

Older than Egypt is Ethiopia

Ethiopia is old, even older than Egypt, but its antiquity is somewhat different. While Egypt was the world's first indisputable nation-state, unique in its complex politico-religious system augmented by magnificent material remains and a corpus of epic literature, in Ethiopia, the very cradle of mankind, the material evidence of its ancient civilisation alone attests to its former glory.

The Ancient Egyptians, from the earliest times, kept records of their kings and this chronology is central to the chronological structure of the early Aegean, Levantine and Mesopotamian civilisations. It is, however, of no import to Ancient Ethiopia. If the Ethiopians did keep records, these have either been lost for ever or not yet discovered. The attempts by unnamed writers to compile an Ethiopian king-list -- the *Kebra Negast* or *Book of the Glory of Kings* -- from the Queen of Sheba to the rise of the Zagwe dynasty, is believed to be a 13th-century creation; its aim seems to have been to establish the political credentials of the so-called Solomonic dynasty, an Ethiopian king-list that traces the rulers of Ancient Axum to Menelik I (originally Bin Ha Malik, The King's Son), the son of the "Israelite" King Solomon and the "Ethiopian" Queen Makeda, the Queen of Sheba.

Confusingly, the Queen of Sheba features prominently in the oral and written traditions of Ethiopia, Yemen and ancient Israel. The Yemenis saw her as a South Arabian queen, the Ethiopians as Axumite. In Arabic her name is Bilquis, in Ethiopia Makeda and in the biblical language of the Israelites she is known as the Queen of Sheba. To add to the confusion, historians suggest that King Solomon must have reigned around the 10th century BC. It is difficult to decipher fact from fiction, but archaeological evidence is indisputable and it reveals that Axum was founded a millennium later.

LUCY-DINKENESH:

Ethiopia easily claims the longest archaeological record of any country in the world. It is in Ethiopia that the story of the evolution of mankind began. The remains of the earliest ancestral humans or hominids have been found there. But while sophisticated civilisations historically developed on the Ethiopian highlands, in many parts of the mountains and rugged country, many of its peoples retained a material existence not much different from the hunter-gathering lifestyles of our ancestral hominids.

Two Ethiopian regions stand out as preeminent sites favoured for habitation by the early hominids -- the Omo Valley in the southwestern part of the country, and the Afar or Danakil Depression. To this day, these remote and inhospitable regions remain largely cut off from the outside world. They form different parts of Africa's Great Rift Valley, which runs from central Africa, through the eastern part of the continent, dissecting the Horn of Africa, dividing Arabia from Africa, marking out the outlines of the Sinai Peninsula, and ending somewhat unobtrusively with the Gulf of Aqaba and the River Jordan Valley.

The Omo Valley and the Danakil Depression are markedly different in landscape and terrain. The latter is a desolate and dreary desert, 100 metres below sea level and one of the hottest places on earth, while the Omo Valley is a veritable Garden of Eden with a rich and luxuriant tropical flora and teeming with exotic fauna.

Remains of *Australopithecus Afarensis*, an early hominid dating as far back as four million years, have been found in an almost complete state in the Danakil Depression, which was not always the arid desert it is today. When the early hominids roamed the Afar region, it was a well-watered and wooded savanna country. In 1974 archaeologists excavating sites in the Awash River Valley discovered the

skeletal remains of a female hominid whom they promptly named "Lucy" (apparently because they were listening to the song Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds by the Beatles). The diminutive three-and-half-feet tall Lucy -- known as Dinkeneshe or "Thou art beautiful" in Amharic, Ethiopia's official language -- lived some 3.5 million years ago. Her skeletal remains are now deposited at the National Museum of Addis Ababa, which is also home to a host of other prehistoric remains.

THE ANTECEDENTS OF AXUM:

The history of Ethiopia goes back a long way. The profusion of Stone Age tools and cave paintings hint at the industriousness and vibrancy of the lifestyles of the earliest Ethiopians and attests to the country's antiquity. During the Chalcolithic Age (6200-3000 BC) the inhabitants began cultivating grains and crops that are still much in use in Ethiopia today. Indigenous grasses and grains, such as teff, from which the national Ethiopian sour pancake-like moist bread is made, began to be extensively cultivated as a staple food. The ensete, a root crop known as the false banana because the plant resembles the banana tree but bears no edible fruit, was also grown in the southern and central parts of the Ethiopian Highlands. Sorghum, barley and buckwheat were also cultivated.

From late prehistoric times patterns of livelihood were established that were to become characteristic of Ethiopia down through the ages and right up to contemporary times. The Early Bronze Age (3000 BC) witnessed the domestication of cattle, a process which had started much earlier in neighbouring Sudan. At this stage of development, regular interaction between the indigenous peoples of Ethiopia and their neighbours first began.

The close proximity of the Ethiopian highlands to the Red Sea has always provided the main line of external communication. This stretch of water has, since time immemorial, provided a means of transport and the Ancient Egyptians recorded voyages to the Land of Punt -- God's Land. To them, Punt was the most ancient country, a sacred territory.

Queen Hatshepsut in the 18th dynasty (1540-1304 BC) dispatched a diplomatic and trading mission to Punt, beautifully depicted on her funerary temple at Deir Al-Bahri. Punt was also the source of a host of exotic goods such as gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, animal skins and hides.

Egyptian legends sometimes referred to Punt as a land ruled by serpent-kings. Interestingly enough, material and literary evidence suggest some form of serpent-worship before the advent of Christianity in Ethiopia. Could then, Ethiopia be the Punt of the Egyptians? To carry the argument further, the sturdy tankwas, or papyrus canoes, that ply Lake Tana -- the source of the Blue Nile -- are curiously reminiscent of the Ancient Egyptian reed boats.

The Hebrews, too, seem to have maintained links with Ancient Ethiopia. The marital union of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon was not the first biblical reference to a Hebrew-Ethiopian marriage. According to the Bible Moses had an Ethiopian wife. "And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married: for he had married an Ethiopian woman," we read in the Book of Numbers.

Ethiopia appears in the King James Version 45 times. Most references to Ethiopia are cited in the Old Testament, not always in the most favourable light. Still, there appears to have been some familiarity with Ethiopian geography in the Levant with frequent biblical references to the rivers of Ethiopia, such as Gihon.

The centrality of the Solomonic link to the Ethiopian heritage is challenged by concrete archaeological evidence. "The Queen of Sheba is clearly recalled as a contemporary of King Solomon, whose reign must be placed around the 10th century BC. There is no archaeological evidence that the site of Axum was settled until one thousand years after this date," argues David W Phillipson in *Ancient Ethiopia*, published by British Museum Press, 1998.

AXUM:

This most celebrated state of Ancient Ethiopia could, in its heyday, be compared in grandeur with the empires of Rome, Persia and Ancient China. Among the most imposing features of its material culture are monumental stelae that mark the burial catacombs of Axumite kings. Some 120 survive today -- many in a dilapidated state of disrepair. The largest is over 30 metres long, albeit no longer standing upright. It was the largest single stone ever quarried in the ancient world. The stelae of Axum are grave markers with which catacombs are invariably associated. Shafts, underground passages and chambers are always found nearby. Alas, most of the burial chambers were looted in antiquity, and only a few broken grave-goods were left by robbers

Byzantine Greek and Roman references to Axum -- a prosperous state which at its zenith stretched from Nubia to Yemen and Hejaz, and encompassed much of the Horn of Africa -- abound. The kingdom, in conjunction with the Nabateans and southern Arabians, apparently held a monopoly over the spice and incense trade.

Relations between Axum and some of its other neighbours remain unclear. We know that Axum's fabled King Ezana (who reigned from 325 to 360 AD) controlled Mero (the once thriving Nubian kingdom) and Yemen as well as the Red Sea coast up to Suakin in Sudan. We know also that Ezana's armies overran Mero when it was in its last throes. A trilingual inscription, vaguely reminiscent of the Rosetta Stone, was erected by Ezana recording his victories over the Nubians in three languages -- Sabaean, Ge'ez and Greek.

The Axumite empire's heartland was the highlands of northern Ethiopia and southern Eritrea. The most impressive ruins are to be found in the northern Ethiopian region of Tigray, and to a lesser extent in Eritrea. The capital, Axum, in northern Tigray still stands today -- a mere shadow of its former glory.

Axum's rulers assumed the title of Negust Nagast, King of Kings, and started minting coins that provide an interesting chronology of the rulers of Axum. No other kingdom in Africa south of the Sahara did this, and the study of the Axumite coinage system reveals much about the development of the political structure, religion and culture of the ancient empire. For example, the earliest Axumite coins bore the crescent and sun-disc, or crescent and star -- designs characteristic of the pagan religion where moon and sun worship was prevalent. Later, when Christianity was officially adopted as a state religion, the cross replaced the crescent and sun-disc as state emblems engraved on official Axumite coins. Many of the earliest coins also had Greek inscriptions but, as Axum grew in importance, the Greek inscriptions were replaced by Ge'ez inscriptions (see box).

Christianity was adopted as a state religion in Ethiopia in the fourth century AD. According to tradition, two Christian youths from Tyre, Aedesius and Frumentius, were shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast of what is today Eritrea. They were taken to Axum, became tutors of the future king, and later Frumentius left Ethiopia for Alexandria and asked the Coptic Patriarch of Egypt to send a bishop to head the nascent Ethiopian Church. Frumentius was consecrated. He assumed the name Abuna Salama, initiating a tradition, whereby the Archbishops of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church were consecrated by the Coptic Pope, which lasted until the early 1970s.

ETHIOPIA AND YEMEN:

The history of Ancient Ethiopia cannot be separated from that of Ancient Yemen, whose recorded history stretches back over 3,000 years. Archaeological evidence shows that settled agricultural communities were established in the Yemeni highlands by the third millennium BC. Urban centres soon developed supported by the surrounding farming countryside. Masonry flourished and monumental sculptures and massive stone architecture were erected. Sophisticated irrigation works were also constructed which attest to a high degree of material sophistication. States like Hadhramaut, Saba, with its capital Ma'rib, and later Himyar thrived as industrious mercantile nations that monopolised the spice and incense trade of the ancient world.

Successive civilisations of Mineans, Sabaeans and Himyarites interacted closely with their counterparts in Ethiopia. The precise nature of the relationship between the people who inhabited Ancient Yemen and their contemporaries across the Red Sea in Ethiopia is unknown. What is clear, however, is that due to geographical proximity, strong cultural and trading links developed between the most celebrated of Ancient Yemeni civilisations, Saba, and the peoples of Ethiopia.

Archaeological research based on the results of excavations and the study of extant monuments and artefacts by Western and Ethiopian scholars reveal growing cultural and trade contacts between them.

It is difficult to ascertain how far Axum, the most glorious of Ethiopia's earliest civilisations, can be viewed as a direct heir to Saba. The mystification is deepened by the confusion between Sheba, a variation of Saba, and Ethiopia in the Bible and other mediaeval documents. Sheba, or the Kingdom of the South, could equally refer to either Yemen or Axum.

That controversy apart, there is no doubt that the cultures and histories of Saba and Ethiopia were inextricably intertwined. The Sabaeans were highly skilled masons and water engineers and, not many centuries after they constructed the Ma'rib Dam, walled cities and other architectural wonders, similar structures began to be erected in Ethiopia.

Scholars claim that some 2,500 years ago, successive waves of Semitic people from southern Arabia crossed the Red Sea into what is now Ethiopia, they brought with them their Semitic language and script. Around the fifth century BC, there is archaeological evidence to show that the Semitic influences intensified. Sabaean merchants and perhaps armies moved across the Red Sea into Ethiopia, as attested by the many Sabeian inscriptions dating to that period. In time they produced a pre-Axumite culture which ripened into a proto-Axumite culture.

We know next to nothing of the pagan religion of the Axumites. In sharp contrast, much is known today about the Ancient Egyptian religious beliefs and practices. We know the names and attributes of Ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses, but little is known about the nature of worship in Ancient Ethiopia -- save perhaps that serpents were sacred creatures and maybe the sun, moon and stars were worshipped, as in Ancient Arabia.

Archaeological evidence suggests that South Arabian gods and goddesses were worshipped in Ethiopia before the advent of Christianity. Nothing, though, is conclusive. Archaeological evidence points to the influx of settlers and cultural influences from Yemen, across the Red Sea, into Ethiopia at least about 800 BC, in all probability much earlier. The Red Sea proved no impediment to trade and cultural exchange. Yemen at the time was at the centre of a trading network that linked Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean world -- what is today Greece, Turkey and the Levant -- with Yemen and onwards to

Oman, the Arabian Gulf, present day Iraq, Iran and India, perhaps even beyond. In Yemen, the Minaean Civilisation was absorbed or superseded by the celebrated Sabaean Civilisation about 1000 BC. Trade relations were revolutionised when the inhabitants of Arabia domesticated the dromedary, or one-humped camel, in the 11th century BC.

The domestication of the dromedary made it easier to transport goods over more desolate regions. The spice trade was the mainstay of the economy. The Sabaeans were great builders and the imposing dam they constructed near Ma'rib, their capital, stands testimony to their accomplished architectural skills. They lived in multistoried apartment blocks in walled cities with monumental gates. From the windows and door designs on the Axumite stelae, it appears that these particular Sabaean colonists probably settled in Ethiopia in much the same way as Europeans settled in America. Indeed, interaction between Yemen and Ethiopia in ancient times is sometimes compared with the historical relationship between Europe and America, with the Red Sea as substitute for the Atlantic Ocean.

The Sabaeans united southern Arabia into a single political entity by the third century BC. By the time of the birth of Jesus Christ, they had expanded their empire to include Ethiopian lands across the Red Sea. With Sabaean power waning in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, their empire was conquered by the Ethiopians in 525. The Sabaean civilisation endured for 14 centuries lasting from around 800 BC to 600 AD. And as Saba declined, Axum arose. The tables were soon turned and Ethiopia had the upper hand. For many centuries afterwards, Yemen remained under Axumite suzerainty.

Trade and cultural exchanges between Sabaean Yemen and Ancient pre-Axumite Ethiopia were strengthened. Artefacts and stone slabs bearing the Sabaean script of southern Arabia became more common in Ethiopia. Soon the monumental stone structures similar to those in Ancient Yemen began to appear in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. The Temple of the Moon in Yeha is the largest surviving structure in East Africa.

With the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD, Axum lost Yemen and Hejaz, and the once flourishing empire shrunk back to its original core region of the northern Ethiopian highlands.

Ge'ez the sacred tongue > LINGUISTIC affinities between Ethiopia and the Arab world are as strong today as they were in bygone days. Ge'ez, Amharic and Tigrinya are related to Arabic. There are some 80 different languages spoken in Ethiopia, but the country's official language is Amharic, better known outside Ethiopia as Amharic. It is the language of higher education, most modern literature and government.

Historical linguists generally hold that the languages spoken by a majority of the inhabitants of Ethiopia today, namely the Afro-Asian languages, have their roots in northeastern Africa. The area covered by speakers of the Afro-Asian linguistic group spans a huge swathe of territory from northwestern Africa, the Sahara, eastern and northeastern Africa, Arabia and southwestern Asia. The Afro-Asian group of languages is divided into Semitic, Cushitic and Omotic -- and speakers of all three groups are found in Ethiopia. Indeed, Ethiopia is the only country where all the three linguistic groups are currently in use.

Scholars also suggest that first Omotic and then Cushitic speaking peoples moved into the Ethiopian highlands about 7,000 BC. The Semitic-speaking peoples entered Ethiopia at a later date. Speakers of the Nilotic languages spanning a vast territory in Sudan and other East African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania inhabit in the southwestern extremities of Ethiopia, and it is not known if they previously inhabited other areas of the country. Of the Cushitic languages spoken in Ethiopia, the most widespread

is Oromo followed by Somali and Sidamo. But the recorded history of Ethiopia has traditionally been the domain of the country's Semitic speakers.

The foremost of the Semitic languages of Ethiopia is Ge'ez, widely regarded as an offshoot of Sabaeen, held in special esteem.

Ethiopia has one of the longest continuous literate traditions in Africa. It is a literary tradition where Ge'ez plays a central, all-important role. Ge'ez is to Ethiopia what Latin is to Europe. Ge'ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the official court language of the Axumites, borrowed 24 symbols from the Sabaeen writing system.

Amharic, the official language of contemporary Ethiopia, is derived from Ge'ez. Two other languages are closely related to it -- Tigre, spoken in Eritrea; and Tigrinya spoken in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, as well as in Eritrea. Both Amharic and Tigrinya use a modified version of the Ge'ez script.

The Axumites left behind a body of written records in Greek and Ge'ez. The Bible was translated into Ge'ez from Greek, and the Ge'ez alphabet bears an uncanny resemblance to both the Coptic and Greek scripts. Ge'ez, which ceased to be a spoken language in the 10th century, is still widely studied by academic scholars who specialise in Ancient Ethiopia.