

The Rise of the Aksum Obelisk is the Rise of Ethiopian History

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According to Aleqa Kidane Wolde Kifle, the word Aksum is a derivation of the word Kush, a Hebrew word, which, in turn, means Ethiopia. Aksum signifies anteriority, primacy and exemplary leadership. It also serves as a primary reference point to the people of Ethiopia and their descendants. Besides, it



Figure 1: Aksum obelisk rises again with big celebration at the site.

refers to the capital city of ancient and holy Ethiopia.² Other traditional sources derive the word from the name of a legendary Emperor, Aksumawi, in the same way as it derives Ethiopia from Aethiops.³ On April 20, 2005, the people of Ethiopia witnessed, with great joy, the return of the first part of the Aksum obelisk, which was stolen by the Fascist forces of Italy in 1937. The second part of the obelisk has arrived on April 22 and the last part has arrived on April 25, 2005. The final arrival was marked by a joyous celebration throughout Ethiopia, Africa and the African Diaspora. A national holiday in commemoration of the successful return will take place in Ethiopia. Quite appropriately, we are gathered here at the eve of the national celebration to express our joy and solidarity with the Ethiopian people.

It is also our hope that this historic event serves as a catalyst for the repatriation of all historical objects from Italy and England to Ethiopia. We also use this occasion to urge the return of all historical artifacts, taken during from the colonial period, from Europe to Africa.

In my view, the Aksum obelisk's rise will be the rise of Ethiopian history, for that matter African history. The rise of the obelisk is a moment to reflect on our past - long, varied and rich past. The obelisk elegantly captures our ancestors' sense of freedom and independence. It is freedom that enabled our ancestors to carve such an architectural wonder. It is freedom that made it possible for them to register history through a remarkable monumental work. It is freedom that allowed them to turn a massive granite stone into a talking drum so to speak



Photo by Massimo A. Alberizzi
Corriere Della Sera

Figure 2: Aksumites welcoming the obelisk with songs.

Our ancestors carved their sense of home, small or big, private or public on the monument so as to distinctly define us as free people. Our ancestors had a remarkable capacity to define and remain true to their Ethiopian identity. In fact, we know that they read Greek, Hebrew, and Latin.⁴ They freely learned from the teachings of Judaism and Christianity. And yet they built and maintained a distinctly Ethiopian tradition. They spoke Ge'ez. They wrote in Ge'ez. They also required foreign migrants, such as Abba Selama and the nine holy saints, to study Ge'ez. *Ferengun habasha aderegu inji inesu ferenj alohnum*. As a result, the return is not only a great milestone in the national history of Ethiopia, but it is bound to serve as an instrument for national renewal, unity and sense of common purpose.

The return of the obelisk should offer us an opportunity to fully establish and draw lessons for the present from the total history of our beloved motherland. It offers us an opportunity to analyze and synthesize, for instance, the teff civilization of the north with the inset civilization of the south. It offers us an opportunity to analyze and synthesize the *kebt arbi* socio-mobility with the *arashu* sedentary life. In short, it should offer us an opportunity to weave the fabrics of Ethiopian citizenry rooted in a culture of democracy and justice.

The return of the Aksum obelisk from Italy was a product of the persistent effort of Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopia in the last almost 70 years. In this regard, it is proper to acknowledge the great contributions of Ambassador Amanuel Abraham, Dejach Amade Lemma, Lij Mikael Imru, Dejazmach Zewde Gabre Selassie, Maitre-Artiste Afework Tekle, Laureate Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, Assefa Gabre Mariam, Ato Tele-Tsadik Mekuria, Professor Mesfin WoldeMariam and other 500 Ethiopian scholars who supported the petition of the Italian scholars, Vincenzo Francaviglia, Giuseppe Claudio Infranca and Alberto Paolo Rossi,

the people of Aksum, the Addis Ababa University Community, the Ministry of Culture, and various governmental, religious, sport and civic institutions throughout the country. In addition, Professor Richard Pankhurst and the organization he chaired, the Afromet persistently pushed for the obelisk's return. The vigilant demand of the Ethiopian Patriotic Association has also significantly contributed to the repatriation of the obelisk. It gives us a great comfort that the Aksum obelisk is going to stand side by side with its sister stela in Aksum, in our divined city, registering the great accomplishment of our ancestors.

The returning obelisk is one of the six major stelae still standing in Aksum. All of the six carved stelae are embellished with the elaborate doors, windows, beam-ends, and other features typical of Aksumite architecture. At their summits are emplacements for what seem to have been either one or two metal plaques.⁵



Figure 3: The Aksum stelae that are still standing.

The obelisk, which is 25 meters long, is carved on all sides, modeling a multistoried building, with a total weight of 170 tones. It was the second tallest and heaviest stela. The largest monument is now fallen and broken, formerly exceeding 33 meters in height, 750 tons in weight with a measurement at the base of about 3 by 2 meters. It is carved on all four sides and shows twelve storeys.⁶ The re-erection of the stela would certainly signal a new beginning as it is almost coinciding with our millennial anniversary in 2000.



Photo by Massimo A. Alberizzi
Corriere Della Sera

Figure 4: The final block of the returned obelisk draped with the Ethiopian flag.

According to Ato Tekle Tsadik Mekuria, Aksum is the beginning of our civilization and a memory of our glorious past.⁷ In fact, there are civilizational sites that preceded Aksum. Ancient sites, such as Yeha, Haoulti-Melazo (sites where artifacts, such as pillars, frieze of ibexes, stelae, naos, and statues are found), Mahebere Dyogne, Sabea (Sites of bronze objects), Fikya (a site of an altar in the shape of a bowl with protomes of sphinxes or lions), Matara (sites of incense altars, libation altars, iron works, and pots), Kaskase (sites of six pillars, statues now at the National Museum of Rome), Addi Gramaten (Libation altars with best preserved sphinx), Zeban Mororo, Der'a, Adulis, and Tsehuf Emmi, and Adi Galamo (cubical incense altars), are remarkable historical sites with profound evidence of our past economic success, political stability, global reach through trade, religion or

scholarship, written tradition, philosophical projections, choreographic beauty, and liturgical brilliance.

According to Rodolfo Fattovich, there are some ninety pre-Aksumite sites. Among the items found in these sites are: inscriptions, temples, stelae, and pots.⁸ Fattovich further added Ethiopia, just like the Ancient Egypt, established a sort of confederacy by uniting the peoples of western lowlands and eastern highlands. Fattovich has identified this confederacy as Damot confederacy from the late 3rd millennium BCE to the early 2nd millennium BCE.

As a matter of fact, when we examine and compare the stelae of Matara in Eritrea with the stelae of Aksum, it will be very difficult to ignore the saying of our visionary ancestors: *zati atsem immeatsmeye*. In Amharic: *yehe atsem keinatte atsem yefelese new*. This skeleton is the skeleton of my mother. The historical unity between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which is like the unity between a child and a mother, is beyond dispute. As a result the leaders of the two countries should resort to what the Great Ethiopian philosopher calls “the light of reason” and peacefully resolve all outstanding issues.

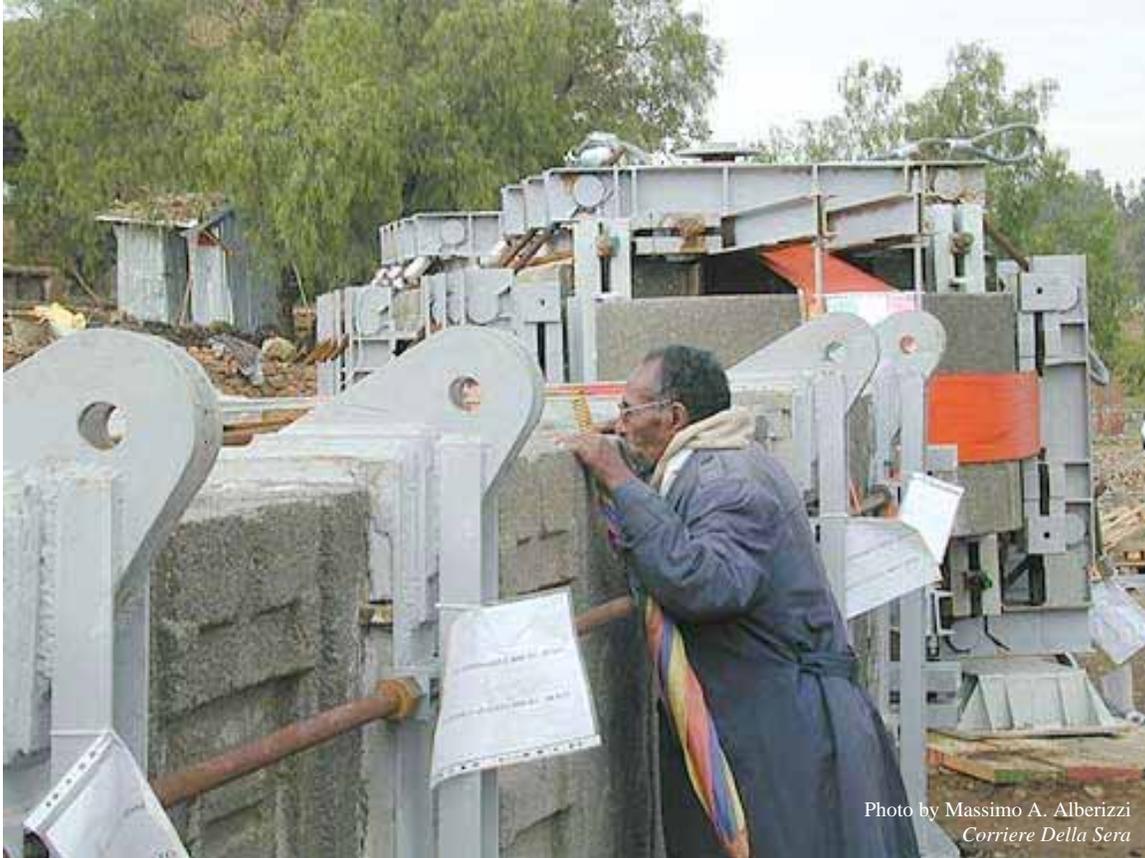


Figure 5: An Ethiopian blessing the returned obelisk with a well-deserved kiss.

These ancient sites preceded Aksum, which ultimately became the capital city of a great empire. Empress Makeda, the legendary woman ruler, ruled from Aksum. The Arc of the Covenant is housed in Aksum. The prophet Mohammed sent his followers to Aksum to avoid religious persecution. Some of the most powerful rulers of Aksum were Christian rulers, who established diplomatic relations with Rome (274 AD), Alexandria and Meroe. Persians and other significant powers of the period had also contacts with Aksum.

The Aksumite kingdom as one of the great states of world history is mentioned in the *Revelation* of Pseudo Methodius, written in the second half of the VII century to the VIII century. It is also mentioned in the *Chapters* of Mani, the founder of Manichaeism (216-276 AD). The *Koran* mentions the Mecca campaign of King Abraha, one of the great rulers of Aksum in the sixth century of the Common Era.

According to Munro-Hay, “the Aksumite state bordered one of the ancient world’s great arteries of commerce, the Red Sea, and through its port of Adulis, Aksum participated actively in contemporary events. Its links with other countries, whether through military campaigns, trading enterprise, or cultural and ideological exchange, made Aksum part and parcel of the international community of the time.”⁹ Munro-Hay also noted that, in the context of the history of civilization in Africa, the position of Aksum in international terms followed directly on that of Pharaonic and Ptolemaic Egypt and Meroe – internationally recognized independent African monarchies of important power status in their age.

With regards to the events of the Aksumite period Touraiev wrote: "A great power took form, in the 3rd century in the world next to the empires of Rome, Persia, and Greece - the 'king of Kings (**Neguse Negest**)' of Aksum is the head of a powerful state, equal to the Roman Emperor or the kings of Persia, with whom he communicated at the same level. He minted coins bearing his own effigy...." The main commercial port of the country, **Adulis**, was the merging point for trade routes of the Red Sea, Indian, and Prthean. This port was located on the waterway from Egypt to India. In the 6th century CE, Aksum reached the climax of its political power and **Adulis** acquired an enormous importance on sea-based trade with India.

The distinguished historian and Geographer R. Henning, talking about the middle of the 6th century of our era, writes: "When the power of Aksum spread over the two sides of the southern part of the Red Sea, its ports were important than the Egyptian ports. Even Alexandria which occupied a dominant position in the Euro-Asian trade, was apparently forced back; and one could have expected a long predominance of **Adulis** had it not been for the rebirth in the 5th century of the Sassanid (Persian) state, which put an end to the

omnipotence of Aksum after its conquest of the happy Arabia." (Emphasis added)

From the end of the 3rd century CE to the middle of the 4th, Aksum was economically and culturally strong. And it was not without good reason that the Byzantine emperors (Eastern Roman Emperors) talk to the "Negus" as their equals in power and splendor." Emperor Constantine writes in 357 CE to the Negus (King) of Aksum about the clerical troubles caused by Bishop Athenasius of Alexandria, Egypt; and he calls them "his Christian brothers." At the beginning of the 6th century of the Common Era, Justin I sends his warship to rescue Negus Ela Atsbaha. Later on, by 535 CE, Justinian sends Nonnos as an Ambassador to Aksum, and in 564 CE, another Ambassador, Julian serves in Aksum.¹⁰ In those days, the Christian Byzantines were looking for an ally against Persia.

Historians' attest to the good relations Aksum established with the Romano-Byzantine world. In fact, Aksum had established trade links with the Roman world both by land routes crossing the Nile Valley and down the Red Sea from Egyptian ports to Adulis. It is this generally peaceful Romano –Aksumite diplomatic and trading relations that we believe should be the basis for the new, post obelisk return relations between Ethiopia and Italy.

The German Aksum Expedition of 1906 led by Enno Littman of Princeton University produced a four-volume work in 1913 containing sketches, photographs, site maps, archaeological features, artifacts, and inscriptions. Our historical knowledge of Aksum has improved as a result of the archaeological diggings and findings.

The Ethiopian Government also established the Ethiopian Institute of Archeology in 1952. With the collaboration of the French Centre National de la Recherché Scientifique, the Institute

conducted several archeological research and also published a journal - *Annales d'Ethiopie*

The British Institute in Eastern Africa returns to Ethiopia to conduct archeological fieldwork under the direction of David Phillipson in 1993. The work has “involved annual seasons of large-scale archaeological excavation conducted in close collaboration with the relevant Ethiopian authorities.”¹¹

Periodization of Aksum

| | |
|--|-----------------------|
| Pre-Aksumite or Yeha cultural cluster from ¹² | From 2000 BCE |
| Early Aksum until the early of Gadarat | (1-71 CE). |
| Gadarat-Endubis | (201-270 CE) |
| Endubis-Ezana local ¹³ | 270-330 CE |
| Ezana International - Kaleb | (330-520CE) |
| Kaleb until the end of the coinage | (520-650 CE) |
| After the end of the coinage | Till the 10th century |

Figure 6: For more information see Stuart Munro-Hay’s *Aksum: An African Civilization of Late Antiquity*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp 61-104.

What are the Cultural Achievements of the Aksumites?

Writing systems, stelae (among the monolithic monuments, one still standing, five lie broken on the ground and one on its way to

Aksum from Rome; the tallest is 33 m high, with false door, windows and butt-ends of beams, perfectly carved in hard stone), numismatics (It is through coins alone that the names of eighteen kings of Aksum are known;¹⁴ several thousand coins have been found; they are minted of bronze (8-22 mm in size), the oldest coin was minted for king Endybis.

The Most notable accomplishments were the musical composition of St Yared (493-568 AD) under the Emperor Gebre Masqal (550-564 AD), who was the son of the famous Emperor Kaleb. St Yared composed five volumes of Ethiopian classical music: 1. Degua and Tsome degua: Book of Mahlet for major holidays and Sundays. Tsome Degua is for Abiy Tsom. Each book has three subsections known as Ge'ez, Izil, and Araray, notations and extensions of a given musical note. 2. Meraf: Book of Mahlet for Senbet, major holidays, and pray songs, and 3. Zemare: Book of Mahlet for after the Qurban; 4. Mewaset: Tselote Fethat; and Qedasse: Praise Songs.

St. Yared also invented ten musical markings known as Serey: Yezet, Deret, Reqreq, Defat, Cheret, Qenat, Hidet, Qurt, Dirse, and Anbir, to be placed above or below or alongside the Ethiopic graphs, thereby allowing an infinite amount of musical notations.

The main musical instruments are drums, lyre, masinqo, sistrum, and imbilta. It took St Yared nine years to complete his musical composition. St Yared taught his works in major educational institutions throughout the country. To this date, the Ethiopian church follows his teachings with only slight modifications.

Below the main stelae group (there are over 100 stelae, some elaborately dressed, including a false door and others irregular monolithic rocks) is a series of underground galleries and chambers dug into the bedrock. The late British archeologist,

Neville Chittick of the British East African Archeological Institute called it a catacomb complex after his extensive excavation in 1973. More archeological excavations have been carried out around Aksum since 1993.

Noted Historical Events in Relation to Aksum

Figure 7: Bishops of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church welcoming the return of the obelisk.



Formative years of Christianity: Aksum, Nubian kingdoms of Nobatia, Alodia, and Makouria, Alexandrian Egypt, and Libyan Pentapolis have played crucial roles in the formulation of the doctrines of the Monophysite Christian

church. The Alexandrian church provided the Archbishop to the Ethiopian church until 1951 when Emperor Haile Selassie appointed the first Ethiopian archbishop. The first archbishop was Frumentius of Tyre who lived in Ethiopia for forty years prior to his consecration by Athanasius of Egypt.



Figure 8: The leaders of the Ethiopian Muslim community witnessing the return of the obelisk.

Formative Years of Islam: In 615 AD, at the time of the prophet Muhammad's mission, the Ethiopians under king Ashama ibn Abjar, had a diplomatic relationship with the Quryash people of Mecca. King Ashama provided sanctuary to a group from the Hijira. The first group stayed in Ethiopia for three months. It was made of 15 people, including the four wives of the Prophet.

The second group had 101 Muslims, 83 of them men; they all stayed in Ethiopia until 628. Muhammad 's daughter Ruquayya and two of his future wives, UMM Habiba and Umm Salama were Ethiopians. The king reportedly arranged Muhammed's marriage to Umm Habiba. It is common knowledge that "because of his kindness to his followers, Muhammed is said to have exempted Ethiopia from the Jihad or holy war of Islam."¹⁵

The King and the State: "The Aksumite royal inscriptions emphasize the king as a dynamic figure, son of a deity (Mahrem) member of one of the Aksumite clans, the leader of his people as war-hero and conqueror but also as judge and lawgiver."

The pivotal position of each individual who occupied the office had a strong influence on the character of the reign. Zosakles' interest in commercial profit and Greek literature, Ezana's predilection for military exercises and his qualities as a leader in

war and Kaleb's religious bent, give some hints as to individual rulers concerns from the limited evidence.

The Ethiopic Writing System as a Major Marker of the Aksumite Civilization



Figure 9: Ethiopic writing system: one of the greatest accomplishments of our Aksumite ancestors.

The hands that carved and dressed the Aksum stelae were also the hands that invented the Ethiopic writing system – a system designed to represent all that matters, geographically,

linguistically, philosophically, numerically and temporally.

In other words, the Ethiopic Writing System has been a remarkable foundation for the structure and order of several fields of knowledge, including philosophy, history, theology, astronomy, grammar, and **tergum** (translation). The System is instrumental in the establishing and strengthening of institutions of higher learning, productions of literary documents, propagation of religious and social systems, and in promoting innumerable cultural achievements.

In a recent British Museum publication regarding the Ethiopic writing system, John F. Healey (1990) wrote: "A much more important *backwater* from the point view of script - no denigration of the culture or literature is implied - is Ethiopia. ... The Ethiopian script, written from left to right, continues in use to the present day, though seven extra letters are used for the modern official language of Ethiopia, which is called Amharic." (Emphasis added.)¹⁶

The Ethiopic Writing System is a system without a doubt perfected by Ethiopians, particularly with regard to its mode of syllabic vocalization. The System has 26 main graphs (I call them syllabographs), further divided into seven sound categories. The first column is called **Sades or Geez**, which means Sunday or free day. The graphs in this column are directly related to the Proto-Ethiopic graphs, which were prevalent as monumental scripts at the height of the Aksumite civilization.

Second, third, fourth, fifth, and seventh columns represent five sound categories. The syllabographs in this column attained their permanent features by a certain systematic attachment of ligatures at specific position of the graphs. The ligatures of these columns follow a predictable pattern. For instance, the second column or

Kaeb or Monday has a **who** sound, which is noted by permanently adding a scratch on the middle right side of the graphs. The third column or **Sales or Tuesday** has a **he** sound, which is noted by adding a ligature at the bottom of the graphs, facing east. The fourth column or **Rab3 or Wednesday** has a **rag** sound and which is written by shortening or lengthening the left legs of the graphs. The fifth column or **Hames or Thursday** has a **may** sound, which is noted by adding a loop at the end of the right part of the graphs. The seventh column or **Sabe or Saturday** has a **bo** sound, which is noted by a mixture of ligatures, the most common being a loop on the top side of the graphs or shortening the left leg of the graphs. Note the System is also developed for astronomic purposes, hence the seven designations to mark the days of the week.

The sixth column also called **Sades or Friday** is by far the most diversified and it appears that all the graphs in this column have unique shape or form. This is the column of the Ethiopic consonants or soft sounds. Most nouns in the Ethiopic grammar usually begin with the graphs of this column.

In addition, the System has a left to right direction, a complete sound system, and order of graphs that correspond to the Egyptian terms for the Beginning (**Ha**) and the End (**Pe**), as shown elsewhere.

According to Olderogge "Until recently, it was thought that the vocalization started during the reign of the Aksumite king Ezana. But with the finding of new inscriptions, it became necessary to come to another conclusion and that is, vocalization is thought to have been introduced a long time before Ezana, fourth century CE, may be, even during the first century of our era." Even though this is a significant observation by Olderogge, it is still difficult to attribute such a low date to a system so complex and so advanced. For instance, the Armenians "invented" their alphabet in 406 CE.

After 1600 years, the alphabet is still undergoing modification - from uncial to a predominantly cursive form of writing. On the other hand, the Ethiopic System, in the main, remains unchanged; it always has the uncial or the one-size form of graphs. It is very likely that the system has gone through similar evolutionary stages before it has stabilized to its present status.

Aksum was us and still firmly remains as a great symbol of our element of identity, our historical essence, our sense of greatness, our technological summit, our architectural brilliance, our recognition of difference, and our arc of faith in all its hues.¹⁷ The dressed obelisk signifies all that matters about us.

The obelisk is a model of our home, our safe space, our religious and political institutions, our imagination, our philosophy, our national synthesis and our ancestral legacy. As a result, the return of the obelisk should inspire us to reacquaint ourselves with our meaningful past and to chart a collective vision for the new millennium. We should make a sincere effort to root and develop our modernity through our own rich and diverse tradition. The return offers us a rare opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with the lessons of history. Historical consciousness is needed to build and maintain a self-confident society.

Around the beginning of the first millennium of the Common Era, our ancestors built a civilization that significantly contributed to our material and spiritual development. In three years, we will be celebrating the end of the second millennium. The critical question, what legacy or what civilization are we going to pass on to our children?

¹ This paper was first presented at a symposium organized by the Ethiopian Students Association of Massachusetts and the Center for African Studies of Boston University on April 24, 2005. All the pictures are taken by Massimo A. Alberizzi of *Corriere Della Sera*. I wholeheartedly thank Mr. Alberizzi for granting a permission to use his pictures.

² Aleqa Kidane Wolde Kifle (1947). *Metshafe Siwasew Wagiss Womazgebe Qalat Haddis*, p. 219.

³ Sergew Hable Selassie (1972). *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*. Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University, p. 68.

⁴ Sergew Hable Selassie writes that "Aksum and Aksumite are mentioned in epigraphical monuments and literature in different languages: Greek, Sabaeen, Ge'ez and Latin at least from the first century of the Christian era." Pp. 68-69.

⁵ Munro-Hay. <http://users.vnet.net/alight/aksum/mhak1.html>

⁶ Munro-Hay. <http://users.vnet.net/alight/aksum/mhak1.html>

⁷ Tekle Tasdik Mekuria (1951 eth cal). *Yethiopia Tarik: Nubia, Aksum, Zaguiye Iske Atse Yekuno Amlak Zemene Mengest*. Addis Ababa: Zetensae Zegubae, pp. 192-211.

⁸ Quoted in Munro-Hay, Stuart (1991). *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

⁹ Munro-Hay, Ch. 3. <http://users.vnet.net/alight/aksum/mhak1.html>

¹⁰ Yuri M. Kobishichanov (1979), *Axum*, p.103. Also in Stuart Munro-Hay's *Aksum*, pp.56-57.

¹¹ Phillipson, David (1998). *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum: Its Antecedents and Successors*. London: British Museum Press, p.8.

¹² Damot monarchy (3rd-early 2nd millennium BC) in the Gash delta on the Ethiopo-Sudanese border, a possible location for the land of Punt (Rodolfo Fattovitch, 1988).

¹³ One of Ezanas inscriptions read as follows: "Aeizanas, king of the Aksumites, the Himyarites, Raeidan, the Ethiopians, the Sabaeans, Silei, Tiyamo, the Beja and Kasou, king of kings, son of the unconquered god Ares." (A translation from DAE 4, Greek, from the three-script versions.)

¹⁴ Anfray, p. 374.

¹⁵ Munro-Hay, Stuart (1991). *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 56.

¹⁶ John F. Healey (1990), *Reading the Past: The Early Alphabet*. London: British Museum Publications, p.47.

¹⁷ For an excellent narrative of Aksum, please see Belay Giday Ameha's (1995 Eth Cal) *Aksum*.