ONE

Beginnings, to 1270

Four million years ago, near Hadar in the most easterly part of Ethiopia's Welo Province, there was a lake in a verdant setting. Its subsequent desiccation safeguarded a treasure for future paleoanthropologists: in 1974, an old shore or marsh yielded up the fossilized remains of "Lucy *Australopithecus afarensis*," a relatively young hominid woman.[1] Her almost complete skeleton reveals an ape-faced species that had just begun its evolution toward intelligence. Her small brain, one-third the size of that of a modern human, directed a compact and rugged body, little more than a meter tall and weighing about thirty kilos, set on pelvic and leg bones dense enough to support erect and sustained walking, if not speedy locomotion. She and her larger male counterpart scavenged meat from carnivores, caught smaller animals, and collected fruit, vegetables, roots, and tubers. Though they used sticks and stones, they did not hunt; they spent most of their lives gathering and collecting near water and sheltering trees. Even with its obvious limitations, *Australopithecus afarensis* survived for at least two million years before giving way to its closely related cousin *Australopithecus africanus*, present about three million years ago in Ethiopia's Omo region.

Africanus was followed by the large-brained *Homo habilis*, who lived in groups clustered at campsites offering water and protection from

1. The Ethiopians call her *Dinkenesh*, or "she is wonderful."

predators. *Homo habilis* flaked stone into knives, hand axes, choppers, and other pointed tools for domestic use and for hunting. While the women and the juveniles foraged nearby and collected 75 percent of the group's food, the males usually ranged away from the campsite in the quest for game. Stalking depended on communal effort and a skillful strategy to compensate for the hunters' relative weakness and slowness. Success hinged likewise on the quality of the weapons carried by each male, and campsite groups supported experts in stone work and specialists who invoked the assistance of the supernatural for a successful hunt. The group came together in the evenings to eat a communal meal and to defend itself against predators, whose approach would be met by salvos of rocks. *Homo habilis* prospered and spread into most parts of savanna Africa.

In fact, *habilis* was so successful that, about 1.5 million years ago, it evolved into *Homo erectus*, the brawnier and brainier species associated with much of the later stone ages. Its much larger skull contained about 1,000 cubic centimeters of gray matter, and it had a fine, erect carriage and a body over twice the size of *afarensis*. In Ethiopia, *Homo erectus* ranged from the coast east to around Harer and the Awash valley and southwest into the Omo valley and to Lake Turkana. Though *erectus* spread widely throughout Africa, which it came to dominate, its growing numbers pushed some groups farther afield, and about 1 million years ago they traversed then existing land bridges into Asia and Europe.

Thus, *Homo erectus* is known in many variants, of whom Peking man and his cousin in Java are the most prominent. In eastern Africa, including Ethiopia, their artifacts reveal members of *Homo erectus* as intrepid hunters, able to track and kill large animals. They butchered the meat with increasingly more efficient, miniaturized, and well-made knives, choppers, scrapers, and cleavers; and, starting about 70,000 years ago, they used fire to prepare the steaks, chops, and roasts that constituted their main source of protein. The flames also provided warmth, protected people from predators, and extended the waking day to permit leisure and reflection, perhaps even illumination, about the meaning of life.

The heat of the campfire also nurtured the slow evolution of *Homo erectus* into *Homo sapiens*. In Ethiopia, individuals of the latter species first show up in the Dire Dawa region about 60,000 years ago and shortly thereafter at Melka Kontoure in the Awash valley. With a 1,300 cubic centimeter brain cage, their high intelligence was manifested almost immediately in their superior manufacture of hafted and chiseled tools

and weapons. The improved technology permitted the establishment of several seasonal campgrounds linked to more or less distant bases, from which hunting parties could rove far afield. The net result was population growth and greater vitality and health. From the surrounding savanna lowlands, *Homo sapiens* spread into the foothills of Ethiopia's central highlands, especially in the west and northwest, to interact with peoples and cultures of the Nile valley. Yet, historical distance and scholarly bewilderment combine to obscure a full understanding of the emergence of Ethiopia's peoples and their material cultures.

Evidence is strong that the Afro-Asiatic (Hamitic-Semitic) group of languages developed and fissured in the Sudan-Ethiopian borderlands. There Proto-Cushitic and Proto-Semitic began their evolution. In Ethiopia, the Semitic branch grew into a northern group, today echoed in Tigrinya, and a southern group, best heard in Amharic. It simultaneously spread to the Middle East, whence, millennia later, it returned in a written form to enrich its cousins several times removed.

Much of the linguistic development came after the eighth millennium B.C., as population grew consequent to the domestication and herding of cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys and the intensive collection of wild grains. This development was followed, perhaps as early as the third millennium B.C., by the cultivation of thirty-six crops, for which Ethiopia was either the primary or the secondary point of dispersion. Most important were teff (*ragrostis tef*), a small-kerneled grass, whose flour was baked into large, round, flat breads, the staple still preferred by many Ethiopians, and ensete (*ensete edulis*, the "false" banana), the pulp of whose pseudostem can, after a complex process, be made into a flour for the bread or porridge still eaten in large parts of southern and southwestern Ethiopia.

The greater versatility of these cultivated foods enabled proto-Ethiopians to advance into the temperate plateaus and to clear the land, which they cultivated with the plow, a feature of the highlands as old there as agriculture itself. As Middle Eastern grains, especially barley and wheat, and pottery from the Sudan spread during the second millenium B.C., the Semitic-speaking northerners came to dominate the plateaus. Coming into contact with Sabaean traders, whose language was uncannily similar to their own, the pre-Axumites fashioned a South Arabian-like state, the Kingdom of Da'amat, which dominated the highlands of western Tigray from Yeha, its capital. It exchanged ivory, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn, gold, silver, and slaves for such finished goods as cloth, tools, metals, and

1. Plowing

jewelry. When, between 300 and 100 B.C., rivals diverted trade and merchants to such new towns as Malazo, Kaskase, and Matara on the central and eastern Tigrayan and Eritrean plateaus, where access to the Red Sea was easy, Da'amat collapsed.

The successor mini-states were places where Ethiopians continued to be exposed to South Arabian customs and religion. The towns featured adjacent, irrigated, intensive agriculture fed by the same type of reservoirs found in South Arabia. Farther away, traditional dryland agriculture was practiced, best exemplified archaeologically in the region around Axum. The use of both farming techniques created a vital synergy, one also evidenced in the high culture that developed.

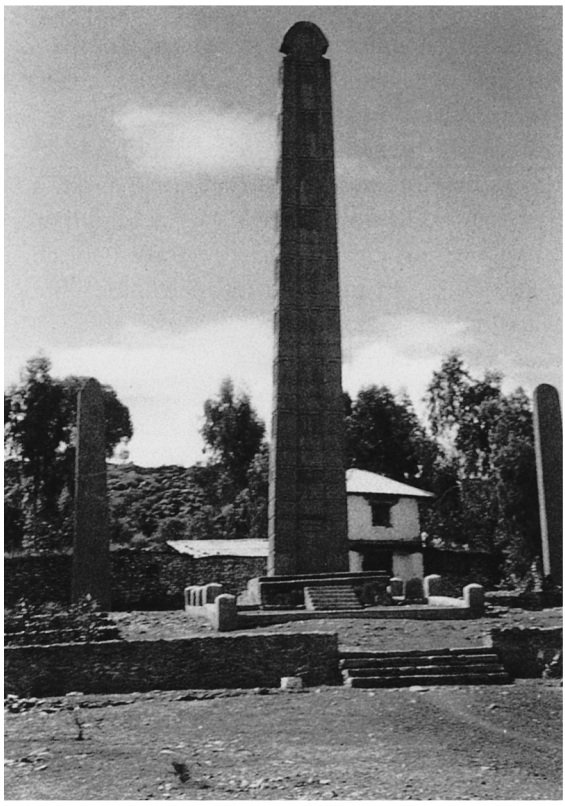
The earliest inscriptional fragments appear to be in Sabaean, but a closer perusal suggests an amalgam, with features that can derive only from Ge'ez, a local Semitic language. The domination of the indigenous culture became more marked after the fourth century B.C. That fact is clearly apparent in surviving monuments, especially in the architecture and sculptures found at Yeha, Haoulti, Malazo, and elsewhere. The stiff forms of the heavily stylized seated figures, the characteristic placement of the hands on the knees, and the drape of the long chemiselike garment

may be based on South Arabian prototypes but are typically Axumite in realization. The few examples of bas-relief portray men who are characteristically Ethiopian but rendered in poses that can be seen at sites from Egypt to Iran. Altars and figurines were decorated with South Arabian religious symbols—the crescent of Almouqah, the circle of Shams, for example—not representations of the traditional snake god and other Ethiopian deities. In an ideological sense, therefore, Ethiopia early joined the Middle East and participated in the region's rich religious history. Similarly, it also shared in the evolving mercantile life of the eastern Mediterranean–Red Sea regional economy.

Trade brought the wealth that permitted the rise of elites who assumed honors and titles. Ambition and greed made for wars of aggrandizement; luck and talent brought consolidation; and success led to greater wealth, more followers, and additional pretensions. The five hundred years before the Christian era witnessed warfare that increased in scale as the stakes became greater. The winner was the inland state of Axum, comprising Akele Guzay and Agame, and dominating food-rich areas to the southwest largely inhabited by Agew-speaking farmers. The rise and then the hegemony of Axum over the coast inland into Tigray and even its subsequent expansion within and without Ethiopia appears linked to the stimulus given to regional trade by Ptolemaic Egypt (330–320 B.C.) and then by the Roman world economy.

When the state of Axum emerges into the wider light of history at the end of the first century A.D., it is a full-blown, if not well-integrated, trading state. The anonymous author of the *Periplus [Geography] of the Erythraean Sea* mentions Ethiopia's main port at Adulis, twenty miles inside the Gulf of Zula, where visiting foreign ships anchored in the channel to protect themselves against attack at night by unruly local peoples. Nevertheless, Adulis offered profit enough to receive a continuous stream of merchants who, in return for ivory, offered cloth of many types, glassware, tools, gold and silver jewelry, copper, and Indian iron and steel used to manufacture high-quality weapons. Befitting its centrality in Ethiopia's economy, Adulis was an impressive place with stone-built houses and temples, a dam, and irrigated agriculture.

Five days to the west-south-west lay the city of Axum, which dominated the ivory trade west into Sudan. The state's leaders not only monopolized the commerce but also sought to dominate trade routes and sources of supply. During the fifth century A.D., for example, Ethiopian armies campaigned northward to establish control over the



2. Obelisk at Axum

commerce that flowed toward Suakin and to pacify the Beja of the Sahil, through which caravans passed en route to Adulis; south of the Tekeze to subdue the Agew-speaking agriculturists of productive but mountainous Simen; southeastward into the Afar desert to command the incense trade; and even across the Red Sea to force Hejaz (a province of modern Saudi Arabia) to pay tribute and to guarantee the seaborne trade.

Our information comes from an inscription copied at Adulis in 525 by the seafaring Cosmas Indicopleustes and subsequently published in his *Christian Topography* (ca. 547). The book reveals that cut pieces of brass and coins were imported in the first century A.D. to use as money in Ethiopia's markets, suggesting a commerce requiring easier exchange. Ultimately, Axum responded by issuing its own coins late in the third

century. Significantly, the first mintings were rendered in Greek and were fractions of the Roman solidus, clearly indicating that the specie was used primarily in international trade. The mere existence of Axumite money signaled Ethiopia's major role in the Middle East, where only Persia, Kushanas in India, and Rome circulated specie. The Ge'ez-speaking masses, however, continued to use traditional salt and iron bars as money and remained aloof from events that brought not only commerce but also Christianity to Axum's shores. They avoided both the coin and the cross—not so the ruling elites, whose interests came to include both.

From the third century, or even before, Axum's Hellenized elites had learned about the new faith from Christian traders. At court, the ideology was discussed philosophically but also, as befitted a place of power, in economic and political terms. Context was paramount: by the early fourth century, Christianity had become the established religion of the eastern Roman Empire. Since Roman trade dominated the Red Sea, it was inevitable that Christianity would penetrate Axum. Conversion was slow and occurred first in the towns and along the major trade routes. The shift was heralded, during the first third of the fourth century, by coins suddenly embossed with a cross and then by monuments carrying imperial inscriptions prefaced by Christian incantations.

According to Ethiopian church tradition, two Syrian boys, Aedisius and Frumentius, brought Christianity to Ethiopia. Shipwreck victims, they were brought to court as slaves and put to work by Emperor Ella Amida (r. ca. end of the third century A.D.). Over the years, their piety, reliability, and especially Frumentius's sagacity and wisdom as royal secretary and treasurer earned the monarch's gratitude, and his will manumitted them. His widow, as regent, asked them to remain in the palace and advise her until her infant son, Ezanas, was ready for the throne. While so engaged, Frumentius sought out Christian merchants, urged them to establish churches, and cooperated fully with them to spread the gospel.

When the young king came to power (ca. 303), Frumentius traveled to Alexandria to urge the patriarch to assign a bishop to Ethiopia to speed its conversion. He must not have been surprised—since his life had normally been astonishing—to hear the prelate nominate him. And back Frumentius went to Axum sometime around 305 (?) to begin a lifetime's work of evangelism, in so doing wresting Ezanas from his traditional beliefs. As linked to trade, Christianity proved a boon to the monarch.

Around 350, Emperor Ezanas followed his commercial star westward

into the Nile valley to secure Axum's trade in ivory and other commodities. He acted because the Sudanese state of Meroë, in its decline, was unable to protect the caravan routes from raiding by the nomadic Beja. The Axumite army encountered little resistance as it made its way into Sudan (Kush), and, at the confluence of the Atbara and Nile, Ezanas raised a stela on which he described the ease of his conquests and thanked the Christian God for His protection. For the next few centuries, no state is known to have challenged Axum's trading monopoly on the African side of the Red Sea.

The trade not only brought prosperity but stimulated important cultural changes. Greek remained the courtly language, but Ge'ez was increasingly the language of the people, and often royal inscriptions used the vernacular. There were Ge'ez versions of the Old and New Testaments, which tradition claims were translated from the Antioch version of the Gospels during the period of the "Nine Saints," who came from greater Syria toward the end of the fifth century. Recent philological scholarship is skeptical about the role of Syriac influences in Axumite Ethiopia and finds no evidence of such a provenance.

Yet the folklore claims that the monks were good Monophysites who believed that Christ had one nature, the human subsumed in the divine, the theological view of the savior's persona championed by the see of Alexandria[2] and transmitted to Ethiopia by Bishop Frumentius 150 years earlier. The monks had been forced into exile after the Council of Chalcedon (451) defined Christ "as perfect God and man, consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with Man, one sole being in two natures, without division or separation and without confusion or change." As the story goes, they found safe haven in Ethiopia, where they were warmly welcomed and then directed east of Axum into the countryside to preach the Word.

Proselytizing among people hostile to the new faith, the monks demonstrated the falseness of the old gods by establishing religious centers where they found temples and other shrines, among them the still active and rightly famous establishment at Debre Damo. They fashioned their monastic rule around communalism, hard work, discipline, and obedience, while introducing an asceticism and mysticism that attracted

2. The connection also yielded the Pseudo-Canon of Nicea (325), which robbed the Orthodox church of authority to name its own prelate and to ordain its own bishops, a power retained by Alexandria for sixteen hundred years.

young idealists. After education and training, the newly ordained went into the countryside, establishing the tradition that monks would be the main purveyors of the Gospels in Ethiopia.

With the new faith came traders responding to overseas demand manifested in Adulis, the region's most important commercial center. It was the destination of choice for Byzantine and other traders who sought to transship goods to Arabia, India, and regions even farther eastward. They came to Adulis by July, to transact their business before the Ethiopian fleet, composed of sturdy vessels made from tightly roped, fitted boards, left for Asia with the summer monsoon winds. At their destinations by September, Axum's traders would sell their cargoes and purchase export goods, and when the prevailing winds changed in October, sail back to Adulis, where the awaiting foreign merchants would buy items in demand in the eastern Mediterranean and themselves return home. Commercial prosperity therefore depended on the safety of the trading lanes and access to foreign markets. Whenever these were threatened, the Axumite Empire intervened to restore security, as was the case in South Arabia in the early sixth century.

There Judaism was resurgent, and Christians were being persecuted, among them the Axumites involved in commerce. The victims appealed across the Red Sea for help, and Axum responded in 517 by sending forces that garrisoned strategic points in Yemen. The Jews retreated into inaccessible country, attracted converts who abhorred foreign rule, raided towns, and interrupted the import-export trade. In 523–524, Emperor Caleb (ca. 500–534; otherwise known as Ella Asbeha) requested and obtained supplies and support from the patriarch of Alexandria and from the Byzantine government—which also had a strong interest in safeguarding commerce—for a major campaign against the Jewish leader, Dhu Nuwas. Caleb immediately ordered the building of a large fleet at Adulis, rented other vessels, recruited a substantial army, and himself led the expedition to Yemen.

After hard fighting, Dhu Nuwas and his forces withdrew, as did Caleb after he had established an interim administration. With the status quo more or less restored, the Jews quickly returned to raiding government outposts and garrison towns from sanctuaries in the mountains and desert. Piecemeal pacification failed, and in 525 Caleb returned with another army that caught the rebel forces in a destructive pincer near the sea. Loath to witness the disaster, Dhu Nuwas spurred his stallion into the sea, and nothing more was seen of horse or rider. The emperor named

Abreha, one of his generals, as viceroy, left him with an army of five thousand men, and returned home in triumph.

Axum was then at the apogee of its power: Christianity had developed apace with the empire's expansion, was firmly established to the south of Tigray in Wag and Lasta, and was growing in adjacent Agew areas (northern Welo), from which Axum continued to obtain export commodities. Trade from Sudan also moved through Agew, especially gold from Sasaw, today identified with the Fazughli region on the Blue Nile. Overseas, however, Axum's effort to build an empire was failing.

In 543, General Abreha rebelled and established himself as the independent ruler of South Arabia. Caleb and his successors fought back, but their limited efforts only helped consolidate and augment Abreha's authority, and he came to dominate the routes to northern Arabia and the east. His success actually advantaged many Axumites, who expanded their commercial activities internationally and locally, especially in San'a, Abreha's capital.

The self-proclaimed monarch kept his options and trading connections open by paying an annual tribute to both the Axumite and Persian emperors. While Abreha ruled, South Arabia was prosperous and well governed; he improved public works and built monuments and churches, since he sought to convert his subjects. He overextended himself, however, in campaigns against Mecca, activities that disrupted the intricate web of desert trading patterns, thus helping to cause a commercial crisis. The Persians became anxious as they saw the lucrative caravan trade dissipate.

They decided to intervene when Abreha's successors proved weak and vacillating, unable to retain the support of either the people or the army. The Sassanids reasoned that South Arabia's current rulers were Ethiopians, who paid tribute to Axum—conveniently forgetting that the same people paid them, too—and that the African power was allied to Byzantium, their bitter political and trade rival. A success in Yemen, therefore, would weaken their enemy and probably would not provoke a counterattack. In around 570, perhaps even on the day Muhammad was born, a ragtag Persian expedition of eight ships and eight hundred soldiers arrived on the South Arabian coast and proceeded systematically to destroy Ethiopian authority, helped by the people, who massacred Axumites throughout the land.

The mother country stood by, apparently impotent to intervene, thus signaling the end of Axum's political authority in Arabia. Commercial life

in Adulis continued, however, and the links to South Arabia were maintained, especially with Mecca, where resident Ethiopians were important as traders and soldiers. Ships from Adulis regularly sailed to and from the Bay of Soaiba, Mecca's debouchment. The connection was destroyed, however, in the mid-seventh century as Islam triumphed in Arabia.

As Muslim power and influence grew in the eighth century, Ethiopian shipping was swept from the Red Sea–Indian Ocean, changing the nature of the Axumite state. It became isolated from the eastern Mediterranean ecumene that for centuries had influenced its culture and sustained its economy. The coastal region lost its economic vitality as trade decreased, and Adulis and other commercial centers slowly withered. The state consequently suffered a sharp reduction in revenues and no longer could afford to maintain a large army, a complex administration, and urban amenities. The culture associated with the outside world quickly became a memory, and Ethiopia turned inward.

Axum's weakened forces lost control over the trade routes into the interior and its monopoly over ivory and gold. In order to support itself, the Christian state moved southward, to the rich grain-growing areas of Agew country. By the early ninth century, the kingdom was well established as far south as the Beshlo River (then the Angot region; currently Wadla Delanta in west-central Welo). The drive southward was characterized by the implantation of military colonies, whose members established a feudal-like social order based on the productivity of the Agew cultivator. Soldiers, of course, took local wives and otherwise helped to assimilate the Agew, but priests and monks acted as the instruments of pacification and acculturation.

During 900–1000, the kingdom was overextended and its soldiers thin on the ground, permitting the majority Agew speakers to fight back. From the fragments of information contained in later chronicles, we learn that there were continual warfare and skirmishing against the isolated government fortresses.[3] Inevitably Axum lost its periphery: churches were destroyed, thousands of Christians died, and the Begemdir region and the area south of the Jema River were lost to state control. A rump

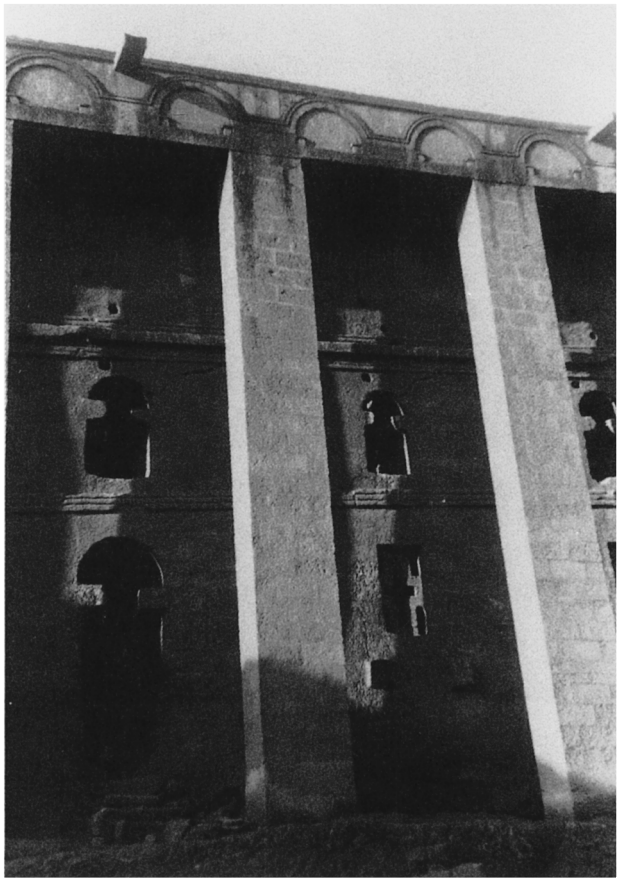
3. One persistent tradition tells of the Agew Queen Gudit, who persecuted Christians and fought their kingdom. In light of subsequent events, the tale suggests that an inland Agew people led by a woman destroyed or turned out the Axumite ruling class. Most active at the end of the tenth century, Gudit was nonetheless so long-lived that she must be a composite of individuals.

central government survived only through enlisting Agew officers and men to throw off their more unruly brethren. The more successful the Agew leaders were, the more they became assimilated into the Semitic culture and integrated into the ruling elites. From their ranks came the progenitor of a new line, the Zagwes, who, however, retained the Axumite social and political order.

The new rulers came from the mountains of Lasta, long a part of the Christian kingdom. Its Agew speakers had quickly absorbed the new religion, and the local nobility had joined the Axumite government. The province was strategically sited astride major north-south communication links, and it is not surprising that its princes originated the Zagwe dynasty. The Agew period witnessed the continuing Ethiopianization of the state, although the Zagwes have been derided in Solomonic chronicles and their achievements obscured. Even at the height of their rule, churchmen considered them usurpers, and the Zagwes created myths that they descended from Moses. In order physically to demonstrate the primacy of the new order over the Axumite line, Emperor Lalibela (r. ca. 1185–1225) directed the building of eleven rock-hewn churches at his capital at Roha (now Lalibela).

The monarch intended a stupendous monument to faith, and certainly the idea of hewing churches from the Lastan mountains was inspired. Although there are other monolithic structures in Ethiopia, the edifices at Roha are amazing, especially the chiseled-out access, courtyards, and interiors and the rich, mostly geometric and linear decorations. The churches' conception and style are very much Ethiopian, and possibly each one is an example of a particular kind of Axumite church, or even of some of Tigray's rock-hewn edifices, altogether forming a museum of sacred architecture. As a technically difficult achievement, it is in many ways unrivaled, and Lalibela denuded the countryside of its tools and masons and recruited craftsmen from as far away as Egypt and the Holy Land.

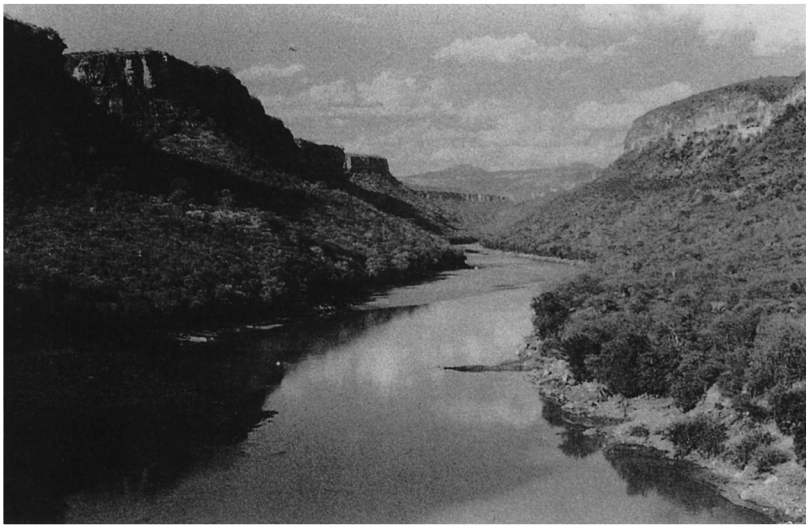
The largest of the eleven structures, Medhane Alem (savior of the world), is 33.5 meters long, 23.5 meters wide, and 11 meters high. It displays an external colonnade on all four sides supporting a gabled roof, the sides of which show carved arches cleverly arranged as if atop each column. The sanctuary itself, comprising a nave and aisles, is a square carved out of the stone, broken by four rows of seven rectangular pillars. The walls are flat and massive, reminiscent of Axumite prototypes, and the few windows are mostly at the top, making for a dim interior, perhaps



3. Church of Medhane Alem. Photograph by Paul Henze.

explaining why Medhane Alem's walls are not so elaborately decorated as some of the other, better lit, churches. The obscurity within Medhane Alem matches our knowledge of the entire Zagwe period.

Ethiopia then enjoyed commercial relations with Egypt and Aden, but Muslims at the coast and Arab shipping took most of the profits. There was a large slave trade, especially to Egypt, where Ethiopians were used as soldiers. In return, Cairene and Alexandrian merchants shipped textiles and finished goods to the port of Mitsiwa, by then Ethiopia's most important emporium. Relations with Egypt were cordial, although both



4. The Blue Nile during the dry season, downstream from Tissisat Falls

its Muslim civil and Christian (Coptic) religious authorities were resolved, if for different reasons, to refuse the Ethiopian church the right to appoint its own metropolitan and suffragan bishops. The lack of provincial prelates impeded the development of clergy and the spread of Christianity, and the Egyptian primate selected to head the Ethiopian church rarely understood the country, its politics, language, or culture. The Zagwes sought to evade Egypt's jurisdiction by turning to the Monophysite patriarch of Antioch, a useless ploy but one that brought Ethiopia to the attention of the crusaders and, in a distorted and romantic way, to the Western world.

In twelfth-century Europe, legends began to circulate about a remote and fabulously wealthy country in the east ruled by a priest-king who had vanquished the infidel Persians. Prester John, as he came to be known, was reportedly a devout Christian who claimed suzerainty over Christendom and ruled a kingdom strategically placed to outflank Islam. Full of exotic people and bizarre animals, his realm was peaceful, crimeless, and united. This vision became a conception of Ethiopia that long dominated Europe's imagination and stimulated its greediness for Ethiopia's resources.

5. Northwest Shewa at harvest time

During the reign of Lalibela, certainly the Zagwe dynasty's high point, Ethiopia comprised an assortment of fiefdoms under the emperor's suzerainty. The monarch made an annual progress to inform himself about local conditions, to act as Ethiopia's supreme judge, to feed himself and his court, and to settle political squabbles. The entire political economy depended on the farmer, who used plow and oxen to turn the high plateau's rich, volcanic soils during May and June in time for sowing when the long rains began. After the harvest in October–November, the cultivator paid taxes in grain and other foodstuffs to the local lord, who, except for a somewhat larger house and a retinue, lived very much like his subjects, mostly making do with locally made tools, cloth, and furnishings. Both noble and commoner suffered from the imperial visit, which resembled an infestation of locusts, so thoroughly did the movable court have a movable feast.

The Zagwes were unable to forge national unity; even in their home province, they could not stop squabbling over the throne, diverting men, energy, and money that could have been used better elsewhere to affirm the dynasty's authority. In the late thirteenth century, for example, the Zagwes were unable to control a small Christian kingdom in northern

Shewa, which had grown rich from diverting trade away from traditional routes through Lasta. The Shewans were ruled by Yekuno Amlak (d. 1285), who was supported strongly by local clerics, since he promised to make the church a semi-independent institution. When the Shewans rebelled, the church therefore remained neutral, though Yitbarek, the last of the Zagwes, had been anointed monarch and deserved fidelity.

In a series of battles from Lasta to Begemdir, the emperor was consistently defeated, finally falling in 1270 in the parish church in Gayint, murdered in front of the altar by Yekuno Amlak, who thereupon proclaimed himself emperor. As a usurper, the new monarch encountered considerable resistance, and, in order to win over Tigray with its many Axumite traditions, he and his supporters began to circulate a fable about his descent from King Solomon and Makeda, Queen of Saba, a genealogy that, of course, gave him traditional legitimacy and provided the continuity so honored in Ethiopia's subsequent national history.