Ethiopia & Eritrea: The History Behind the Borders



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Identity, History, and the Question of Sovereignty

A recent interview on One54 Africa featuring Dawit Asghedom, father of the late Ermias Joseph Asghedom, internationally known as Nipsey Hussle, and his son Blacc Sam, provides an opportunity to revisit an important and frequently misunderstood chapter of African history: the historical relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

While the conversation between Dawit and *One54 Africa* co-hosts Akbar Gbajabiamila and Godfrey Danchimah explored Dawit's Eritrean origins, as well as Nipsey and Blacc Sam's connection to their father's ancestral homeland, it also highlighted the broader significance of identity, cultural continuity, and the preservation of ancestral history. However, certain assertions made during the discussion reflected historical inaccuracies and mischaracterizations concerning the nature and evolution of Ethiopian and Eritrean statehood, particularly, the historical relationship between the two territories and the circumstances that ultimately led to Eritrea's emergence as a separate sovereign state.

These historical distinctions merit clarification to ensure that the historical record is accurately reflected and that the deep political, cultural, religious, and civilizational bonds linking the two territories over centuries are understood within their proper historical context.

From Da'amat to Aksum: The Foundations of a Shared Civilization

Before modern Eritrea's political boundaries were shaped by nineteenth-century European colonial expansion, more specifically, Italy's occupation and consolidation of territories along the Red Sea, much of the region was deeply interconnected with Ethiopian State politics, religion, customs, tradition, language and culture.

These connections extend back thousands of years to the pre-Aksumite Kingdom of Da'amat, which flourished between approximately the eighth and fifth centuries BCE across portions of present-day northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its successor political formations eventually gave way to the rise of the Aksumite Empire, one of the most influential and ancient civilizations in the world.

At its peak, Aksum exercised authority over territories encompassing much of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its political, commercial, and religious influence extended across the Red Sea, connecting the African highlands with Arabia, the Mediterranean, and the wider Indian Ocean trading routes and network.

The Aksumite Empire was not merely a highland kingdom isolated from the sea. Its prosperity depended substantially upon maritime commerce, with the port of Adulis serving as its principal commercial

gateway or outlet to the Red Sea. Through this port, Aksum participated in international commerce involving ivory, gold, agricultural commodities, and other valuable goods exchanged with the Sudan, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, India, Sri Lanka, China, Persia, Greece, and Roman & Byzantine worlds.

Even the first-century Greek commercial account known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* identifies Adulis as an important trading port and describes the political authority of Aksumite King Zoskales over the surrounding region. Moreover, discovery of such archaeological and historical records demonstrate that the Aksumite world extended across both sides of what is now the Ethiopia–Eritrea border. Archaeological discoveries at sites such as Matara in Eritrea and Beta Samati in northern Ethiopia further illuminate the interconnected urban, commercial, religious, and administrative networks that characterized this civilization.

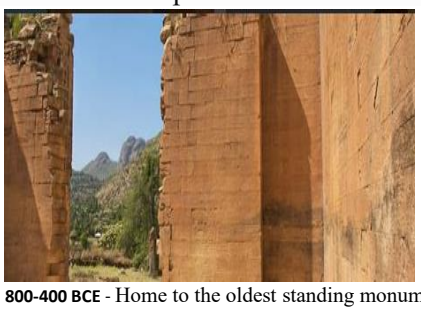
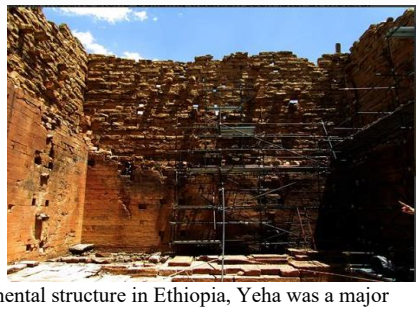


Ancient Centers of Civilization in the Northern Horn of Africa – The archaeological sites of **Yeha, Beta Samati, Matara, and Axum** reveal the deep historical connections that linked communities across present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea long before the emergence of modern national boundaries. Shared architectural styles, inscriptions, religious traditions, trade networks, and material culture demonstrate the development of a common civilizational sphere that evolved from the Daʿamat and pre-Aksumite periods into the Aksumite Empire. Together, these sites illustrate how the cultural, political, and economic foundations of the northern Horn transcended modern borders, reflecting a shared heritage rooted not only in genealogy but centuries of interwoven socio-cultural interaction, trade, innovation, and state formation.

The archaeological record of the ancient Horn of Africa provides compelling evidence of a deeply interconnected civilization whose political, cultural, religious, linguistic, and architectural traditions extended across territories that today constitute Eritrea and Ethiopia. From the pre-Aksumite civilization of Da'amat, centered around Yeha and the northern Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands, to the emergence and expansion of the Aksumite Kingdom, the material evidence reveals a shared civilizational heritage that transcends contemporary political and provincial boundaries. The monumental stone architecture, finely dressed masonry, obelisks, carved inscriptions, religious symbols, burial traditions, pottery, and distinctive architectural techniques found at Yeha, Qohaito, Matara, Beta Samati, and Aksum demonstrate participation in interconnected socio-cultural and political traditions in both present-day Ethiopia and Ertirea. These connections continued through the Aksumite Christian period and are reflected in archaeological and architectural remains across Tigray, Wollo, and Shewa. Sites such as Debre Damo, Kombolcha (Chiqa Beret), Washa Mikael, Abba Yohanni, Yemrehanna Kristos, Lasta Lalibela, Genete Maryam, and Adadi Maryam (Southwest Shewa) demonstrate the evolution and geographical diffusion of architectural, ecclesiastical, and artistic traditions rooted in Axumite civilizations. The historical and religious landscapes of Tegulet, Guzara, Gondar, Ankober, Addis Alem and Entoto, extending into the vicinity of present-day Addis Ababa and beyond, reveal subsequent layers of political and cultural development within this broader Ethiopian highland civilization. The continuity and evolution of

Aksumite civilization, culture, and architecture stand as enduring testimony to the historical interconnectedness of the peoples who inhabited these regions under both centralized and decentralized systems of governance across time and space. The significance of this evidence is that the Aksumite civilization was not the exclusive historical inheritance of any contemporary ethnic, linguistic, provincial, or national constituency; it was a formative civilization whose legacy extended across communities and territories now separated by modern international borders.

The decline of the Aksumite Empire did not represent the disappearance of its civilization, nor did it bring an end to the institutions, religious traditions, architectural knowledge, and political ideals that had developed under its rulers. Rather, these traditions were inherited, adapted, and transformed by successive Christian kingdoms, including the Zagwe dynasty, whose monumental achievements in Lasta, particularly at Yemrehanna Kristos and Lalibela, demonstrate the continuation and refinement of earlier Aksumite architectural and ecclesiastical traditions. The Zagwe period, conventionally dated to approximately the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, was, therefore, not simply an interruption in Ethiopian civilization but an important period of cultural synthesis and institutional development. The subsequent restoration of the Solomonic dynasty in 1270 under Yekuno Amlak introduced a new political chapter, with the dynasty claiming descent from the ancient Aksumite and biblical Solomonic royal traditions. Its emergence was particularly associated with Shewa, including the historical centers of Tegulet, Bulga, Menz, and Ankober, which became important locations in the development of the medieval Ethiopian state and its royal institutions. These successive kingdoms, communities, and regional centers contributed to a cumulative civilization in which older Aksumite traditions interacted with Agaw, Cushitic, Semitic, and other local cultural influences, producing distinctive yet interconnected regional identities. Importantly, the Aksumite Kingdom preceded the emergence of today's administrative provinces and the crystallization of modern ethnolinguistic identities, including the contemporary meanings attached to Tigray and Tigrinya. It is therefore historically anachronistic to assign Aksum's heritage to any particular ethnic group especially considering that both Amharic and Tigringa were formed centuries later and after the fall of the Aksumite Kingdom. Thus, the archaeological and historical record points to a much older, interconnected highland civilization whose cultural inheritance was carried forward by successive generations across present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Yeha, Ethiopia - (Pre-Aksumite and Early Aksumite) 800-400 BCE - Home to the oldest standing monumental structure in Ethiopia, Yeha was a major political, religious, and cultural center of the Daʿmat civilization. Its impressive stone temple, built with finely crafted masonry that has endured for more than two millennia, reflects the emergence of complex state institutions in the northern Horn of Africa. As one of the principal predecessors of the Aksumite world, Yeha stands as a testament to the deep historical roots and continuity of civilization across present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea





Qohaito (500 BCE to 700 CE) - This remarkable archeological site in present-day Eritrea preserves monumental stone structures, ancient inscriptions, carved architectural elements, and remnants of a civilization deeply connected to the pre-Aksumite D'amat and Aksumite cultural worlds. Architectural similarities with Yeha, Matara and other historic centers across present-day Tigray, Wollo, and Shewa demonstrate the extensive cultural, artistic and political connections that characterized the ancient territories across Ethiopia and Eritrea long before the emergence of modern national boundaries.





Matara, Eritrea (Pre-Aksumite settlement, later Aksumite City) 500 BCE – Matara located near Senafe in present-day Southern Eritrea, approximately 25 km north of the current Ethiopian border, was one of the principal urban centers of the ancient Aksumite civilization. The preservation of monumental stone stelae, burial structures, inscriptions and architectural traditions show striking resemblance to those found in Aksum. These similarities reflect the shared artistic, religious and cultural traditions that flourished the Aksumite Kingdom, connecting communities across present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia long before the emergence of modern national boundaries.





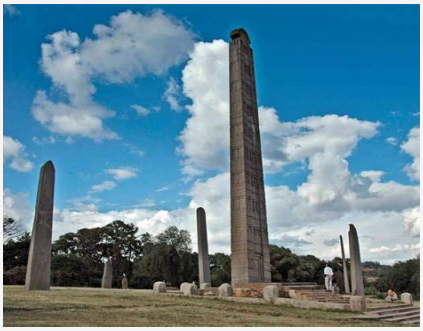
Adulis, Eritrea 500-300 BCE – Adulis served as the principal seaport for the Aksumite Empire. It was one of the most important ports on the Red Sea which connected the Aksumite Kingdom to Roman Egypt, Byzantium, South Arabia (Yemen), Persia, India, Sri Lanka and China. Archaeological remains, including monumental structures, imported artifacts, pottery, and evidence of early Christianity, reveal the economic, cultural, and religious connections that linked the ancient communities of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea into a broader Aksumite civilization.



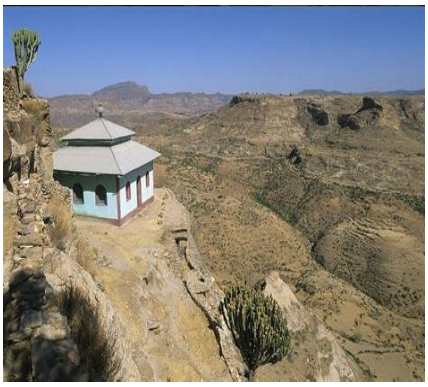
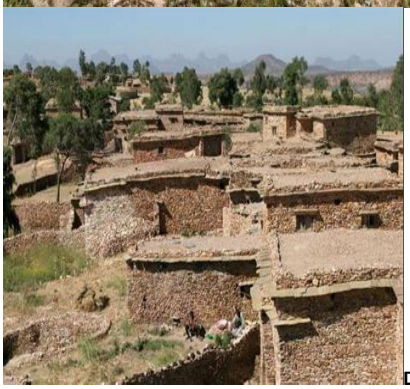


Beta Samati (Late pre-Aksumite period) 750 BCE -400 BCE – One of the most important archeological discoveries in the Horn of Africa. Located in Ethiopia's present-day Tigray region, about 30-40 km northeast of Aksum and near Yeha. Beta Samati provides a rare window documenting the transition from the earlier Da'amat cultural sphere into the Aksumite Empire. Excavations uncovered five Aksumite Coins: 1) A pre-Christian silver coin of King Ezana (300-330 AD), Bronze Coin of King MHDYS (450 AD), Two bronze coins of King Armah (600-630 AD) and a bronze coin of an anonymous Axumite King. These discoveries illuminate the cultural, commercial, and religious foundations of a civilization whose influence extended across the ancient highlands of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea.



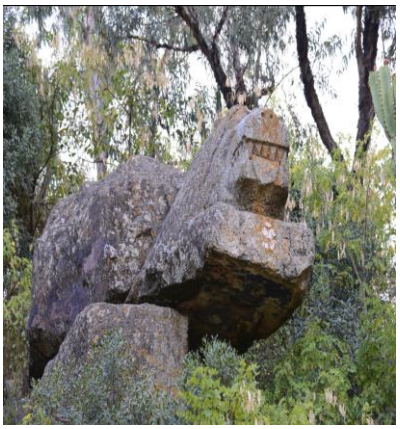


Axum (c. 100 BCE - 900 CE) – The capital of one of Africa's greatest ancient empires, Axum was a uniquely urban, cosmopolitan, and imperial center whose influence extended across the Red Sea, the Nile Valley, and the wider Indian Ocean world. Renowned for its towering stelae, monumental palaces, sophisticated engineering, coinage, and monumental religious architecture, Axum became the political and cultural heart of a civilization that transformed the foundations laid by earlier societies such as D'amat into a powerful imperial state. While sharing architectural and cultural traditions with centers such as Yeha, Matara, and Qohaito, Axum distinguished itself through its unprecedented scale, political authority, and international reach. Its monuments and material culture reveal a civilization that unified diverse regions across present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, linking communities from Tigray and Eritrea to Wollo and Shewa within a shared cultural and political landscape centuries before the emergence of modern national boundaries.

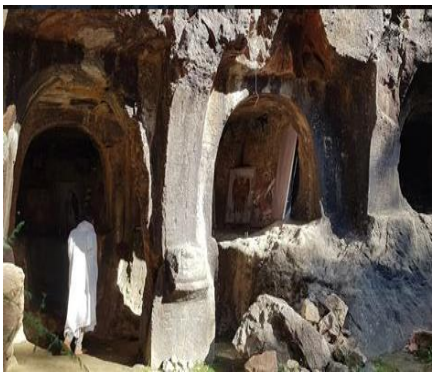




Debre Dammo (6th Century) - Perched atop an isolated mountain plateau in northern Ethiopia, Debre Damo is among the oldest continuously inhabited monastic sanctuaries in Africa and one of the most enduring symbols of the Aksumite Christian tradition. Founded during the reign of the Aksumite Empire and traditionally associated with Saint Abuna Aregawi, the monastery preserves architectural features, construction techniques, and artistic traditions that reflect the sophistication of Aksumite civilization at its height. Its massive stone-and-timber architecture, often compared to the elite structures of Axum, demonstrates the continuity of building traditions that connected religious and political centers across the northern Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands. For more than fourteen centuries, Debre Damo has served as a center of learning, manuscript preservation, and spiritual life, standing as a living link between the imperial world of Axum and the Christian cultural heritage that spread across Tigray, Eritrea, Lasta, and the northern Shewan highlands. Its survival through centuries of political change underscores the remarkable continuity of one of Africa's oldest literary, religious, and architectural traditions.

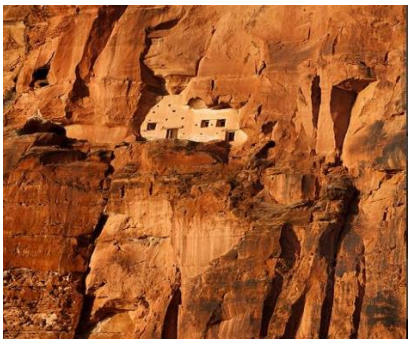



Le lion de Kombolcha : relevé des monogrammes de part et d'autre de la croix ; DAO Poissonnier/CFEE


Chika Beret (Antiquity - Early Aksumite Period) – Located in the South Wollo zone of present-day's Amhara region in north-central Ethiopia, Chika Beret overlooks the strategic corridors that connected the Ethiopian interior to the Red Sea coast. Chika Beret exists as evidence of one of the ancient settlements that flourished within the broader cultural sphere that gave rise to the Aksumite world. Archaeological remains, including stone structures, fortifications, and material culture, reflect the development of complex communities that participated in regional networks of trade, agriculture, and political authority stretching across present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. Together with sites such as Yeha, Matara, Qohaito, and later Axum, Chika Beret illustrates the deep historical continuity of highland civilization in the Horn of Africa. Its commanding position and enduring remains highlight the importance of local centers that linked the interior highlands with the Red Sea world, contributing to the cultural, economic, and political foundations upon which the Aksumite Empire would later emerge.

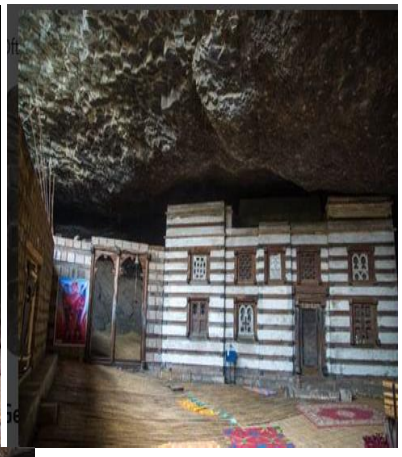
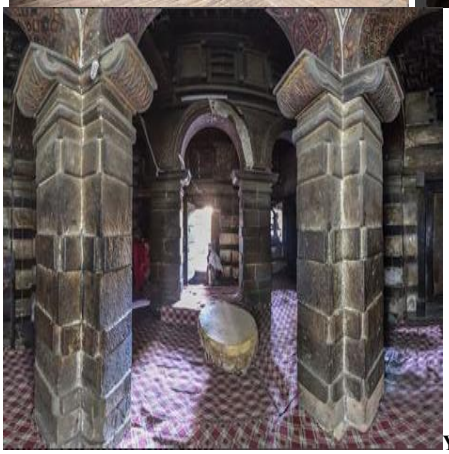




Washa Mikael (Late Aksumite to Early Medieval Period) – Carved directly into a mountainside in central Ethiopia, Washa Mikael is one of the country's most remarkable rock-hewn monuments. Its chambers, pillars, and arches, carved from a single mass of stone, demonstrate the advanced engineering and architectural traditions that emerged from the Aksumite world and later flourished throughout the Ethiopian Highlands. Located in the historic region of Shewa, Washa Mikael reflects the spread of Christianity and monumental construction beyond the Aksumite heartland. Together with sites such as Debre Damo, Genete-Maryam, and Lalibela, it stands as a testament to the shared cultural and religious heritage that linked Tigray, Wollo, and Shewa for centuries.





Abba Yohanni (Medieval Period) – Nestled among the rugged landscapes of northern Ethiopia, Abba Yohanni is a remarkable rock-hewn church that reflects the enduring legacy of Ethiopia's ancient Christian civilization. Carved into living rock and adorned with distinctive architectural features, the site exemplifies the tradition of monumental sacred construction that developed from Aksumite foundations and continued to flourish throughout the medieval era. Together with monuments such as Washa Mikael, Genete Maryam, and the churches of Lalibela, Abba Yohanni highlights the artistic, religious, and architectural achievements that united communities across Tigray, Lasta, and Wollo. Its preservation offers a powerful glimpse into the spiritual and cultural traditions that shaped the Ethiopian Highlands for centuries.

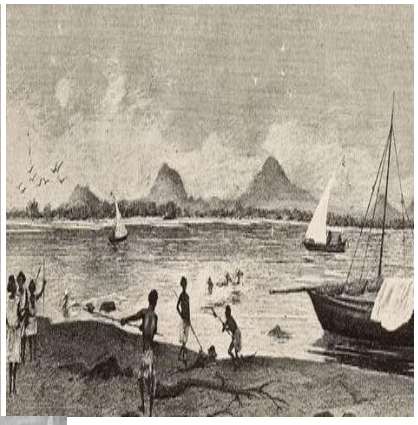
Yimrehane Kristos (12th Century CE) – Hidden within a dramatic mountain landscape in the Lasta region, Yimrehane Kristos is one of Ethiopia's finest surviving medieval churches and a masterpiece of Zagwe-era architecture. Constructed from finely fitted stone and timber rather than carved from rock, the church showcases a sophisticated architectural tradition rooted in Aksumite building techniques while introducing distinctive medieval innovations. Built during the reign of King Yimrehane Kristos, a predecessor of the Lalibela churches, the monument reflects the cultural and religious flourishing of the Zagwe Kingdom. Together with Genete Maryam, Lalibela, and other historic sanctuaries of the northern highlands, it stands as a testament to the continuity of Ethiopia's Christian civilization and the enduring influence of architectural traditions that originated in the Aksumite world





Massawa (1st-7th Centuries) – Principal seaport or maritime outlet for the Aksumite Kingdom which included northern Ethiopia and Eritrean highlands. Situated on the Red Sea coast, Massawa has long served as one of the Horn of Africa's most important maritime gateways, linking the African interior with Arabia, Egypt, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean world. For centuries, merchants, pilgrims, and travelers passed through its harbors, making the city a center of trade, cultural exchange, and political influence. Connected to inland centers such as Axum, Matara, and Qohaito through networks of commerce and communication, Massawa played a vital role in the development of the civilizations of the northern Horn. Its unique blend of African, Arabian, Ottoman, and European architectural influences reflects a rich and diverse heritage shaped by its strategic position at the crossroads of continents and civilizations



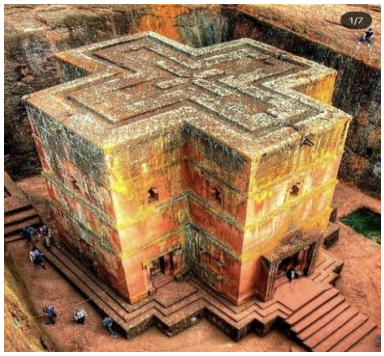




ASAB BAY, STRAITS OF BAB-EL-MANDEB—THE FIRST ITALIAN SETTLEMENT IN AFRICA

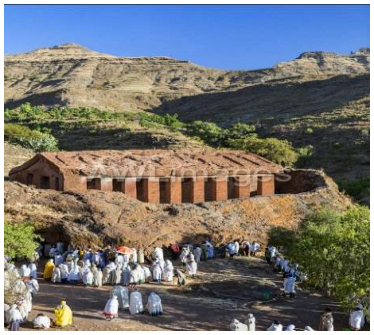
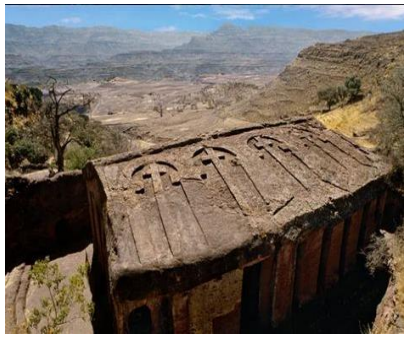
Assab (Antiquity - Present) – Situated near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Assab occupied a strategic position along the Red Sea trade routes that connected the Aksumite Kingdom to Arabia, Egypt, and the wider Indian Ocean world. Through coastal ports in the region, Aksumite rulers maintained vital maritime links that supported trade, diplomacy, and imperial influence across the ancient world. In 1869, prior to Menelik II's ascention to Empror or King of Kings, local Afar sultans sold the Bay of Assab to the Italian shipping company **Rubattino**, establishing Italy's first territorial foothold in the Horn of Africa and laying the foundation for the future colony of Eritrea. Today, Assab remains a symbol of the region's enduring maritime and geopolitical importance.







Lalibela Rock-Hewn Churches (12th-13th Century CE) – Carved directly into the volcanic rock of the Lasta Highlands, the churches of Lalibela represent one of the world's greatest achievements in medieval architecture and engineering. Commissioned during the Zagwe Dynasty, these extraordinary monuments transformed living stone into a sacred landscape of interconnected churches, passageways, and courtyards that continue to serve as active centers of worship today. Building upon architectural and religious traditions inherited from the Aksumite world, Lalibela reflects the flourishing of Ethiopian Christian civilization during the medieval era. Together with sites such as Yimrehane Kristos, Genete Maryam, and Debre Damo, the churches stand as enduring symbols of the artistic, spiritual, and cultural heritage that has united the northern Ethiopian highlands for centuries

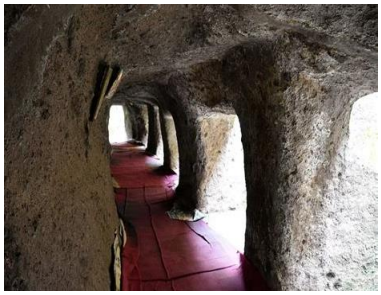




Genete Maryam (13th Century CE) – One of Ethiopia's oldest rock-hewn churches built by Empror Yekuno Amlak after the overthrow of the Zagwe Dynasty, Genete Maryam is renowned for its remarkable architecture and richly preserved interior artwork. Located in the historic region of Lasta, it reflects the flourishing of Ethiopian Christian civilization during the Zagwe era and the continuation of traditions rooted in the Aksumite world. Together with Lalibela and Yimrehane Kristos, Genete Maryam stands as a testament to the enduring religious and cultural heritage of both the Axumite and Zagwe dynasty/civilization





Tegulet (13-15th Century) – Traditionally associated with the restoration of the Solomonic dynasty, Tegulet emerged as an important royal and political center in the Shewan highlands. Its strategic geographical position facilitated connections between the northern and central Ethiopian highlands, making it an important link between the political traditions inherited from the Aksumite era and the emergence of the medieval Ethiopian kingdom. Although much of its architectural heritage was destroyed or heavily damaged during the sixteenth-century Adal invasions under Imama Ahmed ibn Ibrahim Al-Ghazi (Ahmed Gragn), surviving tombs, structural remnants, and archaeological artificats provide valuable evidence of its former significance. Excavations and surface finds, including wheel-thrown and imported ceramics, pottery, glassware, and porcelain, point to extensive commercial connections and external cultural influences. The discovery of shattered millstones and grinding implements has also been interpreted as evidence of the destructive episodes associated with the invasions. Particularly noteworthy are ceramic similarities with early medieval vessels recovered from Soba, the former Christian capital of the Kingdom of Alodia, south of present-day Khartoum in Sudan, suggesting commercial and cultural contacts extending beyond the Ethiopian highlands.


Adadi Maryam (12-13th Century CE) – Located in the Shewan highlands south of Addis Ababa in present day Oromia, Adadi Maryam is the southernmost known rock-hewn church in Ethiopia. Carved from living rock, it reflects the spread of Ethiopia's rock-hewn architectural and Christian traditions beyond the northern highlands, demonstrating the enduring influence of the Aksumite and medieval Ethiopian civilizations across the country.





Guzara (16th-17th Century CE) – Located near Lake Tana in the historic heartland of the Ethiopian Empire, Guzara was a royal residence associated with the emperors of the late medieval and early Gondarine periods. Its stone palaces and ruins reflect the evolution of imperial architecture that culminated in the castles of Gondar, illustrating the enduring strength and sophistication of the Ethiopian state during a period of political and cultural renewal.





Gondar (17th-18th Century CE) – Founded by Emperor Fasilides, who was born in Bulga, Shewa, Gondar became the capital of the Ethiopian Empire after centuries in which political power had shifted southward following the decline of Axum and the rise of the Zagwe Dynasty. Its castles, churches, and royal compounds symbolize the revival of imperial authority and the continuity of Ethiopian civilization from Axum through Shewa to the Gondarine era.

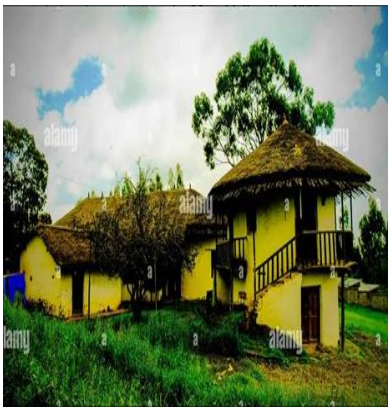




Ankober (18th-19th Century CE) – Perched on the escarpments of Shewa, Ankober served as the royal capital of the Shewan kingdom and the seat of rulers such as King Sahle Selassie. As a center of political power, trade, and diplomacy, it played a crucial role in the revival of the Ethiopian state and the rise of the dynasty that would later produce Emperor Menelik II. Ankober stands as a symbol of Shewa's enduring role in preserving and advancing Ethiopia's imperial traditions.



Addis Alem (Early 20th Century CE) – Founded by Emperor Menelik II as a proposed new capital of the Ethiopian Empire, Addis Alem was envisioned as a major political and religious center in the heart of Shewa. Although Menelik ultimately retained Addis Ababa as the capital, Addis Alem remained an important imperial retreat and ecclesiastical center.Its churches, palace grounds, and historic ties to nearby Menagesha reflect the role of Shewa in preserving and advancing Ethiopia's imperial traditions from the Solomonic era into the modern age. Ethiopia's first paved road was constructed in 1903 by Emperor Menelik. This road from Addis Alem to Addis Ababa symbolized the Empire's modernization efforts in the early 20th Century.





Entoto (Late 19th Century CE) – Perched on the heights overlooking Addis Ababa, Entoto served as the royal seat of Emperor Menelik II and Empress Taytu before the establishment of Ethiopia's modern capital. The Entoto Palace complex and the historic Entoto Maryam Church formed the political and spiritual heart of the emerging Ethiopian state, symbolizing the rise of Shewa as the center of imperial power. Today, Entoto stands as a landmark of Ethiopia's modernization and the birthplace of modern Addis Ababa.












Addis Ababa (1886-Present) – Founded by Emperor Menelik II and Empress Taytu, Addis Ababa became the modern capital of a state whose rulers traced their lineage to the ancient emperors of Axum. Menelik II and Emperor Haile Selassie, traditionally regarded as the 224th and 225th monarchs of the Solomonic dynasty, embodied a royal tradition that connected the modern Ethiopian Empire to its ancient roots. Home to historic landmarks such as the Menelik II Palace, Guenete Leul Palace, the National Palace, Holy Trinity Cathedral, and St. George Cathedral, the city reflects the evolution of Ethiopia's imperial, religious, and national institutions. Today, Addis Ababa is one of the world's foremost diplomatic centers, serving as the headquarters of the African Union, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), and numerous international organizations and embassies. As the political heart of Ethiopia and a leading diplomatic capital of Africa, Addis Ababa stands as a modern expression of a civilization whose history stretches back to the imperial age of Axum.

Contrary to Dawit Asghedom's inaccurate presentation and mischaracterization, beyond the deep, interconnected genealogical heritage shared by its people, Ethiopia and Eritrea, were also not societies separated by the political boundaries that exist today. They participated in a wider historical and civilizational sphere of whose political center, cultural, religious and national identity were inextricably linked to the Ethiopian State since time immemorial.

Adulis, King Kaleb and Ethiopia's Maritime Power

One of the most compelling illustrations of this unified history as chronicled by sixth-century traveler, Cosmas Inidcopleustes, occurred during the reign of the Ethiopian or Aksumite King Kaleb - one of the most celebrated monarchs of the Aksumite Empire. Cosmas who visited Adulis around 518 CE documented preparations for an Aksumite military expedition against the Himyarite Kingdom in southern Arabia, in what is now Yemen. His account, together with contemporary Greek, Syriac, and Ge'ez historical sources, provides important documentary evidence of Aksum's maritime capabilities and its political ambitions across the Red Sea while demonstrating that mainland Eritrea including its port at Adulis were governed by Ethiopia.

King Kaleb's ability to organize and dispatch a major military expedition from Adulis across the Red Sea provides compelling evidence of the port's strategic importance within the Aksumite imperial system. Such an undertaking required not merely maritime infrastructure and military resources, but an established political authority capable of mobilizing the coastal territories and coordinating operations

across the Red Sea. Adulis was therefore not an isolated commercial outpost; it was an essential component of the Aksumite Empire's military, economic, and administrative reach.

King Kaleb's expedition and successful defeat against the Himyarite ruler, Yusuf As'ar Yath'ar, also known as Dhu Nuwas, to establish Aksumite-backed Christian rule in the region, was not an isolated episode of commercial interaction or cultural exchange. It demonstrated that the Aksumite monarchy, when necessary to pursue the cause of justice, possessed the naval capacity to project military power across the Red Sea and exercise influence over territories in the Arabian Peninsula let alone on its own sovereign territory or Red Sea coast.

The historical significance of Adulis, therefore, extends far beyond its role as a commercial trading port. It constituted an integral component of the Aksumite imperial system, serving as a vital maritime gateway through which the Ethiopian Empire sustained its political, economic and military influence both on and across the Red Sea. Moreover, its historical role also illustrates that the territories encompassing present-day Eritrea were deeply integrated into the Ethiopian political and civilizational sphere of antiquity. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that Eritrea, prior to its colonization by Italy and subsequent backing by Arab powers up to and including its secession from Ethiopia in 1993, never existed as an independently constituted nation-state separate and distinct from Ethiopia.

Emperor Zara Yacob: Imperial Reorganization, Administrative Reform, and the Centralization of State Authority

The historical relationship between Ethiopia's central highlands and its northern territories becomes particularly significant when examined during the reign of Emperor Zara Yacob (1434–1468 CE), one of the most consequential monarchs of the Solomonic dynasty. Born in 1399 CE at Tilq, in the historical province of Fatagar, Zara Yacob was closely associated with a region of considerable strategic importance to the Ethiopian monarchy. His father, Emperor Dawit I, had established a royal residence in the area, reflecting Fatagar's importance within the political and military geography of the medieval Ethiopian Empire. The broader Fatagar region lays in the southeast of the present-day, central Shewan highlands in Ethiopia.

Fatagar occupied a strategically important position between the Christian Ethiopian Empire and the Muslim principalities to the southeast, particularly the Sultanate of Ifat, governed by the Walashma dynasty. For generations, the Ethiopian monarchy had confronted the challenge of maintaining imperial authority over these frontier territories while managing the political, commercial, and religious relationships that connected the Horn of Africa to the wider Red Sea world. The Walashma rulers maintained relationships with Muslim political authorities across the Red Sea, including in Yemen and Egypt, and their competition with the Ethiopian monarchy was shaped by both regional ambitions and broader religious and geopolitical developments.

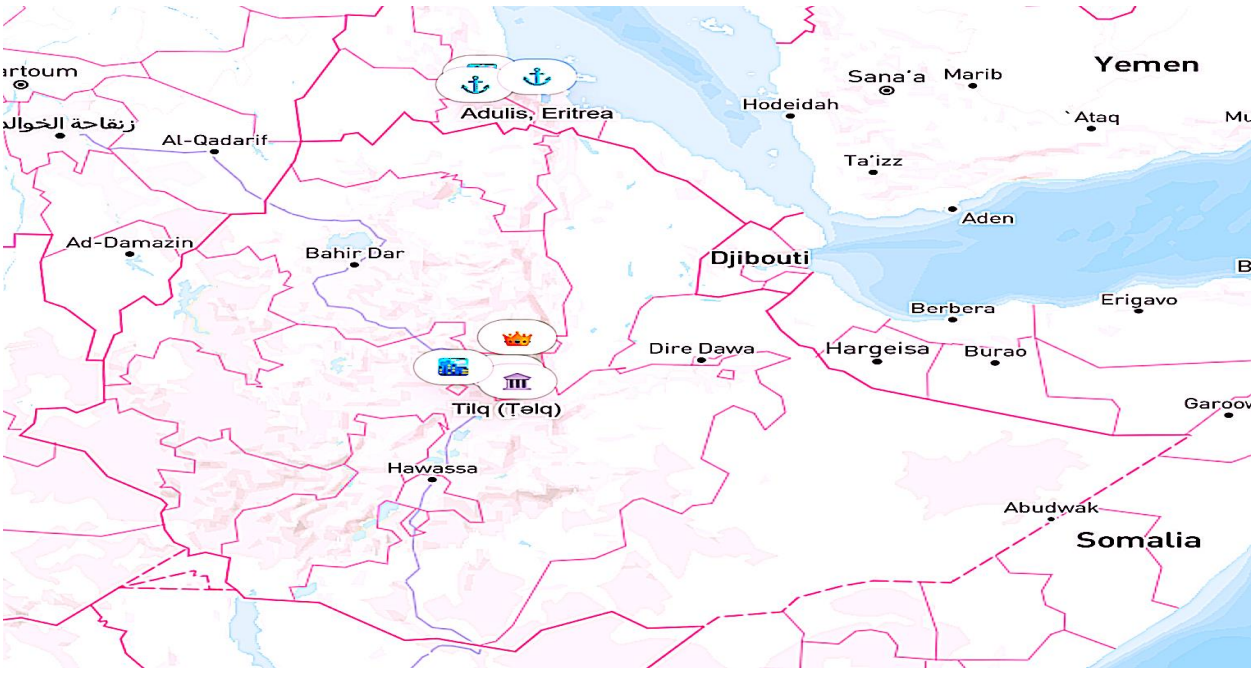
Following prolonged conflict with the Ethiopian Empire, Sultan Sa'ad ad-Din of Ifat was defeated, and members of the Walashma ruling family and their followers sought refuge across the Red Sea under the Rasulid dynasty in Yemen. The Walashma subsequently returned to the Horn of Africa and established a new political center further east, on the Harar plateau, during the early fifteenth century. This development contributed to the emergence of the Sultanate of Adal as the principal Muslim political and military power confronting the Ethiopian Empire from the east. Consequently, by the time Zara Yacob ascended the imperial throne in 1434 CE, the political and military challenge that had previously centered on Ifat in Shewa had increasingly shifted east toward Adal.

Emperor Zara Yacob's reign was, therefore, marked by efforts to strengthen imperial authority, address internal political divisions, and reinforce the institutions through which the monarchy governed its

extensive territories. In 1445 CE, he confronted Sultan Badlay ad-Din of Adal at the Battle of Gomit, where the Sultan was defeated and killed. The victory represented a significant assertion of Ethiopian imperial power and weakened Adal's ability to challenge the monarchy in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Although it did not permanently resolve the political and military competition between the two states, it demonstrated the Ethiopian monarchy's determination to defend its territorial authority against emerging regional powers oftentimes backed by foreign enemies.

Zara Yacob's contributions, however, extended beyond military campaigns. He is credited with establishing Debre Berhan in Shewa as the Empire's capital city around 1456 and making it an important royal residence and imperial center. His decision reflected a broader effort to strengthen the institutional presence of the monarchy through more established centers of government, religious authority, and royal administration. Debre Berhan became one of the important centers associated with his reign and illustrates how the Ethiopian monarchy maintained political authority across geographically extensive territories through royal residences, provincial governors, ecclesiastical institutions, and delegated administrative offices.

Of particular relevance to the history of Ethiopia's Red Sea territories was the development and formalization of the office of *Bahr Negash*, commonly translated as "Ruler of the Sea." Although the administration of the northern coastal territories had antecedents predating Zara Yacob, his reign is associated with the strengthening and reorganization of this important imperial institution. Operating from Debarwa, in present-day Eritrea, the Bahr Negash exercised authority on behalf of the Ethiopian Crown over northern territories that included *Medri Bahri* "Land of the Sea" and areas associated with Hamasen, Seraye, and other adjoining districts. The office reflected the strategic importance of the northern highlands and their access to the Red Sea, as well as the monarchy's interest in maintaining political authority over the routes, communities, and territories connecting the interior to the coast.



This map identifies Tilq, in the historical province of Fatagar, as the birthplace of Emperor Zara Yacob, alongside Debre Berhan, which he established as an imperial capital and royal residence. It also highlights Debarwa, the historic seat of the Bahr Negash, the Ethiopian imperial governor responsible for administering the coastal province of Medri Bahri, and Adulis, the ancient Aksumite port and major center of Red Sea commerce. Together, these locations illustrate the historical reach of Ethiopian imperial authority from the central highlands to its coastal territories. Addis Ababa and Asmara are included as contemporary geographical references, representing the present-day capitals of Ethiopia and Eritrea, respectively.

The significance of these administrative arrangements should not be measured solely by the distance separating the imperial court from the northern frontier. Like other established states, the Ethiopian monarchy exercised authority through regional institutions and officials entrusted with governing territories on behalf of the Crown. The existence of a provincial administration, a regional governor, or a distinct local political structure was not indicative of independence from the imperial state. Rather, these arrangements reflected the practical requirements of governing a geographically diverse and extensive realm.

Zara Yacob's reign therefore provides an important illustration of the Ethiopian monarchy's efforts to reorganize, strengthen, and administer its territories through a combination of military authority, royal centers, and established provincial institutions. His association with the development of the office of the *Bahr Negash* is particularly relevant to the history of the Red Sea frontier, demonstrating that the northern coastal territories were not peripheral to the concerns of the Ethiopian monarchy. They formed part of a broader imperial system whose political, commercial, and strategic interests extended from the central highlands to the Red Sea.

The Cost of Defending Sovereignty: Prolonged Warfare, Foreign Intervention, and the Vulnerability of the Red Sea Coast

The military and administrative achievements of successive Ethiopian Emperors over several centuries must also be understood against the considerable pressures placed upon the Ethiopian State by prolonged warfare, direct and indirect foreign intervention. Although the monarchy repeatedly defended its independence and resisted attempts by external powers from penetrating the highlands, these conflicts demanded enormous military, political, and economic resources. Over time, the cumulative burden of defending the Empire on multiple fronts complicated the administration of distant provinces and increased the vulnerability of strategically important territories along the Red Sea.

The changing political landscape following Zara Yacob's reign is a quintessential illustration of this challenge. Although his victory over Sultan Badlay in 1445 at the Battle of Gomit temporarily weakened Adal, the underlying rivalry between the Ethiopian Empire and the Sultanate remained unresolved. Political divisions within Adal, combined with competing religious and military ambitions, eventually created conditions that enabled more militant leaders to challenge the Ethiopian monarchy.

One of the most consequential figures to emerge from this environment was Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, known in Ethiopian history as Ahmed Gragn. In 1520, Ahmad defeated Sultan Abu Bakr ibn Muhammad and installed Umar Din as the nominal Walashma ruler, while exercising effective authority himself as Imam and military commander. Using Adal as his political and military base, Ahmad Gragn consolidated support among regional Muslim forces and launched a devastating campaign against the Ethiopian Empire beginning in 1529.

Unlike earlier conflicts between the Ethiopian monarchy and the Walashma rulers, Ahmad Gragn's campaign benefited from substantial external military assistance. His forces received support from Ottoman authorities and other Muslim networks across the Red Sea, including military recruits, firearms, and other forms of assistance originating in the Arabian Peninsula. The port of Zeila, in present-day Somaliland, became an important channel through which weapons and supplies could reach Adal. These developments transformed what had previously been a largely regional struggle into a conflict increasingly shaped by the military and geopolitical interests of powers operating across the Red Sea.

The introduction of firearms and the participation of foreign military personnel significantly intensified the conflict. The Ethiopian Empire, confronted by the vast destruction of churches, monasteries, settlements, and agricultural communities, was compelled to mobilize its resources in defense of the

monarchy and the Christian highlands. The Portuguese intervention beginning in 1541, following appeals for assistance from the Ethiopian court, represented a decisive development in the conflict. Portuguese forces and military personnel, including musketeers, joined Ethiopian forces against Ahmad Gragn's armies. The struggle ultimately culminated in 1543 at the Battle of Wayna Daga, where Ahmad Gragn was defeated and killed.

The defeat of Ahmad Gragn, however, did not end the geopolitical contest over Ethiopia's Red Sea frontier. The Ottoman Empire, having expanded its authority into Egypt in 1517 and consolidated its influence across the Red Sea, increasingly sought control over strategic ports and maritime routes connecting Africa and Arabia. In 1557, Ottoman forces seized Massawa, establishing a significant foothold along the coast. Under the command of Özdemir Pasha, Ottoman forces subsequently advanced inland and occupied Debarwa, the important administrative seat of the *Bahr Negash*, the Ethiopian imperial official responsible for the northern coastal province of *Medri Bahri*.

The Ottoman advance encountered sustained resistance from the Ethiopian monarchy. During the ensuing decades, Ethiopian forces under Emperors Gelawdewos, Minas, and Sarsa Dengel repeatedly challenged Ottoman attempts to extend their authority into the highlands. The campaigns of Sarsa Dengel during the latter part of the sixteenth century were particularly significant in preventing Ottoman expansion beyond the coastal territories and their immediate hinterland. Although the Ottomans maintained control over Massawa and other strategic coastal positions, they were unable to establish lasting authority over the Ethiopian interior. The highlands, including much of the territory that today constitutes Eritrea, remained outside the reach of sustained Ottoman rule.

It is important to distinguish between Ottoman control of the port of Massawa as well as Ethiopia's territorial claims and resistance in the surrounding territories. The occupation of Massawa did not erase the earlier history of Ethiopian coastal administration, nor did it mean that the Ottoman Empire had incorporated the entire northern region into its political system. Rather, it produced a contested frontier in which maritime control, local intermediaries, and competing imperial authorities operated alongside one another.

Within this arrangement, the Ottoman administration relied upon local intermediaries to exercise authority over Massawa and its surrounding communities. A prominent leader of the local Balaw community held the title of Naib of Massawa, exercising delegated authority within the Ottoman administrative system under the regional Ottoman governor at Suakin. This office must be distinguished from the much older Ethiopian institutions of coastal administration. The Naib was an Ottoman administrative designation; it was not the origin of Ethiopia's own coastal governing traditions. Long before the Ottoman occupation of Massawa, Ethiopian emperors had maintained regional offices and appointed officials associated with titles such as *Ma'ekel Bahr* and *Bahr Negash* to administer and defend territories connected to the Red Sea on behalf of the Crown.

The broader significance of these successive conflicts lies not merely in their individual military outcomes, but in their cumulative consequences for the Ethiopian State. For centuries, successive Emperors expended substantial military, political, and economic resources defending the Empire against foreign-backed incursions and competing regional powers. Although Ethiopia repeatedly preserved its independence and prevented external forces from establishing lasting control over its highlands, prolonged warfare placed considerable demands upon the imperial treasury, provincial administrations, and the monarchy's ability to safeguard its extensive territories. The northern frontier, geographically more distant from the principal centers of imperial authority overtime and increasingly exposed to competing maritime powers, became particularly vulnerable to foreign occupation and political encroachment.

Equally consequential was the recurring use of local alliances, intermediaries, and military auxiliaries by external powers seeking to establish or consolidate their influence in the region. The foreign military support extended to Adal during the campaigns of Ahmad Gragn offers an earlier illustration of how regional political rivalries could be reinforced by external resources and manpower. In later centuries, foreign administrations likewise relied upon locally recruited troops and auxiliary formations to maintain their presence along the Red Sea coast.

The Italian colonial administration's extensive use of Eritrean Askaris is among the most prominent examples. These developments occurred under different political circumstances and should not be treated as identical, nor should the actions of particular military formations be generalized to the populations from which they were recruited. Nevertheless, they illustrate a recurring geopolitical reality: foreign powers seeking to establish control over strategically important territories frequently relied not only on their own military capabilities, but also on local alliances, intermediaries, and auxiliary forces.

The eventual vulnerability of Ethiopia's Red Sea frontier was therefore not evidence of an absence of historical Ethiopian authority or a lack of resistance by the imperial monarchy. Rather, it reflected the cumulative pressures of centuries of warfare, competing imperial ambitions, internal political divisions, and the growing strategic importance of the Red Sea to foreign powers. The monarchy had repeatedly defended its sovereignty, but the cost of doing so was substantial. As the balance of power in the region changed and European colonial expansion accelerated, the northern coastline became increasingly exposed to a new phase of foreign intervention—one that would fundamentally transform the political geography of the Horn of Africa.

The actual facts prove that there are an abundance of historical records which demonstrate Ethiopia's relationship with the Red Sea and its coastal hinterland was neither incidental nor peripheral to the development of the Ethiopian State. From the Aksumite period, when Adulis served as a major commercial port connecting the Ethiopian highlands with the Mediterranean, Arabia, and the wider Indian Ocean trading world, through the medieval Zagwe and Solomonic dynasties and their established coastal administrative institutions, the Red Sea littoral remained an integral dimension of Ethiopia's political, commercial, and strategic governance and history. This historical relationship continued through successive centuries, notwithstanding Eritrea’s colonization by Italy from 1890-1941 and through subsequent political upheaval until Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia in 1993.

The Emperors Who Defended Ethiopia: A Legacy of Sovereignty and Resistance



King Kaleb (520-550 AD) – Led first military expedition across the Red Sea conquering the Kingdom of Himyar (present-day Yemen) in response to persecution of Christians including Axumite merchants. Mobilized a substantial military force of approximately 120,000 and an estimated naval fleet of 70 ships across the Red Sea. Strengthened important diplomatic and commercial relations with the Byzantine Empire under Emperor Justin I.



Emperor Amda Seyon I (1314-1344 AD) – One of the greatest military commanders widely acclaimed for defeating the Muslim Sultanate of Ifat and its allies. This had strategic importance for access to commercial routes that connected the Ethiopian interior with Zeila and the Gulf of Aden. Defeated forces of Adal at the Battle of Das, reclaimed imperial authority into eastern lowlands and brought numerous southern and eastern territories under Ethiopian Sovereign rule.



Emperor Newaya Krestos (1344-1372 AD)- Son of Amda Seyon who continued military suppression of Muslim rebellion in Ifat and Adal temporarily dismantling independent political leadership of the rebellious Walashma faction. Threatened military confrontation with Mamluk Sutltan of Egypt in response to persecution of Coptic Christians and imprisonment of then Patriarch of Alexendria Mark IV, eventually leading to His Holiness' release. Also rebuilt Debre Igziabher, an important historic monastery overlooking Lake Hayq.



Emperor Dawit I (1380-1412) – Took over throne from his brother Emperor Newaya Maryam, son of Newaya Kresto. Maintained imperial authority during a period of regional military and religious competition. His reign included military engagement with neighboring Muslim powers. Continued the defense of Ethiopia's eastern and southeastern frontiers eventually defeating and killing Walashma ruler of Adal Sultan Sa'ad ad Din II and substantially weakening Muslim political and military power in the eastern Horn.



Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434-1468 AD) – One of the most consequential rulers in Ethiopian history whose reign marked a major revival of Solomonic imperial power. Achieved decisive military victory over the Sultanate of Adal in 1445 and established tributary relations, expanded and permanently deployed Ethiopia's imperial military regiments, re-organized and streamlined the office of Bahr Negash with its capital in Debarwa. Reinforced the monarchy's authority over the northern territories and the Red Sea-facing regions. Strengthened imperial administration and centralized royal authority.



Emperor Lebne Dengel (1508-1540 AD) – Succeeding Emperors Be'ede-Maryam and Eskender, Lebne Dengel faced an increasingly formidable Adal Sultanate, backed by Ottoman military power. Despite defeating an Adal rebellion in 1517, he suffered a major defeat at the Battle of Shimbra Kure in 1529 against Ahmad Gragn's forces, whose superior Ottoman-supplied firearms proved decisive. Recognizing the need for foreign assistance, he initiated diplomatic engagement with Portugal, securing an alliance whose military support, though delayed until after his death, would prove instrumental in restoring Ethiopia's sovereignty. Despite his setbacks, Lebne Dengel evaded capture and preserved the Solomonic Monarchy until his death in 1540, when his son, Emperor Gelawdewos, continued the counteroffensive.



Emperor Gelawdewos (1540-1559) – Emperor Gelawdewos (1540-1559) – Battle of Wayna Daga – 1543- Killed and defeated Ahmad Gragn's forces with Portugues backing. Re-established imperial authority and continued military resistance against the Adal, salvaging Ethiopia's Solomonic Monarchy from Ottoman backed Adal conquest's use of superior military firepower. Gelawdewos was martyred in 1559 at the Battle of Fatagar while fighting forces led by Nur ibn Mujahid, an Emir of Harar and the military leader of the Adal Sultatnate. Nur ibn Mujahid was also the nephew of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Al-Ghazi otherwise known as Ahmed Gragn.



Emperor Minas (1559-1563) – Ruled during the continuing struggle over imperial authority in the northern territories. Faced internal rebellions and challenges involving the northern frontier and the Bahr Negash's treasonous alliance with the Ottomans which entailed cession of Debarwa, the seat of the Bahre Negash, to the Ottomans in exchange for military assistance. Died at the Battle of Enderta before he could reverse the military setback. His son, Emperor Sarsa Dengel, would inherit the throne and struggle against the Ottomans and the treasonous rebels.



Emperor Sarsa Dengel (1563-1597) – Defeated the Adal Sultatnate in 1576 when Sultan Muhamman ibn Nasir of Adal launched a new military campaign, proclaiming a jihad and advancing into the Hadiya region. He then moved his troops to the norther frontier and defeated the rebellious Bahr Negash Yeshaq as well as his Ottoman allies in a decisive military campaign at the Battle of Addi Qarro in 1578. Prior to his victory, Sarsa Dengel captured and destroyed the Ottoman fort at Debarwa. Sarsa Dengel was temporarily driven back by Yeshaq and Ottoman forces until a month later when some of Yeshaq's followers defected. Sarsa Dengel defeated the combined forces and restored imperial authority and control over Debarwa and the Eritrean highlands.



Emperor Suseneyos (1607-1632 AD) – Reign pursuant to Emperors Yacob and Ze Dengel marked by campaigns to consolidate imperial authority, suppress regional rebellions, resist Oromo expansion which commenced under Emperor Lebne Dengel in 1522 and strengthen diplomatic and military connections with the Spanish-Portuguese Crown and the Vatican. Conversion to Catholicism and resulting religious conflict resulted in him abdicating the throne in favor of his son Fasiledes in 1632,



Emperor Fasiledes (1632-1667 AD) – Expelled Jesuit and Portuguese Catholic missionaries who were meddling in Ethiopia's internal religious and political affairs. Restored the Ethiopain Orthodox Church as the State religion and helped restore the historic Church of our Lady Mary Zion at Axum. Founded Gondar as an imperial capital around 1636, transforming it into a major political, administrative, religious and commercial center.



Emperor Iyasu I "The Great"(1682 -1706) – One of the greatest warrior Emperors who reasserted imperial influence in the northwest and secured the submission of the Na'ib of Arkiko of whom the Ottomans served as overlords. Led a successful expedition against the Funj Sultanate which succeeded the Christian Nubian civilization in what is now southern Sudan and parts of Western Ethiopia. Maintained diplomatic and commercial engagement with Egypt and sent the Armenian merchant Murad as an emissary to the Dutch East Indies. Led repeated campaigns against Oromo expansion and rebellious regional forces, protecting the sovereignty of the Empire. Personally campaigned into Shewa and Enarya, extending the reach of the Crown. Established a more defined hierarchy of court titles and ranks. Strengthened the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, restored the historic privileges of Axum, constructed Debre Berhane Selassie Church in 1694 and reformed customs taxation.



Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868) – One of the most consequential Ethiopian Emperors who emerged from the Era of the Princes to reunite the Ethiopian Empire under a centralized monarchy. Attempted to establish a national army after defeating powerful regional princes and develop domestic arms production. Imprisoned British officials and other European dignitaries leading to the British Expedition to Abyssinia from 1867-1868l. Rather than surrender to the British, Emperor Tewodros took his own life.



Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) -Significant military accomplishments include: **Battle of Gundet (November 16, 1875)** where invading Egyptian forces were defeated. **Battle of Gura (March 1876)** where a much larger Egyptian expeditionary force were defeated. **Defended against Italian Coastal expansion in 1885. Battle of Dogali (1887) –** Ras Alula Engida, leading military commander decisively defeated Italy. **Battle of Metema (1889) –** Led Ethiopian forces against Mahdist Sudanese where he was mortally wounded and eventually died.



Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) – One of the greatest military and diplomatic defenders of Ethiopian independence. **Battle of Amba Alage (1895) –** Defeated an Italian advance under the command of Italian General Arimondi. **Siege of Mekelle (1896) –** Along with his consort Empress Taytu compelled the Italian garrison to surrender. Most notable and decisive victory, **the Battle of Adwa (1896) –** Led a united Ethiopian army that decisively defeated invading Italian army under General Oreste Baratieri.



Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974) – Presided over one of the most consequential struggles for Ethiopian sovereignty. **Most significant accomplishment in defense of Ethiopia include: Resistance to Italian aggression (1935-1936) – Mobilized Ethiopia's armed forces to resist the invasion launched by Fascist Italy on October 3, 1935. Battle of Maychew (1936) –** Personally commanded Ethiopian forces when Italy used mustard gas against his troops and innocent civilians. **Address to the League of Nations (1936) –** Condemned Italy's aggression and appealed to international community to uphold collective security. **Continued Resistance –** Supported Ethiopian Patriots and maintained Ethiopia's claim to independence. **Liberation & Restoration (1941) –** Returned to Ethiopia accompanied by Ethiopian Patriot forces and Allied Gideon Force restoring the imperial government and ending Italian occupation.

The defense of Ethiopian sovereignty was not the achievement of a single generation or dynasty, but inherited responsibility of successive emperors and the people who confronted foreign invasion, regional expansionism, and competing imperial ambitions. From King Kaleb's military expedition across the Red Sea in the sixth century to Emperor Amda Seyon's campaigns against Ifat, Zara Yacob's victory over Adal, and the resistance of Gelawdewos, Minas, and Sarsa Dengel against Ottoman expansion, Ethiopia's history is marked by successive efforts to preserve its political independence and strategic interests. Centuries later, Emperors Tewodros II, Yohannes IV, and Menelik II would confront new foreign threats, including British, Egyptian, Mahdist, and Italian military interventions. Their struggles unfolded under different circumstances, yet collectively demonstrate a remarkable continuity in the Ethiopian monarchy's determination to defend the sovereignty of the empire and protect its territorial integrity which was inclusive of present-day Eritrea.

Shared Faith and Ecclesiastial Heritage: The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

Beyond the shared histories of political governance, territorial sovereignty, and successive kingdoms, the common religious heritage of the peoples of Ethiopia and Eritrea provides another compelling dimension of their historical interconnectedness. Although modern political boundaries have divided these territories into separate states, their longstanding ecclesiastical institutions, spiritual traditions, and shared Orthodox Christian faith reflect centuries of religious and cultural continuity that predate modern national borders and cannot be understood solely through contemporary political distinctions.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church represents one of the most enduring institutions connecting the peoples of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, transcending modern political boundaries and successive periods of foreign occupation. Dating back to the fourth-century Christianization of the Aksumite Kingdom under King Ezana and the ministry of Abune Selama (Frumentius), the Orthodox Christian tradition developed across the ancient highlands as a shared religious institution. For centuries, Orthodox Christian communities in Eritrea and Ethiopia belonged to the same broader ecclesiastical tradition, sharing the Ge'ez liturgy, scriptures, monastic institutions, religious calendars, saints, theological teachings, and traditions of ecclesiastical scholarship. Even when Italy established colonial rule over Eritrea (1890–1941), these historical and religious connections endured. In fact, Italian colonial authorities attempted to weaken and sever Eritrean Orthodoxy's ecclesiastical ties with the Ethiopian Church, including the controversial 1929 removal of Ethiopian ecclesiastical authority over Eritrea, a measure rejected as uncanonical by the Orthodox authorities. These efforts demonstrate just how significant the Church's institutional and cultural connections were across the colonial boundary.

The movement of religious manuscripts between monasteries and royal centers provides particularly compelling evidence of these connections. Debre Bizen (Däbrä Bizän), one of Eritrea's most historically significant monasteries, preserves manuscripts that document its longstanding intellectual and religious relationships with the Ethiopian Christian highlands. One particularly remarkable example dates to the reign of Emperor Zara Yaqob (1434–1468): a manuscript known as the *Maṣḥafa Berhan* (Book of Light) records that the Emperor donated it to Debre Bizen following a visit to the royal court in Shewa by the monastery's future abbot, Petros, in 1457–1458. This is direct documentary evidence of royal patronage and the movement of religious literature between the Ethiopian court and an important Eritrean monastery.

Such exchanges illustrate how monasteries, scholars, clergy, and royal authorities participated in a shared religious and intellectual world. The historical significance is not that every community was identical, but that the religious institutions and traditions of the two territories were deeply intertwined. **The modern**

political separation of Ethiopia and Eritrea did not erase centuries of shared ecclesiastical history, spiritual kinship, and cultural inheritance.

Conclusion: History, Sovereignty, and the Imperative of Historical Truth

The historical record, when examined across the centuries, presents an unmistakable picture of the enduring relationship between Ethiopia and the territories that constitute present-day Eritrea. From the ancient Kingdom of Da'amat and the Aksumite Empire to the medieval Zagwe and Solomonic dynasties, and through the successive imperial administrations that maintained authority over the Red Sea coast and its hinterland, these territories were deeply interconnected within the political, cultural, religious, and civilizational development of the Ethiopian State. The emergence of Eritrea as a separate political entity was not the culmination of an uninterrupted tradition of independent nationhood dating back to antiquity. Rather, it was the product of nineteenth-century European colonial expansion, subsequent foreign intervention, and the political upheavals that ultimately reshaped the Horn of Africa.

Italy's acquisition and eventual colonization of territories along the Red Sea fundamentally altered the political geography of the region, transforming historically interconnected Ethiopian territories into a colonial possession administered separately from the Ethiopian Empire. The subsequent British military administration, the postwar international deliberations, and the 1952 federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia under United Nations auspices further illustrate that Eritrea's modern political status emerged through a series of international decisions rather than from an established history of separate sovereign statehood. The federation's dissolution and Eritrea's eventual annexation in 1962, followed by three decades of armed conflict and its internationally recognized independence in 1993, represent consequential chapters in this history that cannot be understood in isolation from the colonial foundations upon which Eritrea's modern territorial identity was constructed.

Equally important is the distinction between acknowledging the historical relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea and denying the legitimacy of Eritrean identity. The two are not mutually exclusive. Eritreans possess a rich and distinguished heritage, encompassing their languages, traditions, religious communities, historical personalities, and ancestral connections to the land. None of this, however, requires the historical record to be rewritten or the centuries of political and civilizational interconnectedness between the two territories to be disregarded. Nor should contemporary political boundaries be retroactively projected onto antiquity in an attempt to establish historical narratives that did not exist at the time.

The experience of the Horn of Africa also offers a broader lesson about the consequences of foreign intervention in African affairs. Colonial powers frequently exploited existing political divisions, manipulated local rivalries, and imposed territorial arrangements that disregarded longstanding historical, cultural, and administrative relationships. Subsequent generations inherited the consequences of these decisions, often at an extraordinary human cost. The Ethiopian-Eritrean experience is among the most consequential examples of how colonial intervention, competing foreign interests, and internal political failures can transform a shared historical inheritance into generations of political estrangement and conflict.

Ultimately, the question before us is not whether Eritreans should take pride in their heritage or whether Ethiopians should acknowledge the distinct experiences of the peoples inhabiting the country's northern territories. Both deserve recognition. The more fundamental question is whether historical inquiry should be guided by documentary evidence and intellectual honesty or subordinated to contemporary political narratives. History cannot be rewritten to accommodate present-day borders, nor can the antiquity of a civilization be diminished by the political circumstances through which modern states emerge.

Returning to the discussion that prompted this examination, Dawit Asghedom, Nipsey Hussle, and Blacc Sam are right to emphasize the importance of ancestral heritage and the preservation of cultural identity. Indeed, the pride they express in their Eritrean ancestry reflects something profoundly African: the enduring connection between a people and the land from which their ancestors came. Yet that same ancestral history deserves to be understood in its full historical context, including the broader Ethiopian civilization to which much of the region was connected for millennia.

The history of Ethiopia and Eritrea is not simply a history of two neighboring peoples; it is a history of shared civilizations, intertwined dynasties, common institutions, external intervention, political rupture, and an inheritance that predates the borders of modern states. Whatever political arrangements the future may bring, no declaration of independence, international recognition, or contemporary boundary can erase the historical record. The past belongs neither exclusively to modern Ethiopia nor exclusively to modern Eritrea. It belongs to the generations who built, defended, governed, and sustained the civilization that both peoples inherited.

History should not be a casualty of politics, and historical truth should never be sacrificed at the altar of contemporary nationalism.

About the Author

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