

How Islam was introduced in the Kingdom of Aksum

In modern-day Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea in the province of Tigray, lay the ancient "Aksum", which was at the same time a city and a kingdom. Research shows that it was a major naval and trading power from the 1st to the 7th cent. CE. As a great civilization, Aksum with its own script and coinage¹ had a profound impact upon the people of Egypt, Southern Arabia, Europe and Asia. Visitors from all these places came to its shores, and some of them stayed as residents.² The peak of Aksum's power came with their invasions into South Arabia from the 3rd to the 6th cent. CE. The kingdom provided a counterpoint to the Greek and Roman worlds, and today; it gives us an interesting example of a flourishing civilization at the end of the period of the great Mediterranean empires. Aksum was a meeting point of religions including Christianity, Judaism, and later, Islam. Archaeological research a hundred years ago brought into light steles or obelisks, palaces, over a hundred churches, and temple ruins. All were built with astonishing methods; some out of one single rock, others with stones shaped like puzzle pieces that fit and held together without mortar. Under the rule of King Ezana (c. 340- 356 CE), Aksum embraced the Orthodox Christian tradition. This happened after Frumentius (†383 CE), a monk and former Syrian captive, had converted the king. The man, then, went to Alexandria, where he gave report to Bishop Athanasius and asked for a formal mission for Aksum. The cleric recognized a tremendous opportunity, granted the favour and appointed Frumentius as bishop.³

When the Arab Islamic invaders started conquering the Mediterranean world, they first left out Aksum, because the city protected Muhammad's family and followers. This allowed the kingdom to remain a trading power until 710 CE. By then, the invaders had increased their power and despite the protection, destroyed the major harbour city Adulis at the coast of the Red Sea. This was the end of Aksum. They no longer had any access to the ports along both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and as a result; the kingdom declined. Its people sought refuge in the mountains and only later gradually, came back to rebuild their city and continue their old methods of farming, handiworks and trade.

This period of Ethiopian history after the downfall of the old Aksum Empire in the 8th cent. CE lies in the dark. At the end of the 13th cent. CE, a great period of cultural

¹ Marilyn Eiseman Heldman, S.C. Munro-Hay and Roderick Grierson, *African Zion: The Sacred Art of Ethiopia* (New Haven/ London: Yale Univers. Press, 1993), 101-116.

² Steven Kaplan, "Ezana's Conversion Reconsidered", *Journal of Religion in Africa* vol. 13, no. 2 (1982): 101-109.

³ Stuart Christopher Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia, the Unknown Land: A Cultural and Historical Guide* (London: I.B. Tauris Publ., 2002), 20.

renaissance followed, which was called “restoration of the Solomonic dynasty”. It brought a revival of Ethiopian culture and literature, which was highly praised as its “Golden Age”. Up to that time, Islam and Christendom were co- existing in the land. Their relationship was balanced to some extent, despite some minor conflicts. When at the end of the 15th cent., a series of young kings came to rule who were not able to effectively lead the state affairs, these were largely overtaken by ambitious royal officials. Unfortunately, since these had already had struggles with the Muslim Kingdom of Adal, this brought about more tensions between the Church and Islam. Under the expansion of the above mentioned Ottoman Empire, the Muslim communities in the Ethiopian region became ever more aggressive, particularly; against the Christians. This went as far as to armed attacks.⁴ At the beginning of the 16th cent. under the leadership of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi (1506- ‘43), the Muslim invasion reached the Ethiopian highlands.⁵ Its mostly Orthodox inhabitants were forced to renounce the Church and adopt Islam. Some of them chose to die for their faith, but because of the pressure, their large majority acquiesced to at least nominally accepting the religion. During these hardships, King Lebna Dengal (Dawid II, 1508- ‘40) sought help from Rome and Portugal.⁶ They answered, but for some reason; the response arrived much later under the king’s successor Galawdewos (1522- ‘59). It came in the form of military support by the Portuguese leader Christopher da Gama (1516- ‘42), son of the famous explorer Vasco da Gama (1460- 1524). Together, the two armies defeated al-Ghazi and once again; established the Christian empire. Even though the expansion of Islam was stemmed at this point, it had already left its imprint. The political power stayed in the hands of the Christians until today, but still there is a 34% population of Muslims.⁷

⁴ Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia* (London: Greenwood Publ. Group, 2008), 178.

⁵ Michael R. Feener, ed., *Islam in World Cultures: Comparative Perspectives* (Santa Barbara/ CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC., 2004), 219.

⁶ Klaus Koschorke, Frieder Ludwig and Mariano Delgado, eds., „Außereuropäische Christentumsgeschichte: Asien, Afrika, Lateinamerika 1450-1990“, in *Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte in Quellen*, Band VI (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Vlg, 2004), 119-121.

⁷“Africa: Ethiopia”, data from the CIA World Factbook, numbers based on 2007 national census, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html> (28.02.2019,