



Aethiopica 7 (2004)

International Journal of Ethiopian and
Eritrean Studies

HELMUT ZIEGERT, Universität Hamburg

Review

DAVID W. PHILLIPSON: *Ancient Ethiopia. Aksum: Its Antecedents
and Successors*

Aethiopica 7 (2004), 216–217

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik

Reviews

über hinausreicht, was bisher üblicherweise für historische Abhandlungen an Literatur verwendet wird. Der kommenden Historiographie Äthiopiens, die sich heute deutlich differenzierter zeigt als früher, ist damit sehr gedient.

Zusammenfassend sei gesagt, dass ohne diese Detailsammlung Einzeldaten – z.B. über: Herrscher, Itinerarien, Kriegszüge, persönliche Konflikte oder Bündnisse, Waren und Preise – in dieser Fülle der Wissenschaft sonst kaum zugänglich wären. Man kann nur eine große Anerkennung und Dankbarkeit dafür äußern, dass ein Fachwissenschaftler sein Arbeitsinstrumentarium so großzügig mit anderen teilt.

Wolbert G.C. Smidt, Universität Hamburg

DAVID W. PHILLIPSON: *Ancient Ethiopia. Aksum: Its Antecedents and Successors*, London 2002 (The British Museum Press), reprint of 1998, paperback, 176 pp. Price: £ 15.99. ISBN: 0-7141-2763-9.

The author was Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, and former President of the British Institute in East Africa. He carried out excavations at different sites in East Africa, from 1993–1997 at Aksum in Ethiopia, these findings were published in 2000. This paperback edition of the book 1998 is unchanged and therefore it does not refer to the archaeological-historical results after 1997.

The author summarizes the results of his own and investigations of others on different topics related to the Aksumite civilization during the first seven centuries A.D., motivated by the importance of Aksum as being the root of the Christian civilization of the Ethiopian highlands. The book is addressed to readers of general interest in history, and to tourists.

The description of the environment presents a long explanation, that Ethiopia is a highland, and of the just recent situation. Unfortunately there is no reference to changing conditions in history, very important for the development and decline of Aksum and the Aksumite State.

“Ethiopia before Aksum” presents a short description of pre-human and early human fossils, then jumping to Neolithic farming with crops and animals: because of the lack of regional data, speculations based on references in the world around are presented. Rock art as a source can unfortunately not be dated seriously in these regions. Assumptions of the influence of South Arabia are not to be proved for these ancient times.

“The Aksumite civilisation” is described referring to information – which? – from stelae, and from coins, throne remains and inscription stones. Pottery production leads to speculations on sociography. Domestic economy and trade are referred to, furthermore the international economy: trade – import

and export overseas – with all ancient centres around. There is a map on p. 69, but without time-markers. It demonstrates the importance of Aksum as one of the ancient states, illustrating the information from historical texts. Mentioned is the correction of dating the Gobodra rock shelter: the cereals are probably only 1000 years old (cf. Phillipson 1990; 1993).

The chapter “Aksumite material culture and beliefs” presents short remarks on possible pre-Christian belief, and a description of finds: the coinage as an indicator of foreign connections and local wealth, pottery, glass, metals and ivory, architecture and burials. – History without dating is myth. Unfortunately the chronology presented in this book is mainly based on the typology of pottery and the unscientific assertion of R. WILDING (1989) with its absolute dating. A chamber-“tomb” at Aksum was not one grave but a cemetery for a lot of burials; of course “sealed” after some – but which? – time; all grave goods were taken out without documentation of stratigraphy and identification of single graves as “associations”: this material is lost for further chronological investigations. Typologies are systems to order something, and to stimulate assumptions only for e.g. function, fabrication, time and origin; but they are not a chronological method for relative and absolute dating.

“The Aksumite system” is described, because of the lack of data, by speculations and banal views on town and countryside, polity and decline. “Christian Ethiopia after Aksum” presents a general view on the history, on monuments like churches, and arts. “The meaning of tradition” points to the increasing importance of Aksum for the present state and the Orthodox Ethiopian Church.

The figures, photos of the author, are of good quality, the notes and references are useful for detailed information, and are leading to the references till 1997 in the Bibliography which invites to further reading.

For most of the topics there exist more detailed and better introductions, but in general the present book is a useful summary of the author’s view on Aksum and Ethiopia on the level of 1997.

Bibliography

- DAVID W. PHILLIPSON 1990, Aksum in Africa = *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 23: 55–65.
- DAVID W. PHILLIPSON 1993, *African Archaeology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- R.F. WILDING 1989, *The pottery*, in: STUART C. MUNRO-HAY, *Excavations at Aksum: an Account of Research at the Ancient Ethiopian Capital Directed in 1972–74 by the Late Dr. Neville Chittick*, London: British Institute in Eastern Africa, 235–316.

Helmut Ziegert, Universität Hamburg