The wealth of Africa
The kingdom of Aksum

Presentation

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What can coins tell us about Aksum?
COINS OF KING EZANA

How similar are these two coins?

How does this page help explain the difference between the two coins?

Source 1: Gold coin
British Museum

Source 2: Gold coin
British Museum
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Crown
Gold
Staff
Inscription
Head and shoulders portrait
Wheat
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Why might there be differences?

**Source 1:** Gold coin
British Museum

- Crescent and disc symbol
- Crown
- Gold
- Staff
- Inscription
- Cross
- Head and shoulders portrait
- Wheat

**Source 2:** Gold coin
British Museum
TRADE

Why was Aksum’s position so good for trade?
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Source 3:
The Aksumites traded with Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean and Arabia, and financed their operations with the first and only coinage known in sub-Saharan Africa until the 10th century.
Reader 1997: 202

How did coins help Aksum’s trade?
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Reader 1997: 202

Source 4: Aksum exports
The goods brought to Adulis by the Ethiopians are listed as ivory, rhinoceros horn, hippopotamus hides, tortoise shell, monkeys, and slaves.
Pliny (c. AD 70) in Munro-Hay 1991: 144

Source 5: Aksum imports through Adulis
Cloth made in Egypt, coloured cloaks, linen, several sorts of glassware, iron used for spears both for hunting elephants and other animals and for war, axes, adzes, swords, big round drinking cups of bronze.
Periplus (1st century AD) in Munro-Hay 1991: 145

What sort of goods went through Adulis?

How else might Aksum make money from trade?
RELIGION

Source 6
No Egyptian obelisks could equal the size of the largest of the Aksumite stelae (33 metres high)
Munro-Hay 1991: 116

Why might the early Aksumite kings have built stelae over their tombs?

Source 7: Stela at Aksum
RELIGION

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Munro-Hay 1991: 116

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Source 8: Inscription of King Ezana
In the faith of God and the power of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost who have saved my kingdom. I believe in your son Jesus Christ who has saved me.
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Source 9: Modern Ethiopian cushion cover showing King Solomon of Jerusalem and Queen Sheba of Aksum beneath stelae.
British Museum
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Why might Ethiopians want to remember the story of Solomon and Sheba?

Source 9: Modern Ethiopian cushion cover showing King Solomon of Jerusalem and Queen Sheba of Aksum beneath stelae.
British Museum
THE FALL OF THE GREAT STELA

What is going on in the picture?

Source 10:
Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
THE FALL OF THE GREAT STELA

What is going on in the picture?

Royal Palace

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What is going on in the picture?

Why do you think the king became a Christian after this event?

Source 10: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla
RULERS

What message does the coin send about the ruler?

Source 11. Gold coin
British Museum
RULERS

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Name – everyone knows who is king
RULERS

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Name – everyone knows who is king
Gold – king and state are wealthy
RULERS

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Name – everyone knows who is king
Gold – king and state are wealthy
Crown – he is king

Source 11. Gold coin
British Museum
RULERS

What message does the coin send about the ruler?

- **Name** – everyone knows who is king
- **Gold** – king and state are wealthy
- **Crown** – he is king
- **Wheat** – he feeds his people

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Staff – royal power
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- **Wheat** – he feeds his people
- **Staff** – royal power
- **Religion** – others must follow

*Source 11. Gold coin
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What message does the coin send about the ruler?

Source 12.
He departed on campaign to re-establish his empire and put it again in order. Those who obeyed him he spared; those who resisted him he put to death.
Ousanas inscription.

Source 13.
I entered bravely into battle and subdued the following peoples: and, having conquered them, reserved for myself half their lands and people...
I am the first and only of the kings to have subdued all these peoples.
Inscription beside the road at the entrance to Adulis.

What impression of Aksumite kings do these inscriptions give?

Source 11. Gold coin
British Museum
RULERS

What information does each source give about the power of Aksum’s rulers?

Historians’ views

**Source 16.**

Aksum’s political control extended to regions beyond the modern borders of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Large areas of southern Arabia were ruled from Aksum at intervals between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD.

Phillipson 1998: 51

Which type of evidence is the most useful?

Archaeological evidence

**Source 14:** Possible likeness of Aksum royal palace © A. Davey

Object evidence

**Source 15:** Seals from Aksum
WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO LIVE IN AKSUM?

Can you identify the main features in the written description?

**Source 18.**
These large residences were basically of one plan; a central lodge or pavilion, raised on a high podium approached by broad staircases, surrounded and enclosed by ranges of buildings on all four sides. The central pavilion was flanked by open courtyards. The buildings are square or rectangular, with a strong central focus on the main pavilion.

Munro-Hay 1991: 98

**Source 17:** Noble’s house
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Munro-Hay 1991: 98

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WATER SUPPLY

How good was the water supply at Aksum?

Source 20.
In addition to its advantageous position for trade, the site enjoyed abundant rainfall, with a long rainy season from late June to early September. There were probably a number of streams and springs, and fertile soil very likely capable of producing more than one crop a year.
Munro-Hay 1991: 34

Source 21.
There is no river within two miles of Aksum, but the inhabitants have good well water; there are many wells hidden, and even in the plain have been found. It appears probable that, in ancient times, almost every house had its well.
Nathaniel Pearce (early 19th century) in Munro-Hay 1991: 97
HOW SHOULD WE REMEMBER AKSUM?

Source 22.
In the 5th century Aksum reached the height of its development and prosperity. The capital, Aksum, was well known throughout the Roman and Persian empires and as far as China in the East.

Collins and Burns 2007: 68

Source 23.
The Aksumites developed a civilisation of considerable sophistication. Aksum’s contribution in such fields as architecture and ceramics is both original and impressive. In addition, uniquely for Africa, they produced a coinage, remarkable for several features, especially the inlay of gold on silver and bronze coins.

Munro-Hay 1991: 10

In your opinion, what was the main significance of Aksum? (consider coinage, trade, language, kingship, religion, independent, African)
Your feedback

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For teachers

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www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk

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