

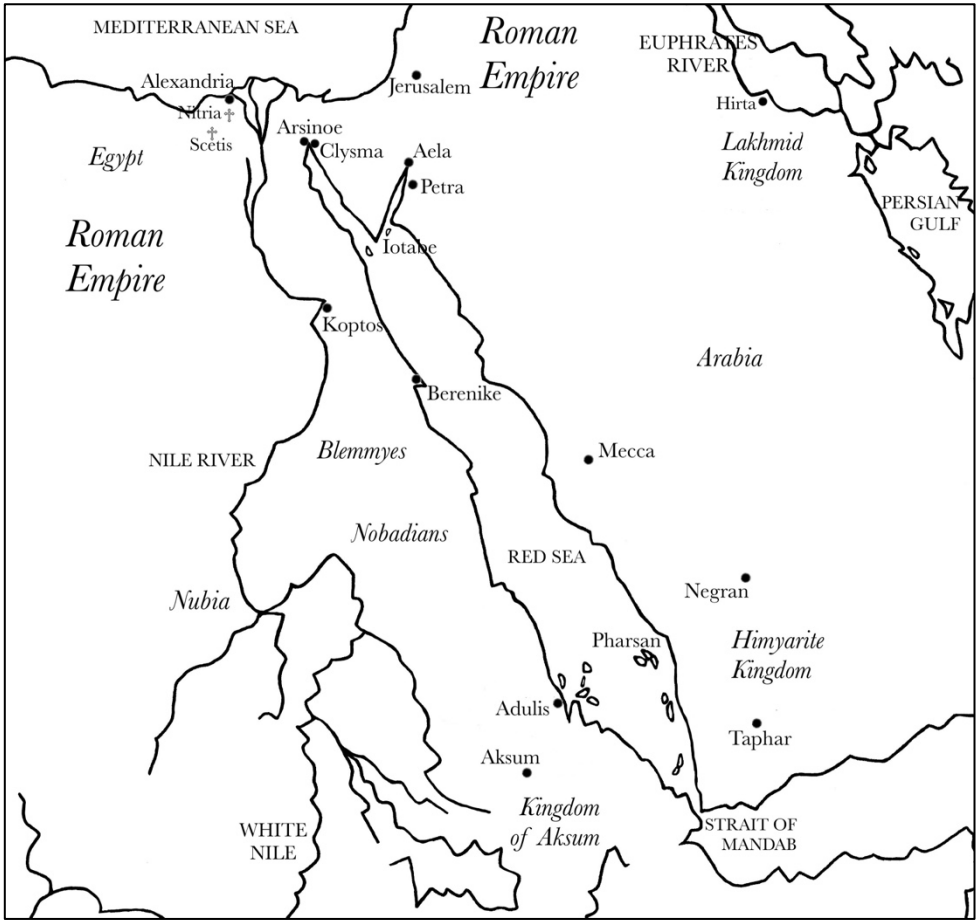
*Ambassadors shall come out of Egypt;  
Ethiopia shall hasten to stretch out her hands unto God.*

PSALM 67:32

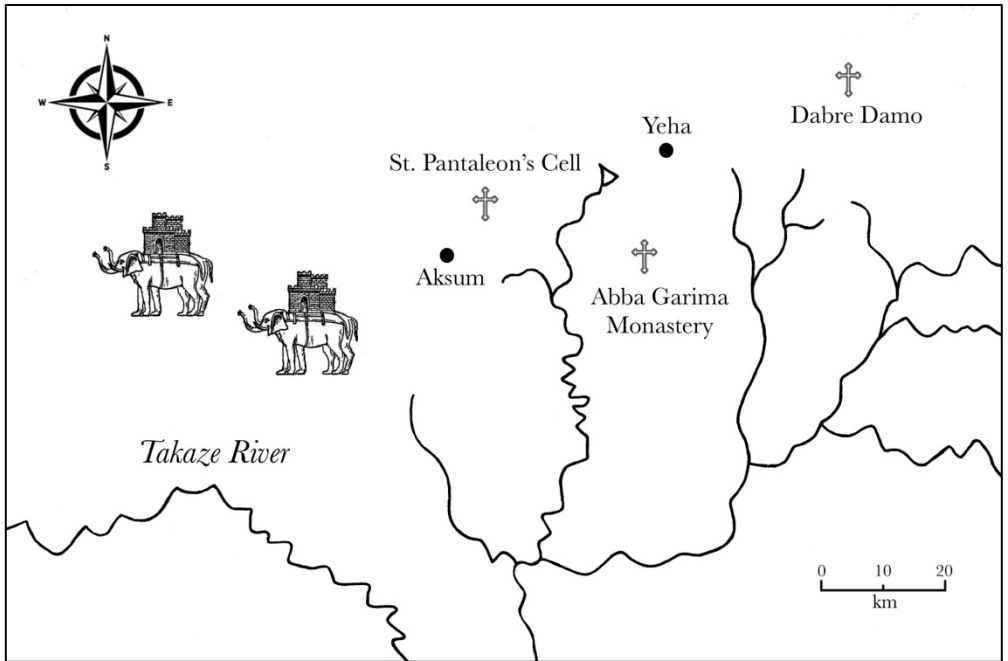
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The Kingdom of Aksum in the Sixth Century



Aksum and Its Monastic Foundations

## Introduction

Civilization in Ethiopia dates back to as early as the third millennium BC. The first mention of the country appears in Egyptian texts from the Fifth and Twelfth Dynasties,<sup>1</sup> which call it “God’s land”<sup>2</sup> and describe it as a source of gold and exotic resources.<sup>3</sup> Sometime afterwards, an influx of inhabitants is thought to have come over the Red Sea from Southern Arabia.<sup>4</sup> Such a pattern of settlement would account for the fact that the native languages spoken in the north of the country belong—rather uniquely for Africa—to the Semitic family, being akin to Hebrew, Arabic and Akkadian, the language of ancient Babylon.

Of the prehistory of Ethiopia not much is known with certainty. The veil begins to be lifted only in the first century AD with the geographical account known as the *Periplus of the Red Sea*. Composed by a Greek-speaking author from Egypt, this text provides an account of the maritime routes from Arsinoe to the western coast of India, describing the places and peoples found along the way. In the fourth chapter, the author refers to the port city of Adulis (in modern-day Eritrea) and comments on the fact that all the exports of ivory to the coast originated

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<sup>1</sup> Fifth Dynasty (2494-2345 BC); Twelfth Dynasty (1991-1802 BC). See Kathryn A. Bard and Rodolfo Fattovich, *Seafaring Expeditions to Punt in the Middle Kingdom* (Brill: 2018), pp. 3-4, 90.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> David W. Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth–Fourteenth Centuries* (Yale UP: 2009), pp. 10-11.

inland from “the metropolis called Auxoume.”<sup>5</sup> This is the earliest reference to what is today known as the Empire of Aksum.

From its capital in the Ethiopian highlands (the source of the Nile river’s main tributary), the kingdom of Aksum would grow to become the main political force of the Horn of Africa, dominating the trade in the region for several hundred years. By the second and third centuries AD, the kings of Aksum had expanded their presence all the way to Southern Arabia<sup>6</sup> (present-day Yemen), although these territories would remain fiercely contested for centuries to come. It was likely this prosperity, coupled with curiosity stemming from its remoteness, which inspired the Tyrian explorer Meropius to seek out Aksum in the early fourth century AD, leading, through a providential series of events, to the Christianization of the country.

A few words on terminology will prove helpful. The word “Ethiopian” comes from Greek and literally means “one of burnt face.” The Greeks used this term indiscriminately to refer to any people of dark complexion. Thus, in the Christian hagiographies, the black demons are often described as “dark Ethiopians.”<sup>7</sup> In the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Homer says: “Now Poseidon had gone off to the Ethiopians, who are at the world’s end, and lie in two halves, the one looking West and the

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<sup>5</sup> G.W.B. Huntingford, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (The Hakluyt Society: 1980), p. 20; Greek text in: B. Fabricius (ed.), *Arriani Alexandrini Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Dresden: 1849), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> David W. Phillipson, *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum and the Northern Horn, 1000 BC–AD 1300* (Addis Ababa: 2012), p. 203.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, see the *Life of Saint Nilus the Younger*, section 5.

other East.”<sup>8</sup> The “Western Ethiopians” here refer to the inhabitants of the Horn of Africa, whereas the “Eastern Ethiopians” refer to the peoples of the Indian subcontinent. To the ancient Greeks and Romans, all these lands formed a distinct geographical unit: they shared an ocean, a tropical climate, exotic flora and fauna, and their inhabitants were similarly dark of skin.<sup>9</sup> Hence, among classical authors it is not uncommon to find the term “India” used to refer to both India proper and to Ethiopia. Other terms that have historically been used to refer to Ethiopia are Cush and Abyssinia, the latter of which derives from the Arabic term for the country, Habash.

Prior to the introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia, the native population was pagan, although it is possible that there were a fair number of Jews living on the territory as well.<sup>10</sup> An ancient stone temple that survives at Yeha bears close similarities to analogous structures in Southern Arabia, such as the presence of incense altars.<sup>11</sup> A war god named Mahrem is attested in several inscriptions.<sup>12</sup> Later hagiographies refer to this period of

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<sup>8</sup> *Odyssey*, Book I.22-24 (trans. Samuel Butler).

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Schneider, “The so-called Confusion between India and Ethiopia: The Eastern and Southern Edges of the Inhabited World from the Greco-Roman Perspective.” *Brill’s Companion to Ancient Geography* (2015), pp. 184-205.

<sup>10</sup> The book of Acts (8:27) speaks of an “Ethiopian eunuch” who had come to Jerusalem to worship (although some have suggested that he was in fact a Nubian; see Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> Phillipson, *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia*, pp. 10-11; Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh University Press: 1991), p. 199.

<sup>12</sup> Munro-Hay, *Aksum*, p. 196.



Ethiopian history as the reign of the “serpent Arwe.”<sup>13</sup> Whether this was a real deity or merely a metaphorical way to refer to pagan religion is unclear. But this landscape would change after the adoption of Christianity in the fourth century.

The story is first related by the Roman historian and priest Rufinus, who claims to have heard it first-hand from Aedesius, a blood-relative to Frumentius, the first bishop of Aksum. According to this account (translated in full below), the faith was first brought to the shores of Ethiopia by Roman merchants, who built churches and places of worship for themselves in the kingdom. Under the auspices of Saint Athanasius the Great, a bishop was later ordained for the region, working many miracles and leading many to the faith.

Simultaneously, however, the Church experienced a period of great trials. The Roman Emperor at this time, Constantius II, espoused a heretical form of Christianity called Arianism, which denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. Athanasius himself was persecuted for his orthodoxy and exiled many times for refusing to submit to the Emperor’s creed. In 356, the Emperor went so far as to write a letter to the rulers of Ethiopia, the brothers Ezana and Saizana, requesting that they send Frumentius to Alexandria for doctrinal examination; should he pass the test, he was to be re-ordained, as the ordination performed by the “heretical” Athanasius was considered to be invalid.<sup>14</sup> History does not record whether the brothers ever answered the Emperor, but by all indications his summons

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<sup>13</sup> Carlo Conti Rossini, “L’omilia di Yohannes, vescovo d’Aksum, in onore di Garimâ.” *Actes du onzième congrès international des orientalistes* (Paris: 1897), p. 147.

<sup>14</sup> The letter is preserved within Saint Athanasius’ *Apology to Emperor Constantius* (Patrologia graeca 25, col. 636-637).

### 3- The Sayings of Abba Moses

a. At one time, Abba Moses was violently tempted by lust. Not able to remain in his cell, he departed and reported this to Abba Isidore. The elder encouraged him to return to his cell, but he refused, saying, "I have not the strength, Abba." Then the latter took him with him and brought him to his chamber and said to him: "Attend to the West." And he attended, and beheld an innumerable multitude of demons, and they were agitated and causing an uproar as they prepared for war. Then Abba Isidore told him again: "Look to the East." And he turned and saw an innumerable multitude of glorious angels. And Abba Isidore said: "Behold, these are sent to the saints by God to assist them. Those in the West wage war against them. But those that are with us are more numerous." Thus, abba Moses thanked God and took courage, returning to his cell.

b. At one time, a brother in Scetis erred. A council was called, and they sent for Abba Moses. But he did not wish to come. Then the elder sent for him, saying, "Come, for the assembly awaits you." Arising, Moses came. Taking up a basket with holes, he filled it with sand and carried it with him. When the brothers came out to greet him, they told him, "What is this, Father?" The elder said to them: "My sins stream down behind me and I do not see them, and I have come today to judge another's sins." Hearing this, they said nothing to the brother, pardoning him.

c. Another time, a council was held in Scetis. Wishing to try Abba Moses, the Fathers condemned him, saying, "Why does this Ethiopian come in our midst?" Hearing this, he was silent. After they all took their leave, they said to him, "Abba, were

you not troubled just now?" He said to them, *I was troubled, but I spoke not.*"<sup>89</sup>

d. They say that Abba Moses was made a priest and received the stole. The Archbishop said to him: "Behold, you have become all white, Abba Moses!" The elder said to him: "If only the inside, lord Pope,<sup>90</sup> was as the outside." Wishing to try him, the Archbishop said to the priests: "When Abba Moses comes into the sanctuary, drive him out and follow him to see what he will say." Therefore, the elder entered the sanctuary; and they rebuked him and drove him out, saying, "Get out, Ethiopian." As he was exiting, he said to himself, "Well were you treated by them, you ashen-skinned, black one. Why do you come among men, you who are not a man?"

e. A commandment was once given in Scetis that the brothers should fast during that week. By chance, some brothers from Egypt happened to visit Abba Moses and he made them a small meal. Seeing the smoke, the neighbours said to the priests: "Behold, Moses has broken the commandment and has made a meal for himself." They said, "When he will come, we shall speak to him." When the Sabbath came, and the priests witnessed the great asceticism of Abba Moses, they said to him before the people: "O Abba Moses, you broke the commandment of men, but you kept the commandment of God."

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<sup>89</sup> Psalm 76:5 (Vulgate)

<sup>90</sup> A term of address used to refer to the Patriarch of Alexandria. It derives from the Greek word for "Father."

f. A brother came to Scetis seeking advice from Abba Moses. The elder said to him: "Go sit in your cell; your cell will teach you all things."

g. Abba Moses said: "A man who flees society is like a ripe grape; he who lives among men is like an unripe grape."

h. Once, the governor heard about Abba Moses and went to Scetis to see him; some men reported this to the elder, and he arose to flee to the marshes. Coming upon him, the governor's men said: "Tell us, old man, where is the cell of Abba Moses?" And he said to them: "What do you want with him? He is a madman." When he arrived at the church, the governor said to the priests: "I have heard stories about Abba Moses, and so I came down to see him; and behold, we were met by an old man going to Egypt and we asked him, 'Where is the cell of Abba Moses?' and he answered us, 'What do you want with him? He is a madman.'" Hearing this, the priests were saddened and said: "What kind of man was this old man who said such things against the saint?" They said: "He was old, wearing worn clothes, tall, and black." The others responded: "That is Abba Moses. He said those things to you to avoid meeting you." Having derived much benefit from the encounter, the governor departed.

i. Abba Moses would say in Scetis: "If we keep the commandments of our Fathers, I assure you before God that the barbarians will not come here; but if we do not keep them, this place will be made desolate."

j. Once, as the brothers were sitting before him, Abba Moses told them: "Behold, barbarians are coming today to Scetis: arise and flee." They said to him, "Will you not flee as well, Abba?" He

said to them: "I have been expecting this day for many years, that the saying of the Lord Christ might be fulfilled: *All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*"<sup>91</sup> They said to him: "We shall not flee, but shall die with you." He responded, "That is not my decision to make; let each see to how he will remain." There were seven brothers at that time, and he said to them, "Behold, the barbarians approach the gate." And entering within, they slew them. One of the company ran behind the chain,<sup>92</sup> and he saw seven crowns descending and crowning them.

k. A brother asked Abba Moses, "I see something before me, but I am unable to grasp it." The elder told him: "Unless you become dead as those who are buried, you will not be able to attain it."

l. Abba Poemen said that a brother asked Abba Moses how man can mortify himself from his neighbour. The elder responded to him: "Unless a man reckon himself as already three-days dead in the tomb, he will not attain this saying."

m. In Scetis, they tell the following story about Abba Moses: one day, as he was travelling to Petra,<sup>93</sup> he tired himself out on the journey and said to himself, "How shall I collect my water here?" And a voice came to him, saying, "Enter, and concern yourself not." And so he entered. He was met by some of the Fathers, and had nothing left but one flask of water; and after he had boiled a few lentils, it was all spent. This grieved the old man, and he prayed to God as he entered and exited the

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<sup>91</sup> Matthew 26:52

<sup>92</sup> The chain of the door.

<sup>93</sup> There is an ancient city in southern Jordan by this name.

monastery. And behold, a cloud of rain came over Petra and filled all his vessels. After this, the Fathers said to the elder: "Tell us, why were you going to and fro?" And the elder answered them: "I was pleading my case with God, saying, 'You brought me here, and behold I have no water for Your servants to drink.' For this reason, I entered and exited beseeching God until He sent us this gift."

n. Abba Moses said that a man must die to his fellow man lest he judge him in any thing.

o. Again he said that a man must mortify himself to every wicked deed before departing from his body lest he do anyone harm.

p. He said again: "If man does not believe in his heart that he is a sinner, God does not listen to him." The brother<sup>94</sup> asked, "What does it mean, 'to believe in his heart that he is a sinner?'" And the elder said, "If one bears his own sins, he does not see those of his neighbour."

q. He said again: "If one's actions do not agree with one's prayers, he labours in vain." The brother asked, "What does this mean, agreement between one's actions and prayers?" And the elder said, "It means that we should no longer do the things for which we pray. For when man leaves aside his desires, then God is reconciled to him and accepts his prayer."

r. The brother asked, "What is it that helps man in all his labours?" The elder said, "God is the one Who helps. For it is

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<sup>94</sup> Based on one manuscript ascription, this seems to be referring to Abba Poemen.