# CHAPTER FIVE

## THE ETHIOPIAN REGION AND THE HORN OF AFRICA UP TO 1270

### MY GOLDEN WORDS

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| "Christian Topography" | Linguistic | -Worship |
| - Cradle | "Mukarrib" | "Nine Saints" |
| - Hegemony | - Precursor | "Lingua-Franca" |
| "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea" | - Stelae | "Proto Language" |
| "Roch-hewn churches" | "Museum of people" | 'Silent trade' |
| "Neutral policy" | "Myrrh" | "Almouqa" |

### 5.1. Peoples and Languages of the Ethiopia Region and the Horn of Africa

- .The Horn of Africa is located in the Northeastern part of Africa and it consisted of four modern states of Africa.
- . **Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea.**
- These languages belong to four super-families or proto-languages. They are:-

1. **Afro-Asiatic,**
2. **Nilo- Saharan**
3. **Niger-Congo and**
4. **Khoisan super-families**

- The largest super-family with large number of speakers is Niger-Congo, which has between 300-400 million speakers.
- The next largest super-family, Afro-Asiatic, has between 200-300 million speakers.
- The Nilo-Saharan speakers are about 30 million.
- The super-family with the smallest number of speakers is Khoisan, which has about 300,000 speakers.



"Live as if you were to die tomorrow, Learn as if you were to live forever".
(Mahatma Gandhi)

- The speakers of the Khoisan super-family are found in a few areas of Southern Africa.
- The Niger-Congo super-family speakers are found in the larger part of western, central, eastern and southern parts of Africa.
- Among the four super-families, Afro-Asiatic and Nilo-Saharan are spoken in the Ethiopian region and the Horn of Africa.
- Afro-Asiatic is the most important in terms of geographical distribution. It is spoken in northern, central, northeastern and the Horn of Africa.
- This super-family has six families.
- They are Berber, Chadic, ancient Egyptian, Cushitic, Omotic and Semitic.
- While the first three are spoken in northern, central and northeastern Africa, the remaining three are spoken in Ethiopia and the Horn.
- These are Cushitic, Omotic and Semitic. Therefore, the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Horn of Africa is very complex.

1. **The Cushitic family**

- The majority of the peoples of Ethiopia and the Horn are speakers of the Cushitic family, which is sub-divided into **FOUR** branches. They are
  - i. North Cushitic,
  - ii. Central Cushitic,
  - iii. East Cushitic and
  - iv. Southern Cushitic. Southern Cushitic is spoken outside the Horn of Africa in Tanzania.

**The North Cushitic**

The North Cushitic is represented by a single language spoken by the Beja people, who are living in northwestern Eritrea and the adjoining districts of the Republic of Sudan.

**The Central Cushitic**

- The Central Cushitic languages are spoken by the Bilen, Agaw, Hamtang, Qimant and Awign.

**The East Cushitic**

- The East Cushitic is spoken in Ethiopia and the Horn.
- The most diversified and the largest in the region is the East Cushitic.
- This branch is further divided into two sub-branches named: -
  i. **Lowland East Cushitic** and
  Ii. **Highland East Cushitic.**
- The **Highland East Cushitic** lives in the south central highlands of Ethiopia. The speakers of this sub-branch include Hadiya, Kambata, Sidama, Gedeo, Alaba, Burji and Libido.
- The **Lowland East Cushitic** is spoken originally in the vast eastern and southern lowlands of the region.

**The Southern Cushitic**

- Today we also find them in the western, central, northeastern and southwestern regions of Ethiopia and the Horn. The speakers of this sub-branch are Oromo, Afar, Somali, Konso, Gidole, Ebore, Dassenech and Saho.

2. **The Omotic family**

- The Omotic family is spoken mainly by the peoples living in Omo valley in Southern and Southwestern Ethiopia...

- The main speakers of this family are Walayta, Gamu, Gofa, Dawro, Konta, Gimira, Kafa, Maji, Ari, Sheko, Dorze and Yem.

### 3. The Semitic languages

- The Semitic languages of Ethiopia and the Horn are generally known as Ethio-Semitic.
- spoken in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, such as Arabic and Hebrew.
- The Ethio-Semitic languages are sub-divided into two:
    i. North Ethio-Semitic and
    ii. South Ethio-Semitic.

**The North Ethio-Semitic**

- The languages are Tigra, Tigrigna and Geez. Geez had long ceased to be a spoken language of the region. But it still survives as a literary language of the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia. Tigrigna is spoken in Tigray as well as in Eritrea. Tigra is spoken only in Eritrea.

**The South Ethio-Semitic**

- It constitutes the most diversified languages of the branch. This branch is not yet clearly classified. So far, two sub-branches have been suggested. They are
- **The 'Outer' South Ethio-Semitic** and
- **The 'Transversal' South Ethio-Semitic**.
- One of the languages of the '**Outer' South Ethio-Semitic** is Gafat. But this language is now dead (extinct), because no one speaks it. The other speakers of this sub-branch are the central, western and northern Gurage.
- The speakers of the **''Transversal'' South Ethio-Semitic** are Amhara, Argoba, Harari and Silti people.

### 4. The languages of Nilo-Saharan

- The languages of Nilo-Saharan super-family are also spoken in Ethiopia.
- The majority of the speakers of these languages live in the present Regional States of Beni-Shangul Gumuz and Gambella.
- Most of them are living in the hot lowlands and valleys between Ethiopia and the Sudan from north to south.
- The main speakers of this super-family in Ethiopia are Anuak, Nuer, Majangir, Mien, Berta, Gumuz, Komo, Ma'o and Kunama.
- However, the great majority of the speakers of this super-family live outside Ethiopia in the eastern Sahara, the upper Nile valley, areas around Lake Victoria in east central Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

♏ In general, Ethiopia and the Horn consisted of peoples who are ethnically and linguistically diversified.

♏ It was for this reason that **Conti-Rossini**, the famous Italian scholar of Ethiopian history, described Ethiopia as **"Museum of peoples"**.

♏ At present, 85 different languages are identified.

♏ In 1987 (E.C), when this statistic was produced two newly-discovered languages called Girir and Angot were under study.

### The Pre- Aksumite States

♍ Even though several pre-Aksumite states might have existed in the region, Punt and Damat were the two states for which we have some written or archeological evidences.

- Our evidences concerning Punt come mainly from Egypt.
- The ancient Egyptians used to refer to the territory to the south of Egypt as the Land of Punt. With this region they maintained closer commercial and cultural relations since ancient times.
- The earliest evidence about the arrival of ancient Egyptian merchant ships to the Land of Punt is dated to about 2700 B.C.
- By far the best known expedition to Punt state was dispatched by the order of Queen Hatshepsut (r. 1490-1468).
- According to the pictorial relief on the walls of her famous temple in Southern Egypt, the expedition brought back from the Land of Punt many natural products like incense, sandalwoods, ivory, rhinoceros horn, gold, ebony, leopards and their skins and various types of live monkeys.
- Of all the items, incense and **myrrh** were the most valid among ancient Egyptians for they were used for ritual purposes.
- They were burnt in large quantities in ancient Egyptian temples.

**Damat**

- The second pre-Aksumite state in the region for which we have some local evidence was called **Damat**.
- It was located a little to the south of Aksum.
- Few information about Damat came from the inscriptions which are left behind by its rulers or kings.
- According to these inscriptions, the state of Damat had maintained a very strong contact with South Arabia.

- For instance, unknown king of Damat used the South Arabian politico-religious title of Mukarrib.
- Moreover, one of the languages by which these inscriptions are written was Sabean, which had its origin in South Arabia.

. **Other Pre-Aksumite States**

- Besides the two known states, several other cities also existed in the northern part of Ethiopia and the Horn.
- Among them, the most important were Yeha, Coloe, Matara, Hawelti, Melazo, Kaskase and Adulis. Archaeological excavations made in these sites indicate that these cities were centers of organized societies as well as pre-Aksumite centers of culture and trade in the Horn of Africa.

**The Aksumite State**

- The Aksumite state developed in the northern part of the Ethiopian region.
- Its center was the present town of Aksum, which became a center for one of the ancient civilizations that rose in northeast Africa.
- Until very recently it was believed that the Aksumite civilization was derived from that of South Arabia.. However, it should be recognized that there were closer contacts between states in the Horn and South Arabia across the Red Sea.
- This narrow strip of water of the Red Sea, rather than becoming a barrier, had brought together the peoples on either side of it.
- This enabled them to share some common features like worshipping the same gods and using the same script.
- Our information about Aksum comes from inscriptions and written sources.
- Inscriptions are available in three ancient languages used in the region.

- These languages are **Sabean, Greek and Geez**. In fact the earliest inscriptions were written in the Sabean language beginning from about the fifth century B.C. But these Sabean inscriptions do not mention Aksum.

**The Periplus of the Erythrean**

The first reference to Aksum was made in written sources.

- Aksum was mentioned for the first time in a document entitled the ***Periplus of the Erythrean Sea***.
- It was a trade manual written in the **middle of the first century A.D**. by an unknown Greek speaking sailor, who visited the Red Sea port of ***Adulis*** and the surrounding regions.
- This document gives a detailed account of internal and external trade of Aksum.
- It also gives accounts of the well-known ports on the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean coasts. It describer the social and economic life of the coastal people.
- The Periplus gives a passing reference to Aksum when it mentions that Adulis was the port of the city of Aksum and that it was fifteen day's journey from the capital.
- It states that a man named ***Zoskales*** was the king of Aksum.
- According to the document, Zoskales was well acquainted with the Greek language, which was the **lingua-franca** of all trading nations by that time.
- The information contained in the Periplus shows that, at that time, the Aksumite state was highly organized and strong.
- Therefore, Aksum seems to have existed for many years before the writing of the document.

- On the basis of this document, scholars have suggested the rise of the Aksumite state to the middle of the second century B.C.

**The Expansion of Aksum**

- At first it seems that the power of the Aksumite state was limited to a relatively small area.
- But gradually Aksum expanded its territory to the north as far as the Beja lands, to the west as far as the country of the Kunama and Tekeze river, and to the southeast as far as Babel Mandeb.
- Aksum also brought Adulis, the oldest port on the Red Sea coast, under its control.
- The port of Adulis had a longer history than Aksum. It was one of the region's principal trading stations and used by the pre-Aksumite states. Aksumite control and monopoly of this port rendered it large revenue.

## Military Expeditions

- .In the subsequent years, using its army, Aksum expanded to include a vast territory by attacking Meroe and crossing the Red Sea.
- .The rivalry over the ivory trade led to frequent clashes between the Aksumite state and the kingdom of Meroe in the Sudan.
- .Eventually, Meroe was destroyed by the military campaign of one of the kings of Aksum in the mid fourth century A.D.
- .The military power of the Aksumite state also extended beyond the Red Sea to parts of the South Arabian Peninsula.
- .This expansion and military strength of Aksum enabled it to emerge as one of the three powerful empires of the world with Byzantine and Persia.
- .The Aksumite king, Kaleb (r. 500-535 A.D), led large military expeditions to South Arabia and was able to control the region.

- This Aksumite military occupation continued until the last quarter of the sixth century, when the Aksumite garrisons were expelled once and for all from the South Arabian Peninsula.

**Aksumite State Structure, Society and Economy**

- . The Aksumite state was based on a well-organized society.
- . Aksumite society constituted different social groups which were divided on occupational basis.
  i. **Peasantry** The great majority of the population consisted of the, while the rest included artisans,
  ii. **Merchants.**
  iii. **Artisans**; they were responsible for the production of agricultural implements and tools
  iv. **Slaves;** while the slaves were working on the land of the landed patricians.

- .The Aksumite state structure was more or less monarchical.
- .The kings were at the center of the political power.
- .Nevertheless, the Aksumite kings did not have absolute power.
- .They appointed officials to various provinces of the empire.
- .The tributary states were ruled by these officials. In return for their services, peasants paid tribute to the officials.

**Economy**

- .Agriculture and trade were the dominant economic activities in the Aksumite Empire.

- .The Aksumite peasantry subsisted on cultivation of crops and animal husbandry. But compared to agriculture, trade yielded much revenue for the Aksumite state.
- Both import and export trade, controlled by the ruling class, became an important factor for the prosperity of the Aksumite economy.
- Aksum enjoyed good trade relations with the outside world through the Red Sea.
- For example Aksumite had very strong relations with Egypt, India, China, the Mediterranean region, Arabia, Syria.
- The center of this international trade was the ancient port of Adulis, which rendered shipping services.
- **.The export items**; According to the Periplus of Adulis consisted mainly of ivory, tortoise-shell, rhinoceros horn, hippopotamus hides, slaves, gold, and live animals like apes, baboons, and giraffes.
- **.Import items;** included textiles, robes, dyed cloaks of many colors, glassware, brass, copper sheets, drinking vessels, wine, olive oil, silver and gold plates for the king, clay utensils and iron tools like spears, axes, adzes and swords.
- .To promote the trade, Aksumite kings issued coins of gold, silver, copper and bronz.
- .The mintage of this currency is believed to have started in the late third century A.D. and seems to have continued until the early seventh century. Some of the early Aksumite coins bore legends in Greek, while the later coins carried inscriptions in Geez language. Almost all of the coins bore the names and effigies of different Aksumite kings.
- .The source of the gold which the Aksumites used to export and to produce coins seems to have been the southwestern part of the Ethiopian region.

## Cosmas Indicopleustes

- .According to a Greek traveler, Cosmas Indicopleustes, who visited Aksum in the first half of the sixth century A.D.
- .The Aksumite kings had sent their commercial agents to the lands to the South of Blue Nile, known as Sasu, to buy gold.
- .Cosmas later on produced a book entitled the **Christian Topography** based on his visit.
- His book deals mainly with the social, political and economic developments in Aksum during the sixth century.
- .In his book, Cosmos described the practice of 'silent trade' conducted between the Aksumite merchants and the local people of the southwest.
- .According to this custom, the two parties exchanged their goods without verbal communication.

## Aksumite Legacy

- .This prosperity also enabled the Aksumite kings to build large palaces and Churches.
- . Aksumite state was the building of monumental stelae or obelisks.
- .These stelae are found in large numbers around the present town of Aksum.
    i. **The longest stelae is 33** meters long and it is found at Aksum fallen down and broken.
    ii. **The second largest obelisk, 25** meters high (It was taken to Rome in 1937, during the Italian fascist occupation and returned to Ethiopia very recently).
    iii. The third largest obelisk, which stands up in Aksum, is **24** meters high.

## The Introduction and expansion of Christianity into Aksum

- .Up to the middle of the fourth century Aksum followed a traditional religion, based on the worship of various gods. The gods were local, South Arabian and Greek in origin.
- .The principal local gods were Astar, Mahrem, Baher and Arwe. The Greek gods comprised Zeus, Ares and Poseidon, while Almoqah was South Arabian.
- . Christianity was introduced to Aksum during the reign of Ezana (r. 320 - 350 A.D) in about 330 A.D.
- . Ezana was the first Aksumite king to be converted to Christianity.
- . According to tradition, Christianity was introduced to Aksum by a Syrian Christian called Fremnatos.
- .Fremnatos was appointed by the Alexandrian patriarch, Atenatewos (328-373), as the first Bishop of Aksum.
- This development brought the Ethiopian Church under the direct control of the Alexandrian Church of Egypt.
- Consecrating and sending bishops for the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from Egypt continued until 1958.

## The Nine Saints ( *Zetegnu Kidusan*)

- . The expansion of the new religion got momentum
- Towards the end of the fifth century.
- .This was the time when some missionaries called the Nine Saints came to Aksum.
- .They came from Eastern Mediterranean countries like Syria, Lebanon and Cyprus.
- Before their arrival, Greek was the language of the Church in Aksum and for that reason the priests were foreigners.

- .There was also no books in local language. The Nine Saints translated the Bible and other religious literatures from Greek to Geez.
- .Aksumite kings closely worked with the missionaries to promote the expansion of Christianity..,
- .The missionaries also introduced a monastic life to Ethiopia.
- .They established several monasteries, which began to serve as centers of Church education in Ethiopia.
- .The Aksumites had also developed their own numerical system which was written in figures and based on Greek letters.

## The Decline of Aksum

### External Factors

- .In the middle of the seventh century hostilities had already developed between the Aksumites and the Muslim Arabs over the control of the Red Sea trade..
- ..As the result of Arabs control of the Red Sea Aksum was out off from the side world. It also lost control over the Red Sea trade.

### Internal Factors

- The Beja pastoralists pushed their way into the territory of Aksum and invaded it.
- The Aksumite state finally came to an end in about 1150 A.D

## 5.3. The Zagwe Dynasty

### Origin, Rise to Power and Expansion

- .The Zagwe dynasty came from the ruling class of the Agaw people of the Lasta region.
- .This region had long been christianized and the people and the ruling class were well integrated with the Aksumite ruling class.
- .The exact date of the beginning of the Zagwe dynasty is not clearly known. The available evidence shows that the dynasty came to power around the middle of the twelfth century.
- .The founder of the dynasty was Marara, also called Marra Takla Haymanot. He established his centre in Adefa, a small town in the district of Bugna in Lasta region. Near Adefa existed another small town called Roha.
- .The center of the kingdom later changed to this town which was named Lalibela, after the well-known king of the Zagwe dynasty.

### Territorial extent

- . In the west the territory stretched up to Lake Tana. In the north the whole region of Tigray and southern Eritrea were parts of the kingdom.
- .The eastern limit of the territory was not clearly known.
- .In the south the territory included the whole of present-day Wollo and northern Shewa.

### Zagwe's dynasty Neutral policy

- The Period of the Zagwe dynasty coincided with the Crusades. However, the Zagwe dynasty did not take part in the wars.

- The Zagwe kings wisely followed a neutral policy and maintained friendly relations with both the Muslim and Christian states of the time.
- This neutral policy won the Zagwe kings many advantages.
- Among these advantages one was their success in getting land in Jerusalem from the Muslim authorities.
- The land was used to build a Church for the Christian community of the town and the pilgrims to the Christian Holy Land.
- The Zagwe kings also maintained religious and commercial relations with Egypt. Bishops continued to be appointed for Ethiopia by the Coptic Church of Alexandria. During this long period of peace, unlike the Aksumites, the Zagwe kings neglected the task of building a strong army. Instead, all their potential energy and wealth was spent on the construction of churches. As a result, they could not successfully defend their kingdom against their rivals.

## Achievements of the Kingdom

- The Zagwe period is renowned in Ethiopian history for its remarkable architectural achievements.
- This was the building of monolithic rock-hewn churches. Even though it started earlier, the tradition of building these churches reached its peak during the reign of Lalibela (ruled about 1190-1225 A.D). Lalibela was responsible for the construction of eleven monolithic churches. These Churches were chiseled out of single rocks. Artistically, they are very beautiful and well-finished. As a result, they are registered by the UNESCO as one of the cultural heritages of the world.
- Both the Aksumite and Zagwe kings maintained close ties with the Orthodox Church, and Christianity continued to be the state and official religion of the country.

- Geez continued to function as the language of the Church and writing. In the field of architecture, there is also similarity and continuity between the two periods.
- The Churches of Lalibela had their origin in the architecture of the Aksumite period. The Church of Dabra Damo, which was built during the Aksumite period, is one example of this. In both cases the Churches were built from single blocks of stone.

**Fall of the Zagwe Dynasty**

- Both internal and external factors are responsible for the downfall of the Zagwe dynasty.
- **Internal Factor**, there was no smooth political succession to the throne.
- The death of a Zagwe king was almost always followed by an intense power struggle among the rival aspirants.
- The struggle between Harbe and Lalibela, both sons of Zan Siyum, in which the latter became successful is one very good example. On the death of Lalibela, a serious power struggle broke out between Ne'akuto Le'ab and Yetbarek. The former was the nephew while the latter was the son of king Lalibela.
- **External factor**. This was the strong opposition against the Zagwe rule in the Tigrean and Amhara regions.
- The rulers of both regions accused the Agaws as illegitimate rulers of Ethiopia, for they did not trace their genealogy from the 'Solomonic' dynasty, about which you will learn in unit seven. However, it was the Amhara region, located to the south of lasta, which took the initiative to depose the last Zagwe king, Yetbarek, around 1270 A.D.