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David W. Phillipson. *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum: Its Antecedents and Successors*. London: British Museum Press, 1998.

This is an excellent outline of Ethio-Eritrean civilization with the ancient town of Aksum as a focus of analysis. The author describes Aksum's foundation and reviews its development over the centuries. As the subtitle denotes, Aksum's "antecedents and successors" are the focus of analysis.

The book has seven chapters. The first chapter gives a general background nicely summarizing the geographical, "human geography" - social, ancient contacts with the outside world, and historical and archaeological studies undertaken on the site. The chapter is graced with fine photographs and portraits of village and church life in Ethiopia and Eritrea. In the historical summary, the author briefly touches upon the modern monarchs, but focuses only on Tewodros, Menelik, and Haile Selassie. He side-steps Emperor Yohannes (1872-1889). Emperor Yohannes was an ardent Ethio-phile, a defender of Christian Ethiopia, and the son of Aksum. Being from the region where Phillipson's research crisscrossed, Yohannes is as worthy of mention as any, if not to supersede, other Ethiopian plenipotentiary. Phillipson, to his credit mentions Yared Kahin (priest) in Chapter 4. Yared was the legendary church musician and sublime poet who created and developed the Ethiopic church hymns in the 6th century. He was from the village of Tselemti "a Sunday's walk" from Aksum. As Donald Levine observed: "Because of the antiquity of their region and the glory of their past, the Tigre (Tigray) are to some extent the cultural aristocrats of Ethiopia" (Levine, D. 1967:2). Aksum is located in the Ethiopian province of Tigray.

Chapter 2 describes Ethiopia before the advent of the Aksumite civilization. The author depends on historical documents, narrations, and archaeological discoveries to explain the socio-economic, religious, and political setup which prevailed in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The "social history" is summarized by the description of clayware, ivory carvings, textile industry, religious life, stoneware, and food production. The author points out that

Ethiopia and South Arabia shared a common political history. However, he emphasizes that the cultural history they shared is almost explainable in superior-inferior relationships, with the culture of South Arabia being the dominant one. He is persistent in stating that every material discovery relating to Aksum had "probably" originated in South Arabia or elsewhere outside Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Chapters 3 and 4 are descriptions of the Aksumite Civilization in terms of political affairs as well as domestic and international economy. Domestic economy sustained "self-sufficient" agriculture for the production of cereal ears, wheat, barley, *teff*, sorghum, oat, pea, lentil, cotton, linseed, *noog*, gourd, and grape. Farming activity was supported by "both humped and humpless varieties of cattle" (p.62). The vitality of Aksum, and its cosmopolitan reach in trade and commerce is demonstrated by Aksum's coins discovered as far as China and India as well as in the Middle East and Europe. Twelve decorative plates and numerous photos and drawings complement the chapters in highlighting the ancient archaeological masterpieces and artifacts.

Chapter 4, entitled "Aksumite Material Culture and Beliefs" provides an inventory of Aksum's artifacts. The chapter starts by listing the name of the Aksumite rulers dating back to A.D. 270. It stops with the reign of Armah in 630. Aksumite coins bearing pagan and Christian symbols testify to the transition from paganism to Christianity sometime between 270-300 A. D. The advent of Islam shortly after the reign of Armah was ominous to Ethio-Eritrean Christianity and to the glory of Aksum. The chapter is a valuable introductory summary of the modest research on Aksum's civilization.

Chapter 5 explains the decline of Aksum, which seems to have been precipitated by environmental degradation and Islamic aggression. The glory faded suddenly. Aksum, which was an internationally recognized power, became isolated. There was a link between the three Christian dominions in Nubia, Egypt, and Jerusalem, but the decline was precipitous and irreversible. Chapter 6 looks at Ethiopia after Aksum's decline. The Christian

heritage flourished, but the political strength had dissipated. The chapter appears a continuation of Chapter 4, but the focus here is more on religious artifacts. The chapter nicely merges with the concluding Chapter 7, which is an elaboration of the Christian culture and tradition which succeeded Aksum. The sum total of Ethio-Eritrean heritage is detailed as a starting point for future research and exploration on Aksum's "precedents and antecedents".

The book will be useful in that it will help initiate interest and nurture curiosity about the region's past history. It will also be an excellent adaptation for an introductory course in archaeological research. However, it does not add new information on Aksum. In terms of advancing knowledge of the topic, the book is modest and unpretentious.

Additionally, the volume falls far short of articulating new discoveries regarding the Aksum civilization. The most that can be said of the volume is that it is an excellent literature review with little authority or intellectual independence. It is an outline of collective research that was already reported by past archaeological discoveries. For example, nearly all the tables and figures are credited by the author to other current and past researchers. Even though Phillipson worked under the auspices of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, his work is overshadowed by the number of scholars he cites to drive home a discovery or material evidences about Aksum. It is difficult to tell which part of the book deals with his work at the site "since 1993." In other words, Phillipson's research on this spectacular civilization has not advanced the field beyond the dead end that it was for decades. However, he has done a great service to scholars of the region by providing a synoptic view of the Ethiopian and Eritrean civilizations.

Another problem with the book is the intellectual conservatism so transparent in the tone of the volume due to the author's unwillingness to credit the Aksumite civilization with originality and indigenous resourcefulness. With the exception of some of the food and crop production that he attributes to the

region, all artifacts, even the indigenous alphabets, are viewed as transplants from across the Red Sea or outside Ethiopia and Eritrea. Phillipson's analysis and observations are replete with qualification stating that significant artifacts and cultural attributes are "probably," "most likely," "presumably" of outside origin. The people of the region have a glory to be amazed about, but none of it is of their making. On page 8, the author states his worthy goal in conducting his research. He recognizes the "unique status of Ethiopian civilization." However, an Ethiopian or Eritrean scholar reading the book cannot help but feel that his or her heritage may be a "transplant" from other localities, such as South Arabia. What is planted in South Arabia, Ethiopians and Eritreans believe, had originated in their midst. In none of the archaeological tradition that the author has reviewed are the people of the region given a measure of credit for originality, creativity, and intellectual inspirations. So much is said about who influenced which Ethio-Eritrean civilization, but neither the Middle East, Asia or Europe is looked at as beneficiaries from Ethio-Eritrean civilization.

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