The Case of the Missing Kingdom of Axum

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During the middle of the first millennium of the Common Era, a small kingdom on the continent of Africa thrived. The Kingdom of Axum, or Aksum in other spellings, as a northeast African kingdom that bordered the Red Sea, just south of Egypt. With the seat of culture, government, and religion in the city of Axum in the Ethiopian Highlands and the port city of Adulis on the western shores of the Red Sea, Axum benefited greatly from the booming trade of valuable commodities, particularly ivory, with many different nations. Historical record recounts the glories of Axum's power; however, it quickly disappeared from history in the sixth century. There is no clear cause for this disappearing act, but conditions of decline surround it. Axum suffered a crippling territorial defeat at the hands of a rival, Muslim Arabs began migrating into the region, and then the ivory trade moved south to the East African coast. Consequently, these conditions caused political, religious, and economic decline leading to historical disappearance.

Territorial losses and military defeats contributed to Axum's decline, but what territory did they have to lose? Beginning in the fourth century CE, Aksumite raiding parties started to disrupt the trade of their northern neighbors, Kush. Kush was a wealthy nation in the Upper Nile Valley who benefited from trade with Egypt and Rome by extension.[1] This all ended when Axumite King Aizanas finally conquered Kush in the fourth century; therefore, they gained control of trade routes between the Nile River to the west and the Red Sea to the east. Sometime after this victory, Byzantine priests converted King Aizanas; thus, Axum eventually became a Christian kingdom.[2]

With a new religion and successful military to support them, the kings of Axum began expanding their kingdom between the Nile and the Red Sea during the opening half of the first

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[1] Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little Brown, & Co., 1959.), 40-5.
[2] Ibid., 172-3.

millennium. With the seat of their economic wealth at the Red Sea port of Adulis, the Aksumites

sought to seize control of the southern end of the Red Sea Corridor.[3] In order to accomplish this,

they needed to conquer the nation of Himyar, small Jewish nation by conversion, forcefully

rejecting all forms of polytheism and uniting tribes in southeastern Arabia.[4] Their rivalry with

Axum led to stronger unification of the tribes, eventually, resulting in outright persecution of

Christian Aksumites residing in Himyar.[5] As a result, King Kaleb of Axum led a formal invasion

force into Himyar and conquered the nation circa 500 AD.[6]

Kaleb withdrew his forces soon thereafter and placed a Christian steward on the throne of

Himyar. After this steward died in c. 520, one by the name Joseph took his place.[7] This steward

expelled the Aksumite forces, slaughtering a great many in doing so. King Kaleb, under the

influence of the Byzantines, invaded Himyar yet again. Rallying under the death of Steward

Joseph, Aksumite forces and controlled the land for another forty to fifty years. Control declined

by 570, however, as the steward again sought more power, placing themselves at the head of

religion and state.[8]

The Axumite conflicts with Himyar had ramifications on the global stage.[9] When Axum

conquered the majority of the Upper Nile Valley with the defeat Kush, Byzantium saw this as

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[3] G.W.B. Huntingford, "The Kingdom of Axum." in *The Dawn of African History*. 2nd ed., Oliver, Roland A., ed. *(*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 22-27.

[4] Greg Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires Before Islam,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015,) doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654529.001.0001, Chapter 3.

[5] G.W.B. Huntingford, "The Kingdom of Axum." in *The Dawn of African History*. 2nd ed., Oliver, Roland A., ed. *(*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 22-27.

[6] Greg Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires Before Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015,) doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654529.001.0001, Chapter 3.

[7] Ibid., Chapter 3.

[8] Ibid., Chapter 3.

[9] G.W. Bowersock, *Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docID=1207932, 107.

opportunity to assert control over Persian interests in the Red Sea. After the conversion of the

Axumite monarchy to Christianity by the Byzantine priests, Axum functioned as a fairly

autonomous client state. Byzantium participated heavily in the trade of Adulis, contingent upon

Axum's ability to enforce their interests in the region. As a result of these wars, Byzantium

dropped Axum as a client state and pulled out of Adulis.[10] This restricted the power of the kings

of Axum for years to come, and with the Muslim conquest in the Nile Valley and tribal warfare

to the south, Axum's territory condensed over the next several centuries to the vicinity of the

cities and the villages in the Ethiopian Highlands.[11] While this severely limited the kingdom's

power, their military defeats alone do not contribute to disappearance in the sixth century, as

Muslim conquest arrives in the eleventh.[12]

In correlation with Axum's rise of military power, Christianity became the national

religion. The kings of Axum held a divine right to rule, judging that they and their armies

righteous in the eyes of the Christian God.[13] Only Axum's elite were members of the Christian

Church since the conversion of King Aizanas in fourth century; but as time when on, each

natural born Axumite became a member of the church. Through this, the Byzantine Church and

the Byzantine Empire gained a strong alliance with Axum, establishing a strong Christian culture

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[10] G.W. Bowersock, *Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docID=1207932, 120.

[11] Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little Brown, & Co., 1959.), 216-9.

[12] Bernard Lewis, "The Invading Cresent," in *The Dawn of African History*. 2nd ed., Oliver, Roland A., ed. *(*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 32.

[13] Greg Fisher, ed., *Arabs and Empires Before Islam,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015,) doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199654529.001.0001, Chapter 3.

in the African kingdom.[14] The exit of Byzantine influence allowed the influence of other cultures

and previous cultures to become mainstream, with varied degrees of success.[15]

As previously established, Muslim conquest did not reach Axum until the eleventh

century; however, it did not stop migration and merchants from infiltrating the region.[16]

Beginning in the early seventh century of the common era, Muslim exiles from Mecca began to

cross the Red Sea, landing at Adulis. King Ella Sham welcomed these exiles, and the ones that

followed over the next several years, with open arms.[17] Over the course of the next thirteen

years, a pluralistic coexistence grew in Axum. During this exile, non-Muslim emissaries from

Mecca arrived in Axum, demanding the return of the exiles. While the emissaries did not

threaten violence, they told stories of crimes that Muslim armies had committed against Meccans

in Mohammed's war to reclaim his homeland. After severe rebuking of the exiles by King Ella

Sham, the exiles expressed deep gratitude for the king's hospitality and pledged further loyalty.

As a result, Axum's king allowed them to stay and expelled the Meccan emissaries; however,

King Ella Sham expressed his discontent of the Muslims not adopting Christianity, perhaps

expressing some public opinion. [18] Upon the end of exile, the Muslims returned to Mecca and

established traditions about their adventures in Axum. According to these traditions, King Ella

Sham converted to Islam during exile, in fact, shortly after the expulsion of the Meccan

emissaries. While most non-Muslim historians assert that these traditions are utterly false, rumor

[14] Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little Brown, & Co., 1959.), 216-9.
[15] Stuart C. Munro-Hay, "A Tyranny of Sources: The History of Aksum from its Coinage." *Northeast African Studies* 3, no. 3 (1981): 7-9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43661096.

[16] Bernard Lewis, "The Invading Cresent," in *The Dawn of African History*. 2nd ed., Oliver, Roland A., ed. *(*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 32.
[17] Hussein Ahmed, "Aksum in Muslim Historical Traditions." *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1996): 47-48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44259282.
[18] Ibid., 51-54.

of these traditions spread like wildfire in the kingdom of Axum. This caused a great revolt in the kingdom, destabilizing the king's divine right, and leading to the diminished power of the throne.[19]

Furthermore, merchants of the Islamic faith entered the Nile Valley and the East African shores in the centuries to follow. These merchants, in particular, were slave traders. They took advantage of the territorial losses and the diminished power of the Axumite kings and plundered the region for slaves to work wherever demanded in the fast-growing Muslim Empire. While the slave traders surrounded the Ethiopians Highlands, they could not climb the heights into the Kingdom of Aksum. This strangulation was not the sole factor but contributed enormously to the disappearance of this once great nation. [20]

In the fourth century, Axum took control of the Kushite trade routes from east to west, between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley. They took control of the African side of the Red Sea straits opposite the Gerrhaneans and the Sabaeans, who united under the Himyarite throne. In order to take total control of the Red Sea Straits and to regulate control of trade coming in from the Erythraean Sea, Axum invaded Himyar and held that position for nearly a century. When the Aksumites took control of the land routes in northeast African, just south of Egypt, the Byzantine Empire took advantage of the Axum's newfound power.[21] Byzantium made them a client state, using Adulis and the might of the Aksumite armies to control three important trade goods coming through the Red Sea Straits from the Erythraean Sea and from the interior of the Continent: gold, silk, and ivory. With these newly acquired overland trade routes from Kush,

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[19] Ibid., 55-57.

[20] J. Alexander, "Islam, Archaeology and Slavery in Africa." *World Archaeology* 33, no. 1 (2001): 50-53. doi:10.1080/00438240120047627.

[21] Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa* (Boston: Little Brown, & Co., 1959.), 172-3.

Axum took over their gold trade from West and North Central Africa. Gold, for obvious reasons, was a valuable commodity for the Byzantines.[22] Silk, the most mystical and foreign of these commodities, came from India and China via the maritime Silk Road and demanded in Rome and Byzantium. Traders unloaded bulk silk at the port city of Adulis, sent by caravan into the Nile Valley, then shipped down the Nile to Alexandria, distributing it out the Mediterranean world.[23] Even before the capture of Kush's Nile Valley trade routes, Adulis had high quality ivory desired by many traders that frequented the Red and Erythraean Seas. A "Greek speaking Egyptian Merchant" lauded the ivory coming out of Adulis, albeit fighting off barbarians in the first century.[24] As a result of this high-quality ivory, Adulis became epicenter of trade for that commodity until departure of the Byzantines.[25]

Throughout this work, the Byzantine departure from the markets of Adulis has been explained *ad nauseam.* As a result of this departure, Byzantine attempted to assert direct control over the Red Sea region, hoping to control the flow of trade to the Mediterranean. As stated, they attempted, and they failed. Soon, Muslim traders flood the region, overwhelming the Byzantine influence.[26] A boom of trade occurs on the Arabian Peninsula, as Islamic conquest explodes out from Mecca. As Byzantine and Muslim spheres of influence collided, Islamic traders searched

[22] A.J. Arkell, "The Valley of the Nile," in *The Dawn of African History*. 2nd ed., Oliver, Roland A., ed. *(*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 11.
[23] G.W. Bowersock, *Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docID=1207932, 107.
[24] Schoff, Wilfred H., trans., *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912,) https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/periplus/periplus.html, 3.
[25] G.W.B. Huntingford, "The Kingdom of Axum." in *The Dawn of African History*. 2nd ed., Oliver, Roland A., ed. *(*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 22-27.
[26] G.W. Bowersock, *Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/longwood/detail.action?docID=1207932, 120.

for easier ways to access the three trade commodities. They had ample access to silk due to proximity with the East and trans-Saharan routes to obtain gold. Trade routes started to develop on East African coastline, reaching the ivory poachers in the "hinterland." Zanzibar Island, Pate Island, and several more become hubs for ivory.[27] These hubs benefitted from textiles, ceramics, and Indian ivory coming from the Asian continent, where spice also became an intriguing new commodity. Because of the interior need for independence from the coastal influence, African ivory declined as a commodity, in favor of a more available Indian ivory.[28] Economic collapse was, again, not the sole factor in this missing nation's case.

A combination of these factors led to this disappearance from historical record. In short, the Muslim sphere of influence strangled, and eventually smothered, the once great nation of Axum. Sieging the Ethiopian Highlands with trade, religion, and military and abandoning the port city of Adulis spelled doom for the kingdom, not allowing external influence to observe. While no single source can identify the exact point of the fall, the slow degrade of nation occurred.

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[27] Stelios Michalopoulos, Alireza Naghavi, and Giovanni Prarolo. "Trade and Geography in the Spread of Islam." *The Economic Journal* 128, no. 616 (2018): 3216-20. doi:10.1111/ecoj.12557.
[28] Shadreck Chirikure, "Land and Sea Links: 1500 Years of Connectivity Between Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Rim Regions, AD 700 to 1700." *The African Archaeological Review* 31, no. 4 (2014): 709-17. doi: 10.1007/s10437-014-6.

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