

Ethiopia or Kingdom of Axum

The 1911 edition of Encyclopedia Britannica says that the first known records of Ethiopia date back to 3000 years BC. The encyclopedia also claims that strong links existed between Egypt and Ethiopia which go back to the 22nd Dynasty of Ancient Egypt. Sometimes both countries were ruled over by the same person and Piye, the ruler of the 22nd Dynasty was the first person to govern both countries.

Merchants from that period talk about a region located south of Nubia or Kush which they refer to as Punt or Yam. Myrrh which came from Punt was found in Egypt as early as the First or Second Dynasty and Professor Richard Pankhurst, the son of the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst and who was the founding director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, believed that trade existed between Egypt and Ethiopia right from the beginning of what was Ancient Egypt.

Modern Ethiopia, it is said can be traced back to the Kush people and was centered around the city of Yeha in northern Ethiopia. The kingdom pioneered agricultural irrigation schemes, cultivated millet and manufactured iron tools and weapons. The remains of a stone temple dating back to 500 years BC has been found at Yeha. This Temple of Almagah used building blocks of limestone of 3 meters length cut exactly to size. The temple itself measured 75 feet, was rectangular shaped and two storey high. This building was built earlier than the Parthenon in Athens or the Coliseum in Rome. The temple windows have symbols of the crescent moon and the sun carved into their shape and these pre-Christian symbols and an inscription on an incense bowl written in Sheba create possible links between Ethiopia and Saba, the homeland of the Queen of Sheba. Some historians believe that Ethiopia was founded by the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

During the period when the temple was built there existed a culture and civilization capable of designing and building reservoirs. It also was a culture and civilization which had developed clear and distinct religious structures and possessed all of the hallmarks of an advanced society. In the city of Aksum, the mythical palace of the Queen of Sheba was said to be located on its outskirts. The palace which could have been constructed around 1000 years BC was said to have been extremely well built and had sophisticated drainage systems installed into its foundations.

Trade was an essential feature of this region. There were massive imports of incense. 1500 years BC, boats with rigging were involved in trading ventures and it is believed that extensive trade networks between Egypt and Ethiopia had existed from around 3000 years BC and prior to the Ancient Egyptian dynasties was the kingdom of Ta-Seti, out of which emerged early religious rituals which were absorbed into mainstream Egyptian culture. Murals painted and engraved on the funeral temple of Queen Hatsheput built around 1400 years BC portray Aksum as a major trading centre for frankincense, a much highly valued commodity and was one of the gifts bought to Jesus at the news of his birth by the three wise men, one of whom was reputed to be King Bazen, who had been on the throne of Aksum for eight years when Jesus was born.

Aksum occupied a region in the Horn of Africa which is now modern day Eritrea, along the shores of the Red Sea. Around 500 years BC settlements had been formed, made up of a mix of farmers and immigrant traders who had arrived from southeast Arabia. These communities devised their own forms of language and writing. The sea ports in this region expanded and started to dominate the Red Sea trade which was starting to compete on commercial terms with the city of Meroe. By the beginning of the first century AD these ports had joined together to establish one unified kingdom, with its capital inland on the Ethiopian Plateau at Aksum. Aksum grew in wealth and international prestige, renowned for its massive stone monuments and architecture and for its carved multi-layered stone pillars called stelae. Writing in the middle of the third century, A.D. Mani, a Persian religious leader, described Aksum as one of the four most important kingdoms that existed in the world at that time. Over a thousand years later, in the 14th Century, Aksum was looked upon by a Venetian trader as a 'Coronation City.' The city had a magnificent basilica which was decorated with gold plates. Throughout this long period the region had developed and maintained international influence and respect. During the Ancient Greek Empire the Ethiopians were seen as a sacred people who the Greek people believed were respected by the Gods. Momnon, an Ethiopian warrior who had fought in the Trojan War, was seen as a major historic figure and only Achilles was seen to surpass him in battle. After he was killed by Achille's sword he was granted immortality by the Greek gods. In Greek mythology the Ethiopian people are said to have got their colour when the sun came too close to their country. The historian Heroditus writes about a group of Ethiopian warriors clad in leopard skins and claws who painted their bodies

red and white and who were among the army of Xerxes which invaded Greece in the 5th Century BC.

Trade existed between Kush, Egypt and the Red Sea from a very early period in time. Two major trade routes were in operation. One went from Nekhebat to the Red Sea and the other route went via Qustal in Nubia. Alongside these trade systems a domesticated agricultural system had been formed sometime between the middle of the 5th and 3rd Millennium BC. Evidence of the cultivation of finger millet has been discovered and there is a possibility that camels may have played a part in this culture during this period as well. Roads which ran through the region of Eritrea and the Red Sea ports of Azab and Adule formed trade links with the Far East, Greece, Egypt and India. There was a flourishing trade in ivory, gold, rhino horn, hippo hides and teeth, wild animal, frankincense, Nubian emeralds and slaves. There were imports of silk, cotton, swords, wine glasses, silver and gold which were manufactured into plates as well as large gold and bronze statues. This trade created links with Kush, Egypt, the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean Basin, Arabia, India, Sri Lanka and China. The Straits of Bab-el Mandeb was classified as one of the three major shipping routes of the Ancient World. Ethiopia was the first country to mint a coin with a Christian symbol on it. Previous coins had the crescent moon and rising sun. Ethiopia also played an important role in the development of and spread of Christianity around the world. The Christian values embraced by Ethiopia in the first Millennium AD are similar to those which now shape the West and had a major impact on Obama's race for President in the USA.

Christianity is in actuality a Near East and African religion. Christianity arrived in Africa long before it reached Europe. Philip converted an Ethiopian eunuch who was the treasurer of Candace. This incident is written about in Acts: Ch8:V26-40. There are many references to Africa in the Old Testament and as previously mentioned, the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba is said to have been the first king of Ethiopia and the founder of the nation. There were Christian missionaries preaching in Africa, India and China when much of Europe was still pagan.

During the reign of King Ezana in the 4th Century BC, a new Ethiopic script was introduced which had an influence upon emergent writing scripts emanating from Georgia and Armenia which was the first country to embrace Christianity as a state religion. These contacts indicate that diplomatic and trade ties existed between these countries and that Ethiopia

engaged with the wider world. Aksum also had established trade links with the Roman Empire., and these extended all the way to China via sea routes, (but also, I personally suspect) and possibly along the corridors of the Chinese Silk Road. Trade routes were also formed between the Arabian peninsular and Aksum and with Kyoto and Fukuoka in Japan. Mani a renowned Persian spiritual leader writing in the Third Century BC describes Aksum as one of the four most important kingdoms in the world at that time. Aksum was a major power and exerted influence upon the rest of the world, and as mentioned in the section on agriculture, Aksum could lie in the region where modern day agriculture might have originated.

Ethiopians recount how Christianity reached their shores as a result of a shipwreck. This led to the drowning of a Christian philosopher from Tyre called Meopius, but his two companions on the voyage, Frumentius and Aedius were safely washed a shore and taken to the Royal Palace. Other conflicting accounts say that Frumentius and Aedius were Christian traders captured by pirates operating in the Red Sea and sold into slavery to King Ella Amida, the pagan king of Ethiopia. Frumentius eventually rose to become an important minister within the royal court of King Ezana. In 347 years AD, King Ezana converted to Christianity and Ethiopia became the second country in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion, Armenia being the first to do so.

Frumentius became the secretary to King Ella Amida while Aedius assumed the title of Royal Cup Bearer. When the king died, Frumentius became Regent to the young prince Ezana who eventually became King of Ethiopia. During their time spent in Ethiopia both men were allowed to spread the Christian message and when Frumentius returned to Egypt he urged the Bishop of Alexandria to send Christian missionaries back to Aksum. As a result of these dialogues Frumentius was consecrated the first bishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He was given the title of Abuna Salama or Bishop of Peace. With the support and approval of King Ezana, Ethiopia became a Christian nation and the link established between the Ethiopian Church and the Patriarch of Alexandria remained unbroken till the 20th Century. The overthrow of Haille Sellaisie disrupted this link but until very recently it was the Bishop of Alexandria who was responsible for the appointment of every Ethiopian bishop.

King Ezana also expanded the power and influence of Aksum which began to rise to prominence during the first century AD. There was an expanding

trade in food products as well as gold and ivory through the Red Sea port of Adulis while the governing city of Aksum was constructed in northeastern Ethiopia on a plateau 7,200 feet above sea level. The port of Adulis connected with trade routes throughout the Roman Empire and also went east to India. Commercial activity along the Red Sea coast was active as early as 100 years BC. The king also constructed large monuments to register his power and influence across the country such as the 100 stone obelisks he had built. The tallest one was 33 meters high, sculptured into a thirteen storey tower designed with intricately crafted window frames, lintels, beam ends and bolted doors. The structure was made from a single quarried stone and was transported a number of kilometers to its final site, but once erected it soon fell down, collapsing onto a nearby graveyard and breaking into three pieces. Still standing next to this site is a twenty seven meter tall obelisk. Beneath its base are a number of tombs, a maze of tunnels, and buried stairwells and shafts. Skulls, bones, pottery, metal and other objects have been found in the tombs. The obelisks were seen as a stairway to heaven for the deceased kings.

Towards the end of the 5th Century a contingent of nine monks arrived in Ethiopia. Quite possible they were fleeing religious persecution from either Syria or Egypt, but they were responsible for introducing a monastic life into Ethiopian culture which since then has played a major role in the development of religious life in this country to this present day. The monks were forced to flee and seek safety in Ethiopia because of their Monophysite beliefs which believed that Christ's divine and human nature had been fused into a single entity at birth. The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon had adopted an entirely different theological approach, seeing a distinct difference between Christ's divine nature and that of his human nature, which they concluded was separate and utterly distinct from Christ's divinity. As a result of this meeting at Chalcedon, the Monophysite belief was declared to be heretical. This led to a split in the church with the separation from the main body of Christian churches by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Egyptian Coptic Church as well as smaller churches in Syria, Armenia and Turkey.

This split occurred in 451 years AD. To this present day these churches are non-Chalcedon and have created their own distinct brand of Christianity within the southern branch of the Christian church. The nine monks who had fled to Ethiopia helped to translate the Bible into Ge'ez, the language spoken at that time in Ethiopia though today the ancient language of Ge'ez is

only used in church services. This translation into Ge'ez must represent one of the earlier translations of the bible from Hebrew into other languages and it might be interesting to compare similarities and differences that exist in this edition to the English translation. There also exists in Ethiopia cultural connections to the world that existed within the Old Testament.

At Debra Dano there exists an ancient monastery built in the 6th Century on the top of a hillside where the only way in is to climb up a rock face with the help of a rope. No women are allowed into the grounds and even female animals are forbidden. Again this represents a Christian institution and a very early example of monastic tradition which still exists today. Also some of its beliefs could lie in much older pre-Christian beliefs.

Many of the rituals of the Ethiopian Church are connected to ancient Judaism such as the veneration which exists in Ethiopia for the Jewish Ark of the Covenant. The original Ark of the Covenant is said to have been bought back from Jerusalem to Ethiopia by King Menelik 1st who is reputed to have been the son of the Queen of Sheba and of King Solomon. Their liaison is said to have resulted from a visit paid by the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon to establish whether he was as wise as he was reputed to be. During her visit the queen was forbidden to drink and myth has it that she slept with the king in order to quench her thirst. She is said to have ruled over a small region which today is part of southern Eritrea. When King Menelik was twenty five years old he paid a visit to Jerusalem and stole the ark. Even today Ethiopia acts as custodian of the Ark of Covenant which is said to be hidden and well guarded in the church of St Mary in Axum.

Links between Judaism and Ethiopia occur in the second chapter of Genesis in the Old Testament when describing the four rivers which mark out the boundaries and flow out of the Garden of Eden. Two of the mentioned rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates are located in the Middle East but the first river mentioned is the Pishon and is said to flow through gold fields. This river could be the Nile, as the second river mentioned is the Gihon which is said to 'encircle all the land of Cush' which is another name for Ethiopia. There are other references to this region throughout the Old Testament which could help to explain why Ethiopia was the second country in the world to adopt Christianity as a state religion. Also the Garden of Eden could be located in Africa, possibly in the Rift Valley where some of the earliest remains of man have been found, if the account of the Garden of Eden has any historical validation.

During the 7th Century the Muslim invasions cut Ethiopia off from the rest of the world. An Ethiopian monastery in Jerusalem helped to provide a focal point for monks from Ethiopia and links with Egypt were maintained with a succession of bishops appointed by the leaders of the Egyptian Coptic Church. Initially the Christian and Muslim communities in Ethiopia co-existed in a peaceful manner. Both benefited from trading with one another and to begin with religious tolerance and acceptance of their different religious belief systems existed on both sides. This was partly due to the fact that there were similarities in their different religious practices. In 615AD Muhammad's wife and cousin sought refuge in Aksum together with a small group of followers. Muhammad's wife and entourage were given protection by the Negus Amah who prevented them from being forcibly repatriated to Arabia. Because Ethiopia had provided a safe haven for this group, Muslims were told by Muhammad to display respect and gratitude towards the Ethiopian people. The history of Islam might have been very different if Muhammad's wife had been forced to return to Arabia. Tolerance existed and the sultans in the region rarely forced the general populace to convert to Islam. But with the passage of time the relationships deteriorated between the two religious communities and the besieged Christian community was forced to flee into the mountains for protection against the Muslim population. Possibly the monastery at Debre Dano originally installed the rope ladder access as a means of protection against possible Muslim aggression and attack. Within the safety of these mountain retreats the Ethiopians protected their Christian and African culture, faith, identity and independence.

Islam occupied the plains of Ethiopia, thus isolating the Christian communities which based themselves in the safety of the mountainous regions of Ethiopia. The Muslim population originally arrived in the region from Saba which lies across the Red Sea on the Arabian peninsular. Today many of the Muslim population of Ethiopia are Sunni Muslims and make-up 25% to 40% of the country's population. Arguments still persist as to whether Haile Sellasie was directly descended from the prophet Muhammad or was a direct blood descendant of King David of Israel.

During the last half of the 10th Century the King of Aksumite was attacked and defeated by an army led by a female warrior chieftain called Judith or Gudit. Where ever her armies went they burnt, pillaged and looted any cathedral or church in their path. In the 12th Century Ethiopia slowly began to emerge from this long and sustained period of pillage and destruction. A

new ruling class emerged called the Zagwe Dynasty, which was heavily criticized for not having been descended from Menelik 1st, the son of King Solomon and Queen of Sheba who as stated previously is said to have formed the first royal household of Ethiopia. King Lalibea built ten churches in the city of Roha which was later renamed as Lalibea. These ten churches were each carved out of natural rock faces, and to this day are a living example of the amazing masonry skills that these 13th century African craftsmen possessed. The purpose behind the construction of these churches was linked to a plan to re-energize and revitalize Ethiopian Christianity.

During the 16th Century the country was very nearly conquered by a Muslim army led by General Ahmed Gran who launched a successful jihad against Ethiopia. After conquering the country he died in a counter attack aided by soldiers from Portugal. This military support given by the Portuguese helped to defeat the army led by Ahmed Gran. During this period of chaos and uncertainty, John Berudez, a Portuguese citizen, claimed that he was the next Bishop of Ethiopia and pressure was exerted on the royal court to convert to Roman Catholicism but these pressures were ultimately successfully resisted.

King Suseynos who ruled Ethiopia from 1607 – 1632 did convert to Catholicism and wanted to forge a military alliance with the west but the succeeding monarch converted back to Christianity enshrined in the Orthodox Christian Church of Ethiopia and preceded to expel all Roman Catholic missionaries from the country. By the 19th Century Islam had become the dominant religion, especially in the south of the country, but monastic life survived, because the monasteries were isolated and constructed in inaccessible regions of Ethiopia. In the last century King Menelik 2nd held off and defeated the Italians in their brutal attempt to colonize Ethiopia, which managed to retain its independence status. Ethiopia was the only African country to do so during the European colonization of the African continent.

Classroom activities for Ethiopia or the Kingdom of Aksum

1. Create a comic script showing how Frumentius brought Christianity to Ethiopia.
2. Map out the trade routes linking Ethiopia with the rest of the world. Write down the goods which pass along these trade routes. Why do you think that Ethiopia was seen as a major trading area in the Ancient World.
3. Design and make a replica of one of the obelisks in Aksum reduced to a manageable size.
4. Discuss in small groups the difference between a Monophysite belief to Christianity and a non-Monophysite belief. Get the small groups to act out a dialogue between the opposing groups. Stress that this took place 300 years after the death of Christ.
5. Look at the second chapter of Genesis and map out where the garden of Eden could be located.
6. Discuss in small groups how the history of Islam may have been different if the wife of Muhammad had been forced to return to Arabia and how this decision changed the nature of Christianity in Ethiopia.
7. Discuss the reasons you believe that Ethiopia has maintained its independence throughout its 2,500 year history. Compare and contrast the invasion and destruction of the Songhai Kingdom in the 16th Century and the Portuguese involvement in defeating the Muslim jihad led by Ahmed Gran.
8. Can you see similarities with this jihad and the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan today? What do you think are the reasons and causes of jihad led by Ahmed Gran in Ethiopia in the 16th Century. Write down your ideas exploring both sides of the argument.