The wealth of Africa
The kingdom of Aksum

Students’ worksheets
AKSUM

Front cover image: Gold coin showing King Ezana and ears of wheat. Aksum, Ethiopia, about AD 340–400. British Museum

Century AD

3rd
- 270 – King Endubis begins coinage

4th
- 340 – King Ezana converts to Christianity
- Conquers new territory
- 476 – Fall of Rome

5th
- 500 – King Ousanas
- 519 – King Kaleb’s expedition to Yemen
- 570 – Persians conquer Yemen

6th
- 630 – End of Aksum as capital

7th

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SHEET 1: HOW IMPORTANT WAS AKSUM AT ITS PEAK?

There are very few clues as to what Aksum was like. Most of the evidence is archaeological. From remains we can see that this Ethiopian kingdom may have been one of the most important states in the region.

**Source 1**
The Aksumites developed a civilisation of considerable sophistication. Aksum’s contribution in such fields as architecture and ceramics is both original and impressive.
Munro-Hay 1991: 10

**Source 3**
Aksum’s political control extended to regions beyond the modern borders of Ethiopia and Eritrea. Large areas of southern Arabia were ruled from Aksum at intervals between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD.
Phillipson 1998: 51

**Source 4**
The general prosperity and reputation of the country led the Persian religious leader Mani to label Aksum as the third of the kingdoms of the world in the later 3rd century.
Munro-Hay 1991: 13

**Source 7**
No other sub-Saharan African state issued its own independent coinage in ancient times. Indeed, only a few other contemporary states anywhere in the world could issue coinage in gold -- Rome, Persia.
Munro-Hay 1999: 9

**Source 8**
Aksum developed a civilisation and empire whose influence, at its height in the 4th and 5th centuries AD, extended throughout the regions lying south of the Roman Empire, from the fringes of the Sahara in the west, across the Red Sea to the inner Arabian desert in the east. The Aksumites developed Africa’s only indigenous written script, Ge’ez... They traded with Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean and Arabia.
Reader 1997: 202

**Questions**

1. What can you learn about Aksum from these sources?
2. When was Aksum most important?
3. How important was Aksum according to these sources?
The wealth of Africa
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SHEET 2: HOW IMPORTANT WERE THE KINGS OF AKSUM?

Aksum was a monarchy, and archaeological evidence shows that the kings were determined to show off their power. Among the objects found have been large stone slabs (called stelae) with inscriptions carved on them detailing some of their achievements. Here is some other evidence of their power.

Source 1
And he improved the roads and subdued the country. And he provided safe conduct on the road for the bringing of tribute together with supplies for men and women.
Inscription of Ousanas, from Aksum, Ethiopia

Source 3
Slaves were also captured; their presence in large numbers at Aksum would help to explain where the manpower came from that must have been available for the building of the stelae and other monuments.
Phillipson 1998: 54

Source 5
When the Beja revolted, we sent our brothers to fight them. When they came back, having made them submit, they led them to us with their entire hoard and their animals: 3,112 cattle, 6,224 sheep and 677 oxen... and 4,400 people.
Inscription of Ezana, from Aksum, Ethiopia

Source 6
Those who obeyed him he spared; those who resisted him he put to death.
Inscription of Ousanas, from Aksum Museum, Ethiopia

Source 8
The craze for the gigantic reflected the tastes of the Aksumite monarchy, and the monuments [stelae] were the concrete realisation of its purpose, which was to instil awe-inspiring admiration for the greatness and strength of the ruler to whom the monuments were dedicated.
Phillipson 1998: 105

Questions

1. According to the inscriptions (sources 1, 5 & 6), what did the kings of Aksum achieve?
2. Why did they write these inscriptions?
3. How else did they impress their people?
**SHEET 3: HOW IMPORTANT WAS TRADE TO AKSUM?**

Aksum’s port at Adulis occupied a vital position between the trade routes of the Mediterranean, and Arabia and Asia. Read these sources to find out whether the kingdom took advantage of this.

**Source 1**
It is noteworthy that the first Aksumite coins were mainly of gold and silver, the gold coins following the weight standard then used in the Roman Empire; furthermore they were inscribed in Greek. They were primarily intended for circulation in international trade.
Phillipson 1998: 74

**Source 3**
The archaeological evidence for possible trade-contact between Aksum and China consists of a single piece of [Chinese] iron.
Phillipson 1998: 67

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

**Source 5**
Cloth made in Egypt, robes, coloured cloaks, linen, fringed mantles, several sorts of glassware, imitation murrhineware, which they use for ornaments and for cutting [to serve as money], material called ‘copper cooked in honey’ for cooking-pots and for cutting into armlets and anklets for women, iron used for spears both for hunting elephants and other animals and for war, axes, adzes, swords, big round drinking cups of bronze, a little money for foreigners who live there, Ladikean and Italian wine, but not much. For the king are imported: silver and gold objects made in the design of the country, cloaks of cloth, unlined garments, not of much value.
Aksum’s imports, described in the *Periplus* (1st century AD), quoted in Munro-Hay 1991: 145

**Source 7**
It has long been recognised that ivory may have been a major export. Recent archaeological research has for the first time revealed that it was also carved locally, at least in Aksum itself, to a very high level of artistry and technological sophistication.
Phillipson 1998: 56

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**Task**
Make a list for the King of Aksum with all the imports into the kingdom on one side, and all the exports to other countries on the other.

**Questions**
What can you learn from source 5 about the following?
- Fashion
- Tools
- Food and drink
- Anything else about life in Aksum
SHEET 4: HOW MUCH HAS ETHIOPIAN RELIGION CHANGED OVER TIME?

As you will see from these sources, some aspects of religion in Ethiopia have changed since the time of Aksum, while others have remained more or less the same. Ethiopia is one of the oldest Christian states in the world, and 60% still follow the Orthodox Church. See if you can spot examples of change and continuity.

Source 1
There is good evidence that building stelae as grave-markers was a widespread practice over much of north-eastern Africa during the last 5,000–2,000 years.
Phillipson 1998: 95

Source 3
Those tombs of the wealthy which are roughly dated to the period after the adoption of Christianity appear to be less flamboyantly showing off power, but they do retain many features from earlier times.
Phillipson 1998: 111

Source 5
The present Old Cathedral at Aksum stands on a massive podium... of typical Aksumite style. The date of the original Cathedral is firmly placed by Ethiopian tradition in the reign of Ezana.
Phillipson 1998: 116

Questions
1. Which coin shows that Ezana has become a Christian (source 4)?
2. Why would Ezana want to show this on a coin?
3. What evidence of religion is there from before the time of Ezana?
4. What examples of continuity are there in Ethiopian religion?
The wealth of Africa
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SHEET 5: WHAT WOULD THE CITY OF AKSUM HAVE BEEN LIKE?

Most of what is known about the city comes from archaeological evidence. This tells us about the buildings of the rich and important people, but not as much about people’s daily lives.

Source 1
The town-plan of Aksum is thus fairly simple; it starts with a ceremonial approach from the east, lined with granite victory-thrones and statues of bronze and precious metals dedicated to the gods, leading to the religious centre with the royal cemetery lying to the north and east. The focus for this region seems to have been the temple/cathedral area, with another row of thrones. The main residential suburb with its huge palaces was situated to the west; and the whole was flanked with lesser cemeteries and more humble residential suburbs. It is probable that there was at least one open square, a market-place perhaps, somewhere in the town centre.
Munro-Hay 1991: 101

Source 3
These large residences were basically of one plan; a central lodge or pavilion, raised on a high podium approached by broad staircases, surrounded and enclosed by ranges of buildings on all four sides. The central pavilion was thus flanked by open courtyards. The plan shows a taste for the symmetrical.
Munro-Hay 1991: 98

Source 5
In addition to its advantageous position for trade, the site enjoyed abundant rainfall, with a long rainy season from late June to early September. There were probably a number of streams and springs, and fertile soil very likely capable of producing more than one crop a year.
Munro-Hay 1991: 34

Source 6
There is no river within two miles of Aksum, but the inhabitants have good well water; there are many wells hidden, and even in the plain have been found. It appears probable that, in ancient times, almost every house had its well.
Nathaniel Pearce (early 19th century), quoted in Munro-Hay 1991: 97

Task
1. From the information in sources 2 and 3, draw a plan of one of these large houses.
2. Make a tourist brochure for the city of Aksum in AD 500, highlighting the major sights.
No other African society south of the Sahara issued its own coinage at this time. Only Rome, Byzantium, and Persian and Indian states minted gold coins at all. Most people used these or relied on other means of exchange. The kings of Aksum, however, thought it necessary to issue coins, and not just in gold and silver, but in copper as well.

Questions

1. Put the coins (sources 1–3) in order of value.
2. Put these coins in order of quality.
3. Why are they of different quality?
4. What information can you get from these coins?
5. Why did the kings of Aksum issue coins?

Task

Look at the stela in sources 4 and 5. This was placed over a tomb, possibly of a king. The carvings on it are supposed to show storeys of a house. Little is known about Aksumite religion before Christianity, so we have to make guesses.

Have a go at guessing:

• why these stelae were made
• what beliefs these carvings show
• why each later one was bigger than the previous ones
Questions

1. What has just happened?
2. Why might the king be blaming the priests?
3. Why might the king have become a Christian shortly after this disaster?
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