

David W. PHILLIPSON, *Foundations of an African Civilisation. Aksum and the Northern Horn, 1000 BC – AD 1300*, Woodbridge: James Currey, 2012, ISBN 978-1-84701-088-9, 294 p.

Ethiopia belongs to very old territories with a tradition of statehood that goes far into Antiquity. For decades or even centuries, Ethiopia has attracted scholars from many regions and continents due to its (alleged or real) exceptionality which was centered on several factors. First, it was one of the first countries that adopted Christianity (in its Orthodox version) already in the 4th century. Second, its ethnic and religious diversity contributed to a specific mixture of cultures that is still tangible until today. Third, Ethiopia was able to maintain its independence (except for a short period of Italian occupation in the 1930s), the fact that contributed to its special position among African and Afro-American community. For the purpose of this review, mainly the first remains relevant as Ethiopia, formerly known as Abyssinia, is a homeland of an ancient Aksum Empire that existed as an important political unit for many centuries until it was diminished during the 7th century.

Already at the end of the 19th century, first major accounts in ancient history of Ethiopia were published and extended in Europe. Numerous books and other materials have been printed since then written by historians as well as archeologists including David W. Phillipson whose recent monograph *Foundations of an African Civilisation. Aksum and the Northern Horn 1000 BC – AD 1300* gives an impressive picture on various aspects of the Aksum Empire. Aksum is one of the oldest empires in Africa that at least in certain periods of time occupied territory not only in the Horn of Africa, but part of the Arab Peninsula as well. Thus it included various cultural and political environments that were unified under one shelter crossing the Red Sea. Aksum, obviously, did not emerge in a vacuum, and at the same time, after its decline, left a strong legacy of statehood, rich culture, and, besides many other things, Christianity. The reviewed book is thus divided into three chapters that deal

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with pre-Aksum period, the kingdom of Aksum, and post-Aksum era. The main body, of course, lies in the era of greatness of Aksum kingdom.

The Ethiopian Highlands are one of the places on Earth where first agriculture appeared and where first animals were domesticated. Archeology provides us with numerous evidence of ancient civilization in what is now Ethiopia and Eritrea. Although the book is written as primarily an archeological account, it gives wide range of data useful for historical research as well. Its rich documentation provides one of the best and most complete and complex analysis of the history of Aksum and its aftermath.

History of the kingdom of Aksum shows various changes in power relations ranging from periods of greatness and wealth to periods of decline and misfortune. Phillipson gives us a multiple picture of his research on Aksumite languages and literacy (chapter 5), written sources (chapter 6), expansionist period (chapter 7), kingship and politics (chapter 8), religion (chapter 9), and a wide range of issues dealing with daily life, urbanizations, rituals, such as burials, material culture, or coinage. Probably the most interesting periods of the existence of Aksumite kingdom is the era of adoption of Christianity by the king Ezana in the first half of the 4th century, the second being the last expansionist era at the end of the 6th century that included a significant part of Arab Peninsula.

First intensive expansion started during the second half of the third century when Aksumite economy developed via international trade and expansion to neighboring areas inhabited by the Bega, Noba and other areas. This period is also marked by coinage and Aksumite artifacts can be found in numerous places in the Mediterranean and Asia. Crucial period of the expansion is associated with the king Ezana, son of Ella Amida. There are still, however, certain issues to be discussed. For instance, we do not know exactly where some of the conquered areas lied or what or whom certain names represented. This is an example of Bega, usually associated with Beja or the Blemmyes, but it has to be said that the connection between Beja and the Blemmyes is not clear up to this day.

Nevertheless, the author bases his findings on exhausting primary sources including written and material ones, accompanies his findings with numerous pictures and maps and thus gives a complete analysis and overview of the important period of Horn of Africa's ancient history which, in many senses, is still relevant up to this day. *Foundations of an African Civilisations* is not only a masterpiece of its kind and a rich academic contribution to our knowledge of ancient history of the Horn of Africa, but it can also be recommended as the basic reading for students of anyone interested in archeology, history, and more specifically Horn of Africa culture, traditions, history, and heritage.

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