



The Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia (2nd century BCE- 10th century CE)

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The three parts of this essay examine the rise and fall of power and wealth in Ethiopia before, during, and after the era of the Axum Kingdom (2nd century BCE-10th century CE). A time line, an annotated bibliography, and a description of sites visited in Ethiopia are appended at the end of the essay.

The first section of the essay focuses on ancient Ethiopia before the Axum Kingdom rose to power. About 5,000 years ago, the indigenous Cushitic-speaking peoples independently discovered agriculture. They domesticated a wide range of endemic plants and formed city-states. More than two millennia later, highland Ethiopia was invaded by Sabaean peoples from southwestern Arabia – likely descendants of the legendary Queen of Sheba. The Sabaean introduced advanced irrigation techniques and iron metallurgy to Ethiopia and superimposed themselves as a ruling class. About 700 BCE, they established the region's first wealthy kingdom, Daamat, in the northern highlands and that state prospered for four centuries.

Axum came next. It began as a tiny city-state, eliminated rivals, and consolidated power to emerge as the successor to Daamat. Then

Axum went on to become the dominant state in northeastern Africa and a leading power in its contemporary world. The second part of the essay tells how that happened. The city of Axum was located in a mountainous region that provided natural defense. Axum had a self-sufficient agricultural base, but little left over for export. It had to trade to grow. The Axumites began by dominating regional trade – procuring locally available elephant ivory, moving east to buy Danakil salt, and venturing south to buy Blue Nile gold. The expanding kingdom then promoted trade routes that linked the rich upper Nile Valley (Nubia and southern Egypt) with Adulis, Axum’s port on the Red Sea. The Axumite royalty constructed a fleet of ships to ply the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and by the 3rd century CE their merchant marine regularly visited India and Ceylon.

The Axumite kingdom began to convert to Orthodox Christianity in the 4th century. Two centuries later, Axum invaded southwestern Arabia to protect Yemeni Christians and to control both shores of the southern Red Sea. The Sabaeans in Yemen eventually called in the powerful Sasanian Persians to evict the Axumite intruders. Axum had

overextended its reach and fell easily. Persia took over Yemen and assumed control of the Red Sea trade. Axum lost its trading lifeline and began a long period of decline. The Semitic-speaking kingdom of Axum moved south, became almost wholly agricultural, and finally was conquered by Cushitic-speaking foes in the 10th century.

The aftermath of the Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia is a millennium of repeat performances on a less grand stage. The Zagwe Dynasty, led by Agau Cushites, came first, in the 11th and 12th centuries. It built a pilgrimage site of eleven spectacular stone churches in Lalibela to gain political and religious legitimacy. The Solomonic Dynasty, led by Semitic-speaking Amharas, occupied center stage for the next 700 years. That group, too, lacked legitimacy since their kings could not claim a link to the Axum line. The Solomonids thereupon invented two myths – that their rulers were direct descendants of King Solomon and Queen Makeda (the Queen of Sheba, whom they claimed was Ethiopian), and that Axum was the home of the Lost Ark of the Covenant (the legendary vessel that is believed to hold the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were originally written). Those legends then

underpinned the aristocratic link between the Solomonic Dynasty and the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church.

Power during the seven centuries of Solomonid rule ebbed and flowed. The dynasty had a good run in the 13th through 15th centuries. They situated the center of the kingdom in agriculturally rich Shewa in the central highlands and taxed agriculture heavily. Foreign trade, based on the export of slaves, ivory, and gold, provided a secondary source of wealth. Christian Ethiopia was nearly conquered by a regionally-inspired Islamic jihad in the 16th century. The expanding Ottoman Empire supplied the African Muslims with firearms and artillery, until then unknown in Ethiopian warfare. But Portugal, at the peak of its Indian Ocean glory, offered equivalent advanced weaponry and troops to the Christian Ethiopian rulers and helped them defeat their Muslim foes.

The Solomonids retreated to northwestern Ethiopia in the 17th and 18th centuries and established a much smaller kingdom based in Gondar. That kingdom disintegrated in the mid-18th century, and for the next 100 years most of Ethiopia was ruled by local warlords (princes). The Solomonids pulled things back together in the mid-19th century.

Emperor Menelik II defeated Italy in the Battle of Adwa in 1896 and preserved Ethiopia's independence from European colonialism.

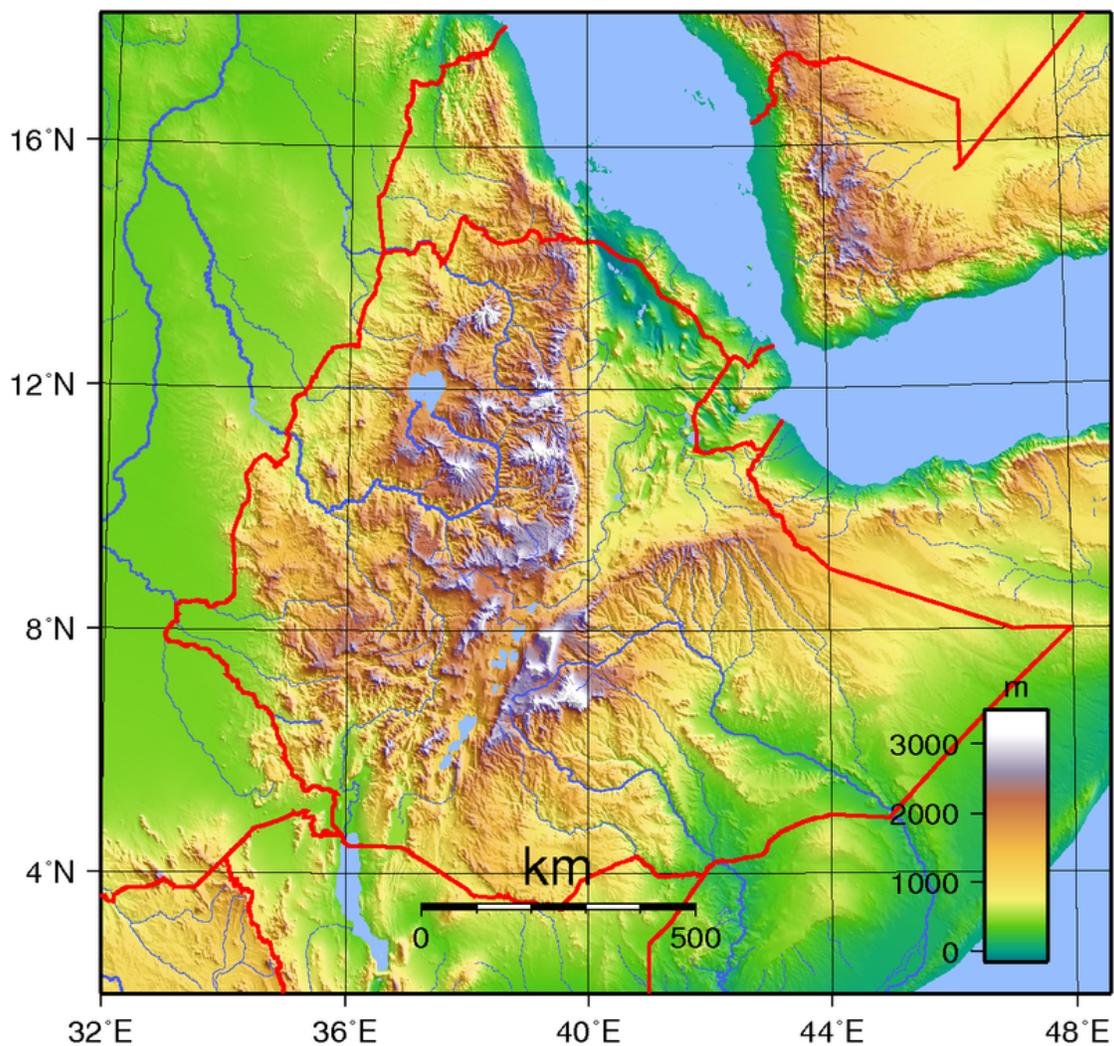
Emperor Haile Selassie I, the last Solomonic dynast, dominated Ethiopia in the 20th century until he was overthrown in 1974.

Ethiopia, once rich and powerful, is now one of the world's poorest countries. Revolutionary governments have had mixed success running the poverty-stricken country in the past four decades. The Derg (ruled 1974-1991) was an unmitigated disaster, but the leaders since 1991 have overseen rapid economic progress.

Ethiopia before the Axum Kingdom (3rd millennium BCE-2nd century BCE)

The Geography of Ethiopia. Ethiopia is unique. Its geography, people, and history are unlike those of any other country in Africa or elsewhere. With only brief exceptions, Ethiopia has escaped being ruled by foreign powers. Located in the northeastern corner of Africa, in the region often called the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is just far enough to the east of the Nile Valley to have avoided domination by dynastic Egypt and sufficiently south on the western edge of the Red Sea to have been

out of the expanding reach of Persia, the Arab Caliphates, and the Ottoman Empire. Ethiopia also managed to stay free of European colonialism, except during 1936-1941 when it was occupied by Mussolini's Italy. The country's location and physical geography have underpinned its long-standing political independence.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
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Ethiopia's Physical Geography

Ethiopia is a land of wide geographical diversity. Its heartland is a mass of high mountains and plateaus that are home to most of its 115 million people. This rugged interior once provided an important degree of natural protection from potential foreign invaders.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Priest_of_rock-Hewn_Churches_of_Lalibela,_a_high_place_of_Ethiopian_Christianity,_still_today_a_place_of_pilmigrage_and_devotion..jpg>

Semitic-Speaking Amharas Are the Dominant Ethnic Group among Ethiopia's 115 Million People – Amhara Priests, Lalibela

Africa's Great Rift Valley runs through its central region, contains a chain of lakes, and bisects the country from south to north. Most of

the eastern third of Ethiopia is sparsely settled arid or desert land. The western portion of the country also is arid although it contains watered grasslands and rainforest areas in the southwest that are quite densely populated. The fertile mountainous highlands receive heavy rainfall, concentrated in the summer season although some areas have short rains in the winter as well. That region is home to villages that house about 90 percent of Ethiopia's people, who practice rainfed agriculture. The country's principal rivers – the Blue Nile, Sobat, and Takeze Rivers – drain westward into the Nile River system and typically provide about five-sixths of the Nile River's water flowing northward through the Sudan and Egypt.

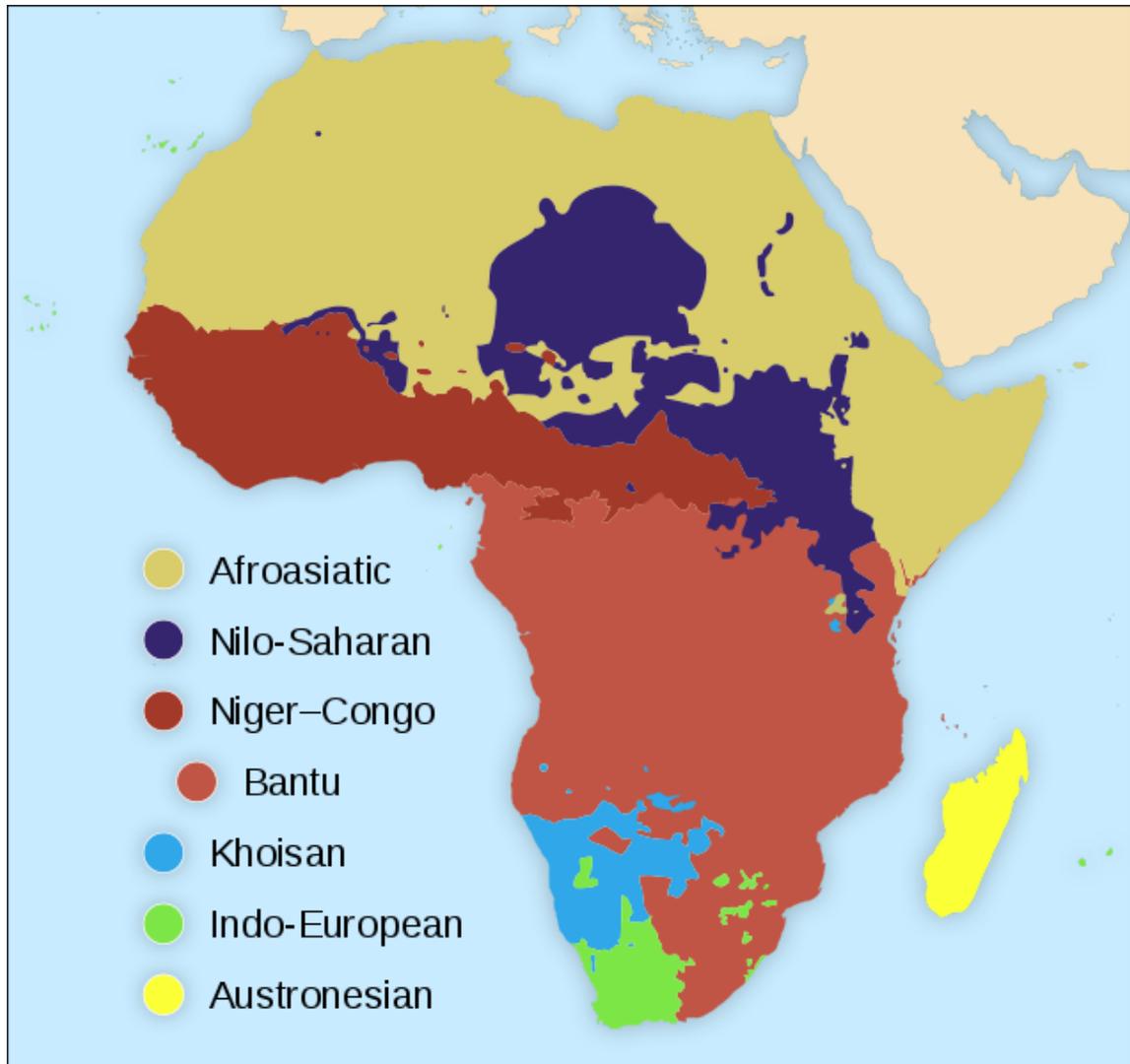
Ethiopia's unusual geography gained brief international prominence in the 19th century when Great Britain worried, impracticably it turned out, that Ethiopian leaders might dam the Blue Nile near its origin at Lake Tana, divert the main flow away from the Nile system, and ruin Egypt's profitable agricultural system. With the independence of Eritrea in 1993, Ethiopia again became land-locked, as it had been during much of its turbulent history.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blue_Nile_Falls_Ethiopia.jpg>

*Tis Isat (Blue Nile) Falls near Lake Tana –
Source of the Blue Nile River*

The Peoples of Ethiopia. The ancient Greeks were fascinated by the diversity of peoples who lived in mysterious Africa. Their geographers and writers held special admiration for those inhabiting the northeast corner – the Horn of Africa – which they called Ethiopia, “the Land of Burnt Faces.” In the Iliad, Homer refers admiringly to the “blameless Ethiopians.” Contemporary historians and linguists typically group the early peoples of Africa, those inhabiting the continent about 3,000 years ago, into five categories.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_African_language_families.svg

Peoples of Africa Today – Afroasian, Nilo-Saharan, Black African (Niger-Congo), Khoisan, Indo-European, and Austronesian

The Afroasian peoples lived in northeastern Africa, including Ethiopia, and in the remainder of Africa north of the Sahara Desert. That group, formerly called Caucasoid, included the Egyptians, the

Berbers (called Libyans by the Greeks), and the Cushites who resided in Ethiopia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Beauty_of_Oromia.jpg>

*Cushitic-speaking Oromo Women and Girls –
Oromos Constitute One-third of Ethiopia's Population*

The Nilo-Saharanans lived originally in the upper Nile River Valley (in contemporary Sudan) and then spread westward across the Sudanic region south of the Sahara Desert to occupy the savanna grasslands as far west as contemporary Mali in West Africa. The Black Africans inhabited only West Africa, prior to the Bantu expansion across the

central and southern parts of the continent that began about two millennia ago. The Pygmies were confined to the rainforest of central Africa. The group that occupied the most territory of Africa at that time was the Khoisan – including the San, once termed Bushmen, and the Khoikhoi, formerly called Hottentots – who populated the grasslands of central, eastern, and southern Africa.

The early people living in Ethiopia spoke Cushitic languages, a sub-family of the Afroasian language family. Contemporary speakers of Cushitic languages living in Ethiopia are the Oromo (the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia today), Somali, and Afar peoples. In the middle of the first millennium BCE (or perhaps earlier), Ethiopia absorbed a major migration of peoples from southern Arabia (contemporary Yemen). Those Sabaean migrants spoke a Semitic language. They first entered Ethiopia to trade and later settled to farm, bringing advanced agricultural techniques and iron metallurgy. The Sabaean peoples and their descendants had an enormous impact on Ethiopia. The main contemporary Semitic languages in Ethiopia are Amhara (the principal language in contemporary usage), Tigray, and Tigrinya. Although

speakers of Semitic languages populate most of the center and north and speakers of Cushitic tongues dominate the east and south, there are pockets of both language families sprinkled throughout the country. The Semitic language, Harari, is spoken only within the walled city of Harar in southeastern Ethiopia, whereas the Cushitic Agau people live in the north and the Cushitic Afars inhabit the arid northeast.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons, available at*
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_woman_from_Tigray,_Ethiopia.jpg>

Semitic-speaking Tigrayan Woman – Northern Ethiopia

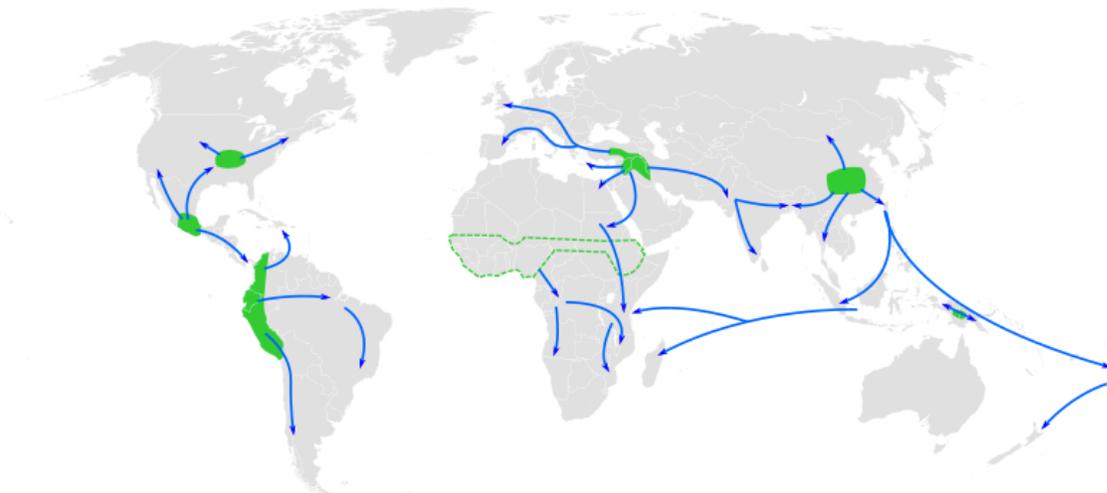
The Rise of Agriculture in Ethiopia. Agriculture was first practiced in the ninth millennium BCE in the Fertile Crescent, a region in southwestern Asia stretching from contemporary Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria through southeastern Turkey to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley in modern Iraq. Several of the key crops – wheat, barley, chickpeas, lentils, and flax – and animals – cattle, sheep, and goats – in the Fertile Crescent package of initial domesticates were later disseminated widely throughout Asia, Europe, and Northeast Africa, including Ethiopia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fertile_crescent_Neolithic_B_circa_7500_BC.jpg>

The Fertile Crescent, c. 7500 BCE

Experts cannot agree on whether Ethiopia independently discovered agriculture or whether people there only began to domesticate plants and animals after that practice was introduced from the Fertile Crescent via southern Arabia. In light of the large number and variety of crops first domesticated in Ethiopia, the prevalent opinion is that Ethiopia is very likely one of the eight or nine places in the world where agriculture was begun independently.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Centres_of_origin_and_spread_of_agriculture.svg

Origins and Spread of Agriculture

Specialists debate the timing of the rise of agriculture in Ethiopia, but most agree that Cushitic Ethiopians were practicing agriculture by the third millennium BCE (5000 years ago).



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Teff_Harvest,_Northern_Ethiopia_\(3131617016\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Teff_Harvest,_Northern_Ethiopia_(3131617016).jpg)>

Traditional Harvesting of Teff – Ethiopia’s Main Cereal

Several plants were native to Ethiopia and were first domesticated there – teff (*Eragrostis teff*, a small-grained cereal that is still a food staple in the contemporary Ethiopian diet), finger millet (*Eleusine corocana*, a drought-resistant cereal that later spread throughout Africa), ensete (*Ensete ventricosu*, a fruit known also as the false banana), nug (*Guizoatia abyssinica*, an oilseed), coffee (*Coffea arabica*, today’s globally popular stimulant that was indigenous to Kaffa in southwestern

Ethiopia), and chat (*Catha edulis*, a mild narcotic still popular in the horn of Africa and in southern Arabia).



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ensete_ventricosum_1.jpg

Ensete, the False Banana – Endemic to Ethiopia

The productivity of agriculture in Ethiopia was improved significantly in the first millennium BCE when the Sabaeans (the migrants from southern Arabia) introduced terracing, irrigation, water storage, use of the iron plow, and humped (*zebu*) cattle into Ethiopia.

Ethiopian farmers today continue to grow the traditional set of indigenous domesticates and crops imported from the Fertile Crescent. But most other Africans living south of the Sahara Desert subsist on crops that were brought in later from Asia – bananas (*Musa*), yams (*Dioscorea*), and taro (*Colocasia*) – or from the Americas – maize (*Zea mays*) and cassava (*Manihot esculenta*).

Ancient Civilizations in Ethiopia (pre-3rd century BCE).

Inscriptions from Ancient Egypt provide evidence of a mysterious land called Punt, probably a coastal kingdom in contemporary Eritrea or Somalia. The earliest records of Egyptian trade links with Punt date from about 3000 BCE. But the most famous trade connection occurred 1,500 years later when Queen Hatshepsut, Egypt's only female pharaoh, sent a successful trade convoy to Punt.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Men_from_Punt_Carrying_Gifts,_Tomb_of_Rekhmire_MET_30.4.152_EGDP013029.jpg>

*Men from Punt (Northeast Africa), Carrying Exotic Trade Goods –
Tomb of Rekhmire, Dynastic Egypt, 15th c. BCE*

Hatshepsut's powerful successor, Thutmose III, sent another large trading expedition to Punt. Detailed Egyptian records indicate that the people of Punt exported to Egypt incense (frankincense and myrrh, produced from the resins of small trees that grew wild in southern Ethiopia and Somalia), ivory (from the extensive herds of elephants then existing in the region), gold and silver (probably mined in the mountains

near Punt), and male and female slaves. After the 15th century BCE, there is no historical evidence of regular trading contact between Punt and the New Kingdom of Egypt.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_NK_edit.svg>

New Kingdom Egypt Conquered Nubia (Gold Mining) and Subjugated the Levant (Trade) – Trade With Punt Was Minor

In the first millennium BCE, the pre-Axumite kingdom of Daamat – spelled DMT in the local Semitic language which omitted vowels – held power in northern Ethiopia for four centuries. The political structure, language, and architecture in Daamat followed the model of kingdoms then ruling in southern Arabia (now Yemen). Daamat was a Sabaean kingdom, created and ruled by recent Semitic-speaking migrants from southern Arabia. Like their contemporaries in Yemen, those Sabaean people worshipped gods represented by the disk of the sun and the crescent of the moon. They built an elegant capital at Yeha (near the later city of Axum), featuring impressive stone temples and palaces, and dominated the highlands of the western Tigray region.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ET_Tigray_asv2018-01_img32_Yeha.jpg>

*Ruins of the Ancient Sabaean Temple, Yeha, Daamat –
c. 7th century BCE*

The economic bases of the kingdom were irrigated agriculture – producing cereals with techniques imported from southern Arabia, metallurgy – making iron and bronze weapons and tools, and, especially, foreign trade. The people of Daamat had an extensive trade network, linked closely to their Sabaean homeland of southern Arabia. The kingdom exported elephant ivory, gold, silver, slaves, tortoise shell, and

rhinoceros horn, and it imported cloth, metals, tools, and jewelry brought to the Red Sea ports from Arabia, Persia, and India. Daamat fell about 300 BCE, after smaller, rival kingdoms emerged in the Eritrean plateau nearer the coast of the Red Sea and caused Daamat to lose control of the Red Sea trade routes.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%27mt_kingdom.jpg >

*Daamat Kingdom, On the Border of Today's Ethiopia and Eritrea –
1st millennium BCE*

The Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia (2nd century BCE-10th century CE)

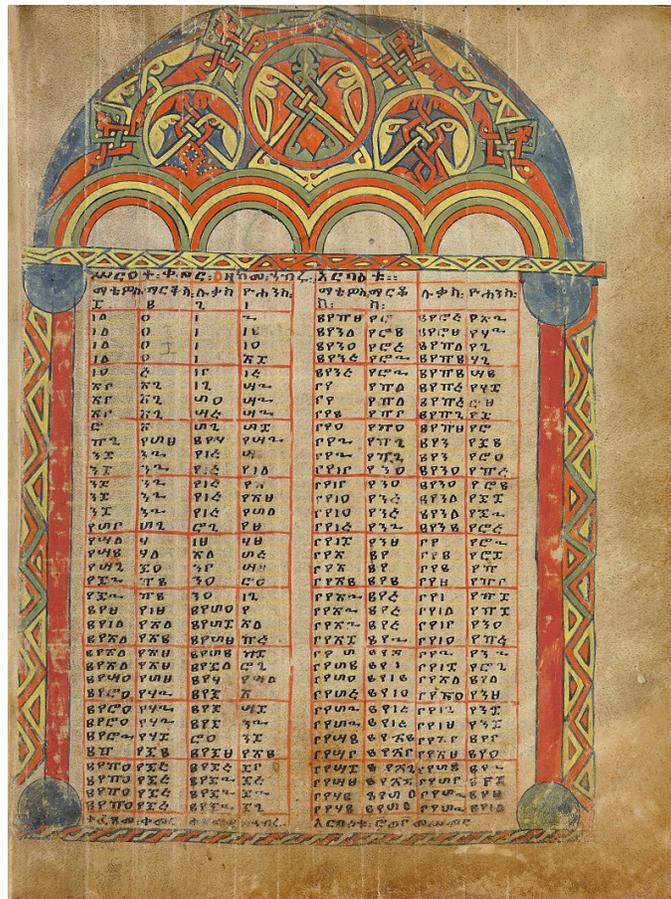
Locational Advantages of Axum. Axum arose in the 2nd century BCE as a small city-state in the northern Ethiopian highlands. Axum won out in a competition among other city-states in the region to become the successor to the kingdom of Damaat, which had disappeared more than a century earlier.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aksum_Kingdom.jpg >

The Axum Kingdom (2nd century BCE-10th century CE) – Territorial Extent c. 150 BCE

Axum's leadership and many of its people were Semitic-speaking descendants of migrants from southwestern Arabia. In Axum, they developed a new Semitic language, Geez (known also as Ethiopic), that survives today only in the recitation of rituals in the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
 <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Canon_Table_Page_-_Google_Art_Project_\(6866843\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Canon_Table_Page_-_Google_Art_Project_(6866843).jpg)>

*Parchment Manuscript in the Geez Language, c. 1505 –
 Gospels, Canon Table Page, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles*

The success of Axum had much to do with the city's location. The site was remote and difficult to access from the Red Sea because of mountainous terrain. Unlike other wealthy kingdoms of that era, Axum never was invaded by the Eurasian super-powers – Rome/Byzantium and Parthian/Sasanid Persia. Mountains surrounded the city of Axum and created a natural fortress that reduced the need for man-made fortifications to protect against invasions from regional competitors. Axum city also was sited in the middle of a fertile and well-watered agricultural area that provided enough food and supplies for the aspiring kingdom to become self-sufficient in agricultural commodities, but did not offer a regular exportable surplus.

Axum soon became the region's principal market center for elephant ivory, because the new city was located in the midst of huge concentrations of elephant herds. Ivory was so valuable that the kings regulated the right to hunt elephants, often to the chagrin of local farmers when marauding elephants damaged crops.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elephant_ivory_tusks_11_\(27640950281\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elephant_ivory_tusks_11_(27640950281).jpg)>

*African Elephant Ivory –
Principal Export in Axumite Era*

The new kingdom was centered at the crossroads of major trade routes, exchanging especially the salt from the Danakil depression to the east with the gold from the Blue Nile basin to the south. Axum thus combined ample natural resources (ivory, salt, and gold) with a fertile agricultural base to create significant wealth.

The expanding kingdom of Axum became the dominant power in northeast Africa for eight centuries until its decline in the 7th century CE and final demise in the 10th century. The maximum population of Axum city and its environs probably was never greater than 100,000, while that

of the Axumite Kingdom (excluding intermittent holdings in southern Arabia and Nubia) was unlikely to have exceeded 500,000.

Sources of Wealth in Axum – Agriculture. Pre-industrial societies gained their wealth from three sources – agriculture along with mining and craft-making, foreign trade, and foreign conquest. In Axum, the principal sources of wealth were agricultural surpluses and the gains from international trade. Only limited mining was done within the boundaries of the Axumite kingdom, and artisans produced crafts mostly for local consumption.

Agriculture was highly productive because rainfall was abundant, soils were fertile, and farmers could harvest two crops per year, especially if they used tools and techniques developed earlier by the Sabaeans in southern Arabia – iron plows, sickles, saws, axes, terracing, and irrigation (using dams, wells, reservoirs, and canals). Agricultural production in Axum was based on small farms operated by tenants or freeholders, not on plantations using slave labor. The crown owned the land and provided usage rights to nobles and small-scale farmers. The

king kept huge herds of cattle to provide mobile feed for nobles and troops in warfare.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zebu_in_Ethiopia_02.jpg>

Zebu Cattle in Highland Ethiopia

The high productivity of agriculture allowed the nascent kingdom to feed people who provided urban amenities (the civil servants, standing army, artisans, and construction workers). A productive agriculture also formed the basis of Axum's success as a trading center

since it meant that the city had ample food supplies for transient merchants and caravan workers. Grain had such importance that twin ears of wheat and barley were represented on Axum's official insignia.

Archaeological evidence gives insights into the diet of the Axumites. The staples foods were *injera* made from fermented teff (the small grain endemic to Ethiopia), wheat and barley cakes and bread, and porridges and gruels made from finger millet.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alicha_1.jpg>

*Injera, Ethiopian Flatbread Made from Teff Cereal –
With Several Kinds of Wat (Stewed Vegetables Or Meat)*

Dairy products were available through processing the milk of local cattle (*zebu*), sheep, and goats. Vegetable oils came from linseed and nug (the endemic oilseed). A wide variety of local fruits and vegetables, including ensete (the false banana), gave variety and nutrition to the otherwise dull diet. Two lightly alcoholic beverages were brewed – beer (*sewa*) and honey wine (*tej*).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tej_\(Ethiopian_honey_wine\)_27241999346.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tej_(Ethiopian_honey_wine)_27241999346.jpg)>

Tej, Ethiopian Honey Wine – Popular Drink for Two Millennia

Rich Axumites drank imported wine from Italy, consumed imported olive oil, and ate local beef and mutton. The poor people, who were mostly involuntary vegetarians, could afford those luxuries only on religious feast days. The Axumite people thus had a reasonably balanced diet, drawn mostly from local produce. In distinction to most other strong pre-industrial empires and kingdoms, however, trade – not agriculture – was the primary source of wealth in Axum.

Sources of Wealth in Axum – Foreign Trade. Axum's wealth from trade was not derived from local agricultural or artisanal exports. Instead, the kingdom created a network of profitable trade routes, centered on the city of Axum, and by the end of the 3rd century CE Axum controlled trade on the Red Sea. The Axumites' principal trade route linked the upper Nile River valley – providing access to Nubia and upper Egypt – with the Red Sea – giving access to southern Arabia, Persia, and western India. Following land and river routes, the Axumite traders could journey from Axum city to the Cataracts (Aswan in southern Egypt) and back in 30 days.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
 <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MapHymiariteKingdom.jpg>>

Trade Routes of the Kingdom of Axum – 2nd-7th centuries CE

Adulis, on the Red Sea, was the main port of Axum, where the kingdom operated a large merchant fleet. Adulis had been founded in the 3rd century BCE by Ptolemy III Euergetes, a Hellenistic pharaoh of Ptolemaic Egypt, to improve Ptolemaic access to Chinese silks and Indian spices. In light of the difficult terrain and lack of roads, the journey from Axum city to the port of Adulis took eight days. Despite

the long distances and high costs of transportation, the remotely-located capital city developed into a wealth-generating trading entrepôt.

Successful Axumite merchants built ships on the Red Sea coast at Adulis, and their ships sailed as far as western India and Ceylon in a regular trading pattern. In the process, Ethiopian Axum was linked commercially with traders professing most of the world's leading religions – Hellenism, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and, from the 7th century, Islam.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
 < https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indo-Roman_trade.jpg >

Africa-Asia Trade Routes in Axumite Era – 2nd-7th centuries CE

Lacking local exports other than elephant ivory, the Axumite leaders developed secondary trade routes to bring export products to the city. They sent caravans to the Danakil depression (only 100 miles distant) to buy locally-produced salt and then traded that salt to the Agau people in the Blue Nile basin for gold produced there. Using some of the gold, they went to the Somali coast to obtain valuable incense – frankincense and myrrh.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boswellia_sacra.jpg>

*Flowers and Branches of the Frankincense (Boswellia sacra) Tree –
Southern Ethiopia*

Axum also obtained slaves from raids and wars with surrounding states. Some slaves were kept as domestic servants for the nobility, but

most were exported. With their exports of local elephant ivory and their re-exports of imported gold, incense, slaves, and hides, the Axumites imported cloth, metals, tools, jewelry, and glassware from Egypt, the Mediterranean, Persia, and India. The key to wealth and power in Axum thus was to maintain control of the Nile Valley-Red Sea trade route and of the subsidiary routes that supplied the products that Axum exported through Adulis.

State and Society in Axum. The Axumites created a centralized system of government that transferred wealth to the state to fund urban monuments and extravagant aristocratic lifestyles. Little is known about the details of the Axumite governmental system. At the top was a strong king who governed autocratically. Regal succession was through the male line from father to son. The Axumite king was not an absolute monarch, however, because he had to exercise careful authority over independent-minded tribal organizations. He was supported by a large standing army and an entourage of civil servants. On occasion, the army convened as a national assembly to advise the king.

The centralized, autocratic system was expensive to operate. To run it, the king of Axum earned revenue in three main ways. He participated directly in agriculture and trade and seems to have operated the large Axumite merchant fleet out of Adulis. Within the kingdom of Axum, he taxed traders and farmers, probably heavily, although the rates of taxation are not known. In the outlying areas later conquered by Axum, the king received regular tribute payments, made by local rulers who were allowed to stay in power if they paid the required tribute.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Axumite_Palace_\(2827701317\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Axumite_Palace_(2827701317).jpg)>

*Multi-storied Axum Palace –
Model of the Ta'akha Maryam Palace, Axum*

Much of the wealth produced in Axum was taxed away by the royal government and transferred to the capital city. There it was used to create impressive and expensive stone monuments and buildings – temples (later churches, from the 4th century), obelisks (stelae), palaces (for the royalty), and mansions (for the nobility). A typical royal palace could have five stories, and a noble mansion often had ten rooms in two stories. Those stone structures, many still standing today, are testimony to the artistic creativity and engineering skill of the Axumites.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stelenpark_in_Axum_2010.JPG >

*Obelisks (Stellae) in Axum City –
Constructed in the Axumite Era with Trading Profits*

The kingdom of Axum must have been very well administered to organize and pay for the extensive urban amenities required to build and maintain those massive monuments. From stone inscriptions that have been translated from Geez, it is known that the Axumite kings exercised tight state control to keep their system operating. They regularly quashed rebellions within the kingdom or in tribute-paying areas, closely policed the collection of taxes, and promoted trade and the use of their own merchant fleet.

The Axum government was the only ancient state in Africa (outside of the Roman Empire) to strike its own coins. Axumite coins first appeared in the late 3rd century CE and were made of gold, silver, and bronze. Some of the coins had a remarkable inlay of gold on silver or bronze backgrounds. The coins were minted according to Roman standards, reflecting the importance of the Roman and Byzantine Empires in Axum's foreign trade. The writing on the coins was in Greek, the main trading language of the Mediterranean and Red Seas, so that they could be used easily in commerce throughout the region. Geez

(Ethiopic) increasingly became the trade language within Ethiopia, beginning in the 3rd century. But only near the end of Axum's power did the rulers choose to strike their coins in both Greek and Geez. The coins contain the names of successive rulers of Axum for 300 years, starting in 270 CE.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KingEndubisEthiopia227-235CE.jpg>>

*Coins Minted by Axumite King Endubis, 227-235 CE –
British Museum*

The issuance of coins ceased in the early 7th century when the kingdom of Axum went into sharp decline. Throughout the Axumite period, much of the local trade continued to be carried out with the

barter system or through the use of commodity currencies like salt or iron.

Culture and Religion in Axum. Two foreign cultural influences predominated in the kingdom of Axum. One was south Arabian, reflecting the Semitic origins of the rulers and much of the population of the early Ethiopian state. As Axum later expanded and became wealthier, those cultural influences began to reverse and go in the opposite direction – eastward from Axum into south Arabia.

The other foreign influence was Greek via Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Egypt, especially the Greek-speaking city of Alexandria. The Greek language and Greek merchants dominated trade in the Red Sea region for a millennium – from the time of Alexander the Great (320s BCE) to the rise of Islam (630s CE). The royalty and merchants in Axum typically spoke Greek as well as Geez, and official government documents were issued in both languages.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Detail,_Ethiopian_Crown_\(2130218640\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Detail,_Ethiopian_Crown_(2130218640).jpg)>

Axumite Royal Crown – National Museum, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The Greek influence carried over into the Axumite religion. For several centuries, the pantheistic religion of Axum centered on a trinity of gods – Astar (heaven), Beher (earth), and Mahrem (sea). The first god represented the supremacy of after-life, the second the centrality of agriculture, and the third the importance of sea-based trade in the Axumite culture. The Greek analogues were Zeus, Ares, and Poseidon. The Axumite traditional religion required animal (cattle, goat, or sheep) sacrifices on pre-ordained occasions.

King Ezana converted to Christianity in the 4th century CE (probably in the 330s), and the Axumite people gradually followed in his footsteps during the next two centuries. The conversion of most Axumites was influenced by the missionary work of Syrian and other monks (sometimes referred to as the “Nine Syrian Saints”). They arrived in the late 5th century and are credited with building churches, standardizing ritual, developing doctrine, and writing religious literature. The Orthodox Christian Bible and liturgy were translated from Greek and Syriac into Geez, and a number of monastic communities were established in Axum. Ethiopia was on its way to becoming a staunch and consistent defender of Orthodox Christianity in northeastern Africa. Axumite Christians were governed by a foreign bishop sent by the see of St. Mark in Alexandria, who was held in high regard but kept aloof from local politics. The link between Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia and Egypt endured until the mid-20th century.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ET_Axum_asv2018-01_img33_StMary_of_Zion_Church.jpg>

*Church of Saint Mary of Zion, Axum –
Constructed in the 5th century and Rebuilt in the 17th century*

The most spectacular cultural manifestations in Axum, the obelisks (stelae), were funerary monuments for the graves of Axumite kings. The stelae were made of single blocks of granite. They were intricately carved, and most were about the height of a human. The largest existing obelisk, 33 meters (108 feet) high and 3 meters (10 feet) at the base, is one of the most massive blocks of stone ever fashioned by mankind. It was built to represent a twelve-story palace, but it fell over (probably

during its original erection) and now exists on site in the stelae park of Axum city in numerous shattered pieces. The largest obelisk continuously standing in Axum is 24 meters (79 feet) high.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Obelisk_of_Aksum_Remains4.jpg>

*Fallen Stela Number 1 at Axum –
One of the World's Largest Stone Monuments*

In 2005, Italy paid for the return to Ethiopia of the Axumite obelisk that Mussolini had taken to Rome in 1937 to commemorate the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. That obelisk, also 24 meters (79 feet) high, weighs 160 tons and was constructed during the reign of King

Ezana in the 4th century. The obelisks were built before the conversion of the Axumites to Christianity (in the 4th century), and their construction ceased thereafter.



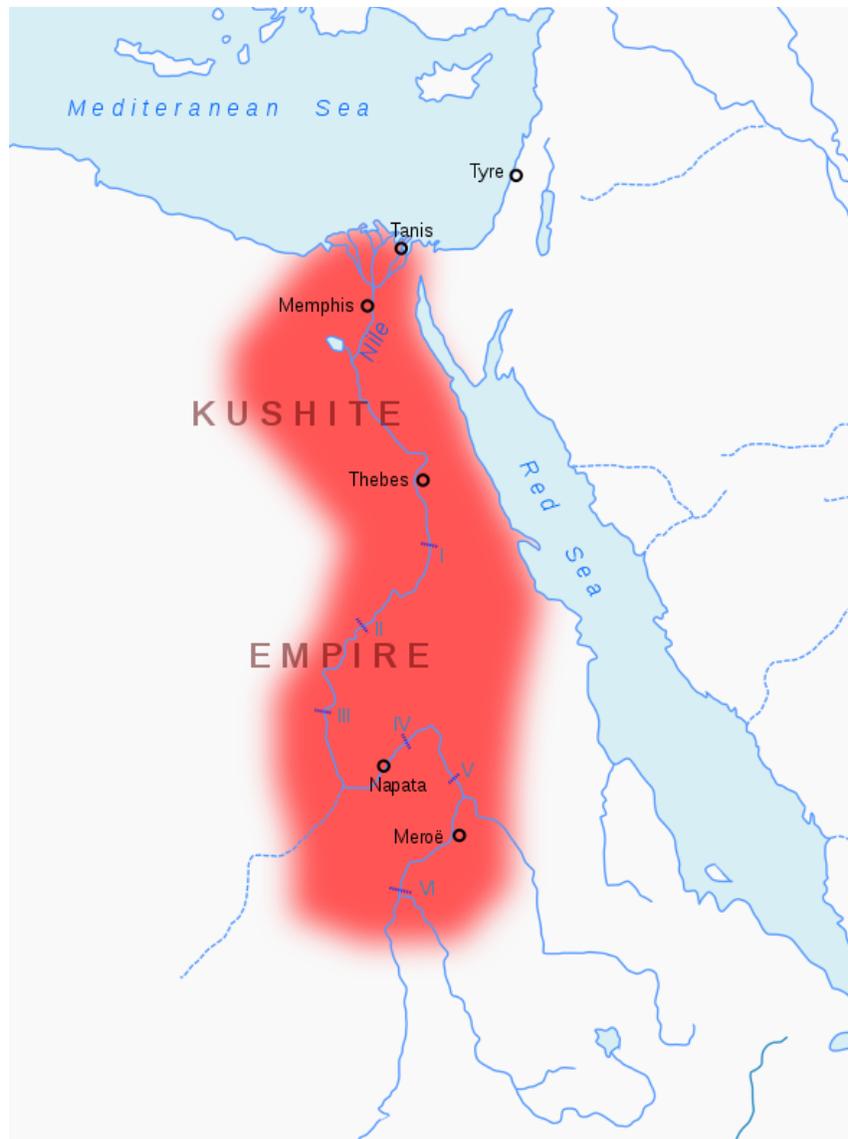
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rome_Stele.jpg>

*“Rome Obelisk” (Stela), Axum, 79 Feet High –
Returned From Italy and Reinstated in Axum in 2008*

The early Axumite monuments were gigantic, because the kings wanted to impress the masses with royal demonstrations of grandeur and symbols of their awe-inspiring power. The enormous labor force needed

for monument construction was organized by means of collective labor conscription through which everyone, including the military, was required to provide labor services.

Meroë's Fall and Axum's Rise. In the mid-9th century BCE, Nubia, an upper Nile Valley region in present-day Sudan, was unified under a revived kingdom of Kush. Napata, below the Fourth Cataract of the Nile, became the capital. Kush's culture, language at court, and religion were Egyptian, and its rulers adopted the pharaonic system of autocratic divine rule. In the early 6th century BCE, the Kushite kings moved their capital southward to Meroë, above the Nile's Sixth Cataract, and revived their kingdom.



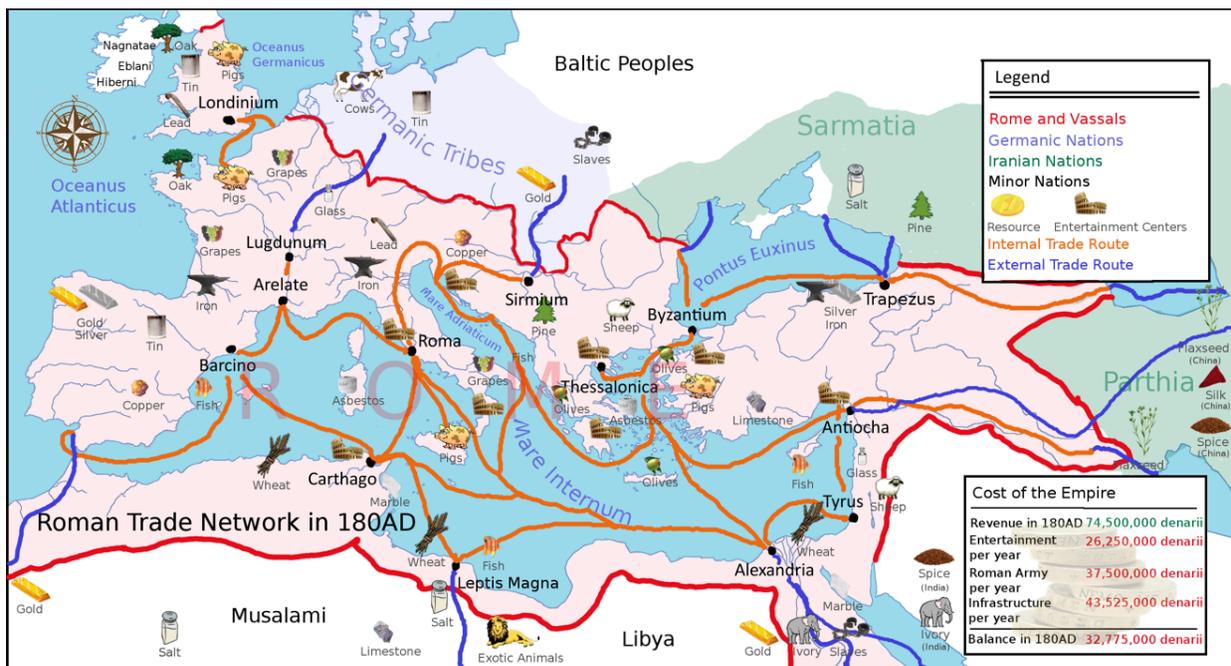
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Egypt_kush.svg>

*The Kushite Empire (25th Dynasty of Egypt), 744-656 BCE –
Territorial Extent, c. 700 BCE*

The Kushite kingdom of Meroë prospered from agriculture (sorghum, millet, cattle, and cotton), mining (gold and iron ore), iron-working, and entrepôt trade in African luxuries (ivory, slaves, ebony,

skins, and live animals). Meroë was a wealthy client kingdom under Ptolemaic Egypt (4th-1st centuries BCE), trading regularly with the Greek pharaohs in Alexandria. Commerce moved along the Nile River that connected Meroe with Alexandria. Meroë is best known to contemporary tourists for its remarkable pyramid architecture.

After Rome took over Egypt in 30 BCE, Meroë declined because the Romans shifted much of the African trade to the Red Sea. The Romans cleared the Red Sea of pirates and revived Egyptian ports.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe_180ad_roman_trade_map.png

Roman Trade Routes, 180 CE

Axum then replaced Meroë as a center for transshipping African commodities, notably ivory and slaves. In 325 CE, King Ezana I of Axum invaded the Meroë kingdom and destroyed the once-great but weakened city of Meroë. Nubia split into two weak kingdoms, divided at the Third Cataract, and lost its importance in regional trade. For more than two centuries afterward, Axumite merchants were unrivalled in plying the profitable trade routes that linked the Nile Valley with the Red Sea.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Archaeological_Sites_of_the_Island_of_Meroe-114973.jpg>

*Kingdom of Meroë, Pyramids in the Northern Cemetery –
Destroyed by Axum, 4th century CE*

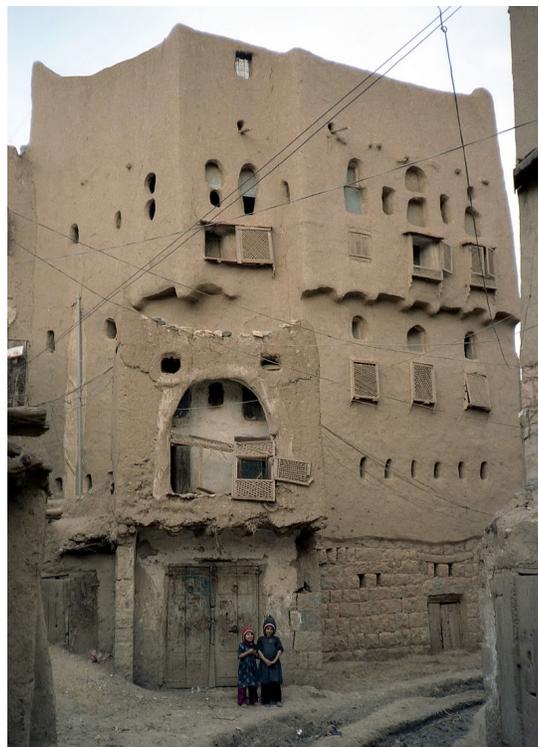
Decline of Axum. At its peak, in the 3rd-6th centuries, Axum was the strongest state in northeastern Africa. Some scholars rank it as the world's fifth leading power – after Rome/Byzantium, Han and post-Han China, Guptan India, and Sasanid Persia – in that era. The city-state of Axum expanded until it controlled a sizeable part of the western coast of the Red Sea.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LocationAksumiteEmpire.png> >

Kingdom of Axum – At Its Peak, 6th century CE

The Axum kingdom invaded and took over part of southwestern Arabia during part of the 3rd century and then lost it. In alliance with the Byzantine Empire and South Arabian Christians who had emigrated to Ethiopia, King Kaleb in 528 sailed 70 ships across the southern Red Sea and invaded and conquered the Himyarite Kingdom of Yemen. His purpose was to free Orthodox Christians in southern Arabia from persecution by their Jewish patriarch. Axum ruled Yemen until 575.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amran.jpg>>

*Traditional Mud-Built House in Amran, Yemen –
The Himyarite Kingdom of Yemen (110 BCE-528 CE) Was Conquered
and Ruled by Axum, 528-575 CE*

The Sabaean kingdoms in South Arabia resented the outside rule of their distant cousins from Ethiopia, and they invited the Sasanian Persians to assist them in getting rid of the invaders. The Persians went to Yemen and subsequently took it over. Axum began to decline in the late 6th century when Sasanid Persia forced Axum out of Yemen and extended Persian power throughout the Red Sea region.

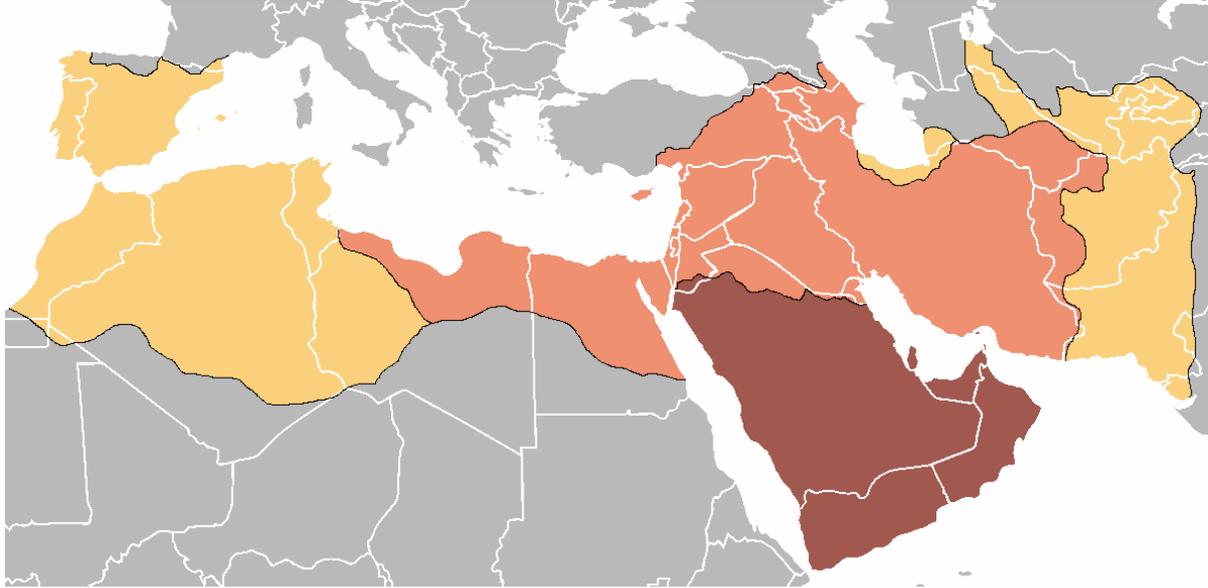


Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sasanian_Empire_621_A.D.jpg>

*The Sasanian Empire of Persia (230-651 CE) –
At Its Greatest Extent, 621 CE*

The lengthy Axumite expansion into Yemen had drained resources from overextended Axum and gravely weakened the kingdom. Imperial greed and religious fervor had debilitated Axum's strength.

Following the rise of Islam in the early 7th century, the Muslim Arabs replaced the Zoroastrian Persians in the Red Sea region and effectively severed Axum's trade routes there. Islamic forces did not attack Axum during the Arab Islamic diaspora. Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, reportedly advised his followers to "leave the Abyssinians in peace as long as they do not attack us." King Armah of Axum had offered asylum in 616 to early converts to Islam, including a daughter and son-in-law of Muhammad, who had fled to Axum from Mecca to seek protection. But peace did not ease Axum's economic difficulties. The diminution of Axumite trading on the Red Sea was soon followed by the loss of Axum's internal trade monopolies in ivory, gold, salt, and incense.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Age-of-caliphs.png> >

The Muslim Arab Diaspora, 622-632 (Dark Red), 632-661 (Light Red), 661-750 (Yellow) – Axum Stayed Independent But Declined

After the kingdom lost its primary source of wealth, its decline was persistent though gradual. Adulis and the coastal regions withered, and Muslim traders took over the Red Sea communities. Land degradation and local rebellions made the situation worse. Government tax revenues and tribute from subjected states decreased, and the government no longer could support a strong military to suppress rebellions. Axum lost control of exports from the Agau gold-producing regions to its south.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shield,_Ethiopia,_leather,_velvet,_gold_leaf,_silver,_copper_-_Peabody_Museum,_Harvard_University_-_DSC06008.jpg>

*Declining Axum Lost Control of Agau Gold –
Ethiopian Shield, Peabody Museum, Harvard University*

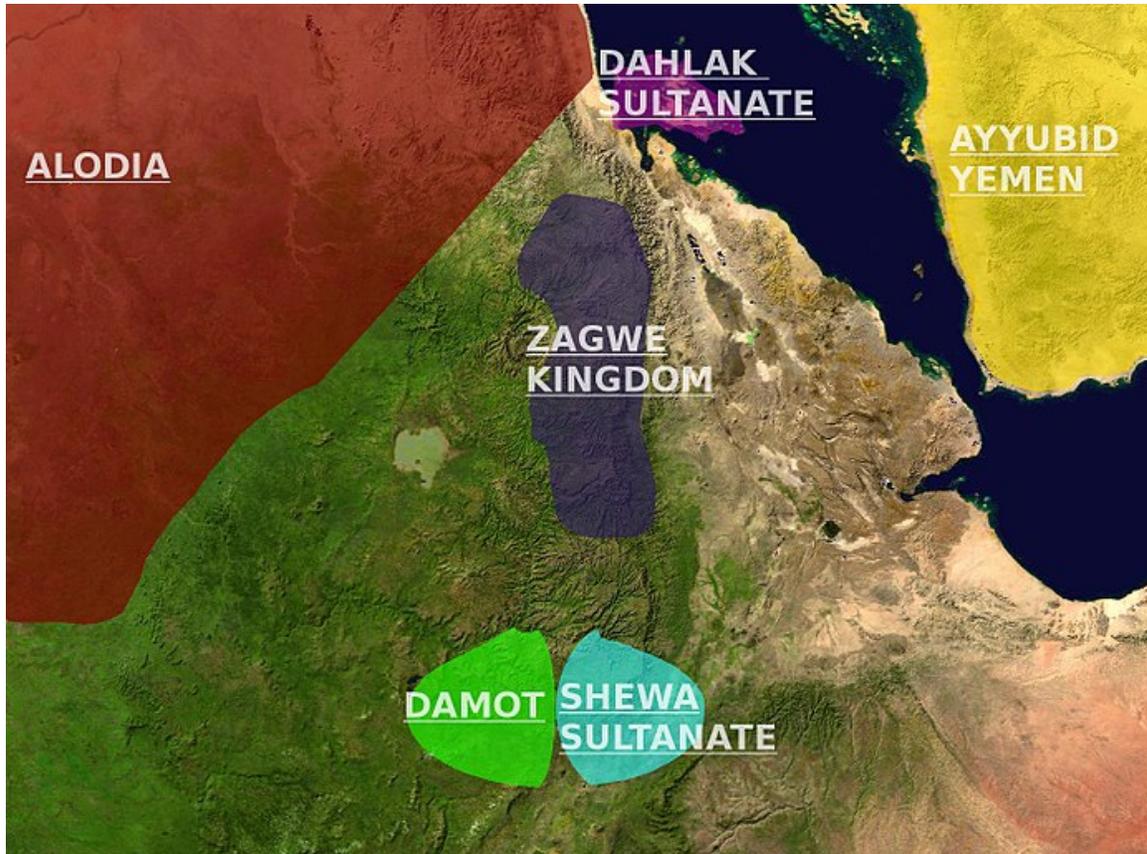
The Axum Kingdom was on a downward spiral. The Axumites experienced growing isolation and gradually retreated southward into the agricultural highlands occupied by the Cushitic-speaking Agau people. According to legendary Ethiopian history, Axum finally was defeated in the 10th century by a fierce Agau warrior queen named Yudit.

Ethiopia after the Axum Kingdom (10th century-present)

Transition from Axum Kingdom to Zagwe Dynasty (10th-12th centuries). After Axum lost control of its trade monopolies in the 7th century, the remnant Axum kingdom retreated from the Red Sea coast and Tigray. The new focus was on agricultural areas, southward toward Lake Tana, occupied by Agau and other Cushitic-speaking peoples. The Orthodox Christian and Geez (Semitic-speaking) kingdom of Axum plodded on for three more centuries, without its former power, wealth, or importance. In the late 10th century, Axum city was devastated by an attack of the Damot people, a group that Axum had long subjugated. The pagan and Cushitic-speaking Damots occupied an area in the Blue Nile basin near the bend of the river in western Ethiopia. Their rebellion against Axum retaliated for centuries of Axumite oppression.

The Damots, however, did not succeed in replacing Axumite rule in the remaining Christian core in highland Ethiopia (Tigray, Lasta, and northern Amhara). That transition occurred later in mountainous Lasta in the central-north of the country. Historians disagree on whether this change took place in the 10th or 11th centuries. Most concur, however,

that a new power, the Zagwe Dynasty, ruled Christian Ethiopia and some pagan and Muslim surrounding regions between 1137 and 1270.



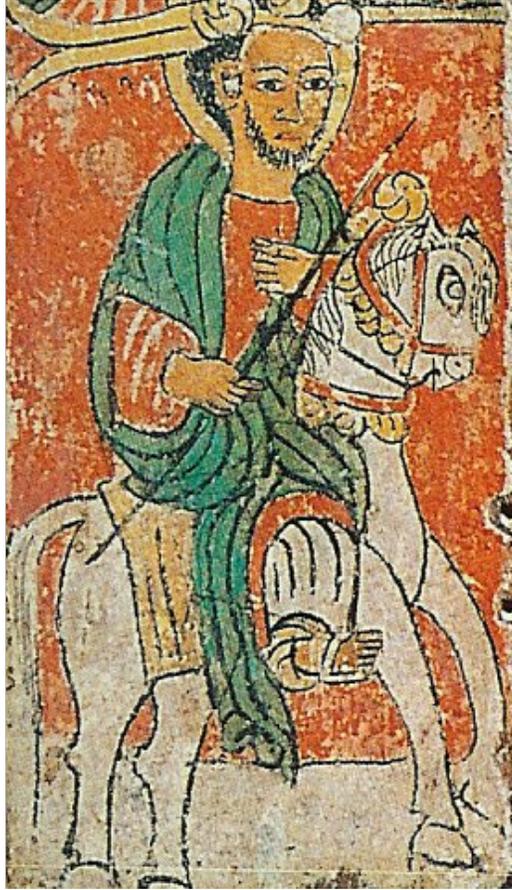
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Approximate_extension_of_the_Zagwe_Empire.JPG>

Ethiopia, Zagwe Dynasty (1137-1270) – c. 1200

The shift to the Zagwe Dynasty represented more than a movement of political power southward from Tigray to Lasta. The new dynasty was ruled by Agau (Cushitic-speaking) people, who had lived in highland Ethiopia for millennia before the descendants of the Axumites

(Semitic-speaking migrants from south Arabia). In spite of the bad press that the Agau interlopers receive in official Ethiopian histories, they were able to consolidate the Christian state in their century of rule.

Stone Churches and Legitimacy in the Zagwe Dynasty (1137-1270). The Agaus of Lasta, who led the Zagwe Dynasty, had long been Christianized and a loyal part of the Axum kingdom. Nevertheless, most of the Semitic-speaking majority in medieval Christian Ethiopia viewed the new leaders as illegitimate because they did not descend directly from the Axumite ruling line. The Agau rulers thus sought political and religious legitimacy. Jerusalem had been the preferred site for Ethiopian Orthodox Christian pilgrims. But access to Jerusalem had been lost during the wars of the Crusades (1097-1291) when Muslim opposition and regional insecurity prevented Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land. The Zagwe leaders, therefore, decided to construct a new pilgrimage site that would emulate Jerusalem. That project reached its height under King Lalibela (ruled c. 1185-1225). It was sited in the town of Roha, later re-named Lalibela.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gebre_Mesqel_Lalibela.png>

*King Gebre Mesqel Lalibela (ruled c. 1185-1225) of the Zagwe
Dynasty (1137-1270) – 15th-century Icon*

The central features of the pilgrimage site were eleven rock-hewn churches. Ethiopians had built stone churches earlier, starting probably in the 10th century. But the complex in Lalibela was extraordinary because the churches were concentrated in a very small area and most were connected by underground tunnels.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bete_Giyorgis_01.jpg>

*The Rock-hewn Church of Saint George (Bete Giyorgis), Lalibela –
Agau Political Legitimacy in Zagwe Dynasty*

The technique used to construct the free-standing stone churches was ingenious. The craftsmen first isolated a large single block of stone (red volcanic tuff) by tunneling around it. They then carved each church from the top down and maintained it as a single stone unit. Artisans next sculpted the inside and the outside of the church separately but simultaneously. The largest and most spectacular of those churches, Madhané Alam (Savior of the World), is 34 meters (112 feet) long, 24

meters (79 feet) wide, and 11 meters (36 feet) high and was probably modeled after the ancient Church of St. Mary of Seyon at Axum.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopie_Lalibela_Bet_Medhane_Alem.JPG>

*Madhané Alam, Rock-hewn Church in Lalibela –
One of the World’s Largest Monoliths*

Similar rock-hewn churches were constructed in other parts of Christian highland Ethiopia, especially in Tigray. The practice ended in the 16th century when the country suffered from wars and a severe economic decline.

Wealth and Power during the Zagwe Dynasty (1137-1270).

The transfer of power from the Axumites in Tigray to the Agaus in Lasta was a large political shift. But that change did not alter the economic realities of medieval Ethiopia. The sources of wealth for the new Zagwe Dynasty were much the same as they had been earlier for Axum. Like the Axumites, the Zagwe leaders had little direct control over mining resources and domestic artisanship was limited to the local market. The Zagwe Dynasty thus relied heavily on agriculture for its basic income and on foreign trade for extra earnings. The agricultural base for Zagwe continued to be cereal (teff, wheat, and barley) production in the highlands. As in the Axumite era, Ethiopian agriculture was productive enough to feed the population in most years and to produce modest surpluses that were taxed away by the government. The government, royalty, and land-owning upper class thus depended on the agricultural surpluses that they appropriated.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ILRI, Stevie Mann -
_Ploughing_with_cattle_in_southwestern_Ethiopia.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ILRI,_Stevie_Mann_-_Ploughing_with_cattle_in_southwestern_Ethiopia.jpg)>

Plowing With Cattle, Southwestern Ethiopia

Foreign trade continued to be an important source of wealth, but much less so than during the height of the Axumite kingdom. Slaves, obtained from wars or raids in pagan areas, were traded to Egypt, where many became soldiers, and elephant ivory retained its importance as an export. Massawa became Ethiopia's principal port. The government taxed trade flows, but it no longer participated directly in trade nor had a merchant fleet. Following the spread of Islam through much of

northeast Africa and the take-over of the Red Sea trade by Arabs, local Muslim merchants assumed most of Ethiopia's trading functions. For the Zagwe Dynasty, the key struggle was to maintain control of the southern trade route to the Cushitic-speaking Sidama region, the source of most of the slaves and ivory exports.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ET_Afar_asv2018-01_img06_Lake_Karum_area.jpg>

Camel Caravan – Salt Desert, Lake Karum, Afar Region, Ethiopia

Transition from Zagwe Dynasty to Solomonik Dynasty (13th century). In 1270, following a series of battles throughout northern and central Ethiopia, Yekuno Amlak personally killed Yitbarek, the last

Zagwean emperor, in front of the altar of a village church. Yekuno Amlak then declared himself the new emperor and successfully fought off other claimants to the throne to become the first king of the Solomonic Dynasty. Because both the old and new emperors were Orthodox Christians, there was no alteration in the close partnership between the political and religious hierarchies.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yekuno_Amlak.png>

*Painting of Yekuno Amlak, c. 1270-1285 –
Genneta Maryam Church, Lalibela*

But two very significant shifts occurred in that transition. The leaders of the Solomonic Dynasty, Semitic-speaking Amharas, replaced the Cushitic-speaking Agaus of the Zagwe Dynasty. In addition, there was a geographic movement of power from Lasta in the central-north to Shewa in the central part of the country. That shift of political power to Shewan Amharas lasted for seven centuries (until Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed in 1974).

Several organizational and architectural changes followed from that political transition. Previously each government had created a permanent city of stone churches, palaces, and official buildings to serve as the capital and seat of power of the empire. But during the first four centuries of the Solomonic Dynasty, the government had no permanent capital. Instead, the capital was mobile, made up of concentric circles of tents, and the emperor changed the site depending on military objectives, food supplies, and resource control. The royal government might have honored regions selected to host it, but it also imposed an enormous strain on them by appropriating local food supplies and other resources. The new government also changed the architectural design of church

buildings. Ethiopian churches became round rather than rectangular, and monasteries consisted of collections of unattractive huts near towns rather than spectacular stone buildings in remote mountain sites.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ET_Gondar_asv2018-02_img40_Debre_Berhan_Selassie.jpg>

Coptic Orthodox Christian Church, Gondar, Ethiopia

Kebre Negast and Legitimacy in the Solomonic Dynasty (14th century). The rulers of the Solomonic Dynasty, like those of the Zagwe Dynasty, were widely regarded as illegitimate. They, too, could not

prove their lineage to Axumite kings. Whereas the Zagwe kings built a rock-church pilgrimage in Lalibela, the Solomonic kings invented a myth linking the descent of their rulers to King Solomon. Although that legendary link was not new in Ethiopia, it was given credence and became part of the country's received wisdom during the reign of the great warrior king, Amda Siyon (ruled 1314-1344).

Amda Siyon commissioned a group of scholars, ostensibly to translate a Coptic book from Arabic into Geez. In the process, the translation was greatly amplified to justify the parentage of King Menelik I of Ethiopia (who is believed to have ruled in the early 1st millennium BCE). The resulting book, *Kebre Negast* ("Glory of the Kings") is based in part on the Old and New Testaments. But the Ethiopian translators took sufficient liberties to claim that Menelik I was the son of the biblical King Solomon and Makeda (the queen of Sheba, who is claimed to be from Ethiopia). By linking Ethiopia firmly to Judeo-Christian tradition, the book glorified and legitimized the line of imperial succession. It quickly became a national epic in the 14th century and remained one for 600 years.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Saba_ephiop.jpg>

*Illustrations in the Kebra Negast (Glory of the Kings), 1920s –
Religious Legitimacy Buttressed Imperial Rule*

Amda Siyon also commissioned a second book of enormous importance in imperial Ethiopia. *Fetha Negast* (“Law of the Kings”) codified the imperial laws and solidified the already strong linkages between imperial rule and the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. That book is a loose translation of a text, written originally in Arabic by an Egyptian Coptic Christian, Iba al-Assal, which collected the principal legal practices of the period. *Fetha Negast* justified the divine right of

kings to rule and gave rationales for slavery. The laws in that book remained in use in Ethiopia until the early 20th century.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopian_Horses_\(2427081498\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopian_Horses_(2427081498).jpg)>

Amda Siyon I (1314-1344) Commissioned Fetha Negast (Law of the Kings) – Ethiopian Law Is Based on Biblical Precepts

Lost Ark of the Covenant and Orthodox Christianity. The Lost Ark of the Covenant is a legendary vessel that is believed to hold the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were originally written. The 14th-century Ethiopian epic, *Kebre Negast*, describes how the Lost Ark was moved from Jerusalem to Axum. According to that book's

version of the biblical story (told in 1 Kings 10: 1-13), Makeda, an Ethiopian queen of Sheba (Saba), visited Jerusalem, was seduced by King Solomon, returned to Ethiopia, and bore a child, who became King Menelik I. When Menelik was a young man, he traveled to Jerusalem to meet his father. Before returning home, Menelik and his friends stole the Ark of the Covenant and brought it to Axum where it remains stored in St. Mary's Church of Zion (Maryam Tseyon).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maryam_Sion_in_Axum_Nebenbau_mit_der_Bunde_slade_2010.jpg>

*Chapel of the Tabot At St. Mary's Church of Zion (Maryam Tseyon),
Axum – Sanctuary for the Lost Ark of the Covenant*

This story has generated controversy over whether the Ark ever existed and whether it was taken to Ethiopia. But the story solidified the

links between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the monarchy. It is a crucial part of the imperial effort to show that all Ethiopian emperors were direct descendants of King Solomon through Menelik I. The tabot, a representation of the Ark of the Covenant, is one of the most important religious symbols in Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Every church must have its own tabot if it is to be a legitimate place of worship, and the tabot is central in many religious festivals.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:01_-_priests_carring_Tabots.jpg>

*Ethiopian Orthodox Priests Carrying Tabots –
Timkat Ceremony, Addis Ababa, January 2015*

The close links between church and state, belief and control, symbol and reality, and work and leisure permeated Ethiopian society. There are numerous fasting and workless days in the church calendar, which most Ethiopians followed religiously. All Wednesdays and Fridays are fasting days on which food and drink are taboo before noon and only vegetarian diets are permitted thereafter. All Saturdays and Sundays (as well as the more than 50 church festival days) are holy days on which no heavy work should be done on farms, in factories, or at home. The impact of these religious restrictions on labor productivity has not been studied.

Like the Coptic Christians in Egypt and the Syriac Christians in Syria, Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believed in the monophysite interpretation of the nature of Christ. A doctrinal schism at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 arose over whether Christ had a single nature (only god-like) or a dual nature (god-like except human when on earth). That doctrinal split reflected a deep division between Greek religious philosophers (dual nature) and Syrian and Egyptian monks (single nature). As a result of that schism, Ethiopian Christians aligned with

their brethren in Egypt and Syria against the officialdom of Orthodox Christianity in Constantinople.



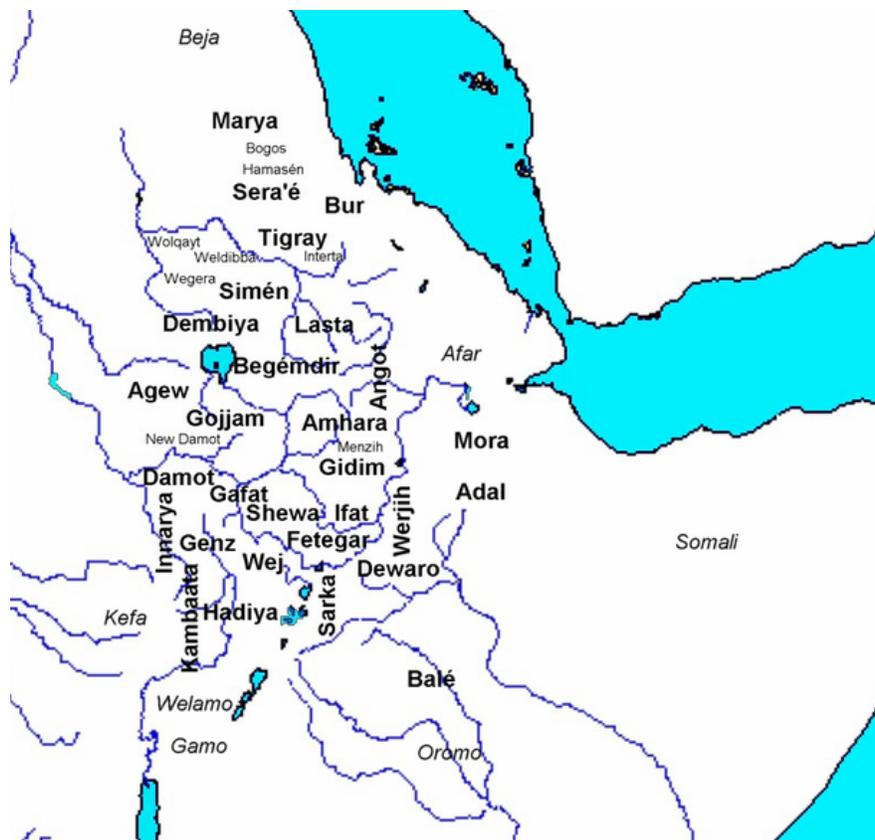
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bet_Giyorgis_priest_\(5498442207\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bet_Giyorgis_priest_(5498442207).jpg)>

*Ethiopian Orthodox Priest, Lalibela, 2011 –
Believes the Monophysite Interpretation of Christ's Nature*

Wealth and Power in the Solomonic Dynasty (13th-15th

centuries). The new Amhara rulers from Shewa consolidated, strengthened, and expanded the empire. That process reached its peak under the warrior king, Amda Siyon (ruled 1314-1344). Shewa, the home province of the Solomonic rulers, was in the southern part of the traditional Christian region of Ethiopia. Amda Siyon and his successors

consolidated their Christian empire by suppressing opposition from the feudal nobility in Christian Tigray to the north, pacifying that crucial region, and securing its loyalty to the crown. The Shewan leaders expanded their empire southward by forcing pagan states, notably resource-rich Sidama, to recognize Amharic suzerainty and pay tribute to Ethiopia. The Ethiopian leaders incorporated the regions to the west, including gold-producing Damot, directly into their expanding kingdom.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MedievalEthiopia.png>>

Ethiopia under Emperor Amda Seyon I (1314-1344)

A political compromise was reached to permit expansion eastward toward the Red Sea ports. The small Muslim states there, such as Ifat, agreed to recognize and pay tribute to the Ethiopian empire. In return, the Ethiopian rulers permitted the Muslims to dominate trade in Christian as well as Muslim parts of the Solomonic empire.

Wealth in medieval Ethiopia continued to be generated principally from agriculture. An Egyptian visitor to Ethiopia in the 14th century observed that most farmers produced a wide range of food crops – teff, wheat, barley, sorghum, millet, chickpeas, and lentils – and many also produced cash crops, including bananas, lemons, apricots, peaches, and grapes, which differed according to agro-climatic zone. Some progressive farmers obtained two harvests per year.

Foreign trade also was a key source of wealth. There were three key trade routes to Red Sea ports – a northern route (Sudan via Lasta to Massawa – the main port), a central route (Shewa to Massawa or Zeila – the secondary port), and a southern route (southern tributary provinces via Shewa to Zeila). Although the merchants were Muslim, the Amhara

rulers collected the trade taxes. Foreign trade was still based on the export of slaves, ivory, and gold.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hairstyle_of_Tigray,_Ethiopia_\(15173475900\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hairstyle_of_Tigray,_Ethiopia_(15173475900).jpg)>

*Ethiopian Woman From Tigray –
Highly Prized in Medieval, Middle-Eastern Slave Markets*

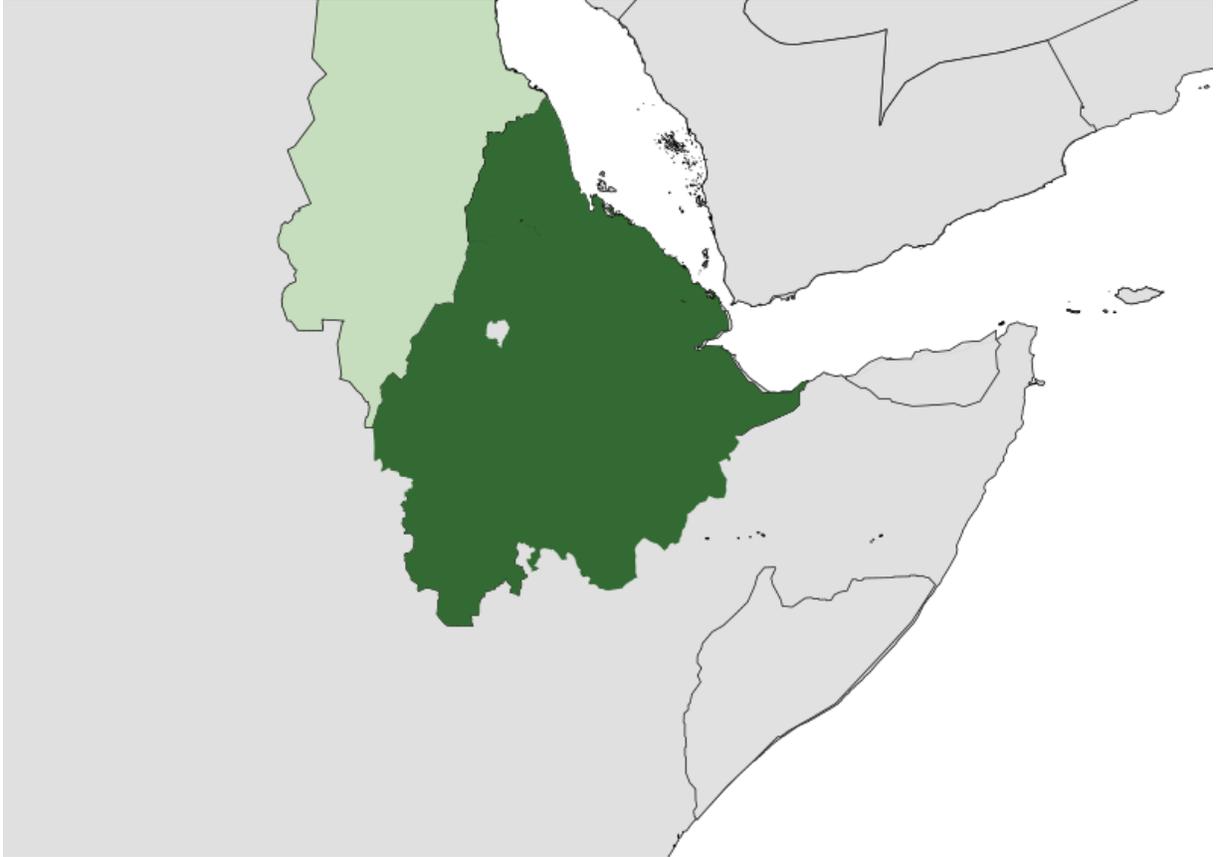
The slave export markets expanded from Egypt to Arabia and the Persian Gulf region. Many of the enslaved Ethiopian peoples had features – light black skin, substantial height, and thin faces – which

were deemed attractive in the new slave markets in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf regions, and thus they often sold for premium prices.

Taxation and Church Wealth in the Solomonic Dynasty (13th-15th centuries). The Solomonic rulers introduced a comprehensive system of taxation to transfer wealth from traders and farmers to the crown, church, and nobility. Taxation focused on foreign trade and agriculture, the two main sources of wealth in the empire. Tax payments were made either in kind – usually in grain, cattle, honey, butter, or cloth – in gold, in bars of salt that served as currency (*amole*, which were cut to a standard size of one foot by three inches by three inches), or by providing labor services to the state. The state set tax rates at low levels, so that taxes could be collected readily, and placed a high priority on tax enforcement.

The Shewan rulers collected a tax of 10 percent of all goods imported into Ethiopia (such as cloth, metals, and luxuries) by taking one-tenth of those commodities in kind. So as not to discourage Ethiopian exports, the state levied a much smaller percentage of tax on exports (principally slaves, gold, and ivory). Trade and trade taxes were

less important in medieval Ethiopia than they had been during the Axumite era.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_1500.svg>

Solomonic Ethiopia (Dark Green Area) in the Horn of Africa, 1500

Most wealth in the early Solomonic era came from agriculture. The crown, church, and nobility received some of their wealth by operating land that they owned. But most farmland in medieval Ethiopia was owned by peasant farmers who operated their own small plots. The

state taxed away the small agricultural surpluses that the peasants could generate. Farmers had to pay two kinds of taxes – a fixed annual payment and a percentage (often 10 percent) of production or, less commonly, of wealth. The state transferred some taxing rights (through a system known as *gult*) to the church or the nobility (or other supporters of the crown). The church created its substantial wealth in three ways – by owning and operating farm land, receiving taxing rights from the crown (*gult*), and taking contributions from members.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:On_The_Road_To_Simien_Mountains_National_Park,_Ethiopia_\(2446794591\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:On_The_Road_To_Simien_Mountains_National_Park,_Ethiopia_(2446794591).jpg)>

*Taxation of Small-farm Agriculture –
Farm Near Simien Mountains, Northern Ethiopia*

Ethiopia and the Portuguese-Turkish Conflict (16th century).

For more than a millennium, empires in Ethiopia had engaged in active foreign trade. But they had been largely isolated from foreign intervention. That welcome state of isolation changed in the early 16th century. The Ethiopian empire in that century retained many of the key features of the country's earlier empires. It was based on feudal exploitation of peasant agriculture and on heavy taxing of foreign trade, and power was shared between the crown and the Orthodox Christian Church. The core of the empire was made up largely of Semitic-speaking peoples and ruled by Amharas. Surrounding that core were provinces of alien peoples, many Muslim and some animistic. The degree of central control over those outlying regions depended on the ability of the emperor to tax trade and put down rebellions.

In the late 15th century, the tiny European kingdom of Portugal invented the caravel ship, improved navigational techniques, sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in southern Africa, and thus led Europe into an Age of Exploration. Portuguese motivations were both commercial and religious – to circumvent Muslim nations' control of the

lucrative trade routes to Asia, especially for spices (pepper, cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg), and to spread the Roman Catholic religion at the expense of Islam.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portuguese_Caravel.jpg>

*Portuguese Caravel Ship, 15th-century Innovation –
Led to the European Age of Exploration and Imperialism*

Concurrently, the Turkish Ottoman Empire was expanding its control in Southeastern Europe and the Middle East, notably over Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and coastal Arabia, by using its superior military power to advance trade and Islam. The commercial and religious

conflict between Portugal and the Ottoman Empire came to a head in the Red Sea region. Portuguese commercial interest in Ethiopia waned in the 1520s, however, when Portugal established port colonies in east Africa and India and thus did not need Red Sea ports for mercantile purposes.

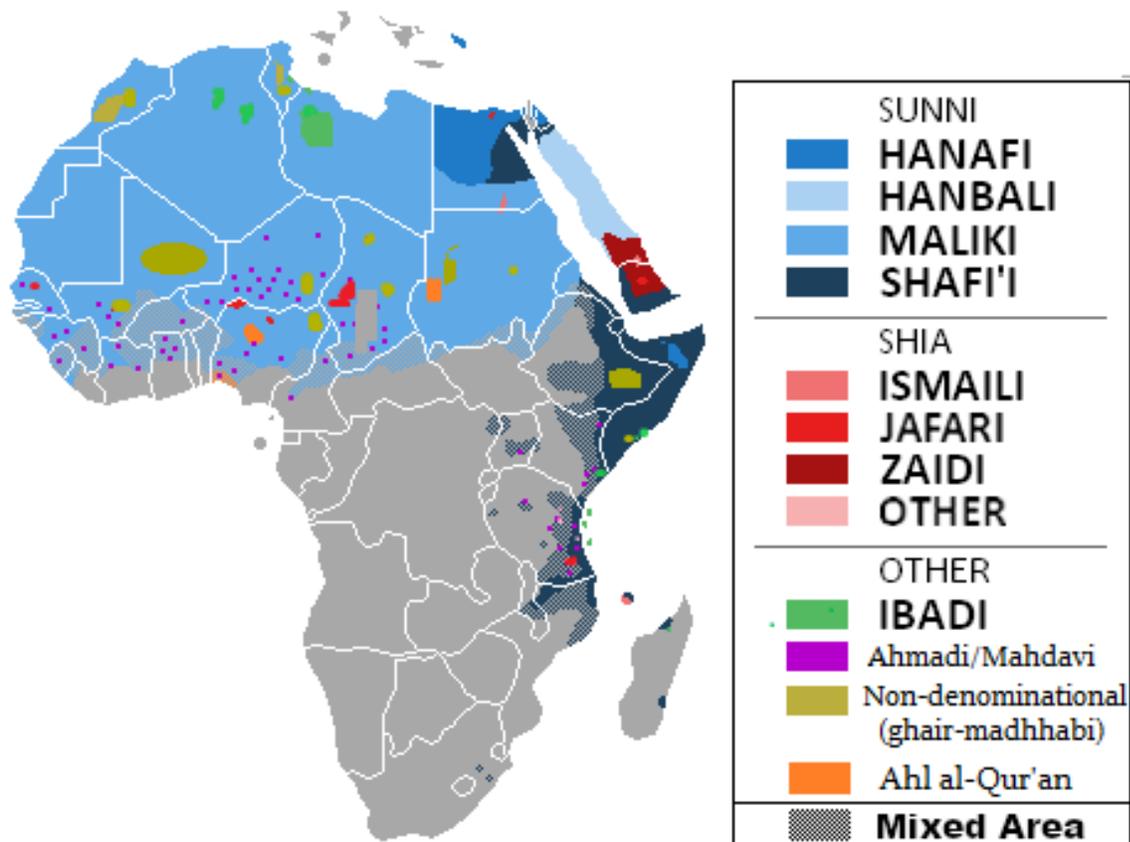


Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OttomanEmpire1600.png>>

The Ottoman Empire in Anatolia, Eastern Europe, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, and North Africa – c. 1600

The Islamic Jihad in Ethiopia (16th century). Following the expansion of Islam in the 7th century, the Orthodox Christian kingdom of

Ethiopia and its neighboring Muslim states co-existed in an uneasy peace for nearly 800 years.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Self-reported_muslim_affinity_in_africa.png >

*Spread of Islam in Africa –
Ethiopia Was a Christian Outpost*

But in the early 15th century, expansionist Ethiopia conquered some small Muslim states, notably Ifat. The Ifati people moved to the eastern side of the Rift Valley, established a new Islamic state, Adal, and awaited their chance for revenge. After the Ottoman Turks gained

control of the Red Sea region in the early 16th century, they offered to supply Adal with firearms and artillery – then unknown in Ethiopian warfare.

Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (known derisively by the Ethiopians as Ahmad “Gran,” the left-handed) took charge of the jihad in 1527 at the age of 21 and trained his army in the use of the new weaponry. His extraordinary leadership, ample Turkish firearms, good administration of conquered areas, and fanatical courage in battle resulted in a series of military victories and a wide expansion of territory. Christian Ethiopia was near total destruction.

The Ethiopians eventually received military aid from Portugal. The Christian kingdom thus gained access to the same new weapons – firearms and artillery – that the Ottomans had supplied to their Muslim foe. In 1542, Christopher da Gama, a son of the renowned mariner, Vasco da Gama, arrived in Ethiopia with 400 soldiers who were well armed with advanced weaponry. After suffering an initial defeat, the Portuguese and Ethiopian armies killed Ahmad in battle in 1543. Thereafter, the Adal Muslims ended the jihad and retreated to their

original homelands. During the 16 years of fighting, Ethiopia suffered an enormous loss of manpower, church property, and trade taxes.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gragne.jpg>>

Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Led a Muslim Jihad Against Christian Ethiopia (1527-1543) – Portugal Supplied Ethiopia With Modern Weapons

The long-run impacts of the devastating, 16-year war were even more severe for Ethiopia. The political vacuum left by the expansion and later retreat of the Muslims allowed the Oromo (Cushitic-speaking) people to expand from their pastoral lowlands to the highland and border areas. Moreover, the huge economic setback and the loss of hundreds of

thousands of lives destroyed any realistic prospect that Ethiopia might be successful in making a transition to commercial or industrial capitalism. In that instance, Ethiopia won the war for survival but lost the long-run battle for early modernization. Its Christian leaders retreated to the northwest to form a much smaller and more cohesive state. The new empire was less than half the territorial extent of the earlier one, but it was much easier to govern and defend.

The Portuguese in Ethiopia (16th-17th centuries). Ethiopia first became known to Europeans through the Prester John legend. A fictitious letter, written in the 12th century, claimed that a powerful Christian king, named Prester John, ruled a mysterious land in Africa or Asia and might come to the aid of European nations in the Crusades. The Prester John legend persisted well after the Crusades had ended. When Portugal sent a naval envoy (1510) and a diplomatic mission (1520-1525) to Ethiopia, the Portuguese referred to the Ethiopian emperor as Prester John.

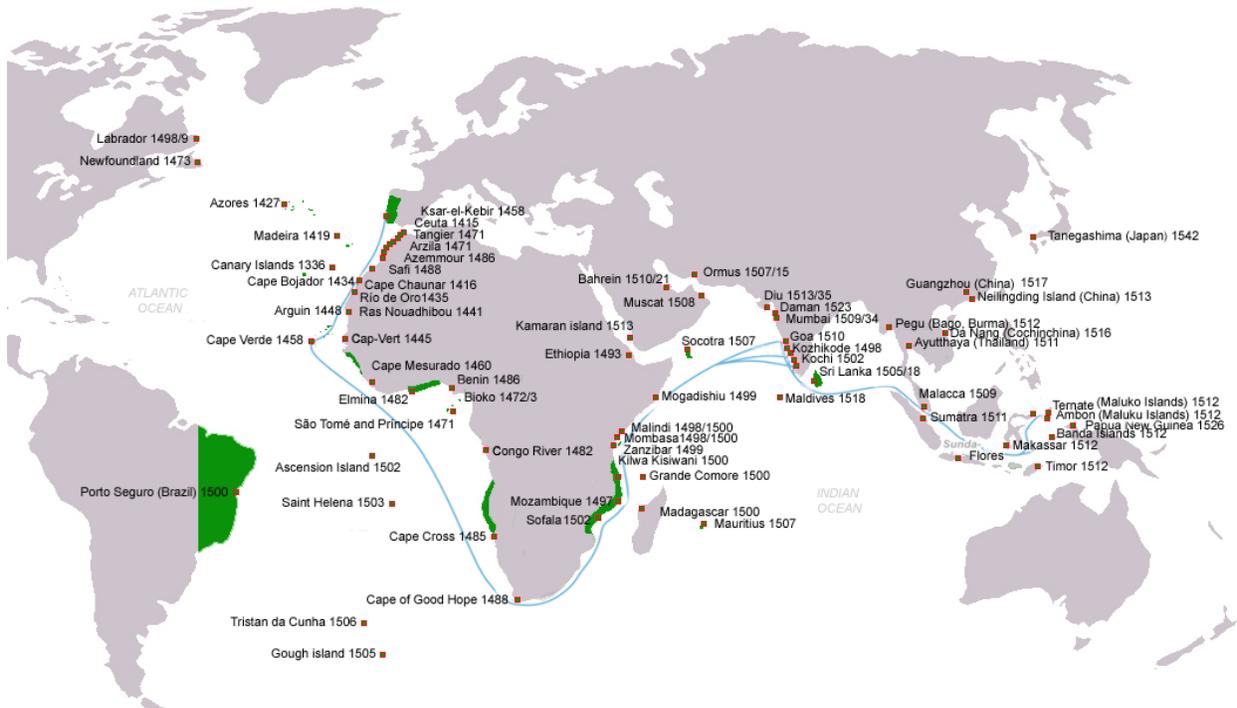


Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at <>

*Illustration of Prester John As the Emperor of Ethiopia –
On A Map of East Africa in Queen Mary's Atlas, 1558, British Library*

Portugal had commercial, military, and religious motivations for intervening in Ethiopia in the 16th and 17th centuries. The commercial motive was to take control of ports on the Red Sea, principally Massawa. But after Portugal captured ports in east Africa (Sofala in Mozambique and Kilwa in contemporary Tanzania), Persia (Hormuz at the entry to the Persian Gulf in contemporary Iran), and India (Goa in

western India) and thus controlled the major Indian Ocean trade route in the 1520s, the commercial value of Ethiopia's Red Sea ports declined.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Portuguese_discoveries_and_explorationsV2en.png>

Portuguese Trade Routes and Settlements – 16th century

Portugal's military interest was to fend off further expansion of the rising Ottoman Empire and to contain the spread of Islam. For that reason, Portugal in 1542 answered the request from Emperor Galawedos (ruled 1540-1559) of Ethiopia for military assistance against Ahmad ibn Ibrahim. Portuguese weapons and troops provided crucial support to

help Ethiopia defeat and kill Ahmad and thus end the Turkish-supported Islamic jihad in 1543.

For the next century, Portugal's primary interest in Ethiopia was to attempt to convert the Ethiopians from Orthodox Christianity to Roman Catholicism. The Jesuit missionary, Pero Pais, converted Emperor Susneyos (ruled 1607-1632) to Catholicism, largely because the emperor expected in return to receive military aid from Portugal. Strong popular opposition to Catholicism forced Susneyos to abdicate in favor of his son, Fasiladas, in 1632. Fasiladas (ruled 1632-1667) immediately expelled the Jesuits and banned Catholicism in Ethiopia. Thereafter, Portugal declined as a world commercial power, became part of Spain between 1580 and 1640, and gradually lost interest and importance in Ethiopia.

The Rise and Significance of Gondar (17th century). In 1636, Emperor Fasiladas established his political headquarters in the small village of Gondar. He then ended the Shewan Amhara tradition of mobile, tented capitals and had a permanent capital constructed with impressive stone buildings.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gondar,_cittadella,_palazzo_di_re_fasiladas_05.jpg
>

*Castle and Imperial Quarters of Emperor Fasiladas. Gondar –
Constructed in the 17th century*

The location of Gondar in the northwestern part of Ethiopia reflected the desire of medieval emperors to have their headquarters sited at a distance from the expanding Oromo people and the rival, small Muslim states. Gondar soon grew into the political, economic, and cultural center of the reduced and more cohesive Ethiopian empire, then popularly known as Abyssinia. The new city continued as the capital of the country for two centuries, although its political importance declined as the empire splintered in the mid-18th century. Gondar became an

impressive capital of Ethiopia. But its population probably never exceeded 70,000, even at its peak at the turn of the 18th century.

Fasiladas introduced architectural innovations in his new capital by sponsoring the construction of large, stone monuments. The most impressive were the churches and the castle-palaces, both much larger and more elaborate than anything that had been built in Ethiopia for several centuries. Those monuments mirrored the all-encompassing link between the church and the crown in ruling and transferring wealth in medieval Ethiopia.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gondar_City.jpg>

Solomonic Castles at Gondar

The combination of political power, military strength, economic prosperity, and a permanent capital provided an opportunity for an Ethiopian cultural renaissance in the 17th and 18th centuries. The patronage of the church and the state supported the outburst of creativity of architects, artists, writers, and musicians. Ethiopia enjoyed a medieval renaissance. Gondar became well-known for its accomplishments in architecture, painting, sculpture, calligraphy, poetry, literature, and music.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Benishangul_Gumuz_People_in_their_traditional_dress_and_musical_instrument.JPG>

*Ethiopian Music Flourished in Gondar –
Benishangul Gumuz Musicians, Western Ethiopia*

Sources of Wealth and Power in Gondar (17th-18th centuries).

The new capital of Gondar was located in a fertile agricultural area, just north of Lake Tana. Cereal agriculture (teff, barley, and wheat), oilseeds (flax), and animals for transport (horses, mules, and donkeys) provided much of the wealth in the empire. Foreign trade was the second source of wealth for the Gondarine Empire. From its founding in 1636 until the middle of the 18th century, Gondar was the center of crossing trade routes. The primary trade route linked the Nile Valley in central Sudan with the Red Sea coast at Massawa. After the Ottoman Turks seized control of Massawa in the 16th century, the trade route to Sudan became more important. But because most trade in Ethiopia was in the hands of Muslim merchants, the Red Sea trade route remained viable for Ethiopian commerce.

Coffee is endemic to southwestern Ethiopia (especially Kaffa) and was first domesticated there for local consumption. For centuries, the Ethiopians roasted the coffee beans, pulverized them, and then mixed them with butter to form spheres about the size of billiard balls. The product was a source of instant energy for workers or travelers. Coffee

was first exported to southern Arabia in the 15th century. The stimulant became an important export to the Sudan and Egypt in the 16th century and then expanded into the Turkish and European markets via the port of Mocha in Yemen in the late 17th century. Coffee was either sold directly at Red Sea ports, or it was bartered in the Sudan for gold and slaves that were then transhipped to Red Sea ports for re-export. Indigenous coffee thus became the basis of Ethiopian trade.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FruitColors.jpg>>

*Coffee (Coffea arabica) – Indigenous to Kaffa, Southwestern Ethiopia
and Major Export Since the 16th century*

Gold (from Damot south of Lake Tana) and slaves (from southern Ethiopia and the Sudan) were traditional exports that continued their

prominence in the Gondarine era. Ethiopia imported cloth, firearms, glassware, and other luxuries from both the Sudan and the Red Sea ports. Muslim merchants carried out most of the foreign trade in Ethiopia, since they operated easily in the Sudan and the Red Sea ports – both by then under Islamic rule.

The wealth of the Abyssinian Empire was reduced by the expansion of the Oromo peoples, the Cushitic-speaking pastoralists from southern Ethiopia, who moved into the highlands and the border zone between highland Abyssinia and lowland Adal. To gain their support for the feudal system, the Amhara emperors bought off the upstart Oromo leaders and assimilated them politically into the ruling system. The new Oromo settlements provided a useful buffer between the reorganized Christian empire in the highlands and the Muslim states in the arid eastern regions and along the coast. But the Oromo expansion led to a significant decline in the area controlled and the amount of taxes collected by the Amhara rulers, relative to those of their predecessors.

The Ethiopian Jews in Gondar (17th-18th centuries). In the 17th and 18th centuries, a number of Ethiopians, probably not exceeding

100,000 people, practiced Judaism, and a few of those Jewish Ethiopians lived in Gondar. The Amharas called them the Falashas (migrants), but they referred to themselves as the Bete Israel (people of Israel). Most of the Bete Israel were Cushitic-speaking Agau people who lived in the rugged Simien Mountains north of Gondar. Judaism probably was transferred to Ethiopia in the 1st millennium BCE – from Dynastic Egypt via Meroë (the kingdom in contemporary Sudan) to the Kingdom of Axum.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Semien_Mountains_13.jpg>

*Simien Mountains, Northwestern Ethiopia –
Home Region of Most of Ethiopia's Bete Israel People*

The Ethiopian form of Judaism was based on an early version of the Old Testament (the Greek Septuagint version) that had been translated from Hebrew into Greek and then into Geez (Ethiopic). Because the Bete Israel could read the sacred texts in Geez, the liturgical language, they were able to continue practicing their religion through the centuries.

Like all Jewish people, the Bete Israel believed in one God, the God of Israel, who would send a Messiah to redeem them and return them to the Holy Land. But Ethiopian Judaism was pre-rabbinic and thus depended entirely on written law, without support from oral law codified in the Talmud. The Ethiopian Jews had priests, not rabbis, presiding over temple services, and they had monastic monks and nuns. The Bete Israel also had no knowledge or use of Hebrew.

Following centuries of religious tolerance and of local autonomy for the Bete Israel, in 1616 the Catholic Emperor Susneyos conquered and persecuted the Jews of northwestern Ethiopia. Thereafter, they were subjects of the Ethiopian empire. In their Simien Mountain homeland, the Bete Israel were farmers whose farming practices were no different

from those of other Ethiopians. But in Gondar, they were specialist craftsmen – blacksmiths, goldsmiths, weavers, and metal-workers – in occupations that were anathema to the Christians (about two-thirds of the population) and the Muslims (most of the remaining third).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Falasha_gondar_injera_2006.jpg>

Bete Israel People – Preparing Injera In Gondar, 1996

The Timkat Festival of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church in Gondar. The Timkat (Epiphany) Festival, which occurs on January 19 each year, is one of the nine major feasts of the Ethiopian Church. (The eight others are Conception, Christmas, Transfiguration,

Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost.) The celebration of this important and colorful festival shows the close ties between Ethiopian Orthodoxy and the Old Testament. The Epiphany in Ethiopia is a reenactment of Christ's baptism in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. In contrast, in most Western Christian faiths, the Epiphany is a holy day that celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the Magi.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gondar_Fasiladas_Bath_Timket.jpg>

Timkat (Epiphany) Festival – Fasiladas's Bath, Gondar

In the Timkat Festival, the most important symbol of the church, the tabot – the representation of the Ark of the Covenant, is moved with great ceremony to the site of the baptismal water. In Gondar, for example, that holy site is the Bath of Fasiladas (located adjacent to the Castle of Fasiladas). A priest from each major church carries his church's tabot on his head in a procession that gradually converges on the Bath of Fasiladas.

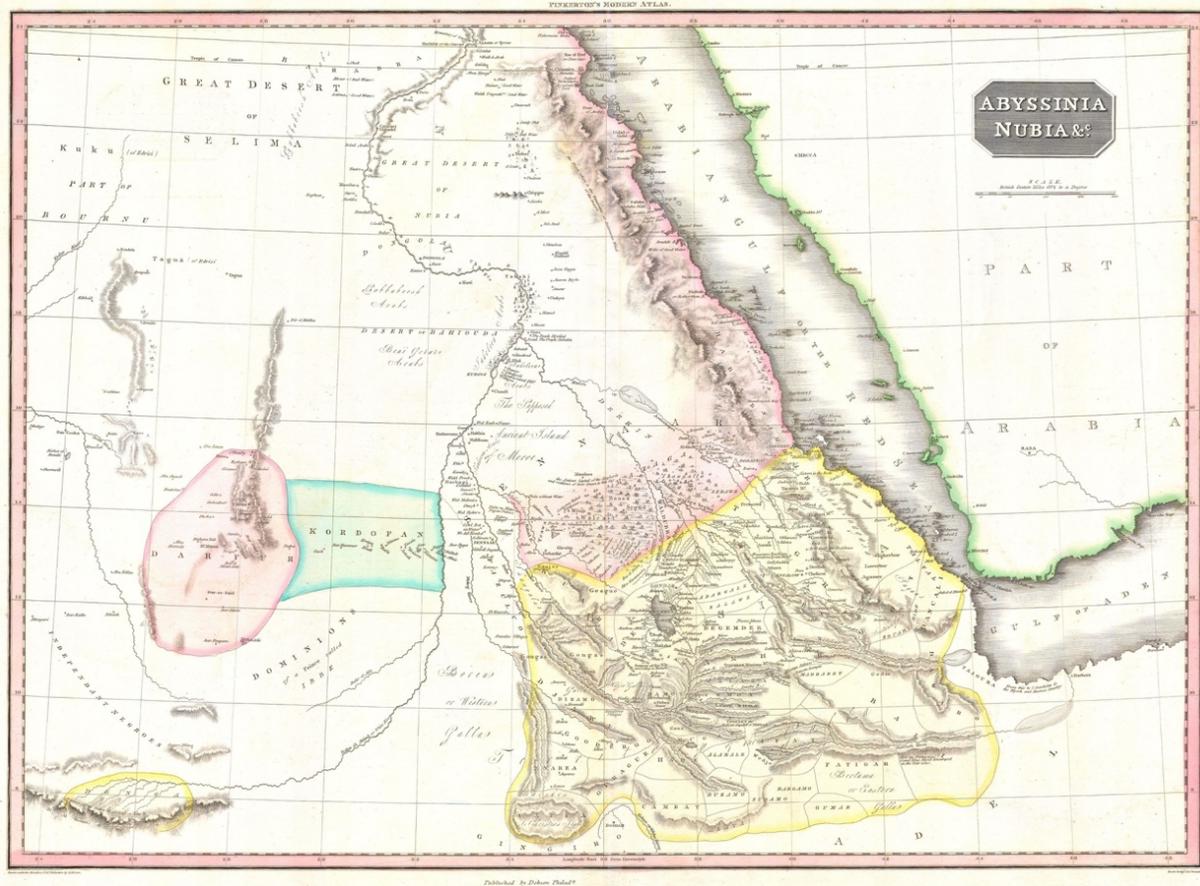
The procession features keberos (double-headed, conical hand drums) and the dancing of dabtaras (lay clerics) and symbolizes David and the House of Israel bringing up the ark with music – from drums, sistra (metal rattles), lyres, and harps – and dancing. The tabots are kept overnight in the Bath of Fasiladas, and the participants in the festival remain there for a night of festive ceremony. On the following morning, the priests bless the water in an artificial lake (created each year for the festival) and thousands of people immerse themselves in the water. Later the priests return their tabots to their own churches in another colorful and joyous procession. The ceremony allows people to renew their baptismal vows without being re-baptized.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Timket_Ceremony_Gondar_Ethio.jpg>

Priest Carrying A Tabot – Timkat Festival, Gondar

The Mesafint Period (mid-18th-mid-19th centuries). The Gondarine Solomonic Empire peaked about the turn of the 18th century and then went into steady decline. The inglorious time between the mid-18th and the mid-19th centuries is known as the Mesafint Period (the period of the princes). Imperial rule from Gondar totally broke down, and power was disseminated to regional princes (*rases*). The emperor in Gondar had no more power than any local magnate.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
 <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1818_Pinkerton_Map_of_Abyssinia_\(Ethiopia\), Sudan_%5E_Nubia_-_Geographicus_-_Abyssinnia-pinkerton-1818.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1818_Pinkerton_Map_of_Abyssinia_(Ethiopia),_Sudan_%5E_Nubia_-_Geographicus_-_Abyssinnia-pinkerton-1818.jpg)>

*Pinkerton Map of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), 1818 –
 In the Heart of the Mesafint Period of Instability*

There were several related causes of the splintering of the formerly cohesive Solomonic empire. Ethiopia had never fully recovered from the devastations suffered during the Islamic jihad in the 16th century, and the crown had difficulty controlling alien – Muslim and animistic – subordinates and neighbors. Weakness in the center quickly multiplied

in the periphery, and debilitating wars led to the destruction of lives and property.

The most immediate threat came from the Oromo people who had expanded widely after the Islamic jihad and shifted from nomadic pastoralism to sedentary agriculture. The Shewan Amhara rulers, beginning with Susneyos in the early 17th century, decided to assimilate the Oromo leaders into the Amharic feudal political system. That attempted accommodation was never fully successful. The opportunistic Oromos gradually usurped power in the center and alienated Amharic and Tigrayan regional princes who then rebelled against central control. That instability, along with droughts and pest attacks, caused periodic famines that exacerbated the central political weakness. Prospects for recovery of the empire did not seem bright.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Early_nineteenth_century_warriors_Colour.jpg>

Ethiopian Warriors During the Mesafint Period, Early 19th century

Divided Ethiopia in the first half of the 19th century. During the first half of the 19th century, Ethiopia began to recover from the disintegration of the Mesafint Period. The empire remained splintered, and the imperial government in Gondar was still weak. But three regional states – Tigray in the north, Amhara in the northwest, and Shewa in the central-south – rose to fill the political vacuum. Tigray in the northern highlands was based on the salt trade, grain production, and access to Massawa. Amhara in the northwestern highlands depended on

cereal production and on exports of gold, slaves, ivory, and civet (musk used in perfume). Shewa in the central-southern highlands benefited from political stability and exports of coffee, slaves, hides, and ivory. Semitic-speakers, the traditional leaders in Ethiopia, ruled all three of those states.

With the diminution of central authority and the rise of warlords, economic power shifted away from the north and northwest and moved steadily southward to Shewa. That state also benefited from capable leadership. King Sahle Selassie of Shewa (ruled 1813-1847) was a strong public administrator. He reorganized the government and the military, brought about a high degree of political stability, and thus paved the way for aggressive Shewan expansionism under his rule.

Sahle Selassie recognized that the key to military strength was the importation of modern weapons – rifles, cannons, and ammunition. His strategy of territorial expansion in the south and southwest was intended to increase Shewan economic power by gaining greater control over the areas that supplied his state’s principal exports – coffee, slaves, and

ivory. Those exports bought imported firearms, and the new weapons created more exports.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:King_Sahla_Sellase_colour.jpg>

King Sahle Selassie of Shewa (ruled 1813-1847)

Egypt under Muhammad Ali (ruled 1805-1848) took control of the Red Sea region from the Ottoman Empire and expanded opportunities for Ethiopian trade. The exportation of slaves to Egypt and Arabia reached 25,000 captives annually. In the 1840s, Sahle Selassie established diplomatic relations with the two leading colonial powers in

Africa – Britain and France – to ensure the independence of expanding Shewa.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ModernEgypt,_Muhammad_Ali_by_Auguste_Couder,_BAP_17996.jpg>

*Muhammad Ali Pasha (Ruled Egypt, 1805-1848) –
Painting by Auguste Couder, 1841, Palace of Versailles, France*

Imperial Objectives in the second half of the 19th century. The splintered remnants of an Ethiopian empire could be brought together only through adroit political, economic, and military leadership. During the second half of the 19th century, that leadership emerged from three extraordinary individuals who ruled as emperor – Tewodros II (ruled

1855-1868) from Amhara, Yohannes IV (ruled 1871-1889) from Tigray, and Menelik II (ruled 1889-1910) from Shewa. Those three emperors held six principal objectives for a revived Ethiopian empire – reunification, expansion, independence, reorganization, modernization, and solidification.

Reunification meant the tying together of the mostly Semitic-speaking, highland areas of traditional Abyssinia, centered on the three regional powers – Tigray, Amhara, and Shewa. That objective was primary and probably the most difficult to achieve. Expansion referred to the goal of recovering outlying areas that formerly had been a part of the Ethiopian empire and of taking over new regions that could provide resources or serve as a buffer from outside threats. Independence from colonial takeover and from neighboring incursions was necessary to protect the integrity of the resurrected empire.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_lancer_of_Tigre_colour.jpg>

*Lancer From Tigray –
T. Lefebvre et al, Voyage en Abyssinie, Paris, 1845-1849*

Reorganization of the military and of the government apparatus was required so that the new imperial state could expand and maintain its political independence. Modernization of the country's agricultural and industrial technology, political and economic institutions, and transportation infrastructure was needed to ensure success of the reorganization. Solidification of the ruling coalition of crown and church through an evolving feudal political economy was the ultimate

political goal of all three leaders. The key to imperial success was to find the right mix of continuity and change.

Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868). Kassa Haylu of Qwara (the future Emperor Tewodros II) was born in 1818 in Qwara, an Amhara frontier province in the northwestern corner of Ethiopia. Although he was of minor royal lineage, Kassa became a frontier bandit. In his early life, Kassa was an Ethiopian Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and powerful and redistributing the spoils to the poor and weak. His shift from banditry to politics was seamless, and he moved on to become the leader of Qwara and then of all Amhara. By 1854, Kassa had expanded the areas under his control to include all of highland Abyssinia – except for the two other leading regional powers, Tigray and Shewa. Kassa became Emperor Tewodros II in 1855 and vowed to reunite all of Abyssinia under his imperial rule.

Consistent with his idealistic youth, Emperor Tewodros set progressive and compassionate goals to help the poor under his administration. But he alienated the church by transferring some church landholdings to the state, and he lost the support of peasants when he

increased agricultural taxation. After Tewodros lost the support of the poor and the church, some of the nobles began to undercut him at court.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:T%C3%A9wodros_II_-_2.jpg>

*Kassa Haylu of Qwara (1818-1868) –
Became Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868)*

Tewodros successfully reorganized the military, upgraded its weaponry through imports of modern firearms, and streamlined the bureaucracy somewhat. He wrote to Queen Victoria to seek British military assistance, especially in manufacturing weapons. After receiving no reply, Tewodros quarreled with and imprisoned the British

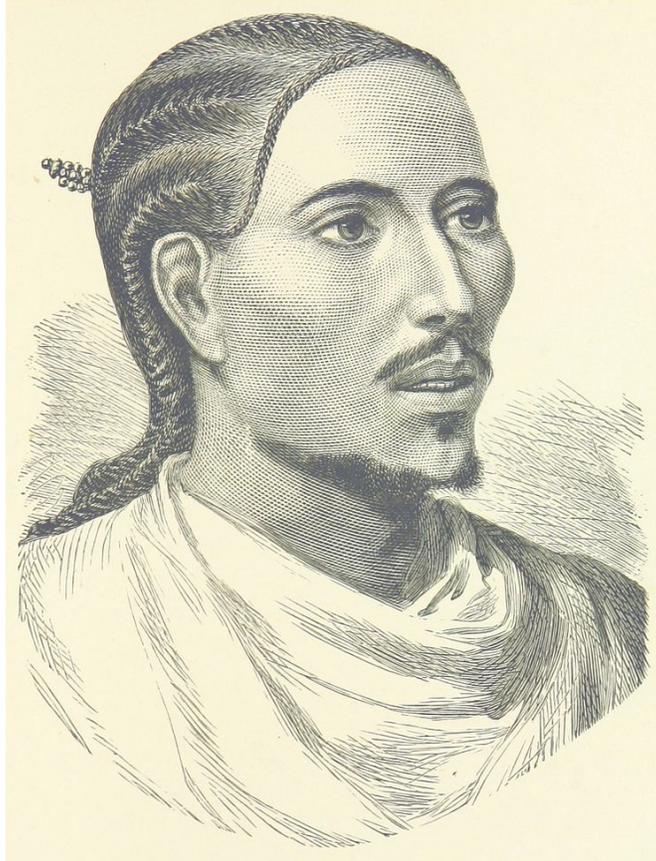
Consul and other foreigners at court. In response, Britain dispatched Sir Robert Napier to Ethiopia in late 1867 to carry out a punitive expedition. Napier's superior forces defeated Tewodros's army at the Battle of Magdala in 1868. Britain, with no long-term interest in Ethiopia, freed the English captives and recalled Napier's army. Tewodros was humiliated and committed suicide.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1867-68_Abyssinia_Expedition_\(47\)_Magdala_sentry_post_over_gate_\(Custom\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1867-68_Abyssinia_Expedition_(47)_Magdala_sentry_post_over_gate_(Custom).jpg)>

*Victorious British Troops –
At A Captured Sentry Post Above Magdala Fortress, 1868*

Emperor Yohannes IV (1871-1889). Kassa Mercha of Tigray – the future Emperor Yohannes IV – was born into a royal family. Throughout his life, Kassa Mercha was a devout supporter of the Orthodox Church and a strong Tigrayan chauvinist. He became the Dejazmach (commander of the gate) of Tigray and opposed the efforts of Tewodros to reunify Ethiopia. In 1868, Kassa Mercha permitted the British invading forces free access through Tigray and remained neutral in the struggle between Ethiopia and Britain. After Britain won the Battle of Magdala, the departing British army supplied Kassa Mercha with excess mortars, howitzers, muskets, and ammunition. Those military supplies proved decisive in his struggle to become emperor of Ethiopia. Wagshum Gobaze, the ruler of Amhara, had been crowned Emperor Takla Giyorgis at Gondar, immediately after Tewodros had committed suicide in 1868. Kassa defeated Gobaze at the Battle of Assam in 1871 and became Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SMITH\(1890\)_p211_JOHANNIS,_KING_OF_ABYSSINIA.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SMITH(1890)_p211_JOHANNIS,_KING_OF_ABYSSINIA.jpg)>

Emperor Yohannes IV (ruled 1872-1889) – From H. F. H. Smith, Through Abyssinia, An Envoy's Ride To the King of Zion, 1890, British Library

The new emperor worked hard to achieve his goal of reunifying Ethiopia through political compromise. But he first had to fend off invasions by Egypt in 1875 (Battle of Gundet) and 1876 (Battle of Gura). Finally in 1876, King Menelik II of Shewa agreed to yield his expanding state to imperial rule in return for a promise of extensive

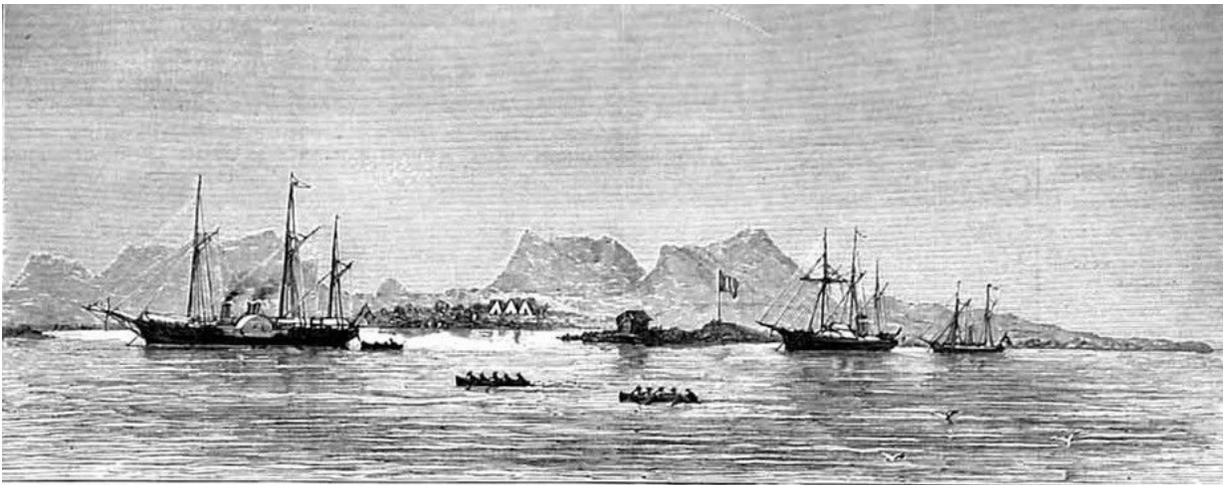
Shewan autonomy. For the first time in its imperial history, the reunified Ethiopian state then controlled all of Abyssinia plus southern areas to Gurage.

In 1887, Yohannes defeated Italy at the Battle of Dogali in eastern Ethiopia, although Italy continued to threaten Ethiopia's independence. In 1889, Yohannes held off an invasion in Ethiopia's west by the Mahdists (Dervishes) from Sudan. But during a crucial Ethiopian victory at the Battle of Metemma, the emperor was killed by a sniper's bullet.

Italian Expansionism and the Partition of Africa (1870-1885).

Italy was unified in 1870, encompassing an area close to the country's current boundaries. Because the new nation had colonial aspirations, the unification of Italy had a significant impact on Ethiopia and the other countries of the Horn of Africa. Italy first intervened in the region in 1870, when it claimed the minor Red Sea port of Assab (in contemporary Eritrea) as a coaling station on the newly opened Suez route (France had completed the Suez Canal in 1869). Italian plans for a colonial presence in northeastern Africa accelerated in the 1880s. In

1882, Italy established a colony in Assab with full colonial governmental powers. Three years later, the Italian government invaded Massawa, seized control of that leading port, and then immediately blockaded all sales of military equipment to Yohannes IV in Ethiopia. With those actions, Italy clearly demonstrated its intentions to conquer and colonize as much of Ethiopia and Somaliland as possible, subject to local resistance and the opposition of colonial competitors.



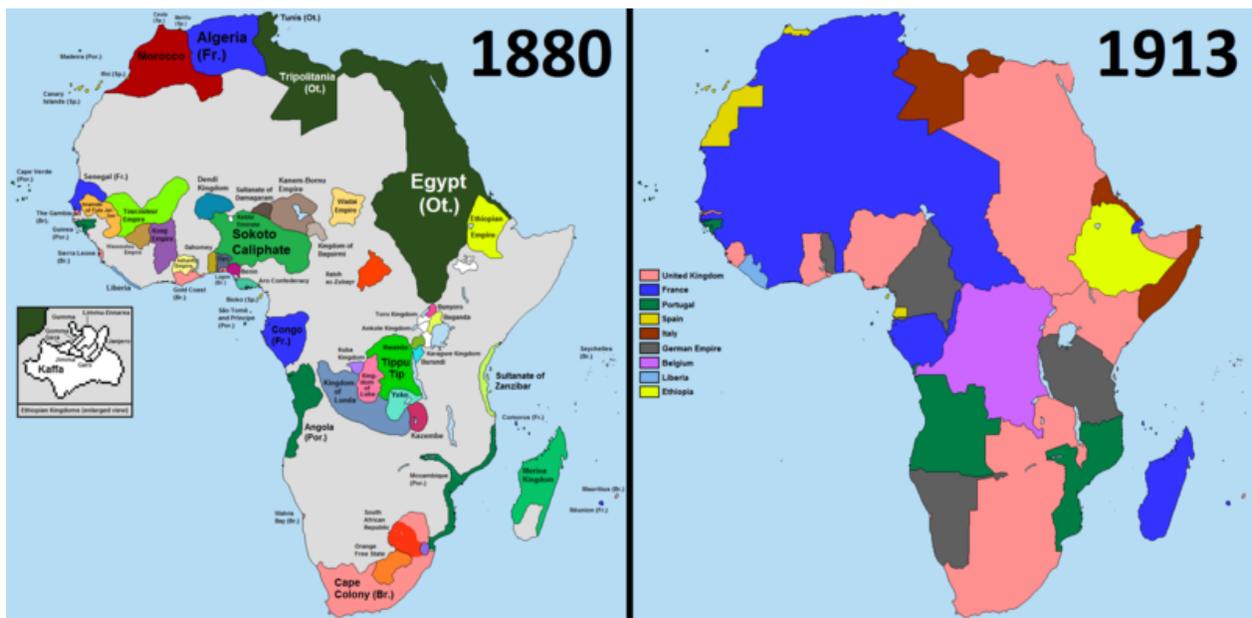
ASSAB BAY, STRAITS OF BAB-EL-MANDEB—THE FIRST ITALIAN SETTLEMENT IN AFRICA

Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Assab_1880.jpg>

Assab, Eritrea – First Italian Settlement in Africa, 1880

The scramble for colonies in Africa among European powers was in high gear in the early 1880s. Initially, only Britain, France, and Portugal held colonial territories in Africa. Then in the late 1870s and

early 1880s, King Leopold of Belgium and newly unified Germany joined the competition. Italy and Spain were not far behind. The partition of Africa, which occurred at the Conference of Berlin in 1885, was essentially a projection of European power politics into Africa. It had little to do with European perceptions of immediate economic gain or of African rights. Italy received diplomatic rights to seek colonies in northeastern Africa and thereafter accelerated its colonial efforts in that region.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Scramble-for-Africa-1880-1913.png>

European Colonialism in Africa, 1880 and 1913 – Italy (Red), Britain (Pink), France (Blue), Portugal (Green), Germany (Brown), Independent Ethiopia (Yellow)

King Menelik II of Shewa (1865-1889). Menelik was born in 1844, the son of King Haile Melekot of Shewa, and was the crown prince to succeed to the throne. In 1855, when Menelik was 11, his father died. Before Menelik could assume the throne, Emperor Tewodros imprisoned him in Magdala where he remained for a decade. After Menelik escaped from prison in 1865, he became king of Shewa at age 21.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Minilk.jpg>>

King Menelik II of Shewa (ruled 1865-1889)

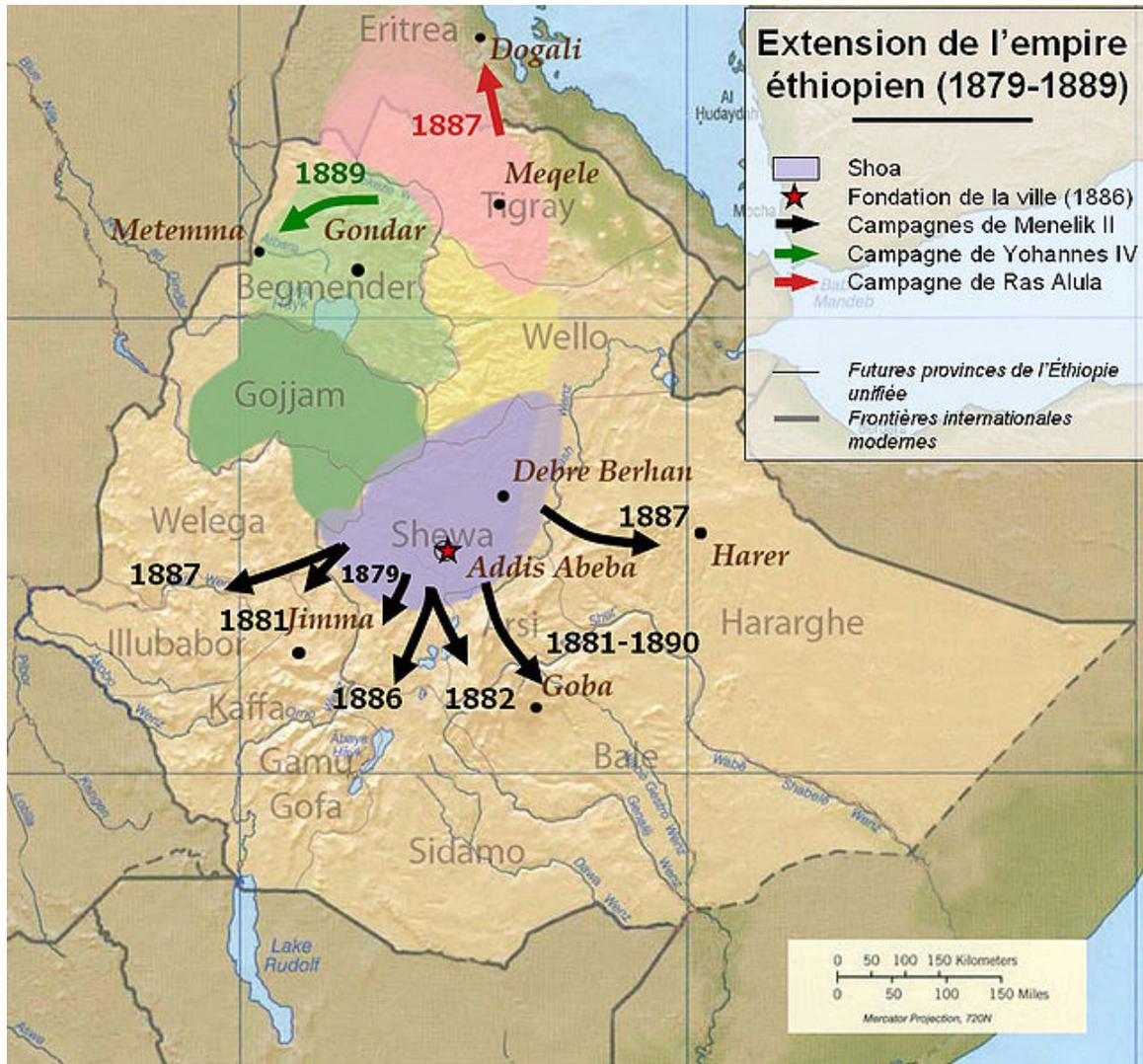
Shewa then was the richest and most powerful of the Ethiopian states, following a half-century of political stability, economic prosperity, and territorial expansion. Under Menelik's leadership, the state prospered and expanded even more. Menelik moved the capital of Shewa twice during his kingship. He shifted the capital in 1881 from Ankober to Entoto and in 1887 from Entoto down the mountain to a new town, Addis Ababa (new flower). In 1883, Menelik married Taitou Betul, an extraordinarily intelligent, thoughtful, and cautious woman, who provided effective counterpoint to aid his strong leadership.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Taytu_Betul.jpg>

*Taitou Betul, Third Wife and Powerful Consort of Menelik II --
From the French Newspaper, "Le Petit Journal", 1896*

Like the other Ethiopian states, Shewa produced a modest agricultural surplus that the state taxed away from the farmers and landowners. The main source of wealth for Shewa, however, was foreign trade and expansion. The Shewan state parlayed its central location into trade monopolies by channeling nearly all of the exports of ivory, coffee, and slaves from the southwest and south through Shewa en route to Red Sea ports. Menelik spent much of those export earnings on imports of modern firearms and ammunition. He then used his additional military power to expand Shewan suzerainty in the areas that were the sources of the exports. Shewa gained control of Gurage in the south in 1875, Kaffa in the southwest in 1881, Jima in the southwest in 1884, and Harar in the east in 1887. Never before had those resource-rich outlying areas, mostly inhabited by animists or Muslims, all been under the control of a state from the Semitic-speaking center or a part of the Ethiopian empire.

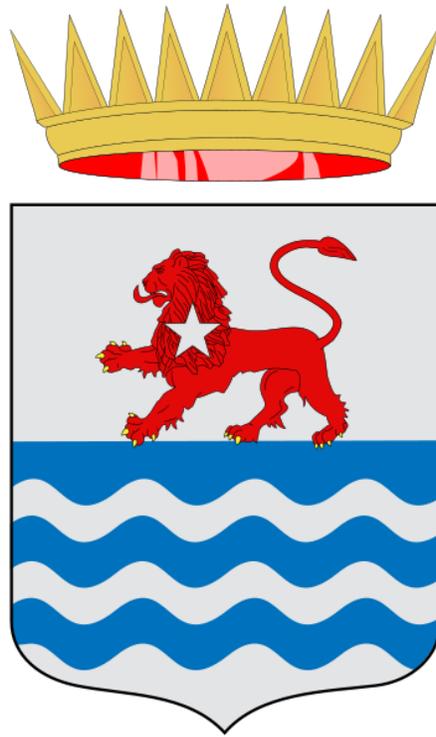


Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Menelik_campaign_map_1_3.jpg

Expansion of the Ethiopian Empire Under Emperor Yohannes IV and of Shewa Under King Menelik II, 1879-1889

Emperor Menelik II and the European Colonial Powers (1889-1906). Menelik II became Emperor of Ethiopia in 1889 following the death in battle of Yohannes IV. Shortly thereafter, Menelik signed the Treaty of Wichale (a Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship) with

Italy. Article XVII of that treaty was disputed. Italy claimed a protectorate over Ethiopia because the Italian version of the disputed article stated that Italy must represent Ethiopia in all international affairs. In 1890, Italy expanded from its colonial ports of Massawa and Assab and established a colony in Eritrea (named after the Latin words for red sea, *Erythraeum Mare*).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coat_of_arms_of_Eritrea_\(1919-1936\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coat_of_arms_of_Eritrea_(1919-1936).svg)>

Coat of Arms of Italy's Eritrea Colony, 1882-1936

Italian troops then moved inland from Eritrea into Tigray and occupied the important Tigrayan trading town of Adwa. Italy hoped to

gain colonial control over all of Ethiopia, whereas Ethiopia disputed its status as an Italian protectorate and wanted to force the Italians out of Tigray.

The two countries went to war in 1895. The outcome was decided in the Battle of Adwa in 1896. The Ethiopian army won a total victory, destroying half of the Italian army. Thereafter, the European colonial powers treated Ethiopia with greater respect.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ItaloAbyssinianWarpainting.JPG>>

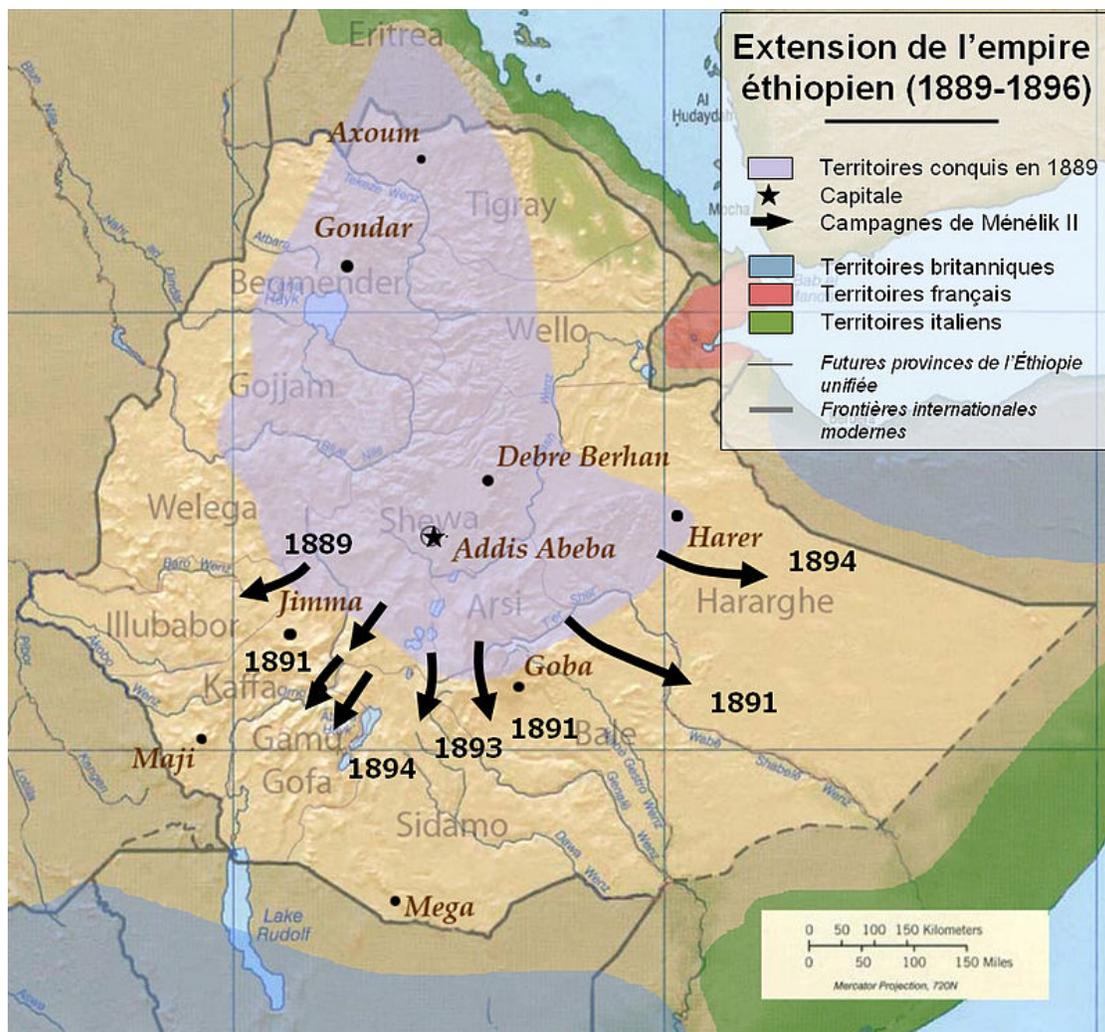
*Emperor Menelik II's Ethiopian Army, Assisted by St. George (Top) –
Defeated Italy in the Decisive Battle of Adwa, 1896*

In the peace treaty, Italy formally recognized Ethiopia's independence, and Britain and France soon negotiated treaties of friendship with Ethiopia. Moreover, Britain, France, and Italy subsequently settled boundary disputes with Ethiopia, determining the country's borders at about their current locations. However, in the Tripartite Agreement of 1906, the three European nations largely ignored Ethiopian sovereignty by mutually agreeing that Britain should have a free hand in the Nile Valley, France should have rights to construct a railroad in an economic zone of influence from Djibouti to Addis Ababa, and Italy should have a vague right to intervene in western Ethiopia to connect its colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland.

Emperor Menelik II and Ethiopian Expansionism (1889-1907).

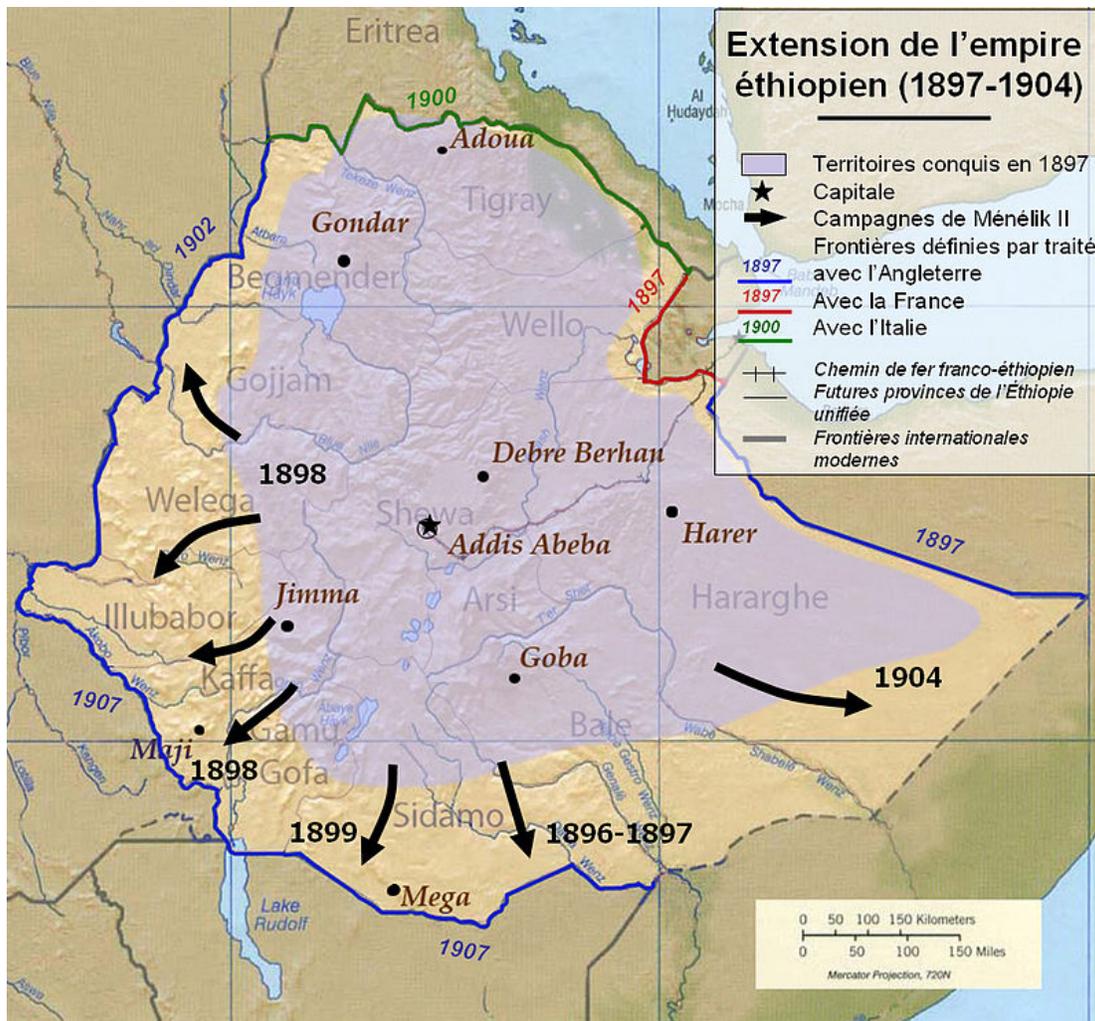
After he became emperor in 1889, Menelik continued the expansionist strategy that he had employed so effectively as king of Shewa. He imported modern firearms and either conquered or threatened into submission the largely Cushitic-speaking, animistic peoples to the south and southwest and the mostly Cushitic-speaking, Muslim peoples to the east and southeast of Abyssinia. In less than two decades, Menelik more

than tripled the area of his empire. Ethiopia expanded to the south to Italian Somaliland (annexing Sidama in 1891 and Borena in 1897), to the southwest to Sudan and Kenya (adding Kaffa in 1897 and Maji in 1898), and to the southeast to British Somaliland (taking Bale in 1891 and the Ogaden in 1904). By 1907, the country reached its current size.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Menelik_campaign_map_2_3.jpg

Ethiopian Expansion Under Menelik II, 1889-1896

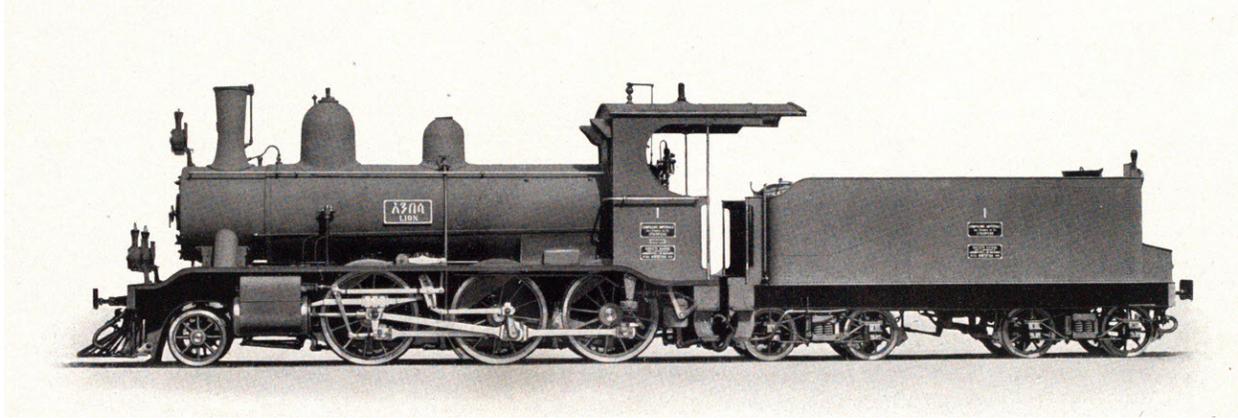


Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Menelik_campaign_map_3_3.jpg>

Ethiopian Expansion under Menelik II, 1897-1904

Menelik introduced some modernization into the economy – the telegraph (1898), a central bank (1905), and modern roads and new schools (early 20th century). Most important, he agreed to French financial support for construction of a railroad from Djibouti in French Somaliland to Addis Ababa. The railway was started after the Battle of

Adwa in 1896 but not completed until 1915, two years after Menelik's death from natural causes.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CIE_Nr._1_Lion.jpg>

Steam Locomotive Engine No, 1, “Lion” On the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railroad – Giving Ethiopia Access to the Red Sea in 1915

As emperor, however, Menelik successfully maintained the traditional system – a feudal political economy in which the autocratic emperor heavily taxed agriculture and foreign trade, shared the spoils with the church and nobility, conquered outlying areas to expand traditional exports (coffee, ivory, gold, and slaves), used the foreign exchange to buy modern weapons, and maintained a large standing army to ensure independence and underpin expansion. That archaic system served the needs of the emperor very nicely. There seemed no need to

risk following Europe into the industrial revolution or Japan into reform of a feudal society.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emperor_Menelik_II.png>

*Menelik II, Emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1913) –
Expansionist, Reformer, and Autocrat*

Tafari Makonnen (1892-1916). During the long reign of Haile Selassie as Emperor of Ethiopia (1930-1974), the Ethiopian people and those outside the country held conflicting images of that powerful, tiny, and complex man. In the early years of his rule, Haile Selassie gained

national and international reputations as a courageous leader, a defender of his nation against Italian intervention, a strong African nationalist, and an elder statesman who skillfully mediated disputes between African countries.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Haile_Selassie_in_full_dress.jpg>

*Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia (1930-1974) –
Portrayed In Full Dress Uniform, 1970*

Later on, Haile Selassie was increasingly criticized, especially within Ethiopia, as a power monger, an autocrat who was bent upon preserving

a semi-feudal system, a demagogue who intentionally misled his people, and a cynic whose interest in reform and development was intended mainly to preserve inequalities in his impoverished country. Both of these conflicting images were largely correct.

Tafari Makonnen, the man who later became Emperor Haile Selassie I, was born into the Shewan Amhara royal family in 1892. He was the great-grandson of King Sahle Selassie of Shewa (ruled 1813-1847) and a cousin of Emperor Menelik II (ruled 1889-1913). His father, Ras Makonnen, was a close associate of Menelik and served as governor of Harar (the important eastern province that Menelik had conquered in 1887).

As a boy and teenager, Tafari impressed the crown with his phenomenal memory and maturity. At age thirteen, Tafari received the important title of dejazmach (a noble title equivalent to a count) and a year later he was given his first appointment as a provincial official. Because of his early entry into the bureaucracy, Tafari did not receive a formal education. He was tutored by a French Jesuit, Monsignor

Jerome, and was literate. But he had little interest in or time for reading and writing.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tafari_Dejazmatch_Harrar.jpg>

Dejazmach Tafari Makonnen, Governor of Harar, 1906 (Age 14)

Ras Tafari Makonnen (1916-1930). Tafari Makonnen was an ambitious politician and schemer from the outset of his career. In 1916, he was on the winning side in the rebellion against Emperor Lij Iyasu (ruled 1913-1916), Menelik's unpopular grandson. Tafari then became part of an unprecedented experiment – a dual government in which

power was shared between Empress Zawditu (ruled 1916-1930), Menelik's daughter, and Tafari.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_empress_zauditu.jpg>

*Empress Zawditu (1876-1930) –
Co-ruled Ethiopia With Ras Tafari Makonnen, 1916-1930*

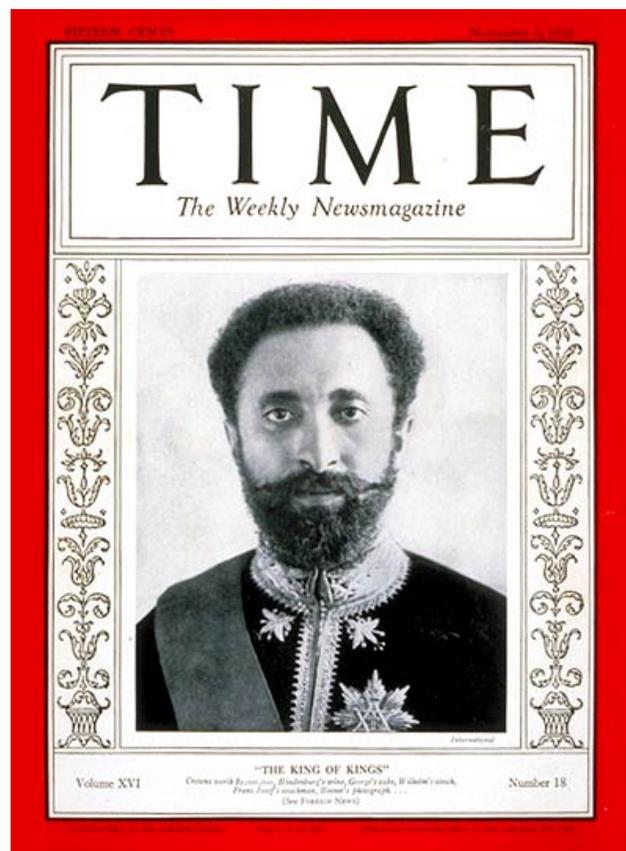
In the political compromise of 1916, Tafari received the prestigious title of Ras (prince) and was named heir to the throne. He then waited patiently for his chance to rule as he built his political power base at home and abroad. Rather than undercutting the Empress directly, Ras Tafari adroitly constructed political alliances to ensure that

he would succeed her. He focused his attention on the two key political power centers – Shewa, the leading province economically, and Addis Ababa, the capital city that in only two decades had become the administrative and economic center of Ethiopia.

Ras Tafari worked hard to identify himself as a reformer, but always within the context of the existing political structure. In 1923, he started Ethiopia's first newspaper, *Berhanena Selam* (Light and Peace). A year afterward, he was instrumental in pushing through the first decree that began to abolish slavery, and later in the 1920s, he supported the establishment of new schools and hospitals. Ras Tafari also served as Ethiopia's de facto foreign minister under Empress Zawditu. He skillfully arranged Ethiopia's entry into the League of Nations in 1923, only four years after that organization's founding, and he negotiated a Treaty of Friendship with Italy in 1928, which was supposed to have lasted for twenty years. In 1928, Ras Tafari received the title of Negus (king), a rank second only to that of being emperor.

Emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1936). Empress Zawditu died of natural causes in 1930, and Ras Tafari Makonnen became Emperor

Haile Selassie I (Power of the Trinity). Ethiopia in the 1930s was afflicted by the Great Depression and threatened by European fascism. The new emperor thus focused initially on building a strong centralized government and a modern, professional military to protect his country's independence.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Selassie_on_Time_Magazine_cover_1930.jpg>

*Emperor Haile Selassie I, Cover of Time Magazine, November 3, 1930 –
Following His Inauguration As Emperor of Ethiopia*

To strengthen his decrepit economy, Haile Selassie constructed infrastructure – modern roads, a network of telephone communications, primary and secondary schools, and hospitals. In 1933, he built the first radio station in Ethiopia. For political reasons, he located most of that infrastructure in the Amharic and Tigrayan regions – the center, northwest, and north. In 1931, Haile Selassie introduced the country's first constitution and Parliament (although he retained full political control) and he decreed that slavery should be fully abolished.

In the mid-1930s, Mussolini precipitated a war with Ethiopia to avenge the Italian defeat at the Battle of Adwa (1896) and to gain control of Ethiopia and thus connect fascist Italy's colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland. Italy invaded the Ogaden region of Ethiopia in 1934 and then demanded an apology from Ethiopia. In 1935, France gave a free hand to Italy in Ethiopia in return for Italy's promise to stay out of French Tunisia. Italy then invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea in October 1935.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
 <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_War_Map_\(may_1936\)_it.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_War_Map_(may_1936)_it.svg)>

*Italy's Invasion and Takeover of Ethiopia, 1935-1936 –
 From Italian Colonies in Eritrea and Somalia*

The League of Nations condemned the Italian aggression but omitted gasoline from its international embargo against Italy. Britain and France were embarrassed by Italy's invasion, but did not want to push Mussolini into alliance with Hitler of Nazi Germany. Italian

military force, based on tanks, artillery, airplanes, and poison gas, overwhelmed the Ethiopian army. Haile Selassie went into exile in Britain in May 1936, just before the Italians captured Addis Ababa. Italy steadily overcame courageous resistance and occupied Ethiopia by the end of the year.

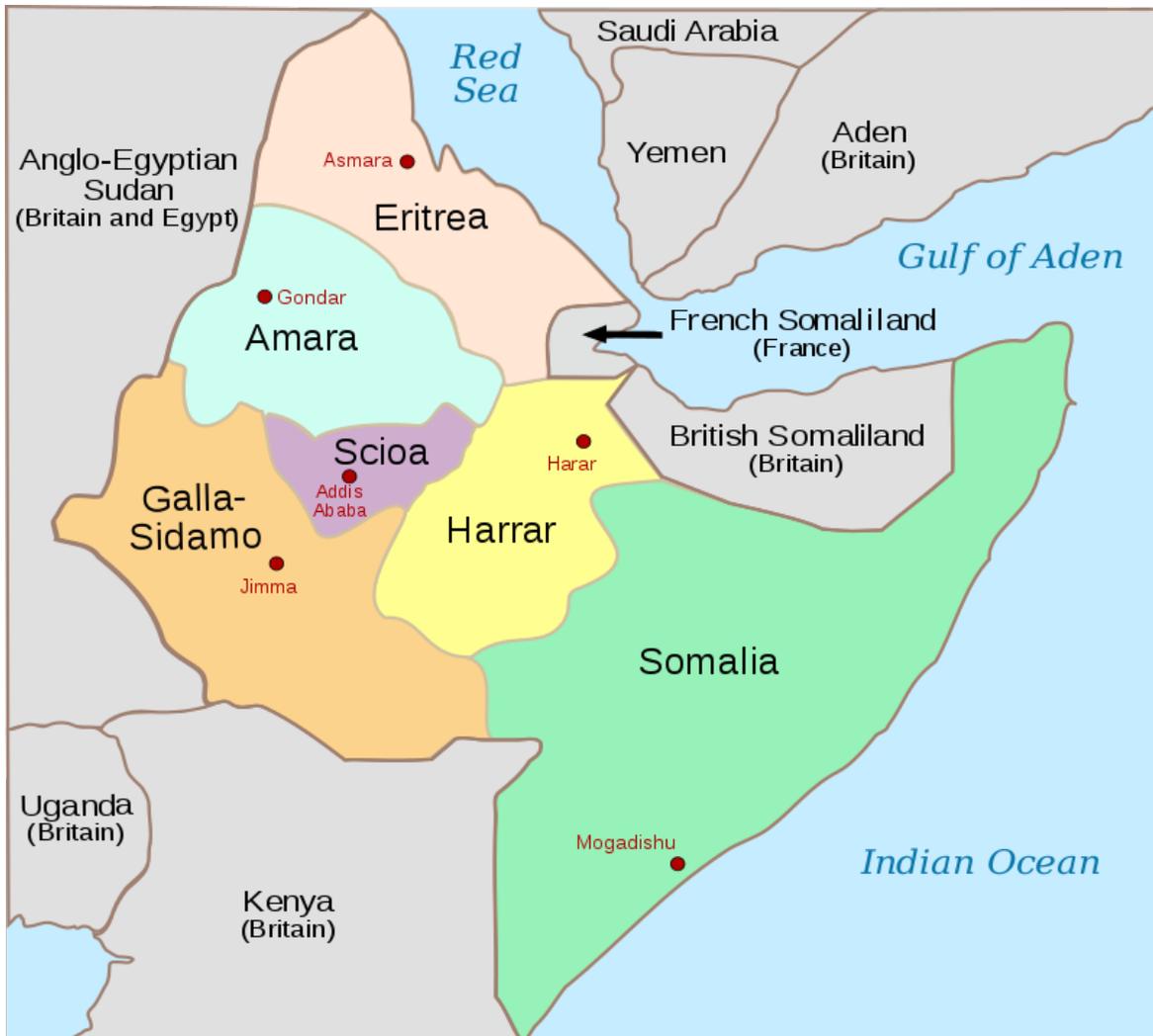
Exile, Liberation, and World War II (1936-1945). Emperor Haile Selassie had gone abroad in May 1936 to seek support against the Italian invasion. The deteriorating military situation in Ethiopia forced him to stay in Britain and to remain in exile for nearly five years. Haile Selassie made an impassioned plea for help at the League of Nations in Geneva in June 1936. In seeking to maintain the independence of his country, he asked: “What answer am I to take back ...? God and history will remember your verdict.” Even in the absence of their emperor, the Ethiopian army fought on until the end of 1936 and Ethiopian patriots resisted into 1937.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Selassie.jpg>>

Emperor Haile Selassie, mid-1930s

The Italian occupation of Ethiopia was brutal. The occupation army of 150,000 soldiers had a difficult time controlling guerrilla resistance, especially in mountainous terrain. Italy truncated the country by transferring Ogaden into Somaliland and Tigray into Eritrea. After World War II began in 1939 and Mussolini aligned with Hitler against the Allies, Britain finally listened to Haile Selassie's pleas for military assistance in liberating Ethiopia from fascist rule.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italian_East_Africa_\(1938%E2%80%931941\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Italian_East_Africa_(1938%E2%80%931941).svg)>

*Italian East Africa, 1936-1941 –
Ethiopia Was Divided Into Five Colonial Provinces*

The emperor fled to the Sudan in June 1940 and reentered Ethiopia in January 1941 at Omedla with an Allied, mainly British, invading army. Italian resistance in Ethiopia melted away, and the emperor reentered Addis Ababa with the Allies on May 5, 1941,

precisely five years after Haile Selassie's departure for exile. Liberation was completed at the Battle of Gondar in November 1941. Britain insisted on having a strong supervisory role in governing Ethiopia during the Second World War. The country faced very difficult economic adjustments after the liberation – Italian investment had stopped, the Ethiopian army had to be demobilized, and exports and government revenues were disrupted.

Post-war Foreign Policy and the American Alliance (1945-1974). Ethiopia emerged from World War II with enhanced international prestige, but a weak economy. Emperor Haile Selassie stressed three principal foreign policy goals in his nearly three decades of post-war rule. For national prestige and the economy, he insisted that Ethiopia regain its access to Red Sea ports that were critical for its foreign trade. He gained greater control over the railroad that connected Addis Ababa with Djibouti (then in French Somaliland). More important, Haile Selassie successfully pushed to have Eritrea returned to Ethiopian control in 1952. Eritrea, and its ports of Massawa and Assab,

had been an Italian colony (1890-1941) and supervised by Britain (1941-1952).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_and_Eritrea_attached_\(Derg,_PDR\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_and_Eritrea_attached_(Derg,_PDR).png)>

*Ethiopia Including Eritrea, 1952-1993 –
Ethiopia Reclaimed Eritrea in 1952*

The emperor's second aim in his foreign policy was to expand and modernize Ethiopia's military and economy – to guarantee the country's independence and underpin his regime's control. He received only modest war reparations from Italy at the end of World War II (\$25 million, mostly spent on a cotton factory and a hydroelectric plant). Haile Selassie then entered into a longstanding alliance with the United

States. The American government provided significant amounts of military and economic assistance to Ethiopia, helping the country to build the largest standing army in Africa, in return for an American intelligence base in Asmara.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kagnew_Station_Asmara,_Eritrea_\(30479586840\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kagnew_Station_Asmara,_Eritrea_(30479586840).jpg)>

Kagnew Station, Asmara, Eritrea – American Intelligence Base

For personal and national prestige, Haile Selassie’s third foreign policy objective was to serve as a leading elder statesman in African affairs. He lobbied to site the headquarters of two new international organizations – the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa

(1958) and the Organization of African Unity (1963) – in Addis Ababa. He personally mediated several African disputes – Algeria/Morocco (1963), Nigeria/Biafra (1969), and northern and southern Sudan (1972).

Post-war Domestic Policy and Increasing Autocracy (1945-1974). Haile Selassie faced difficult dilemmas in his post-war domestic policy. Western donor countries, especially the United States, along with progressive elements in Ethiopia pressured him to develop Ethiopia – economically, socially, and militarily. But the benefits of greater development brought the attendant risks of challenges to imperial control. Sustained development would require reform. The highly skewed distribution of income brought further pressures. The centuries-old feudal system had transferred wealth to the crown, nobility, and church at the center and left most peasants impoverished. People on the periphery, led by the Oromos (who had become the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia), complained that most government-sponsored development occurred in Semitic-speaking areas in the center and north.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_Mekele_ManHarvestingWheat.JPG>

Threshing Wheat in Mekele – Ethiopia’s Rural Areas Continued To Be Desperately Poor Under Haile Selassie’s Rule

Haile Selassie responded by increasing his autocratic rule rather than accommodating demands for reform. His system of control relied on unyielding personal loyalty, a widespread intelligence network, total control of patronage and gift-giving, institutionalized corruption within the bureaucracy, and a strong police and military.

That system of imperial control was increasingly challenged by young Ethiopians who had been educated abroad and brought home

concerns about greater democracy and human rights, more equal income distribution, and improving village and urban life through education, public health, and public works. Those radical ideas began to be echoed by students on Ethiopian campuses as opposition to the totalitarian regime and calls for reform grew. A coup attempt in 1960, led by the reformist and American-educated Neway brothers, narrowly failed. The regime responded with greater suppression, not reform, and polarization increased.

Downfall and Overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1973-1974). After the failed coup of 1960, the imperial regime became increasingly totalitarian. By relying even more heavily on police and military suppression of dissent, the government of Haile Selassie lost the support of the few progressives in Ethiopia – although not of the American government. The regime felt it dare not risk losing the traditional support of the nobility, and so it was unwilling to contemplate meaningful land reform or increased taxation of the rich. The crown chose not to redistribute assets or income or to loosen its tight political

control and instead met increasing opposition with greater force.

Unknowingly, Haile Selassie's regime was ensuring its own downfall.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JFKWHP-ST-C307-19-63.jpg>>

*Emperor Haile Selassie –
With US President John F. Kennedy, Boston, 1963*

The proximate causes of that downfall arose in 1973-1974. Three events demonstrated the inherent weakness of the regime. The Ethiopian economy was battered by the global downturn following the first oil price rise engineered by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Concurrently, Ethiopia experienced especially severe drought and famine. Because the country did not have

an effective food policy, it had to turn to foreign suppliers of emergency food relief to alleviate widespread famine. A British journalist filmed the famine in the north and showed the world that the Ethiopian government was unwilling or incapable of feeding its starving people. Ethiopia also had engaged in expensive and unpopular wars with Eritrea (suppressing a movement for independence) and Somalia (driving back a Somali invasion of Ogaden, which was populated largely by ethnic Somali peoples).

A successful military coup, led by a secret committee known as the Derg, occurred in 1974. The Derg moved carefully against the entrenched aristocracy, gradually imprisoned the palace nobility, and eventually deposed Emperor Haile Selassie I in September 1974. The coup leaders then took control of the government and of the emperor's fifteen palaces and his network of businesses (including the brewery and bus company in Addis Ababa). Nearly a year later, in August 1975, the Derg murdered Haile Selassie. He died at age 83.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Haile_Selassie_Deposition.jpg>

*The Deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie I By the Derg –
From the Jubilee Palace, September 12, 1974*

Legacy of the Solomonic Dynasty (1270-1974). Seven centuries of rule by Solomonic emperors brought Ethiopia a mixed legacy. Three principal contributions of the Solomonic Dynasty – maintaining political independence, the Orthodox Christian religion, and Ethiopian culture – stand out. The Shewan Amhara rulers protected the political independence of Ethiopia for almost all of their 700 years in power. They nearly lost it during the Islamic jihad of the 16th century, before recovering slowly. They routed Italy in 1896 and fended off European colonialism (except for Mussolini’s brief occupation, 1936-1941).

The Dynasty also preserved the Orthodox Christian religion, and Ethiopia stood as an island in a sea of surrounding Muslim territories. Portuguese Jesuits converted one emperor (Susneyos in the early 17th century), but he was forced to abdicate and the Catholics were sent home. Muslims dominated commerce but not religion or culture. The Semitic-speaking highlanders further maintained their traditional artistic culture (painting, music, and calligraphy) and Ge'ez language, fending off the intrusion of foreign influences.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Addis_abeba,_cattedrale_di_san_giorgio,_esterno_06.jpg>

*Solomonic Legacy, Support of Ethiopian Orthodox Church –
St. George's Cathedral, Addis Ababa*

Faced with increasing threats in the 20th century, however, the Solomonic system turned rigid and caused its own destruction. The crown insisted on retaining totalitarian power and thus refused to introduce democratic reforms. The system continued to favor the very rich over the poor masses and the Semitic-speaking center-north over the outlying regions, and the Solomonic emperors refused to promote economic restructuring and sustained development. The ruling oligarchy made every effort to keep the hierarchical system and only grudgingly accepted any modernization of society. The Solomonic system collapsed after foreign-educated progressives returned with hopes of reform and development, were rebuffed by military suppression, and eventually gained the support of reformers within the military. Without the support of the military, nothing was left to prop up the debilitated Solomonic hierarchy.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ET_Addis_asv2018-01_img38_Lion_of_Judah.jpg>

*Solomonic Legacy, Totalitarian Power –
Lion of Judah Statue, Addis Ababa*

Goals of Ethiopia’s Revolution (1974-1976). The committee of army officers who led the military coup, the Derg, took power gradually between February and September 1974. The reformist officers wished to end the severe inequality of income and asset-holdings in Ethiopia, to alleviate the desperate poverty that afflicted many Ethiopians, and to slow the degradation of the country’s natural resources. They moved quickly to create a socialist economy that they hoped would shift power away from the feudal hierarchy toward poor people.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Teferi_Benti.jpg>

*Brigadier General Teferi Benti –
Chairman of the Derg and Head of State of Ethiopia, 1974-1977*

A prominent slogan throughout the revolutionary campaign was “Land to the Tiller.” The Derg carried out a massive land reform that nationalized all land and permitted small-scale farmers to hold up to 10 hectares (about 25 acres), although most farmers received only 1-2 hectares. Land reform was intended to placate the Oromos who resented earlier land grabs by Amhara nobility.

The Derg tried to establish a Marxist command economy based on central planning. In hopes of realizing economies of scale in agricultural production, the officers' committee announced that agriculture would be collectivized into peasant cooperatives and state farms. The government nationalized industries, banks, and service companies with the intent of transferring benefits from the former owners (the crown, church, and nobility) to the workers. In contradiction to their espousal of democratic principles, the Derg set up a one-party state and created the Workers' Party of Ethiopia as the only permitted party. As military officers, the members of the Derg felt they needed to strengthen Ethiopia's already large military establishment to safeguard achievement of the goals of the revolution. In late 1976, the Soviet Union agreed to supply Ethiopia with massive amounts of military assistance, and the share of military spending in the government budget ballooned to 40 percent.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Marx_Engels_Lenin.svg>

The Derg – Marx, Engels, and Lenin in Ethiopia

Mengistu’s Consolidation of Power (1974-1978). The Derg began by murdering 59 high-ranking members of the former government (during 1974) and by strangling Haile Selassie (in 1975). Major Mengistu Haile Mariam emerged as the toughest and shrewdest member of the Derg. American-educated, ruthless, and power-hungry, Mengistu brutally overcame all opposition. In the first two years of the revolution, he came forward first as the co-leader of the Derg and then as its

unabashed spokesman. Mengistu showed little restraint in slaughtering civilian dissidents.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mengistu_Haile_Mariam_3.jpg>

*Major Mengistu Haile Mariam –
Ethiopia's Brutal Military Dictator, 1975-1991*

Two civilian groups of radicals vied for power at the beginning of the revolution. The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) was dominated by northern, Semitic-speaking young people who had studied in the United States and wanted a democratic, not a military,

government. During a horrendously bloody period of near anarchy in 1977, Mengistu decimated the EPRP and wiped out many of Ethiopia's most capable young people. The other civilian group was the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (known by its Amharic acronym, MEISON), which consisted mainly of Oromos who had been educated in France and chose initially to collaborate with the Derg. But that group lost out when Mengistu created his one-party state.

Mengistu's consolidation of power was buttressed by his military victories on two opposite fronts, both heavily assisted by massive Soviet military aid. In 1977, Mengistu won a victory in the north over the rebel guerrilla movements in Eritrea that were attempting to gain independence from Ethiopia. In the south, in 1978 Mengistu contained and then reversed an invasion by Somalia in the Somali-speaking Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Mengistu thus consolidated power and became a ruthless military dictator.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Ethiopia.svg>

*Flag of the Ethiopian National Defense Force –
The Basis of Mengistu's Ruthless Power*

Disastrous Agricultural Policies (1974-1991). The socialist policies adopted by the Mengistu regime were a disaster for Ethiopian agriculture. The agricultural sector provided 85 percent of national employment, half of total income, and nine-tenths of export earnings – mostly from coffee. Land reform, begun in 1975, was intended to redistribute assets away from the rich Amhara nobility. But in the economic chaos of the Mengistu government, redistribution of land created over-cultivation on smaller farms, land degradation, and declining yields. The socialist government created a three-tiered

structure of agricultural operations – small farms, producer cooperatives, and state farms.

Most households were organized into producer associations that allocated land, usually in farms of only 1-2 hectares (2.5-5 acres). In spite of their difficulties, those small farms produced about 90 percent of the countries' agricultural output and were the least inefficient mode of operation. The government formed 4,000 producer cooperatives that served 300,000 farm households and produced 6 percent of agricultural output. Yet despite interest-free loans and government subsidies, the cooperatives were less efficient producers than the traditional small farms.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ploogh_tool.jpg>

Unhappy Ethiopian Farmer – Plowing With Zebu Cattle

The state farms were even worse. The government wasted 60 percent of its agricultural budget on state farms, which produced only 4 percent of agricultural output with bungling inefficiency. The government also forced farmers to sell much of their produce to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation at very low prices. Farmers thus paid more taxes to the new government than they had to Haile Selassie's regime. Those disastrous policies caused food production to fall by 25

percent between 1975 and 1990 and increased the vulnerability of the rural poor to drought and famine.

Mengistu's Downfall (1988-1991). Several factors contributed to Mengistu's downfall. In 1988, the failing Soviet Union cut off military aid to Ethiopia. Soviet military assistance had exceeded \$300 million in most years since 1977 and permitted Mengistu to allocate half of government revenue to military spending. The economic failures of Mengistu's socialist experiment increased popular resentment against the regime. Agricultural collectivization reduced food production and exacerbated the effects of three major periods of drought. Ethiopia suffered a national famine and several hundred thousand deaths in the mid-1980s. The government compounded its errors by forcing people to resettle into villages or to move to other parts of the country. Per capita income in Ethiopia declined by half during Mengistu's brutal regime.

Ethnic nationalism was the ultimate cause of Mengistu's downfall. The Amhara people constituted only about 30 percent of Ethiopia's population. Most other ethnic groups expected greater opportunities after the revolution. When those aspirations were not met, they began a

series of anti-Amhara insurrections. The first insurrection was in Eritrea where the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) was fighting for independence from Ethiopia. The EPLF trained and armed their Tigrayan cousins to help form the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:TPLFsymbol.PNG>>

Logo of the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF)

The TPLF then shifted its goal from independence for Tigray to taking over the government of Ethiopia and formed a coalition of regional groups, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), for that purpose. The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) strongly

opposed Mengistu but chose not to join the EPRDF coalition. The EPRDF rebels won a series of victories in early 1991. Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe in May 1991, and the EPRDF, led by Meles Zenawi of Tigray, took over the government.

Emigration of Ethiopian Jews (1985-1991). The Ethiopian Jews, known as Bete Israel or Falashas, were farmers and urban craftsmen who lived mainly in the Simien Mountains region north of Gondar. Although they might have numbered 100,000 in the medieval period, there were probably about 30,000 Ethiopian Jews living in post-revolutionary Ethiopia. After many centuries of autonomy, they began suffering persecution in the early 17th century and they never were able to regain their political independence. During the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the Ethiopian Jews lost much of their land to the aggressive land grabs perpetrated by Amhara nobility and businessmen. Most Ethiopian Jews thus lived in or near poverty. Through their adversity, the Bete Israel maintained a fervent belief in their pre-rabbinic version of Judaism.

In the post-World War II period, the plight of Ethiopia's Jews was not much alleviated despite the very close diplomatic ties between the new nation of Israel and Haile Selassie's Ethiopia. Israel provided significant amounts of economic and military assistance to Ethiopia (until 1973 when Ethiopia was forced by the OAU to sever ties with Israel). But that aid did little for the country's small and remote Jewish population.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopie-falasha.jpg>>

Areas of Inhabitation (Green) of Bete Israel in Ethiopia

Most Ethiopian Jews migrated to Israel in two spectacular evacuations carried out by the Israeli government with American assistance. The first, Operation Moses, occurred in 1985. Following a disastrous famine in Ethiopia, about 15,000 Ethiopian Jews emigrated. The second, Operation Solomon, took place in May 1991. At the request of the American Embassy, the conquering EPRDF forces delayed their entry into Addis Ababa to permit the emergency airlift of 14,400 Ethiopian Jews in only twenty-four hours on 41 Israeli military and civilian aircraft. Very few Ethiopian Jews remain in Ethiopia.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_Government_Press_Office_\(GPO\)_-_IDF_OFFICER_HELPING_ETHIOPIAN_IMMIGRANTS.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flickr_-_Government_Press_Office_(GPO)_-_IDF_OFFICER_HELPING_ETHIOPIAN_IMMIGRANTS.jpg)>

*Operation Solomon, May 1991 –
Airlifted 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia to Israel*

Meles's Reforms (1991-1998). The EPRDF government, led by Meles Zenawi, concluded that the socialist experiment of the Mengistu government had been unsuccessful. Meles and the other leaders of the coalition were ethnic nationalists who favored the devolution of power to the regions. With the encouragement of the donor community, led by the United States, the new government abandoned state socialism and liberalized economic policy. Meles and his cohorts scrapped central planning and returned the economy to a market orientation. Market decisions, not government planners, would allocate resources. They began to divest state-owned corporations believing that private management would bring more efficient results.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meles_Zenawi_-_World_Economic_Forum_Annual_Meeting_2012.jpg>

Meles Zenawi (1955-2012), President of Ethiopia, 1991-1995, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, 1995-2012 – Pictured in 2012

The Meles government introduced positive incentives for farmers to grow more food, by removing the exploitative taxes that the Mengistu government had imposed on agriculture. Policymakers dismantled the horribly inefficient collectivized system of state farms, producer cooperatives, and producer organizations and returned to farmer management, abandoning state planning. They closed the state marketing board and allowed farmers to market their products freely,

rather than being forced to fulfill quotas at low prices. The Ethiopian economy responded to those positive incentives with a spurt of rapid growth between 1992 and 1997 averaging nearly 8 percent per year. The Meles team held open elections in 1995 (although the opposition parties chose to boycott), and they devolved budgetary authority to ten autonomous regions. In light of that impressive performance, expectations for continued success were high – within Ethiopia and among donors.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:On_The_Road_To_Simien_Mountains_National_Park,_Ethiopia_\(2446794591\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:On_The_Road_To_Simien_Mountains_National_Park,_Ethiopia_(2446794591).jpg)>

*Ethiopia's Agriculture Revived with Good Policies –
Mixed Grain and Livestock Farm, Northwestern Ethiopia*

The Ethiopian-Eritrean War (1998-2000). American President Bill Clinton visited Africa in early 1998 and praised both Ethiopia and Eritrea for achieving impressive economic growth during the 1990s. But in May 1998, the two neighbors began a brutal two-and-one-half-year war that was the most costly conflict in the world at that time. That shocking event surprised almost everyone. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and President Isaias Afwerki of Eritrea had been long-time guerrilla allies in their fight against Mengistu and together had negotiated Eritrean independence from Ethiopia in 1993. The two countries had joined in an economic union with equal access to Eritrea's Red Sea ports (Massawa and Assab).



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Isaias_Afwerki_in_2002.jpg>

Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki – Pictured in 2002

The proximate cause of the fratricidal war was a border conflict over 250 square miles of unproductive land near the border town of Badme. The underlying causes of the conflict ran deeper. Ethiopia was concerned that Eritrea would violate its promise to permit Ethiopia uninterrupted access to Eritrean ports and that Eritrea would flood the Ethiopian market with cheap manufactured imports. Eritrea complained that Ethiopia was imposing high import duties on Eritrean exports and that Ethiopia refused to accept the new Eritrean currency, the *nafca*, in

violation of the two countries' agreement to form an economic union. Furthermore, both leaders were proud and stubborn ex-guerrillas who were chauvinistic about their fledging countries.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons* available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eritrean%E2%80%93Ethiopian_War_Map_1998.png>

The Ethiopia-Eritrea War, 1998-2000

The effects of the war were disastrous for both combatants – 100,000 deaths in prolonged trench warfare, an expensive bilateral arms race, a freezing of foreign aid and investment, a cessation of economic

growth, and the displacement of one-third of Eritrea's population. A coalition of international mediators, led by Tony Lake of the United States and including also the European Union, the Organization of African Unity, and the United Nations, finally succeeded in negotiating an end to the war in December 2000. Peace, however, has not been the panacea that many had hoped it would be.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eritrea_in_Ethiopia_\(1943-1987\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eritrea_in_Ethiopia_(1943-1987).svg)>

*Contemporary Ethiopia (White Area) and Eritrea (Red Area) –
No Longer an Economic Union*

EPRDF Governments (2000-present). Since the signing of the peace agreement, Ethiopia and Eritrea have maintained a tension-filled

relationship but have avoided open fighting. The Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission issued a decision delimiting the borders between the two countries in 2002. The country suffered from another severe drought in 2002 and had to turn to international donors for food aid, including \$470 million from the United States, to avert famine. Ethiopian income per capita declined by nearly 5 percent in 2003, but recovered when normal rainfall resumed.

Parliamentary elections were held at five-year intervals between 1995 and 2010, and the EPDRF won all four times, subsequently electing (and then re-electing) Meles Zenawi as the Prime Minister. International observers judged the elections to be reasonably fair and credible, although opponents charged the government with intimidation and vote-rigging. Meles and his governments continued to introduce a cautious set of economic reforms – privatizing state enterprise and easing government regulations – to reorient economic policy away from the disastrous state socialism introduced by Mengistu.

The Meles government also pursued the goal of ethnic federalism – decentralizing government so that regional ethnic groups have budgetary

authority. In 2003, it established nine semi-autonomous administrative regions and two special city administrations (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa), which have taxing and spending powers.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_administrative_divisions_-_de_-_colored.svg>

Ethiopia's Nine Semi-autonomous Administrative Regions – Established in 2003

Following the death from natural causes of Meles Zenawi in 2012, Hailemariam Desalegn became Prime Minister of Ethiopia.

Hailemariam, an engineer and a member of the small Welayta ethnic group of southern Ethiopia, had been deputy prime minister and foreign minister. He continued the EPDRF policies of Meles – economic policies that promote rapid growth and political repression that guarantees EPDRF rule.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hailemariam_Desalegn_with_Obamas_2014_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hailemariam_Desalegn_with_Obamas_2014_(cropped).jpg)>

*Hailemariam Desalegn, Prime Minister of Ethiopia, 2012–2018 –
With US President Barack Obama (Left), Washington, 2014*

In the parliamentary elections held in May 2015, the EPDRF won 500 of the 547 seats, and its allies claimed the remainder. Opposing groups

again alleged improper practices and election rigging. In 2016, the Ethiopian government declared a state of emergency following violent anti-government demonstrations. Following continuing political unrest, Hailemariam resigned in 2018.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at

Abiy Ahmed (1976 –) – Prime Minister of Ethiopia (2018 –) and Winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize

Abiy Ahmed then was elected leader of the ruling EPDRF and became Ethiopia's prime minister, the first ethnic Oromo to hold that

position. Abiy promised political and economic reforms and an end to the violent protests led by the Oromo Liberation Army. Within three months, Abiy ended the war with Eritrea by offering to evacuate the disputed territory that had been awarded to Eritrea, an action that led to his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. Later in 2018, Sahle-Work Zewde was elected President of Ethiopia, the first woman to hold that largely ceremonial post.



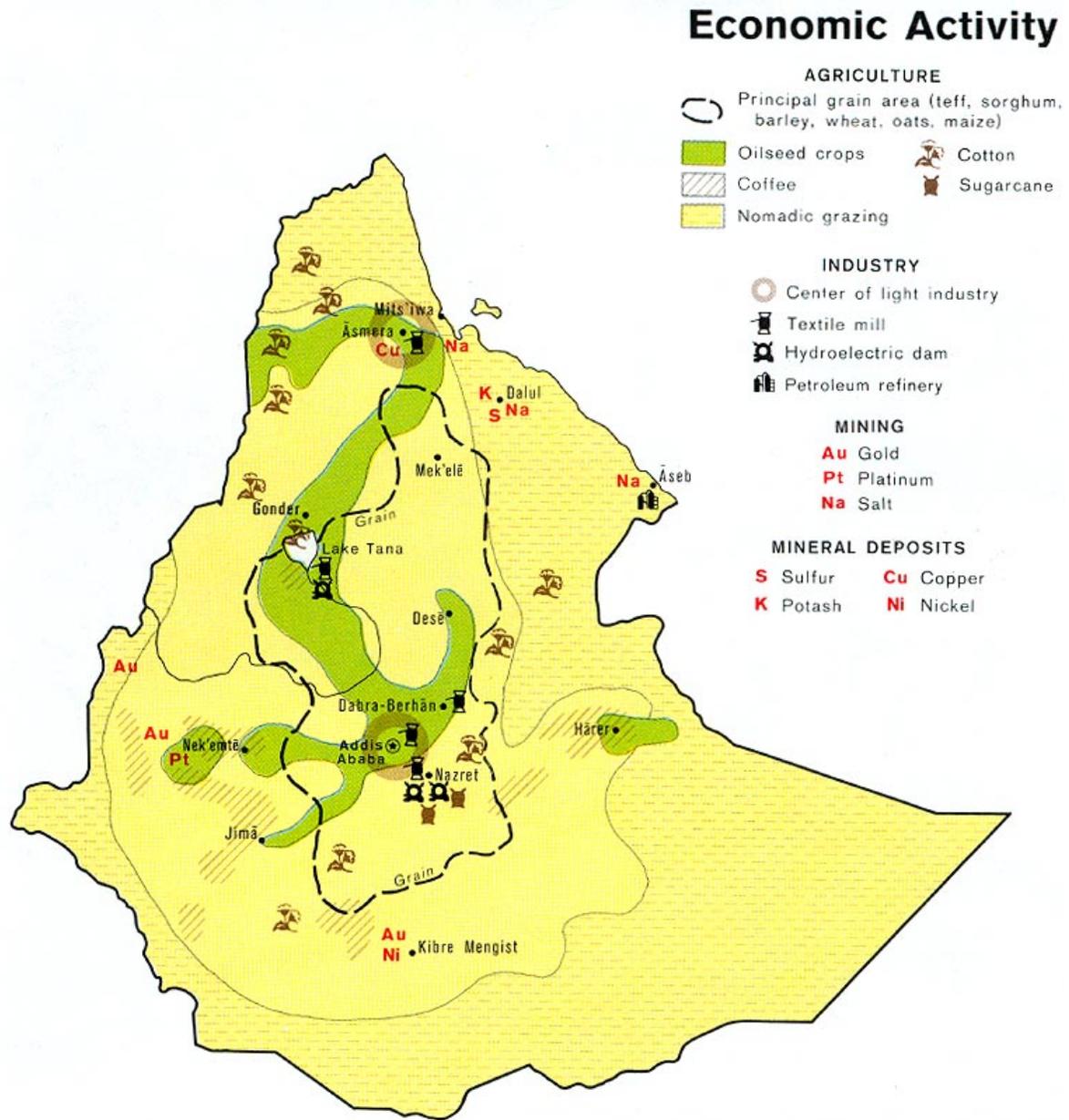
Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
< https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sahle-Work_Zewde.jpg >

Sahle-Work Zewde (1950 –) – President of Ethiopia (2018 –)

Although Abiy freed political prisoners and welcomed home exiled rebel groups, he has been unable to resolve the struggle with the Oromo

separatists. Much remains to be accomplished before Ethiopia can begin to enjoy political freedoms and sustained economic development.

Ethiopian Economic Development. Ethiopia's land area, 426,370 square miles, is 72 percent of that of Alaska. The Ethiopian population of 115 million is primarily Oromo (34 percent) and Amhara (27 percent) and includes numerous smaller ethnic groups. The primary religions are Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (43 percent), Islam (34 percent), and Protestant Christianity (19 percent). Between 1990 and 2019, Ethiopia's GDP per capita (adjusted for purchasing power and in constant prices) grew at an annual average rate of 3.7 percent and reached \$2,312 in 2019 (13 percent of the world average). That income indicator declined at the rate of -0.5 percent between 1990 and 2003 and then soared at the world-class annual rate of 7.3 percent between 2003 and 2019. Nevertheless, Ethiopia ranked among the world's 20 poorest countries in 2019.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethiopia_econ_1976.jpg

Location of Economic Activities in Ethiopia

Following significant investments in public health, Ethiopia's life expectancy improved from 47 years (1990) to 66 years (2018), but its

rate of adult literacy was only 52 percent (2017). Accordingly, Ethiopia's ranking in the UNDP's Human Development Index (173rd of 189 countries) – the gold standard of quality-of-life indicators because it incorporates income, health, and education data – is lower than its ranking in the World Bank's listing of per capita incomes (168th of 187 countries). Only 19 percent of Ethiopia's people use the Internet (2017). In spite of its recent attempts to reform, Ethiopia ranked a woeful 159th of 190 countries in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index. Encouragingly, corruption is not as widespread in Ethiopia as in many other emerging economies. The country ranked 96th of 198 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index compiled by Transparency International.

The Ethiopian economy depends heavily on exports (\$7.6 billion in 2019). Its leading export products are coffee (33 percent), oilseeds (19 percent), and clothing (12 percent). Ethiopia also relies on foreign assistance (\$4.9 billion), foreign direct investment (\$3.4 billion), and international tourism (\$3.5 billion from 800,000 international-tourist

arrivals in 2018). A World Bank study, in which the poverty line was defined as \$1.90 per day (in 2011 PPP dollars), concluded that 23.5 percent of Ethiopia's population lived in poverty in 2015.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
<[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Female_coffee_farmer_in_Ethiopia_\(5762538117\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Female_coffee_farmer_in_Ethiopia_(5762538117).jpg)>

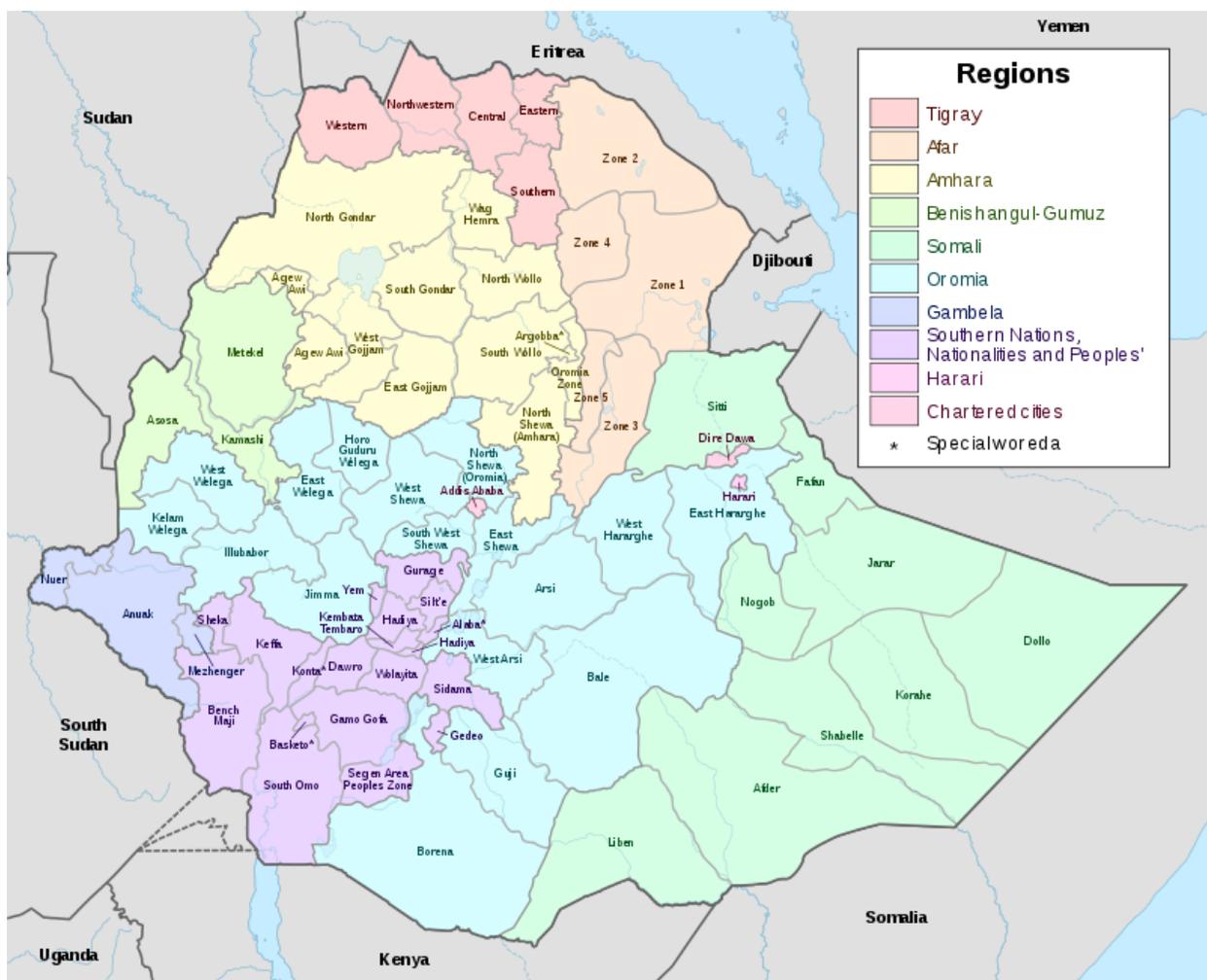
*Woman Coffee Farmer in Southwestern Ethiopia –
Coffee Provides One-third of Ethiopia's Export Earnings*

Recent economic performance in Ethiopia thus has been impressive. But numerous longstanding barriers constrain the prospects for continuing economic progress in Ethiopia. Because much of its

limited wealth in the past was transferred to the crown, nobility, and church and spent unproductively on monuments or military ventures, Ethiopia suffers from low skill and management levels and high rates of illiteracy. Ethiopia remains primarily an agricultural country, but its history was marked by exploitation of farmers by members of the ruling hierarchy – imperial and Marxist. High population growth (estimated at 2.6 percent in 2019) has led to erosion, soil depletion, and deforestation. The country has suffered from poor governance, economic policy intended to enrich the elites, a high foreign debt, and intermittent food shortages.

Those constraints need to be alleviated if Ethiopia is to enjoy continuing economic success in the future. With assistance from foreign donors, the country should strive to increase public investments in human capital – for education, training courses, public health facilities, and water supplies. Additional productivity gains in agriculture could come from small-scale irrigation, high-yielding seeds, better agricultural practices, more chemical fertilizers, and gradual mechanization of threshing and milling. Outside of agriculture, the country will need to

control inflation and stabilize the exchange rate, favor development over military spending, and encourage efficient, export-oriented agricultural processing, industrialization, and mining. Although the road ahead will be long and difficult for this struggling country, the potential for sustained success exists.



Source: Wikimedia Commons available at
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_zones_of_Ethiopia.svg

Contemporary Ethiopia's Regions and Landlocked Border

Lessons for Contemporary Powers

What lessons for contemporary powers can be drawn from the experiences of the Axum Kingdom in Ethiopia and of successor rulers of Ethiopia? Axum fell because the kingdom's rulers overplayed their hands. In the 4th century, Axum invaded Meroë (in Sudan), destroyed a trading competitor, and had the good sense to retreat in victory. But in the 6th century, King Kaleb conquered Yemen, the once-rich homeland of his ancestors, and occupied it. He was motivated by nationalistic greed – a desire to control the ports on both shores of the southern Red Sea – and religious fervor – a hope to promote Orthodox Christianity, goaded by Byzantine leaders in Constantinople. But the Axumites had not foreseen that the Sabaeans in Yemen would call in the Sasanid Persians to evict the Ethiopian invaders. Axum then lost control of the Red Sea trade to the Persians and with it the main source of Axumite wealth. The religiously-inspired foray into Yemen thus debilitated the strength of the Axumite kingdom, precipitated undesired foreign competition, and led to the eventual fall of the kingdom. The lesson in foreign policy is to balance religious fervor and nationalistic pride

against the maintenance of economic opportunities and regional geopolitical realities.

A millennium later, in the 16th century, the Solomonic Dynasty of Orthodox Christian Ethiopia nearly perished. The Ottoman Empire supplied Ethiopian Muslims, fighting an Islamic Jihad, with advanced weaponry – firearms and artillery – that the Solomonids had never used. In the nick of time, Portugal saved the day and offered both modern weapons and troops to Christian Ethiopia. The lesson is to keep up with advanced military technology or to find allies who can provide it in need. The Solomonids later astutely moved to the secure northwestern part of the country and, with the help of Portuguese advisors, reorganized their truncated empire into a defensible unit.

During the 20th century, the Solomonic emperors of Ethiopia were not nearly as wise as the ancestor from whom they claimed ruling legitimacy. Twice, Ethiopia had golden opportunities to reform the traditional system and introduce policies that could lead to greater democratization and sustainable development. Menelik II in the early years of the century and Haile Selassie in the two decades after the

Second World War had complete domestic political control and widespread foreign support. But both were myopic and chose to continue the archaic feudal system – an autocratic taxation of agriculture and foreign trade, a system of shared spoils between the nobility and the church, and a preference for spending on the military rather than on development. That rigidity ensured that most Ethiopians would live in poverty and ultimately brought down the autocratic regime in a violent revolution. The lessons are clear. Land reform and other methods of asset redistribution are necessary if societies are to transform and develop, politically and economically. Educated people and downtrodden masses in even the most hierarchical and under-developed countries eventually will demand such reforms. Aristocratic leaders will survive only if they have the foresight to introduce meaningful changes, even when reforms will undercut the short-run interests of some in the ruling class.

Ethiopia Time Line

from 3000 BCE	origins of agriculture – Ethiopian highlands, teff, finger millet
1st millennium BCE	Sabaeen migrants from Yemen – new agriculture, iron metallurgy
1st millennium BCE	Judaism probably transferred to Ethiopia – from Dynastic Egypt via Kingdom of Meroe to Kingdom of Axum.
c. 700-300 BCE	Daamat Kingdom – irrigated agriculture, Red Sea trade routes
3 rd century BCE	port of Adulis founded – by Ptolemy III Euergetes, a Hellenistic pharaoh of Egypt – access to Chinese silks, Indian spices
2 nd century BCE- century CE	rise of Axum Kingdom – evolved from city 2 nd state to regional power
325	Axum destroyed Meroë (Sudan) – monopolized Nile Valley trade
c. 330	King Ezana of Axum accepted Christianity – began conversion
3 rd -6 th centuries	peak of Axum power – controlled inter-regional, Red Sea trade
528-575	Axum ruled Sabaeen Yemen – protected Orthodox Christians – evicted by Sasanid Persians – lost control of Red Sea trade

616	King Armah of Axum offered asylum to daughter and son-in-law of Muhammad – had fled from Mecca to seek protection
7 th -10 th centuries	remnant Axum kingdom – centered in Blue Nile region
10 th century	Damot rebellion – ended remnant Axum kingdom
1137-1270	Zagwe Dynasty – led by Ahaus, centered in Roha (Lalibela)
1185-1225	King Lalibela – Zagwe leader, built many of the stone churches
1270	Yekuno Amlak (first Solomonic ruler) – killed Yitbarek (last Zagwe ruler)
1314-1344	Amda Siyon ruled – Amhara from Shewa – consolidated, strengthened, expanded the empire
14 th century	<i>Kebre Negast</i> and <i>Fetha Negast</i> – written and circulated – commissioned by Amda Siyon – legitimized imperial succession
13 th -15 th centuries	first peak of Solomonic Dynasty – mobile tent capital
15 th century	first coffee exports from Ethiopia – to southern Arabia
1527-1542	Islamic Jihad, led by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim – key defeats of Christian Ethiopian kingdom

1543	Ethiopians and Portuguese defeated, killed Ahmad – ended jihad
16 th century	coffee became important export – to Sudan and Egypt
1607-1632	Emperor Susneyos ruled – converted to Catholicism – forced out
1632-1667	Emperor Fasiladas ruled – expelled Catholics – built Gondar
late 17 th century	coffee – key export to Turkish and European markets – via port of Mocha in Yemen
17 th -mid-18 th c.	Gondarine era – cultural renaissance in Gondar, stable kingdom
mid-18 th -mid-19 th c.	Mesafint Period – empire splintered, power to regional princes
1st half of 19 th c.	Ethiopia divided – Tigray, Amhara, Shewa, rising regional powers
1813-1847	King Sahle Selassie of Shewa ruled – strong public administrator – political stability – expanded Shewan territory
1855-1868	Emperor Tewodros II ruled – controlled highlands, except Tigray, Shewa
1868	Battle of Magdala – invading British force won, Tewodros committed suicide

- 1870 unification of Italy – Italy colonized port of Assab on Red Sea
- 1871-1889 Emperor Yohannes IV ruled – unified highland Ethiopia
- 1875-1876 Yohannes defeated invading Egyptian army – Battle of Gundet, 1875 and Battle of Gura, 1876
- 1885 Italy colonized port of Massawa – principal Red Sea port
- 1887 King Menelik II of Shewa – moved capital to Addis Ababa
- 1889 Emperor Yohannes IV killed – by invading Mahdists from Sudan
- 1889-1910 Emperor Menelik II ruled – tripled size of Ethiopian territory
- 1889 Treaty of Wichale – Italy claimed protectorate over Ethiopia
- 1890 Italy colonized Eritrea – Ethiopia became landlocked
- 1896 Battle of Adwa – Ethiopia defeated Italy – destroyed half of Italian army – preserved Ethiopian independence from colonialism
- 1896-1915 construction of railroad from Djibouti to Addis Ababa – French control

1916-1930	joint rule of Ethiopia – Empress Zawditu and Ras Tafari Makonnen (later Haile Selassie)
1923	Ethiopia joined the League of Nations – terms negotiated by Tafari
1930-1974	Emperor Haile Selassie I ruled – autocratic rule by Lion of Judah
1931	Haile Selassie introduced Ethiopia’s first constitution and Parliament – but retained full political control
1935-1936	Italian invasion, conquest of Ethiopia – Mussolini’s imperialism
1936-1941	Haile Selassie in exile in Britain – lobbied for eviction of Italians
1936	Haile Selassie’s impassioned speech at League of Nations – unsuccessful
1941	Allied liberation of Ethiopia from Italy – British-led
1952	Ethiopia took over Eritrea – Haile Selassie refused autonomy
1960	Neway brothers attempted coup – failed – Haile Selassie abroad
1963	Organization of African Unity formed – headquarters in Addis Ababa

- 1974 gradual military coup – Derg deposed Haile Selassie
- 1975 Derg leaders murdered Haile Selassie – last Solomonic ruler
- 1974-1991 Mengistu Haile Mariam ruled – brutal, autocratic socialism
- 1976 Soviet Union began supplying Ethiopia – huge military assistance
- 1978 Mengistu contained invasion by Somalia – Somali-speaking Ogaden region of Ethiopia
- 1985 Operation Moses – 15,000 Ethiopian Jews flown to Israel
- 1988 Soviet Union ended aid to Ethiopia – undercut Mengistu’s military strength
- 1991 Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took power –Mengistu escaped to Zimbabwe
- 1991 Operation Solomon – 14,400 more Ethiopian Jews flown to Israel
- 1992-1997 economic liberalization – 8 percent annual growth of income
- 1995 Parliamentary elections – EPRDF won, Meles Zenawi elected Prime Minister

1998-2000	Ethiopian-Eritrean War – disastrous fratricidal border conflict
2000	Parliamentary elections – EPRDF won, Meles Zenawi re-elected Prime Minister
2002	Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission issued decision delimiting border – neither side agreed
2002	Ethiopia suffered severe drought – food aid averted famine
2003-2019	economic boom – 10 percent annual growth of per capita income
2005	Parliamentary elections – EPRDF won, Meles Zenawi re-elected Prime Minister
2010	Parliamentary elections – EPRDF won, Meles Zenawi re-elected Prime Minister
2012	Meles Zenawi died – Hailemariam Desalegn became leader of EPRDF and Prime Minister
2015	Parliamentary elections – EPRDF won, Hailemariam Desalegn re-elected Prime Minister
2018	Hailemariam Desalegn resigned – Abiy Ahmed became leader of EPRDF and Prime Minister
2018	Abiy Ahmed negotiated peace with Eritrea – received Nobel Peace Prize in 2019
2018	Sahle-Work Zewde elected President – first woman to hold that office

Bibliography

I am offering below annotations on selected books that I found particularly helpful in understanding Ethiopia's political and economic history. I have divided my recommendations into five categories – complete histories of Ethiopia, histories of ancient Ethiopia, complementary histories of Africa, special topics in Ethiopian history, and biographical, narrative, and fictional books on Ethiopia. In each category, I list two highly suggested readings and two supplementary readings.

Complete Histories of Ethiopia

Highly Suggested Readings

1. Harold G. Marcus, *A History of Ethiopia*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2002. This well-written paperback is the best short history of Ethiopia. If you have time to read only one book on Ethiopia, this one is my recommendation. The book is especially good on political evolution in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is current through the year 2000. This volume is thin on Ethiopia's early history, and its interpretation of economic change is uneven. But it is a great read and well presented.

2. Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians, A History*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. This informative paperback is written by the scholar who has published the most on Ethiopia's political, economic, cultural and social history. The first half of the book is particularly good in providing insightful background on the rise and fall of Axum, Lalibela, and Gondar. Despite its recent publication date, the volume does not give extensive coverage of the post-World War II era. It neatly complements Marcus's study.

Supplementary Readings

1. Paul B. Henze, *Layers of Time, A History of Ethiopia*, London: Hurst & Company, 2000. This book is another useful complete history of Ethiopia. Henze was an American scholar and former CIA station chief who spent much time working in Ethiopia. His book is a well-researched and nicely-presented synthesis of Ethiopian history. In reflection of the author's own experience, his coverage of events since 1962 is especially insightful. The book also contains good coverage of Ethiopian art and architecture.

2. David Buxton, *The Abyssinians*, Southampton, UK: Thames and Hudson, 1970. This out-of-print hardback will be hard to find, but it is well worth the search. The book contains vivid descriptions and illustrations of Ethiopian religion, culture, architecture, literature, painting, music, and jewelry. You might want to skim the first third of the volume, which offers a dated treatment of Ethiopian peopling and history. The appendices on language and calendar are intriguing and worth reading.

Histories of Ancient Ethiopia

Highly Suggested Readings

1. Roland Oliver and Brian M. Fagan, *Africa in the Iron Age, c. 500 B.C. to A.D. 1400*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975. This marvelous little book is a valuable complement to Oliver and Fagan's short history of Africa. I strongly recommend it for readers who desire to understand how Ethiopia's ancient and medieval history was different from that of the rest of Africa. The volume neatly summarizes the histories and contributions of the Axum, Zagwe, and Solomonic dynasties in Ethiopia.

2. Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, New York: Norton & Company, 2005. I think this book is one of the most important of the past decade. It examines why some cultures have been able to overpower others from the perspectives of

geography, militarism, epidemiology, and economics. I include it here because it analyzes how agriculture was invented independently in Ethiopia and how this discovery influenced early Ethiopian cultures, notably the Axum kingdom.

Supplementary Readings

1. Yuri M. Kobishchanov, *Axum*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979. This volume is a translation from the original Russian of a monumental work by a leading scholar of ancient Ethiopia. Four decades after the book was written, it remains the most detailed extant compilation of information on Axum. The study offers fascinating insights into Axum's politics, economy, religion, and society. But the reader has to mine the nuggets carefully among masses of turgid detail.

2. Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum, An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991. This book interprets the history of Axum from the viewpoint of a British archaeologist who participated in extensive digs there. The best section of the volume is its description of Axumite architecture, complete with ample illustrations. The rest of the book is long on details and short on analysis. I recommend it mainly for serious students of Axumite history.

Complementary Histories of Africa

Highly Suggested Readings

1. Roland Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa*, London: Penguin Books, 1995. This little paperback is deservedly in its sixth edition. I have been using it for four decades, because it is the most balanced history of settlement and change covering the entire African continent. I recommend it highly for those who would like to put Ethiopia's history into a broader African context. It will help you

understand how Christian Ethiopia survived when it was surrounded by cultures that converted to Islam.

2. Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin, *Africa and Africans*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1995. Bohannan, an anthropologist, and Curtin, a historian, were renowned specialists on Africa. In this long-popular introduction to Africa, they weave together dimensions of culture – peoples, religions, agriculture, and governance – with evolutionary themes of history – settlement, empire building, colonialism, and independence. I highly recommend this fine book, especially for its thematic syntheses.

Supplementary Readings

1. Basil Davidson, *The Lost Cities of Africa*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987. For 55 years before his death in 2010, Davidson was one of the most prolific historians writing about Africa. *Lost Cities* gives us a comparative analysis of the emergence and decline of kingdoms and empires throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Ethiopia featured the Axum, Zagwe, and Solomonic dynasties. In this award-winning book, Davidson shows how other significant states arose elsewhere in Africa.

2. Jocelyn Murray (ed.), *Cultural Atlas of Africa*, New York: Checkmark Books, 1998. Every bibliography should have one recommendation for a “coffee-table purchase,” and this book is it. This atlas includes three sections – physical geography (geology and climate), cultural themes (such as peopling, empires, European incursions, and architecture), and colored maps and vignettes on each African country. The photographs are outstanding, the maps are nicely detailed, and the text is very concise and informative.

Special Topics in Ethiopian History

Highly Suggested Readings

1. Richard Pankhurst, *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia*, London: Lalibela House, 1961. This volume is the first of the author's numerous analyses of Ethiopian history. The format is to present summaries and quotations from travelers and historians who visited Ethiopia between 1300 and 1800. Topics are organized by function, e.g., from agriculture to slavery. I suggest that you read his 1998 book first and use this one for investigation of topics of interest. It is full of useful insights.

2. Geoffrey Last and Richard Pankhurst, *A History of Ethiopia in Pictures*, Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1969. This remarkable little book presents a capsule of Ethiopian history from early man to Haile Selassie, richly illustrated with drawings that show the evolution of Ethiopian culture through time. In a couple of hours, the reader can receive an illuminating historical summary and pictorial introduction, especially of the ancient through the medieval periods (featuring Axum, Lalibela, and Gondar).

Supplementary Readings

1. Patrick Webb and Joachim von Braun, *Famine and Food Security in Ethiopia: Lessons for Africa*, Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1994. This short book, by two food economists who were then at the International Food Policy Research Institute, analyzes the tragic Ethiopian famines of the 1980s. Although the volume contains a wealth of useful information on how the agricultural policies of the Marxist government exacerbated the drought-related famines, it is written mainly for specialists.

2. David Kessler, *The Falashas: A Short History of the Ethiopian Jews*, London: Frank Cass, 2012. This book looks at the origin, evolution, struggles, and eventual emigration to Israel of the Bete Israel (or Falasha) people, a fascinating group of Jewish Ethiopians who were farmers and craftsmen in northeastern Africa for more than two

millennia. This treatment of an important topic, however, is uneven and often repetitive. I thus recommend the book mainly for those with a special interest in the Ethiopian Jews.

Biographical, Narrative, and Fictional Books on Ethiopia

Highly Suggested Readings

1. Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor: Downfall of an Autocrat*, New York: Vintage Books, 1989. This fascinating book was written by a Polish journalist who interviewed Haile Selassie's officials and servants soon after the emperor was deposed in 1974. The book is an intriguing exposé of the harsh realities of Haile Selassie's rule and of the revolution that overturned it. Much of the story is told in the poignant words of the interviewees. This account is a "must read" for those interested in Ethiopian history.

2. Nega Mezlekia, *Notes from the Hyena's Belly: An Ethiopian Boyhood*, New York: Picador USA: 2000. The astonishing cruelties and ironies of growing up in Ethiopia in the 1970s and early 1980s are told beautifully in this sometimes shocking account. Mezlekia grew up in Jijiga, a town near Harar in arid eastern Ethiopia. His award-winning book is part social history and part autobiography. In it he offers insightful, yet disturbing, perspectives that might be difficult for some Westerners to grasp.

Supplementary Readings

1. Graham Hancock, *The Sign and the Seal*, New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1992. This best-selling historical novel is a compelling detective story. Hancock is a controversial British journalist with years of African experience. His book attempts to solve the mystery of the Lost Ark of the Covenant (the legendary vessel that held the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments). It examines whether the Ark of the

Covenant was stolen and transferred to Ethiopia, as Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believe.

2. Alan Moorehead, *The Blue Nile*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962. This volume, along with Moorehead's *The White Nile*, are classic studies of European intervention in Northeast Africa in the 19th century. *The Blue Nile* focuses on Ethiopia in Part One (James Bruce in Gondar, 1769-1771) and in Part Four (Emperor Tewodros II vs. Britain in the Battle of Magdala, 1868). This book is a very readable and well-researched study. But it covers only two thin slices of Ethiopian history.

Sites Visited in Ethiopia

Ethiopia Suitcase Seminar
Stanford Travel-Study Program
October 20-November 10, 2007
Land-based, with Domestic Flights

Addis Ababa

We started and ended our expedition in Addis Ababa. Addis, a relatively new city, was selected to be Ethiopia's capital in 1887. But in spite of recent government efforts to decentralize political power, much still focuses on Addis. We visited St. George's Cathedral, dedicated to the patron saint of Ethiopia's dominant Orthodox Christian community, and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University. In the National Museum, we saw replicas of the skeletons of two early specimens of early man (*Australopithecus afarensis*) – Lucy, the original discovery in 1974, and Selam, the recently-discovered, three-month-old baby girl. We enjoyed excellent briefings from Richard Pankhurst, the scion of historians of Ethiopia, and Eleni Gabre-Mahdin, a recent Stanford Ph. D., who is helping to organize Ethiopia's first commodity exchange.

Harar

We next flew to Harar, a Muslim city located on a high plateau in eastern Ethiopia. Harar is not included on most itineraries of tour groups visiting Ethiopia, but it should be. The colorful small city is one of Islam's holiest places, yet it is also a bustling commercial center. Harar has been an important entrepôt on the trade route between the upper Nile region and the Red Sea for a millennium, and it was the center of the Islamic jihad that nearly destroyed Christian Ethiopia in the 16th century. Today Harar is an attractive walled city that serves a rich agricultural hinterland, featuring high-quality coffee and chat (whose leaves provide

a narcotic stimulant, popular in northeastern Africa and southern Arabia). We visited a coffee roaster, were treated to a coffee ceremony, and waded our way through the chaos of the world's largest chat market.

Bahar Dar and Lake Tana

From Harar, we flew westward to Bahar Dar, the attractive capital of Amhara Province, located on the southern edge of Lake Tana. Lake Tana is the source of the Blue Nile, which (along with other Ethiopian rivers) provides five-sixths of the water of the Nile River in Egypt. We hiked along a steep, rocky escarpment to observe the Tis Isat (Blue Nile) Falls, now reduced in water flow after the construction of two hydroelectric projects, but still one of the world's finest waterfalls. After boarding a boat at our lakeside hotel, we journeyed across Lake Tana (from south to north). En route, we stopped to hike to two spectacular Ethiopian Orthodox Christian churches – one on the Zege Peninsula and the other on an island in the middle of the lake – both filled with fresco paintings of biblical scenes. Then we met our bus and drove north to Gondar.

Gondar

Gondar was the imperial capital of Ethiopia for two centuries, starting in the 1630s. Emperor Fasiladas ended four centuries of mobile capitals (in massive tent cities) by constructing a permanent headquarters in the northwest. We visited his magnificent castle complex (the buildings surrounding Fasiladas's castle were constructed by his successors). For a century, Gondar was the center of an Ethiopian political resurgence and cultural renaissance. The ceiling paintings at Debre Berhan Selassie Church, where we observed an Orthodox Church service, are representative of a new and distinctive form of Ethiopian art. Our group took a twelve-hour bus ride through the Simien Mountains, photographed the remarkable scenery at the top of Ethiopia, observed the endemic Gelada Baboons, and enjoyed lunch at the new Simien Park Lodge.

Axum

Our next stop was Axum, Ethiopia's most significant historical site. The Axum Kingdom was the most powerful state in Northeast Africa in the 3rd-6th centuries, and its ships monopolized commerce in the Red Sea and traded regularly with India and Persia. The Axumite rulers built magnificent palaces and erected enormous obelisks (stelae) as funerary monuments. We visited the stelae park and a reconstructed palace. We also went to the Church of St. Mary of Zion, which Ethiopian Orthodox Christians believe holds the Lost Ark of the Covenant (the container for the stone scriptures presented to Moses). Our group ventured to Yeha to visit the impressive Temple of the Moon, built during the Daamat Kingdom about 500 BC. En route, we stopped in Adwa, the site of Ethiopia's victory over Italy in 1896, which preserved Ethiopian independence.

Lalibela

Lalibela was our final historical site. For many in our group, the eleven rock-hewn churches in Lalibela were the most impressive dimension of our entire itinerary. Seeking religious and political legitimacy, the kings of the Zagwe Dynasty (12th-13th centuries), notably King Lalibela, sponsored the chiseling in situ of these incredible religious monuments out of stone (red volcanic tuff). The architectural accomplishment is breath-taking. Underground passages connect the churches, and one has to squirm through difficult paths and tunnels to visit them all. The churches are active today, and in each one the priest proudly shows the gold cross given by King Lalibela and other invaluable relics. Outside of town, we saw the fascinating Naakuto Laab Cave Church, built in a cliff-side. Lalibela is deservedly Ethiopia's most renowned tourist attraction.

Rift Valley Region of Southern Ethiopia

Half of our group extended the trip for five days to visit the Rift Valley region of southern Ethiopia. Although the drives were long and the roads often were poor and full of cattle herds, the southern extension had several highlights. Bishangari Lodge on Lake Langano is a beautiful eco-friendly facility, set in a forest filled with birds, monkeys, and baboons. There we had a marvelous two-hour walk in the early morning. In Nechesar National Park, we enjoyed scenic views of Lake Chamo and saw a range of antelopes – Swayne’s hartebeest, greater kudu, dik dik, Grant’s gazelle, and Thomson’s gazelle. During a late afternoon boat ride on Lake Chamo, we watched a dozen hippos and numerous crocodiles cavorting in the water. In a Hidaya village, we watched women scrape the leaves of the ensete (false banana) plant. Southern Ethiopia was fascinating.

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Ethiopia Suitcase Seminar
Stanford Travel/Study Program
January 8-24, 2002
Land-based, with Domestic Flights

Gondar

The Amhara leaders of the Solomonic Dynasty chose not to establish a permanent capital during the first nearly four centuries of their rule. Instead, their capital was a mobile, tented city that wandered through the country (and was said to bring more distress to hosting farmers than a swarm of locusts). But in 1636, Emperor Fasiladas decided to turn the village of Gondar in northwestern Ethiopia into an imperial capital city. The castles constructed in the 17th century are largely intact today and reflect a strong Moorish/Portuguese influence.

In Gondar, our group had the very good fortune of taking part in the most important religious festival of the Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church – the Timkat (Epiphany) Festival. Earlier in Axum, we had

arisen at 4 AM to walk slowly around the city in a pre-dawn, candle-lit processional to celebrate a minor feast day. Many of us had expected that we would have a repeat of that moving spiritual experience during the three days of the Timkat Festival. Instead, Timkat turned out to be a carnival of joyous singing and dancing that lasted for hours. We Stanford travelers found ourselves in the middle of throngs of dancing Ethiopians surrounding their priests who were marching solemnly through the city.

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