

## Ethiopia in Historical Perspective

Anyone with a serious interest in understanding Ethiopia today can only do so with some understanding of Ethiopian history. When I taught Ethiopian, African, and world history to students in the Emdeber Secondary School back in the 1960's, I spent a fair amount of time trying to collect teaching materials that could be used in the preliminary texts I was preparing for our students. At that time, textbooks were practically non-existent for students, and what was available was often outdated and incomplete. I took time to travel to Ethiopia's historic sites, primarily those in the north, and took many pictures that I then used to show students as part of their school materials. On the return trip to Ethiopia this spring, Danièle and I took the historic tour of northern Ethiopia, and a fair number of photos, some of which are contained in the narrative that follows.

Our trip covered a visit to Bahir Dar, Gondar, Lalibela, and Axum. What we did not visit was the famous town of Adwa, where Ethiopian forces under Emperor Menelik II (1889-1913) vanquished an Italian army in 1896, and preserved Ethiopia's independence for decades to come. It is not by coincidence that Ethiopia's successful struggle for independence led to the establishment of the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa, and its successor organization today, the African Union. Good introductory references to the machinations among the great powers of the time can be found in Harold Marcus' *The Life and Times of Emperor Menelik*, and more recently, Addis Ababa historian Bahru Zewdie's *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*.

Keeping in mind that we were not able to visit Adwa, our four-day trip did provide some useful benchmarks in Ethiopian history. Bahir Dar is the town located at the southern end of Lake Tana, and is the source of the Blue Nile Waterfall. When we visited this time, the waterfall was small, in part because it was not yet in the rainy season, and in part because Ethiopian Electric Power operates two hydropower stations, one with 5MW capacity and the other with 85MW capacity. The significance of the Blue Nile, Alan Moorhead's commentaries notwithstanding, is that, along with the White Nile, it has served as the lifeblood of Egypt from ancient times, and is the stuff of ancient legend. James Bruce "discovered" the source in the 1770s, and thereafter, a raft of European explorers continued to learn more about the geography of Ethiopia, discovering along the way that visitors had long been to Ethiopia, not the least of whom were the Portuguese in the 16th century, and who wound up constructing a bridge that is still in use today.

By way of comparison, here are two photos, the first of which was taken in 1967 and the second on this trip, of the Blue Nile waterfall. The difference in water flow illustrates a critical issue for Ethiopia, namely, available electric power (over 97 percent of all electricity in Ethiopia is produced from hydroelectric plants) and sufficient water for agriculture (Ethiopia is experiencing climate change and a long-term pattern of rainfall decline, particularly in the northern part of the country).



Blue Nile Waterfall, 1967



Blue Nile Waterfall, 2009

Water is far from the only reason to visit Bahir Dar. The late emperor Haile Selassie I considered a shift in the capital from Addis to Bahir Dar, and though not realized then or since, the city is one of the most organized and well maintained in Ethiopia. And it is globally connected, as evidenced by the name of a local restaurant we passed on our tour.



Bahir Dar Obama Restaurant, 2009

Now one major reason for visiting Bahir Dar is the monasteries that around found along the shores and on the islands of Lake Tana. Lake Tana is 90km long and 60km wide, and when the shore pockets are included, represents some 5,700 square km, second only to Lake Victoria. There are no jet skis on the lake, nor are there sailboats, or large commuter boats. There is significant fishing, e.g., Nile perch, but one reason for the limited use of the water is the presence of bilharzia, or schistosomiasis, a nasty snail that attaches easily to the body and without treatment, can destroy one's liver. Local Ethiopians know this, but because the demand for water is so great, many wind up taking multiple treatments just to be able to continue fishing, for example.

As to the monasteries, we took a boat ride to one on the far shore, and not readily accessible by vehicle. Our boat is featured below, along with a picture of a reed boat used by a local fisherman. Reed boats have been known about and used since antiquity, and are found at many of Ethiopia's lakes. Think Nile perch when you see one today.



Lake Tana Monastery Tour Boat, 2009



Lake Tana Reed Fishing Boat, 2009

After an hour's ride, we reached the shoreline and began a half-hour walk up to the monastery. We visited this one because it was accessible to both women and men, whereas some of those I saw years ago were restricted to men. When dollar tourist signs appear, there usually is some theological adaptation by locals, and our monastery was no exception.



Lake Tana Monastery 17<sup>th</sup> century Wall Painting, 2009

Monasteries typically have extensive illustrations both inside and along the outside of the inner perimeter under the portico. This image illustrates St. George, Ethiopia's patron saint, slaying the dragon. I think of him every time I drink a St. George beer, perhaps Ethiopia's best known local brew.

I mentioned the presence of the Portuguese in the Bahir Dar region. One structure we passed while en route to visit the waterfall is a bridge built in the early 16th century, presumably by missionaries, but no doubt by local workers in some kind of corvée operation. At any rate, while we have walked across some older bridges, e.g., in southern France, it is always interesting to find a structure like this on your trail.



Portuguese Stone Bridge over a Blue Nile Tributary, ca, early 16<sup>th</sup> century

Back in Bahir Dar, we spent some time in one of Ethiopia's national pleasures, coffee. Ethiopia is home to coffee - Kaffa province in the south is where we get the English word "coffee" in the first place, not to mention, Ethiopian coffee marketed through Mocha, in Yemen, and other such places. If you want to read about the history of coffee, by the way, I recommend John Prendergast's *Uncommon Grounds* - a delightful romp through the terminology, culture, and marketing of coffee from ancient time to Starbucks. At any rate, the following picture illustrates part of what Ethiopia has to offer the world - the best coffee you can drink, and with a smiling face as well.



Bahir Dar, Ethiopia Coffee Service, 2009

Our next stop was Gondar, which we took in a 4x4 vehicle over some three hours of countryside headed north and to the east of Lake Tana. One face of Ethiopia that no one should forget is that it is still an agricultural economy, and one that today still does not produce enough to ward off periodic threats of famine arising from drought and other calamities. The image below illustrates how little has changed for many farmers, namely, the luck of having at least one head of livestock to draw a plough, but rarely enough credit or sufficient rain to be far from economic peril.



Farmer with Plough on Bahir Dar-Gondar Road, 2009

The significance of Gondar is that it was not just the capital of Ethiopia from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It also was a site where successive emperors were able to build a string of individual castles. These castles were inspired to some extent by Portuguese missionaries who had been in the country in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but equally, if not more importantly, the style of building from ancient Axum, as can be seen in various motifs in the buildings. The fact that Ethiopians built such structures during this period attests to the geographic range of their domain, that is, the fact that they were able to amass sufficient revenues to build these structures, but also to maintain them. What led to their abandonment was the decline in imperial authority in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, a period that endured until the rise of Theodore II (1855-1868), and which is known as the Zemena Mesafint, or Era of the Princes, in Ethiopian history. The picture below illustrates the castle of Fasilides, the largest of these structures, and which, along with the other castles, is today well maintained by Ethiopian professionals.





Palace of Emperor Fasilides (1632-1667)

One of the most famous of Gondar's castles is Fasil's bath, a structure built over an artificial pool. Renovation by a Norwegian team in 2009 meant that we were able to see it only with no water this year. The image below, taken from a postcard, shows how it appears during the celebration of Timkat. People from around Ethiopia, and beyond, come to this place to receive blessings by local priests, for health and a long life. I have never seen this celebration, but understand it is a very moving one, a true pilgrimage for many.



Timkat Celebration at Fasil's Bath, Gondar

From our visit to Gondar, we then flew to Lalibela, which is east of Gondar, and nestled in the Ethiopian highlands. Lalibela is a UNESCO world heritage site, so designated for its rock-hewn churches. The only possible comparison I could draw would be Petra, in Jordan, but I would argue that the churches of Lalibela are even more compelling for their complexity, and for the various tunnel and passage links that connect them one to another.

The churches of Lalibela were carved/constructed from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. They are carved from relatively soft stone, and for this reason, visiting them today is more restricted than it once was. Perhaps one of the most magnificent of these structures is the church of St. George, carved around 1275. The image below shows how it was carved down from the rock face. It is accessible by a narrow pathway, as are all of the others.



Church of St. George, Lalibela, ca. 1275

Our last stop was in Axum, not far from Adowa, which I mentioned earlier in this narrative. Axum was the site of Ethiopia's ancient capital. Not quite as old as an ever earlier site at Yeha, Axum embodied the growing economic and military power of Ethiopia during the first through the sixth centuries. Our guide indicated that the site has only had some five to six percent of the prospective sites explored, and so there is much to be discovered. What we do know is that the Axumites, inspired perhaps by the legend of Solomon and Sheba, and their son, Menelik, who became the first Emperor of Ethiopia, were engaged in trade in Ethiopia, in the present-day Sudan, then known as the kingdom of Meroë, across the Red Sea into present-day Yemen, and perhaps as far away as India, through their ancient port of Adulis, on the Red Sea.

To commemorate their power, Axumites built stone-carved stelae, whose alternating layers of stone and post design mimicked regular buildings in the region. This design was an inspiration for the motifs also found in the churches in Lalibela centuries later, and with an echo in the castles of Gondar.

The images below are of one of the Axum obelisk monuments. The first image shows an obelisk that had been taken to Rome by Mussolini's fascist forces in 1937, following their invasion and occupation of the country from 1936 to 1941. For many years, this obelisk stood at the end of the Roman Forum, just across the street of the headquarters of FAO. Subsequent pressure by Ethiopians and the historian Richard Pankhurst, persuaded

the Italian government to restitute and restore the monument at its original site, and which was completed in 2007-08. When we visited Axum, we were able to take a picture of the monument after the re-dedication ceremony, and the removal of the scaffolding.



Axum Obelisk in Rome, Italy, 1966



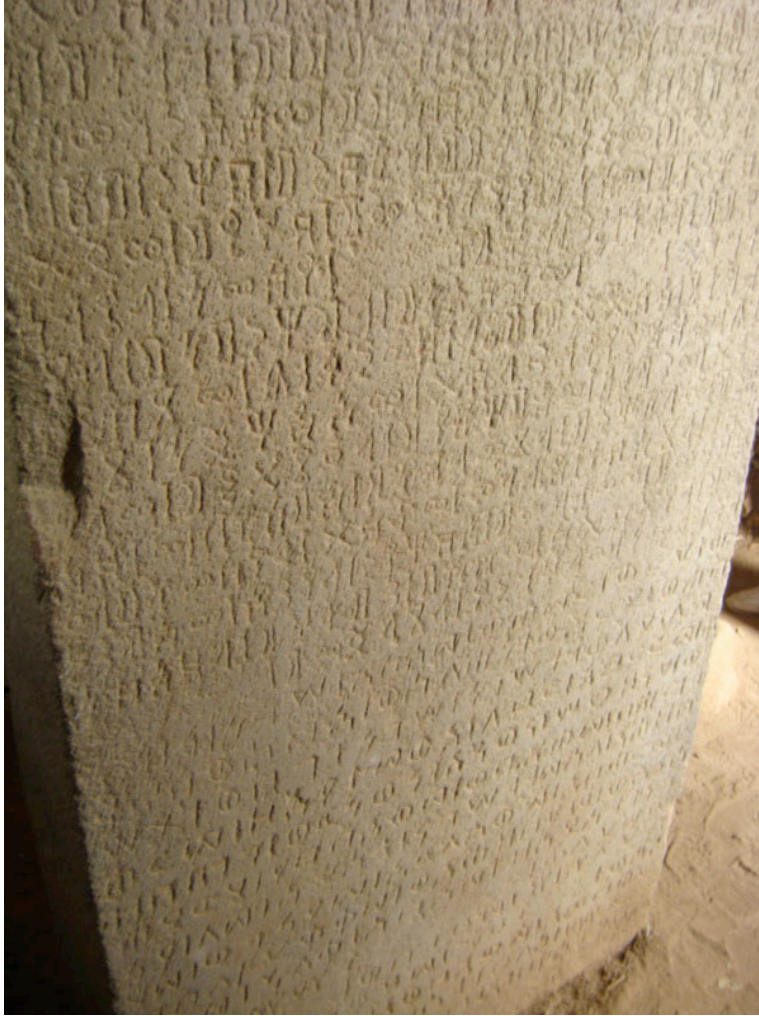
Restored Axum Obelish Returned by the Italian Government – 2009

One of the interesting sites in Axum is the Ezana statue. King Ezana commemorated a military victory over the Kingdom of Meroë in the early fourth century, around 341, and had a stone carved and erected to note the victory and his subsequent decision to convert to Orthodox Christianity. The stone is important in that it contains a trilingual inscription – in Greek, Sabaean (an ancient language once used in Yemen, including, presumably, by Queen Sheba, from which the name is derived), and Ge-ez (Ethiopia’s ancient liturgical language and parent language of Tigrinya, Amharic, and Guraginya, among other contemporary languages spoken in Ethiopia today).

The original market (shown here in a picture I took during a visit in 1967), is now housed in an enclosed structure in downtown Axum, and currently is not accessible to the public. However, I discovered that three local Ethiopian farmers discovered a nearly identical second market several years ago, and which we were able to see. It seems that Ezana was good at marketing his brand, and may have had erected several of these stones, providing an indication to passing merchants and would-be rulers that they were entering the powerful kingdom of Axum and that they should acknowledge its importance.



King Ezana Commemorative Monument, Axum, 1967



Second King Ezana Commemorative Monument, Axum, 2009

Although Axum's power was eclipsed by the expansion of Islam in the seventh century (hence a decision to move the capital to Lalibela, for example, well removed from the coastal region), it still served as a symbol of Ethiopian power. For centuries, Ethiopian monarchs came to Axum for their coronation. The key edifice for this was Old St. Mary's Church of Zion, shown below. Adjacent to this church is the storehouse of various artifacts from Ethiopian rulers, including crowns, robes, and various memorabilia. This structure is also said to house the original Ark of the Covenant, but it is not accessible to outside visitors, and today is carefully guarded by local priests.



Old Church of St. Mary of Zion in Axum – 2009



Royal Treasury in Axum and Home of the Ark of the Covenant – 2009

Years ago, when the structure had a lesser level of security, I managed to persuade a local guardian priest to show some of the crowns (which I used to teach my students in Emdeber secondary school). Here is a sample from my visit in 1967.





Crowns of Fasilides (1632-1661), Ras Michael Suhul, Yohannes IV (1872-1889), Menelik II (1889-1913), the coronet of Ras Tafari (1928-1930), and the crown of Haile Selassie I (1930-1974)

The legend of Solomon and sheba is well enshrined in Ethiopian history. It also is the source of the story surrounding the presence of Ethiopia's ancient Jewish community, the Falasha. Although most of the Falasha, who lived largely in communities just north of Gondar, have since left for Israel, the linkage between Ethiopia and Israel remains, in both liturgy and everyday life. The illustration below points to the origins of Ethiopia's Solomonic dynasty as dating from ancient times.



Painting of Queen Sheba and King Solomon – Axum – 2009

Today, Ethiopia remains as much a paradox as it often has been. In economic terms, it is one of the poorest countries in the world, with per capita income around \$U.S.150, and

with a life expectancy just under 50 years. At the same time, it is a country rich in history, and with a level of energy and interest in the future that compels one to look beyond the headlines to what are the roots and links of culture today. The image below illustrates but one of Ethiopia's many links to the outside world, in this case, a curio shop we passed by in Lalibela on this trip.



Sign for Curio Shop in Lalibela, 2009

As Ethiopians say, "if you wait long enough, even an egg will walk." Stay tuned for one of the more interesting places in the world.