

AXUM

This small town in the Eritrean highlands (also spelled Aksum) was the earliest imperial capital of Ethiopia. Later it became, and it remains to this day, the most important center of Christian worship in the country.

The first historical mention of Axum is in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, a Greek navigator's guide to the Red Sea written in the first century A.D. The author describes the Red Sea port of Adulis (near modern Massawa), and states that "eight days' journey inland lay the metropolis of the Axumites" (sec. 4). The Axumite king, named Zoscales, was reported to be "noble and imbued with Greek education" (sec. 5). There was indeed a good deal of [Greek influence](#) in the early kingdom of Axum, as seen in its Greek-style coinage and in the Greek inscriptions left by some of its rulers. In the third and fourth centuries A.D., Axum extended its dominion over most of what is today Ethiopia and across the Red Sea into South Arabia.

One of the most active of Axumite rulers, Aezana, left commemorative stelae in three languages: Greek, the Sabaean language of South Arabia, and the native Ge'ez of Ethiopia. In his earlier stelae, Aezana attributes his [military](#) victories to the intervention of the Ethiopian god Mahrem (equivalent to Ares), but the last of the stelae begins and ends with Christian invocations. The latest coins of Aezana also have a cross on the reverse face, in place of the crescent and disk found on earlier Axumite coinage. From these facts one may infer that the Axumite ruler, and presumably his subjects, were converted to Christianity shortly before the year 350.

The story of Ethiopia's conversion is confirmed in most of its details by the Roman historian RUFINUS. He tells how two educated Greek youths, Aedesius and Frumentius, were kidnapped and taken to Axum, where in time they became great favorites of the reigning king. When the king died, they were made guardians and tutors of his infant son, Aezana, and

in this role they began spreading the Christian faith within the country. When Aezana reached manhood, he allowed the brothers to go their ways, but Frumentius went to the patriarch of Alexandria with the request that he be allowed to return to Ethiopia as bishop-missionary. This was granted by the newly installed patriarch, ATHANASIUS I, and upon his return to Axum, Frumentius effected the official conversion of Aezana and of his subjects. Ethiopia was thus brought under the wing of the Alexandrian church, where it was to remain until 1958. Frumentius has come to be known in Ethiopian tradition as Abba Salamah (father of peace). (See [SALAMA I, ABUNA.](#))

The power of Axum gradually weakened after the fifth century, in part because of continual involvement in the wars of South Arabia. However, one of the seventh-century rulers, Armah, gave sanctuary to some of the earliest followers of Muhammad when they were temporarily driven from Arabia, and this was remembered with gratitude by the early Muslims. For a time Axum was exempted from the *dar al-harb*, the list of sanctioned [military](#) targets for Islamic conquest. Later, however, the nomadic BEJA TRIBES of the Red Sea littoral were converted to Islam, and it was these local enemies and erstwhile subjects of Axum who played a major role in the final weakening of the kingdom. The Axumite monarchy vanished into oblivion near the end of the tenth century, and power passed to another Ethiopian people, the Agau. “Encompassed on all sides by the enemies of their religion, the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by which they were forgotten,” as Edward Gibbon put it.

It was inevitable that Axum should become, after the conversion of Aezana, the most important center of Christian worship in Ethiopia. A tradition that must date from this time claims that Menelik I, the legendary son of Solomon and Sheba and founder of the Ethiopian empire, carried away the Tables of the [Law](#) when he left Jerusalem, and that they ultimately came to rest at Axum. Another tradition, possibly more historically accurate, tells how in the fifth century Axum became a

place of asylum for the Nine Saints, learned Monophysite scholars who had been expelled from the Byzantine domains in Syria. [Supposedly](#) it was they who brought the monastic tradition to Ethiopia and who translated the Greek scriptures into the native Ge'ez language. The names of the Nine Saints figure prominently in Ethiopian hagiography, and many monasteries are named for them.

The traditions of the Twelve Tables and of the Nine Saints were sufficient to assure that Axum would retain its religious importance long after its political eclipse. The Church of Saint [Mary](#) of Zion, built according to tradition in the year of Aezana's conversion, had the status of a kind of national cathedral. It was seen and described by the Portuguese [missionary](#) Alvares in the sixteenth century, but soon afterward was destroyed by the Muslim invader Ahmad Gran. The present Church of Saint Mary, which occupies the same spot, was first built around 1665. It continues to enjoy the special status of its predecessor, and until the twentieth century nearly every Ethiopian emperor was crowned there. The ceremony was performed in the courtyard immediately in front of the cathedral, where a monolithic coronation throne can still be seen.

Although the original church has vanished, other antiquities of the Axumite period are numerous in and around the town. The most spectacular remains are the enormous stelae, sometimes called obelisks, that were erected by Axumite rulers and nobles of the pre-Christian era. At one time there were more than fifty of these, but many have fallen down and been partially destroyed. The great royal stelae are elaborately carved in the form of imitation "sky-scrapers," with a false door at ground level and lines of false windows at successively higher levels, culminating in a crescent-shaped capital at the top. The largest of them, now fallen, stood 110 feet (33 m) high and had thirteen stories. The tallest stela that is still standing is 70 feet (21 m) high, with ten stories. Recent [excavation](#) has disclosed very extensive tomb chambers beneath the stelae, though most of their contents have long since been removed by plunderers.

In a field near the town of Axum are the scattered blocks of a large stone monument. According to tradition it marked the tomb of Menelik I and his mother, the queen of Sheba, but its actual time of origin is unknown. Elsewhere is a large rock-cut cistern, presumably for irrigation, which has come to be known as the “bath of the queen of Sheba.” Somewhat farther away in the hills behind Axum are the rock-cut tombs of the historically attested emperors Kaleb and Gabre Maskal, from the sixth century.

Excavations by a German expedition in 1906 uncovered the remains of three sumptuous palaces from the Axumite era. In 1958 a French expedition found the remains of a pre-Christian temple and of two very early churches, one in fifth-century Syrian style. The most recent excavations at Axum beneath the royal stelae were carried out by a British team in 1973 and 1974.

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