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AKSUM

Ancient East African Empire

1260L



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The Aksum Empire was the result of two world hubs sharing their collective learning about agriculture, and rose to become a great power in the ancient world because it formed a crucial link between East and West on the supercontinent of Afro-Eurasia.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT

EAST AFRICA

East Africa was the cradle of our species. For millions of years, many of our hominine ancestors roamed across the land. It is ultimately the homeland of every human being spread across the planet. Additionally, East Africa was the region that birthed one of the mightiest of African civilizations: the Aksum Empire. At its height in the third century CE, some ancient writers deemed it one of the four great powers of the world, alongside Rome, Persia, and China. Thanks to its position in the web of collective learning in Afro-Eurasia, it rose to become one of the most complex agrarian civilizations of the ancient African world.

African agriculture, in general, got a late start. It was invented independently on the other side of the continent in West Africa, around 3000 BCE. This “lags behind” the Fertile Crescent by several millennia. The transition from foraging to agriculture did not happen easily in Africa because, for one reason, humans evolved there and the environment was well suited to that mode of life. Also, because of the “trap of sedentism,” humans were reluctant to transition to a less healthy, more miserable form of life like early agriculture, if they could help it. So agriculture appeared late in West Africa. What is more, agricultural knowledge didn’t spread out from West Africa until about 2,000 years later. However, the peoples of East Africa were the recipients of collective learning from not only West Africa, but from the much earlier centers of agrarian knowledge in Egypt and Southwest Asia.

COLLECTIVE LEARNING FROM TWO AGRARIAN HUBS

The region known as the “Northern Horn” of East Africa kept up with foraging for many thousands of years after the dawn of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent. But as agrarian civilizations in that region grew larger, communications to the distant land of the Northern Horn also continued to grow. Knowledge of farming filtered down from Egypt and Southwest Asia and the peoples of the Northern Horn began to adopt a mixture of foraging, plant domestication, and animal herding. They domesticated ensete, a type of banana, at a very early point, perhaps as early as 3000 BCE or more. The people of the Northern Horn foraged for animal hides, bird feathers, myrrh for use as perfume, and even obsidian rocks to trade with Egypt.

By 2000 BCE, the majority of people in the Northern Horn were semi-nomadic, making use of foraging and domesticated plants and animals. They still used stone tools. Copper and bronze were rare in the region, so they did not go through a bronze age, but instead transitioned directly to iron. Some people in the region still foraged without domesticating anything, but the knowledge transmitted from Southwest Asia and

Egypt created a mixture of the two lifeways of foraging and agriculture. To the south, the rest of Africa would transition to agriculture much more slowly. But East Africa was jolted by two major hubs into the agrarian era.

By 1000 BCE, hunting and gathering was on the decline, and agriculture was becoming increasingly dominant. Southwest Asia had transmitted the knowledge of wheat and barley, and introduced them into the region. East Africans domesticated a local variant, teff, for similar use. These three formed the major East African crops. Meanwhile, the Bantu peoples of West Africa arrived, and two centers of independent agricultural learning converged in East Africa. The Bantu brought with them knowledge of sorghum and millet. It is around this time that the agricultural way of life solidified itself in East Africa, bringing the human history of foraging in the region, which stretches back hundreds of thousands of years, mostly to a close.

EARLY EAST AFRICAN STATES

Around the same time, a major agrarian civilization arose in the Northern Horn, popularly known as D’mt. This mysterious kingdom flourished from the tenth to the fifth centuries BCE. They formalized and intensified their trade relations with Egypt. They began developing mass exportation of agricultural goods, along with intricate stone jewelry. When the kingdom of D’mt fell, smaller kingdoms populated the area. These kingdoms adopted iron and began exporting their metal work. Collective learning arrived from Arabia and Egypt, influencing Aksum’s architecture and material culture, increasing the literacy of its people, and introducing the pre-Islamic Arab religion, which worshipped many gods.

For many years, Aksum was just a tiny settlement in the Northern Horn, slowly acquiring more land and wealth from trade. Then in 30 BCE, something decisive happened. The Romans under Augustus conquered and annexed Egypt. Aksum was brought into contact with the Roman world in the Mediterranean. Trade routes shifted from the Persian Gulf and overland Asian routes more to the Red Sea. Aksum soon became a hub of overseas trade between the vast Roman Empire and the states of India. It grew as a prosperous connection for the transmission of trade goods and collective learning across the entire supercontinent of Afro-Eurasia.

AKSUM AT THE CENTER OF AFRO-EURASIA

Becoming a mercantile power can transform a small state into a powerful kingdom very quickly. Aksum managed trade between India and the Mediterranean in ivory, gold, emeralds, silk, spices, agricultural products, salt, exotic animals, manufactured

goods, and much more. In the first century CE, Aksum flourished. They could afford to build a powerful navy to patrol the Red Sea and protect their trade routes. It was at this time that Aksum was first mentioned by Greco-Roman scholars.

Aksumite civilization continued to grow in wealth, power, and complexity. Aksum's capital showed signs of rapid growth. It was a loose collection of impressive buildings and burial grounds. The town grew so rapidly that there seems to have been no master plan for the city's layout, or the designation of city walls for where the city would stop growing. Aksum built many grand monuments, and the wealthiest citizens were buried in elaborate tombs marked by huge stone pillars, called stelae, with intricate carvings upon them. Aksum had a division of labor: bureaucrats, priests, soldiers, merchants, and artisans. It had its own coinage, each dynasty etched onto the gold coins, and these have been found by archaeologists across the Old World from Rome to Persia to India.

Being a naval power, Aksum was able to transport troops and expand its frontiers. The third century CE marks a period of intense military expansion. At its height, the Aksum Empire controlled North Ethiopia, parts of Sudan, the southern Arabian peninsula, most notably Yemen. With wealth to hire swords and ships, and no comparable power



Image of ancient stelae field in Aksum, Ethiopia.



Range of the Aksum Empire in East Africa.

in East Africa to oppose them, the Aksum Empire was one of the true powers of the ancient world, and one of the first complex agrarian civilizations in Africa. In the fourth century CE, Aksum formally adopted Christianity as its state religion, linking it culturally to the Roman Empire, which had also officially made Christianity its state religion. As a hub of trade in the ancient world, Aksum was also a frequent witness to the technological developments transmitted across Afro-Eurasia.

THE FALL OF AKSUM

Aksum continued to prosper long after the Western Roman Empire declined and fell in the 400s, but its imperial ambitions were also definitely part of its own downfall. Launching another series of military campaigns to subdue Yemen again in the 500s, they exhausted their treasury. Eventually they were booted out of Yemen, never to return. Meanwhile, the Aksum elite were embroiled with infighting, weakening the state. Another blow fell with the Justinianic Plague around 541 CE, a hugely destructive plague that scholars are fairly certain was the same disease, *Yersinia pestis*, that caused the Black Death. Aksum still had its revenues from trade between India and Byzantium (transformed from the Eastern Roman Empire) and still did not fall, though its territory had been reduced.

In the 600s, however, the Islamic conquests further weakened Aksum. As Arabian armies spread across the Old World, Aksum managed to fight them off. However, the

Christian empire suddenly found itself isolated economically and politically. This meant that the main source of Aksum's strength – trade – was taken away. The gradual drying of the climate in the Northern Horn also reduced the capacity of Aksum agriculture, the number of people they could support, and the revenues they could get from taxing the land. Nevertheless, Aksum limped on for another few centuries, its glory days behind it, but its independence intact. All told, this East African agrarian civilization survived for nearly a millennium.

Then around the year 960 CE, Aksum's royal family was overthrown by an unknown female usurper. Legend has it was a Jewish queen named Gudith, but evidence is sparse for that. We do know that at this point the Aksum dynasty came to an end. Their successors, the Zagwe dynasty (est. 900, r. 1137-1270), similarly lived isolated from the world, no longer the recipients of the Afro-Eurasian network of collective learning. The same goes for the Solomonic dynasty (1270-1529) that followed them were also fairly isolated though they eventually fell under the influence of Portuguese colonists and fought many wars against the surrounding Islamic states.

LESSONS IN COLLECTIVE LEARNING

The Aksum Empire is a curious case for Big History. It was the recipient of collective learning from two independent regions that gave birth to agriculture: the Fertile Crescent and West Africa. For many centuries, East Africa bore a strange mixture of agriculture, pastoralism, and foraging. After the full transition to agriculture was achieved around 1000 BCE, East Africa quickly progressed to agrarian states, rather than having a long period of early agriculture like in other regions. This also may be the result of knowledge for social organization transmitted from Southwest Asia. More than that, a millennium later, Aksum arose as a very powerful empire in the ancient world, the recipient of collective learning along trade routes of Afro-Eurasia. The transformation of East Africa, in just 2,000 years, from the cradle of humanity still foraging and using stone tools, to a powerful ancient empire wielding blades of iron and ruling the seas, is testament to the power of collective learning and the networks of the Afro-Eurasian supercontinent. Once the "energy bonanza" gets underway, it can spread rapidly to other regions and quickly increase human complexity.

After the Islamic conquests of the 600s, however, Aksum was cut off from that network of collective learning. This stands in sharp contrast to the Ghana Empire of West Africa which continued to grow in strength and wealth by open trade with the Islamic world. A network of collective learning has the power to make or break human civilizations. Once East Africa entered the unified global system of the modern era, it suf-

fered numerous hardships that were shared by other peoples in sub-Saharan Africa. And today, the challenges that face East Africa are some of the most concerning of our age. It is our challenge to help East Africa to fully enjoy the benefits of a global network of collective learning, rather than suffer from the inequalities such a network can sometimes cause.

The Aksum Empire teaches us one final thing. For several decades, historians had postulated that Aksum was founded by immigrants from Southwest Asia, who brought "superior civilization" along with them. Today, archaeology shows that complex agrarian civilization in East Africa shows signs of developing many centuries before there were any such migrations. Investigations into East African history and the hunt for empirical evidence have dispelled the myth that the African peoples were "historically incapable" of producing powerful agrarian states.

The examples of Aksum in East Africa and Ghana in West Africa disprove such claims. While the entry of sub-Saharan Africa into the agrarian era was later than Southwest Asia and Egypt, once they adopted agriculture, agrarian states arose very quickly. This was no small feat in a region of the world where humans evolved and had adapted to the environment as foragers for hundreds of thousands of years, and millions of years for the ancestral species that came before them. While sub-Saharan Africa suffered greatly during the Modern Revolution, it must not be forgotten that for centuries in the ancient and medieval world, the states of Africa stood at the highest point of complexity that humanity could offer, and also the highest point of complexity in the grand narrative of the Universe to that point. It remains to be seen if all regions of the world can share in the collective learning of a global system, to reach even greater heights of complexity in our common story.

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Cover image: An overview of the holy town of Aksum, Ethiopia, with many native rondavel huts, and a view of the river and neighboring hill. © Scheufler Collection/Corbis

Image of ancient stelae field in Aksum, Ethiopia. © Dave Bartruff/Corbis

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