

The Early Christian Basilicas of Ancient Aksūm (modern Ethiopia and Eritrea)

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Entry tags: Religious Group, Christian Traditions, Religious Place, Basilica, Abrahamic, Religious Complex, Archaeological monument, Archaeological Site

More than a dozen structures attest to the spread of Christianity in the kingdom of Aksum, located in Ethiopia and Eritrea from the fourth century CE to the seventh century CE. The Aksumite King 'Ezana converted to Christianity in the early fourth century CE. The conversion took place shortly after Constantine's own conversion and at a time when the neighboring kingdom of Ḥimyar located in South Arabia (modern Yemen and Saudi Arabia) converted to a Jewish-sympathizing monotheism around 380. Literary sources attribute Aksūm's conversion to Christianity to the influence of the first bishop of Aksūm, a man named Frumentius, who was ordained by Athanasius. Local tradition states that at the end of the fifth century, nine saints/monks who had fled persecution in the eastern Roman Empire contributed to the founding of monasticism in the region. Early churches of Aksūm include the two tombs of the sixth-century negus Kaleb and his son Gäbrä Mäsqäl, located at a site known as Endā Kaleb. Southeast of Aksūm, the Basilica of Arba'ətu ʿĪnsəsa presents a similar rectangular structure with three naves. Archaeologists have also identified two churches near Betä Giyorgis, a hill northwest of Aksūm, but only one of the two has been properly excavated. Archaeologists have also found a small basilica that has been tentatively dated to the sixth century at Endā Qirqos at Ḥawəlti-Melazo, ten kilometers south of Aksum. Outside of the capital of Aksūm, archaeologists have identified a basilica in the Ethiopian village of Agula (ca. 150 kilometers southeast of Aksūm). Several sites have been uncovered in Eritrea, at Adulis (near modern Zula), Mätära (ca. 150 kilometers northeast of Aksūm), Toḵonda, and Qoḥayto (both near modern Adi Keyh, ca. 20 kilometers north of the city of Mätära). The most recent addition to the early Christian archaeology of Ethiopia is the basilica of Betä Säma'ti', located near the modern village of Edaga Rabu. Radiocarbon analysis, along with the study of pottery, has demonstrated that the basilica was used as early as the 4th century CE and is thus one of the oldest basilicas in the Horn of Africa. The basilicas of Aksūm have an East-West oriented rectangular tripartite plan. A stone podium, an altar on the eastern side of the building, and monolithic pillars dividing the central nave from the aisles are usually present. The width and length of the nave and the number of columns can vary, and so do the narthex and apse.



Date Range: 300 CE - 800 CE

Region: Ancient Aksum

Region tags: Africa

Modern Ethiopia and Eritrea

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Grasso, Valentina A. and Harrower, Michael, "The Basilica of Betä Säma'ti' in its Aksumite, Early Christian, and Late Antique Context", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (2023).
- Source 2: Di Salvo, Mario, *The Basilicas of Ethiopia: An Architectural History* (London, 2016).
- Source 3: Castiglia, Gabriele, "In Adule, Aethiopum urbs maritima. L'impatto monumentale del cristianesimo ad Adulis e nel Corno d'Africa in età tardo antica", *Antiquité Tardive* 26 (2019): 327-348.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/15/>

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes



Type of excavation:

– Scientific

Notes: Fourteen structures have been identified as early Christian Aksumite basilicas.



Years of excavation:

– Year range: These sites were excavated between the 19th century and today.



Name of excavation

– Official or descriptive name: Major excavations include the Eritro-British Expedition at Adulis and the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition at Aksum. The basilicas have been found at Beta Samati (1), Matara (2), Tokonda (1), Qohayto (3), Hawelti-Melazo (1), Aksum (1/2), Arba'etu Ensesa (1), Beta Giyorgis (1), Adulis (3).

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

– Elevation



Type of elevation

– Hill

– Mountain

– Other [specify]: Aksum lies at an elevation of ca. 7,000 feet.

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– Yes

↳ Type of feature

– Mound

Notes: At Hawelti, for example, a wide and low mound with traces of steles datable to the first millennium BCE.

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

– Yes

↳ Is there a distinct boundary between the place and the urban fabric:

– No

Notes: Buildings are found in both urban and rural contexts. No Aksumite urban site was surrounded by walls.

↳ Is the place located significantly within the urban fabric:

Is the place centrally located, or at the crossroads of significant pathways?

– Yes

Notes: At least some of these structures were located at the crossroads of trading routes.

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

– Yes

↳ Are there settlements in close proximity to the place:

– Yes

Notes: The local population grew in the first half of the first millennium CE. There seem to have been a little demarcation between the buildings of Aksum.

↳ Are there routes of travel in close proximity to the place:

– Yes

Notes: The epigraphic record mentions improvements to infrastructures and Aksum, the capital, was served by several roads.

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

– No

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

– Yes

↳ A single structure

– Yes

↳ The structure has a definite shape

– Other [specify]: In some Aksumite site, only one basilica as been identified. This is for example the case of the basilica of Beta Samati.

↳ One single feature

– Other [specify]: N/A

↳ A group of structures:

– Yes

↳ Are they part of a single design/construction stage:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: This is the case of the basilicas of Enda Kaleb at Aksum. The basilicas are over two tombs, supposedly belonging to the sixth-century negus Kaleb and his son Gäbrä Mäsqäl. These tombs are found in specular buildings of ca. 26 x 14 meters.

↳ A group of features:

– No

↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:

– No

↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:

Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function

– Worship

↳ Worship:

– Communal

↳ Is the structure/feature finished:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:

– Yes

↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:

– Yes

Notes: Several buildings were modified over time.

↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:

– Yes

↳ How was the structure/feature destroyed

– Collapsed

↳ Was it destroyed deliberately:

–Other [specify]: The kingdom of Aksum declined during the late-sixth and early-seventh centuries. The causes of the destruction of the churches are not known with certainty.

↳ Was it destroyed by accident/natural phenomena:

–Other [specify]: Even archaeological excavations have contributed to the destruction of some of these sites!

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:

– Yes

↳ In antiquity

– More than once

Notes: The Church of Beta Samati was constructed in more than one phase.

↳ In modernity

– Post-Renaissance

Notes: The Old Cathedral of Aksūm was likely constructed after a seventeenth-century building, but local sources attributes the building to the late antique period.

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Yes



Dedicated to a supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: These are basilicas where the Christian god was worshipped.



Dedicated to more than one supernatural being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– No

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– Yes

Notes: At least in one case they were.



Specify

– King or emperor

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– Field doesn't know

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– No

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– No

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– Yes

↳ Is this sponsor of the same religious group/tradition as the main usage of the place:

– Yes

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

– Other [specify]: Unclear.

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– No

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– Yes

Notes: In the case of Adulis, three churches were built in close proximity. Of the four buildings excavated, three had apsidal sanctuaries and the fourth a possible rectangular sanctuary, suggesting that at least three building were basilicas.

↳ Are any of the structures attached to or associated with a landscape feature:

– No

↳ Are any of the structures attached to other structures:

– No

↳ Is there a hierarchy among the structures:

– No

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– Yes

↳ In the average place, what percentage of area is taken up by built monuments:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Footprint of largest single religious monument, square meters:
Please add dimensions in the comments, if known.

– Square meters: 600

Notes: The largest basilica is the one first excavated by the British Museum at Adulis.

↳ Height of largest single religious monument, meters:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Size of average monument, square meters:
– Square meters: 150

Notes: The average basilica is ca. 15x10.

↳ Height of average monument, meters:
– Field doesn't know

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– Yes

↳ Earth
– No

↳ Sand
– No

↳ Clay
– No

↳ Plaster
– No

↳ Wood
– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Grass

– No

↳ Stone

– Yes

↳ Is this material sourced locally:

– Yes

Notes: The buildings were mostly made of stone with some wooden parts.

↳ Is this material lacking in the local natural environment:

– No

↳ Other

–Other [specify]: N/A

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials

– No

Decoration

Is decoration present:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):

– Yes

↳ On the outside:

– Yes

↳ On the inside:

– Yes

Notes: Marbles with grapevines were found in the surrounding of one of the churches excavated at Adulis.

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– Field doesn't know

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– No

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Yes

↳ Is it geometric/abstract

– Yes

↳ Floral motifs

– Yes

Notes: See the grapevines on marbles at Adulis.

↳ Is it writing/caligraphy

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: N/A

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– No

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief as opposed to sculpture carved on the round is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– Yes

↳ Reliefs representing the god(s) worshipped at the place:

– No

↳ Reliefs representing mythological narratives:

– No

↳ Reliefs representing human/historical narratives:

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: N/A

↳ Are there paintings present:

– No

↳ Are there mosaics present:

– No

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:

– No

↳ Other type of decoration:

– Yes [specify]: Monkey heads, .i.e. wood beams projected beyond the façade, a feature also characterizing pagan monolithic stelae in the region.

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– No

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

– No

Notes: Several burials have been located inside the churches. They usually post-date the buildings. Only in the case of Enda Kaleb at Aksum the basilicas were meant to be burials too.

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

– No

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

– No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

– No

Are grave goods present:

– No

Notes: The tombs of Enda Kaleb have been open since the sixteenth century at least so several artifacts may have been lost. In the other burials we do not have goods.

Are formal burials present:

– No

Notes: Only in the case of Enda Kaleb.

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

– Yes



Are they anthropomorphic:

– No



Are they sky deity:

– Yes

Notes: The Christian god is often invoked as the "Lord of Heaven and Earth".

↳ Are they chthonic (underworld)

– No

↳ Are they fused with king/kingship role (king = high god)

– No

↳ Are they the monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

– No

↳ Are they kin relation to elites:

– No

↳ Are they other type of loyalty or connection to elites:

– No

↳ Are they unquestionably good:

– Yes

↳ Are they other:

– Other [specify]: N/A

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are previously human spirits present:

– No

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are nonhuman supernatural beings present:

– No

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Are mixed human-divine beings present:

– No

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:

– No

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):

– No

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

– No

Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:

– No

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

– No

Are there self-sacrifices present:

– No

Are material offerings present:

– Field doesn't know

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

– Field doesn't know

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Field doesn't know

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: We have zero information about pilgrimages and feasts in ancient Aksum.

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– Field doesn't know

Are festivals present:

– Field doesn't know

Divination and Healing

Is divination present:

– No

Is healing present/practiced at this place:

– No

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes

↳ On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

– specify: It is impossible to tell.

↳ How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: We don't know.

↳ Are there orthodoxy checks:

– Field doesn't know

- ↳ Are there orthopraxy checks:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Are there synchronic practices:
 - Field doesn't know
- ↳ Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:
 - No

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– Yes

↳ Present full time

– Yes

Notes: Literary sources attribute Aksūm's conversion to Christianity to the influence of Frumentius, the first bishop of Aksūm. A fourth/fifth-century Greek work mentions that a bishop was travelling to Adulis at the time.

↳ Present part time

– No

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific sex/gender:

– Yes

Notes: Christian bishops are men only.

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific ethnicity:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are the religious specialists of specific class/cast:

– No

↳ Are religious specialists dedicated to the place for life:
– Field doesn't know

↳ Are the religious specialists stratified in a hierarchical system:
– Yes

↳ Is access within the space segregated by this hierarchy:
– Field doesn't know

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:
– Yes

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:
– Field doesn't know

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:
Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders
– Field doesn't know

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– No

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– No

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– No

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

– No

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

– No

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General References

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