

The book under review spans an impressive range of cultural development and change in northern Ethiopia/Eritrea. While mainly focusing on the Aksumite state, the book also discusses its precursor(s) in Pre-Aksumite times as well as its dynastic successors – i.e., the ‘deep history’ of this state. The book brings together a very wide range of information – textual and historical (from both internal and external sources), archaeological, architectural, art, historical, and technological, as well as numismatics evidence. Perhaps most important, it includes a coverage of more recent archaeological evidence, recovered since 1993, when archaeological research resumed in this part of Africa after a long period of socio-political conflict. While not all scholars in these different disciplines will agree with every interpretation in this book, Phillipson is to be commended for bringing together so much material for the long-range view, which also offers scholars many points of debate. The book is a much more in-depth study of Aksumite civilization than Stuart Munro-Hay’s 1991 book, *Aksum. An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, and will definitely replace this book as the standard reference.

Phillipson states that this book is for three different audiences. The first are specialists in studies of the northern Horn of Africa. The second are archaeology students at Ethiopian universities, for which it will certainly prove useful. For the third intended audience, less specialized readers, including visitors and tourists to Ethiopia, the book seems less accessible because

of its detailed coverage of the topics, but it is exactly this detailed information which makes it useful to the other audiences. Of importance here is that footnotes are at the bottom of each page and not in the back of the book – and thus are much more easily accessible to the scholar and student. There are also a number of line drawings of admirably reconstructed monuments/architecture, which greatly help to illustrate the book’s text.

The kingdom of Aksum is discussed in thirteen thematic chapters: an introductory summary; a discussion of the kingdom’s linguistic history; relevant textual sources; the emergence and expansion of the state; Aksumite kingship, politics and religion; subsistence practices, including farming and herding; urbanism and non-funerary architecture; burials; Aksumite technology, material culture and



A New Look at Aksum

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Foundations of an African Civilisation. Aksum & the Northern Horn 1000 BC – AD 1300

by David W. Phillipson

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coinage; foreign contacts; and Aksumite decline and its political successors. Phillipson notes the differences in dates given for the end of the Proto-Aksumite period, when there is the earliest, best preserved evidence of Aksumite culture on Bieta Giyorgis hill (excavated by the expedition

of the University of Naples ‘l’Orientale’ and Boston University, 1993-2003) to the northwest of Aksum. But he does not recognize this classification as having a larger regional and cultural significance. Nor does Phillipson recognize the internal scheme of Aksumite phases of the archaeological investigations on Bieta Giyorgis hill based on absolute and relative dates obtained through controlled stratigraphic associations at the settlement of Ona Nagast. While it is useful to look at the broader range of development of Aksumite culture, the distinction of internal phases, based on

the evidence of the material culture, is also helpful in order to recognize significant changes over the course of this 700 plus year sequence.

In Chapter 3 (in the book’s Part I, ‘Before Aksum’), Phillipson discusses the evidence of Aksum’s precursor in the northern Horn, the so-called ‘kingdom’ of Da’amat. Much less is known about the first millennium BC in the northern Horn than about the next millennium, and problems discussed here include what polities developed there before Aksum. Ongoing excavations in northern Ethiopia of sites of this period will hopefully expand what we know about it; but for the present, this is a useful summary. However, in terms of the concept of the earlier land of ‘Punt’ (Chapter 2, The Northern Horn 3000 Years Ago), Phillipson does not recognize that Punt is only known because of its mention in Egyptian texts of the third and second millennia BC; and without these texts no one would ever have conceived of such a specific place. So ancient Egypt is the starting point for studies about the land of Punt, thought to be located in the southern Red Sea region and where the ancient Egyptians obtained exotic materials, especially incense, as well as ivory and ebony. Rodolfo Fattovich has also done archaeological investigations in the Kassala region of eastern Sudan, which suggest a hinterland region of Punt where these materials were obtained – as well as the cultural input of this region to later developments in the northern Horn. More information about this cultural input from the western hinterland would have been useful.

Perhaps the weakest part of Phillipson's book relates to the evidence he cites for Aksum's 'Decline and Transformation' (Chapter 16). Explaining that phenomenon by the accelerated debasement of gold coinage after the sixth century (p. 210) related to exhausted auriferous deposits in the region of Aksum is a narrow interpretation that does not take into account the textual and numismatic evidence, not to mention broader-scale

events, historical and economic, within the kingdom as well as external ones. But perhaps the biggest problem with this chapter (as well as the next one) is the over-interpretation of the historical and political implications of the churches in eastern Tigray. To make inferences about political organization and change on the sole basis of churches, with a problematic relative chronology, is a weak argument; more must be known archaeologically about Late/Post-

Aksumite times before such inferences can be made.

Two minor problems of this book should be cited: 1) the readability of this book would be greatly improved with a larger font, and 2) more site maps, placing all of the sites mentioned in the text, would be helpful.

Overall, the book is an important work. It contains a wide range of data on the development of this early African

civilization from a long-range view, including what preceded and followed this state. It will certainly be a useful source of information for scholars and students of ancient Aksum. David Phillipson is to be congratulated for the meticulous scholarship represented in this volume, and his capable synthesis of material and evidence relating to this remarkable early state.

