

# THE BRITISH MUSEUM

## The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Aksum

---

Teachers' notes



Supported by



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



The CarAf Centre

[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

## THE WEALTH OF AFRICA: USING THESE RESOURCES

This educational resource consists of 16 sets of resources on African civilisations, countries and themes.

Each set of resources includes:

- Teachers' notes
- Students' worksheets
- A presentation

Download the resources free at [www.britishmuseum.org/schools](http://www.britishmuseum.org/schools)

### Teachers' notes

These are intended to provide background material for teachers, but can also be referred to by students who want more contextual information.

### Students' worksheets

These are stand-alone worksheets which can be downloaded as classroom resources or viewed on the interactive whiteboard. They are self-contained, with tasks and questions and a limited number of sources in which the language has been slightly amended to make them more accessible to the likely reading ages of the students. They are also designed to be used independently of the teacher, e.g. for homework.

If teachers do not wish to spend more than one or two lessons on Aksum, then the sheets will prove ideal for small project work, with groups of students taking one sheet, finding interesting and relevant information, and reporting back to the rest of the class. A specimen lesson plan along these lines is given on the next page.

### Presentation

This provides a simpler and more visual introduction to the civilisation. It contains some of the images and sources found in the other sections, and can be shown on the whiteboard or used at home to give an overview of the main topics covered.

### Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit [www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica) to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

## LESSON SCHEME: AKSUM IN AN HOUR

### Aim

To decide how advanced the Aksumite civilisation was.

### Starter: Impressions of the Kingdom of Aksum

Scroll quickly through the images in the presentation, and get feedback from students on their first impressions, especially on how advanced they consider the civilisation to have been. (10 minutes)

### Research

Divide the class into groups with one group per resource sheet. Each group has to look at the question at the top of the sheet, and decide on the answer by studying the sources. The group should note 5–10 relevant facts that it can feed back to the rest of the class as evidence of its answer. (20 minutes)

### Feedback

Each group feeds back its findings, opinion and evidence to the rest of the class, who could take notes. (15 minutes)

### Discussion

The central question of 'advanced' can be debated, i.e. which aspects reveal Aksum to have been a developed civilisation etc. (15 minutes)

### Homework

e.g. The ambassador for the kingdom of Aksum defends his country – pick and explain five details that show how advanced Aksum was at this time, or look at the presentation site, if not already done in class, or do further research into one of the topics to find more information.

## AKSUM c. AD 100–700: TEACHERS' NOTES

### Introduction

Aksum was the name of a city and a kingdom which is essentially modern-day northern Ethiopia (Tigray province) and Eritrea. Research shows that Aksum was a major naval and trading power from the 1st to the 7th centuries AD. As a civilisation it had a profound impact upon the people of Egypt, southern Arabia, Europe and Asia, all of whom were visitors to its shores, and in some cases were residents. The peak of Aksum's power came with the invasions into South Arabia in the 3rd, 4th and 6th centuries, and the invasion of Meroe around AD 320, which caused the final decline of the Kushite kingdom.

Despite its power and reputation – it was described by a Persian writer as one of the four greatest powers in the world at the time – very little is known about it. Aksum had written scripts, but no histories or descriptions have been found to make this African civilisation come alive.

### Why study Aksum?

Aksum provides a counterpoint to the Greek and Roman worlds, and is an interesting example of a sub-Saharan civilisation flourishing towards the end of the period of the great Mediterranean empires. It provides a link between the trading systems of the Mediterranean and the Asiatic world, and shows the extent of international commerce at that time.

It holds the fascination of being a 'lost' civilisation, yet one that was African, Christian, with its own script and coinage, and with an international reputation. It was arguably as advanced as the Western European societies of the time. It provides a different impression of Ethiopia from the modern media representations.

For schools following Key Stage 3 History in the English National Curriculum, this section could be a case study to show what Africa was like long before the Europeans arrived.

### Location

The kingdom of Aksum straddled two vastly different climatic and topographical regions. Its main port on the Red Sea, Adulis, was in an area of blisteringly high temperatures, little rainfall, and sparse, scrubby vegetation. Yet it was one of the few natural harbours along the coast, and strategically placed at the mouth of the Red Sea, a short distance from the Arabian peninsula. Just 60km inland the country rises to a 2,000-metre high plateau with plentiful rainfall – at the time of Aksum's power, due to chance, there were two rainy seasons instead of the usual one – resulting in rich soils, forests and agreeable temperatures. It was the skill of the Aksumites in making the most of these two parts of their kingdom, and joining them together into a single economic unit, which was the main cause of their success and power.

### Natural resources

Despite its recent tragic reputation, parts of Ethiopia are rich in natural resources, and Aksum was well placed to exploit them. Timber was needed to make charcoal for the production of iron tools and weapons, and this was abundant. Cereal crops grew easily in the well-watered, fertile soil – the growing season could be as long as nine months, and two crops a year could be grown on the terraces cut into the hillsides. There was good pasture for cattle. The population was therefore well fed. While one of the greatest worries of the rulers of Rome was how to feed their population, the kings of Aksum had no such problem. And if the rains failed, they had a secret weapon – teff.

Teff is a grain that grows nowhere else except Ethiopia. Not only is it a crop that is far more nutritious than other cereals, it needs very little water.

## History

Not much is known of the history of Aksum, other than what can be gleaned from the inscriptions left by various kings on their achievements. Ezana, c. 321–360, is probably the best known of the rulers, or at least the best at publicising himself, and he is credited with the introduction of Christianity, as well as waging campaigns to secure tribute and expand territory. It is known from inscriptions that at the time he came to the throne, Aksum ruled over much of modern Ethiopia, as well as the kingdom of Meroe to the north and most of South Arabia.

One of the first actions of Ezana was to seize back control over the Beja, one of the most powerful desert tribes which had proved a thorn in the flesh to Aksum and Meroe. He sent his brothers, who succeeded in their mission, and this resulted in the forced deportation of six tribes of Beja, from kings down to children, firstly to show submission to Ezana personally, and then to be resettled far away. Although little is known about the military set-up, it is clear that it was the strength of its army that made Aksum respected and powerful.

## Social life

Aksum was a hierarchical society with a king at the top, then nobles, and the general population below. This can be discerned by the buildings that have been found, and the wealth of the goods found in them. Although Aksum had writing, very little has been found out about society from inscriptions. It can be assumed that priests were important, and probably traders, too, because of the money they would have made. Most of the poor were probably craftsmen or farmers.

In some descriptions, the ruler is described as 'King of Kings' which might suggest that there were other, junior kings in outlying parts of the empire which the Aksumites gradually took over.

There is evidence of at least 10–12 small towns in the kingdom, which suggests it was an urban society, but for descriptions of these there is only archaeological evidence. Little or nothing is known about such things as the role of women and family life.

## The capital

Stuart Munro-Hay, an archaeologist who worked extensively at the site, described Aksum as covering about 75 hectares, with a population of around 20,000. There seems to have been a ceremonial approach from the east, lined with granite victory-thrones and statues of bronze and precious metals dedicated to the gods, leading to the religious centre with the royal cemetery lying to the north and east. The focus for this region seems to have been the temple/cathedral area, with another row of thrones. The main residential suburb with its huge palaces was situated to the west, and the whole was flanked with lesser cemeteries and more humble residential suburbs. It is probable that there was at least one open square, a marketplace perhaps, somewhere in the town centre.

## Religion

Aksum was a meeting point of religions, including Christianity, Judaism and, later, Islam. Before the arrival of Christianity, little is known about religion, apart from what can be guessed from the stelae or obelisks that can still be seen in the capital, and what might be temple complexes in the main towns.

## Stelae

The stelae, which are tall, flat-sided spires, some decorated as if to represent the storeys of a building, and often with a false door at the bottom, are commonplace in Aksum. They often cover tombs, but seem to have been made as much for prestige as for religious belief, since they vary in size, getting bigger with time. The most fascinating is the largest – 33 metres in height and weighing 700 tonnes – carved from a single block of stone which makes it one of the largest monolithic structures of the ancient world. It had to be brought from a quarry 4km away – no-one knows how, but elephants may have helped – and was gradually raised on a ramp so that it could stand upright in a pit. Engineers have calculated that the pit would have been too shallow to have held it, and it must have toppled and crashed to the ground the moment it became upright. It lies there still, as it did on the day it fell hundreds of years ago, a lasting monument to human folly.

## Christianity

Aksum embraced the Orthodox tradition of Christianity in the 4th century AD (c. 340–356) under the rule of King Ezana. The king had been converted by Frumentius, a former Syrian captive who was made Bishop of Aksum. On his return, Frumentius had promptly baptised King Ezana, who then declared Aksum a Christian state, followed by the king's active converting of the Aksumites. By the 6th century, King Kaleb was recognised as a Christian by the emperor Justin I of Byzantium (r. AD 518–527) when he sought Kaleb's support in avenging atrocities suffered by fellow Christians in South Arabia. This invasion saw the inclusion of the region into the Aksumite kingdom for the next seven decades.

## Judaism

Although Christianity had a profound effect upon Aksum, Judaism also had a substantial impact on the kingdom. A group of people from the region called the Beta Israel have been described as 'Black Jews'. Although their scriptures and prayers are in Ge'ez, rather than in Hebrew, they adhere to religious beliefs and practices set out in the Pentateuch (Torah), the religious texts of the Jewish religion. Although often regarded by scholars/academics as not technically 'Jewish' but instead a pre-Christian, Semitic people, their religion shares a common ancestry with modern Judaism. Between 1985 and 1991 almost the whole Beta Israel population of Ethiopia was moved to Israel.

## Solomon and Sheba

The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are important figures in Ethiopian heritage. Traditional accounts describe their meeting when Sheba, Queen of Aksum, went to Jerusalem, and their son Menelik I formed the Solomonic dynasty from which the rulers of Ethiopia (up to the 1970s) are said to be descended. It has also been claimed that Aksum is the home of the Biblical Ark of the Covenant, in which lies the 'Tablets of Law' upon which the Ten Commandments are inscribed. Menelik is believed to have taken it on a visit to Jerusalem to see his father. It is supposed to reside still in the Church of St Mary in Aksum, though no-one is allowed to set eyes on it. Replicas of the Ark, called Tabots, are housed in all of Ethiopia's churches, and are carried in procession on special days.

## Trade

Trade links between Aksum and South Arabia existed for some time before Aksum's contact with the Romans began. Aksum benefited from being part of a maritime trading system that linked the Roman Empire and India. The Roman demand for goods from southern India resulted in large numbers of ships sailing down the Red Sea from Roman Egypt to the Arabian Sea and across the Indian Ocean to India. The kingdom of Aksum was ideally located to take advantage of this new trading situation. Adulis, the commercial centre of Aksum, was the city's major trading port on the Red Sea. It was the place where goods from across the Kingdom arrived for export, and it was also where goods such as silks, spices, glass, brass and copper from Egypt, India and Arabia arrived. Among the many descriptions of Adulis is one by the famous Roman author Pliny, who mentions the fact that the exports also included slaves, hippopotamus hides and apes. Despite its excellent location on the Red Sea, Adulis was twelve days' journey from Aksum, over difficult and precipitous terrain, and this must have been a drawback for trade.

## Ivory

Whenever ancient authors talk about Adulis, Aksum or Ethiopia, they always give prominence to elephants and their ivory. Indeed, ivory may have been a factor in the decision to make Aksum the capital city. Such was the importance of the ivory that Aksum competed with its neighbours in Meroe (Kush) for ultimate control of the trade. This may have been one of the reasons for the later invasion around AD 320. This highly desired commodity was favoured by the Romans, who enjoyed luxury items, and in Egypt, Arabia, India and China.

According to the *Periplus* in the 1st century AD, elephants lived inland, like the rhinoceros, but sometimes they were hunted on the shore itself, near Adulis. In the reign of the Roman emperor Justinian (AD 527–565), a Greek-Byzantine ambassador called Nonnosus visited Aksum and saw a herd of 5,000 elephants. According to an account in the *Christian Topography*, written in the 6th century, the author Cosmas notes that there is a 'multitude of elephants with large tusks; from Ethiopia these tusks are sent by boat to India, Persia, the land of Himyarites, and Romania'. Aksum ruled over such regions by exacting tributes and duties from the communities which were otherwise self-regulated. These trade duties provided kings with the revenues to support military campaigns and other ventures.

In 1962, an archaeological dig by the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology found an elephant's tusks in the Aksumite ruins at Adulis, and in 1967 they discovered pieces of a terracotta figurine of an elephant in the walls of the castle at Dongour.

## Decline

There is no exact date for the decline of Aksum, nor any agreement over its cause as it seems to have been a relatively slow process. The fact that coinage ceased to be issued about AD 630, and that the capital was virtually abandoned around this date, gives a clue as to the end of its period of power. The emergence of Arab traders in the 7th century saw competition for the major markets in Alexandria, Byzantium and Europe. The Persian Empire was also expanding at this time, and beginning to dominate the Red Sea. There is no evidence of a military defeat, but it is likely that the rulers of Aksum simply decided to abandon their coastal interests and concentrate instead on the interior.

There are other explanations too. Like other civilisations, Aksum may have suffered from the very factors that made it great. The huge amount of timber needed to sustain its iron foundries would have led to deforestation, and the plentiful rainfall which had proved such a benefit to crop growing, now led to soil erosion and mudslides that threatened the capital and reduced the amount of fertile land.

There is also the possibility that, as with Rome, the great wealth of the ruling class, as shown by the size of their buildings and richness of goods, led to complacency and a weakening of central control.

Whatever the reasons, the Aksumite rulers moved their capital southwards, deeper into the more fertile interior and away from foreign influence, and, in the words of Edward Gibbon, 'slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.'

Today, Aksum is regarded as the holiest city in Ethiopia and is an important pilgrimage centre. It attracts thousands of pilgrims from within Africa and from around the world, who come to experience its Christian heritage.

Ethiopia, built on the foundations of Aksum, remains the only country in Africa to have remained independent of foreign control throughout its history, except for a short Italian occupation in 1936-41.

## Coinage

Coins have a unique significance in the history of Aksum. They are particularly important because they provide evidence of Aksum and its rulers. The inscriptions on the coins highlight the fact that Aksumites were a literate people with knowledge of both Ethiopic and Greek languages.

It is generally thought that the first Aksumite coins were intended for international trade. These coins, bearing the name of King Endybis (c. AD 270/290), were mainly struck in gold and silver and followed the weight standard which existed in the Roman Empire.

Initially, the symbols of the crescent and disc, which were common to the religions in South Arabia to which Aksum adhered, were used on early Aksumite coins. However, after the conversion of King Ezana around AD 340-356, a powerful statement was conveyed by the king's decision to replace the existing symbols with a cross which clearly denoted the importance that Christianity had in the kingdom. The coins also had a portrait of the ruler on the obverse and reverse of the coin along with teff, a local type of wheat. Inscriptions were another form of information included on the coins.

For the most part, gold coins were inscribed in Greek and often intended for exports, while silver and copper coins were in Ge'ez. From the 4th century AD, an increasing number of copper coins were issued which had evidently Christian inscriptions such as 'Joy and Peace to the People' and 'He conquers through Christ'. With the replacement of gold coins with copper ones, the craftsmen of Aksum started using specialised techniques of gilding, which was unique to the kingdom and involved gold leaf being added to crowns and other symbols to enhance the appearance, and most probably the value, of coins.

## REFERENCES

Collins, R & Burns, J, 2007, *A History of Sub-Saharan Africa* (Cambridge University Press)

Kaplan, S, 1982, 'Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered', *Journal of Religion in Africa* Vol. 13, Number 2, 101–109

Munro-Hay, S, 1991, *Aksum: an African civilisation of late antiquity* (Edinburgh University Press)

Munro-Hay, S, 1999, *Catalogue of the Aksumite Coins in the British Museum* (British Museum Press)

Phillipson, D, 1998, *Ancient Ethiopia* (British Museum Press)

Reader, J, 1997, *Africa: a biography of the continent* (Penguin)

## Your feedback

---

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit [www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica) to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

## Find out more

---

The British Museum's collection spans over two million years of human history and culture, all under one roof and includes world-famous objects such as the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures, and Egyptian mummies.

The Museum's collection of over 200,000 African objects includes material from ancient to contemporary cultures. Highlights on display throughout the Museum include a magnificent brass head of a Yoruba ruler from Ife in Nigeria, vibrant textiles from across the continent, and the Throne of Weapons – a sculpture made out of guns.

## For students

---

Students can experience and engage with the collection in many ways, from taking part in activity sessions at the Museum to using free online resources or playing interactive games in the classroom and at home.

## For teachers

---

Search the Museum's collection online at [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org) for information about objects, including pictures to download or print.

## Schools and teachers newsletter

---

Sign up to the schools and teachers newsletter to receive regular updates on free special exhibitions previews, teacher events and new free resources at [www.britishmuseum.org/schools](http://www.britishmuseum.org/schools)

## Ancient Civilizations websites

---

These award-winning British Museum websites have been specially designed for students in Years 5 and 6. Each site is supported by information and guidance for teachers. [www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk](http://www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk)

## The CarAf Centre

---

These resources have been produced by the British Museum in collaboration with The CarAf Centre, a community educational support centre and registered charity based in the London Borough of Camden. For more information, visit [www.thecarafcentre.org.uk](http://www.thecarafcentre.org.uk)

**THE  
BRITISH  
MUSEUM**

Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG  
📍 Holborn, Russell Square, Tottenham Court Road  
Telephone +44 (0)20 7323 8000  
[information@britishmuseum.org](mailto:information@britishmuseum.org)  
[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)