

CHAPTER THREE

3. Politics, Economy and Society in Ethiopia and the Horn to the End of the Thirteenth Century

3.1. Emergence of States

Defining state:

- ✓ State refers to an autonomous political unit having population, defined territory, sovereignty and government with the power to decree and enforce laws.
- ✓ State was the outcome of regular cultural process.
- ✓ Historically, states arose independently in different places and at different times, for example, it emerged in Ethiopia and the Horn independently from other parts of the world.
- ✓ In the case of Ethiopia and the Horn, societies in this region underwent political, economic, social and cultural changes from ancient times to the end of the thirteenth century.
- ✓ One important factor for the emergence of states was the beginning of sedentary agriculture which made people to engage in farming by forming settlement. Intermediaries (traders) also began to buy agricultural products of sedentary people.

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- ✓ In such way states were formed mainly through the expansion of agriculture that gave rise to class differentiation. Moreover, the growth of trade facilitated the development of states.
- ✓ The first states were theocratic states, and priests (shaman) maintained the social and religious affairs of their people. Gradually, however, as production became market oriented, the priests were gradually replaced by chiefs, who began collecting regular and compulsory tributes known as protection payments.
- ✓ Ethiopia and the Horn is one of the regions in Africa, where early state formation took place. From small beginnings, such states gradually developed into powerful kingdoms and even empires with a well-demarcated social structure.

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3.2. Ancient States

In North and Northeast

A. Punt

Punt was the earliest recorded state in Ethiopia and the Horn.

Evidence for the existence of Punt: Egyptian hieroglyphic writings and vivid paintings tell us a series of naval expeditions, which the Egyptian Pharaohs/kings sent to Punt.

E.g. 1. Expedition was sent to Punt by Pharaoh Sahure (r. 2743-2731 B.C.) to collect myrrh, ebony and electrum (gold and silver alloy).

2. Egyptian Queen Hatshepsut (1490-1468 B.C.), sent five ships under the leadership of Black Nubian Captain Nehasi via Wadi-Tumilat and the expedition was welcomed by Punt's King Perahu and his wife Ati. This was the best described and illustrated expedition.

The expedition was able to return collecting frankincense, cinnamon, sweet smelling woods (sandal), spices, ivory, rhinoceros horn, leopard and leopard skins, ostrich feathers and egg, monkeys, giraffes, people, etc.

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- **Exports of Punt to Egypt:** Iron, bronze, foxes, cattle, animals fur, dying and medicinal plants
- **Its imports from Egypt:** axes, daggers, swords, knives, sickles, clothes, bracelets, necklaces, beads and other trinkets(cheap jewelry).
- ✓ But the exact location of Punt has remained vague. Some scholars suggest that Punt might be located in Northern or Northeastern Somalia because of the reference to incense and myrrh. Some others suggest that Punt might be located in Northern Ethiopia because of the reference to gold, ebony and monkeys.

B. Da'amat, Yeha, Hawulti Melazo and Addi-Seglemani in the vicinity of Aksum could also be mentioned.

- ✓ Among these, Da'amat king's is said to have used politico-religious title known as *Mukarib* in the 5th century B.C. and in Da'amat various gods and goddesses were worshipped.

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Yeha

- ✓ It probably emerged around 1,000 BC as a small center where South Arabian merchants and their agents bought and stored ivory, rhinoceros horn and other goods.
- ✓ Remains of walls of some of its buildings and stone masonry as well as still standing temple and inscriptions indicate Yeha's glory.

Hawulti Melazo: a site where stone tablets that are inscribed in rectangular temple surrounded by a wall decorated with paintings representing herds of cattle were excavated.

Addi-Seglemani: was site of oldest Ethiopian monumental inscription.

C. The Aksumite State

- ✓ The nucleus of the Aksumite state was formed around 200-100 B.C. Originally, it was small and it was expanded and enlarged gradually.
- ✓ Trade was flourished in Aksumite state.

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- **Aksumite state's major items of export:** Ivory, myrrh, emerald, frankincense and some spices (like ginger), cinnamon, gold, rhinoceros horns, hippopotamus hides, tortoise shells and animals like apes.
- **Its imports:** Manufactured products like garments and textiles from Egypt, India, Roman Empire, and Persia; glassware and jewelry from Egypt and other places; metallic sheets, tools or utensils of various kinds, oil and wine from Roman Empire and Syria.
- Zoscales (c.76-89), the then king of Aksum, used to communicate in Greek language, Lingua Franca/common language/ of Greco-Roman world. Aksum also had relations with Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Laodicea (Asia Minor).
- **Evidence for Aksumite trade:** obtained from the Adulis inscription written in Greek, and the Christian Topography, describes commercial activities of the Red Sea areas. It also mentions the internal long distance trade between Aksum and a distant region called Sasu, most probably in Beni Shangul and the adjoining lands beyond the Blue Nile.

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- ✓ Merchant took to Sasu cattle, lumps of salt (probably salt blocks) and iron in exchange for gold.
- ✓ Aksumite kings had extensive contacts with the outside world notably with the South Arabian region which led to exchange of ideas, material and spiritual culture. Occasionally, the contact involved conflict. E.g. Around 200A.D, the army of Aksumite king Gadarat attacked and posed threats on peoples in Southern Arabian Peninsula, in the present day Yemen.
- ✓ B/n the third to the seventh centuries, Aksumite kings minted coins in gold, silver and bronze for both overseas and local trade.
- ✓ Aksum was one of the four great powers of the world (i. e. Roman Empire, Persia, China and Aksum) at the time.
- ✓ Kaleb (r. 500-35) expanded overseas territories of Aksum beyond Himyar and Saba.

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Decline of the Aksumite state

- ✓ The Aksumite state declined since the late seventh century because of internal and external challenges. Environmental degradation, decline in agricultural productivity and possibly plague infestation started to weaken it.
- ✓ With the destruction of the port of Adulis by the Arabs around 702, the international lifeline of the state was cut. Aksumite international trade came under the control of the rising and expanding Arab Muslims.
- ✓ Its political and military power also declined and local rebellions challenged its hegemony. Finally, rebellions of the Beja, the Agaw and Queen Bani al Hamwiyah (Yodit) finally sealed the collapse of the Aksumite state.
- ✓ **Its achievements:**
- ✓ Include surviving indigenous script and calendar as well as EOC hymns and chants, paintings; diversified ceramic tools, ivory curving, and urbanization and sophisticated building traditions (palaces, stele, churches). It also developed complex administrative and governance system, and agricultural system including irrigation.

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D. Zagwe Dynasty (1150 to 1270).

- ✓ Agaw elites took part in Aksumite state structure serving as soldiers and functionaries for at least four centuries.
- ✓ After integrating so well with Aksumite ruling class, they successfully took over the state administration. Accordingly, the Agaw prince Merra Teklehaimanot married Masobe Worq, the daughter of the last Aksumite king Dil Na'od. Later, he overthrew his father-in-law and took control of power.

Its political center: was in Bugna District within Wag and Lasta, more exactly at Adafa near Roha (Lalibela).

Trade: The Agaw kings maintained the Aksumite traditions. They renewed cultural and trade contact with eastern Mediterranean region.

Exports: Slaves, ivory and rare spices

Imports: Cotton, linen, silver and copper vessels, drags and coins.

Achievements: construction of caves, rock-hewn-monolithic churches of Lalibela.

Among the eleven churches of Lalibela, Bete Medhanelem is the largest of all and Bete Giyorgis is said to be the most finely built in the shape of the cross.

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Its Collapse: was due to internal problems of royal succession and oppositions from groups claiming descent from the ancient rulers of Aksum who referred the Zagwe as “illegitimate rulers.”

- ✓ Then, Yekuno-Amlak (r.1270-1285) members of the power claimants or the Solomonic Dynasty fought and killed the last king of Zagwe, Yetbarek and took power and ‘restored’ the Solomonic Dynasty which later stayed in power for many centuries.

E. East, Central, Southern and Western State

Included: **Bizamo** (establishment-in 8th century and it was located opposite to the present area of Gojjam and around the current Wambara area); **Damot**, located in south of Abay, had renowned king in the 13th century known as Motalami; **Enarya**: was a kingdom in the Gibe region in southwestern Ethiopia and its royal clan was called Hinnare Bushasho (Hinnario Busaso); **Gafat**, unclear whether Gafat was a state or not but it is claimed that its mountains were rich in gold.

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F. Muslim Sultanates/Principalities since 8th century

- ✓ Included: **Shewa where Makhzumite Sultanate** in 896 A. D (283 A.H.) was established; **Fatagar** was founded around Minjar, Shenkora and Ada'a in the eleventh century and known for cultivation of wheat and barley, fruits as well as herding of cattle, sheep and goats; **Dawaro**: located south of Fatagar between upper waters of Awash and Wabi-Shebelle extending to Charchar in Northeast and Gindhir in Southeast and it had a currency called *hakuna*; **Bali**: was an extensive kingdom occupying high plateau, separating basins of Shebelle and Rift valley Lakes;
- ✓ Included also: **Ifat** was a state located adjacent to Shewan Sultanate. Its territory ran from northeast-southwesterly in the Afar plain eastward to the Awash. It was established by Umar Walasma who came to Ifat b/n 1271 and 1285.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS...

External contact of Ethiopia and the Horn:

- 1) With Egypt since at least 3,000 B. C. It was a form of earliest contacts with the Mediterranean world or the Greco-Roman World.
 - 2) With South Arabian Kingdoms starting sometimes before 1,000 B.C.
 - 3) With the East Roman or Byzantine Empire, a contact came following the introduction of Christianity to Aksum, and Aksum and the Byzantine Empire had also commercial contacts which declined in the 7th century due to the expansion of Islam in the region.
 4. With India and Persia-commercial relation was established
- ✓ Such contacts around the middle of the 12th century had made Europeans to regard Ethiopian Highland Christian Kingdom as the land of Prester John.

3.3ECONOMY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Economy:

- ✓ Included: 1. Agriculture was basic economic activity in highland parts and it consisted of use of local irrigation technology and soil fertility techniques.

Basic resource: Land and had tenure system (for its holding, sharing and using)

Common land tenure system of ancient time comprised communal right to land which was a group right of the family, clan and lineage.

- ✓ Peasants in the north had *rist* rights in their respective areas. **Rist** is a kind of communal birthright to land. The *rist* owners were known as *bale-rist*. But they paid tributes to the state which was collected by state functionaries or officials who were given *gult* right over the areas and populations they administered on behalf of the state.
- ✓ **Gult** is a right to levy/impose tribute on *rist* owners' produce. The tribute collected by *bale-gults*, partly allotted for their own up keep and the rest were sent to the imperial center. *Gult* right that became hereditary was called **Riste-Gult**.

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2. Handicraft

- ✓ Indigenous handcraft technology such as artisans had existed since the ancient period.
- ✓ Artisans were engaged in metal work, pottery, tannery, carpentry, masonry, weaving, jewelry, basketry and others.
- ✓ E.g. Metal workers produced swords, javelins, shields, knives, axes, sickles, hoes and others. Tanners produced leather tools.
- ✓ However, the artisans were mostly despised and marginalized. The ruling classes mostly spent their accumulated wealth on imported luxurious items rather than the domestic technology.

3. Trade (already discussed)

Socio-cultural Achievements:

Architecture: 1. Steles/obelisks building were practiced in Axum(the longest was 33 meters in height. The other two had heights of 24 and 21 meters.

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2. Zagwe period's rock hewn churches were part of UNESCO's world heritage, registered in 1978.

3. Writing System: Scripts developed in Sabeian and Ge'ez languages.

4. Calendar: There was invention of Ethiopic solar calendar.

- ✓ There was also Muslim (Islamic) calendar which is a lunar calendar. The Oromo and the Sidama (celebrating new year-*Fiche Chambalala*) had a calendar based on star known among the Oromo as *Urjii*.

5. Numerals

- ✓ Numerals appeared in Ethiopia and the Horn at the beginning of fourth century AD. E.g. In Ge'ez language there has been the use of numeral system.