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Review

DAVID W. PHILLIPSON, *Foundations of an African Civilisation:
Aksum & the Northern Horn 1000 BC–AD 1300*

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Bibliographical abbreviations used in this volume

- AE* *Annales d'Éthiopie*, Paris 1955ff.
- ÄthFor* Äthiopistische Forschungen, 1–35, ed. by E. HAMMERSCHMIDT, 36–40, ed. by S. UHLIG, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner (1–34), 1977–1992; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (35–40), 1994–1995.
- AethFor* Aethiopistische Forschungen, 41–73, ed. by S. UHLIG, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998–2011; 74–75, ed. by A. BAUSI and S. UHLIG, *ibid.*, 2011f.; 76ff. ed. by A. BAUSI, *ibid.*, 2012ff.
- AION* *Annali dell'Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"*, Napoli: Università di Napoli "L'Orientale" (former Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli), 1929ff.
- BSOAS* *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, London 1917ff.
- CSCO* *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, 1903ff.
- EAE* S. UHLIG (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, I: A–C, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003; II: D–Ha, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2005; III: He–N, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007; (in cooperation with A. BAUSI), IV: O–X, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010; A. BAUSI (ed. in cooperation with S. UHLIG), V: Y–Z, *Supplementa, Addenda et Corrigenda, Maps, Index*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014.
- EFAH* Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Orient-Abteilung, Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, herausgegeben im Auftrag des Instituts von NORBERT NEBES.
- EMML* Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa.
- IJAHS* *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Boston, MA – New York 1968ff.
- JAH* *The Journal of African History*, Cambridge 1960ff.
- JES* *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa 1963ff.
- JSS* *Journal of Semitic Studies*, Manchester 1956ff.
- NEASt* *Northeast African Studies*, East Lansing, MI 1979ff.
- OrChr* *Oriens Christianus*, Leipzig – Roma – Wiesbaden 1901ff.
- OrChrP* *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, Roma 1935ff.
- PICES 15* S. UHLIG – M. BULAKH – D. NOSNITSIN – T. RAVE (eds.) 2005, *Proceedings of the XVth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Hamburg July 20–25, 2003* = *AethFor* 65, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- PICES 16* H. ASPEN – BIRHANU TEFERRA – SHIFERAW BEKELE – S. EGE (eds.) 2010, *Research in Ethiopian Studies: Selected papers of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Trondheim July 2007* = *AethFor* 72, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- PO* *Patrologia Orientalis*, 1903ff.
- RIÉ* É. BERNAND – A. J. DREWES – R. SCHNEIDER 1991, *Recueil des inscriptions de l'Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite*, I: *Les documents*, II: *Les planches*, Paris: [Académie des inscriptions et belle-lettres] Diffusion de Boccard.
- RSE* *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, Roma 1941–1981, Roma – Napoli 1983ff.
- SAe* *Scriptores Aethiopici*.
- ZDMG* *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, Leipzig – Wiesbaden – Stuttgart 1847ff.

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DAVID W. PHILLIPSON, *Foundations of an African Civilisation: Aksum & the Northern Horn 1000 BC–AD 1300* = Eastern Africa Series, Woodbridge, Suffolk: James Currey – Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Inc., 2012. 304 pp. Price: GB-£: 40.00. ISBN: 978–1–84701–041–4.

Increasing archaeological researches in the northern Horn of Africa, standing questions about the emergence of complex societies in this region, and a growing number of scholars and students interested in this field have highlighted the necessity for a synthesis of the current knowledge about the people who inhabited this area in the past and about the processes which led to the appearance of hierarchical societies at a state level of complexity in 1st millennium B.C./1st millennium A.D. Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Foundations of an African Civilisation by David Phillipson aims at responding to this challenge by presenting a critical outline of the present status of Ethiopian archaeology¹ and an updated overview of 1st millennium B.C. and early 2nd millennium A.D. Ethiopia and Eritrea, 14 years after the publication of *Ancient Ethiopia* by the same author.²

The book is organized in 3 parts and 16 chapters, with a general introduction (Chapter 1) and an epilogue (Chapter 18).

Part I focuses on the second and 1st millennium B.C. and provides an overview of the period immediately preceding the appearance of a literate complex society in this region at the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. (Chapter 2). Furthermore, Part I describes the cultural changes that occurred along the 1st millennium B.C. which led to the progressive emergence of the Aksumite civilization (Chapter 3).

Part II (Chapters 4 to 16) indisputably represents the core of the book. After an introductory summary (Chapter 4), greater attention is dedicated to describing the emergence and expansion of Aksum's polity between the 1st and 6th centuries A.D. (Chapter 7), and gives a thematic outline of all major aspects of the Aksumite civilization: languages and literacy (Chapter 5), written sources (Chapter 6), kingship and politics (Chapter 8), religion (Chapter 9), subsistence economy (Chapter 10), urbanism and architecture (Chapter 11), funerary monuments and burial practices (Chapter 12), technology and material culture (Chapter 13), coinage (Chapter 14),

¹ In this article, references to “Ethiopian archaeology” or “Ethiopian studies” may be assumed to include Eritrea.

² PHILLIPSON 1998.

and foreign contacts (Chapter 15). In Chapter 16³, Phillipson examines evidence on the decline of Aksum as a political centre and the hypothesis that there existed a progressive shift in eastern Tigray, which was at the core of the Ethiopian Christian civilization between the second half of the 7th century A.D. and the 11th century A.D.

Part III (Chapter 17) surveys the period between the early 11th and late 13th centuries A.D., during which the Agäw Zagwe dynasty flourished in the Lasta region, now part of Amhara region, establishing its capital city at the famous site of Lalibäla–Roha.

In the epilogue (Chapter 18), guidelines for future researches and strategies for heritage management are provided, and will be reviewed later in this article.

One of the strengths of this book, which becomes immediately noticeable while reading, is Phillipson's holistic approach to the study of ancient Ethiopia and Eritrea, by integrating data and methods from different disciplines. The author operates a successful attempt to provide an assessment of the ancient past of these two regions that is firmly grounded in archaeological data, project updates and evaluation of the sources, and is integrated with evidence from history, numismatic, philology, linguistics and environmental studies. The result of Phillipson's dependable work and accurate methodology is a comprehensive essay of the ancient history of Ethiopia and Eritrea, and a fundamental contribution to the scientific community for further discussions and debates.

Our comprehension of the archaeological development of Ethiopia and Eritrea expands as research projects progress, bringing new evidence to light. However, there are aspects of the archaeological history of these regions that have been largely studied or repeatedly revised and are now commonly accepted by scholars. Some criticism to this book lies with Phillipson's disregard for some well established models and shared opinions, that are crucial to facilitate the scientific debate and to advance our discipline as a whole.

One, quite striking example, in my opinion, is Phillipson's lack of adoption of the established archaeological periodisation between the early 1st millennium B.C. and the late 1st millennium A.D. Although the definition of the earliest phase, known as "Pre-Aksumite" culture (ca. 800/400 B.C.), is still largely debated,⁴ we have come to a common cultural development model as a result of multiple revisions of available data and increased chronometric precision. There is a well defined and reliable cultural sequence, at least for the area of

³ The hypothesis of a progressive shift in eastern Tigray at the core of Ethiopian Christianity is mostly based on the comparison between churches, architecture and layout, as proposed in detail in ID. 2009a.

⁴ ID. 2009b: 257–274; but also FATTOVICH 2012: 1–60.

Aksum, that marks the most significant cultural changes before, during and after the Aksumite civilization.⁵ Phillipson's acknowledgement of this shared tool would have facilitated comparative analyses of his ideas in the light of the most recent archaeological results, together with encouraging advances and further refinement of such a tool. It is in fact widely recognized by archaeologists working in this area the need of a confrontation on this topic in order to share the terminology used and to make data from different regions comparable.

Palaeoclimatic reconstruction theories also lack adequate representation in this book. Palaeoenvironmental studies conducted at various locations of the Tigrean plateau, provide a reliable reconstruction of the climatic fluctuations, that occurred in this region from the 1st millennium B.C. up to the present, providing relevant information and interesting insights on the role played by environmental conditions on the development and decline of the Aksumite civilization.⁶ These studies suggest that favourable climatic conditions between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D., might have significantly concurred, together with economic and social factors, to the emergence and expansion of Aksum's polity. Moreover, a significant contribution to our understanding of adaptation strategies adopted by ancient local communities to environmental and/or social pressure, comes from research projects recently conducted in the area of Aksum. These provided new insights for local-scale palaeoenvironmental reconstructions and the analysis of land-use and land management strategies by integrating recent data on Aksumite settlement patterns with geological, geoarchaeological and Palaeoagricultural observations.⁷

There yet remains opportunity to comment on some specific statements in the book that require clarification. In the first section of Chapter 3, dedicated to the first half of the 1st millennium B.C., the author describes (p. 33) the rock-cut shaft tombs similar to the ones excavated at Yəḥa, but associated to large stone-built platform and stelae recorded at Betä Giyorgis. This may be confusing, especially for non-specialized readers. It should be clear that those tombs refer to a later period (mostly to the second half of the 1st millennium B.C. and early 1st millennium A.D.). Also confusing is the statement on page 42, according to which it is uncertain whether all the stelae and burials present in the cemetery of "Ona Enda Aboi Zewge" (OAZ) at Betä Giyorgis are attributable to the second half of the 1st millen-

⁵ FATTOVICH – BARD – PETRASSI – PISANO 2000: 72–75.

⁶ BRANCACCIO – CALDERONI – COLTORTI – DRAMIS – OGBAGHEBRIEL 1997: 29–44; MACHADO – PÉREZ-GONZÁLES – BENITO 1998: 312–321.

⁷ CIAMPALINI – MANZO – PERLINGIERI – SERNICOLA 2006: 219–226; SERNICOLA – SULAS 2012: 549–573.

nium B.C. Excavations conducted at the site confirmed that this area has been used as a cemetery between the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. and the mid-4th century A.D.⁸ In chapter 13, it is argued (p. 161, main text and footnote 7) that local imitation of imported forms first occurred between the late-5th and early-7th centuries. Fragmentary ceramic vessels from Betä Giyorgis⁹ suggest that ceramic imitation of metal and glass vessels might have occurred since the late 1st millennium B.C./early 1st millennium A.D.,¹⁰ proving that this kind of vessels was already traded from the Mediterranean area, as also reported in the *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* in the mid-1st century A.D.¹¹ Also the occurrence of imported ribbed-amphorae (the so-called “Ayla-Aksum” type), ascribed by the author (p. 197, footnote 17) to the mid-5th and the early 7th centuries A.D., can be anticipated on the base of excavated material.¹²

In spite of the elements of criticism summarized above, the value of this book as a general compendium and state-of-the-art publication of Ethiopian archaeology is undisputable.

In addition to the quantity and variety of the data presented, the book rightly emphasizes the uncertainties and gaps that characterize our knowledge on ancient Ethiopia and Eritrea, providing valuable guidelines and directions for future research. The book demonstrates our limited knowledge of the period preceding the early 1st millennium B.C., albeit there is evidence of the existence of complex societies in this area, and how little archeological research has been invested in the study of the periods following the decline of Aksum.

An important message that Phillipson sends out in his book, is that it is now time to start stronger collaborations, and interdisciplinary research projects to answer pending questions on ancient Ethiopia and Eritrea. Phillipson urges to move Ethiopian studies away from what has been defined by the author as a *pioneering research* stage (p. 246), characterised by isolated research initiatives, focused on specific cultural or chronological phases, more prominent sites and élite elements. The effectiveness of such an “integrative” approach is demonstrated by the author himself, who complemented historical sources with an archaeological approach for the reconstruction of a relative chronology of the Lalibela-Roha rock-hewn churches complexes.¹³ In Phillipson’s scenario of long-term stronger collaborations and ad-

⁸ FATTOVICH – BARD – PETRASSI – PISANO 2000: 50–55.

⁹ MANZO 2003: 7–46; ID. 2005: 54.

¹⁰ ID. 2003: 7–46; ID. 2005: 54.

¹¹ CASSON 1989: 53, par. 6.

¹² MANZO 2005: 57.

¹³ PHILLIPSON 2009b: 257–274.

vances for the whole discipline, a fundamental role must be played by Ethiopian and Eritrean scholars and administrators. This book is in fact dedicated to the future leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, by placing in their hands a great part of responsibility for the future of their heritage in terms of both research lines and preservation strategies.

It is in fact stated by the author (p. 4), that his work is directed to three distinct audiences: specialists primarily interested in the northern Horn, archaeology students at Ethiopian universities, less specialized readers (mainly Ethiopian and Eritrean living in these countries or abroad, foreigners and tourists). The challenge of writing a detailed, comprehensive and updated account on Ethiopian/Eritrean past, which pays due attention to the precision and critical overview requested by specialised scholars and simultaneously meets the needs of clarity and readability of students and other readers is a serious one. Those reading Phillipson's book will discover how hard it must have been to find the right balance between such distant aims. The imposition of arbitrary new parameters is required. Nevertheless, the final result remains excellent as Phillipson's book is a useful working tool for scholars, a complete and updated textbook for students, and a readable and informative account for those who wish to be introduced to the past of these regions.

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KAI MERTEN, *Das äthiopisch-orthodoxe Christentum: Ein Versuch zu verstehen* = Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte 44, Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012. 348 Seiten. Preis: € 24,90. ISBN 978–3–643–11645–1.

Der evangelische Pfarrer und promovierte Theologe ist Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter für Religionswissenschaft an der Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt am Main. Das Werk beruht nicht nur auf literarischen Quellen, sondern auch auf Beobachtungen, Erfahrungen und Begegnungen während seiner Aufenthalte in Äthiopien. Das Buch basiert auf einem religionswissenschaftlichen Seminar über die religiöse Landschaft Äthiopiens im Wintersemester 2010/11, und ist durch Anregungen von Studenten und Studentinnen ergänzt worden.

Das Werk ist in neun Abschnitte untergliedert.

1. Die Einleitung (S. 7–14); 2. Der Aufbau des Buches (S. 15–20); 3. Vorbemerkungen zur Umschrift äthiopischer Wörter (S. 21–22; die Umschrift der Fachbegriffe wird jedoch nicht konsequent durchgezogen); 4. Geschichtlicher Überblick (S. 23–53); 5. Die Glaubensvorstellungen des äthiopisch-orthodoxen Christentums vermitteln die Lehre, die Mythen und Legenden sowie die ethischen und sozialen Vorstellungen der äthiopischen Kirche (S. 54–151); 6. Das Glaubensleben des äthiopisch-orthodoxen Christentums stellt die