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II. Definition

The term 'Pre-Aksumite Period' was originally suggested by Francis Anfray to indicate the earliest phases of the ancient history of northern Ethiopia.⁵ Initially he used this term to indicate only the period immediately preceding the rise of Aksum, as distinct from an earlier 'Ethiopian-Sabeian period' when northern Ethiopia was deeply affected by a South Arabian influence. In his latter studies he extended this term to include both phases of Ethiopian history, maintaining at the same time the original division into two periods: 'Ethiopian-Sabeian Period' and 'Intermediate Period'.

The 'Ethiopian-Sabeian Period' corresponds to the epoch when the peoples living in northern Ethiopia were directly in contact with the South Arabians, particularly the Sabeians, and produced a mixed culture with evident South Arabian elements. In any case, with the term 'Ethiopian-Sabeian', Anfray stressed, the basic originality of the Ethiopian culture.

The 'Intermediate Period' corresponds to the epoch when the Ethiopian peoples continued to assimilate the South Arabian influence, but at the same time started to generate a new cultural pattern, from which the culture of the following Aksumite period emerged.

This cultural historical division is perfectly coherent and most likely reflects the real history of the region. In fact, from the historical point of view, we can distinguish three main stages in the development of the state in northern Ethiopia:⁶

- the rise of the Sabeian-like *D'mt* kingdom around the mid-first millennium BC in Tegray and Eritrea;
- the breaking up of the regional territorial unity into kinglets in the late first millennium BC to early first millennium AD;
- the emergence of Aksum, as a unified kingdom, in the first half of the 1st millennium AD.

Nevertheless, the sequence of Ethiopian-Sabeian, Intermediate and Aksumite periods poses to the archaeologist some problems that cannot be easily solved, at least at the present stage of research.

In particular, it is still practically impossible to identify correctly in the archaeological record a cultural horizon which might be safely ascribed to the Intermediate Period. On the contrary, the available evidence points to the occurrence of two distinct archaeological cultures,⁷ occupying the same area in different times, but defined by almost totally different sets of materials: the pre-Aksumite culture and the Aksumite culture.⁸

Therefore, in my opinion, from a *strictly* archaeological point of view, we must avoid the division into 'Ethiopian-Sabeian' and 'Intermediate' periods and use the term 'Pre-Aksumite Period' only in its broadest meaning to indicate the time span during which the pre-Aksumite culture developed. This does not mean that in this period

of basic cultural traditions, at least in as far as they are reflected by the archaeological evidence.

In this paper, then, 'Pre-Aksumite Culture' and 'Pre-Aksumite Period' will be used to indicate, respectively:

- i) the set of specific artefact-types recurring together in a group of sites within northern Ethiopia (mainly Tegray and central Eritrea) in the first millennium BC;
- ii) the segment of the time-trajectory covered by it.⁹

No other historical connotation will be given to them.

III. Sites

Pre-Aksumite assemblages have been recorded in many sites of Eritrea and Tegray. A quite complete list of them has been supplied by Godet,¹⁰ together with the bibliographical references. It includes the following sites:

- a) Tegray: Abunä Gärima, Abba Pantaleón, Addi Galamo, Addi Mal Gundi de Gällila(?), Amba Daran(?), Amdä Şeyon de Seglaman, Edaga Hamus(?), Enda Konatat Asir(?), Ganti, Hawli, May Mbio, Medoge, Seffra Aboun, Málazo (including Gobochehela), Sabea (Sobeá), Seffra Turkwi, Sekoualou, Wazza, Yéha;
- b) Eritrea: Addi Grameten, Sembel-Makk(?), Baraknaha, Deraa, Dibdib, Enzelal, Fiya (Feqya), Ona Hachel, Hal-Hale, Káskásé, Mátara.

Two other possible pre-Aksumite sites have been recorded in northern Eritrea: Danga, a site thirty miles northwest of Káran.¹¹

Finally, Michels¹² has reported a number of new sites in the region between Yéha and Aksum: Ser Ser, Addi Keshi, Musa Metabhen, Aoudi Welka, Mirai Aba Aíşca, Enda Gully, Hanza Mohouta (Yéha), Ain Gerger, Seffra de Gezmat, Aramu, Adi Habalo, Medare Shimfoho, Addi Maryam Wíse, Enda Maryam Sho Weeto, Old Fort, Addi Maryam, Addi Gunda, Addi Ahuwi, Addi Qualakuh, Murrúke Addi, Hasina, Geb Geb, Enda Kianá Hemerit, Addi Berekti, Mai Ruba, Mishilam, Betá Pantaleón, Addi Atero, Addi Kerni, Mai Siya, Addi Barah, Enda Maryam, Behaleiti, Addi Wuferti, Derega, Addi Kana, Addi Haleki, Gobo Ishir, Safaho, Eiyé Maha, Mishilam, Addi Gudi Yelbo, Guanga Edaga, Gudjad Agezen, Ketetekily, Gobo Dura, Addi Osri, Gollo, Addi Daro, Tareta, Menkarhu.

A few pre-Aksumite objects have also been recorded at Taña Qirqos island in Bägémder, but they might have been brought there in later times.¹³

On the whole, at present, about ninety pre-Aksumite sites are known.

of Aksum, Adwa, Agamé (Tegray) and Akkälä Guzay (Eritrea). They are scattered throughout the *wýna dāga* environmental zone, at an average altitude of 1800-2500m.

The pre-Aksumite site consist of towns, ceremonial centres, villages, hamlets and compounds.¹⁴

IV. Cultural Features

Pre-Aksumite culture is defined by the following categories of artifacts: architectural monuments, graves, sculptures, small votive altars, pottery, metal tools and seals, and lithic industry.

a) Monuments

So far, architectural remains have been recorded at Yéha, Hawli and Mälazo, in Tegray and Fiqiya, Mätara, Käskäsé and possibly Enzelal in Eritrea.

They include:

- Yéha: remains of a temple and a 'palace', together with scanty traces of houses.¹⁵

The temple, 18.66 x 15.02 meters in area and at least 13 meters in height, was rectangular in shape with the entrance to the west and the facade forming a recess, originally with a stairway. It is built on a podium with seven steps. It is made of rectangular and externally pecked stone blocks. Traces of four central pillars are visible inside.

The 'palace' has been excavated only in part. It was built on a podium with eleven steps, lying on foundations made of stone blocks five meters deep. At the entrance there was a stairway and a portico with six square pillars more than four meters high. Inside, the walls of the rooms were reinforced with wood beams.

- Hawli: remains of two small temples and traces of square pillars.¹⁶

The temples are quadrangular structures, built side by side and oriented to the east, with a projection at the entrance in the middle of the facade. They were, respectively, 11 x 11 metres and 10.5 x 10.5 meters in size. Along the facade there was a small step on which some clay figurines were placed. They were built with roughly squared blocks.

The pillars were square monoliths. They surrounded the temples. Such monoliths most likely belonged to an earlier building.¹⁷

- Mälazo: remains of a small temple.¹⁸

many small votive altars. It was built with small square blocks and ornated with stone wedges. The whole structure was surrounded by a boundary wall, 18.20 x 12.30 metres in size.

- Mätara: remains of buildings of schist slabs.¹⁹

- Fiqya: remains of a building made of schist slabs.²⁰

- Käskäsé: remains of square monolithic pillars.²¹

- Enzelal: remains of a temple like the one at Yéha.²²

Some scanty evidence of pre-Aksumite buildings has been recorded at Seglamen and Addi Grameten.²³

A typical feature of pre-Aksumite architecture is the use of South Arabian-like monumental ornaments.²⁴

b) Tombs

They have been discovered at Yéha and Mätara.²⁵

The pre-Aksumite tombs are of catacomb type, with a quadrangular pit and, at the base, one, two or three burial rooms, sometimes closed with a slab. The pits are usually three metres deep.

c) Sculptures

Sculptures and clay figures have been found at Addi Galamo, Hawli, Mälazo, Fiqya, Addi Grameten, Dibdib, Mahabere Dyagove.

They are:

- Addi Galamo: a small statue representing a sitting woman.²⁶ The statue represents a female figure in a long dress, ornamented with 'floreale' patterns, and with the hands on the knees, holding two pots.

- Hawli: two statues of sitting women, a 'throne', a clay sphinx and many clay figurines.²⁷

The statues represent female figures with the hands on the knees, wearing a draped dress and ornamented with big breast-collars. The hairs are in the form of stylised curls.

The 'throne' is composed of a chair with bovine legs and a baldachin sculptured in one block of stone. The outside edges

bearded figure in a short kilt and holding a fan, and a small female(?) figure in a long dress and holding a long stick.

The sphinx represents a lying lion, most likely with a human head.

The clay figurines are rough representations of sitting women, cattle and other animals (warthogs, lions, birds), a plough, a conical hut, and a rectangular hut.

- **Figya:** a rectangular offering table with two projecting sphinxes.²⁸

- **Addi Grameten:** a stone sphinx.²⁹

It represents a lying lion with a human head and the hair collected in long plaits. It is ornamented with a palm collar.

- **Dibdib:** a sphinx.³⁰

- **Mahabere Dyagove:** a small stone figurine representing a bull.³¹

d) Small votive altars

These have been found at Mälazo, Yéha, Addi Galamo, Māṭara, Der'a, Addi Grameten.³²

The following main types can be described:

- i. a simple table lying on a rectangular pillar, with three steps at the base;
- ii. cubic incense altars on tronco-pyramidal base, often decorated with the sun disc and moon crescent;
- iii. cylindrical incense altars on tronco-conical base, with the sun disc and moon crescent;
- iv. cubic incense altars on tronco-pyramidal base, reproducing the facade of a palace;
- v. rectangular basins with stepped base, reproducing the facade of a palace;
- vi. rectangular offering tables with a spout sculptured to represent a lion head;
- vii. small tripod incense burners.

e) Pottery

The pre-Akumite pottery can be divided into sixteen main groups of ware, on the basis of fabric, surface finishing and colour.³³

The most common are red-orange ware, black-topped ware, light red slip ware, dark red slip ware, black polished ware, cream ware and brown ware.

A specific kind of ware are the light cream, mica tempered amphoras.

Typical forms are cups, bowls, dishes, long-necked bottles, jugs, and jars with the rim turned outside.

Specific types are the tulip-like pots with a dark red slip or black top, cylindrical pots with concave walls and a conical cover; black topped jugs with a vertical handle and incised triangular decorative patterns; rough jars with a moulded rib parallel to the rim and a vertical handle; small black polished carinated cups; small boxes with a cover; black polished caliciform cups with a long foot.

The decoration is incised, impressed, moulded and painted. The decorative patterns are usually very simple geometrical motifs (wolf-teeth, zigzag, straight or wavy lines). On a bottle from Yéha, however, two ibexes are engraved. The engravings are often filled with a white paste.

The biconical cups decorated with white painted criss-cross patterns are particularly remarkable.

e) Metal tools and seals

Bronze and iron objects have been found at Hawlti, Yéha, Sabea and Māṭara.³⁴

The bronze tools include sickles, chisels, ornaments and pins.

The iron tools include sickles, knives and blades.

Bronze seals are particularly remarkable. They represent the very schematised profiles of animals (lion, ibex, birds) or geometrical symbols, sometimes framing short South Arabian inscriptions.

f) Lithic industry

A microlithic obsidian industry occurs in the pre-Akumite layers at Māṭara and Yéha,³⁵ and in the sites recorded by Michels in Tegray.³⁶

It is characterised by retouched flakes and crescents.

At Seqalu some big discoidal scrapers have been collected on the surface mixed

g) Writing

The most impressive cultural feature of the pre-Aksumite culture is the use of South Arabian writing for monumental inscriptions and votive dedications.³⁸

From the paleogeographical point of view, the Ethiopian inscriptions correspond to groups A, B and C of Pirenne's classification of the South Arabian epigraphical texts.³⁹

V. Phases of Development

The main phases of development of the pre-Aksumite culture may be inferred from the analysis of the stratigraphical sequences at Yéha and Māṭara, the preliminary seriation of the pottery occurrences in the tombs at Yéha, and the comparison between these sequences and the other pottery assemblages.⁴⁰

a) Stratigraphical sequences at Yéha and Māṭara

At Yéha, three main pottery assemblages in apparent stratigraphical sequence have been identified.⁴¹

The first assemblage (Yéha I a), characterised by brick-like red ware, seems to be associated with a late utilization of the 'palace'. The second one (Yéha I b), characterised by black topped ware, is most likely contemporary to the building of the 'palace'. The third one (Yéha II), characterised by red-orange ware, is earlier than any other architectural remains so far discovered at the site.

At Māṭara, two main pre-Aksumite levels have been recognised.⁴²

The upper one, with red, black, cream and painted ware, corresponds to the layers Māṭara III, IV with architectural remains. The second one, with burnished ware with engraved decorations and black topped ware, corresponds to the layers Māṭara V, VI, VII, VIII, and is earlier than the architectural remains.

Comparison of these assemblages has shown that:

Yéha II and Māṭara V-VIII share very few types of pottery, i.e. rims with a groove along the lip and a moulded rib parallel to it, and sherds decorated with a chain-moulded pattern, suggesting a correspondence between the lower level at Yéha and the layers V-VI at Māṭara;

Yéha I b and Māṭara III-IV practically share the same kinds of ware and can be regarded as contemporary;

the ware from Yéha I b is totally absent at Māṭara, where the Aksumite occupation immediately overlaps the upper pre-Aksumite level.

b) Preliminary seriation of the tombs at Yéha

The pottery collected in the tombs at Yéha is the same as that of the settlement, being comparable to the assemblages I a and I b.

The tentative seriation of the pottery and metal tools collected in the pits and single rooms of each tomb point to two groups of assemblages.⁴³

i) t. 3, only pit; t. 4, pit and room; t. 6, pit and rooms A, B; t. 9, pit and rooms A, C; t. 12, only pit;

ii) t. 3, room; t. 9, room B; t. 12, rooms A, B, C.

The occurrence of iron tools in the first group might suggest that it is more recent than the latter one. At the same time, the inclusion of the pits of the tombs 3, 12 in the first group might be explained by the long deposition given at the original burial.

Moreover, the seriation of the tombs, on the basis of the quantity of pottery and metal objects in the single assemblages, suggests the following, more detailed, sequence of the tombs:⁴⁴

t. 6	-	pit, rooms A, B;
t. 5	-	pit, room ?;
t. 11	-	pit, room ?;
t. 2	-	pit, room ?;
t. 4	-	pit, room ?;
t. 9	-	pit, rooms A, B;
t. 3	-	room, pit reused in later times;
t. 9	-	room B;
t. 12	-	rooms A, B, C, pit reused in later times.

Finally, comparison between the materials in the tombs and those from the settlement suggests a basic correlation between the tombs 5, 6 and the level I a, and between the tombs 3, 9 (room B) and the level I b, while the tombs 4, 9 (rooms A, C) occupy an intermediate position between the two levels. The tomb 12 (rooms A, B, C) correspond basically to the level I b, but the occurrence of red orange ware might point out to a transitional position between the levels II and I b.⁴⁵

c) Comparisons of the different assemblages

Comparison of the materials collected in the other pre-Aksumite sites and the sequences at Yéha and Māṭara⁴⁶ suggests that:

the pottery assemblage of the Southern Deposit at Hawli is comparable to Yéha I b and Māṭara III-IV;

the pottery from the temples at Hawli is comparable to Yéha I a;

- the pottery from Ona Hachel (Hamasén) is comparable to Mätara III-VIII and Yéha I;
- the pottery from Kāskāsé, Sefra Turkui and Sefra Abun corresponds to Yéha II;
- the pottery from Mälazo is comparable to Yéha I a;
- the pottery from the tomb 1 at Kāskāsé⁴⁷ is comparable to Yéha I b;
- the pottery from the deposits A, B, C at Sabea is comparable to Yéha I b and Mätara III-IV.

On the whole, the following general sequences of the pre-Aksumite pottery assemblages can be outlined:⁴⁸

Ona Hachel	x-----x
Mätara	VIII VII VI V IV III
Kāskāsé	x-----surf-----x t. 1
Addi Gramcten	x-----x
Sabea	x-----x
Yéha	x-----II-----x t. 12 3 9B 4 9A,C 6
Sefra Turkui	x-----x
Sefra Abun	x-----x
Hawlti	x-----S Dep-----x x--temples--X
Mälazo	x-----x

This evidence points to three phases of development of pre-Aksumite culture:⁴⁹

Phase 1 (Early Pre-Aksumite):

It is documented by the lower layers at Mätara (V-VIII) and Yéha (II), and the surface collections at Sefra Turkui, Sefra Abun and Kāskāsé. No architectural evidence can be safely ascribed to it. The pottery include red orange ware, ware that is red orange outside and black inside, and cream ware at Yéha; black topped ware, black polished ware and red-brown burnished ware at Mätara. This suggests a cultural diversity between Tegray and Eritrea. Contacts between these regions, however, are evidenced by the occurrence of red polished ware at Mätara and Yéha and red orange ware at Kāskāsé and Yéha. Characteristic types of pottery are: amphoras (cream ware) at Yéha; black burnished cups decorated with incised triangles along the rim, sometimes filled with white paste, at Mätara; big jars with a groove along the rim and a moulded rib parallel to it, and with a vertical handle, at Mätara and Yéha. Some pots of possible South Arabian origin (amphoras, fragments of ring-bases) occur at Yéha. Obsidian microlithic tools are quite common at Mätara.

Phase 2 (Middle Pre-Aksumite):

It is documented in most sites of the pre-Aksumite culture. Most monuments, including the temple and the 'palace' at Yéha, the ruins at Kāskāsé, the square pillars at Hawlti, can be ascribed to this period. It was characterised by the development of towns with big monuments and stone buildings, the use of writing, the manufacture or use of metal tools. Both the small votive altars and most sculptures can be ascribed to this phase. At this time, the pre-Aksumite cultural area was quite homogenous, in so far as all assemblages contained the same kind of ware. Almost all groups of ware occur in this phase, save for the red-orange ware, orange ware with gray rim and brick-like red ware. Black topped ware, red polished ware and painted ware are characteristic of this phase. Typical shapes are small cups with a carinated profile, cups or bowls with an outside-moulded lip, small jars with an outside-turned flat rim decorated with criss-cross rhomboidal patterns along the shoulder.

Phase 3 (Late Pre-Aksumite):

It is documented mainly at Yéha, Hawlti and Mälazo. It is characterised by brick-like red ware, black rough ware, red rough ware, and red-orange ware. The small temples at Hawlti and Mälazo, together with the clay figurines from Hawlti, may be ascribed to it. The pottery includes small hemispherical jars with S profiles, black polished cups with vertically moulded ribs, black or red rough jars. The South Arabian elements are practically non-existent. It seems that at this time, the pre-Aksumite cultural area was again divided into an eastern (Akkāla Guzay, Agamé) and western (Adwa, Aksum) region. The occurrence of red-orange ware at Yéha and Hawlti might suggest that some local traditions emerged again in the western region.

A similar division of the pre-Aksumite culture into three phases has been recently suggested also by Michels⁵⁰ on the cluster analysis of the pottery collected in the surveyed sites and the obsidian hydration dating.

VI. Chronology

In the absence of a firm set of C14 dates, the correct dating of the pre-Aksumite culture is still uncertain. It can only be inferred by cross-dating⁵¹ with the cultural sequences of the neighbouring countries, in particular South Arabia and the Nile Valley.⁵²

In any case, a tentative internal chronology based on the obsidian hydration dating has been recently suggested by Michels.⁵³

a) South Arabia

The cross-dating with South Arabia is based mainly on the epigraphical evidence.⁵⁴ It depends on the dating of the A and B South Arabian writing types suggested by I. Pirenne.⁵⁵

Three different chronologies have so far been suggested for the South Arabian evidence⁵⁶

- long chronology:

It was originally suggested by Glaser and Hommel. According to this chronology: the Qataban and Ma'in kingdoms appeared in the 13th century BC; the Ma'in kingdom disappeared in the 7th century BC; the Qataban kingdom survived side by side with Saba up to the 2nd century BC; the Kingdom of Saba, with its monumental inscriptions, flourished in the 8th century BC; the kingdom of Himyar started in the late 2nd century BC and was still in existence in the 4th century AD.

This long chronology has been recently revived by von Wissman, who dated the A and B groups of Sabeian inscriptions between the 8th and the 5th centuries BC.

- short chronology:

It has been suggested by Pirenne on the basis of comparison with the development of the writing in the early Greek inscriptions. According to this chronology the oldest monumental Sabeian inscriptions go back to the 5th century BC and the monumental culture of Saba, Ma'in and Qataban flourished mainly in the 5th-4th centuries BC.

- 'intermediary' chronology:

It was followed by the American team working in northern and southern Yemen in the early 1950s. According to them, the kingdom of Saba appeared in the 8th century BC, but flourished together with the kingdoms of Ma'in and Qataban in the mid-Hellenic period.

In spite of some divergent opinions,⁵⁷ the scholars working in Ethiopia have unanimously accepted the short chronology, dating the main phase of development of the pre-Aksumite culture, i.e. the Sabeian-like monumental phase, to the 5th-4th centuries BC.⁵⁸

At present, such a dating can be doubted because of the very recent results of the ISMEO Archaeological Mission in Yemen, led by A. de Maigret.

At Wadi Yala, about 30 kilometres southwest of Marib, the Italian mission has excavated in 1987 the remains of a Sabeian town, collecting some samples of charcoal and written sherds in a stratigraphical sequence supplying a new set of C14 dating for the Sabeian period.⁵⁹

Five C14 dates have been obtained (C14 half life, 5568 years): 1. 2600 ± 50 BP (R 1945a); 2. 2570 ± 60 BP (R 1949a); 3. 2750 ± 75 BP (R 1948a); 4. 2840 ± 70 BP (R 1946a); 5. 2980 ± 65 BP (R 1947a).

The sequence of the calibrated dates in the stratigraphy, from the top to the

- stratum A, sample 1: 850-650 BC;
sample 2: 825-585 BC;

- stratum B, sample 3: 1100-795 BC;
sample 4: 1240-830 BC;

- stratum C, sample 5: 1395-920 BC.

These dates suggest that the Sabeian town at Wadi Yala existed in a period of time between 1395/850 BC and 920/585 BC, according to, respectively, the upper and lower values of the calibrations, with all possible intermediate values.

Moreover, four sherds with traces of inscriptions were collected at this site in the stratum A, and three were found in the stratum B, confirming that the writing was already used at least in the 8th-6th centuries BC. In turn, the occurrence at the same time of a monumental inscription of the B4 group (in conformity with Pirenne's paleographical typology) point to a dating earlier than at least the late 6th century BC (when the town was apparently destroyed) for the A and B groups of Sabeian inscriptions.

These dates are supported by a set of C14 datings recently supplied by the American team working at Wadi Al-Jubah in northern Yemen.⁶⁰ They are basically in agreement, too, with the datings from Hajar Bin Humeid supplied by van Beek.⁶¹

On the whole, these results confirm that the long chronology of the pre-Islamic South Arabian culture is basically correct, suggesting that the Sabeian sequence started in the mid-to-late 2nd millennium BC and ended in the mid-1st millennium BC.

Therefore, we can quite safely date the main pre-Aksumite cultural phase (Middle Pre-Aksumite) to the 8th-5th centuries BC, if not to an earlier age.

Besides the epigraphical evidence, some other cross-dating elements may be inferred from the pottery.⁶²

Some bowls from the lower layers in the stratigraphical tests (S 1, S 2) at Yéha, with a horizontal groove along the rim, might be compared to specimens from Hureida and Hajar Bin Humeid, respectively dated to the 6th-4th centuries BC and to the 10th (level H) and 6th (level K, J) centuries BC.⁶³

The moulded chain decorative pattern, visible on fragments collected at the base of the 'palace' at Yéha and Mâṭara III-IV, occurs at Hajar Bin Humeid in the levels Q, N, L, going back respectively to the 9th-8th and 7th centuries BC.⁶⁴

A fragment of amphora, identical to the specimens from Yéha, was collected at Hajar Bin Humeid, level F, going back to the 6th-5th centuries BC according to the C14 calibrated dates.⁶⁵

Finally, the pecked stone slabs used to build the temple and the 'palace' at Yéha may be compared to the ones 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 187, 188, 189, 190, 191, 192, 193, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198, 199, 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1000.

This evidence, though still very scanty, suggests a dating to the 10th-6th centuries BC for the early pre-Aksumite phase, 9th/8th-7th centuries BC for the beginning of the middle pre-Aksumite phase, and 6th-5th centuries BC for the middle pre-Aksumite phase.

b) Nile Valley

A few Napatan/Meroitic objects and Meroitic-like pots have been collected at Yéha, Hawliti and Māṭara.

An alabaster vessel has been found in tomb 12 at Yéha. It is comparable to vessels from the royal cemeteries at Nuri, El-Kurri and Meroe South, going back mainly to the 8th-7th centuries BC.⁶⁷

Two Meroitic amulets have been found in the Southern Deposit at Hawliti. They are comparable to specimens from the cemetery at Meroe South, going back to the 6th-5th and 2nd centuries BC.⁶⁸

Some campaniform cups have been found in the pit of the tomb 4 at Yéha and in the Southern Deposit at Hawliti. They are comparable to bronze, silver and pottery beakers from the western cemetery at Meroe and from Barkal, dating back to the 7th, late 5th-mid 3rd centuries BC, 1st century BC-1st century AD and 1st-3rd centuries AD. In particular, the beakers from the tomb 4 at Yéha and the Southern Deposit at Hawliti are comparable to a bronze vessel from the tomb W 461 at Meroe, going back to the late 5th-mid 3rd centuries BC.⁶⁹

A cornaline amulet of Meroitic type has been found in the levels III-IV at Māṭara, but it cannot be dated precisely.⁷⁰

The position of the tombs 12 and 4 at Yéha and the Southern Deposit at Hawliti in the sequence of the pre-Aksumite pottery assemblages suggest that the beginning of the middle pre-Aksumite phase was not earlier than the 8th-7th centuries BC and its end was not earlier than the late 5th-mid 3rd centuries BC.

c) Other evidences

Syrian, Achemenian and Greek influences have been noticed on the pre-Aksumite sculptures by de Contenson.⁷¹

The posture of the statues from Hawliti is comparable to that of statues and funerary bas-reliefs from northern Syria, going back to the first half of the 1st millennium BC. In particular, the statues from Hawliti are comparable to archaic Greek funerary statues from Asia Minor, dated to the late 7th-early 6th centuries.

The expression of the face, on the statue from Hawliti, is comparable to the one on Greek statues of the first half of the 6th century BC.

5th centuries BC, and of the one on a small statue from Amrit, dated to the 6th-3rd century BC.

These analogies may confirm a 6th century dating for the middle pre-Aksumite phase.

d) Obsidian hydration dating

On the basis of the scription of the potsherds and the hydration dating of the obsidians collected in 253 sites surveyed between Yéha and Aksum, Michels distinguished seven site clusters covering the whole pre-Aksumite and Aksumite periods.⁷²

In a first arrangement of his data, Michels divided the pre-Aksumite evidence into two phases ('South Arabian', 'Intermediate') dated by means of the obsidian hydration method to 700-400 BC and 400-100 BC respectively.

In a later paper he distinguished three phases, most likely in order to fit better with the accepted historical sequence for northern Ethiopia: Early Pre-Aksumite, ca 700-400 BC; Middle Pre-Aksumite, ca 400-150 BC; Late Pre-Aksumite, ca 150 BC-Ad 150.

In my opinion, lacking more detailed information, the dating and occurrence itself of this third phase is still uncertain. In any case, his dates seem to confirm the dating of the main pre-Aksumite cultural phase (Middle Pre-Aksumite in my sequence) to the 7th-5th centuries BC.

No evidence is as yet available to date the end of the pre-Aksumite culture. In fact, the literary sources normally used to fix the beginning of the Kingdom of Aksum have no archaeological value. They suggest a dating for the rise of the Aksumite state as an historical phenomenon, i.e. as a social institution, not far from the emergence of a new archaeological culture.

According to Michell's original sequence, the transition occurred between 100 BC and 100 AD. On the other hand, the C14 date from the top of the first extension of the platform 'A', antedating the stelae at Aksum (1820 ± 50 bp, calibrated AD 150 ± 50 MASCA; AD 25-330 Klein) suggests that a monument in the typical Aksumite architectural style already existed in the 1st-3rd centuries AD.⁷³

At present, the available evidence suggests the following chronological sequence of the pre-Aksumite culture:

- Early pre-Aksumite Phase ? - 9th/8th centuries BC;

- Middle pre-Aksumite Phase, 8th/7th - 4th/3rd centuries BC;

- Late pre-Aksumite Phase, 3rd/2nd centuries BC - 1st/2nd centuries AD.

However, it is possible - if we accept the lower value of the calibrated C14 date from the Platform 'A' at Aksum - that the Aksumite culture appeared during the 1st century BC.

VII. Society and Territory

On the available archaeological and epigraphical evidence, it is possible to outline the main changes in the socio-economic structures and the organisation of the territory during the pre-Aksumite period.

1. Early Pre-Aksumite Phase

It seems that in this phase, the pre-Aksumite cultural area was divided into two main regions: an eastern region, including Akkälä Guzay and Agamé; a western region, including Adwa and Aksum. They were characterised by totally different kinds of ware.

These regions probably reflected a cultural - and maybe ethnical - division of northern Ethiopia, going back to the late prehistorical times (2nd millennium BC).⁷⁴

Contacts between the two regions are suggested by the occurrence of red polished ware at Yéha and Māṭara, and red orange ware at Yéha and Kāskāse.

At this time, no urban centre probably existed in either regions.

The subsistence economy in this phase is uncertain. Most likely, cattle breeding was performed, as we have good evidence of domestic cattle along the Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland by the 4th millennium BC⁷⁵ and on the Eritrean plateau by the 2nd millennium BC.⁷⁶ Plant cultivation is not yet confirmed, but it is very probable.

The social organisation of the Ethiopian peoples in this phase is still unknown. Schneider⁷⁷ has suggested on the basis of scanty epigraphical evidence that chiefdoms were already in existence on the plateau, but this hypothesis is not confirmed by any factual evidence. Nevertheless, it might be supported by the traces of a complex society going back to the late 3rd-early 2nd millennium BC, in the Gash Delta on the borderland.

The early pre-Aksumite settlement pattern is unknown. No evidence is available from the western region. In the eastern one, it might have been characterised by scattered villages, like the one of the earlier Ona Culture in the Hamasén.⁷⁸

The occurrence of South Arabian-like potsherds at Yéha may suggest contacts between the peoples of the western region and the south Arabs.⁸⁰

The occurrence of iron slags in the level II at Gobedra rock-shelter, dated to the early 1st millennium BC⁸¹, points to the introduction of metallurgy into the western region during this phase. In fact, the pottery from this level is directly comparable to the red orange ware from the level II at Yéha. The use of iron might have been

Finally, red-orange sherds like the early pre-Aksumite ones of the western region have been collected in sites of the so-called Jebel Mokram Group (mid 2nd early 1st millennia BC) in the Shurab el Gash area, 35 kilometres south of Kassala, by the I.U.O. Archaeological Mission to the Sudan.⁸² They point to contacts between the highlands and the lowlands, along the caravan routes towards the Nile Valley, at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC.

2. Middle Pre-Aksumite Phase

During this phase both regions were included in the same cultural area, as we can infer from the pottery evidence.⁸⁴

At the beginning of this phase, large ceramical centres appeared at Yéha in Tegray and Kāskāf in Eritrea. At the same time, at least two towns developed at Yéha (ca 75000 sqm. in size) and Māṭara (ca 40000 sqm. in size). In turn, small ceremonial centres were built at the opening of the valleys of the rivers draining towards the lowlands, mainly in Eritrea.

There is no reason to doubt that agriculture and cattle breeding were practiced. In particular, the remains of a dam at Saṫra, near Qabaito,⁸⁵ possibly going back to the pre-Aksumite period, suggest that artificially regulated irrigation was practiced, at least in Eritrea.

The occurrence of big public buildings (mainly temples), a sophisticated art, an elaborate craft of stone-carving (altars and offering tables), and bronze seals, together with the use of writing and a clearly cut site hierarchy, point to a very complex society, most likely at the state level. It is possible, too, that the tombs close to the temple at Yéha⁸⁶ formed a royal cemetery.

In western Tegray, the settlement pattern was characterised by regularly spaced small villages (ca 1-3 ha in size) and hamlets (less than 1 ha in size), about 2 to 3 km apart, dominated by a major town at Yéha and main ceremonial centres at Hawli, Adi Atero(?) and possibly Seglamcn.⁸⁷

This phase was characterised by a strong Sabeian influence, as we can infer from the archaeological and linguistic evidence.⁸⁸

The archaeological picture is perfectly confirmed by the epigraphical evidence.⁸⁹

It suggests that a 'kingdom' (the *D'mit* kingdom) arose in northern Ethiopia in the first half of the 1st millennium BC. The names of four kings are recorded: *W'm Hywt*, *Rd'm*, *Rbh*, *Lmn*. The earliest three ones associated the queens in the rule. These kings used the titles *mlk š'n*, *šyt*, *mkrb d'mt*, *mlk š'n ygdyn*, *mkrb d'mt wsb*. They ruled on the *sb* (Sabeans) and the *br*, the Reds and the Blacks, suggesting a division of the population. Finally, they worshipped both South Arabian and indigenous gods: *štr*, *Hbs*, *Dt Hmn*, *Rb*, *Šmn*, *Šdgn*, *Šyhn*. Moreover, the inscriptions confirm that Sabeans were living on the plateau.⁹⁰

VIII. Origins

The monumental inscriptions stress a direct link with the kingdom of Saba. However, some rock inscriptions discovered in Eritrea might suggest contacts with other South Arabian peoples as well.⁹¹

At this time, the pre-Aksumite people had contacts also with the Kingdom of Kush in Nubia, the Achaemenian Empire and the Greek world. But these contacts were mostly indirect.

Some analogies between the pottery of the so-called Hagiz Group (late 1st millennium BC), identified in the Sudanese lowlands between the Atbara river and the Gash Delta,⁹² and the middle to late pre-Aksumite pottery suggest that in the 1st millennium BC the lowlands on the way to the Nile were included within the Ethiopian area of influence.

3. Late Pre-Aksumite Phase

In this phase, the pre-Aksumite cultural area seems to have been divided again into two main regions, like in the early phase. The occurrence of late pre-Aksumite/early Aksumite sites in the Rore region might suggest the spreading of this culture northwards to the Red Sea along the Ansäba Barka valleys.⁹³

No sure evidence of towns going back to this phase has been traced so far. Maybe, they survived in Eritrea, as at Mätära, where the Aksumite town immediately overlaps the pre-Aksumite settlement.⁹⁴ In the western region, Yéha was probably still a major ceremonial centre until it was destroyed by fire.⁹⁵ In fact, the pottery evidence suggests that the 'palace' was used at this time.⁹⁶

The subsistence economy certainly involved plough agriculture most likely introduced from South Arabia, and cattle breeding, as we can infer from the clay figurines found at Hawli.⁹⁷ The same figurines show that, at least in Tegray, the people were living in two different kinds of huts: conical huts of typical African style and rectangular huts of 'Mediterranean' style.

The absence of large towns, together with that of monumental buildings, monumental inscriptions and art point to the collapse of the middle pre-Aksumite state. Nevertheless, some social complexity survived in western Tegray, as we can infer from the minor ceremonial centres at Hawli and Mäläzo, and the number of bronze seals in tomb 6 at Yéha. It seems, however, that, in some cases, prestige goods, like bronze objects and incense altars, going back to the previous period were reused.⁹⁸

According to Michels⁹⁹, the settlement pattern in Tegray was characterised by regularly spaced hamlets and villages scattered throughout the region.

At this time, the South Arabian influence practically disappeared.¹⁰⁰ On the contrary, some Meroitic influence apparently affected the western region. It may be recognised in the 'temples' at Hawli and Mäläzo.¹⁰¹

Three major hypotheses have been forwarded to explain the origins of the pre-Aksumite culture: migrations of peoples from South Arabia to northern Ethiopia in late pre-historical times;¹⁰² Sabean colonization,¹⁰³ acculturation.¹⁰⁴ More recently, it has been suggested on linguistic grounds that this culture emerged as a result of a long process of contacts, going back at least to the 2nd millennium BC, between the opposite shores of the Red Sea.¹⁰⁵

Archaeological analysis of this culture enables us to distinguish some cultural components reflecting different traditions which converged to create it.

The most impressive component is the South Arabian, and more specifically Sabean one. It has been stressed by scholars since the identification of this culture at the end of the last century,¹⁰⁶ as it gives material support to the linguistic reconstructions of Ethiopian origins.¹⁰⁷

Another component may be linked to 'African' traditions, reflecting the local cultural background.¹⁰⁸

A third main component may be connected to the cultural traditions of the Red Sea coastal plains in southern Arabia and Eritrea, going back to the 3rd-2nd millennia BC.¹⁰⁹

Finally, minor Greek, Achaemenian and Meroitic influences can be observed.¹¹⁰

a) South Arabian component

This component is evident in all power manifestations of the elite: monumental architecture, monumental inscriptions, art, votive incense altars and offering tables, bronze seals. Very few pottery types, on the contrary, can be ascribed to it.

The monuments at Yéha and Käkäsé exhibit some typical South Arabian features, such as the podium with steps (Yéha; Marib, Hureida), the square pillars such with big rectangular bases (Yéha, Käkäsé, Hawli, Marib, Gebun, etc.), the pecked stone slabs (Yéha, Marib, Hureida) and building decorations.¹¹¹ In particular, the temple at Yéha is comparable with the temple C at Hureida (which is later in time), the temple at el-Mesagid and the 'Mausoleum' at Marib; the portico of the palace at Yéha is like the ones of the oval temple at Marib and the temple of Atar at Timna. Finally, an inside wall under the floor of the third level in the 'palace' at Yéha is built within the same technique of the walls of the oval temple at Marib, with two layers of rectangular stone slabs and a pebble filling.¹¹²

From the paleogeographical and linguistic point of view, the monumental inscriptions perfectly correspond to the Sabean ones, as we have already stated.

The ibex frieze along the edge of the baldachin on the 'throne' from Hawli is typically South Arabian too.

in many sites of Yemen and Hadramawt.¹⁴ It is possible that some Ethiopian specimens were directly imported from South Arabia.

Very few bronze seals have been found in South Arabia, as far as I know: one specimen was discovered at Hureida; other ten pieces were obtained from the antiquities market.¹⁵ They might have been introduced from Ethiopia to South Arabia.

The title *mkrb*, used by the Ethiopian kings, surely derives from Saba, but we do not know if the Ethiopian *mukaribs* really corresponded in the ritual functions to the Sabeans ones.

The inscriptions state that some South Arabian gods were worshipped in Ethiopia, but most gods are not South Arabians.¹⁶

The following pottery types are comparable with the South Arabian specimens.¹⁷

- jars with grooves along the rim (Yéha, Hadjar Bin Humeid, Hureida);
- cups with carinated profile (Yéha, Hajar Bin Humeid);
- pomegranate-like pots (Yéha, Māṭara, Marib?);
- amphoras (Yéha, Māṭara, Marib, Hadjar Bin Humeid, Wadi Hadamaut);
- jugs with vertical handle (Yéha, Qataban).

A South Arabian origin has been suggested for a pottery incense burner from tomb 12 at Yéha.¹⁸

In turn, three decorative patterns occur in both regions:

- wavy line comb incisions (Yéha, South Arabia in general);
- moulded chain patterns (Yéha, Māṭara, Hadjar Bin Humeid, Huqqa);
- hemispherical knobs (Yéha, Marib, Hadramaut).

Finally, the use of the plough¹⁹ and artificially regulated irrigation might have been introduced into northern Ethiopia by the South Arabs.

Such evidence suggests that, in spite of the strong linguistic arguments, pre-Aksumite Ethiopia had contacts with three main South Arabian regions: Saba, Qataban and Hadramaut.

b) African component

This component can be recognised in the pottery, the lithic industry and a few other elements of pre-Aksumite culture.²⁰ It reflects both local and northern traditions going back to the late pre-historical times.

Two or possibly three ware groups can be presently ascribed to this component: red-orange ware; black topped ware; black polished ware. The first two groups, particularly, represent a major component of pre-Aksumite pottery.²¹

again in the late phase. It continued to be produced, though with different shapes, in the early Aksumite times.¹²

This kind of ware most likely derived from a local fabric tradition occurring in the Aksum region by the middle of the 3rd millennium BC, as we can infer from the ceramic sequence in the rock-shelter at Gobedra.¹³ It probably belonged to a quite widespread family of ware, including also the red-orange ware from the lower layers at Natchabiet and Lalibela caves near Bahr Dar in Bägémder, going back to the mid-1st millennium BC.¹⁴

Some typical pre-Aksumite decorative patterns (simple rectangular, triangular and round projections) might belong to the same local tradition, as they occur on the early pottery at Gobedra.

The black topped ware was originally typical of the eastern region in the early pre-Aksumite phase, being quite frequent in the lower layers at Māṭara. In the middle pre-Aksumite phase it spread over the whole pre-Aksumite area. In the late phase it was again limited only to the eastern region where it survived until the early Aksumite phase.

The most common vessels are bowls and big dishes. Other typical pots are tulip-like vases, jugs with vertical handles and decorated with incised patterns, beakers, small jars and small cylindrical cups.

This ware is totally absent in the Arabian peninsula. In Africa it appeared in the late 5th-early 4th millennium BC in Egypt, where it was typical of the predynastic Naqadian culture (4th millennium BC), and spread southwards along the Nile Valley and eastern Sudan in the 4th-2nd millennia BC. In Nubia, it was a basic feature of the ceramics of the A-Group (4th/3rd millennia BC), C-Group (3rd/2nd millennia BC), Kerma (3rd/2nd millennia BC) and Pan-Grave (2nd millennium BC) cultures, and survived up to the Napatan period (1st millennium BC). Along the northern Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland, it appeared in the 4th millennium BC, occurring in the ceramic assemblages of the Butana Group (4th millennium BC), Gash Group (3rd/2nd millennium BC) and Jebel Mokram Group (2nd/early 1st millennium BC).¹⁵ In Eritrea, this ware occurs for the first time in the early Ona culture, most likely going back to the 2nd millennium BC.¹⁶

At present, we can quite safely state that it was introduced into the highlands from the lowlands during the 2nd millennium BC, confirming the occurrence of contacts between the two regions at this early date.¹⁷

In pre-Aksumite times, it probably belonged to a local Eritrean tradition.

The black polished ware occurred initially in the eastern region during the early pre-Aksumite phase and spread over the whole pre-Aksumite area in the middle and late phases. The most typical vessels are bowls, bottles, cups with carinated profile, chalices and beakers. The bowls are usually decorated with incised geometrical patterns filled with white or red paste. A bottle from Yéha is decorated with engraved ibexes.

This ware is not frequent in South Arabia, while it is characteristic of the Nile Valley. Here, it appeared in predynastic Egypt and was produced up to historical times, as it is indicated by the 'domestic ware' of Napatan, Meroitic and post-Meroitic times.

The Ethiopian bowls, particularly, show some interesting affinities with the Middl Kerma specimens of the 2nd millennium BC. Moreover, the practice of filling the incisions with white or red paste belongs to a very ancient Nubian tradition, going back to the 4th millennium BC.

The occurrence of black polished sherds along the northern Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland, mainly in the Butana Group (4th/early 3rd millennium BC),¹²⁶ might support the hypothesis of a diffusion towards the highlands in a quite ancient time.

On the whole, pre-Aksumite pottery shows many affinities with that of the Nile Valley, and in particular with the ceramics of the C-Group and Kerma.¹²⁹ At present, however, very few of these elements occur on the pottery of the 3rd-2nd millennia BC in the intermediate region of the Gash Delta and cannot support the hypothesis of their diffusion from the Nile to Ethiopia. On the contrary, most of them appear on the pottery of the Red Sea coastal plains and this probably represents another cultural component to be discussed in the next section.¹³⁰

The pre-Aksumite lithic industry has never been properly described. In any case, on the basis of the available evidence and my personal experience, it seems that we can quite safely connect it to the late pre-historical microlithic traditions of the eastern Sudan and the Horn of Africa.¹³¹

At the same time, the macrolithic scrapers collected at Sequalu - if they really belong to pre-Aksumite pottery - might derive from a Middle Stone Age tradition, which survived in northern Ethiopia until the Aksumite time.¹³²

Finally, the conical hut represented by a clay model from Hawliti, going back to the late pre-Aksumite phase, may be related to African traditions. It may be compared with the hut engraved on a Meroitic bronze bowl from Karanong in Nubia and to the more recent huts of Barya and Kunama.

c) Red Sea component

In the last nine years, systematic archaeological surveys along the southern Saudi Tihama and the Yemeni Tihama in Arabia have brought to light a new cultural complex, dated to the 2nd and possibly 3rd millennia BC. It is characterised by a set of ceramics totally different from the Bronze Age and 'Sabea' ones of the inland plateau, showing, on the contrary, many affinities with the Nubian C-Group and Kerma pottery.¹³³

This cultural complex occupied a huge area, stretching from the southern Saudi Tihama to the central Eritrean coast and to Aden. It is represented by four main sites: Sihi in the Saudi Tihama;¹³⁴ Wadi Urqi, 40 kilometres south of Hodeida, in the Yemeni Tihama;¹³⁵ Sababir, Aden, in South Yemen;¹³⁶ and Adulis on the Eritrean

sufficient number of common features to be ascribed to the same basic cultural tradition.

Comparison of pre-Aksumite pottery and the one of the Tihama complex enables us to recognise many similarities in the shapes and decorations of the pots, including most of the elements initially interpreted as Nubian features of Ethiopian pottery.

Moreover, the pottery of the early Ona Culture in Hamasén can be linked to this tradition.¹³⁸

In particular:

- most of the burnished ware, including cups, bowls and jars with geometrical engraved decorative patterns (triangles, rhombs, etc.) from the lower layers at Mätara are directly comparable to specimens from Sihi;¹³⁹
- the tulip-like pots and the big jars with vertical handle and/or a moulded rib parallel to the rim, found mainly at Mätara, are directly comparable to types from Subr;¹⁴⁰
- the jars with short neck and outside-turned rim, quite frequent in the pre-Aksumite assemblages, are directly comparable to some jars from Sihi;¹⁴¹
- the bowls with thickened rim, frequent mainly at Yéha, are comparable to types from the Yemeni Tihama.¹⁴²
- some atypical pots from tomb 12 at Yéha (a bowl with high foot and concave profile; a hemispherical bowl with flattened hemispherical foot) are directly comparable to types from Sihi.

Such evidence suggests that the Tihama tradition was a major component of pre-Aksumite culture, involving mainly the eastern region in the early phase.

d) Other components

Greek and Achemenian influences can be recognised in pre-Aksumite art, as we have previously noted.¹⁴³ They most likely reached northern Ethiopia through South Arabia.

Finally, a Napatan/Meroitic influence may be recognised in some aspects of pre-Aksumite art, architecture and pottery.¹⁴⁴

The ladies represented by the statues from Hawliti are adorned with a pectoral balanced by a counterweight on the back which is comparable to Egyptian, Napatan and Meroitic ornaments.¹⁴⁵

in the region. It confirms that a state arose in Eritrea and Tegray around the 8th century BC under the pressure of a strong Sabean influence, which affected only the elite of the population.

The acculturative hypothesis, at the moment, remains the more acceptable one from the archaeological point of view. However, the data is as yet insufficient to enable us to state that the members of the elite in the middle pre-Aksumite phase belonged to a local Ethiopian-speaking people or had a Sabean origin.

The picture of the pre-Aksumite period emerging from the archaeological evidence is rather complicated. It can be outlined as follows:

a) Late 2nd - early 1st millennium BC

At this time, northern Ethiopia was divided in to two cultural regions.

The eastern region included Akkälä Guzay, Agamé and possibly Hamasén. It was included in the Afro-Arabian Tihama cultural complex and was already in contact with the Sudanese lowlands and may be also with the Nile Valley.

This region might have participated for a long time in the long distance trade between Egypt and the Horn of Africa, possibly including South Arabia. In fact, some evidence from Kasala, Aqordat, Subr and the Bronze Age sites of northern Yemen suggest that trade contacts between the lowlands along the northern Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland and South Arabia occurred in the late 3rd-early 2nd millennia BC.¹⁵²

The western region corresponded to western Tegray from Agamé to the Takkázé river. It was inhabited by a local population in contact with the peoples of the Gash Delta, along the traditional route towards the Nile Valley.

In the early 1st millennium BC this region was in direct contact with the South Arabs, maybe via Aden, Dankalia and Mäqqalé.

b) Middle 1st millennium BC

Around the 8th century BC, direct contacts between the people of western Tegray and the Kingdom of Saba originated a state in this region. In fact, the geographical and chronological distribution of the monumental inscriptions suggests that the core of the *D'mt* kingdom was located between Yéha and Seglamen. It is quite possible that, from the beginning, Yéha was the capital of this state. In that case, tomb 12 at Yéha, which is transitional between the early and the middle pre-Aksumite phase, might be regarded as the earliest royal tomb in northern Ethiopia.

This state soon came to include the eastern region in its territory. The result was the emergence of a homogeneous culture over the whole country, characterized by many eastern elements. Such a culture can be regarded as the 'Classic Pre-Aksumite Culture'.

The 'throne' itself was probably a naos. In such a case, it reflects an Egyptian-Meroitic tradition, rather than a South Arabian one.¹⁴⁷

The sphinxes, representing a lying lion with a male human head, belong to the Egyptian-Meroitic tradition, rather than to the Greek-South Arabian one showing a sitting winged lion with a female face.

The small temples at Hawlti are comparable to the building 292 discovered at Meroc, and a chapel painted on a Meroitic dish.¹⁴⁸

The temple at Mälazo has an outside wall, unknown in South Arabian religious architecture but typical of the Egyptian and Meroitic temples.¹⁴⁹

In the pottery, besides the already mentioned beakers, there are a few vessels which might be compared to Meroitic specimens.¹⁵⁰

- jars with a long neck and a rib at the base, from Mājara, Sabea, Hawlti;
- bottles from Yéha; in particular the expanded rims of some red slip bottles from Yéha and Mājara are exactly like the Meroitic specimens.

The Meroitic component may be explained by contacts between the Kingdom of *D'mt* and the Kingdom of Kush in the middle pre-Aksumite phase, and a more direct Meroitic influence in the late phase, when the small temples at Hawlti and Mälazo were built.

On the whole, the available evidence suggests that the pre-Aksumite culture was basically African. It originated from the convergence in one culture of two main local traditions going back to the 2nd millennium BC:

- the eastern (mainly Eritrean) tradition, also represented by the early Ona Culture in the Hamasén,¹⁵¹ connected to the Tihama cultural complex and in contact with the peoples of the eastern Sudan and the Nile Valley;
- the western (Tegrean) tradition of local origin.

The South Arabian influence was a superficial - though impressive - element, affecting for a few centuries (if not a few decades, as R. Schneider has suggested to me) only the upper strata of the population. Its most important effect was probably the introduction of the plough and artificial irrigation into the plateau.

The Meroitic influence was a very marginal element, which was not really absorbed by the Ethiopian people.

IX. Conclusions

At present, archaeology supports neither the hypothesis of a migration from

At this time, contacts with the Kingdom of Kush occurred and it seems that the Ethiopian queens adopted the garments and ornaments of the Napatian queens.

The lowlands between the Atbara river and the Gash Delta also came under the Ethiopian area of influence, suggesting a control on the caravan routes from the highlands to the Nile Valley.

c) Late 1st millennium BC - early 1st millennium AD

Between the 5th and 3rd centuries BC the Sabean-like state collapsed and the pre-Aksumite cultural area was again divided into two regions. However, complex societies survived in both regions.

In this phase, the pre-Aksumite culture maintained some elements of the previous phase, side by side with new elements in part of Meroitic origin.

Finally, Aksumite culture emerged at the beginning of the 1st millennium AD and a new state - the Kingdom of Aksum - arose in Tegray as a consequence of the increasing Roman trade along the Erythrean Sea.¹⁵

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