

THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The wealth of Africa The kingdom of Aksum

Students' worksheets



Supported by



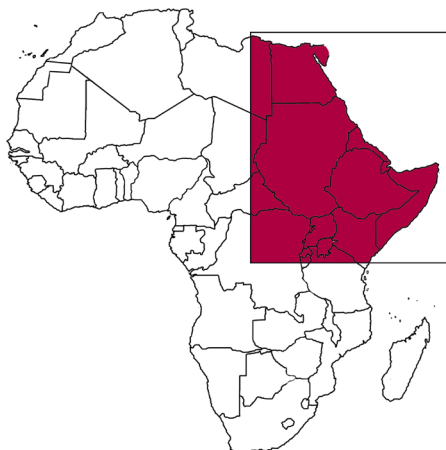
Arts & Humanities
Research Council



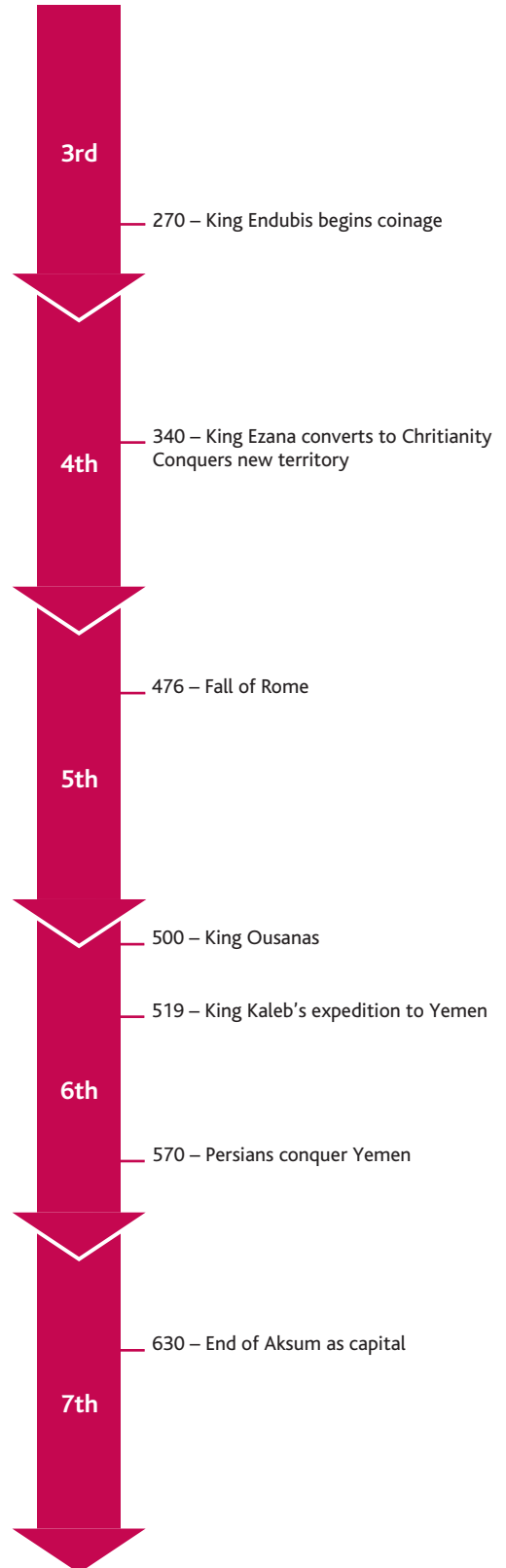
The CarAf Centre

www.britishmuseum.org

AKSUM



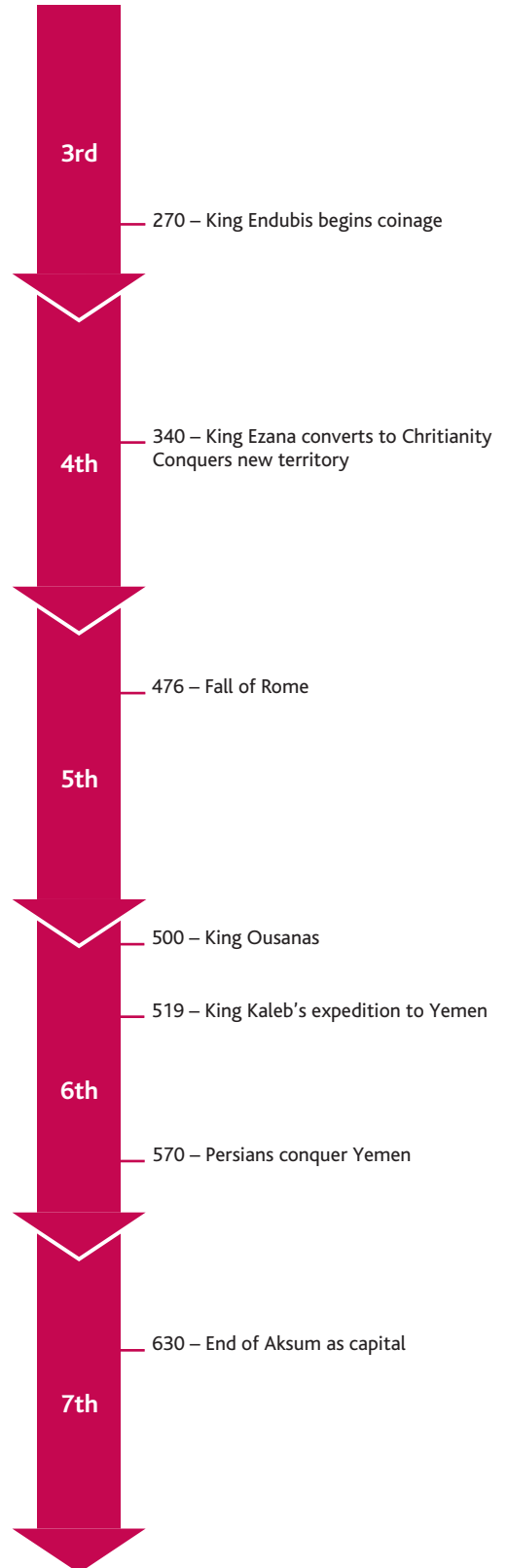
Century AD



AKSUM



Century AD



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



Source 2: Red jar, AD 275–350
British Museum



Source 5: Gold coins of King Ezana, c. AD 320–360
British Museum



Source 6: Copper coin, AD 340–540
British Museum



Source 9: Modern Ethiopian cushion cover showing King Solomon of Jerusalem and Queen Sheba of Aksum beneath stelae.
British Museum

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?

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



Source 2: Silver coin of Ousanas
British Museum



Source 4: Tomb, probably royal, at Aksum



Source 7: Seals from of Aksum,
Aksum Museum, Ethiopia



Source 9: Possible likeness of Aksum palace
© A. Davey

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



Source 2: Ivory and wood pyxis, made in Alexandria (Egypt), 5th century AD
British Museum



Source 6: Ivory panel
Aksum Museum, Ethiopia

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?



Source 2: Aksumite stelae field with low-status stelae



Source 4: Coins of Ezana, before and after conversion to Christianity
British Museum



Source 6: Church of St George, Lalibela, Ethiopia, built in the 12th or 13th century



Source 7: St George and the Dragon
17th-century Ethiopian painting
British Museum

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.



Source 2: Noble's house at Aksum



Source 4: Reservoir at Aksum



Source 7: Fallen giant stela at Aksum



Source 8: Stelae at Aksum

SHEET 6: USING THE EVIDENCE

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



Source 4: Stela (detail)



Source 2: Silver coin
British Museum



Source 1: Copper coin
British Museum



Source 3: Gold coin
British Museum



Source 5: Stelae at Aksum

SHEET 7: THE FALL OF THE GREAT STELA AT AKSUM



Source 1: Illustration by Tayo Fatunla

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?

Your feedback

Please help the British Museum improve its educational resources for schools and teachers by giving your feedback. The first 250 teachers or tutors to complete the online survey before 12.00 on 1 September 2011 will receive a printed set of illustrations of African civilisations by artist Tayo Fatunla. Visit www.surveymonkey.com/s/wealthofafrica to complete the survey and for terms and conditions.

Find out more

The British Museum's collection spans over two million years of human history and culture, all under one roof and includes world-famous objects such as the Rosetta Stone, the Parthenon sculptures, and Egyptian mummies.

The Museum's collection of over 200,000 African objects includes material from ancient to contemporary cultures. Highlights on display throughout the Museum include a magnificent brass head of a Yoruba ruler from Ife in Nigeria, vibrant textiles from across the continent, and the Throne of Weapons – a sculpture made out of guns.

For students

Students can experience and engage with the collection in many ways, from taking part in activity sessions at the Museum to using free online resources or playing interactive games in the classroom and at home.

For teachers

Search the Museum's collection online at www.britishmuseum.org for information about objects, including pictures to download or print.

Schools and teachers newsletter

Sign up to the schools and teachers newsletter to receive regular updates on free special exhibitions previews, teacher events and new free resources at www.britishmuseum.org/schools

Ancient Civilizations websites

These award-winning British Museum websites have been specially designed for students in Years 5 and 6. Each site is supported by information and guidance for teachers. www.ancientcivilizations.co.uk

The CarAf Centre

These resources have been produced by the British Museum in collaboration with The CarAf Centre, a community educational support centre and registered charity based in the London Borough of Camden. For more information, visit www.thecarafcentre.org.uk

**THE
BRITISH
MUSEUM**

Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG
📍 Holborn, Russell Square, Tottenham Court Road
Telephone +44 (0)20 7323 8000
information@britishmuseum.org
www.britishmuseum.org