sacred precincts of the cathedral of Mary of Zion, the stelae, mostly fallen, and a vast store of local legends about its history (Ch. 2: 1) to preserve its memory.

2. Legend, Literature, and Archaeological Discovery

1. The Legends of Aksum

The town of Aksum is today only a small district centre, not even the capital of the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray in which it is situated. However, despite this relative unimportance in modern times, Aksum's past position is reflected by the prime place it occupies in the fabric of legends which make up traditional Ethiopian history. For the people of Ethiopia, it is even now regarded as the ancient residence and capital city of the queen of Sheba, the second Jerusalem, and the resting place of the Ark of the Covenant. One text calls the city the `royal throne of the kings of Zion, mother of all lands, pride of the entire universe, jewel of kings' (Levine 1974: 111). The cathedral of Maryam Tseyon, or Mary of Zion, called Gabaza Aksum, was the holiest place in the Ethiopian Christian kingdom, and is still said to house the Ark, supposedly brought from Jerusalem by the first emperor, Menelik. Tradition says that he was the son of king Solomon of Israel and the queen of Sheba conceived during the queen's famous visit to Jerusalem. Although no information survives in the legends about the ancient Aksumite rulers who really built the palaces and erected the giant stone obelisks or stelae which still stand in several places around the town, these monuments are locally attributed in many instances to Menelik or to Makeda, the queen of Sheba or queen of Azab (the South). Such legends are still a living force at Aksum today; for example, the mansion recently excavated in the district of Dungur, west of Aksum, has immediately been absorbed into local legends as the `palace of the queen of Sheba' (Chittick 1974: 192, n. 28).


In the tales describing life in Ethiopia before the reign of the queen of Sheba, Aksum holds an important place. A tale about a local saint, Marqorewos, states that Aksum was formerly called Atsabo (Conti Rossini 1904: 32). The Matshafa Aksum, or `Book of Aksum' (Conti Rossini 1910: 3; Beckingham and Huntingford 1961: 521ff), a short Ge’ez (Ethiopic) work of the seventeenth century or a little earlier, says that the town was formerly built at Mazeber (‘ruin’) where was the tomb of Ityopis (Ethiopis), son of Kush, son of Ham, son of Noah. A structure called the `tomb of Ethiopis' (Littmann 1913: II,
taf. XXVII) is still shown near Aksum, a little to the west of the modern town in an area where the ruins of many large structures of the ancient capital still lie buried. Makeda next moved the city to the territory called `Aseba, from whence she is said to have gained her name queen of Saba (Sheba). The third building of the city is stated to have been accomplished by the kings Abreha and Atsbeha (Ch. 10: 3). An Arab writer of the sixteenth century, describing how the tabot or Ark was removed from the cathedral of Aksum to a safe place when the Muslim armies approached, says of Aksum `it is not known who built it: some say it was Dhu al-Qarnayn (Alexander the Great). God alone knows best!' (from the Futuh al-Habasha, or `History of the Conquest of Abyssinia' by Arab-Faqih; de Villard 1938: 61-2).

Several modern authors (eg. Doresse 1956, 1971; Kitchen 1971) have speculated as to whether Tigray or the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderlands, instead of Arabia or the Horn of Africa, may have been the legendary `God's Land' of the ancient Egyptians. This land of Punt, producer of incense and other exotic treasures, where the pharaohs sent their ships, may at least have been one of the regions included at some time in the Aksumites' extended kingdom. Egyptian expeditions to Punt are known from as far back as Old Kingdom times in Egypt, in the third millenium BC, but the best-known report comes from the New Kingdom period, during the reign of queen Hatshepsut, in the fifteenth century BC. She was so proud of her great foreign trading expedition that she had detailed reliefs of it carved on the walls of her funerary temple at Dayr al-Bahri across the Nile from the old Egyptian capital of Thebes. The surviving reliefs show that the region was organised even then under chiefly rule, with a population eager to trade the recognisably African products of their lands with the visitors. Aksum is still today a sorting and distribution centre for the frankincense produced in the region, and it is not unlikely that the coastal stations visited by the ancient Egyptians acquired their incense from the same sources. Punt is suggested to have been inland from the Sawakin-north Eritrean coast (Kitchen 1971; Fattovich 1988, 1989i), and, apart from the great similarity of its products with those of the Sudan-Ethiopia border region, an Egyptian hieroglyphic text seems to confirm its identity with the Ethiopian highland region by reference to a downpour in the land of Punt which caused the Nile to flood (Petrie 1888: p. 107). The inscription dates to the twenty-sixth Egyptian dynasty, and knowledge of Punt seems to have continued even into the Persian period in Egypt, when king Darius in an inscription of 486-5BC mentions, or at least claims, that the Puntites sent tribute (Fattovich 1989ii: 92). One extremely interesting Egyptian record from an 18th Dynasty tomb at Thebes actually shows Puntite trading boats or rafts with triangular sails (Säve-Söderbergh 1946: 24), for transporting the products of Punt, indicating that the commerce was not exclusively Egyptian-carried, and that local Red Sea peoples were already seafaring — or at least conveying goods some distance by water (Sleeswyk 1983) — for themselves.

Returning to more specifically Aksumite matters, the Book of Aksum states that Aksumawi, son of Ityopis (Ethiopis), and great-grandson of Noah, was the founder of the city, and the names of his descendants (the `fathers of Aksum') gave rise to the various district names. His son was Malakya-Aksum, and his grandsons Sum, Nafas, Bagi'o, Kuduki, Akhoro and Fasheba (Littmann 1913: I, 38). In other legends (Littmann 1947), it is said that once a serpent-king, Arwe or Waynaba, ruled over the land, exacting a tribute
of a young girl each year. It may be that the tale reflects memory of a serpent-cult in the region. Eventually a stranger, Angabo, arrived, and rescued the chosen girl, killing the monster at the same time. Angabo was duly elected king by the people, and one of his successors was Makeda. Sometimes the legends say that it was Makeda herself who was the intended sacrifice and inheritor of the kingdom. The essential element of all this was to appropriate for Aksum, one way or another, the legends which referred to the remote origins of Ethiopian history. The Englishman Nathaniel Pearce, who lived in Ethiopia in the early nineteenth century, related (Pearce 1831) how these stories were still current amongst the Ethiopians; ‘In the evening, while sitting with Ozoro, she told me a number of silly tales about Axum, among others a long story about a large snake which ruled the country . . . which sometimes resided at Temben, though Axum was the favourite residence of the two’. Pearce was later shown what seems to have been a fruit press, but which he interpreted as being ‘made by the ancients to prepare some kind of cement in for building’; his Ethiopian friend told him that this had actually been designed as a container for the snake’s food.

The origins of these legends hark back to some unknown time after the conversion of the kingdom to Christianity in the reign of king Ezana of Aksum in the fourth century AD, or in some cases perhaps to an even earlier period when some Jewish traditions had entered the country. Such legends had their political use in providing pedigrees for national institutions. It was believed in later times that the state offices from the king downwards were descended from the company which had brought the Ark to Aksum from Jerusalem (Budge 1922: 61). Doubtless the Christian priests, searching for a longer pedigree for their religion to impress pagans and unbelievers, would have been interested in developing these tales which connected Ethiopia with Solomon and Sheba. The Ethiopian kings themselves, anxious to acquire the prestige of ancient and venerable dynastic ancestors, could scarcely have hoped for a more august couple as their reputed progenitors. Even in the official Ethiopian Constitution, up to the time of the end of the reign of emperor Haile Selassie, the dynasty was held to have descended directly from Solomon and the queen of Sheba through their mythical son, the emperor Menelik I.

The real events in Ethiopia's history before the present two millenia are lost in the mists of antiquity, but valiant attempts were made by Ethiopian chroniclers to fill in the immense gap between the reign of Menelik I and the time of the kings of Aksum. The king lists they developed (all those now surviving are of comparatively recent date), name a long line of rulers, covering the whole span from Menelik through the Aksumite period and on to the later Zagwé and ‘Solomonic’ dynasties (Conti Rossini 1909). There is little point in reciting the majority of these names, but some of the most important of the reputed successors of Menelik I are worth noting for their importance in Ethiopian tradition.

Illustration 2. Built into one of the walls of the cathedral of Maryam Tseyon at Aksum, the so-called Stone of Bazan, surmounted by the Stele of the Lances.

The legendary king Bazan was supposed to have been reigning at the time of the birth of Christ in his eighth year (one modern interpretation even depicts him as one of the Three
Kings who came to Bethlehem). A tomb is attributed to him in the south-eastern necropolis of Aksum, at the entrance to the modern town on the Adwa road. Near the cathedral is a stone on which is written in Ge‘ez ‘This is the sepulchral stone of Bazen’, but when this inscription was actually carved is unknown (Littmann 1913: IV, 49); evidently after the arrival of Christianity in Ethiopia, since it begins and ends with a cross. Two rulers preeminent in Ethiopian tradition were Abreha and Atsbeha (Ch. 10: 3), brothers who are said to have ruled jointly. They were converted to Christianity by the missionary Frumentius, and their example was eventually followed by the entire nation. Another hero in Aksumite legend was king Kaleb, also called Ella Atsbeha (Ch. 4: 7). He was regarded as a great conqueror and Christian hero whose expedition to suppress the persecution of his co-religionists in the Yemen by the Jewish king there caused his name to be famous throughout the Christian world. He is recognised as a saint in several church calendars. Two sons of Kaleb, called Gabra Masqal and Israel, are said to have succeeded him, and their rule is supposed to have encompassed both the physical and the spiritual worlds. Local legend in Aksum attributes an unusual double tomb structure to Gabra Masqal and his father Kaleb (Littmann 1913: II, 127ff); but Gabra Masqal is also supposed to be buried at his monastic foundation, Dabra Damo, to the north-east of Aksum. Finally among the legendary accounts come Degnajan, Anbessa Wedem and Dil Na’od, the kings in whose reigns, according to tradition, the collapse of Aksum eventually occurred (Sergew 1972, 203ff). It seems that in reality the stories about these three rulers refer to a time after Aksum had ceased to be the capital, and the traditions, interestingly, associate all of these theoretical ‘kings of Aksum’ with activities in Shewa, Amhara, and other southern regions, even mentioning details implying a shift of the capital.

Much of this legendary literature is, of course, based very broadly on actual events and personalities. The story of Kaleb’s conquest of the Yemen is at least a genuine historical occurrence (Ch. 4: 7), and, although there seem to be various distortions, the main theme of the conversion of the kingdom to Christianity by Frumentius also has independent historical confirmation (Ch. 10: 2). When more information is available about Ethiopian history in the period of Aksum’s zenith and decline, it is very probable that the reality behind many other legends will be decoded into more prosaic form.

Legendary accounts for the fifth century are particularly rich, since it was then that the so-called Nine Saints (Sergew 1972, 115ff) and other foreign missionaries arrived in Ethiopia. Some of these would appear to have been Roman subjects from the Syrian provinces, probably seeking safe exile from the persecutions suffered by followers of the monophysite interpretation of the nature of Christ. They settled in various districts of the Aksumite kingdom, and began, it seems, the real Christianisation of the Ethiopian countryside population as apart from the official, royal, conversion of the fourth century, whose influence was no doubt somewhat limited. Around the missionaries’ work a large and fascinating cycle of legends, full of miraculous happenings, developed, and is reported by the various gadlan (‘lives’, literally ‘struggles’) of the saints. Their arrival and activities are set in the reigns of the fifth and sixth century kings Sa’aldoba, Ella Amida, Tazena, Kaleb and Gabra Masqal. The legendary accounts certainly contain elements of truth, and it seems that the missionaries who worked to convert the Aksumite population
left traces of themselves in the Ge’ez language itself, since they used certain Aramaic/Syriac words in their translation of the Bible which remained in use ever afterwards (Ullendorff 1967).

One of the stories related about the end of Aksum, the tale of the foreign queen, called Gudit, Judith or Esato, seems also to have actual relevance to Ethiopian history in the last half of the tenth century. Gudit is said to have attacked the Aksumite kingdom, and driven the king out. Her armies harried the royal forces, destroying cities and churches as they went, and collecting plunder on a large scale. In Aksum they are said to have caused immense destruction, damaging the cathedral, smashing the altars, and even toppling some of the great stelae. Certain Arab historians corroborate parts of the tale; one, Ibn Hawqal, (Kramers and Weit 1964) states that, in the later tenth century, a foreign queen was able to take over the country, eventually killing the king. Another simply notes that a Yemeni king, sending a gift to the king of Iraq, included a female zebra previously sent to him by a queen who ruled over Habasha (Abyssinia), dating this event to AD969-70 (el-Chennafi 1976). The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria preserves a letter from an unnamed Ethiopian king to George (Girgis) II of Nubia, in which the king, attacked by the ‘Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiyya', bemoans his fate, attributing his distress to a rift between the monarchy and the patriarchate, and begs the Nubian king to intercede for him with the Alexandrian patriarch (Atiya et al. 1948, 171-2; Budge, 1928ii: I, 233-4). Though the origin of this queen is obscure, it is possible that she was ruler of one of the pagan kingdoms to the south, such as Damot.

The Portuguese father Francisco Alvares, whose book on Ethiopia was written by 1540 (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961), reported that Aksum (which he calls "a very good [big] town named Aquaxumo")... "was the city, court and residence (as they say) of the Queen Saba [whose own name was Maqueda]"... He also wrote that "Aquaxumo was the principal residence of Queen Candace (the title of the queens of the ancient Sudanese kingdom of Kush or Kasu, whose capital was Meroë), [whose personal name was Giudich] (Judith or Gudit), who was the beginning of the country's being Christian... they say that here was fulfilled the prophecy which David spoke "Ethiopia shall arise, and stretch forth her hands to God" (Psalm lxviii. 31). So they say they were the first Christians in the world". Alvares has conflated the pagan/Jewish queen Judith with Candace (Kandake) the ‘queen of the Ethiopians', whose eunuch treasurer was converted to Christianity by the apostle Philip (Acts, ch. 8), and whom the Ethiopians claim was actually a ruler of Ethiopia rather than of Meroë; in such ways do the legends grow more and more confused. Alvares also mentions the "large and handsome tower... a royal affair, all of well hewn stone" (the pre-Aksumite Sabaean temple at Yeha, Ch. 4: 1), as another edifice which "belonged to Candace".

Ethiopian Christian chroniclers have sought to connect their country with several other events and prophecies mentioned in the Bible. The kingdom was referred to in ancient documents as ‘Aksum' or the country ‘of the Aksumites', after the capital city and the ruling tribal group or clan. The people, or perhaps a group of peoples including the ‘Aksumites', were also called ‘Habasha', and the name for the ir country, Habashat, is that from which we derive the now out-of-fashion name ‘Abyssinia'. However, already by the
fourth century AD the Aksumite king Ezana, in his long list of titles in a bilingual inscription (see Ch. 11: 4), uses the word `Ethiopia' in the Greek version as the translation for `Habashat'. The original use of the Greek designation `Ethiopia' was either as a general designation for the black peoples south of the Egyptian border (as the Arabs later used `al-Habasha' or its plural `Ahabish' for groups like the Zanj, Beja, and Nubians as well as the Abyssinians; Tolmacheva 1986), or more specifically as a reference to the kingdom of Kush or Kasu, with its capital at Meroë on the Sudanese Nile. But after the eclipse of this state, the kings of both Aksum and Nubia (Munro-Hay 1982-3) used the name `Ethiopia' to refer to their own countries and peoples. Thus the mentions of Kush in the Bible have been attributed to Aksumite `Ethiopia', instead of Meroitic/Kushite Ethiopia, by those Christian interpreters determined to bestow a long and prominent tradition, beginning with Kush, grandson of Noah, on their country.

By the fourth century AD Aksumite pilgrims began to appear in Jerusalem, and St. Jerome noted their presence (Cerulli 1943: I, 1). A few fourth-century Aksumite coins have been found there and in Caesarea (Barkay 1981; Meshorer 1965-6). Later the Ethiopians had a religious house at Jerusalem (Meinardus 1965) which helped to spread the growing interest in Ethiopia in subsequent centuries, and also played its part in disseminating the legendary history of Ethiopia in the west.

The Ethiopian traditional king-lists and chronicles are important in that, late as they are in their present form, they show how vital the legends concerning Aksum have been to the Ethiopians throughout their history. They are unquestionably erroneous, since there are widely differing versions both of the king-lists and the lists of metropolitan bishops of Aksum starting with Frumentius. They also fail to name those kings and bishops who are known from inscriptions, coins, and other sources except in a very few cases. Although it has been suggested that, in the case of the kings, this could be in part due to the Ethiopian rulers' custom of employing several names (as, for example, a personal name, a throne name, a 'tribal' name and so on; see Ch. 7: 5), the differences in the lists are not to be so simply explained. Nevertheless, the compilation of the lists, the collection of anecdotes and chronicles, and the attempts to root Ethiopian tradition in the remote past connected with eminent persons, places and events, clearly indicates the importance of the country's past history to mediaeval and even to more modern Ethiopians. Such texts remain a testimony, whether their contents be partly legendary or not, to the efforts of Ethiopian scholars over the centuries to understand and interpret their own history.

2. Aksum in Ancient Sources

Some details about the political and military history of Aksum have been preserved in ancient documentary sources, some Aksumite and some foreign. A number of Greek and Roman geographers and scholars noted small snippets of information about contemporary Aksum, and certain travellers, merchants, ecclesiastics and ambassadors added various
facts about the country in their writings. None of them seems to have acquired any really substantial knowledge about the kingdom — certainly no-one appears to have left us more than the briefest accounts — but at least we are afforded some slight glimpses from time to time.

The Roman writer Gaius Plinius Secundus — Pliny the Younger — whose notes on Ethiopia in his *Naturalis Historia* were probably completed in their present form in AD77 (Rackham 1948: 467-9), mentions only Aksum's 'window on the world', the Red Sea port of Adulis, through which the kingdom's international trade passed. Another document, called the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, notes the 'city of the people called Auxumites' (Schoff 1912: 23) or 'the metropolis called the Axomite' (Huntingford 1980: 20), or 'the metropolis itself, which is called Axômitês' (Casson 1989: 53), and gives details of the trade goods imported and exported. This anonymous report, which modern scholars view as either an official report, or a merchants' and sailors' guide to the known Red Sea and Indian Ocean ports, dating perhaps somewhere between the mid-first and the early second century AD, also describes the ruler of this region. This monarch, almost certainly the Aksumite king himself (but see Cerulli 1960: 7, 11; Huntingford 1980: 60, 149-50; Chittick 1981: 186; Casson 1989: 109-10), was called Zoskales; he is represented as a miserly man, but of good character, who had some acquaintance with Greek literature. The famous Greek astronomer and geographer, Claudius Ptolomaeus — Ptolemy — of Alexandria, describes Aksum in the middle of the second century AD as the seat of the king's palace (Stevenson 1932: 108); and the existence of a prospering trading centre at Aksum at about this time is confirmed by the latest archaeological investigations (Munro-Hay 1989).

The Persian religious leader Mani, founder of the Manichaean religion, who died in 276 or 277AD, is reported by his followers to have described the four most important kingdoms of the world as comprising Persia, Rome, Aksum and Sileos, the latter possibly China (Polotsky 1940: 188-9). This remark shows that Aksum's repute was spreading in the contemporary world. It was about this time that the Aksumites produced their own coinage, an excellent way of bringing their country into prominence abroad, since only the greatest of contemporary states issued a gold coinage.

Around 356AD, the Roman emperor Constantius II wrote a letter to Ezana, king of Aksum, and his brother Sazana, on an ecclesiastical matter. The letter has been preserved in the *Apologia ad Constantium Imperatorem* of the famous Alexandrian patriarch Athanasius (Szymusiak 1958). Aksum is also mentioned in the account (Philostorgius; ed. Migne 1864: 482ff.) of the travels of an Arian bishop, Theophilus 'the Indian', who was sent by Constantius to try to convert the Arabian kingdoms; he later seems to have visited Aksum. It has been suggested that possibly it was he who carried the letter from Constantius to the Aksumite rulers, but Schneider (1984: 156) points out that according to Philostorgius Theophilus returned from his mission not long after 344AD. The ecclesiastical historian Rufinus (ed. Migne 1849: 478-9), writing at the end of the fourth century, gives an account of the conversion of the country, apparently taken directly from bishop Frumentius of Aksum's erstwhile companion, Aedesius of Tyre.
Very little is known of the fifth century history of Aksum, but in the sixth century the
dramatic events following upon king Kaleb of Aksum's expedition to the Yemen greatly
interested the Christian world. Several ambassadors from Constantinople, sent by the
emperor Justinian to propose various trading and military arrangements, have left
accounts of their embassies. One ambassador described the king's appearance at an
audience (Malalas, ed. Migne 1860: 670). Another Greek-speaking visitor, Kosmas,
called `Indikopleustes', who was in Ethiopia just before Kaleb's expedition, was asked by
the king's governor at Adulis to copy an inscription so that it could be sent to the king at
Aksum. He complied, and preserved the contents of the inscription, together with various
other interesting details about Aksumite life, in his Christian Topography (Wolska-Conus

After the time of Kaleb, foreign reports about Ethiopia grow much sparser. The
Byzantine historian Procopius mentions (ed. Dewing 1961: 191) that Kaleb's successor
had to acknowledge the virtual independence of the Yemeni ruler Abreha, but all the rest
of our information on the later Aksumite kings comes from inferences drawn from their
coinage. For the followers of the recently-arisen prophet Muhammad, the Muslims, the
country was important because the reigning najashi gave asylum to the prophet's early
followers (Guillaume 1955: 146ff). Muhammad is said to have mourned when he heard
of this king's death. However, the najashi, Ashama ibn Abjar, though he was the ruler of
the territories of the Aksumite kingdom, may no longer have used that city as his capital.
There is reason for thinking that by the time of Ashama's death in 630AD, the centre of
the kingdom may have shifted elsewhere. If this is so, the portrait of a najashi or nigos
(the picture is labelled in both Greek and Arabic), preserved on the walls of a hunting
lodge at Qusayr `Amra in Jordan, built and decorated at the command of the Caliph al-
Walid (705-715AD), would be of one of the successors of Ashama ibn Abjar who was no
longer resident at Aksum (Almagro et al 1975: 165 & pl. XVII).

In the ninth and tenth centuries, Arab historians still noted the vast extent of the territories
of the reigning najashi see (Ch. 4: 8), but situated the capital at a place called Ku`bar or
Ka`bar, a large and prosperous trading town. Where this was, we do not know at present,
but presumably it was situated in a place more favourable for the exploitation of trade
and for participating in current political events than was Aksum. The legends about the
fall of Aksum to Gudit, which seem, from the accounts of the Arab authors, to have
derived from events in the later tenth century, do not really militate against this. Aksum,
as Ethiopia's pre-eminent ecclesiastical centre, and perhaps coronation city, (a function
restored to it in later times), may have suffered from Gudit's armies, but was not
necessarily the country's administrative capital at the time. The great wealth of its
cathedral, the ruins of its palaces, and the giant funerary monuments of its former kings,
might well have attracted the attention of invaders in search of loot. Several of the kings
mentioned in Ethiopian historical texts are said to have moved their capitals, doubtless
reflecting the memory of a real event, unless they were already by that time nomadic
tented capitals as was customary later in Ethiopian history.
3. The Rediscovery of Aksum in Modern Times

Whatever was the cause of the end of the former Aksumite kingdom, a new centre eventually appeared in the province of Lasta to the south under a dynasty, apparently of Cushitic (Agaw) origin, later regarded as usurpers, called the Zagwé (Taddesse Tamrat 1972: 53ff; Dictionary of Ethiopian Biography 1975: 200ff). The existence of a long and a short chronology for this dynasty indicates that the Ge‘ez chroniclers were in some confusion as to the precise events occurring at the end of the 'Aksumite' period until the advent of the Zagwé. The Zagwé capital, surely one of the world's most remarkable sights with its marvellous rock-cut churches, was at Roha, later renamed after the most famous of the Zagwé kings, Lalibela, who seems to have died around 1225. It still bears his name.

The Zagwé dynasty was eventually superseded by the so-called `Solomonic Restoration' in 1270, under king Yekuno Amlak. This new dynasty held to the legalistic fiction that Yekuno Amlak was a direct heir to the old Aksumite kings, whose line had been preserved in exile in the province of Amhara until strong enough to regain their inheritance by ousting the Zagwé monarchs. By the time of this restoration, and for a long period afterwards, the highland kingdom was involved in struggles with the constantly encroaching power of the Muslim states which had become established along the seaboard, and were pushing inland and up onto the Ethiopian plateau. In spite of some successes, the kingdom was in great distress when the first westerners began to renew the old contacts formerly maintained with the Ethiopian highlands by Greek, Roman, Indian and Arab traders.

Though there is a mention of Aksum (Chaxum) in a Venetian merchant itinerary (Crawford 1958: 28) of the late fourteenth century (which specifically notes Aksum's status as a coronation city and the magnificence of its basilica, richly ornamented with gold plates), it was, in fact, the Portuguese who first made real contact. A number of Ethiopian kings, such as Widim Ar’ad (1297-1312), Yeshaq (1414-1429), and Zara Ya’qob (1434-1468), had previously tried to communicate by sending missions to Europe, and as a result a certain interest was aroused.

In the early fourteenth century the now-lost treatise written by Giovanni da Carignano, who obtained his information from an Ethiopian embassy which stopped at Genoa in 1306 while returning from Avignon and Rome, had declared that the legendary Christian king Prester John was to be found in Ethiopia (Beckingham 1980). It is, of course, possible that Jacopo Filippo Foresti of Bergamo, who summarised Carignano's work in 1483, interpolated this idea, but a map of 1339 already shows Prester John in Ethiopia. Aksum appears on a map by Pizzigani in 1367 as Civitas Syone, the City of Zion, appropriately enough in view of its cathedral dedicated to Mary of Zion. At the end of the fourteenth century Antonio Bartoli of Florence was in Ethiopia, and in 1407 Pietro Rombulo arrived there, remaining for a very long time. Envoys of Yeshaq reached Valencia with letters from the king to Alfonso of Aragon in 1428. In 1441 Ethiopian
monks from Jerusalem attended the Council of Florence (Tedeschi 1988) and some of their remarks about their country, recorded through an Arab-speaking interpreter by Poggio Bracciolini, constitute the first more or less credible description of Ethiopia printed in Europe (1492). Embassies sent by Zara Ya’qob to Cairo in 1443 and 1447 were also reported in Europe. In 1450 Rombulo went to Italy as ambassador for Zara Ya’qob to Alfonso of Aragon, and met Pietro Ranzano, who recorded some of his account in his very muddled description of the land of Prester John (this work is still unpublished). Alfonso replied, mentioning that on a previous occasion the artisans and envoys he had sent had all died. Ethiopian maps were produced, such as the Egyptus Novelo of c.1454 (which does not include Aksum) and that of Fra Mauro, 1460, which shows it under the name ‘Hacsum’. From 1470-1524 the Venetian Alessandro Zorzi was collecting his Ethiopian Itineraries (Crawford 1958), some of which mention Aksum or Axon (‘great city of Davit, prete Jani of Ethiopia’).

The Portuguese, beginning their expansion in the East, envisaged allying with Prester John against the Muslims, who were natural enemies of Portuguese trading development. Portuguese sailors, soldiers, and priests began to penetrate into Ethiopia in the later fifteenth century, and their accounts renewed interest in the history and legends of the country, and also brought to notice the ruins of the ancient capital of Aksum (Rey 1929; Caraman 1985; de Villard 1938). This was a fascinating period in the history of Ethiopia. The tales told by the Portuguese missionaries and envoys, and the absolutely extraordinary journeys, made willingly or not, which they undertook, are well worth the reading; but they are not, alas, within the compass of a work purely on Aksum. It was they, however, who reintroduced the ancient Ethiopian capital to the world, and some of them described the ruined town with a certain amount of detail. The best of these accounts are quoted in extenso below, Ch. 5: 3.

In the last years of the emperor Eskender (1478-1494) Pero de Covilhã, the first of the Portuguese envoys, who had been sent to the east by his king João II, reached the country. He was never allowed to leave, and he remained in Ethiopia until he died. By 1502 king Manoel I of Portugal had adopted the resounding title `Lord of the Conquest, Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, India, Arabia and Persia', a manifesto of intentions towards Ethiopia which were never to be realised. Perhaps the conquest of Goa and Ormuz had raised expectations elsewhere. In 1507 Covilhã was joined by João Gomes, a priest sent by Tristão da Cunha. Both of them were still there when the priest Francisco Alvares, to whom we owe a great debt for his description of the Ethiopia of his day (Alvares, ed. Beckingham and Huntingford 1961), arrived with the Portuguese fleet bringing the ambassador Rodrigo de Lima in 1520 (Thomas and Cortesão 1938). In 1512, the first reply to these embassies was sent by the Ethiopian queen-regent Eleni (Helena), through a certain Matthew, apparently an Armenian, who eventually managed to get to Portugal and return with the 1520 embassy, dying just afterwards. The military successes of the emperors Na`od (1494-1508) and Lebna Dengel (1508-1540) led the Ethiopians to make little of the opportunity for alliance offered by Rodrigo de Lima's embassy, a grave error since almost immediately after the embassy's departure in 1526 the attacks of the amir of Adal, Ahmad Gragn (or Grañ; `the left-handed'), began to wreak havoc in the kingdom. This continued until 1542, but already in 1541, in response to renewed appeals,
the Portuguese soldier Cristovão da Gama, son of Vasco da Gama, had arrived with his troops. The Portuguese (though da Gama himself was killed in 1542) helped the new emperor Galawdewos or Claudius (1540-1559) to rescue his country from the depredations of the amir of Adal, who eventually died as a result of wounds inflicted in battle. Galawdewos himself later perished in battle, but the Ethiopian Christian state was from this time on in less danger from its Muslim enemies than before.

During his campaigns Gragn, like queen Gudit, had sacked Aksum and it was probably he who burnt the famous cathedral of `our Lady Mary Zion, the Mother of God'. Sartsa Dengel (1563-1597) was the next king after Zara Ya`qob to celebrate his coronation at Aksum, and perhaps at this time he built a small church in the ruins, which probably perished in its turn during the Galla war of 1611. There may have been some restoration of this structure, before the present church was constructed by the emperor Fasiladas (1632-1667) with Portuguese or Indian influenced architects; it seems to have been dedicated in 1655. Though the ancient cathedral disappeared as a result of Gragn's destruction, there is preserved among the Portuguese records Francisco Alvares' description of its appearance a decade or two before (Ch. 5: 3).

In spite of the harmony of purpose between Ethiopians and Portuguese in the mid-sixteenth century, the latter's influence in Ethiopia was brief. By the time of the emperor Susenyos (1608-1632), religious disputes had grown up between the Catholics and the Ethiopian Orthodox church, and Jesuit arrogance destroyed the atmosphere of trust. As a result the Portuguese were expelled from the country by Susenyos' son Fasiladas. It was, however, this Portuguese episode in Ethiopia which first revealed the remains of the Aksumite civilisation to the outside world, through the writings and travels of the Portuguese ecclesiastics.

Francisco Alvares, the chaplain accompanying the embassy which arrived in 1520, left an interesting account in his book *The Prester John of the Indies*, published in Portuguese in Lisbon in 1540 (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961). Apart from the description of the great five-aisled basilica of Maryam Tseyon, he mentioned the stone thrones nearby, and a reservoir which does not seem to be the well-known one called Mai Shum (Ch. 5: 1). He described some of the stelae, and visited the `Tomb of Kaleb and Gabra Masqal', which he mentioned was supposed by some to contain the treasure chests of the Queen of Sheba. He also noted some information about Abba Pantelewon and Abba Liqanos, both churches on small hills near Aksum.

Illustration 2a. The title page of Francisco Alvares 1540 book on Ethiopia. Though the book itself is rich in information about Ethiopia, including a valuable section on Aksum and its ruins, the illustrator has shown `Prester John' with all the trappings of a contemporary European monarch.

In 1603, the Spaniard Pedro Paez (Pero Pais) arrived in Ethiopia after extraordinary adventures in the Yemen, where he was a prisoner for seven years. He wrote a *History of Ethiopia* (Pais 1945-6), and also mentioned Aksum in his letters to a friend, Thomas Iturén, with whom he corresponded every year (Caraman 1985). Through João Gabriel,
captain of the Portuguese in Ethiopia, who was present at the time, he was able to
describe the coronation of Susenyo at Aksum on 18 March 1608 (Ch. 7: 6). He also
mentions the thrones, the stelae, and the church, though he comments that this latter
could not be compared with the ancient one. Paez even prepared a measured drawing of
the `Tomb of Kaleb' (Monneret de Villard 1938: 68).

Two years after Paez' death in 1622, Manoel de Almeida arrived. His History of Ethiopia
(Huntingford 1954), which contained revised material from Paez' work, noted that about
twenty stelae were still standing, and seven or eight fallen and broken ones were visible
(Ch. 5: 3). He commented that it was said that these were overthrown by the Turks during
the war of Sartsa Dengel with the viceroy Yeshag (1578). Such an incident is not
mentioned in the Ge`ez chronicles.

Emmanuel Barradas, who accompanied de Almeida's mission, also left some notes (de
Villard 1938: 68-71) on Aksum's monuments, some of which were `very large and of
notable majesty', including `high and beautiful columns or pyramids', evidently the
stelae, which bore comparison with the biggest and best at Rome. He also mentions an
inscription with letters on one side in `Amharic' of an ancient style, and on the other
letters which appeared to be Greek or Latin. The thrones are described, and also the
`Tomb of Kaleb and Gabra Masqal'.

In 1625, the new catholic patriarch Alfonso Mendes reached Ethiopia, bringing with him
from Diu the Jesuit father Jerónimo Lobo, who had gone there after a courageous but
abortive attempt to enter the country via Malindi, on the Indian Ocean coast (now in
Kenya). Lobo remained nine years in Ethiopia; his account of his travels, the Itinerário,
was first published in 1728 in a French translation by Le Grand, and later appeared in
English translated by Samuel Johnson (1735). All he says of Aksum is

"and the place where she (the Queen of Sheba) had her court still exists today, with
monuments of remarkable magnificence, as well as the town where they say she was born
and which still today preserves her name, the land being called Saba by the Abyssinians,
all of which I saw and traversed on several occasions".

When James Bruce, (who detested the Jesuits, and who referred to Lobo as `a grovelling
fanatic priest') launched into one of his denunciations of Lobo's inaccuracy, he made the
mistake of assuming that Lobo's `Caxume' was Aksum, and ridiculed his geographical
understanding (Bruce 1790). Actually, Lobo was referring to Qishn in Arabia.

Finally, in 1660 the Jesuit Balthasar Telles or Tellez published his Historia geral de
Ethiopia a alta, at Coimbra in Portugal. This was an abridgement and revision of de
Almeida's (unpublished) book, just as the latter depended to some extent on Paez.
Translated into English, Tellez' The Travels of the Jesuits in Ethiopia was published in
London in 1710. It contained a brief account of Aksum and its monuments (Ch. 5: 3).

The information imparted by the various missionaries who worked in Ethiopia in the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though full of semi-legendary material, allowed Job
Ludolf, or Ludolphus, in 1681, to publish at Frankfurt the first full History of Abyssinia,
(excluding the fabulous 'history' written by Tellez 'Chimerical author', Luis de Urreta, published at Valencia in 1610 — a book about which Geddes (1696: 467ff), quoting an extract about vast and mythical Dominican convents in Ethiopia, noted `though it is an octavo of 1130 odd pages, and a small print, there is not one syllable of truth from the beginning to the end'). Ludolf's work was translated and printed in English the next year. It included, in Book II, a chapter (XI) entitled "Of the Royal City of Axuma: and the Inauguration of their Kings". Ludolf has very little to add, beyond a number of sighs at the transience of material things, to the Jesuit reports, merely saying that

"of old this city was adorn'd with most beautiful structures, a fair palace, and a cathedral proudly vaunting her obelisks, sculptures, and several sumptuous edifices. Some of the pillars are still to be seen, with inscriptions of unknown letters, remaining arguments of their antiquity, now demolish'd by the wars, or defac'd with age. The city itself, now totally ruin'd, looks more like a village, than a town of note . . . only the ruins still remain to testify that once it was great and populous".

The next additions to our knowledge about the country came from travellers who for one reason or another managed to penetrate through what is now the Sudan or from the inhospitable coastlands and climb through the passes to the high Ethiopian plateau. The French doctor, Charles Poncet, journeyed to Aksum (which he called Heli) in 1699, but limited himself to describing three pyramidal and triangular granite needles, covered with hieroglyphs, in the square in front of the church. He noted that they had bolts represented on them, which surprised him, since the Ethiopians did not employ them. However inaccurate the description, it is evident that he refers to the three largest stelae.

The Scottish explorer, James Bruce, arrived in 1769 and stayed in the country until 1772. In his book, Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, he devoted some pages to the description of the antiquities of Aksum. He mentioned forty obelisks "none of which have any hieroglyphs upon them", discussed Poncet's bolts, and suggested that the three largest stelae were the work of Ptolemy Euergetes. He also illustrated this part with a "geometrical elevation, servilely copied, without shading or perspective, that all kind of readers may understand it". This illustration is very inaccurate, but does give an impression of the stelae. Bruce also mentioned one hundred and thirty three pedestals with the marks of statues on top; some of these pedestals still remain visible today. Bruce claimed that two of them still bore the statues of "Syrius the Latrator Anubis, or Dog Star". These were "much mutilated, but of a taste easily distinguished to be Egyptian". What these actually were is, alas, now a mystery, but his evidence, with that of Alvares, leads one to think that there must have been many more pedestals or thrones visible than can be seen today. He also saw other pedestals "whereon the figures of the Sphinx had been placed". He commented on the 'magnificent flights of steps' of the platform of the former church "probably the remains of a temple built by Ptolemy Euergetes, if not of a time more remote", and dismissed the cathedral as a "mean, small building, very ill kept, and full of pigeons dung". He also added that the king himself told him that the Ark of the Covenant had been destroyed by Gragn with the church, "though pretended falsely to subsist there still". He saw the various pillars and thrones (or at least so one supposes from his description of "three small square inclosures, all of granite, with small octagon pillars in the angles, apparently Egyptian; on the top of which formerly were small
images of the dog-star, probably of metal"). Bruce found, below the coronation stone, another stone with a defaced inscription which, naturally, he announced 'may safely be restored' with the Greek letters reading 'King Ptolemy Euergetes'. He further alludes to the Mai Shum reservoir, and estimates the town to have amounted in his time to some six hundred houses. Oddly enough, in view of his particular desire to see most of the monuments as Egyptian, Bruce was, while in Tigray, actually presented with a late Egyptian (possibly XXXth Dynasty or Ptolemaic) cippus (a small stele bearing magical texts) of Horus, which he illustrates in two engravings. This is one of the very rare Egyptian or Meroitic objects known from Ethiopia, but a standing figure of the same deity shown on the cippus, Horus-the-Child or Harpokrates, is also known from a cornaline amuletic figure found at Matara (Leclant 1965).

Illustrations 3 & 4. Prints after one of Bruce's sketches, showing the Egyptian Cippus of Horus given to him in Ethiopia.

In spite of Bruce's curious interpretations of the Aksumite monuments visible in his time, his publication, though a certain amount of incredulity greeted his account of what he had seen and done, attracted interest in Ethiopian history and antiquities. He was soon followed by Henry Salt, who travelled to Ethiopia with George Annesley, viscount Valentia, in 1805, and again as British envoy in 1809. In the last volume of Valentia's three-volume account (1809), Salt contributed a chapter on Aksum, and first published Ezana's inscription as well as other antiquities; the folio aquatint companion volume to Valentia's work contained a picture of the stelae, the first nineteenth-century illustration of Aksumite antiquities. Salt also published A Voyage to Abyssinia in 1814, illustrating it with a copy of Ezana's famous trilingual inscription. With Salt, who cleared the base of this inscription, we may say that archaeology had arrived at Aksum, although it was not until 1868 that a deliberately planned excavation, amateurish though it seems to us today, was undertaken. This occurred when soldiers accompanying the British military expedition, sent to relieve the prisoners kept by the emperor Tewodros (Theodore) at Magdala, opened some trenches at the site of the port of Adulis. They were theoretically under the distant supervision of R. R. Holmes, the British Museum's agent, who actually remained up-country endeavouring, unsuccessfully as it transpired, to obtain permission to visit Aksum (Munro-Hay, 1989). Other visitors of various nationalities followed, including Theodore Bent who, in 1893, was able to add a certain amount to the description of Aksum and its surroundings in his Sacred City of the Abyssinians (1896). The Italian archaeologist Paribeni, in 1906, and the Swede Sundström, also excavated at Adulis and found impressive ruined structures, with a number of coins and other objects (Paribeni 1907; Sundström 1907).

Illustration 5. The Greek version of the trilingual inscription of king Ezana of Aksum first published by Salt. Photo BIEA.

With the beginning of archaeology in the country, the potential for discovering more about the Aksumites' way of life was immensely increased. Details about technological and agricultural affairs, or urbanisation, not available from any other source, now began to emerge. The major event in Ethiopian archaeology until the excavations of modern
times, was the arrival of the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, led by Enno Littmann, in 1906 (Littmann et al. 1913). The German team explored Aksumite sites along their route across Ethiopia, and surveyed the whole Aksum region; they dug for the plans of major structures, and meticulously planned, drew or photographed whatever they cleared. Almost immediately after their return a preliminary report appeared (Littmann and Krencker 1906). The German team also presented, in their copiously-illustrated four-volume publication in 1913, sketches, photographs and descriptions of everything of interest both ancient and modern. This included a number of Aksumite inscriptions, which were translated and so offered some primary material for speculations about chronology and other aspects of Aksumite history.

The foundation which they laid has been built upon, though very modestly in comparison to work in other countries, by subsequent expeditions. Archaeological and survey work has been done by Italian, French, American and British teams, and by the Ethiopian Department of Antiquities (most of it only published in preliminary reports in the *Annales d'Ethiopie*, but see also Chittick 1974 and Munro-Hay 1989). The surveys and excavations have revealed numerous structures and domestic material of Aksumite date in many parts of northern Ethiopia. As a result, some idea can now be obtained as to the extraordinary civilisation developed between about the first and seventh centuries AD by the Aksumites at their capital city and other urban centres. Though the archaeological study of the kingdom is still in its infancy, the results are very impressive, and we can now put Aksum firmly into its place among the great civilisations of late antiquity.

### 3. The City and the State

#### 1. The Landscape

A traveller arriving at Gabaza, the coast station and customs point for the port city of Adulis (Ch. 3: 4) a short distance inland, may well have looked westwards towards Aksum from the hot and humid coastal plain by the Red Sea shore with some trepidation. As James Bruce (1790) put it

"The mountains of Abyssinia have a singular aspect from this (coastal plain), as they appear in three ridges. The first is of no considerable height, but full of gullies and broken ground, thinly covered with shrubs; the second, higher and steeper, still more rugged and bare; the third is a row of sharp, uneven-edged mountains, which would be counted high in any country in Europe".