



The Decline and Collapse of the Kingdom of Aksum (6th-7th CE): An Environmental Disaster or the End of a Political Process?

Gianfrancesco Lusini

Though the origins of the ancient African state having Aksum as its capital city are still a matter of debate, the outcomes of the archaeological researches inform us that the town started to grow at least from the fourth cent. BC. and that in about three hundred years the kingdom developed into a regional power controlling the highlands of Eritrea and Tigray (Northern Ethiopia). From a Greek source like the anonymous seafarers' guide known as *Periplus of the Eritrean Sea* (§§ 4–5), composed in the decade 60–70, we learn that in the second half of the first cent. AD the town and the surrounding territory were in a prosperous condition, being a crossroads for trading in the Red Sea, along the maritime route between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean.¹ The African capital city is found at the center of Tigray highlands, in a position relatively far from the coast, but its economy and wealth are a consequence of the close connection with the port of Adulis,² qualified by the same *Periplus* as ἐμπόριον νόμιμον, ‘legally limited port’,³ or—according to the modern language—‘port of trade’. From the end of the third cent. AD, when Aksum begins to coin money, the African kingdom establishes a stable and friendly relationship with Rome, until forming a *de facto* political ‘alliance’ (*φιλία, amicitia*) with its emperors.⁴

¹ Sidebotham (2009, 2012), Howard-Johnston (2017).

² Zazzaro (2013), Speidel (2015: 94–101), Anfray (2016), Giostra and Massa (2016), Nappo (2018: 142–145).

³ Casson (1989: 50–51, 274–276).

⁴ Most probably, in specific circumstances, agreements and treaties of political friendship must have reinforced such alliance between Rome and Aksum. As pointed out by Speidel (2015: 119):

G. Lusini (✉)

Dipartimento Asia Africa e Mediterraneo, Università di Napoli L'Orientale, Napoli, Italia

Starting at least from the fourth cent. AD, the Aksumite rulers laid the foundation of a sacred kingship,⁵ proclaiming themselves as ‘sons’ of a war god of South-Arabian origins named Maḥrəm⁶ (the Greek Ares). The sovereign’s deification is noticeable in the monumental size of the Aksumite architectures, from palaces to burials, to whom stelae are connected as indicators of the graves and representations of the heavenly king’s dwelling, shaped upon his material abode. However, at least from the first quarter of the third cent. AD, the kings of Aksum adopted a title by which they wanted to differentiate themselves from other coeval monarchies, particularly those of South Arabia, ruling over societies based on clans and tribes. Thus, in Sabaic epigraphic records (*CIH* 308⁷ and *Ja* 631⁸), the Aksumite king Gadar(at) styles himself *mlk ḥbšt* ‘king of Ethiopia’ (*CIH* 308 from Riyām) or *mlk ḥbšt w ’ksmn* ‘king of Ethiopia and of the Aksumites’ (*Ja* 631 from the sanctuary ‘Awām in Mārib). Yet, in the so-called bronze ‘scepter’ of ‘Addi Gälämo⁹ (the most ancient Gə’əz royal inscription known to us) the same king bears the title of *ngṣy ‘ksm* (*RIÉ* 180¹⁰). The development of *ngṣy* in contrast to the ESA¹¹ *mlk* (a word of Semitic origin

«although the details of these agreements remain unknown, the concept of *amicitia* (political friendship) apparently played an important role, much as it already had in Roman economic foreign relations in the earliest treaties between Rome and Carthage».

⁵ Conti Rossini (1947–48), Caquot (1957).

⁶The transliteration system adopted here for Ethiopian personal and geographic names is the same used by the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Hamburg University). Therefore, the seven vocalic orders are ä (I), u (II), i (III), a (IV), e (V), ə (VI) and o (VII).

⁷From 1889 to 1832 the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres of Paris kept opened a fourth section of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* to publish there all the edited inscriptions in South-Arabian languages, commonly known as *Corpus Inscriptionum Hymariticarum*. The epigraphic texts gathered in such volumes are indicated by the abbreviation *CIH* followed by a progressive number.

⁸In 1962 Albert Jamme, the epigraphist of the archaeological expedition supported by the American Foundation for the Study of Man in the 1950s (directed by Wendell Phillips), published in a volume the hundreds of dedicatory inscriptions in South-Arabian language found in Mārib, the capital city of the Kingdom of Saba’ (Avanzini 2016: 34–35). The epigraphic texts he published are indicated by the abbreviation *Ja* followed by a progressive number.

⁹‘Addi Gälämo, in the region of Aṣbi and Där’ā (Tigray), east of the ‘Addigrat-Mäqälä road, is one of the most important archeological sites documenting the pre-Axumite Period (8th–seventh cent. BC). Particularly, the votive deposit found in the mid-1950s proved to contain a significant sample of objects tracing back to the Ethio-Sabean cultural and historical phase, including the scepter of the third century king Gadar(at).

¹⁰The *Recueil des inscriptions de l’Éthiopie des périodes pré-axoumite et axoumite* is a collection of ESA, Greek and Gə’əz inscriptions found or documented in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The work, published between 1991 and 2000, is one of the most important products of the team working for the Mission française d’archéologie of Addis Ababa in the second half of the 20th cent. (Francis Anfray, Étienne Bernand, Abraham Johannes Drews and Roger Schneider). The epigraphic texts are indicated by the abbreviation *RIÉ* followed by a progressive number.

¹¹The acronym ESA (Epigraphic South-Arabian)—alternatively ASA (Ancient South-Arabian)—generally indicates the South Semitic languages (and the related epigraphic documentation) used in

already used by the Ethio-Sabean rulers of Da‘amat¹²), though this root is attested in Gə‘əz¹³ too with a strictly religious meaning, possibly reflects more than a lexical variation. Probably, this linguistic choice expresses the awareness of the distance between the Sabeo-Himyarite and the Abyssinian concept of monarchy, and the word *ngṣy* contains a reference to the intent of including a plurality of ethnic and linguistic components under a common political rule. From such imperial ambition the characteristic Ethiopic title *nəgušā nägäšt* arose, literally ‘king of kings’, namely ‘king (ruling over) kings’, which was already brought by Sembrouthes, the successor of Gadar(at)¹⁴ who signed his unique epigraphic record (*RIÉ* 188) βασιλεὺς ἐκ βασιλέων Ἀξωμειτῶν μέγας Σεμβρούθης.¹⁵

We find the consequences of this situation in the inscriptions of the following centuries. E.g., ‘Ezana (r. ca. 330–365) opens *RIÉ* 188 = *DAE* 10¹⁶ carefully listing the components of his state,¹⁷ and therefore he proclaims himself «king of Aksum and of

the pre-Islamic kingdoms flourished in Yemen and Oman before the rise of the political leadership following the religious principles of Qur’ān, and the consequent superimposition of Arabic over the whole peninsula.

¹²The name Da‘amat—or Da‘əmat—occurs in pre-Aksumite royal inscriptions in Sabaic language to indicate both the Ethio-Sabean community and its territory. The rulers bear the title *mukarrib* of Da‘amat and Saba’ and style themselves *yg‘dyn*, possibly a tribal affiliation. The Semitic root *g‘z* is the same appearing in the name of the language Gə‘əz and in the title *mlkn ‘g‘zyn* used by the Ethiopian official Abraha in *CIH* 541, dated 543/548 AD (Kropp 1991).

¹³Gə‘əz is the South Semitic idiom spoken at least by the ruling class of Aksum, and therefore used as the official language for the epigraphic documentation issued by the royal court. Starting from the end of the first millennium AD, though the everyday use declined, Gə‘əz survived as literary and liturgical language among the Christian clergy of post-Aksumite Ethiopia.

¹⁴Fiaccadori (2004: 106–107), Marrassini (2014: 194–196).

¹⁵Or «‘(the) great(est) king from among the kings of (the) Aksum(ites)’, i.e. from among his predecessors: a superlative predicate—so often misunderstood in scholarly literature—that seems to anticipate the later formula βασιλεὺς βασιλέων, *basileus basileon*/Eth. *nəgušā nägäšt*, ‘king of kings’, i.e. ‘king among(st) kings’ or ‘king par excellence’», as suggested by Fiaccadori (2010: 610b). However, the Ethiopian linguistic background of Sembrouthes’ self-introduction is reaffirmed by Marrassini (2014: 195): «Si tratta invece, molto probabilmente, di un calco dall’etiopico, dato che questa è anche la costruzione *normale* in gezz (sostantivo/aggettivo + ‘əm ‘da’ + stesso sostantivo/aggettivo) e in tigrino (con ‘ənkab) per esprimere il superlativo relativo».

¹⁶The *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition (DAE)* was the German archaeological and scientific mission financed by Kaiser Wilhelm II and conducted from January to April 1906. The team, guided by the Orientalist Enno Littmann, was including Daniel Krencker, Theodor von Lüpke and Erich Kaschke. In addition to the first survey and text excavation at Aksum, a priceless collection of ESA, Greek and Gə‘əz inscriptions found during the mission are published in the last of the four volumes of the mission’s report. The epigraphic texts are indicated by the abbreviation *DAE* followed by a progressive number.

¹⁷Marrassini (2014: 228–230).

Həmer¹⁸ and of Raydān¹⁹ and of Saba'²⁰ and of Salḥen²¹ and of Ḥayyāmō²² and of Bəgā²³ and of Kāsu²⁴. Thus, the king responsible for the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Aksumite ruling class (in the decade 340–350) draws a geo-political horizon going from Nubia to Eritrea and from Tigray to South Arabia. Once sketched this state of things, it seems appropriate to apply the notion of ‘imperial kingdom’ to Aksum too, with reference both to the universal claims of its sovereigns and to the real cultural complexity of the society. From the political point of view, we can argue that the same process of state formation, from the original chiefdom, confined on the Betä Giyorgis hill, up to a ‘little kingdom’ and finally to a ‘regional empire’²⁵ directing the Red Sea trade route, authorized the development of an ‘imperial’ attitude of the Aksumite sovereigns. Particularly, along the western front, when ‘Ezana, triumphed over Meroe and put an end to its political autonomy, he started to present himself not only as the king of Aksum and Ḥimyar, but also as the sovereign of the ‘Ethiopians’ (βασιλεὺς Αἰθιόπων, RIÉ 270 = DAE 4 and RIÉ 270bis)²⁶ with a new reference to the whole East-African horizon. When the *nägusä nägäst* reached the Eritrean seashore to take control of the Adulis port of trade, and established his garrisons on the Yemenite territory to compete with the king of Ḥimyar within the international political play, he gradually became aware of his ‘supra-national’ dimensions and duties. From the cultural point of view, this is the possible historical and political background allowing the birth and the growth of the ‘messianic’ conception of the Aksumite kingship, emblematically expressed in a legendary form in some chapters of

¹⁸ Həmer = Ḥimyar. The fourth cent. Aksumite claim for the political control over the Ḥimyarite territories was more the expression of a desire than a historical fact, though the Ethiopian army had the control of some strategic positions in the Northern provinces of Čizān and Nağrān.

¹⁹ Raydān was the name of the castle of the Ḥimyarite kings.

²⁰ In the fourth cent. The kingdom of Saba' was no more existing as a political entity, but since the first Ḥimyarite kings originated from inside the Sabean leadership, they used to style themselves «kings of Saba' and ḏu Raydān and ḥaḍramawt and Yamanat», giving a model to the coeval Aksumite title.

²¹ Salḥen was the name of the castle of the Sabean kings.

²² Ḥayyāmō is a geo-political term not yet fully understood. It can refer to the South-Arabian possessions in the Horn of Africa or to the Tihāma, the Yemenite shore of the Red Sea coast, where Aksum tried constantly to maintain its military presence for a better control of the maritime trade route.

²³ Today the Cushitic-speaking Beğā (the ancient Blemmyes) are living in the lowlands between Eritrea and Sudan.

²⁴ Kāsu is most probably a geographic reference to the territories of the former Kingdom of Meroe (Nubia, Sudan).

²⁵ According to a ‘processual model’ of state formation, as that proposed in Kulke (1986) with reference to the Southeast Asian History. I thank Robert Rollinger for suggesting me to exploit this bibliographic resource.

²⁶ Marrassini (2014: 19–21).

the 14th cent. *Kəbrä Nägäst* (*The nobility of the kings*). Being a stratified literary creation,²⁷ the most popular section of the work is the apocryphal tale concerning the meeting between the Queen of the South Makəddä and the King of Israel Solomon.²⁸ In its final section (§§ 116–117), possibly derived from original sources dating back to sixth–seventh cent., the religious novel glorifies the ‘millenarian’ role reserved to the Christian rulers of Aksum and Byzantium²⁹ and explicitly mentions the two emperors, Kaleb and Justin I, who signed a treaty against the South-Arabian Kingdom of Ḥimyar.³⁰

Aksum and Ḥimyar are fighting for the land possession and for the control of trading in the Red Sea. For reasons of strategic equilibrium, Ḥimyar receives support from Sasanian Persia, with the aim of contrasting both the Ethiopian military initiatives and the presence of Byzantium in the region.³¹ Around the year 518, during the reign of Justin I, the Nestorian merchant Cosmas (later nick-named ‘Indicopleustes’) is dwelling in Adulis,³² and he is the eyewitness of the announcement of the crucial events reported in his *Christian Topography* (2, 54–56). The king of Aksum, (Ellä/-e Aṣbəḥa) launches a decisive attack against the king of Ḥimyar Yüsuf As’ar Yat’ar occupying the capital city ዘመን ፈቃድ afär. The temporary Ethiopian annexation of South Arabia brings on the Ḥimyarite throne first a nobleman called Sumūyafa‘Ašwa‘ (r. 531–535), imposed and supported by Aksum, then an Ethiopian official named Abraha (documented until 553) who takes the power by force. The end of his ruling, around 560, preludes first to the Persian occupation of ዘመን ፈቃድ afär, between 570 and 575, then to the reduction of Ḥimyar to a Persian province, around the year 575.

All the scholars who commented the chain of events here summarized acknowledged that from this moment on a definitive change occurred in the political relationships among the Red Sea countries, and Aksum was obliged to find a new position within the international framework transformed by the strong Sasanian presence. In other words, one can affirm that the loss of the favorable positions in South-Arabian territory (with the fall of the Tihāma strongholds like Ma‘afir, in the Čizān province, and especially the oasis of Nağrān) was a momentous accident for the African kingdom. The Ethiopian interests suffered a hard blow after the reduction of the freedom of movement of the Aksumite commercial fleet in

²⁷ Shahîd (1976).

²⁸ Bausi (2016: 96–117).

²⁹ About the apocalyptic mood widespread in the Mediterranean Late Antiquity, once can share the criticism against the «often overdetermined perspective on apocalypticism that views it as fundamentally aligned with resistance to temporal authorities» (Shoemaker 2018: 3). Actually, also in the minds of the 6th–seventh cent. Aksumite kings «apocalypticism was, to the contrary, regularly joined to ideas of imperial expansion and triumph, which expected the culmination of history to arrive through the universal dominion of a divinely chosen world empire» (*ibidem*).

³⁰ Bezzold (1905: 135–137).

³¹ Harmatta (1974), Sidebotham (1996: 792–797), Bowersock (2004), Howard-Johnston (2017).

³² Wolska-Conus (1968: 364–369), Garzya (1992: 64–66), Bowersock (2013: 22–33), Speidel (2015: 83–88).

the whole Red Sea. The decline of the substantial incomes deriving from the control of sea trading, and consequently from the collection of duties, was a factor of crisis for Aksum, whose ruling class resulted impoverished. Because of the Sasanian naval blockade, the Ethiopian kings lost financial resources to fund the monumental public works requested to maintain and guarantee the social control.

Apparently, the victorious expedition of the Sasanian army resulted in occupying the Dahlāk islands and the Eritrean coast, because local traditions attribute to the Furs, commonly identified with the Persians, old luxuriant plantations and the digging into the ground of wells for gathering the night humidity.³³ Until today, there is no evidence supporting the hypothesis that the same army, starting from a bridgehead on the archipelago, crossed the Red Sea and occupied the Eritrean coast. In this case, the Persians could have attacked and ruined the structures of the Adulis port, causing a serious damage to the economy of the Ethiopian kingdom. However, the effects of the chain of political and military events occurred on the Asiatic shore of the Eritrean Sea were sensible for the financial economy of Aksum, based since the first cent. AD on the sea trading between Alexandria and India. For six centuries, the wealth of the Ethiopian kingdom owed so much to the political and economic relationship with Adulis that it would be crucial to understand until when the biggest port of the Red Sea stayed active and remained under the Aksumite control, before its inhabitants definitively abandoned the city. The chronological sequence, reconstructed through field researches, culminates with the period between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh cent., when a part of the town was covered by fluvial sands, with the collapse of walls and the progressive accumulation of sediments over them.³⁴ Thus, interpretations of the archaeological data would invite us to consider the decline of Adulis as the effect of an environmental disaster, but one can also presume that some external factors, e.g. the Persian intervention, could have damaged the urban structures and weakened the capability of the citizens to react against the natural phenomena they had previously faced with success.

Whatever happened to Adulis in the same time the Sasanians reduced Ḥimyar to a Persian province, around the year 575, some elements lead us to think that the diminishing of the international role of the Eritrean port was rather slow, and the process lasted for the whole seventh cent., culminating at the beginning of the eighth cent. Indeed, after the Sasanian rule in Yemen was overthrown, and the Umayyad Caliphate definitively annexed the whole region, we have enough information about the increase of the Arabian naval activities in the Red Sea. At the beginning, the aim of the Caliphate was to develop the route connecting Qulzum (Clysma) to Ġidda, namely Sinai to Hīgaz, therefore the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean shores to Mecca. The growth of the competition between the Arabian interests and the still living presence of the Aksumite fleet, based in Adulis, became unavoidable. In the year 641, the rivalry resulted in an open conflict, when an

³³Conti Rossini (1928: 295–296), Puglisi (1966: 41–43), Tedeschi (1966: 51–52).

³⁴Paribeni (1907: 570), Anfray (1974: 753), Zazzaro et al. (2014: 50–51).

anti-Ethiopian naval expedition started from Čidda, with the goal of damaging the Eritrean port used by the pirates to organize raids against the coast controlled by the Caliphate.³⁵

With reference to the Arab-Ethiopian relations, it is useful to reconsider the artistic witness provided by the cycle of frescos decorating the internal walls of the palace of Quṣayr ‘Amra, in the Kingdom of Jordania. The building was erected by the order of the Crown Prince Walīd ibn Yazīd (706–744), namely Walīd II (r. 743–744), during the rule of his predecessor Hišām ibn ‘Abd al-Mālik (691–743), in the twenty-year period 724–743. On the walls of the widest room of the architectural complex (including also the *hammām*), painted scenes illustrate the delights of the court’s life. On the hall’s west wall,³⁶ six kings are portrayed while giving homage to the ‘defender of the faith’. They are «symbolic figures who stand for the whole political and cultural heritage of the world the Arabs had now inherited».³⁷ Though the writings in Greek and Arabic over the figures’ heads are partially lost, one can recognize the historical personalities (the names or their titles). Beside the Persian Khusrāw (the I Anūshirwān or the II Parwīz) and the Visigothic Roderic, possibly there are a Turkish *khāqān* and the Chinese emperor, definitely the *kaisar* of Byzantium and the *nāgus* of Ethiopia (the first in the middle of the scene, the second at his left). This record of the king of Aksum, particularly his comparison with the major rulers the Umayyad Caliphate considered enemies of Islām in the first half of the eighth cent., requests a plausible explanation. Likely, at that time an Ethiopian fleet kept on circulating in the Red Sea, as suggested by contemporary Arabic chronicles, claiming that Abyssinian pirates would have plundered Čidda in 702.³⁸ Possibly, the portrait of the *nāgus* on the hall west wall of the Quṣayr ‘Amra palace is the consequence of a military clash, of the Ethiopian defeat, of the Arab conquest of the Dahlāk islands, and of the creation of a local sultanate.

Apparently, there is a contradiction between the philological and artistic data and the archaeological evidence about the end of Adulis, unless we admit that the decline and the depopulation of the Eritrean town does not coincide with the abandon of all the Ethiopian ports on the Red Sea. Actually, already in ancient times the residential and monumental center was located at a certain distance from the sea (twenty stadia according to Procopius, two miles for Cosmas), but the port activities were elsewhere, chiefly in Gabaz(a). This place is known also from the map transmitted together with Cosma’s work, who puts here a fundamental institution like the ‘custom’ (*τελώνιον*), and the archaeological site has been identified with the Galala ‘hills’, about 6 km south-east of Adulis.³⁹ Cosma’s map is the only source mentioning another costal place to the north of the town with the name of Samidi. Indeed, surface remains of Late Antique structures have been detected in an

³⁵ Christides (1994: 27–42).

³⁶ Fowden (2004: 197–226).

³⁷ Fowden (2004: 199).

³⁸ Wüstenfeld (1859: 44).

³⁹ Peacock and Blue (2007: 33–37).

archaeological site located about 7 km north of Adulis, and they can be reasonably identified with this ancient port.⁴⁰ To sum up, the rich and Hellenized center was distinguished from the port neighborhoods, according to an urbanistic and topographic solution commonly exploited in ancient times.⁴¹

A sufficiently clear picture seems to emerge from this reconstruction. The network of ports with Adulis at its center kept on functioning for a period longer than commonly admitted, independently from the destiny of the residential center and even after the inhabitants abandoned the city. From the last quarter of the sixth cent., the Persians, now masters of the west coast of the Arabian Peninsula and of the ports of Mokhā and ‘Aden, in the attempt to prevent the access of Aksum to the sea, occupied the Dahlāk islands. Maybe they occasionally landed on the Eritrean shore, in proximity to the Buri peninsula. The new situation of the sea trading brought Adulis to ruin, but the ports—with the contribution of pirate societies—kept on working in favor of the Ethiopian interests, even after the Tihāma and Hiğaz coasts passed into the Arab caliph hands. The collaboration between Aksum and the Eritrean pirates is a well-known fact at least from the fourth cent., because in the events which brought about the evangelization of Ethiopia the pirates played a role. Once attacked the ship having Frumentius of Tyrus on board, they delivered the ‘apostle of Ethiopia’ to the Aksumite court, where he educated the young ‘Ezana a Christian. The two naval expeditions started from Ġidda, in 641 and after 702, were against the pirates and their bases, but the real purpose was to keep Aksum far from the sea and to consolidate the Arab interests in the whole region. The fresco of Quṣayr ‘Amra, where the defeated *nāgūs* gives homage to the winning caliph, could be seen not only as an expression of the claim of the Islamic sovereign to rule the entire world, but also as a consequence of the conclusion of this conflict.

Discussing the reasons, the times and the modalities of the decline of Adulis, we enter the core of a similar debate dealing with the end of Aksum itself. The scientific *querelle* is burning since in the area of the ancient Ethiopian capital city scholars retrieved geo-archaeological data indicating environmental factors as possible causes of the collapse and end of the town as well as of the state. The starter of these researches of ‘ecological’ trend has been Karl Butzer (1934–2016), a charismatic figure of archaeologist and geographer, who in the 1970s first applied to the Aksum area a ‘geodinamic’ analysis.⁴² From the study of the sediments, he deduced the existence of several alluvial strata under the Aksum soil, corresponding to different aggradation phases. He interpreted the first stratum and the related phase as the effects of a period of intense rains fallen over the Central Tigray highlands between the first and the fourth cent., with important agricultural and anthropic

⁴⁰Peacock and Blue (2007: 65–77).

⁴¹As in the cases of Athens and Piraeus, Rome and Ostia, Ravenna and Classe, just to quote a few; cf. Zazzaro (2017: 161), illustrating the «pattern of port facilities separated from the residential area and located elsewhere on the coast or on islands, both for administrative or practical reasons».

⁴²Butzer (1981), Munro-Hay (1991: 259–260).

implications. The high level of soil moisture made possible two harvests per year and became an attractive factor for a growing urban population. The intensive use of the natural resources and of the lands surrounding the town were the logical consequences of these three hundred years of economic and demographic growth. Butzer assigns the second alluvial stratum and the related aggradation phase to a period beginning with seventh cent. The soil proves to be harsher and shows a different composition because of the presence of debris, partially of artificial origin, resulting from the unraveling of architectural structures. Therefore, the scholar can state that «interpretation seems unequivocal: soil and slope instability in response to overintensive land use, particularly of marginal surfaces, combined with wide-spread field and settlement abandonment».⁴³ Thus, the human action would have been responsible for the progressive impoverishment of lands, for degradation and erosion of soils, in a word for the environmental disaster (according to a model adopted in the case of Adulis too). This situation would have resulted in economic crisis and political disintegration of the state, through a series of passages not firmly documented yet.

Actually, the same interpretation of the geo-archeological data is rather unsecure. Thirty years after Butzer, another group of scholars made a sediments analysis over soils located far from Aksum, in the Southern Tigray region of Lake Hašəngä (or Ašangä), drawing conclusions sensibly different.⁴⁴ The pluvial phase would have covered the period from third to fifth cent., whereas the harsh phase would have occurred in the middle of sixth cent., namely at the beginning of the ‘golden century’ of the Aksumite monarchy, when the African state attained the maximum of its political and territorial expansion. Recently, in the same region south of Aksum another archaeological mission brought to light the ruins of a church dating back to the mid-seventh cent. The remarkable dimensions (29 m. × 15 m.) and the refined shape of the building prove that the Christian state was still vital, territorially vast and capable to fund public works.⁴⁵

Even more puzzling is a thesis, recently reaffirmed,⁴⁶ imputing the crisis of Aksum to the arrival on the Eritrean shores of the bacteria of the *Yersinia pestis*, in the years when this illness was responsible for the death of thousands of people in the territories of Byzantium. The infection arose after the Gothic war, fought in Italy from 535 to 553. The pandemic known as ‘plague of Justinian’ severed in Constantinople particularly in the years 541–542 and one can imagine that via Yemen and through the Eritrean ports the disease entered in Ethiopia too, around the year 548. A reliable evidence is provided by the ESA inscription *CIH* 541, dictated by the Ethiopian official Abraha, who overthrown the Himyarite nobleman Sumūyafa‘Ašwa‘ and took the power in ḥafār.⁴⁷ The text of the long and celebrated epigraph gives an overview of the complex political situation of South Arabia

⁴³ Butzer (1981: 487).

⁴⁴ Marshal et al. (2009).

⁴⁵ Gaudiello and Yule (2017: 238–244).

⁴⁶ Yohannes (2011).

⁴⁷ Avanzini (2014: 253–258).

in the years preceding the Sasanian occupation. The inscription records how the restoration of the Ma'rib dam, promoted by Abraha himself, slowed down just because of the pestilence and the state of permanent war in the country. Actually, even admitting that Ethiopian soldiers serving in the Abraha's army introduced the disease in Aksum, there is no reason to think that the infection had social and political consequences like those registered in other Mediterranean areas where it developed in the same decades. The absence of evidence from the Ethiopian side, both textual and archaeological, prevent us from attributing to the epidemic factor and to the related theory of the sanitary disaster a decisive role in the beginning of the process that brought about the decline and the end of the African metropolis.

Actually, the accumulation of sediments and debris in the seventh cent. Alluvial stratum of Aksum proves that the inhabitants of that time faced new troubles in managing the effects of the season rains. Admittedly, the impact of the rainy waters over no longer controlled soils provoked their fast and unstoppable disintegration. Yet, in such a case, one can hardly decide whether disastrous natural events activated the political crisis or, vice versa, internal factors weakened the social bonds and provoked the loosening of the mechanisms of civil cohabitation, facilitating the negative effects of atmospheric events. In other words, rather than explaining the economic and political crisis as the effect of the human exploitation of natural resources, it is useful to emphasize the environmental consequences of the social troubles, pointing out the presence of constant and verifiable dynamics in different historical contexts. When a community economically structured and hierarchically organized loses its cohesion because of the impact of whatever crisis factor, internal or external, the capability of maintaining the collective control of the environmental modifications slows down and the natural elements reconquer their original predominance, detrimental for the development of the same community.

Assuming this interpretative pattern, the ending of the Aksumite political history seems to coincide with the sunset of the previous forms of civil cohabitation. Actually, there is no evidence indicating that a military clash with an external enemy determined the decline of the state. Rather, the crisis of Aksum was the consequence of a failure in the social system operating for centuries and fostered by the financial resources coming from Adulis. To a considerable extent, the financing of the public works (particularly those requested for gathering and saving season waters) and the private building activities were depending on the incomes from trading in Adulis. Consequently, it is reasonable to think that only the access to the sea, through the Eritrean port, allowed the African state to take part in a profitable system of commercial traffics and to collect the money for social investments. Without that, a serious repercussion affected the capital city, and the whole kingdom suffered far-reaching consequences because of an economic, social and political crisis, which eventually brought about the end of the Aksumite state.

Significantly, if we look for a starting point of the process that culminated in the end of the political life of Aksum, we should better take into consideration the numismatic evidence as a good indicator of the different economic phases. Even though Aksumite monetary history—of fundamental importance for the reconstruction of the controversial

kings' chronology – keeps on fomenting an intense debate,⁴⁸ scholars agree on three points at least.

1. Coinage is present in Aksum without interruption since the end of the third cent. AD, when we register the circulation of the first issue of money by a king named Endybis.
2. The Aksumite authorities determined the weight of the golden coin to the extent of a half of the Roman *aureum*, namely g 2,7 against 5,4,⁴⁹ following the Diocletian reform of the year 296.
3. The last Aksumite kings who promoted and imposed coinage for international trade reigned in the first half of the seventh cent.

Therefore, according to the most convincing reconstruction, after Adulis lost its international economic role, the kings of Aksum abandoned the monetary economy as the result of a drastic reduction of the state-regulated international trade. Actually, the coins of the last Aksumite kings are of bad quality and the quantity of gold they contain is lower than in the previous centuries. This too is a clear sign of the crisis of the Ethiopian involvement in the sea trading system that started from the port of Adulis and progressively affected the Aksum metropolis.

If things are so, we can date the beginning of the Aksum decay to the period immediately after the Sasanian intervention in South Arabia, in the last quarter of the sixth cent., when the resources deriving from the trades managed by Adulis started to be insufficient. As it happens regularly in cases like this, the effects of the crisis of the economic system supporting the social organisation had dramatic consequences on the forms of the human settlement.⁵⁰ In spite of the scarcity of data, we can reconstruct this 'early post-Aksumite' period, marked by distinctive features.⁵¹ We observe the contraction of the urban population and its partial redistribution outside the city area previously inhabited, with the consequent political fragmentation and the foundation of chiefdoms, guided by new elites of which we still know very little.

In the process, factors of economic crisis and cultural discontinuity intertwined according to the pattern 'transformation without disaster'. Social and institutional actors must have disappeared, who dominated the political scene of Aksum during the whole period when Adulis functioned as a place of transfer and exchange of goods and riches. The two civil elites, that of the state officials and that of the businesspersons, but also the two main institutions, the Crown and the Church, were forced to redefine their own social roles, very much reduced within the new economic and political panorama. Archaeologists and historians can agree in identifying the causes that determined this new phase, namely the inexorable decline of trades and towns, the gradual weakening of the state authority and the

⁴⁸ Bausi (2003), Phillipson (2014: 181–193).

⁴⁹ Pedroni (1997: 20–22).

⁵⁰ Phillipson (2014: 209–212).

⁵¹ Michaels (2005: 201–216).

growing international isolation, until the establishment of new political authorities, as expressions of cultural and social groups on the rise.

This is a key for interpreting the latest known inscriptions carved in Aksum by the will of a political authority. *RIÉ* 193 I-II = *DAE* 12 and 13 are cut on the same stone by a historical figure named Danə'el, self-styled *hadani*. The word means in Gə'əz 'tutor, guardian', and here possibly indicates that this Danə'el was playing a hegemonic role *de facto*, but without a full legitimacy. He titles himself also 'son of Däbrä Førem'⁵² a qualification which could be the clue of a possible religious affiliation, because in Gə'əz *däbr* is the word indicating both a mountain and a monastery. Most probably, to this enigmatic ruler, who lived at some point in the post-aksumite phase, between 9th and 11th cent., we can attribute the anonymous inscription *RIÉ* 194 = *DAE* 14 too. In this text, the sovereign includes among his military deeds the victory over another *hadani*, named Karuray, the fight near Kassala against the Barya people, and the submission of the *näguś* of Aksum. The last information is precious, because it reveals the persistence in the old capital city of a ruling class vindicating a continuity with the imperial past, even though the royal title was purely formal, and the *näguś* was no more than the head of one of the various chiefdoms struggling for the dominance over Northern Ethiopia. This leadership has the merit to have allowed the survival of a 'capital without empire', thanks to the agreement with the Christian Church. From this pact between the religious and the secular institutions, the new profile of Aksum arose, that of a 'holy city' for the whole Ethiopian Christianity. Here the Tables of the Law are kept since the times of the Queen of the South Makədda and the King of Israel Solomon, as the mythical narrative of the *Kəbrä Nägäšt* supports. Here through the centuries the Ethiopian emperors went regularly to receive the religious investiture from the hands of the Metropolitan, the head of the Church and somehow the only heir of the Late Antique Aksum.

Within the general debate about the 'imperial' phenomenon, with special reference to the role played by ethnicity as a factor of legitimization and integration,⁵³ we can look at the historical experience of Aksum as an interesting model. Actually, the formation and the development of this ancient African state is more the work of a multi-cultural ruling class, exemplified by figures like the third cent. Sembrouthes and the fourth cent. 'Ezana, rather than the manifestation of an 'ethnic' group taking the power and imposing *manu militari* its rule on the surrounding peoples. From its beginning, the economic and political growth of Aksum into the space a 'regional empire' is largely due to its close relationship with Adulis and the sea. The rise, the long success and eventually the decline of the Eritrean port determined fortunes and misfortunes of the Aksumite history. The access to the sea allowed the cosmopolite kings of Aksum to exercise a political influence over the territories from

⁵² Munro Hay (1991: 262–264), Munro-Hay and Nosnitsin (2005).

⁵³ Particularly, Gehler and Rollinger (2014: 9) pose the question «ob Imperien ihre Geschichtlichkeit anders als Nationen und Nationalstaaten begründen, um ihre Integration (im Inneren) zu befördern und ihre Legitimation (nach außen wie innen) zu festigen».

Meroe to Ḥimyar, with the constant target of controlling the maritime trade route from Qulzum to ‘Aden. As long as the geo-political context enabled the exchange of goods and riches between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, the ‘empire of Adulis-Aksum’ prospered as a multi-national political building.⁵⁴ As soon as external circumstances and factors prohibited the pursuit of trade activities, the same empire was forced to turn inward and to look for new ‘national’ paths for its survival.

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⁵⁴ Approximately, one can imagine the number of constituents of the political mosaic kept together by the sovereigns of Aksum and their courts by reading the celebrated Greek inscription (most probably to be dated between 195 and 220 AD) Cosmas found on a throne in Adulis and transcribed in his work. For the most recent analysis of this text by an unknown Ethiopian ruler, see Speidel (2016).

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Gianfrancesco Lusini (born 1962, PhD 1991), formerly Assistant and Associate Professor (2006), since 2019 is Full Professor for Ge'ez and Amharic Languages and Literatures at the Dipartimento “Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo” of the University of Naples “L'Orientale”. He is the editor of the journal “Rassegna di Studi Etiopici” (established 1941) and of the series “Studi Africanistici. Serie Etiopica”. He is the project manager of the “Catalogo Nazionale dei Manoscritti Etiopici in Italia” and the editor of the series “CaNaMEI. Reports”. Alexander von Humboldt fellow (2001–2002, Hamburg University), and Visiting Professor of the Addis Ababa University (since 2014), he is the director of the “Centro di Studi sull’Africa” of the University of Naples “L’Orientale” and the editor of the series “Studi Africanistici”. He published dozens of articles and several monographs, notably *Studi sul monachesimo eustaziano* (1993) *Il Gadla Absadi* (text and translation, 1996) *Bessarione di Nicea. Orazione dogmatica sull’unione dei Greci e dei Latini* (2001) *Ascensione di Isaia. Concordanza della versione etiopica* (2003), *Vocabolario italiano-amarico* (with Berhanu Abebe, 2014), and *Vocabolario amarico-italiano* (2020).