

Ancient Civilizations of Africa: Kingdom of Aksum

The Kingdom of Aksum (or Axum), was an important trading nation in northeastern Africa, growing from ca. 5th century BC to become an important trading nation by the 1st century AD. It converted to Christianity in 325 or 328 (various sources).

It has commonly been thought to be founded by Semitic-speaking Sabaeans who crossed the Red Sea from South Arabia (modern Yemen), but some scholars contend that it was an indigenous successor of the older D'mt or Da'amot kingdom, pointing to evidence of a Semitic speaking presence at least as early as 2000 BC, as well as evidence suggesting that Sabaean immigrants remained in Ethiopia for only a few decades. Aksum began to decline in the 7th century AD, and the population was forced to go farther inland to the highlands, eventually being defeated c. 950 AD. Ethiopian tradition holds that a Jewish Queen named Yodit (Judith) or "Gudit" (a play on "Yodit" meaning "evil") defeated the kingdom and burned its churches and literature, and although there is evidence of churches being burned around this time, there is some doubt as to whether she actually existed. Another possibility is that the Axumite power was ended by a southern pagan queen named Bani al-Hamwiyah, possibly from of the tribe al-Damutah or Damoti (Sidama). After this period, the Axumite kingdom was succeeded by the Zagwe dynasty in the eleventh century or twelfth century, although limited in size and scope. However, Yekuno Amlak, who killed the last Zagwe king and founded the modern Solomonid dynasty, traced his ancestry and his right to rule from the last king of Axum, Dil Na'od.

Geography

The Kingdom of Aksum at its height extended across portions of present-day Eritrea, northern Ethiopia, Yemen, northern Somalia, Djibouti, and northern Sudan. The capital city of the kingdom was Aksum, now in northern Ethiopia. Other important cities included Yeha, Hawulti, Matara, Adulis, and Qohaito, the last three of which are now in Eritrea.

Societal structure

The Aksumite people represented a mix of Cushitic and Semitic speaking people in Ethiopia and southern Arabia.

The Aksumite kings had the official title negusa nagast - King of Kings. Aksumite kings traced their lineage to David, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. All emperors of Ethiopia claimed this royal heritage.

Foreign relations and economy

Aksum traded with India and Rome (later Byzantium, a strong cultural influence on Aksum), exporting ivory, tortoise shell, gold and emeralds, and importing silk and spices. Aksum's access to both the Red Sea and the Upper Nile enabled its strong navy to profit in trade between various African (Nubia), Arabian (Yemen), and Indian states.

In the 2nd century AD, Aksum acquired tributary states on the Arabian Peninsula across the Red Sea, and conquered northern Ethiopia. In 350 AD, they conquered the Kingdom of Kush.

Aksum remained a strong empire and trading power until the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD. However, because the Axumites had sheltered Muhammad's first followers, the Muslims never attempted to overthrow Aksum as they spread across the face of Africa.

Eventually, the Islamic Empire took control of the Red Sea and most of the Nile, forcing Aksum into economic isolation. However, it still had relatively good relations with all of its Muslim neighbors. Two Christian states northwest of Axum (in modern day Sudan), Maqurra and Alwa, survived until the thirteenth century when they were finally forced by Muslim migration to become Islamic. Aksum, however, remained untouched by the Islamic movements across Africa.

Cultural achievements

The Kingdom of Aksum developed its own alphabet (Ge'ez or Geez).

Under King Ezana, the kingdom adopted Christianity in place of its former polytheistic religion around AD 325. The Ethiopian (or Abyssinian) Church has lasted until the present day. It is still a Monophysite church, and its scriptures and liturgy are still in Ge'ez. Aksumite Christianity may be one of the foundations for the legend of Prester John.[citation needed]

A legend has it that at that time, a foreign boy named Frumentius was made a slave of the royal court, and later a tutor to the royal children. When the king died, the queen asked Frumentius to help rule Axum. He had declined promised freedom and remained until the queen's son, Ezana, was old enough to rule. Frumentius established a number of Christian churches, and when Ezana became king he made Christianity (Monophysite) the official religion of Aksum. This custom of a slave who teaches kings remained an important tradition for the next few hundred years.

It was a cosmopolitan and culturally important state. It was a meeting place for a variety of cultures: Egyptian, Sudanic, Arabic, Middle Eastern, and Indian. The major Aksumite cities had Jewish, Nubian, Christian, and even Buddhist minorities.

The Kingdom of Aksum was also the first African polity to issue its own coins. From the reign of Endubis up to Armah (approximately 270 to 610), gold, silver and bronze coins in imitation of contemporary Roman currency were minted. Issuing coinage in ancient times was an act of great importance in itself, for it proclaimed that the Axumite kingdom considered itself equal to its neighbors. The presence of coins also simplified trade, and was at once a useful instrument of propaganda and a source of profit to the kingdom.

In the early times of the kingdom, around 1700 years ago, an unknown king ordered the construction of giant Obelisk of Axum.

