aksumite period. The inscriptions have apparently been found at Yeha, a monumentalised site of both pre-Aksumite and Aksumite times. Bent who visited Aksum, might have also visited Yeha, as he had also visited other sites such as Adulis (Munro-Hay 1989, 44). The production of the inscriptions, however, has been described as Yemeni in origin. Ryckmans has argued that Hadramawt provenance (Yemen), is a likely source of provenance, yet no conclusive proof of this since can be given. Confusingly, inscriptions within the same collection are also attested to have been found in Yeha. There is a clear archaeological context that would support their origination from north-western Africa (Ryckmans 1955, 3). Other objects, discussed by Ryckman as well, are all noted as having been found in Yeha, yet produced in Yemen ('stela' in Appendix A). While no conclusive remarks can be given, it is clear the objects are currently not well understood. Comments on its production, seeing its provenance, seem highly unlikely and were probably made in the understanding of a more dominant role for South-Arabians in Ethiopia, as discussed in Chapter II.

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[10] Entries from the British museum collections are organized in Appendix A under 'British Museum online database entries'. In text reference will be made to Appendix A and the object description.

Fig. 43: Two Sabaean inscriptions of the 'Bent collection', found in Yeha, kept in the British Museum ('stela' and 'religious/ritual equipment' in Appendix A).

The British Museum (Goodfellow-Adulis)

Aksumite archaeology effectively started in 1868 with the operations of the British army during the British Expedition to Abyssinia, of which finds then made at the site of Adulis are still in the British Museum depot (Zazzaro 2013, 31). The expedition, however, brought not just soldiers, but also an officially appointed archaeologist: Sir Richard Holmes (Munro-Hay 1989, 45). Describing the looting at Maqdala in 1868, Sir Richard Holmes notes the acquisition of several artefacts, bought from British soldiers he observed hauling them around. One of these, a golden crown, was bought on the spot for 4 pounds, while a pile of ancient manuscripts offered to him were promptly refused as they were deemed too heavy to carry.[11] Holmes said to have purchased himself only a single coin. Indeed, there is exactly one coin attributed to him in the British Museum collection ('coin' in Appendix A). Yet, there are a great many gold and silver chalices, crosses, cups and ritual items listed under his name in the collection ('Sir Richard Rivington Holmes' in Appendix A).

Holmes was also involved in the excavations at Adulis during the British Expedition to Abyssinia, after he was refused permission to go to Aksum by the expedition commanders. The excavations at Adulis were performed by Goodfellow, who was a captain in the royal engineers. At Adulis, Holmes described the interesting remains of what appeared to be a 'Byzantine' church, mentioned in Chapter II:

> 'Next morning I rode over to the ruins and examined the building the plan of which he had laid bare. This I at once saw to be an early Byzantine church. The east end was apsidal and the columns square like those of Dongolo and Agula. Fragments of

[11] British Museum, Original Papers, XCIV, Registered no. 51.

carved marble, among them a cross, were found and preserved. These remains have been forwarded to the Secretary of State for India.' (Munro-Hay 1989, 46)

Fig. 44: Self portrait of Holmes at the enigmatic 'Byzantine' ruins at Adulis ('drawing by Sir Richard Rivington Holmes' in Appendix A).

The mention of such a structure is one of many remarkable finds in the area that are now deemed to have been completely lost. The structure has been documented in multiple landscape paintings, including a self-portrait by Holmes (see fig. 44). The accuracy of this depiction can be measured by comparison to another drawing produced by Captain Cornelius Francis James, who was with the Expedition as part of the Bombay Staff Corps (see fig. 44, Chapter III).

Fig. 45: Column and column capital excavated in Adulis in 1868 ('architecture; column' in Appendix A).

In contrast to other lost structures, elements of the described Adulis church have actually been taken completely, and are now in the British Museum. A somewhat problematic observation made by the author of this thesis, is that the structural elements taken from Adulis are merely referred to as 'Early

Byzantine' in the online database. In fact, despite clear historical context and documentation as to their African provenance, they are therefore categorised as part of the 'European' department ('architecture; column' in Appendix A).

The claim that these structures were fully Byzantine and not at least in part of Aksumite origin, is argued on the basis of stylistic resemblance with Byzantine structures, mainly the floral motifs. An assumption that will be challenged in this section and argued further along in this chapter on the basis of material evidence. Although the stylistic denomination based on resemblance is not without merit, there is clear and abundant evidence for similarly decorated marble and ivory fragments at Aksum and many other Aksumite sites, though in this case they are not considered.

Fig. 46a: Example of an ivory panel, decorated with floral motifs. Kept in the BIEA, Nairobi ('B /882\ details, ivory panel' in Appendix B).

Like the Byzantines, Aksumite objects can be observed to have been made using floral patterns in framed, linear spaces (Phillipson 1997, 152) (see fig. 46a and 46b). Though Early Byzantine influence can be argued, it seems a very large and perhaps inappropriate leap to suggest this structure is completely Byzantine in origin, seeing how discussions on similar matters of shared design for the

pre-Aksumite period, have shifted to accommodate more pronounced, local influences. Another example of floral motifs to decorate Aksumite objects can be found in figure 47.

Fig. 46b: Decorated marble in the British Museum, excavated at Adulis and dated 6th century (left) ('sculpture' in Appendix A). Column built into the Cathedral at Aksum, believed to have been part of a 'throne' structure (right) (Munro-Hay 1989).

The British Museum (Munro-Hay Tringali Collection)

The unofficial 'Munro-Hay collection'; a 1989-1990 purchase of many different objects by the British Museum from Italian archaeologist G. Tringali through Dr. Munro-Hay, who was a leading researcher and archaeologist specialised in Ethiopia and Southern Arabia with a particular interest in the archaeology of the ancient Aksumite kingdom. His first publication on the subject was his 1978 dissertation 'A History and Reappraisal of the Aksumite State from Numismatic and Archaeological Evidence', in which he reassessed the site's chronology. He subsequently published works of great importance in the following years on the excavations at Aksum led by Dr. Neville Chittick in 1974, and the coinage of Aksum. Munro-Hay was the author of the British Museum catalogue detailing their Aksumite coin collection. His works are still of great importance for understanding Aksum as an archaeological site.

The unofficial 1989-1990 Munro-Hay collection represents one of the most recently acquired collections of Aksumite artefacts from Ethiopia. The collection boasts a multitude of various objects, ranging from necklaces and earrings to the typical coarse red ware pottery of Aksum. The roughly 104 objects this collection is made, were bought from locally based collector G. Tringali through Dr. Munro-Hay.[12] While the objects listed as part of this purchase are mostly incomplete and fragmentary. When one seeks to delve deeper into this Munro-Hay collection, the complete lack of information on the collection itself, aside from the just as fragmentary and incomplete object descriptions listed on the online database of the British Museum, becomes apparent. The objects are all deemed part of the 'Egypt/Sudan' department and are presented in the online database merely through a key descriptive

[12] This estimate is unofficial and based on the counting of Aksumite objects in the British Museum online database, bought from G. Tringali through Dr. Munro Hay.

term. Virtually all pottery sherds are listed as 'bowl', while everything else is promptly described as 'bead', 'jewellery', 'vessel', 'sample' or even just 'artefact'. Furthermore, not a single object in this collection has a photograph published and many lack descriptions at all. Even the more intriguing objects, such as the strangely ambiguous 'game piece(?)', come with remarkably vague descriptions. In this case: 'Pottery disc with central perforation.' ('bead (?); game piece (?)' in Appendix A). Not surprisingly, there is no work or research currently being done on these objects. For the past 32 years since its purchase, the Munro-Hay collection has not been on display and has been kept in the museum depot.

The collection in itself thus leaves and poses more questions than it could possibly answer under current circumstances. A particular interesting question, however, is regarding the object provenance. Officially, excavation finds are to be reported to the Ethiopian Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage. According to a story by the former Professor for Museums and Heritage of Aksum University, however, the agency often knowingly refuses to take responsibility for these material finds, especially those found fortuitously. Partly because of the agency's inefficiency and even incompetence, a sizeable black market for Ethiopian archaeological artefacts can be found in the modern city of Aksum itself (Walker 2019). While there is no available record on how the objects have been required by either Munro-Hay or the British Museum, it is not unlikely they were acquired through these markets as part of a rescue operation, or neglected findings from excavations at Aksum by G. Tringali around 1987. These questions remain for the time unanswered as the collection sits unresearched in the British Museum depot.

The British Museum (Coin purchases and donations)

Coins are one of the most important sources of Aksumite chronology and perhaps present the type of object most frequently found in Aksumite collections. The Britsh Museum hosts a great number of Aksumite coins. These have been studied and catalogued by Munro-Hay in the published *Catalogue of the Aksumite Coins in the British Museum*. Two collections can be discerned from the many coins listed on the British Museum online database. One of them is the collection accumulated by Roger Brereton, who lived in Ethiopia. His coin collection was purchased by the British Museum in 1989 and contains hundreds of coins, among which some very rare editions ('Roger Brereton' in Appendix A).

British Institute in Eastern Africa, Nairobi

The British Institute in Eastern Africa has been an important institution for the organisation of excavations at Aksum. Two of the last major publications on excavations in Aksum were led by Dr. Neville Chittick for the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) in 1972-1974 and the 1991 expedition led by D.W. Phillipson. The findings of the 1972-1974 excavations were only published more than ten years after their conclusion, in 1989 (Munro-Hay 1989). This was due to the hasty conclusion the expedition experienced, with the onset of the first Ethiopian civil war from 1974. In his eulogy, Philipson wrote that Chittick always intended to continue his excavations, but after his death,

the team had dispersed and Munro-Hay was tasked with writing the report (Philipson 2005). This delay in reporting, as well as the falling apart of the excavation team, political upheaval and, shortly after, the passing of Munro-Hay himself, has caused the excavation and its materials to be somewhat forgotten about.

Upon researching the BIEA databases, it was found that the institute holds a rather stunning amount of records, plans and documented materials from its series of excavation at its repository in Nairobi. The online repository lists a total of 12935 objects, photos, plans, etc.[13] Significantly, the collection of photographs associated with these excavations, and of its collections, have been digitalised as part of the Aluka Project, a resource now published on JSTOR (Isaacman, Lalu and Nygren 2005). The collections showcases a myriad of objects completely out of the scope of current research efforts, and references objects otherwise not accounted for in Aksumite archaeology, such as ceramic replicas of Aksumite structures (see fig. x), metal objects; (some of which resemble belt buckles, *fibulae*) swords, knives, spears, keys, carved ivory (furniture and figurines) and much more. Objects referenced as part of the Tomb of the Brick Arches excavation are currently kept here. These are significant in particular, because these excavations produced some of the only known examples of worked ivory found for Aksumite archaeological contexts. The collection contains a great amount of individual pieces and fragments (see fig. 47). It likewise contains many other objects unresearched

Fig. 47: Two examples of carved ivory in the BIEA repository; a figurine (left) ('B /1617\ - 'Venus of Aksum' - ivory – obverse' in Appendix B) and a panel with flower motifs (right) ('B /883\ - ivory panel (lower) - detail of carving' in Appendix B).

Ashmolean Museum

The Ashmolean Museum houses a large collection of Aksumite coins. Approximately 600 coins are held by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. These have been studied and published in the 2016 *Sylloge of Aksumite coins in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* by Wolfgang Hahn and Vincent West.

French Collections

French excavators have been involved in research at Aksum or Aksumite sites such as Matara and Adulis from the 19th century. French archaeologists have, however, been transporting significant archaeological finds from field research to the Museum of the Archaeological Section of Addis Ababa

[13] For full database access, see: British Institute in Eastern Africa - Nairobi. (n.d.). in JSTOR: Axum Archive. <British Institute in Eastern Africa, Axum Archive on JSTOR>

(to what was then still Imperial Abyssinia) since at least 1955 (Caquot and Drewes 1955). Despite the name of this sub-chapter, there are as such no substantial collections of Aksumite artefacts in France as far as this author can find. French archaeologists and institutes have, however, been very involved in Ethiopia's archaeology and the foundation of that country's own cultural institutions. So much so, in fact, that through French archaeological reporting, the inventory of Ethiopian institutions becomes clear, despite lack of recent reporting by those institutions themselves. An example is the excavations published by Caquot and Drewes. Their finds contained: A statue and base (see fig. 59), fragments of an altar, tripod altars in alabaster metal objects and metal cups (Caquot and Drewes 1955). Finds of excavations Institut Ethiopien d'archéologie led by Francis Anfray in 1961 and 1962 are also kept in the National Museum Addis Abeba (Zazzaro 2013, 31). Anfray himself has been very involved in setting up the earliest museums in Ethiopia during the 1960's. In a 1965 publication, he reported with a large amount of pictures, as to the contents of the Asmara Museum collection (Anfray 1965).

As observed, despite the extensive involvement of French authorities, institutes and researchers in the region's archaeology from the 1950's onwards, no public collections on Aksumite materials seem to be present in current French (public) collections. In 1976, when the *Laboratoire de Recherche des Musées de France* issued an investigation on pre-Aksumite and Aksumite pottery, the fragments analysed from sites as Matara, Adulis, Yeha and Aksum itself were all 'envoyée pour analyse'. The report states the sherds came from Ethiopia, which at that time still included Eritrea (Gautier 1976). It is not fully clear from the report if they were subsequently sent back, and indeed if they came from an Ethiopian institution or the region in general, but no known French collection is referenced in this research. There is, however, a collections hosted by France in Ethiopia itself in the Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes (CFEE).[14] There is a permanent exhibition there since 2014 in partnership with ARCCH, though these do not seem to include Aksumite artefacts, judging from the online source.

Some interesting and unique collections, it should be noted, are still kept in French museums. One of these is a photo collection made on a linguistic mission to Ethiopia by Marcel Cohen around 1910, as seen in the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac. These include many pictures of the Aksumite throne bases spread about the city and offer great material for studying the state of conservation of Aksum's monuments over time (see fig. 48).[15]

[14] For an overview of this collection, see: Centre français des études éthiopiennes (CFEE). (n.d.). La céramique de Mota (Éthiopie) [Webpage]. Retrieved from :
<https://cfee.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article34&lang=fr>
[15] For an overview of this collection, see : Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. (n.d.). Retrieved from :
<musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac - Explore collections>

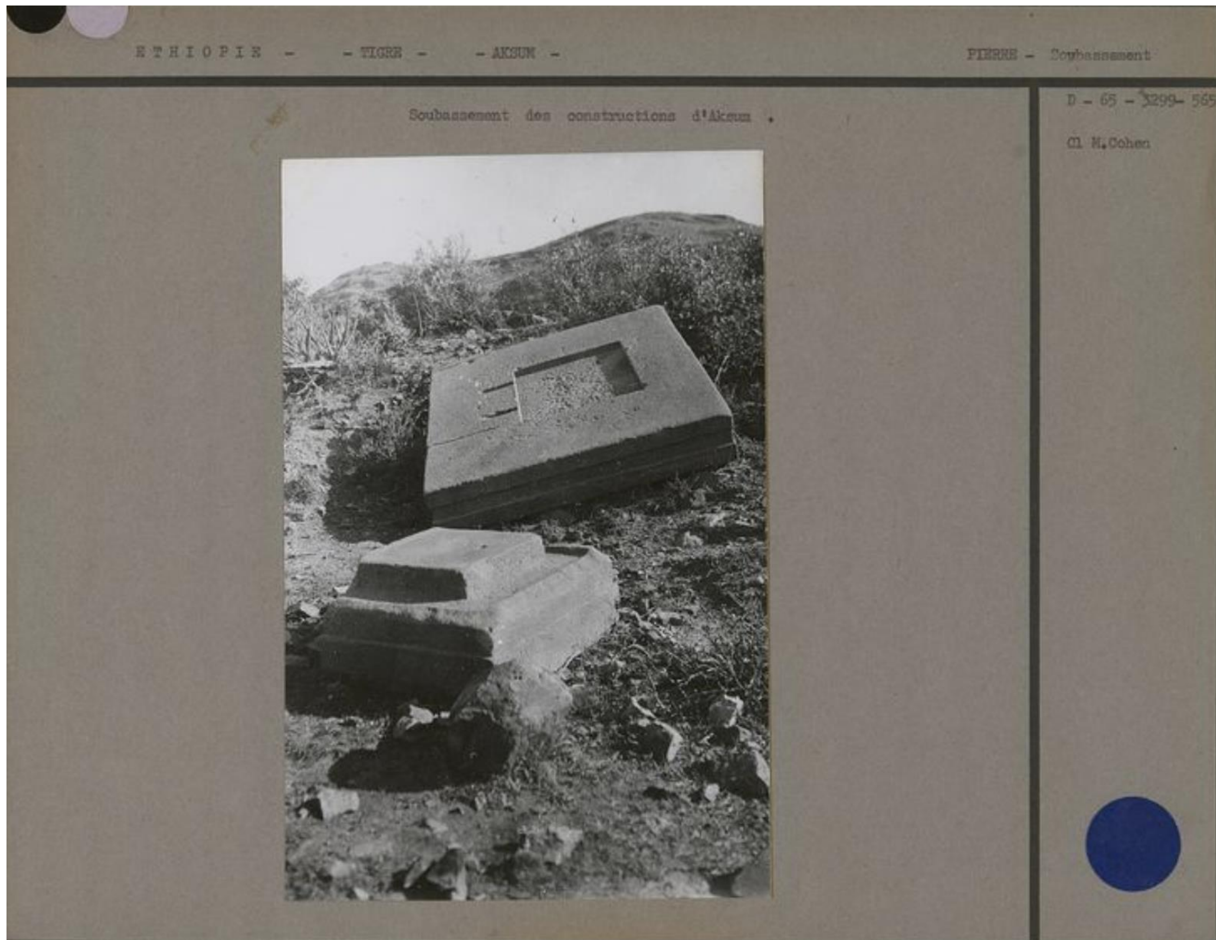

Fig. 48: A picture of the Aksum throne bases from the online Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac archive ('Soubassement des constructions d'Askum' in Appendix D').

Italian Collections

Although arguably having had the most prominent role in displacing Aksumite artefacts and even monuments, as has been discussed in Chapter III, the Italian collections are incredibly hard to reconstruct and can relatively be deemed as the worst documented. Here detailed are some of the institutions which are known to hold, or very likely hold Aksumite artefacts. The insecurity expressed here derives from many transfers of ownerships of the collections. Italian institutions keeping Aksumite collections have been merged or closed/discontinued over the course of nearly one and a half century. Since these collections have traditionally not been included in the scope of research projects, retracing them has become a complicated task. Current knowledge of these collections relies heavily on internet-based collection research, as well as previous research by Chiara Zazzaro, who has worked on reconstructing and tracing finds made at Adulis. It should be noted that most of the Italian collecting/looting was done through personal efforts, as highlighted in Chapter III. A great many objects can therefore be assumed to be in the hand of private collections, not accessible to the public. In some cases, however, as with parts of the Paribeni coin collection supposed to be in Rome, some objects seem genuinely lost (Zazzaro 2013).

The Museo Coloniale and the Istituto Italo-Africano (IIA)

The Italian collections of Aksumite artefacts have been held in a multitude of institutes for research and conservation. Two primary institutes were the *Museo Coloniale* (1904-1971) and the Istituto Italo-Africano (IIA) (1906-1995). The Aksumite collection of the *Museo Coloniale* was partly comprised of the Paribeni Collection from his 1907 Adulis excavation. The largest part of the materials then excavated by Paribeni were put in the Asmara Museum, which was managed by the Italian colonisers (Zazzaro 2013). Zazzaro has published an article in which she presents a wide array of interesting metal finds from the Adulis excavation that ended up in the *Museo Coloniale* (Zazzaro 2006). In that same study Zazzaro also identifies Aksumite ceramic materials, wrongly catalogued as Libyan by excavator Monneret de Villard, to be part of the *Coloniale* collection (Ibid., 3). The museum was named the *Museo dell'Africa Italiana* after an interlude under Mussolini, finally becoming the *Museo Africano* from 1947 onwards. When it closed its doors definitively in 1971, its collections were transported to the care of the IIA. The IIA itself subsequently merged with the *Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente* (IsMEO) in 1995, inaugurating the newly formed yet short-lived *Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* (IsIAO) (1995-2012).

Fig. 49: Sample of metal objects from the 1907 Adulis excavation by Paribeni, originally part of the *Museo Coloniale* (Zazzaro 2006)

Amidst scandal and a reported five million euros missing from its financial reporting, the IsIAO was forced to close in 2012. Upon inspection, its collection management proved to be in complete disorder and many artefacts were kept under extremely poor conditions. The collections were deemed too significant to be dispersed, and were therefore kept intact (Stella 2016).

Fig. 50: Abandoned boxes at the IsIAO. Picture taken around its closure in 2012 (Stella 2016).

It is challenging to find a detailed account on where the collection ended up after 2012, but it is clear that the collections were split up and placed under the care of relevant institutions. During this period of moving and separation, as well as in the previous state collection mismanagement, we can assume objects went missing both intentionally and unintentionally. A suspicion expressed by Zazzaro as well (Zazzaro 2013). Part of the IsIAO collections was placed under the care of the *Polo Museale del Lazio* (2014-present), an overarching organization caring for the collections of over 40 institutions and cultural and archaeological sites. As stated on their website more specifically, the Polo Museale absorbed the part which used to be the original *Museo Africano* collection.

Aside from that, the *Museo delle Civilta* (2016-present), a relatively newly formed museum hosting a wide array of archaeological materials from European, African and Asian cultures absorbed a part of the old colonial collection as well. Which collections or materials it absorbed, however, seems unspecified in published sources or the available online catalogues. Collection description provided on the website of the *Museo delle Civilta* states it concerns ethnographic and art collections. It does not further specify what objects it includes, what their provenance was or relevance to the museum. It thus remains largely unclear what collections from the IsIAO ended up in the *Museo delle Civilta*.

The collections of the *Museo delle Civilta* and the *Polo Museale del Lazio* thus are deemed the institutions likely in possession of the most significant Aksumite collections, judging from this brief reconstruction. Reconstructing the collections from accessible databases by these institutions, however, remains challenging. Neither host online databases or archives and the *Polo Museale del Lazio* website seems inconsistently accessible.

A third destination for the IsIAO collections was the IsMEO in Rome from which it was originally partly formed. It seems in its turn, the IsMEO was able to absorb the IsIAO paper, photo and African sections when the IsIAO shut down. Its stated contents are: 'Over 200,000 volumes, 2,500 periodicals of which about 500 are in progress (as of 2012), manuscripts, woodcut prints, geographical maps, photographs'.[16] The IsMEO thus hosts a valuable collection for future studies on archaeology in the Eritrean and Ethiopian territories during the 19th and 20th century.

Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale (UNIOR)

The UNIOR is one of the few research institutes worldwide that has successfully completed consecutive archaeological excavations in Aksum. It currently still cites 'Aksum (Ethiopia)' as being an ongoing archaeological project on the UNIOR webpage, although the last archaeological report was published in 2008.[17] The publications include reports on the finds and dating of several sites surrounding Aksum, as well as analysis of objects that were consulted from private collections by locals. Ethiopian farmers around Aksum find items often. Some of the finds investigated by the UNIOR programme were bronze seals. Other finds from their excavations include stone figurines, coins, dense and varied ceramic assemblages and clay tokens, among other finds (Fattovich, Manzo and Sernicola 2008).

The Oriental Institute of the Naples University hosts a great collection accumulated over close to 150 years of collecting by Italian scholars. Opened on 13 November 2012, it is the first nucleus of the museum collections of L'Orientale. The collections span a great geographic range, from Egypt to Japan, including many ethnographic, zoologic, botanic and archaeological materials from Eritrea and Ethiopia. The 'University Museum System' of the *Museo Orientale* was established in 2017 and currently includes two larger collections: The University's own *Museo Orientale 'Umberto Scerrato'* and the *Museo della Società Africana d'Italia*. The Naples University took over the collection of the *Società Africana d'Italia* (SAI), founded in 1880, after its formal secession in 1975 (Delle Donne n.d.). The society had its own museum, which was subsequently closed as well. In 2014, however, a new museum opened under the aforementioned University Museum System, after the collection was lost to the public for decades (Caterina, Giunta, Graziani, Loreto and Manzo 2017). The Museum boasts the SAI's ethnographic collection, including materials from the Horn of Africa. While most ethnographic materials are of a more recent era than Aksumite archaeology is concerned with, the SAI's collections also included Egyptian collections from 4th to 2nd century B.C, as described on the Museo della società Africana d'Italia Wikipedia page.[18] Though no reliable source was consulted, the SAI's collections may contain some reference to Aksumite materials as well, as there is reason to think 18th and 19th century collectors mistakenly categorised Aksumite archaeological materials as Egyptian or Sudanese.

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[16] For general information on ISMEO, see: <Biblioteca "IsIAO" · ISMEO>.
[17] For information on the UNIOR excavations at Aksum, see: <Progetti in corso (unior.it)>.
[18] For the exact Wikipedia page, see: <Museo della Società Africana d'Italia - Wikipedia>.

Fig. 51: Collage of stone bulls, pot sherds and coinage from the 'Manzo collection' in the Napolitan *Museo Orientale,* as published on the website (Museo Orientale ''Umberto Scerrato'' in Appendix C).

The *Museo Orientale 'Umberto Scerrato'* is more directly related to the University's own collections and holds relation to its archaeological excavations and projects and also contains materials from the SAI collections. As the Museum itself states: 'It [Museo Orientale] sees to the classification, protection and enhancement of the University's heritage of assets of historical, artistic and scientific interest […]' (Museo Orientale n.d.). A 2017 publication on the museum collections remarks on the content of the museum collections and notes clearly the inclusion of objects from Eritrean and Ethiopian antiquity. These materials have been collected over many years and were eventually put together from various chairs and laboratories of l'Orientale. The article furthermore specifically states were built up from excavations as well (Caterina, Giunta, Graziani, Loreto and Manzo 2017).

As stated above, l'Orientale has been involved in archaeology at Aksum for many years and still continues to do so. One collection which has been digitalised are a collection of ceramic sherds, 'stone bulls' (which have been the focus of research by Manzo regarding the Ona culture) and Aksumite coins excavated in Ethiopia and Eritrea, attributed to Andrea Manzo, who has been an important researcher in Aksumite archaeology the past decade (Museo Orientale ''Umberto Scerrato'' in Appendix C). It is therefore clear that this museum collection includes materials relevant for Aksumite archaeology, of which much is currently not fully in scope.

German Collections

The German Aksumite collections here discussed seem to have been completely based on the DAE finds of 1906. These are now stored in the *Staatliche Musee zu Berlin*. This is also where the original documents and photographs of the DAE are currently kept (Philipson 1997, 1-2). The items listed in the online catalogue pertaining to Aksum are very vague and inexplicable. Unfortunately, no reply to inquiries on additional information has been made. The collections will here be divided into the museum collection and the coin collection

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Museum Collection)

As per the museum database, the collection of materials came to be when the Aksum Expedition collection partly went to the German Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in 1914, a year after the publication of the DAE finds. The objects that were collected by the museum have, however, not been catalogued, photographed, accurately described or seem to be completely digitalised. Going purely from the translation of the online catalogue, the museum hosts very obscure finds. One such item is a bronze 'ear spoon hanging on a ring' which is categorised as a 'toilet device'. It further contains other notable objects such as buttons, wires, needles, hooks and nails, but also arrowheads and a hand cross. The lack of further description or photographs make it impossible to determine whether these items are ancient Aksumite or of a more recent date. The description does state the items were acquired for the antiquities department ('Staatliche Museen zu Berlin' in Appendix C).

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Munzkabinet)

The Aksumite coins kept in Berlin according to the online catalogue are just two in number. While hosted in the same database, the Munzkabinet constitutes a different collection. The coins are not found under 'aksum', but the lesser used 'axum'. At least two Aksumite coins exist in the collection, among which a pristine example of golden coin by Aphilas, which can be considered very rare ('Axum: Aphilas' in Appendix C).

Fig. 52: Golden coin depicting the Aksumite king Aphilas (270-330 A.D.). Part of the Munzkabinet collection.

Swedish Collections

Though small, the Swedish museum of Ethnography (Världskulturmuseerna) houses a collection comprised of materials excavated in Adulis by the Swedish missionary Richard Sündstrom. Working as a missionary and doctor in Eritrea, in the employment of the Italian government, Sündstrom also wrote anthropological and archaeological research. As explained in Chapter III, Sündstrom briefly became involved in the excavations at Adulis led by Paribeni, but apparently did so as part of the DAE led by Enno Littmann. Sundstrom subsequently donated 'some' of the finds he acquired to the Swedish Museum of Ethnography ('Sundström, Richard: missionär' and 'Tyska Aksum-expeditionen (1906-1907)' in Appendix C).

The collection itself is worth mentioning as an example of the disparity in collections concerning Aksumite objects, but also hosts items possibly of interest to future research. While the online

database of the museum hosts merely six references, these references apparently contain an unspecified number of objects made out of different materials. One entry, for instance, notes ‘diverse pieces of glass, bronze objects, etc.’, mentioning ‘metals’ further into the description as well. Another entry is described as ‘potsherds. Daji Mahasi’ and yet another remarkably notes ‘floortiles’ (‘Tyska Aksum-expeditionen (1906-1907)’ in Appendix C). Zazzaro notes being aware of this particular collection and adds that it contains ‘various pieces of glass, bronze objects’ and some coins (Zazzaro 2013, 32). As far as sources are available, this collection has not been researched by her or any other researcher.

Dutch Collections

The Dutch collection here described is based on a direct search entry in the online database of ‘De Nederlandsche Bank’ (‘De Nederlandsche Bank’ in Appendix C). The Dutch central bank coin collection. This collection was not described in any catalogue or source that was available to this author. Though such a source might very well be available, this was not within scope of this research.

The collection here described consists of 9 coins total made from a variety of materials and in different periods within the Aksumite history, varying some 250 years. The quality of the coins is likewise very diverse, with at least one pristine golden coin, and a small collection of copper coins which are in poor condition. The acquisition of the coins was made in different years. Some coins were bought in 1963, others in 1990 and some more recently in 2011, as discerned from the inventory numbers made available.

What is perhaps most interesting to note here is the lack of provenance as provided in the online catalogue, and the description of the ‘political entity’ which was responsible for issuing the coins. It is claimed in the description of all coins that these were issued by ‘Greek states’ in Aksum. This misconception likely arrives from the coins considered to be part of a larger coin collection from antiquity. It is nevertheless, a misrepresentation.

Fig. 53: Golden coin depicting the side profile of Aksumite king Ebana (440-470 A.D.). Part of the Nederlandsche Bank collection (‘tremissis’ in Appendix C).

The United States Collections

The United States hosts some of the world’s largest archaeology and art collections. Though no clear evidence of major collections in United States cultural institutions was found in the research

conducted as part of this thesis, American observers and researchers have been involved in Aksum's archaeology. The collections discussed here do not, however, directly follow from the sources and histories discussed in Chapter III, but instead are discerned from researching the online database of some major institutions. Though none are deemed significant, they should nonetheless be considered, be it merely as an example of the surprising and unaccounted for spread of many objects.

The Smithsonian

The Smithsonian holds one of the largest art collections in the world. Its collection on Aksumite objects, however, is very small. While none of the objects listed in its database are relevant for the study of ancient Aksum, some objects do possibly relate to the looting of Magdala. One of the main objects then looted were processional crosses made of precious metals. The relation to the Smithsonian museum collection cannot be verified by this research, but the collection holds a number of such crosses of which the provenance is poorly documented ('Collection search results: Aksum' in Appendix C).

The American Numismatic Society

At least 291 coins as digitised in their online collection, ranging from standard mints to unique ones, acquired between 1967 and the present. The most recent purchase in the Aksumite coin collection published in the online collection was made in 2008. The bulk of coins have been purchased through private collectors. Notes on provenance, however, sometimes go no further than 'an Istanbul dealer' or contain no description at all ('Collection search results: Aksum' in Appendix C). All coins in this collection, bizarrely, are categorised as 'Islamic'. An error that is striking, since the kingdom of Aksum is well known to have been one of the earliest attested Christian monarchies in the world (Munro-Hay 1982).

Ethiopian Collections

The Aksumite collections of Ethiopia have come into formation after Ethiopia's primary archaeological institutions were established in the 1950's. The main collections of concern to this thesis are held in the National Museum of Ethiopia and the Aksum Museum. These collections previously also included the Asmara Museum, but since Eritrea's independence this museum and collection is no longer in the scope of Ethiopian authorities. The Ethiopian Orthodox is also in the process of finishing the Aksum Church Museum, although it is unclear if this collection will contain archaeologically relevant materials for the study of ancient Aksum. As will be shown in Chapter V, however, the process of building this museum has actually ended up destroying some sites of archaeological interest.

Despite the clear wealth of Aksumite materials currently in Ethiopian Museums, there are virtually no recent or significant studies apart from Zazzaro (2013) that give an overview of the collection, its conservation status and catalogue. This thesis, when exploring archaeological reports to recreate the museum collections, currently does not have access to any sources that might disprove or confirm the

current location of any of the objects mentioned. Thus lacking the resources for accurate verification and available sources to offer a great deal of context, most done in this section is portray the objects reported to have been brought or put on display in Ethiopian museum's through archaeological or secondary sources.

Aksum Museum

The Archaeological Museum at Aksum, usually referred to as the Aksum Museum, is located at the main stelae field in the centre of Aksum. As stated, not much can be said about this museum, other than a handful of random descriptive accounts found on the internet. One rather disappointed comment left by a visitor on TripAdvisor for instance, reads: '[…] it's a small hall with many wallpapers, few old jars and utensils. A few minutes is enough unless you have time to read.' (Tripadvisor n.d.)

Fig. 53: Picture taken from the main display hall in the Aksum Museum (Tripadvisor n.d.).

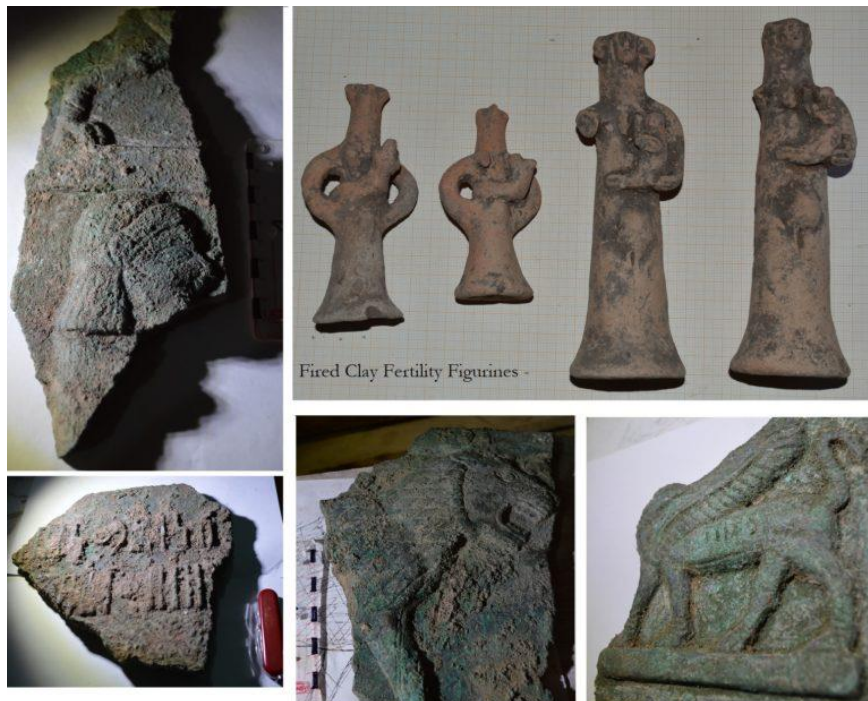
Some more interesting sources for objects (likely) kept at the Aksum Museum comes from the Axum Archive of the BIEA. It is certainly not much to go from, but the image descriptions of several objects here found state simply: Aksum Museum. Closer inspection of these artefacts makes it somewhat likely these large stone slabs featuring inscriptions were kept in Aksum where they were found, instead of being placed in the National Museum of Ethiopia, which hosts more precious objects. In figure 43, the base of the column can be recognized from pictures taken during the DAE.

Fig. 54: Array of inscriptions at the 'Aksum Museum' ('Aksum Museum – sculptured stone for ident 1' in Appendix B).

Fig. 55: Sculptured stone, likely part of one of the palaces of Aksum, as evidenced in the DAE photographs featured in Chapter II ('Aksum Museum – sculptured stone for ident 2' in Appendix B).

It can be furthermore expected that the collection of the Aksum Museum is largely unpublished and unknown. A single, yet highly informative blog post on the website of Popular Archaeology in 2019, elaborates on the current state of heritage management at Aksum. One of the main observations he makes, is of the finds made by local farmers or amateur archaeologists in or around Aksum. It seems the Aksum Museum is the place where many objects are brought to in the region when they are found. Their processing and the authorities' response to fortuitous finds, despite their legal obligations, seems to be one of comprehension, dismissal and incompetence. As Walker writes on one instance, working there as an archaeologist for the University of Aksum:

‘One evening in September 2103, I received a somewhat frantic call from a merchant saying some farmers had brought in some special items and would I be able to assess them. What they had uncovered was a series of cast bronze plaques, and other cultural materials the likes of which were not even found in the museum. These included large cast-bronze/copper Ethio-Sabaean inscriptions (8th-5th cent. BCE), images of lions, humans, and winged sphinx, ceramic figurines and vessels, along with various small finds such as name-stamps, and inscribed stone amulets.’



Found Artifacts brought to the attention of the authorities, but ignored. It is hoped these materials are still safeguarded in Aksum Museum where the merchant donated them in 2014. There were mulitple artifacts in this hord which have yet to be accurately studied or published due to fear of being falsely accused of looting.

Fig. 56: A sample of the artefacts brought to Aksum Museum in 2014, with a note by Samuel Walker (Walker 2019).

All authorities, including the local Culture and Tourism, dismissed the artefacts on account of the original context being lost, therefore rendering the objects worthless. Walker notes the objects were donated to the Aksum Museum in 2014 by the merchant who found them. He writes later to have been accused of having looted these artefacts on the basis of his pictures by a local newspaper. Though unfortunate and downright frustrating reports such as these are not uncommon, they do serve to illustrate the sheer wealth of discoveries likely to await future archaeological excavations at Aksum.

National Museum of Ethiopia

Fig. 57: Assemblage of finds from Yeha, dating to the first millennium B.C., on display in the National Museum of Ethiopia (Independent Travellers n.d.)

The National Museum of Ethiopia grew out of the Institute of Archaeology which was founded with the help of French authorities, who were then doing archaeological research in Northern Ethiopia. Most of the collections hosted in the National Museum comes from absorbing the finds made during these excavations. In 1976 with the establishment of the ARCCH, a museum was created to showcase its finds. Rather bizarrely, the museum now proudly has on display the bone fragments of 'Lucy', the famous skeleton of an Australopithecus afarensis, a giant stone carved head, emblematic of Mexico's ancient Olmec culture and given as a token of friendship, multiple imperial chairs, yet very little artefacts to represent ancient Aksum. In fact, given the available photographs of the exhibition, the finds reportedly dismissed by local authorities as mentioned by Walker, are seemingly of equal interest to what is on display.

Fig. 58: Assemblage of finds from Matara, as on display in the National Museum of Ethiopia (Independent Travellers n.d.)

In the single study recently discussing the collection of the National Museum, severe issues in collection management at National Museum have been noted, as reportedly original inventory numbers have been replaced without taking into account their relation to the original notes by the excavators, so that these are now irreconcilable (Zazzaro 2013). There is also no online record of the collections currently in either museum. Ceramics in Addis Abeba collection contain mostly 'imported' ceramics from the Middle-East and Mediterranean region (Zazzaro 2013, 60-62). This is consistent with remarks by Phillipson and available data from pictures. Therefore, the collection is largely reconstructed through the study of Zazzaro, and the original archaeological reports, of which some finds will be shown here below.

Fig. 59: Statuette and Altar bearing Sabaean inscription, excavated in Mekelle and kept in Addis Abeba (Caquot and Drewes, 26).

Fig. 60: Ceramic head excavated in 1955 at Aksum and kept in Addis Abeba (Leclant 1959).

Eritrean Collections

Highlighting the Eritrean collection briefly is of use, since the collections which constitute it are of considerable value to the Aksumite material heritage, as well as the developments of the pre-Aksumite period. Since the Ethiopian Civil War led to the independence of Eritrea from the original Ethiopian territories, its collections have become separated as well. The Italian occupiers collected artefacts in the Asmara Museum which they controlled. They have Thus, the main collections from Adulis housed in what is now the Asmara National Museum, have come to constitute a separate research tradition. Eritrean heritage authorities have even requested Ethiopia return artefacts Eritrea now considers part of its own archaeological legacy. For instance those objects which were found by Anfray during his 1960-1965 excavations, and which were brought to Addis Abeba (News 24 2006). The Museum does probably contain a number of remarkable items excavated during the 40's and 50's, as material transport to the Museum are noted in the original reports (Davico 1946, Franchini and Rici 1953). The Adulitan collections have mainly been mapped and researched in the past two decades by Chiara Zazzaro (Zazzaro 2006, 2013). Asmara collections furthermore mostly consistent of pot sherds, one collection which contains finds by Paribeni's Adulitan excavations of 1907 (Zazzaro 2006).

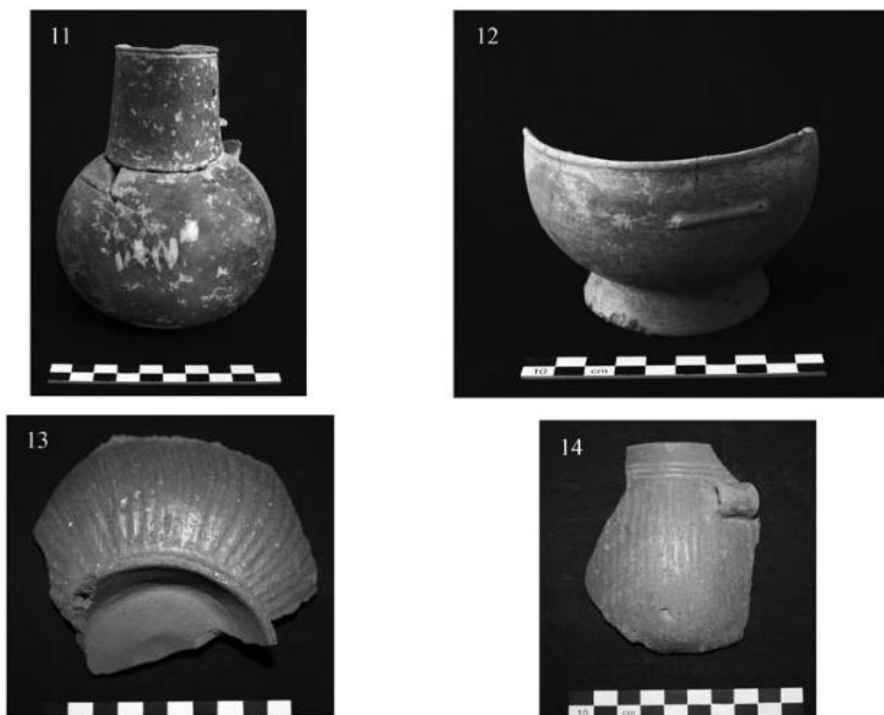


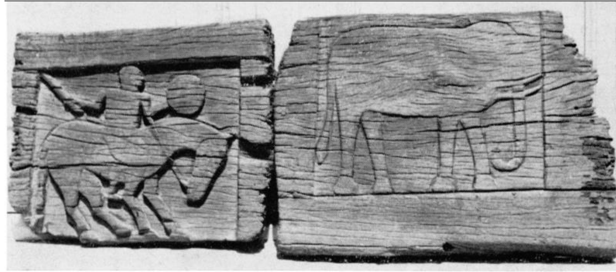
Fig. 61: Collection of ceramic artefacts stored in the Asmara Museum collection (Zazzaro 2013, 38)

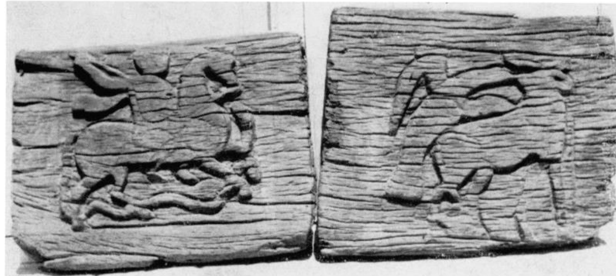
Through the work of Zazzaro, the poor state of conservation and management of a great number of objects in the Asmara National Museum comes to light. Mostly kept in carton boxes, the collection suffers from confused organisation which has caused some items to be included in collections they likely shouldn't be, while others have lost their original provenance description, so that it becomes near impossible to tell where and when they were excavated. Zazzaro notes how in this way interesting objects, such as a Roman-style figurine has ended up in the Paribeni collection of the Asmara

museum, despite there being no mention in his original find descriptions (see fig. x) (Zazzaro 2013). It is therefore a difficult task to accurately reconstruct the collections kept in the Asmara museum.

Fig. 62: Ceramic 'Roman-style' figurine (Zazzaro 2013, 45)

It is, however, noted in a number of articles and publications by Italian, French and British researchers that their finds were transported to the Asmara museum. It is therefore possible to reconstruct at least in part some of the objects that by their latest record are kept in this museum. These contain exquisite artefacts, some of which date to the period associated with the D'MT kingdom. These objects are shown here below, and concern some of the discussions referenced in Chapter II, such as the Throne of Hawelti, a sphinx found by Alberto Davico, a similar object found by Franchini Rici and a set of decorated marble pillars, apparently taken from Adulis. The museum also contains materials excavated by Anfray, Doresse and Leclant.





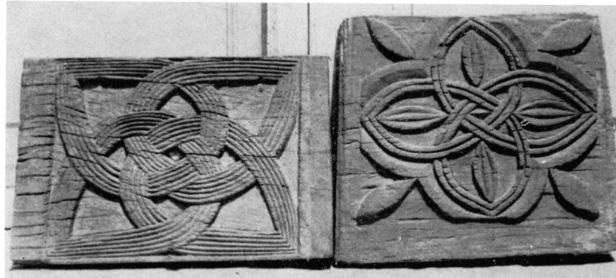


Fig. 63: Sculpted wood excavated at the Asmara church (Anfray 1965)

Fig. 64: Amphorae excavated at Adulis (Anfray 1965)

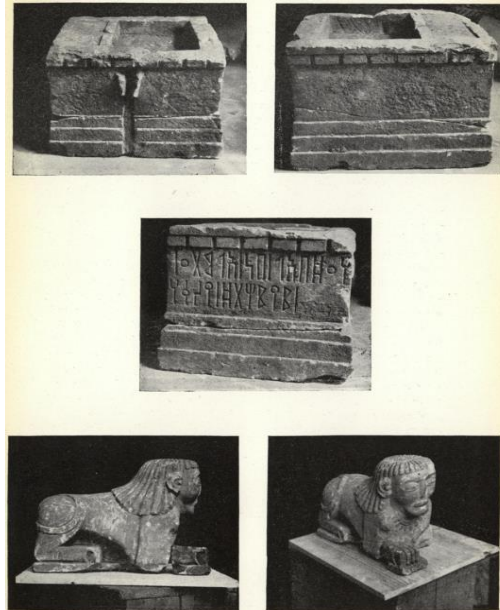


Fig. 65: Altar and Sphinx found in 1942 by Alberto Davico near Kaskase (Davico 1946, 4)

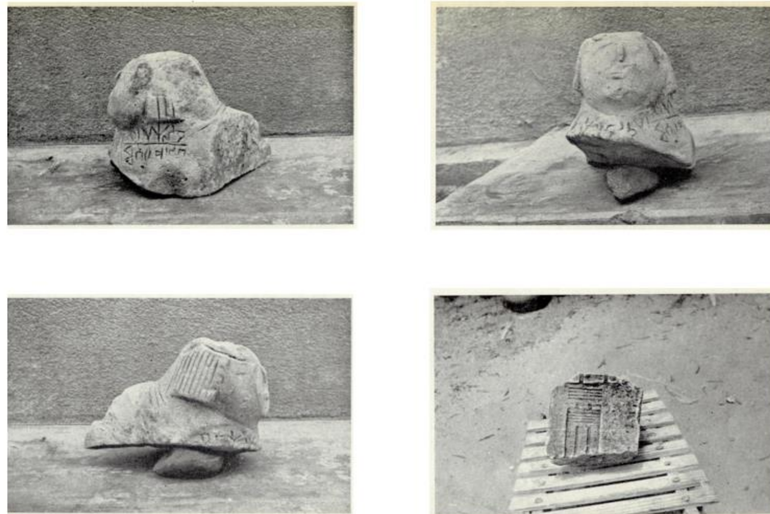


Fig. 66: Remains of a 'sphinx's head', as reported by in 1953 by Franchini and Rici and kept in Asmara (Franchini and Rici 1953, 28).

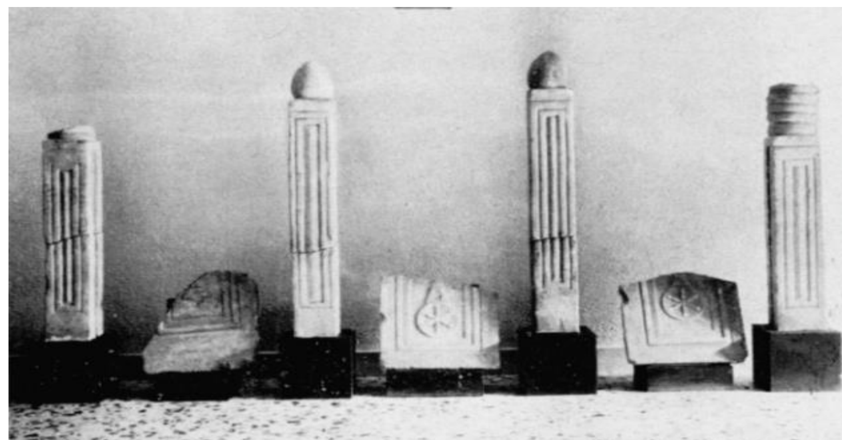


Fig. 67: Row of sculpted marble excavated in Adulis as on display in the Asmara National Museum in 1965 (Then simply the Asmara museum) (Anfray 1965).

Chapter V: Managing Aksum

Having presented research on collections of ancient Aksumite objects, this thesis now returns to the archaeological site of Aksum in the present.[19] It does so to argue the value of these collections in future heritage outreach strategies that might benefit a threatened site. Discussions and research on Aksumite material heritage are rarely focussed on objects and artefacts, but pertain overwhelmingly to the World Heritage Site (WHS) and Aksum's impressive monumentality. What is central to most of these discussions and publications on the site of Aksum, however, is often the threats which the site has faced over the course of the past decades. Since Aksum's listing as a World Heritage Site in 1980, defects in its visitor management, conservation management, adequate site mapping and urban encroachments to the standards of the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention have been noted by observers, scholars, the World Heritage Committee itself and its advisory body ICOMOS. Confusion about the actual agencies responsible for the implementation of management plans has been repeatedly noted by ICOMOS, as has the inadequate manner in which adopted federal legislation protecting the archaeological site has been as of yet realized (ICOMOS 2016).

Aside from these management and legislative issues plaguing the ancient remains, a plethora of additional man-made and environmental hazards form an existential threat to the site that exacerbate the shortcomings of Aksum's management practices. Understanding the depth of these issues is essential to recognise both the importance and potential for promoting Aksumite history and archaeology through its other material heritage, namely, its excavated materials. To substantiate the need for this approach, this chapter discusses the city of Aksum as a World Heritage Site, the management of its historic monuments and its relation to the World Heritage Committee (WHC) as an institution concerned with its conservation. The UNESCO List of World Heritage in Danger, its aims, operations and opportunities for future management of Aksum will likewise be considered, not only to briefly assess the future of the archaeological property, but also affirm the severity of its issues considering the standards set by the World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines. This research thus provides a critical analysis of the state of management, conservation and accessibility of the World Heritage Site that is Aksum, arguing that the material collections holding Aksumite objects, artefacts and materials hold great potential for the future and furthering of research on ancient Aksum.

Aksum as World Heritage

The relation between Aksum and World Heritage goes back almost as far as the inception of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee and List. In 1972 the World Heritage Convention was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO during their seventeenth annual convention in Paris, introducing the World Heritage List (WHL) and installing the World Heritage Committee (WHC) as its governing and executive body. In 1978, only six years after having established the WHL, a

[19] All ICOMOS reports, State of Conservation reports, Committee Decisions, etc. will be listed in Appendix D instead of the general bibliography.

Reactive Monitoring Mission (RMM) led by ICOMOS was sent to Ethiopia to assess whether the ancient site and city of Aksum was fit to be included on the World Heritage List, which then only contained a handful of archaeological sites (ICOMOS 1980). The RMM duly reported its findings to the WHC in 1980, describing briefly the Aksumite property in terms of its outstanding universal value. Several architectural and archaeological features of the ancient structures found in Aksum, such as the 'tall, obelisque-like stelae of imposing height', together with 'an enormous table of stone', vestiges of columns and 'royal tombs inscribed with Aksumite legends and traditions', were considered. The foundations of what is referred to as 'fortresses' in the western section of the city, likely referring to the Dungur Palace, were described as well (ICOMOS 1980). Concluding on its analysis, the RMM took mainly Aksum's imposing stelae into consideration for its decision. These are now one of the main features that authenticate the Aksumite architecture (Hagos 2015). Citing the first criterion for WHL inscription, which observes the aspect of unique qualities, or representing 'a masterpiece of human creative genius', Aksum was recommended for inscription on the WHL and adopted by the WHC in 1980 (ICOMOS 1980).

A brief critical reflection on the actual role of the WHC in managing the World Heritage property is warranted here, since most documentation on the state of conservation of Aksum is done through the mechanics of the World Heritage system. The World Heritage List was introduced as a way of monitoring archaeological and cultural sites considered to be exceptional and of 'Outstanding Universal Value' (OUV), measured through a set of fixed criteria. In practice, the WHL necessitated that the concept of heritage would become founded in the legal domain of regulatory powers of the state, at a time when concepts of 'heritage', let alone 'world heritage', were still in its infancy (MacDonald 2006, 201). The WHL further established a transboundary legal framework for the protection of cultural and natural heritage sites and imposed universal conservation and management standards. Although UNESCO had (and still has) in effect no real legal power, the establishment of this list and the notion of responsibility has been interpreted as a means for UNESCO to exercise pseudo-legal power (Litton 2011). Mainly through an honour system that would bind the State Party to the Convention articles and its commitments once signed. The expectations to uphold and honour State Party commitments for the sake of the international community implied in the notion of world heritage itself are made clear by the Convention articles:

> '[…] considering that deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world' (UNESCO 1972).

Ambitious as these articles were, implementing their theoretical standards in practise has not proven a universal success. Instead, it has arguably to a fragile system invaded by geopolitics, as will be shown later. The failings of the World Heritage Committee as well as the difficulties in demanding a

universal standard of heritage management are made evident in the case of the World heritage property of Aksum. It was difficult to envision in a concrete manner what World Heritage designation would mean for Aksum. In practice, the pseudo-legal expectations associated with inscription, were hard to incorporate in communal approaches to heritage and its conservation, as well as the perceptions on heritage management infrastructure, which were deeply Western in nature.

A leading issue that arose in practice through the imposition of universal standards, as has been amply observed, is the dichotomy between communities, state sovereignty and legislation on the one hand, and the supposed world community interest on the other. The legal implications and practical expectations were largely unknown at the time and not fleshed out (Litton 2001; Francioni 2008, 3). This was still the case when the property of Aksum was designated to be World Heritage in 1980. Its subsequent failure to comply to WHL standards has become a longstanding affair that goes back as far as the designation itself. Through the documented state of conservation reports (SOC's), there resources identifying the main issues reaching back several decades. Three fundamental issues pertaining the archaeological site: 1) site mapping, 2) site management and 3) hazard management. These three issues have been identified retrospectively by the author as adequately representing the current threats to Aksum, based on the research in this chapter. They will be illustrated in the following sub-chapters, while simultaneously providing a comprehensive overview of urgent matters to be addressed for the betterment of Aksum's conservation.

Fig. 68: Archaeological sites listed as part of the Aksum archaeological site World Heritage property (ICOMOS 2016).

Archaeological Site Mapping

When inspecting Aksum's 1980 inscription, a persistent issue was already hiding between the lines, that would constitute a myriad of contemporary problems. The report arguing for Aksum's inclusion

on the WHL referred to the fourth criterium, which reads: ‘outstanding examples[s] of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history’. The still inadequately addressed issue this generated, is the need to define which ‘ensemble’ precisely the inscription was referring to. More bluntly: What *exactly*, was made a World Heritage site/property? Through later specifications in the Convention’s Operational Guidelines, defining a property became of crucial importance when strategizing management approaches, seeing as all subsequent legislation, regulation or management regarding the site’s or surrounding development plans rely on the clarity of set boundaries to a heritage site. Yet, all parties involved in Aksum’s WHL inscription failed to specify property boundaries. In fact, the report which saw Aksum become a WHS merely referenced the city ‘Aksum’ at large when notifying on its decision. A grossly unspecific reference to a large number of structures of archaeological interest, set in the contemporary city of Aksum which still carries the same name. Similarly urban-bound additions to the WHL such as ‘the historic centre of Rome’, were all supplemented by descriptions of the referenced properties and shortly after provided with detailed maps. It would be unthinkable should all ancient structures encompassed in this listing simply be referred to as ‘Rome’ by ICOMOS or UNESCO.

The initial lack of a description of Aksum as a World Heritage site has continued into the present, as pleas by UNESCO authorities for property delineations and associated management plans, have featured ceaselessly from as early as 1996 up to as recently as 2021. In 2005, for instance, ‘lack of demarcation of the site’ was amply noted, followed by a reiteration in 2006 of the ‘lack of cartography, documentation and equipment’ (30 COM 7.B 39). A submission deadline was issued by December 1st 2008 for ‘the map of the property indicating clearly the boundaries of the World Heritage property and buffer zones’. Near identical restatements identifying lack of clear property demarcation and management plans as a clear threat to the site’s Outstanding Universal Value and integrity, followed in the Committee’s 2010 and 2012 reports. The Committee then appealed to the Ethiopian State Party in 2013 ‘to finalise the clarification of the boundaries of the property and its buffer zone as a matter of urgency’ (37 COM 7B.38). The State Party finally submitted a rudimentary draft of the World Heritage property boundaries in 2015 as part of its State of Conservation report. Nonetheless, given the lack of detail the map reproduced, remaining concern and lack of proper documentation was cited in 2015’s Committee Decision. (see fig. 69.). The incomplete nature of the draft map provided prompted calls for adjustments by the Committee, which were dismissed by the Ethiopian delegation on the basis that ‘all the important attributes and features of the property have been included in the official boundary of the property’ (SP SOC 2016).[20] The 2016 Reactive Monitoring Mission to Aksum, launched after mounting concerns relating to an amassing number of issues, notes that:

[20] SP SOC refers to the yearly State of Conservation report which are sent by managing authorities to the WHC.

'[…] the delineation of the property and buffer zones has been formalised [...] However, the maps that accompany the Regulation relate only to longitude and latitude coordinates and provide no topographic or urban detail. Detailed maps need to be developed […]'

Despite insistence of Ethiopian authorities, the lack of detailed demarcation makes legislation made in reference to this map near impossible to enforce. The map furthermore contained mistakes, which were pointed out by ICOMOS, according to Tekle Hagos (Hagos 2018). The RMM concluded the mapping effort in general was a 'major advancement', but the Committee itself continued demanding clarification. Again, concern about the lack of sufficient boundary mapping was noted in 2018. Finally, in 2021, the Committee again chose to compliment 'the State Party's reported progress in defining the boundaries', while a few lines later urging 'the State Party to submit a minor boundary modification and detailed maps indicating the proposed property and buffer zone boundaries, as previously requested, and in conformity with Paragraph 164 of the *Operational Guidelines'.* At that point, however Ethiopia's council of Ministers had already approved the boundary maps (Reg. No 346/2015).

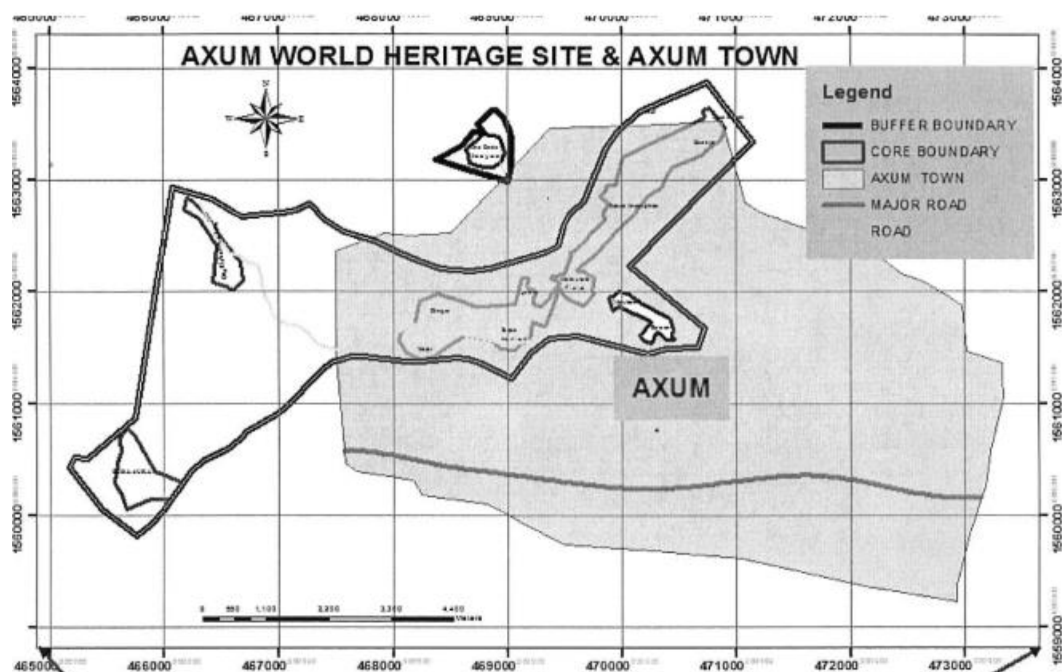


Fig. 69: World Heritage Site of Aksum property delineation, as created by the State Party (UNESCO 2015 in Appendix E).

The 'minor boundary modification' procedure as requested in paragraph 164 of the operational guidelines seems, however, to deride the longstanding nature the lack of adequate property description has become. The cited guidelines paragraph 164 establishes procedures for adjusting already existing property demarcation maps, now crucial to WHL inscription. The need for adequate property mapping is further emphasized by decision 39 COM 11 in 2015, in which the 'legislative, regulatory and contractual protection measures' were re-established. A rephrased operational guidelines paragraph 99

now states that ‘the delineation of boundaries is an essential requirement in the establishment of effective protection of nominated properties. The reference to paragraph 164 concerning the ‘minor modification to the boundaries’ is notable, when in essence UNESCO documents have never dealt with such completed map-based outlines as required for a World Heritage Site, despite the State Party’s implicit acknowledgements for the need for more sufficient mapping (SP SOC 2019). This lack of boundaries set to define the World Heritage property has had a significant impact on further complex issues arising in the site’s management and its conservation.

Heritage Management

The issues pertaining to the management of the World Heritage Site Aksum are multi-faceted and relate to conservation management, development management and tourism management. As noted, the major problem stemming from the above-described lack of exact property boundaries, is the subsequent inability to formulate adequate management plans for the conservation of ancient Aksum, as the boundaries and core assets of the site remain unclear (Hagos 2015). The undefined nature of the archaeological area prevents effective regulation to be applied to it, and allows for urban encroachment, accidental destruction of new archaeological finds in the area, and inappropriate developments in the immediate vicinity of monuments. As stated in the revised 2015 Operational Guidelines of the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention ‘all properties inscribed on the World Heritage List must have adequate long-term legislative, regulatory and/or traditional protection and management to ensure their safeguarding.’ (WHL OG 97). And ‘Protection and management of World Heritage properties should ensure that their Outstanding Universal Value, including the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity at the time of inscription, are sustained or enhanced over time.’ (WHL OG 96). The responsibility for such long-term management plans for Aksum is held by Ethiopia’s Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH), which, acknowledging the need for more adequate heritage protection, has superseded the 2000’s Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage Proclamation (No 209/2000) since 2015. From a statutory point of view, therefore, the ARCCH has custodial responsibility for the Aksum sites and on paper boasts a well thought out plan for advancing Aksum’s heritage management.

The Aksum World Heritage Reserve Area Designation of 2015 (No 346/2015) established the above discussed property and buffer zone boundaries through coordinates and made way for an ARCCH site management office to be located in the city of Aksum, headed by an appointed site manager. Furthermore, the regulation authorized a multi-stakeholder Advisory Committee for Aksum to be formed, made up of representatives from civil administration, academia, civil society groupings, religious institutions, tourism industries and the ARCCH site manager, chaired by the Mayor of Aksum (ICOMOS 2016). This was mainly in response to a request by the Committee, which urged ‘the State Party to implement the Management Plan with, if possible, the involvement of the Department of Archaeology, Aksum University, and to review the Aksum Master Plan in terms of

heritage management' (37 COM 7B.38). Among the tasks of this advisory Committee is to assess development proposals within the property and buffer zone.

Although on paper a formal managing structure is in place, there are several factors which hinder its decision-making capabilities. First, the 2015 regulation itself has no directive or otherwise regulatory structure fit for direct implementation, meaning that no procedures on how to identify, manage and develop current or potential new archaeological sites is in place or can be established by the Advisory Committee (Hagos, 2018). It furthermore means a lack of workable regulatory legislation defining the rules and guidelines for assessing the development of either new construction or renovations in the existing heritage landscape (RMM 2016, 23). Secondly, the Committee designated to assess and uphold these constructions to regulatory standards has only been formed in 2021 (44 COM 7B. 43). Thirdly, while on-site presence of the ARCCH was decided to streamline execution of these plans, the Agency for Culture and Tourism, who employs a site manager in Aksum, is currently the *de facto* authority over the archaeological premises. The municipal government of Aksum furthermore controls the developments in the property's environment. Since the ARCCH supposedly carries the responsibility for curating the Aksum property, this lack of clear on-site presence constitutes a mismatch between authorities. The ARCCH is also the reporting agency to the World Heritage Centre which has been pointed to by the State Party in failure to communicate developments and regulation effects to the World Heritage Centre. Such communication on behalf of the State Party, however, had a history of falling short before the ARCCH was established in 2015. The 2013 RMM was set out in large part due to non-compliance with paragraph 172 of the Operational Guidelines, which invites State Parties to inform the Committee on intentions or authorizations of 'major restorations or new constructions which may affect the Outstanding Universal Value of the property.' (OGL 2015, 172)

The results of inadequate mapping and lack of successful implementation of management plans are, ironically, fairly well documented. The 2013 and 2016 ICOMOS RMM's affirm the issue of urban encroachments has been persistent since 1996. Such encroachments, however, can already be discerned in the 1978 RMM report with initial mentions of 'cabanes' (regional styles of house construction) covering unspecified parts of archaeological interest (ICOMOS 1980). The 2013 RMM lists several instances of urban developments encroaching on the archaeological premises, which had only further developed according to the 2016 RMM (ICOMOS 2016). It likewise noted a whole list of inappropriate and unregulated civilian constructions in the core zone of the World Heritage property: a new tourist lodge constructed close to the Tomb of Basen; a storm water gutter dug on the road to the Tombs of Kaleb and Grebbe Meskel and a seven story hotel being developed just outside the core zone, posing dangerous precedents for further high-rise developments (ICOMOS 2016). Regarding the gutter, a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) reportedly had been made by the ARCCH, yet the mission could not be presented with this document (ICOMOS 2016). Encroaching developments have also been realized by local authorities themselves. In 1988 a new residence for the Patriarch of the

Church was built directly opposite the main Stelae Field, despite repeated calls by the Committee to delay its construction and conduct a Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA). More recently, the long-discussed Aksum Church Museum, placed inside the site's designated core zone, destroyed *in situ* remains of potentially Aksumite walls with brick-arched gate (Hagos 2015, 11). Such finds would be the only examples of their kind.

The management of heritage furthermore has direct implications for its conservation by generating revenue as a result of the successful management of tourism. While most studies on Aksum's lack of management plans focus solely on the state of conservation of its heritage, however, the general gap in heritage management policy for Aksum has led to serious flaws in the ability of tourism to develop and direct visitor flows (Welegebriel Asfaw 2019). Heritage is a cultural source of personal and communal identity, but equally a vital source of economic revenue (MacDonald 2006, 200). The realisation of economic potential, especially considering the UNESCO World Heritage 'brand' (King and Halpenny 2014; Poria, Reichel and Cohen, 2011; Adie, Hall and Prayag, 2018), is a key concern for site management, as generating income, mainly through tourism, is needed to finance its conservation or development. A site's economic potential, however, extends to its surrounding communities as well, who may come to rely on the flow of visitors (Job and Lane, 2017). This is especially true for unindustrialised nations in Africa. Already in the 1960's the economic potential of the tourism industry was outlined by the UN for nations seeking development. And even then, investments into site conservation was argued for to increase authenticity and cultural worth for visitors (Lanfant 1980, 15). In 2019, 51% of Africa's tourism industry was accounted for by leisure, recreation and holidays. And in Ethiopia specifically, the industry experienced a growth of around 7% per annum in the years leading up to 2012 (Geremew 2012). As of 2019, expectations for the development of tourism and annual visitors were optimistic and predicted sustained growth (Welegebriel Asfaw, 2019). Ethiopia has thus identified the tourism industry as an area of significant economic opportunity. But unless well managed, its effects for heritage conservation will prove adverse (Comer and Willems 2011).

Several plans over the last two decades aimed at boosting Ethiopia's renown and feasibility as a tourist destination. Investments in Ethiopia's tourism development, according to a series of investigations by the World Bank Group, would revitalise Ethiopia's image, protect and promote its cultural heritage and provide economic opportunity for its communities (World Bank 2006), through fostering competitiveness and job creation (World Bank Group 2012). The Ethiopian Sustainable Tourism Development Project which received 35 million USD in aid from the World Bank was aimed at (World Bank 2016, ICOMOS 2016, 25). A 2009 study commented on several issues pertaining the development of tourism in Ethiopia, such as lack of proper infrastructure and lack of competitive marketing (Mitchel et al 2009). A further main concern addressed by these studies was the matter of community opportunity and inclusion. Integrating host perspectives is of paramount importance when

considering long-term project support, as dissatisfied residents will often perceive a project less favourably (Alrwajfah, Almeida-Garcia and Cortés-Macías; 2021). The perception and experience of tourism from both the local and tourists' perspective is determined by the process of exchange taking place between the two parties. One way of including community is by training locals as tour guides (Hall, 2019) (Alazaizeh, Jamaliah, Mgonja, and Ababneh, 2019). The ability to interact with tourists has furthermore been observed to constitute a more positive attitude to their influx, as most people desire to gain new information and perspectives (Alrwajfah, Almeida-Garcia and Cortés-Macías 2021, 39). Especially for a nation seeking to develop itself through tourism, fostering sustainable tourism practices is particularly important (Man Cheng, So and Nang Fong, 2021). Managing this growth sustainably has been shown to indirectly impact topics such as food-security. Ethiopia ranks amongst the world's most vulnerable nations (Degarege and Lovecock 2019).

While the ambitious plans set out for Ethiopia and Aksum's heritage conservation and tourism industry, as has been mentioned previously, there is currently no leadership of professionals at the Aksum World Heritage Site who can effectively execute necessary day-to-day activities (Hagos 2018). Already in 2012, Aksum based scholar Geremew noted the troubling effects of unmanaged increases in tourism to Aksum's social and environmental footprint, as growth seems the main motivation in development initiatives, without proper consideration of sustainable practice (Geremew 2012). The site features no visitor flow management strategy, leaving it vulnerable to be overwhelmed by an increase in tourism. An observation that is already made during times of religious pilgrimage when flows increase notably (Welegebriel Asfaw 2019) (It should be noted that by far most tourists to Aksum are domestic tourists (Geremew, 2020)). At the same time, the downsides of these proposed beneficial developments could prove adverse. At some extremely popular and aesthetically spectacular archaeological sites such as Machu Picchu, Petra, Pompeii or Angkor Wat, steady increase of tourism over the years has led to significant investments by companies or relevant governmental institutions, but also significant increase in damages to the site itself. Damage to such sites is in many ways irreparable, and destruction of those archaeological qualities and materials are in fact undermining what is attractive about these sites in the first place (Comer and Willems 2011).

When considering community inclusion, and more importantly, its sustainable inclusion to the development of Aksum as a heritage destination, there seems to have been given little attention by authorities. Notably, tourist guide training programmes have already been established by UNESCO, but these are deemed to be ineffectively managed, poorly timed and not of lasting worth (Welegebriel Asfaw 2019). Equally the tour guides on sites are deemed less likely to have good connections to the tour operators in Aksum than at other sites, such as Lalibela. There, reports highlight structural organisation which seems to be lacking at the ancient capital (Mitchell et al 2009). Furthermore, questions have been raised regarding UNESCO official's approaches to involving local stakeholders in their development efforts. As Welegebriel states:

‘[The locals] stated that someone from UNESCO, Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritages or other office come and finish every activity without consulting and involving the actual owners of the heritages (the locals). Only those very few individuals who are currently benefiting more from tourism get information about such activities. Even the local cluster agency of culture and tourism is very weak and less committed in involving locals, as it lacks dynamism, creativity and attention.’ (Welegebriel Asfaw 2019).

The circumstances of management here outlined for Aksum have led its monuments to be exposed to a number of vulnerabilities. Many remains are scattered across the city and remain unprotected. Ever since first reports of Aksum’s throne bases lying around the ruined ancient city, these have continued to do so. Occasionally, it seems, being moved at random.

Aksum’s stelae often suffer the same circumstances. The stele 7 discussed in Chapter II for its use of Greek inspired decorations, currently lies toppled within the city’s boundaries on top of stele 36. Many other examples of stelae lying toppled, broken or unprotected, such as stele 4, 5 and 6, can be given.

Fig. 71: Stele 7, featuring Greek motifs, lying on top of stele 36 (Walker 2019).

Hazard Management

Finally, the lack of management plans, visitor flow management, regulations and conservation measures employed at the WHS Aksum have resulted in its most characteristic structures having sustained critical damage through the inability to address man-made and environmental hazards. Among the most dire of such conditions, is the case of Stele 2 and 3.

It was already decided in 1947 that all looted Ethiopian artefacts during the periods of colonisation would be returned (Philipson 1997, 143). Stele 2, however, would remain standing in Rome for anoth-

er 70 years before a bilateral agreement between the Ethiopian and Italian governments was made after its displacement by Mussolini (Bandarin 2009). Months of public debate, expert opinions and recommendations by UNESCO (2005) and archaeological professionals on how to place the returned monolith in its original landscape, were largely dismissed by Ethiopian authorities (Hagos, 2015). Contrary to their recommendations, it was decided to place the stele in its supposed original position. This not only required the complete destruction of an original Aksumite foundation, precluding any future archaeological possibility of researching the very tomb it was meant to designate, but also destabilizing the foundations of the adjacent stele 3 through construction works. Stele 3 is now only able to remain standing upright through drastic support systems impacting its visibility (Philipson 2012, 147; Hagos 2022). All of this was performed with the knowledge of stele 3's instability at least ten years prior (Philipson 1996). Other structures, such as the elaborately designed and archaeologically significant mausoleums and tombs, authenticating archaeological Aksum, are being faced with major structural disintegration, as noted in Reactive Monitoring Missions, due to similar man-made and environmental hazards (see fig. 72).

Fig. 72: Cracks in the slabs supporting the doorway to Mausoleum (Hagos, 2018; 301) Destabilized Stele 3 and current support system in place (Hagos, 2018; 302)

By all measures, the archaeological site of Aksum is under severe threat of degradation and destruction (Hagos 2019). The list of factors affecting the property, collected from state of conservation reports, RMM's has grown from the single matter of lack of management plans to include fundamental issues of all kinds. As per 2021: i) housing, ii) interpretive and visitation facilities, iii) management systems/management plans, iv) water (rain/water table), v) structural instability of Stele III, and more are all noted as current threats by UNESCO. It is important to remark, however, that some of these threats are by no means the fault of Ethiopian heritage authorities, and the increasing work that has been delivered on mending these issues by the State Party authorities is noteworthy and commendable. The ICOMOS led RMM likewise opted to praise developments whenever appropriate. Yet, it can easily be argued this is due to the restricted nature of the

Convention's directive, and the statements seem only made to affirm their lack of legal power when continually confronted with wilful negligence or uncooperative attitudes. When in 2016 a report was published, finalising a Reactive Monitoring Mission (RMM), it became clear that the ICOMOS representatives had to deal with faulty information provided or complete lack thereof, despite the ARCCH's claims it could provide all the information requested (ICOMOS 2016). Necessary information for review or mission reporting has been consistently noted as incomplete or unavailable by ICOMOS and other parties (Hagos 2018; ICOMOS 2010, 2013, 2016). Aksum-based professor Tekle Hagos thus challenged these positive remarks by elaborating further on the lack of progress and implementation of the RMM recommendations, asserting the lack of knowledge, mission, or vision by Ethiopian authorities, as well as 'the negligence of UNESCO' for not taking further action (Hagos 2018, 311-312).

Fig. 73: Picture of water flooding the Tomb of the Brick Arches, reportedly standing over a meter high (Walker 2019).

Aksum as World Heritage in Danger

Following this analysis discussing the relation between Aksum and its status as a World Heritage Site, the questionable record in applying to the Convention and the Committee's standards leads this research to a discussion on the List of World Heritage in Danger (LWHD), and Aksum's potential for listing to showcase the severity of its issues. The RMM's cited above did not occur incidentally, as

they are dispatched by the Committee and are used to assess the nature of a perceived 'threat' to a WHS (OG 184). The last twelve years have seen three separate RMM's in response to concerns over Aksum's structural integrity, faulty management and inconsistent reporting on the state of conservation. A number only found for sites inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger. Not only do environmental and manmade hazards threaten the structural integrity of its monuments, from 2020 onwards Aksum has been the theatre of an all-out civil war, in which cultural sites are being targeted, bombed, looted and deliberately demolished in possible acts of 'cultural cleansing' (BBC News 2021).

Here it will be argued that Aksum should be listed on the LWHD, and that such a decision might ultimately benefit the archaeological site Aksum. Ultimately, the benefit of this research is showcasing the poor state of conservation, management and the level of threats facing the World Heritage Site Aksum, through the parameters of the World Heritage Convention and the standards set by it. This study and many other studies have long cited the severe need of more adequate conservation strategies, yet these are based overwhelmingly on anecdotal or single archaeological reports. There is thus need for a study which showcases the severity of Aksum's case through the mechanics set by the World Heritage Committee to reference the state of conservation of Aksum in a measured manner.

The List of World Heritage in Danger

The LWHD is in a sense a complementary list to the original World Heritage List with a far less glamorous, yet specific function and context of usage, namely listing those sites of Outstanding Universal Value of which its continued existence is deemed threatened under certain circumstances. The existence of the LWHD has been debated, yet considerably less researched than the original WHL, while being founded simultaneously and for similar reasons. While academics from all fields of research have spent many books and article detailing the workings, effects, etc. of the WHL, the LWHD has traditionally received less attention (Hølleland, Hamman and Phelps 2019, 35-37). An observation which is consistent with its sparse usage. As the founding Convention text noted:

> 'The Committee shall establish, keep up to date and publish, whenever circumstances shall so require. Under the title of 'List of World Heritage in Danger', a list of the property appearing in the World Heritage List for the conservation of which major operations are necessary and for which assistance has been requested under this Convention. This list may only include such property as is threatened by serious and specific dangers, such as the threat of disappearance caused by accelerated deterioration, […] destruction caused by changes in the use or ownership of the land; major alterations due to unknown causes; abandonment for any reason whatsoever; the outbreak or threat of an armed conflict […] The Committee may at any time, in case of urgent need, make a new entry in the List of World Heritage in Danger and publicize such entry immediately.' (UNESCO 1972)

The LWHD was originally intended to function as a list for sites to promote financial and development aid to tackle a range of severe issues threatening a World Heritage Site. State Parties with World Heritage sites garner international and national prestige, have access to the World Heritage Fund for monetary assistance, and can tap the potential benefits of heightened public awareness, tourism, and economic development (Meskell 2014, 221). Likewise, some tangible benefits might arise from inscription to the LWHD. The request for assistance can lead to monetary aid, as well as other forms of assistance, as per the Convention. It has for instance been asserted that inscription means higher rates of attention and exposure on social media platforms, such as Instagram, which is directly tied to visitor interest (Falk and Hagsten 2021).

An important distinction is often made in two ways the LWHD can be used or interpreted. One way concerns the fire alarm approach, in which danger to a site is conveyed through inscription, supported or proposed by a State Party itself in most cases. Other cases concern mostly dangers through 'inappropriate developments' that threaten the site, such as infrastructure projects or certain renovations. In that case adoption often occurs without State Party approval and the inscription can be seen to take on a more punitive character (Hølleland, Hamman and Phelps 2019, 35-37). Thus, while the Convention set out to accumulate heritage deemed to be of Outstanding Universal Value in a single list, the LWHD was in essence conceived on the basis of a site's management and conservation practices failing to live up to the Convention's standards, since the List of World Heritage in Danger can only be made up of properties before listed on the WHL proper. Going from the established 1972 Convention mechanism, a state would recommend its own sites out of concern for the aforementioned treaty obligations. As has been established through the inscription of Dubrovnik's archaeological city centre in 1991, a State Party does not have to agree to the inscription for it to be added to the list (Brown, Liuzza and Meskell 2019, 294). A request for assistance as to the preservation, protection or management of a site in this sense, however, is not identical to a request for the listing of a property by any representative. It does however, constitute a condition necessary for its inscription, which does not have to be initiated by the State Party concerned with the property itself (Francioni (ed.) 2008, 182). In essence, agreement by a state party for a property to be listed as World Heritage, is implicitly consenting to the possibility of that same property being listed as endangered. A few notable precedents have taken place to confirm this mechanism. The most notable of which the intense legal debate ensuing from the continued pressure put on Nepal in the matter of the Kathmandu Valley. Despite repeated concerns from the Committee, Nepal fervently opposed listing on the LWHD, until eventually the Committee took its inscription on themselves, citing urgent need (Francioni (ed.) 2008, 193). In such cases, the World Heritage Committee can be interpreted as a neutral third party adding to the concern of activists (Litton 2011, 242).

As mentioned previously, the WHL and the Convention's operate through a mode of shared understanding, or through an honour system, in which the State Party having signed the Convention is

deemed to adhere its principles on the basis of trust and its reputation being at stake. This satisfies the shared responsibility principle as laid out in the Convention (Hølleland, Hamman and Phelps 2019, 52). In effect, however, this means the LWHD does not only reflect the management of a single World Heritage Site by a State Party, but also is perceived to relate to the trustworthiness of the State Party signature to the Convention articles. As the status of threatened heritage in principle means failing to oblige to the Convention, it is understood to resemble, as Francionci states a violation deemed 'to be an offence against all the State Parties to the Convention.' With even UNESCO's website acknowledging the perception of 'dishonour' in the danger listing (Francioni (ed.) 2008, 178). Listing on the LWHD thus potentially harms a State Party's reputation which would mean that in theory, agreements with this particular state tend to be perceived as less valuable and a state less trustworthy. Such loss of face must be strategically avoided (Guzman 2008, 596). As the Convention states:

> 'It [The State Party] will do all it can to this end, to the utmost of its own resources and, where appropriate, with any international assistance and co-operation, in particular, financial, artistic, scientific and technical, which it may be able to obtain.' (UNESCO 1972)

This understanding of LWHD listing as a consequence of failure, has made one scholar on International Law underline the power of the LWHD mechanism by calling it one of the most powerful tools available to the Committee (Battini 2011). It has even been shown empirically that State Parties can be incentivised to take action and invest in their World Heritage properties, merely by the threat of inscription on the LWHD (Hølleland,and Hamman and Phelps, 2019; 52). While having such a tool in theory could aid in the Committee's efforts to ensure adequate protection and funding for World Heritage properties, in practice the LWHD has contributed to the opposite end through the politicising of heritage, as State Parties have been shown to politically ally and manoeuvre themselves to avoid listing, as it can be interpreted to be of a more punitive nature (Brown, Liuzza and Meskell, 2019; 289, Hølleland, Hamman and Phelps, 2019; 55).

The success of the World Heritage Convention could potentially lead to its undoing, as Meskell has argued, since the potential benefits in an economic and political sense have mobilised the state parties to utilise the Convention for other means than its foundational charter. Conservation and management of 'world heritage' as such, has become less interesting than the economic benefits World Heritage Status suggests (Meskell 2015). Furthermore, observing the 195 State Party signings of the convention, the World Heritage Fund has logically reached its peak. While the means of conservation, protection and management of stay roughly similar, challenges increase, making for a near impossible task (Meskell 2014, 221). The ever-growing amount of inscriptions to the WHL means that its demands for conservation financially become less and less attainable, and less and less an objective (Ibid., 228). An emerging trend at the Committee meetings has been identified to accommodate planned or ongoing

industrial extraction activities and infrastructure development, rather than protect existing World Heritage sites (Ibid., 237). It is not simply the materiality of the past but its transactional potential that can mobilize ancillary effects in other domains, driven by economic and political imperatives (Meskell 2019). The goal of the convention, namely long term conservation, has become increasingly challenged by the political and economic incentives of the state parties that effectively control the dynamics of the World Heritage Convention (Meskell 2014). Furthermore, the Committee's representatives are increasingly chosen for their political and diplomatic skills, instead of their expertise in a relevant field of natural, archaeological or historical education (Meskell 2015, 6). Using econometric analyses of decision-making trends within the World Heritage Committee from 2003 to 2013, it is clear that there has been an increasing divergence between the recommendations of the Advisory Bodies and the Committee's final decision. In 2014, some 47% of their recommendations were overturned by the Committee, with a record 81% of nominated sites inscribed on the List, taking the total to 1,007 properties (Ibid., 8). More often than not, the politics of inscription have been long decided before the Committee meetings take place and/or the sites in question are presented. Inscriptions are based on the successful petitioning, pacting and geo-political alliances cemented on of State Parties rather than the qualities of any given site. So much so, that written statements of support prior to meetings have had to be explicitly forbidden. Indeed, it has even been remarked that Committee delegates see successful operations in the Committee as a proving ground for further positions (Ibid., 9-10).

Currently, until 2025, Ethiopia sits amidst the 21 State Parties on the World Heritage Committee. It has been observed statistically, however, that listings occur more often when the property's concerned State Party is not represented in the Committee (Hølleland, Hamman and Phelps 2019). War and civil unrest have historically made up the vast majority of LWHD inscriptions. LWHD used mostly at times of war in the state territory (Ibid., 52). They have, however, historically speaking also stayed on the list longest (Ibid., 35-37). For these very sites, it often takes considerably longer for any meaningful progress towards delistment is made. The effectiveness of LWHD listing in such circumstances can thus easily be questioned. As remarked by the Chairperson in the 2012 Committee session in response to attacks on Mali's Timbuktu: 'All we have are computers, papers and pens… You're dealing with bandits and criminals and all we have are pens and paper.' (Meskell 2013, 492).

Conclusion

Currently, the challenges facing the site as identified in 2021 are listed as being: 1) insufficient delimitation of this serial property, 2) Lack of Conservation and Management Plans, 3) lack of appropriate urban planning and building regulations, 4) urban encroachment, 5) inappropriate new developments, 6) rising water level/seepage, 7) structural instability of Stele II and Mausoleum, 8) housing, 9) lack of interpretative and visitation facilities. Point 3) here concerning the lack of management has been a long standing issue to which the State Party has of yet found no appropriate solution, even though claims to this intention have been made repeatedly to ICOMOS officials. As

recent as 2016, they reported no signs of improvement on the matter, but listed it as a critical danger for site preservation (ICOMOS 2016, 46). It is noteworthy in this instance, that the Minaret and Archaeological remains of Jam in Afghanistan, were inscribed on the LWHD for this very reason alone.

Not only does this analysis of the LWHD argue the fact that Aksum's current situation is thus, that a listing would not be out of order, it further recognises the problematic nature of its usage, as well as the general shortcomings of the World Heritage Committee in practice. This leads to the conclusion that, despite the fact that the Aksumite site enjoys World Heritage status, sustainable development of the archaeological property can and should not rely on the Convention treaty's or the currently existing mechanisms of the convention. Taking into account the broad analysis of Aksum's archaeological history and the history of its collections, in its next chapter, this research will propose a more fundamental (and as outlined above necessary) approach, focussed on 'making' Aksum a more appealing archaeological culture and heritage destination through the neglected material collections stored in several museums. Herein lies significant opportunity to promote Aksumite heritage in new and creative ways outside of the problematic structure plaguing its World Heritage Site. As will be argued, not only does this grant significant advantages to Aksumite heritage, but it in turn could also help address the persistent issues in managing the World Heritage Site by fostering public interest or generating additional funds. Something Aksum desperately needs.

Chapter VI: Discussion; Making Aksumite Heritage

Introduction

Having presented broadly the history, archaeology, collections and site management practices in Aksum, this research has provided a comprehensive scope of Aksumite heritage, founded in both historical and current contexts. In this chapter, findings from the previous chapters will be taken into consideration and used to argue here for what should be the foundations of a recommended digital outreach strategy, proposing through the establishment of a supportive theoretical framework the use and integration for raising awareness on Aksumite heritage.

Structuring this chapter and its discussion, it sets out an interpretation of the concept 'heritage', and discuss why and how it is 'made'. This chapter will be guided by three core concepts central to processes of heritage making, which shall be discussed in detail below. These are: accessibility, visibility and interactivity. In the absence of these factors, which as illustrated in Chapter III, IV and V is the case for Aksum, this chapter argues for the use of digital surrogates and spaces as a supplement, alternative or necessary solution to these perceived issues. A large asset in this discussion, and in part the main purpose of this thesis, is argued to be the material collections which are currently largely neglected and kept in museum depots worldwide

Discussing the ways in which Aksumite material culture can be mobilised in a comprehensive outreach strategy, the action plan that will be proposed will be built up in two parts. First is a theoretical discussion, which identifies the subjects of materials or 'content' which can be effectively used in the proposed outreach strategy. Then, secondly, the theoretical discussion will be supplemented largely by the actual materials found in Chapter IV, therefore bringing merely theoretical discussions or propositions of use to the realm of practice. To argue the necessity of this approach, this chapter sets out by seeking a working definition of heritage, founded firmly in current research traditions, which supports it.

Processes of Making Heritage

What is Heritage?

To understand how the concept of heritage can aid in developing a digital outreach strategy for Aksum, a discussion on its use and meaning is necessary, as well as formulating an understanding of the 'processes' which shape its formation and usage. In both academic and popular archaeology, heritage is frequently used to identify a range of historic, aesthetic, significant or otherwise representative sites, structures or monuments from the past in the present. The reference to heritage in this sense is often taken to portray a fixed, material notion, embodying an inherent quality that explains itself adequately. However, the concept of heritage, what it refers to, what it represents and what or who can represent it, has been a topic of scholarly debate for decades. The debate effectively illustrates the needs of the times, and reflects the people who heritage was supposed to represent.

Heritage as a concept, its social and legal implications, is heavily rooted in 19th century enlightenment and romanticism theory. It was initially believed that heritage as such was constituted by a set of works of arts and monuments that unmistakably encapsulate past or present communities and cultures, and as such should be preserved in their 'original' or 'authentic' state (Smith 2006). The need for heritage to represent a static, yet enduring monument of antiquity or communal traditions, was directed more largely by the political formation of national identities. There arose the particular political need for heritage places to serve the purposes of aggrandising a state, by hailing them as evidence of a 'people's' greatness and the longevity of its predecessors of state. The intellectuals of the 19th century; antiquarians, romantic nationalists, writers and artists, quickly came to selectively recognize impressive monuments of the past as national symbols informing the present (Hutchinson 2012, Silberman 2013, 2016). Thus, when the term heritage first started being used, its implications were bound to the ideals of European nationalism. The valorisation of heritage and its associated objects or places as a means to validate societal identities and beliefs, remains relevant in the present (Lewis 2012, Munasinge 2005).

Already in 1903, Austrian scholar and philosopher Alois Riegl was able to identify in his time what he called "a modern cult of monuments" (Riegl 1996). This accurate description of attitudes towards heritage, its conservation and management, is still deceptively relevant and lies at the base of what has been criticised during the 20th century up until today. While the 20th century launched an array of critiques and questioned which processes were actually at the foundation of what was duly selected as being 'heritage', the 19th century, foundational notion of heritage was already becoming institutionalised through national laws establishing protocols for monument conservation (Silberman 2015, MacDonald 2006, Meskell 2018). Heritage became codified in an attempt to officially discern the 'places of heritage' from more ordinary ones. Since heritage itself was a mainly theoretical understanding which encompassed certain beliefs and responsibilities, a legal designation was sought to reflect that. The institutionalisation of heritage thus fixed its phenomena to special, legally designated places (Phelan 1993; Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2012; Pickard 2012).

In line with those developments later that century, as the Second World War had concluded and a desperate scramble for integrating cultural heritage management to prevent further destructions through conflict, the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organisation (UNESCO) was founded. While hailed at the time as a powerful tool in conservating cultural heritage worldwide, its institutionalised notions of heritage are in essence the product of an outdated and static form of 19th century ways of heritage thought. Through its legislation, narrowly defining what heritage should be and what it can represent, normative guidelines on what heritage *is* through a top-down process are set (Meskell 2018). The 1972 Convention discussed in Chapter V has been monumental in this sense. It defines cultural heritages as those sites or monuments that are of 'outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science' and 'which are of special value by reason of their beauty or

their interest from the archaeological, historical, ethnological or anthropological points of view.' (UNESCO 1972). While on the surface such statements might superficially refer to well-intentioned definitions of cultural heritage, they define and legitimise what heritage is and who gets to decide *what* is heritage. This has come to be known as the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), a mode of thought which is rooted in the 19th century 'heritage canon' (Gentry and Smith 2019).

How is Heritage?

From the 1980's, structural criticisms have come to redefine heritage, not as something which can be institutionalised, but instead as something deeply personal. Moving away from the 19th and 20th century romantic notions of the 'universality' of heritage and its values (Meskell 2018), consensus now argues that heritage cannot at all be an objective statement, but rather supposes a deeply personal one. Recent discussions have instead highlighted the personal or communal 'processes'; interactions, experiences and dialogues on objects, spaces and structures to be at the heart of what heritage actually is or can be. Silberman, for instance, explains that heritage places are important spaces for interacting and finding out about the past, not because of an inherent of objective quality which its monuments might possess, but because of their 'evocative relationship of present to past' (Silberman 2015). As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has phrased it, heritage is 'a mode of cultural production in the present, that has recourse to the past.' (1998, 7).

Heritage does not just relate to remnants of the past but constitutes deeply personal notions of meaning in the present. In fact, it should be argued that what heritage is, or rather what we want it to be, refers to the present-day use of the past for our contemporary societal, personal, cultural or even economic purposes and agendas (MacDonald 2006, 200-203). This very complicit act has made heritage susceptible to political motivations deliberately attempting to create heritage through the careful shaping of its representation, the inclusion of certain elements, as well as exclusion. An important observation made by Michael Herzfeld in his study on Bangkok, is the often ugly reality of 'making' heritage. In this process of carefully selecting what that should contain, strategies of betterment are always imbued with political and economic viewpoints that generally exclude part of the population who's heritage is at stake (Herzfeld 2016). Such observations furthermore underline the issues associated with AHD. For if heritage is a personal affair, how can any institution attempt to designate sites as such? Or indeed, how can heritage, once designated, always express the same sense of meaning it did before? (Silberman 2015).

Some researchers have even concluded that by acknowledging personal perceptions underlining appreciations of heritage in a personal or communal sense, 'there is, really, no such thing as heritage' (Smith 2006, 13). Despite heritage being more and more associated with abstract processes rather than objective values, attributed directly to sites or monuments, it is still undoubtedly the objects and places of heritage which trigger such processes and as such effectively come to produce and represent it. This is why, even though definitions of heritage can be complex, unique archaeological objects or places of

significance are rarely less prized or historically significant because of these theoretical discussions. It is in this sense that it has been argued objects and places of heritage should be regarded as a 'vessel of value' (Araoz 2011). As Araoz elaborates:

> 'The philosophy of conservation and its resulting doctrinal foundation, the protective legislation, the identification and official registration processes, and the methodological framework and professional protocols for intervening in heritage places are all fixated on the protection of the material vessels that carry the value.' (Araoz 2011, 58).

The visibility, accessibility and interactivity of these representative assets is thus vital for both the processes of heritage and its subsequent projection on those same physical attributes. The processes of personal interaction and meaning as relating to heritage are argued extensively in a wide array of papers, but for the purpose of this thesis are best exemplified in a research trend within museum studies: New Museology. New Museology is a wave of museologist studies on the agency of objects and space in shaping perceptions of current and past cultures in museums, that started as early as the 1990's. New Museology emphasizes the importance of personal relations to culture through interaction with objects and centres around the shift from static collections to spaces of interaction which can be multi-faceted, personalised and more inclusive (McCall and Gray 2014, 20). In its display, no space holds more significance as the stage for display and making of heritage than museums (MacDonald 2006, 203). This specific type of interaction shapes both the understanding of the object in the mind of the onlooker, as it does the onlooker; for through the interaction the object has the potential to alter existing ideas and perceptions of the subject or facilitate the creation of entirely new ones. The object therefore has a matter of agency, which is particularly important for creating the 'image' that is associated with a people or culture. Exhibitions are the space in which such interactions are allowed to take place, and in effect the past can be made, through the representation of objects in designed spaces. This has led to the understanding of the 'performative museum' in which the experience of the materials is affected by the space in which they are represented (Taylor 2009). It can be concludingly observed that in an individual's mind places as such do not exist without the associated sensational, emotional and personal notions of that place (Shouran, Bende and Gheibi 2019).

(Digital) spaces of Heritage

The observations and studies of museum studies apply in equal measure to heritage landscapes, or archaeological sites. This is exactly because of their 'evocative relationship of present to past' as argued by Silberman, or their ascribed quality as 'vessels of value' by Araoz. Heritage has only in the past two decades or so, however, come to terms with the emergence of an entirely new space: the digital space. Use of new and digital technologies have quickly and profoundly impacted the nature of possibilities in making accessible, visible and interactive all objects and spaces of heritage. In essence,

use of these technologies thus also offers a platform and space for 'making heritage' which remains thus far not fully understood or equipped. The potential of digital spaces for the purpose of making heritage is especially important to those sites and objects which otherwise would not be available, visible or interactable at all. As argued in Chapter III, VI and V, these three factors heavily impede on the potential of Aksumite archaeology and history to be fully appreciated. Exploring the theoretic potential of the digital space thus becomes especially interesting for the heritage of Aksum, and therefore the focus of this discussion.

This approach is highly relevant. The digitalisation of cultural institutes has already transformed museums, heritage spaces and places in simultaneously fundamental and mundane ways. As Bouquet has anecdotally noted for instance, 'contemplate a visit to a museum today, and chances are that you will first visit its website.' (Bouquet 2012, 14) Such observations extend to archaeological sites as well. The digitisation of museums has been proposed to be an equally democratising shift in museum history as its initial opening to the public two centuries ago (Bouquet 2012, 12).

Museums are now successfully moving away from narrative driven approach to learning in museums, and instead, in line with New Museology theory, opting for more open-ended and non-linear approaches to learning which employ the museum as a space in which this process can be facilitated (Hornecker and Ciolfi 2019). This has allowed for a number of innovations for the design of exhibition spaces and opened it up to new methods of engagement. These developments have re-directed the one way stream of information from object to subject, to encompass more equal definitions of subject-object interaction. Museums have thus transitioned themselves, allowing concepts of material agency and personal experience to be placed at the centre point of what heritage is. As Sandra Dudley has adequately phrased it:

> 'It is only through this interaction that the thing becomes properly manifest to the viewer – in effect, it is only through the object–subject engagement that the material artefact or specimen becomes real at all.' (Dudley 2010, 5)

Researchers have argued that in many ways the museum has always pioneered such new visualisation technologies, yet the past two decades or so of accessible technological developments, however, have profoundly impacted the ways, and spaces, in which people are able to interact with cultural heritage (Pavement, 2019). In the case of museums, the 'mobile museum' offers a great deal of opportunities for broadening audiences and is in effect as well a phenomenon associated with 'the need to stay current'. The process of a digital museum space not only involves the opportunities for museums themselves, however, but also the museum organizations need to stay current for an audience that is increasingly exposed to the latest digital trends through a multitude of media outlets (Baggesen 2019). Even pop-cultural expressions such as selfies and social media posts have become an integral and even promoted part of a museum visit; not only giving the digital space access to museum collections, but

vice versa as well (Ibid., 119). The need for heritage-based institutions to relate themselves to 'novel' technology has been noted in studies on virtual reality (VR) technologies as well, which in part relates to the success of its implementation and positive experience of its use by those interested (Rauscher and Humpe 2022). While the mission of museums has transformed since then, they have retained their character as places of interaction, experience and portrayal, deeply rooted in visual anthropology (Bouquet 2012, 122).

Uniting all these different ways in which heritage has come to be infiltrated by digital novelties and experiences, is the notion of heritage 'content'; an umbrella term for any digital expression or tool relating to cultural heritage (Terras et al 2021, Hanes and Stone 2019, Raptis et al 2019). Referring to heritage content is useful, since there are many separate ways in which digital spaces or expressions can be found which rely on the same theoretical framework for its successful implementation. To avoid confusion, this research will use the concept of 'content' for all materials, sites or spaces (digital or physical), which are recognised to hold the ability to evoke 'processes of meaning-making'; from traditional material archaeology to digitalised photographs and 3D-modelled heritage sites. Anything that holds the power to evoke personal dialoguing and the creation of personal relation to an archaeological culture.

Theories of Heritage Content

In this section the various types of contents which facilitate the creation of heritage are discussed in more detail. The importance of the here discerned contents relies heavily on the argued modes of heritage creation above described, such as the concepts of meaning making, imagery, subject-object interaction and the spaces which facilitate it. The outreach strategy this thesis will thus propose is founded on these notions of subject-object perception and the creation of heritage through meaning-making processes by interacting with heritage. This interaction is facilitated by the 'space' in which heritage is presented.

Here discussed will be a theoretical framework of understanding heritage in a number of identified useful ways in which such content might appear. The types of content discussed in this section are: 1) Objects and (Exhibition) Spaces, 2) Digital Archiving, 3) Emerging Digital Technologies, 4) Social Media and Video-based heritage Interaction. The choice of these four content types is made by the author's research on available sources, data, visualisations, etc. which would serve the purpose of a digital outreach strategy for Aksum. The four content types are furthermore discerned on the basis of available sources discussing such heritage content types on which a theoretical understanding can be built. The resulting theoretic framework that is established through the discussion of each content type will then support the integration of these modes of content presentation in a proposed outreach strategy. There is a theoretical overlap between most of the types of content here identified by the author. All these content types serve to fulfil a specific cultural need, however. In the subsequent section on 'Making Aksum' the theory will be added upon with specific examples. In this way, this

chapter will produce several theoretically supported, practical examples of potential projects to make accessible, visible and interactive Aksum's cultural and archaeological heritage.

Objects and (Exhibition) Spaces

As discussed previously in this chapter regarding the definitions of heritage and the processes of heritage making, the experience of heritage is reliant to an extensive degree on the objects and spaces which portray it; both in museums and at specific sites. Such spaces are thus imperative in addressing the three identified core concepts related to processes of heritage making. Though many observations on the role of objects and spaces in heritage have featured earlier in this chapter, here will be discussed in detail a theoretical framework for the use of objects and spaces in processes of heritage making. Not merely focussing on their physical expressions, this section will integrate notions of 'digital surrogates' and digital spaces to establish a theoretical framework for employment of digital counterparts in an outreach strategy for Aksum.

It is the objects representative of past or present cultures that rely its message to its onlooker, and the onlooker who in turn interprets the objects in their own way (Macdonald 2006, 200). Hence, in order to make heritage or convey history's message, its representative objects are an essential element. A question which has increasingly gripped the academic field of museology is whether this same reasoning translates to 'digital-born' objects, faithful reproductions of original, physical objects which can be displayed or interacted by a visitor or user (Meehan 2022). The use of digital media, in theory, has the ability to relate museum objects to a digital space which reproduces the original space. Furthermore, it can help exhibit objects which would otherwise not be considered or available for display (Liestol 2014). Referring specifically to the research presented in Chapter IV of this thesis, this is an essential benefit for the Aksumite material heritage which in itself underlines a powerful argument for the employment of digital exhibitions.

But while digitalisation strategies hold many benefits for the presentation of cultural heritage, it is equally criticised by scholars for their apparent failure to reproduce 'authentic' experiences of objects or spaces. Critics have equated the digitalisation of objects often as simply a reduction to 2D 'digital surrogates'. It has even been argued that the response of viewing an object associated with processes of meaning making are caused by an objects irreplaceable 'raw materiality' (Messham-Muir 2005). The notion of materiality and an object's 'aura' in particular are persistent arguments against full reproducible value of objects (Burns 2017, 4) Recent studies on information seeking and educational imagery, however, have done much to address this and attest to this perception losing steam. Furthermore, the idea that digital objects are in themselves made to replace physical objects is a flawed assumption and such critiques often miss the point. In archaeological fieldwork, for instance, documentation using photogrammetry is well accepted and relied upon technology for study. No archaeologist, however, would argue for the abandonment of archaeological sites if digital reproductions exist.

Digitalisation and the concept of digital spaces, furthermore, should not be deemed as something separate from museums. As has become apparent during the covid-19 pandemic which caused museums worldwide to close their doors, digitalisation can provide accessibility where otherwise impossible. In the current strategies by museums to increase their exposure to a wider audience, the digital space has become a detrimental and integrated part. Museums are increasingly seeking participation through online exhibitions and digitising collections, which allows an ever growing number of visitors with increasingly sophisticated wishes to interact with its objects (Gil-Fuenteteja and Economou 2019). Instead of envisioning these spheres as separate, they should be seen as complimentary or overlapping in many ways; the digital being not simply a reproduction of the physical, but firmly rooted in it (Burness 2016, Budge 2017).

Spaces are thus imperative in addressing the three identified core concepts related to processes of heritage making. Museums are now successfully moving away from narrative driven approach to learning in museums, and instead, in line with New Museology theory, opting for more open-ended and non-linear approaches to learning (Hornecker and Ciolfi 2019). This has allowed for a number of innovations for the design of exhibition spaces and opened it up to new methods of engagement. These developments have re-directed the one way stream of information from object to subject, to encompass more equal definitions of subject-object interaction. These have allowed for the concept of material agency and personal experience to be placed at the centre point of what heritage is. As Sandra Dudley has adequately phrased it:

> 'It is only through this interaction that the thing becomes properly manifest to the viewer – in effect, it is only through the object–subject engagement that the material artefact or specimen becomes real at all.' (Dudley 2010, 5)

While ultimately a museum exhibition focussed on Aksum would undoubtedly be impactful in creating awareness, given the difficulties associated with its creation and the limits of its accessibility, this research will thus argue for the utilisation of insights, techniques and possibilities in digital exhibitions for the proposition of an effective outreach strategy. There are many assets and types of content which can be employed and mobilised to this end, again referring to the research of this thesis in Chapter IV.

Digital Archiving

The digital holds the potential to create spaces which can feature materials, objects or content not otherwise put on display. As argued for museum spaces, this same argument holds for the creation of digital archives (Liestol 2014). Archives are of immeasurable importance for the storage of important documents, artefacts or photographs and are crucial for providing accessibility to them in general. Such archives can encompass multiple types of materials. In particular academic works, documentation or photographs are of importance here.

Just as with objects or other space related content which can facilitate interaction with heritage, the accessibility of archives through digitalisation has likewise been an important topic of accessibility, sustainable heritage research, visibility and interaction. There's no better way to experience the past then by seeing it and web-based content is no exception. It can even provide unique opportunities for the visualisation of archival resources which might otherwise be out of reach for some, or prove a fruitful ground for archival partnerships and collaborations. A great example of both these potential benefits is a recent project by The Dutch National Archive (Nationaal Archief), which has stored and made accessible its Dutch East India Trading Company (VOC) and West India Trading Company (WIC) documents, through a browser-based user friendly interface featuring a world map and visual cues for different types of content: maps, paintings, drawings, documents, reports, etc. (Atlas of Mutual Heritage n.d.). Aside from that, the 'Atlas of Mutual Heritage' project combines its collections with those of other institutions, and uses explanatory texts to put the content into perspective and context. The interactive map thus proposes a unique product of digitalising archives in a creative manner, as a tool of learning which would otherwise not be possible to develop.

Fig. 74: Interface of the freely accessible 'Atlas of Mutual Heritage' of the Dutch National Archive (Atlas of Mutual Heritage n.d.).

Aside from this example of improved visualisation, though, overall digitalisation itself offers the potential to promote obscure or isolated collections for interaction and research. Examples of this are found internet-wide, such as the Rodolfo Lanciani archive, part of the much larger Mapping Rome project by the Oregon, Dartmouth and Stanford universities, as well as Studium Urbis (Mapping Rome n.d., Stanford Digital Repository n.d.). Echoing once more Phillipson's comment on the diffuse research traditions and lack of overview of research and reports on Aksum's archaeology, making

archives not location-bound, but organised and openly accessible through a digital solution would itself be a great boon to archaeological and historical research on Aksum.

In particular photographs can serve as powerful objects in the digital archive, that hold the potential to stimulate conversation and discussion, as they have become a primary way of expression in communication online (Budge and Buress 2018). While most photographs used are in fact very fleeting and temporal expressions, their ability to relive and dialogue with captured moments remains unchanged. If anything, the number of photographs produced and shared in social communication and social media platforms, has only enhanced the recognisability of the power that photographs and video hold. In a heritage related context, research shows the impact the sharing of characterising images has on both the site and visitor perception, tourists sharing pictures not only 'document' the site, 'but also shape it' (Falk and Hagsten 2021). When it comes to processes of heritage making, heritage content as produced on sharing platforms specifically for pictures, Flickr has already been the subject of argument to this benefit (Terras 2011). Recognising the importance of the image here as a tool of learning through accessibility, some identified online archives concerning pictures of Aksum, archaeological field studies there or materials which are currently hard to trace, will be a great asset in the following recommended outreach strategy.

Emerging Digital Technologies

When discussing 'emergent digital technologies', what is referred to is an open-ended collection of digital technologies that are continuously added to, improved upon and made more affordable and accessible to the market or even private consumers. Such technologies concerned here include 3D-moddeling using various methods such as photogrammetry, laser scanning or graphics engine based solutions. What will be discussed here, however, is their potential and desired outcomes based on this thesis' understanding of heritage and the processes underlying it. The choice of technologies to discuss here is based on research prominence.

Recent studies have reviewed the way in which Virtual Reality (VR) applications can facilitate the experience of heritage or enhance its modes of perception. Creating virtual spaces in which objects or entire monuments can be reviewed has been shown to make for an 'info-cultural-tainment experience' (Palumbo et al., 2013; Rauscher and Humpe 2022). As discussed under 'Objects and Spaces', it has been argued that the response of viewing an object associated with processes of meaning making are caused by an objects irreplaceable 'raw materiality' (Messham-Muir 2005). But this argument seems implausible and unsupported, when considering the impact ascribed to digital media in the case of heritage. Materiality in this sense also seems to suggest all physical modes of interaction are employed in interpreting objects, but in the context of archaeological sites or museums this is hardly ever not the case. To put it more simply: interaction cannot be limited to physical interaction, when those physical dimension; touch, weight, etc. are usually prohibited in heritage places (Edwards in Dudley 2010).

In this sense, emerging technologies such as photogrammetry and 3D-modelling hold significance in the same theoretical sense of 'traditional' heritage making processes that rely on interaction. Moreover, they allow for a completely new dimension to the possibilities of digital interaction that holds enormous potential for the digital recreation of heritage spaces. It allows for 3D- models to act as a digital surrogate that can be turned, zoomed into and viewed at will in an enhanced or focussed digital environment. The fateful reproduction of objects and entire monuments is possible to a very high and satisfying degree, where usually (or sometimes still) hampered by the limits of rendering technologies which allow for noise, faults in the imagery or colour reproduction (Hindmarch, Terras and Robson 2019, 244, Taylor 2009). It must be stated, however, that improvements in visualization capabilities improve at an exponential rate, and that for the purposes of this study the current capabilities in 3D-modelling, available more than suffice.

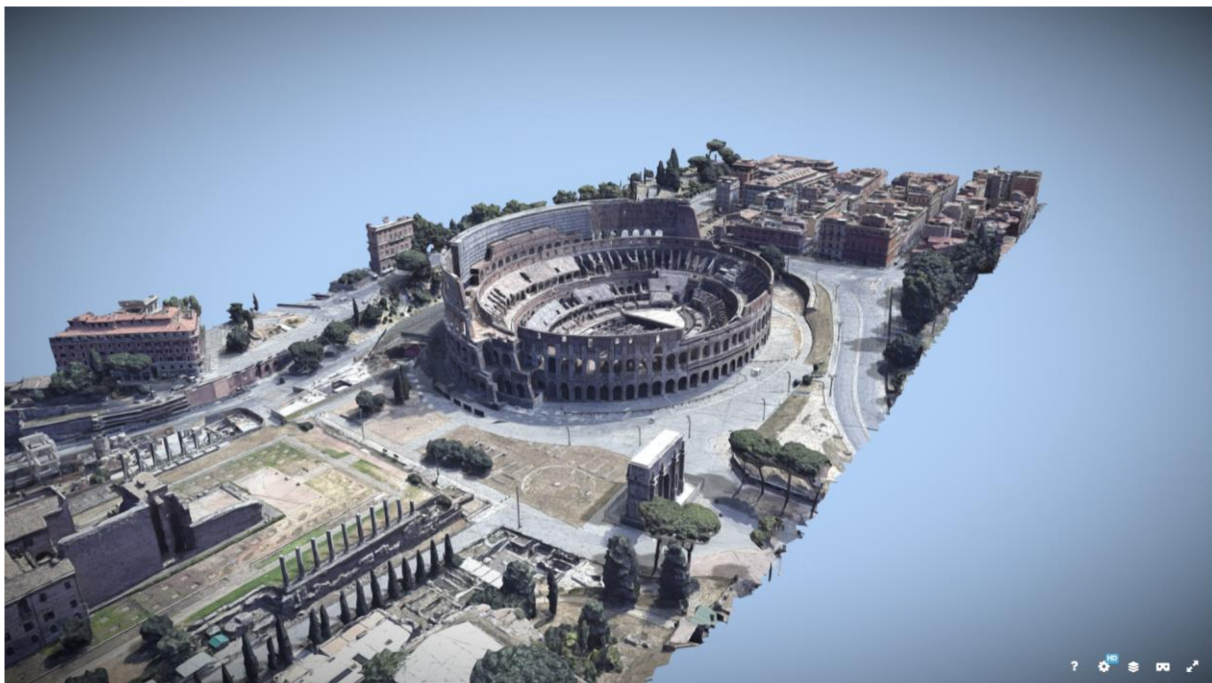


Fig. 75: 3D model of the Colosseum as found on Sketchfab ('Colloseum, Rome' in Appendix E).

Moreover, use of such technologies is closer and more accessible then ever, with entire online platforms dedicated to collecting and sharing 3D-models of everything conceivable. Sketchfab, which has the ability to create contexts for digitally rendered objects as well. Such contexts can enhance the digital spaces of interpretation and in some cases even mirror the original context to a considerable degree, while of course not reproducing it exactly (Hindmarch, Terras and Robson, 2019; 250). The content which could be created along these lines thus hold great potential and opportunity for the visualisation of Aksum in a digital space. As will be discussed, there are already some efforts underway which support these observations and its possibilities for implementation.

Fig. 76: A very detailed reproduction of the Sutton Hoo helmet, as found on Sketchfab ('Sutton Hoo Helmet' in Appendix E).

The benefits of using digital spaces as a mirror to the physical spaces allows for multi-purpose usage of these renderings that supplement the physical in novel ways. There is an educational element to the new liberties that digitally recreated spaces hold, which has been researched and recognised even in everyday in tools such as Google Maps and Google Earth, where users are free to explore large parts of the world in an instantly accessible way. Such educative processes have been described as positive, 'meaningful' and engaging, exactly because students are able to interact with their direct surroundings as they please (Landicho 2020). An interface for interaction, even when it comes to more 'mundane' applications such as Google Maps, thus boasts clearly advantageous implications for heritage, through the possibility of seeking personal meaning and connection with objects. Either when interaction or accessibility is denied for any reason, or simply to supplement or enhance a potential viewing or visiting experience. Digital technologies used to visualize allow users to seek and answer their own questions when it comes to the past, its objects and monuments.

Social media and popular video-based heritage content

The advent of social media has caused for great interests and hopes of its use for involving the public in cultural heritage. Not only that, but it has also already yielded remarkable observations. Research relating to social media impacts on heritage have established a connection between visitor flows to World Heritage Sites in connection to the number of times a site shows up on Instagram (Falk and Hagsten 2021). A similar study has been made using photos posted on photo-sharing platform Flickr, yielding very comparable results (Levin et al 2019). Such studies support the basic principle that exposure and interaction with heritage can facilitate interest. Social media platforms and video-based heritage interaction can prove vital in reaching a large audience effectively.

Production of educational content through video has been widely employed and has produced many for the creation of compelling content effective at transferring an idea. The video medium offers a number of possibilities otherwise unavailable. Currently no contemporary, engaging or otherwise up-to-date video content exists, let alone in the public domain. Video-based content published on popular social media channels garner millions of views and followers, eager to learn through entertaining and informative. The success of these platforms should be attributed to the entertaining and visually pleasing presentation, as well as the amount of content available to choose from.

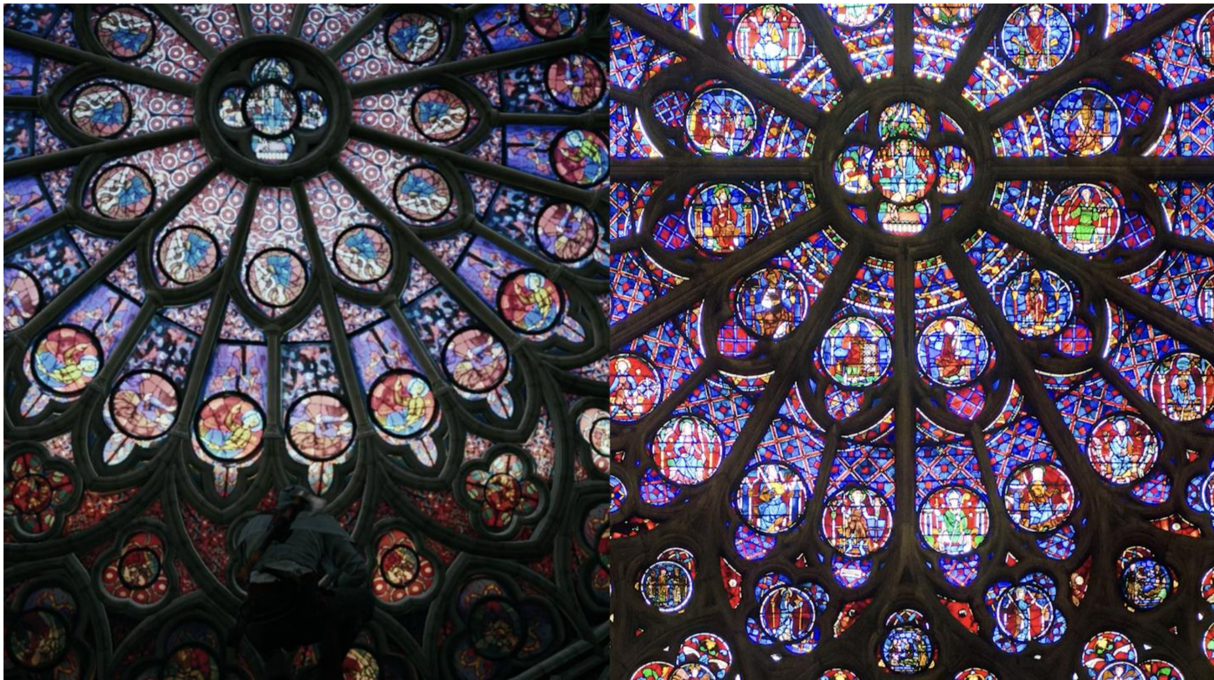


Fig. 77: Comparison of reconstructed Notre Dame's southern rose window in Assassin's Creed: Unity (left) and the actual southern rose window (right) (de Rochefort 2021).

Video-based solutions also imply an often-overlooked application of a potential 'info-cultural-tainment experience', namely: video games (Hanes and Stone 2019, Bontchev 2015, Garcia-Fernandez and Medeiros 2019, Balela and Mundy 2011). As has been argued for digital exhibition spaces, as well as emerging digital technologies, studies have suggested that digital surrogates or recreated environments can evoke a very same type of response ascribed to physical objects or spaces. In the absence of accessibility of certain monuments, video games have even been employed to make up for this inaccessibility. When in 2019 the Notre Dame in Paris was partially destroyed by a devastating fire, the creators of the Assassin's Creed video game franchise Ubisoft, appreciated for its complete and detailed reconstructions of past urban environments, offered free access to their 'Unity' instalment. This release featured a fully rendered reconstruction of the late 18th century Notre Dame. Ubisoft released a statement, saying they want to give everyone the chance to experience the majesty and beauty of the Notre Dame.' (Mochocki 2021). The Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) even reported in a video report on the use of digital reconstructions and models in the actual

rebuilding of the Notre Dame, showcasing the ability and importance of rendering truthful, reliable digital surrogates, even when it comes to full scale cathedrals.

While video games in itself will not be discussed as a future solution for the Aksumite case as laid-out, the theoretic discussions arguing for its meaningful implementation in heritage show that much is to be gained from popular exposure through video-based solutions in outreach strategies, for example 'serious games', when done right (Hanes and Stone 2019, Bontchev 2015, Garcia-Fernandes and Medeiros 2019). These insights translate to earlier observations on digital technologies and spaces as well. All in all, it grants a great example of how emerging visual technologies can have great recourse for the experience, understanding and personal connection with heritage.

Making Aksum; Proposing an Outreach Strategy

This section will use the above outlined theoretical discussions and insights to produce a practical recommendation that mobilises available resources encapsulating the Aksumite heritage in a comprehensive and executable strategy which aims to promote education on and interaction with the Aksumite heritage, thus facilitating its incorporation in a broader historical awareness and dialogue on global antiquity. Most of the above discussed methods of utilising content in processes of heritage making has been studied in isolation and only applied to a small range of subjects. What has thus far not been done, however, is using these means in a *total* manner; incorporating digitalisation of archives, exhibition of material collections and even reproduction of authenticate monuments, structures or archaeological landscapes in a comprehensive strategy that would seek to make Aksum accessible, visible and interactive. This section will thus relate the theoretical frameworks to possible, potential or already available (digital) content to produce a recommended strategy.

Ideally, this should be done in a project unifying multiple efforts to successfully incorporate and include insights and people. An effective outreach strategy thus utilises and employs these basic insights of accessibility, visibility and seeks compelling platforms through both traditional and innovative media to create engagement and educational experiences. Underlying the necessity for a media strategy for Aksum is the conception that in an individual's mind places as such do not exist without the associated sensational, emotional and personal notions of that place (Shouran, Bende and Gheibi 2019).

(Digital) Aksum Exhibition Space

Observations made in both this Chapter and Chapter IV, serve to argue the neglect and underrepresentation Aksumite objects in museum depots and other archives. The power museums hold in promoting cultures to the public has been argued above and is generally well-attested. This research was only able to discern one instance in which specifically Aksumite objects were incorporated in an exhibition. The exhibition, held in the Ashmolean Museum until January 2018, concerned its impressive collection of Aksumite collections. Freely accessible, the temporary exhibition was of modest size. Aside from that single instance, Aksumite objects are not usually the subject of planned

exhibitions. On the contrary. As shown, the issue pertaining to many of ancient Aksum's archaeological artefacts, is the fact that many of these objects are not on display and kept in less-than-ideal conditions for their conservation.

Recent years have seen the increased interest of the cultural heritage sector in digital means of visualizing and presenting archaeological data and heritage. This growing interest is due to viable digital solutions for an audience's equally growing appreciation of digital content. Archaeology is full of compelling content and stories. Aksum, likewise, lends itself easily in creating an engaging narrative. Some of which have actual direct connections to currently remaining artefacts. The pillar, observed in Chapter IV, features as a remnant in one of the main early sites of archaeology surrounding Aksum. Together with stories, narratives, paintings and

A relatively cheap method of achieving this is through photogrammetry. Photogrammetry maps an object using photography and through it is able to reproduce an object in three dimensions. Its results offer detailed reproductions of either standalone objects or archaeological features embedded in the landscape. Over the years, such techniques have become an integral part of the archaeological toolkit (Douglas, Lin and Chodoronek 2015).

Digital Aksum Archive

Building on the notions of accessibility, visibility and interactivity, digital archives are a source of significant potential for research on ancient Aksum. This research has furthermore shown the considerable disparity in languages, locations and institutes in which Aksumite artefacts, archaeological materials or sources. A great example of this is the formative study on Aksumite archaeology by the BIEA, published in German only and kept primarily in German specialist libraries. Not only is German illegible to a large number of potential researchers, but copies of the actual publication are also very hard to come by. In fact, this research has had to rely on a 1997 publication by Phillipson, who compiled photographs and information from the original works. In his own words: 'The work of the expedition was fully published in 1913 in four large volumes. These books are now extremely rare, and being written in German, are not readily accessible to most Ethiopians.' (Phillipson 1997, 1)

The digitalisation of archives holding works on Aksumite archaeology, photographs, paintings, but also records of the Aksumite material heritage and where they can be found or consulted, should all be included to offer a complete digital archive from which Aksumite heritage can be studied. This is imperative for the future of research, as well as fostering effective outreach. Digital archives, just like museum exhibitions, can use their contents to facilitate interaction with the Aksumite history and archaeology. In the case of Aksum, this research has identified several (online) archives with substantial photographic materials showing the Aksumite monuments or even objects through the decades from as early as 1907.

The execution of such a strategy can rely on like-minded efforts. One such example is the current effort by the Aluka project integrated on JSTOR.org since 2008. The mission of this project is to digitalise archives on African history, stating that: ‘[…] much critical evidentiary material remains in a precarious state, even when housed in official repositories. Each year, thousands of personal papers, pamphlets, photographs, news-papers, and other critical documents not in secure repositories are inadvertently destroyed.’ (Isaacman, Lalu and Nygren 2005, 4). While the project originated in South Africa and revolved mainly around Africa’s struggle for freedom from colonial powers, it has since come to encompass digitalised photographs of a set of African World Heritage Sites, including Aksum. The JSTOR entry holds the digitalized pictures of the BIEA excavations in 70’s and 90’s, some of which feature extremely rare objects of strong archaeological significance that have otherwise never been featured, such as the ivory figurine and ceramic replica that have been shown in Chapter II, but furthermore include decorative and inscribed metals, weaponry, glass mosaics and pieces of ivory furniture. The collection holds almost 13,000 drawings, plans and photographs of objects, virtually none of which have been adequately studied or referenced in academic research.

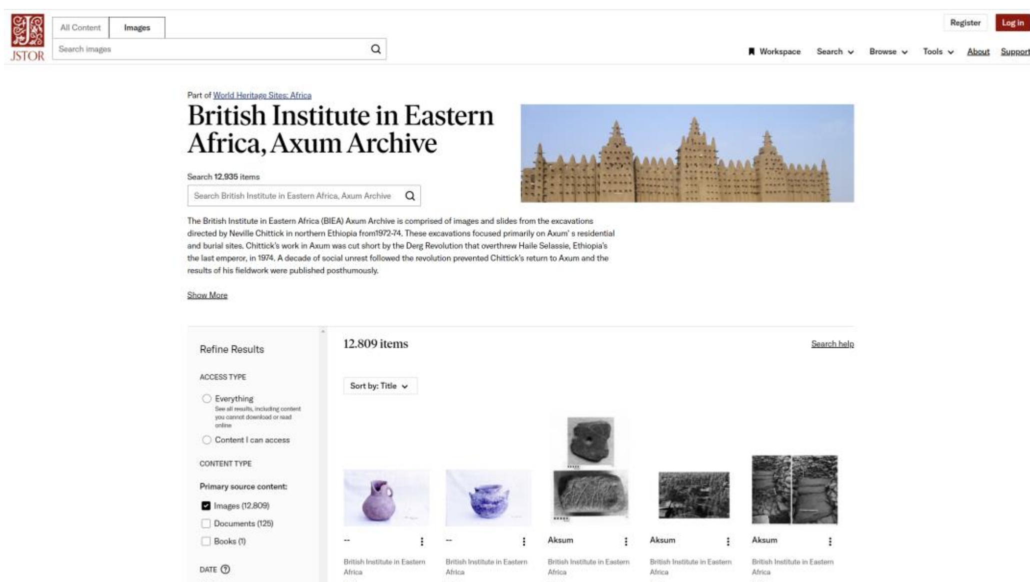


Fig. 78: Interface of the JSTOR BIEA ‘Axum Archive’, powered by the Aluka Project (see Appendix B).

Anecdotally, the significance of this database, founded on data from only the excavations managed by a single institute, is so great that virtually every time this author consults the entry, something new and surprising is found. Such efforts should be amplified and communicated in more clear and accessible ways, playing into contemporary means of engagement and media outreach. While popularizing an archive in itself is difficult, integrating it and all other means here argued for combined in a single outreach strategy or project, would allow it to be a backbone in future efforts for studying Aksum. Building on these works, the archives presented in Chapter IV should likewise be considered for integration into the Aluka project as published on JSTOR, therefore promoting accessibility and a comprehensive overview by utilising already ongoing efforts.

This chapter has argued effectively for the need of heritage content to be accessible, visible and interactive in order to facilitate processes of meaning-making. Likewise, the previous chapter has argued against the current accessibility of the World Heritage Site that is Aksum, on the basis of mismanagement, poor information services and a political conflict which has thus far raged on for two years and has seen severely destructive episodes. As such, Aksum cannot be deemed accessible in the current climate. This research thus argues, on the basis of the previously addressed theoretical framework, that greater public awareness and interest for Aksumite heritage and the World Heritage Site itself can be achieved through digitalising its objects. But as addressed, the same theoretical could, and should be applied to the most authenticative element of Aksumite architectural heritage: its monuments.

The merit of this can be argued theoretically but has also yielded a multitude of successes in companies and projects seeking to conserve, revive or promote cultural heritage sites. An example of this is the work by CyArk, a company developing 'place-based storytelling experiences for web and mobile as well as immersive applications for virtual reality' through their own platform Tapestry.[21] Another such company enjoying rapid growth and success is Capturing Reality.[22] Both companies showcase the capabilities currently available in rendering extremely high quality 3D-models of entire structures.

[21] Information retrieved from the general website. For more information, see: Storytelling (cyark.org).
[22] Information retrieved from the Capturing Reality website: 3D preservation of Cultural Heritage - Capturing Reality.

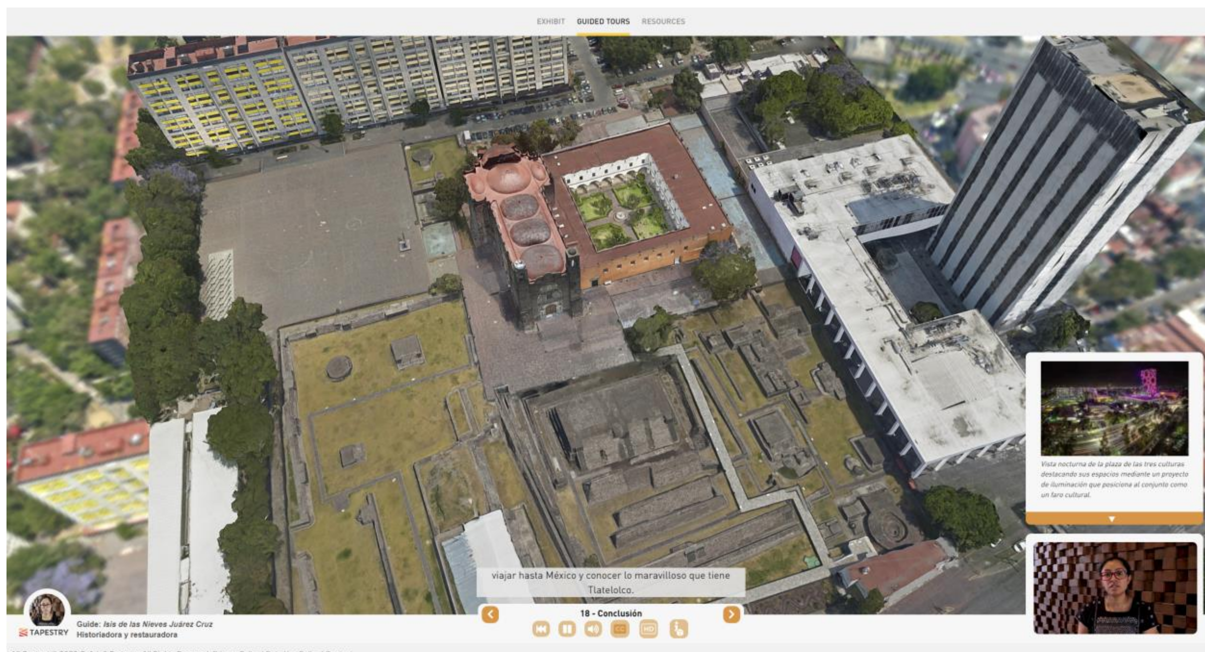


Fig. 79: High quality 3D rendering of the 'Plaza de Tres Culturas' in Mexico, featuring its entire surroundings. A guided tour is integrated in the viewing experience, featuring archaeologists' and locals' views.[23]

The success of this approach, digitalising heritage landscapes, can be argued through the same theoretical sense of the studies on exhibitions. The ability to freely interact with faithfully reproduced heritage site representations allows for curiosity to guide the personal experience. Aside from enhanced modes of interaction, visibility and accessibility, the experience is supplemented by information points and video recordings of local people informing users about the site. This shows that digital reconstructions of monuments and landscapes hold not just opportunity for digital conservation, representation and increased interaction, it also creates a platform that, if used appropriately, has great potential for community inclusion in heritage representation and narrative construction.

While such an effort may seem somewhat implausible at first glance, many affordable and available techniques exist to facilitate the creation of digital surrogates. In the case of Aksum, examples of such products already exist. The previously highlighted online platform for digital models, Sketchfab, hosts some detailed and engaging models of Aksum's stelae that are publicly accessible. The main source of these models is the Zamani project, which hosts some of its content on Sketchfab. The mission statement as expressed on their website directly implies the theoretic framework which has been outlined above:

> 'Zamani Project undertakes data collection and analysis, heritage communication, and training and capacity building for experts and the public so that they have access to high-quality spatial heritage data, and can learn from, conserve, and protect heritage.' (ZAMANI Project n.d.).

[23] Screenshot captured using the Tapestry application as hosted on the CyArk website. For access, see: Plaza de Tres Culturas, Tlatelolco: Tapestry | CyArk.

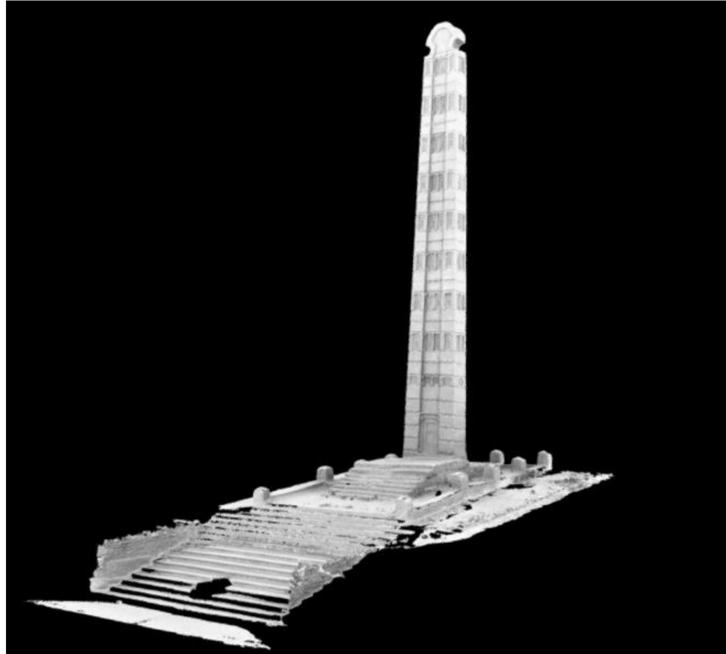


Fig. 80: 3D modelled rendition of stele 3 at Aksum as available on sketchfab.com (‘Stele No. 3. In Appendix E).

The models produced as represented are reportedly made between 2006-2007. Visible is a level of noise and a lack of colour reproduction, yet these are easily addressed and replicated. A similar project on the ruins of Lalibela rock hewn churches close to Aksum by the Zamani project, for example, successfully manages to include this environmental data in its reproduction and as such grants an additional level of visual engagement. Yet, outside of merely visual data which presents a stimulating interactive and accessible platform to make the Aksumite monumental heritage visible, it likewise offers viewers the option to consult historical or archaeological information. Through the use of visual cues presented in the digital reproduction, certain elements can be supplemented by additional information, as fig x shows. These models thus present a feasible and adequate medium through which to present and make accessible Aksumite heritage through accessible online platforms in an engaging and informative manner.

Fig. 81: 3D modelled rendition of the stelae park featuring interactable elements providing further information ('Stelae Field' in Appendix E).

In the theoretical discussion the recreation of space in digital environments has also been argued. Fig x proposes an example of such recreated spaces, but other immersive means exist too, that potentially enhance those same effects. Again featuring the Zamani project, 360 photography shows to be an excellent means to let users explore environments close to home or otherwise out of reach at their own liberty. Allowing for a 'virtual tour', the recreation of the Lalibela churches offers a unique experience from a visitor's point of view that allows a multitude of angles to be consulted, integrating the monument firmly in its natural environment.

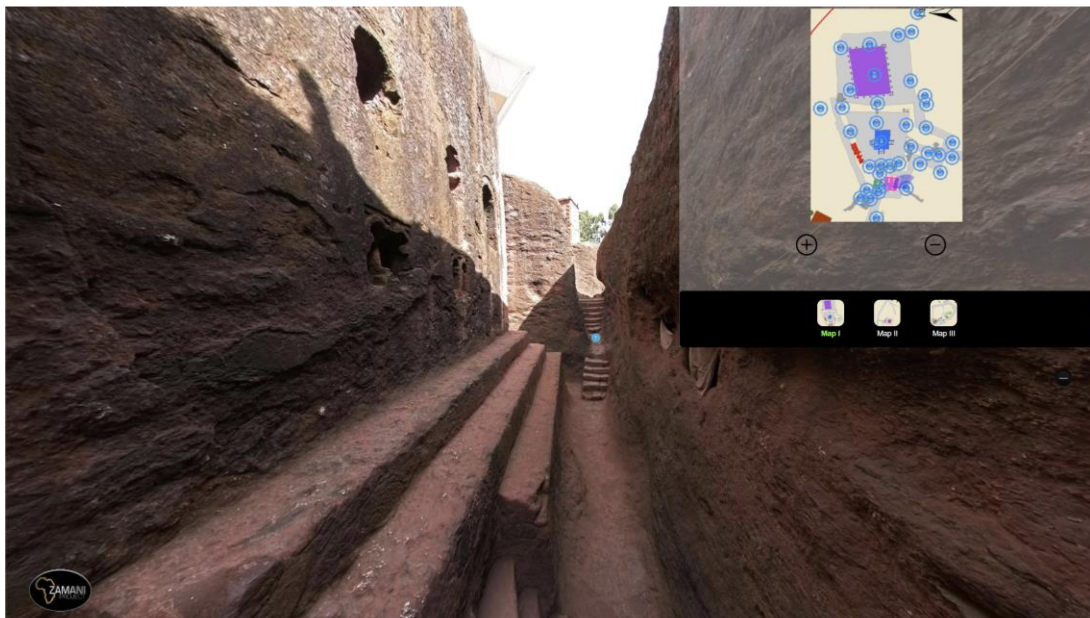


Fig. 82: 'Lalibela Panorama Tour', created by the Zamani Project (ZAMANI Project n.d.).

It furthermore includes certain objects or details as captured by photography that add a level of realism and information which is often purposefully excluded in 3D modelling. An example in fig of the Lalibela virtual tour shows, for instance, the protective roof placed over the entire structure at Lalibela,

enables a level of experience otherwise hard to achieve. At the same time, the exclusion thereof further adds to the merit of 3D models. The two techniques thus complement each other considerably.

Portraying Aksum

Video based outreach has been at the forefront of outreach in archaeology for decades. Through documentaries and re-enactments, though often more with entertainment than purely educational motives in mind, stories and sites have been portrayed and made accessible to large audiences. Online (social) media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and even TikTok offer great potential to replicate these methods with additional methods of engagement and facilitating interaction.

The online video sharing platform YouTube is a great example. Through anecdotal analysis of historical videos, both demand and interest for less discussed historical topics is attested. A recent publication, for instance, on the history of Ethiopia before and during World War II has garnered over 150.000 views in under two weeks.[24] These observations serve to assess the need of similar content which could evoke interest and want for further exposure to Aksumite history and archaeology. Another video, posted in 2019, on the same channel 'Kings and Generals', which in large part deals with Aksum, boasts more than twice the number of views. While these examples point to the potential for exposure and awareness, it also shows the need for more accurate and easily reviewable information and sources. The narrator, for instance claims in passing that Adulis most likely grew into a formidable trading port from a Ptolemaic settlement used for hunting elephants. A statement which is not only highly problematic in that it ignores knowledge on pre-Aksumite Adulis and other settlements but exposes the general over-reliance on Mediterranean historical sources in reconstructing Aksum.[25] This particular example thus not only shows the potential for hosting 'info-tainment' on social media platforms, but also the need for academics and researchers to be involved in publishing well-researched opinions and up to date information.

Formulating a recommendation for an outreach strategy

This chapter has discussed the modes of meaningful interaction with and experience of heritage through the processes that constitute its formation in the subject. Above discussed are a multitude of content types that facilitate such heritage making processes, highlighted both through theoretical frameworks as well as through practical application. It now falls to this research to discuss how all these observations can be combined into a comprehensive outreach strategy with the end goal of fostering interaction, awareness and meaningful interaction with heritage.

The most effective strategy for implementing all these facets is by including all content types, preferably on a single platform which can be promoted. Hosting digitalised archives including

[24] The video referenced can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr4RU4LLdnc. Reviewed on 6-10-2022.

[25] The video referenced can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJGnnxPn7SU. Reviewed on 6-10-2022.

photographs of objects and landscapes; 3D models showcasing the Aksumite monumental legacy as well as their environment in an interactive manner; entertaining and educative video content or cultural-info-tainment; and possibly digitalised objects as provided by those institutions identified as being in possession of substantial Aksumite material collections.

The institutions currently housing Aksumite artefacts, have by their displacement greatly attributed to the discussed current state of research of Aksumite artefacts; their de-contextualisation, misplacement and de-valuation by in effect keeping these objects from the public. An appropriate course of action would thus be to have the outlined institutions in Chapter IV housing Aksumite heritage invest in and develop a shared framework of collection research and open-access platform that might benefit the Aksumite state of research, as well as the public access to this World Heritage. This would affect those institutions' responsibility in a different manner than by restitution alone, although this indisputably would be an end goal; by mobilising institutional resources of those identified in this research to hold Aksumite material heritage, to effectively research, exhibit and promote the historical kingdom of Aksum.

Furthermore, any attempt at effecting this digital outreach strategy, should not go without the inclusion of the communities that claim the Aksumite heritage as their own. Not only does this embed, it acknowledges the current communities that care for these monuments and include them in a sense of their contemporary identities. As addressed in Chapter V, the World Heritage Site of Aksum holds strong significance and meaning for its local community, as well as Ethiopia and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity at large. It is still the stage for religious ceremony and procession, which place its monuments not only at the forefront of historical or archaeological portrayals, but deeply embed it into the contemporary cultural identity of the Aksumites and Ethiopians at large. Engagement by heritage authorities, tourism managers, practitioners, locals etc. with (potential) tourists on platforms like social media is a recognised means to create long-term engagement towards the site (Hamid, Mohamed and Suki 2021). Thus, testimonials, views and perceptions of Aksumite objects, monuments and Aksum itself is vital to portray a complete view of the World Heritage that is Aksum as relating to both past and present and can further stimulate dialogue, foster understanding and facilitate meaning making processes in a digital environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has examined the potential of emerging digital technologies and social media in heritage education and engagement, specifically with regard to the ancient Aksumite civilization. It has argued for the importance of accessibility, visibility, and interactivity, notions taken from the in facilitating processes of meaning-making and the need for a comprehensive outreach strategy that incorporates a range of content types, including digitalized archives, 3D models, virtual reality experiences, and social media platforms.

The chapter has also highlighted the current challenges facing the Aksumite heritage, including neglect and underrepresentation in museum collections, limited accessibility to the archaeological site due to political conflict, and a reliance on outdated or incomplete sources in historical narratives. In light of these issues, the chapter has proposed a strategy that seeks to promote education on and interaction with the Aksumite heritage through digital means, making it more accessible, visible, and interactive to a wider audience.

This proposed strategy includes the creation of a digital Aksum exhibition space, featuring photogrammetry reproductions of objects and landscapes; the integration of Aksumite sources and materials into an accessible digital space; an archive, such as the Aluka project on JSTOR; the digital reconstruction of Aksumite monuments and landscapes through 3D modeling and virtual reality experiences; and the use of social media platforms and video-based outreach to engage the public in the Aksumite heritage.

To effectively implement this strategy, it will be important to involve a range of stakeholders, including researchers, cultural heritage professionals, community members, and the wider public. Collaboration and partnerships will be key in ensuring that the Aksumite heritage is accurately and meaningfully represented, and that it is able to make a meaningful contribution to global historical awareness and dialogue. Overall, this chapter has demonstrated the potential for digital technologies and social media to play a significant role in heritage education and engagement, and has proposed a practical strategy for leveraging these tools in a project based heritage outreach strategy.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the urgent need for the better management and public outreach of the archaeological heritage of Aksum, a World Heritage Site facing numerous threats. The research has aimed to provide a critical assessment and attempted overview of the management practices of Aksumite collections and the site itself, and to propose a strategy for generating public awareness of Aksumite heritage based on theories of heritage making, combined with the use of innovative digitalization strategies. This thesis set out to map the archaeological heritage of and assess the current state of heritage and collection management and conservation. It has explored the potential for new insights and innovative technologies to aid in formulating an effective heritage outreach strategy and has proposed to do this employing the largely undiscovered material collections of Aksum's rich ancient heritage. Aside from that, this study has given detailed account of the earliest archaeological developments in the Ethiopian highlands, the history of archaeology at Aksum from the time of Prester John to Benito Mussolini, up to the current state of heritage management at the UNESCO World Heritage site and the state of Aksumite material collections. First, the findings of this research will be used to reflect on the research question this research posed in the introduction. Then, the implications will be discussed and potential for future research and action reflected upon in a critical reflection.

Research Question

The research questions which have guided this research have been thoroughly discussed throughout this thesis. The main observations will here be briefly discussed. Recalling the research questions posed at the start of this research, they read:

1) What is the state of research for the heritage of Aksum, and how have its archaeological site and materials developed to that point?
2) How can archaeological material collection research be employed in heritage outreach strategy based on digital technologies and outreach, by looking at theories of heritage making?

The first research question has been thoroughly analyzed in Chapter II, III, IV and V. What has been argued here is that the state of Aksumite heritage is overall extremely poor, caused both by historic events rooted in colonialism, as well as current failing management practices. What is evidently clear, however, is that the current political instability has made Aksum inaccessible to archaeological researchers outside of Ethiopia. This prevents archaeological excavations from being performed, and further might dissuade any potential researchers from studying the area. The result, is what is here observed as a negative pattern in which Aksum consistently falls out of the scope of ongoing research on antiquity and other research frameworks, which only leads the archaeological site and the material collections to be neglected further.

The second research question has been amply discussed in Chapter VI. The main findings here argued is that due to the lack of accessibility of both the Aksumite heritage site and its collections, digital

technologies can be effectively used to expose a potentially large audience online to Aksumite heritage. The effectiveness hereof has been argued both on the base of theoretic research, as on the base of successful earlier efforts for different subjects. However, the most important observation to make here is the fact that there is an abundance of scattered materials which could be employed in such efforts. From entire neglected museum collections, to a wide range of obscured online databases and research, there are already plenty of online resources which could be employed, further made available for study, research or creating awareness, with even some examples of 3D modelling projects having been performed at Aksum. Using these methods and theories, a heritage outreach campaign can be effectively set up to create awareness on the Aksumite heritage that might ultimately aid its conservation overall and promote its integration into archaeological or historical narratives of global antiquity.

Critical Reflection

The importance of this study rests in its ambition to provide new insights and invite new perspectives to an area and region of archaeological research which, despite its unique archaeological cultures, is largely underappreciated by archaeologists, historians, heritage managers and the wide public. The merit of these new perspectives rests in the observations made in this study considering the state of conservation and public awareness on the ancient Aksumite past. As has been stated and argued many times before, these are in a lamentable state and face a high multitude of diverse threats. From man-made deliberate destruction to environmental damages that damage the structural integrity of Aksum's monuments. This study has sought to list clearly and concisely the many kinds of threats Aksum has faced throughout the strategy. Yet, also in the very present, public awareness on Aksum remains low. Its integration into narratives on globalized antiquity remains unaccomplished. Anecdotally, it is hard to find a major publication on connectivity in ancient times that seriously discusses or considers the Aksumite kingdom. Nor is the subject published on frequently aside from loose archaeological reports. Therefore, this study has sought to argue from a theoretic framework a new approach that blends insights from several related disciplines of archaeology; museology, heritage studies, and seeks to speak to a wide audience using digital spaces and innovative, interactive technologies, where the objects and sites which tell the tale of the Aksumite past remain inaccessible for various reasons. It is in the view of this researcher necessary, for the future conservation of Aksum itself, and the broadening of archaeological and historical awareness, that public outreach should be creatively and strategically pursued for all the reasons cited above. Given the fact that Aksum's management system and material collections are, seeking public awareness in an integrated strategy; a new strategy, is severely needed.

Currently, there are a wave of accessible, exciting, and innovative technologies and method being made available, exploiting spaces of digital interaction, that suit the purpose of heritage outreach and conservation exceptionally well. Many of which are tried and proven; photogrammetry, 3D-modelling

and online archives are well-attested as being valuable sources of access, visibility and interactivity for anyone seeking to learn more about any archaeological subject. The interaction, so vital for shaping a subject's perception and attachment to heritage, as is argued, can be realized almost fully by using what is termed a 'digital surrogate'. While these technologies are thus in no way novel or untried, it is the opinion of this researcher that they are vastly underemployed. And when they are, they do not serve the purpose which suits them most brilliantly: to bring to an audience archaeology and heritage which is otherwise unseen.

Objects and places are the gateway to our past. Interacting with them is what makes the past come alive to us. When access to objects and places is restricted, our interaction with them rescinds likewise, and the history remains obscured to us. The digital spaces researched in this study herein take up an undeniable position of opportunity, that should not be employed as a novelty, but a necessity. It is for all the reasons outlined broadly in this study, that exploiting digital spaces to raise awareness on the Aksumite past; its history and archaeology, should become a goal in itself. All these opportune innovations and are, however, employed inconsistently when it comes to heritage-based outreach, and remain vastly underappreciated as a tool for generating awareness when it comes to seriously endangered sites such as Aksum. This study not only has sought to combine several schools of research but has designed and proposed concrete case studies in which such research insights can be employed directly in the case of Aksumite archaeology: by using the vastly unexplored material wealth in museum and institutional collections as the subject of such innovative and interactive technologies. By using modelling technology to display these objects, paired with renderings of its unique monuments, integrating them in the rich stories, histories and archaeological reports of Aksum, we are fully able to design a large scale and convincing outreach strategy that would potentially draw in an unspecified audience which currently has no means of interacting with Aksumite archaeology. Through laptops, computers, mobile devices. The possibilities for allowing access to a wealth of combined information, images, archives as collected and made available in this study alone, are virtually endless.

While this research acknowledges its limitations, such as the incomplete nature of available sources and archives, it is hoped that it will, through its observations and ambition to invite critical dialogue and insights to its subject, contribute to the development of new research frameworks and innovative strategies for the better management and preservation of Aksum's cultural heritage. Ultimately, the survival of Aksumite heritage depends on our collective efforts to protect and promote this significant civilization of antiquity.

Implications for Future Research

While the subject of Aksumite archaeology currently has no shortage of needs for future research, from understanding more deeply the emergence of Aksum itself, to matters of its urban sprawl, rela-

tions to its hinterland and other settlements within its borders, or even how it politically structured itself. Much still remains completely unknown about the Aksumite past.

More compelling and directly relevant to the aims of this study, however, would be to further analyze and investigate the material collections, of which some contents were highlighted only briefly. Of particular interest would be to uncover the collections in Swedish and German institutions and understand the type of objects kept there more clearly. Moreso, however, would be to research in-depth the large collection of the BIEA, which is by all accounts currently housed in Nairobi. This collection especially, out of view of any current researcher, evidently houses a vast number of objects that would excel current knowledge on ancient Aksum. Objects of ivory, metals of many sorts, some mundane, some militaristic, ceramics mimicking structures. Aside from archaeologically significant, many objects furthermore promise the ability to showcase the aesthetic quality of Aksumite objects, and hold the potential to impress their onlooker of the brilliance of Aksumite civilization.

In keeping with its conclusion, however, this research concludes with an appeal for future action. Drawing on the insights collected in this study, action should be taken to put the recommendations, examples and case studies to use in a comprehensive public outreach strategy, using digital spaces to facilitate interaction, promote visibility and access to Aksum's ancient past. Effort should be taken to construct a project-based approach to work together with museums, heritage authorities and all relevant institutions or organizations otherwise involved in the content of this study, to effect the change that Aksum desperately needs and deserves. Using digital spaces, innovation and creativity, utilizing the, it is necessary that archaeologists use them to promote archaeology, its research and stories, in a way otherwise impossible. In this case, after having lost its place in the ancient world, it is about time digital spaces, be used to re-connect Aksumite antiquity.

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Appendix B: BIEA – Nairobi Repository Entries

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- British Institute in Eastern Africa - Nairobi. (n.d.). in JSTOR: Axum Archive [Aksum Museum – sculptured stone for ident 2]. Retrieved from: Aksum - Aksum Museum on JSTOR

Appendix C: Other Databases

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Bernhard, H. (1976). Relief depicting incense and myrrh trees obtained by Hatshepsut's expedition to Punt [Photograph]. In Wikipedia. Retrieved November 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_of_Punt#

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Appendix D: UNESCO Documentation

ICOMOS Reports

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