
*Rosetta* 9.5: 16-22.

[http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/colloquium2011/day_coins.pdf](http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/colloquium2011/day_coins.pdf)
Imitation in Aksumite Coinage and Indian Imitations of Aksumite Coins

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Introduction

The sudden appearance and disappearance of Aksumite coins in the Indian Ocean region in the late third century remains an enigmatic clue to a dynamic phase of international trade and diplomacy. This study will explore how the Aksumite kingdom of Ethiopia used imitation of Byzantine coins as part of its strategy to usurp the role of the eastern Roman Empire in long-distance trade with the East. These coins demonstrate a flourishing and self-confident polity, but also illustrate the importance of cultural tradition in the pursuit of maritime trade.¹ Discussing these themes further, the use and production of Indian imitations of Aksumite coins as part of a cultural tradition of imitation, which incorporated Byzantine, Roman and Kushan material will be explored.² Such an examination of genuine and original coins in the context of the mysterious phenomenon of Aksumite trade clearly highlights the fluidity of notions of continuity, distinction and differentiation, which gave the maritime trading network of the Indian Ocean its unique and ambiguous historical character.

¹ For a general overview of Aksumite coinage, see either Munro-Hay 1999 or Juel-Jensen and Munro-Hay 1995.
² For examples of Indian imitations see: Aksumite, Juel-Jensen 2000; Roman, Turner 1989; Byzantine, Krishnamurthy 2006.
Aksum, trade, and the right of Christian kingship

East Africa formed one of the key peripheries of the ancient Mediterranean world. Pharaonic Egypt appears to have derived both trade and tribute from Punt (probably the coastal region of East Africa down to Zanzibar). Punt provided not only cinnamon and incense but also live animals for the entertainment of the elite.³ By the Roman period East Africa south of Egypt was still a mysterious but important part of an extended trade network. The first-century A.D. Periplus Maris Erythrae provides the first literary reference to a kingdom of Aksum in the region of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, though it is clearly already an established commercial centre.⁴ Archaeological evidence supports the impression of the literature, revealing the development of a ‘proto-Aksumite’ kingdom from the fourth century BC, developing by the first century AD into what can be regarded as the developed Aksumite state.⁵

The significance of the kingdom of Aksum extends far beyond the coast of modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, however. The structure, ideology and economy of this kingdom provide a unique lens through which to view, to the west, the development of the eastern Roman Empire during its Late Antique phase, and to the east, the shifting patterns of Indian Ocean maritime trade during the transitional fourth to eighth centuries. Coinage is crucial to constructing this picture as it was the most mobile and public assertion of Aksumite identity within its trade network. The form and spread of this coinage provides the scaffolding for a reconstruction of the ambitions and achievements of the Aksumite state to which the evidence of written and archaeological material can be added.

The coinage of Aksum was tri-metallic, with a gold issue circulating within Aksum and outside as a medium of long-distance exchange, and copper and silver coinage which, apart from a few stray finds, appears to have served

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³ Meeks 2003.
⁴ Periplus Maris Erythrae, chapters 4 and 5 discuss in detail Roman relations with the Aksumite kingdom.
⁵ Phillipson 1998.
mainly local needs. This coinage was based heavily on contemporary Byzantine gold and copper issues, and the gold coins in particular, accorded with the weight standard of the Byzantine solidus (4.53g). In design, too, Aksumite coins feature the facing bust of Byzantine issues, and legends in Ge’ez. In one other important respect, the iconography of Aksumite coinage mirrors that of Byzantium: it asserts by the use of Christian symbolism, including the cross and Christogram, Aksum’s competing right to Christian kingship. Indeed, on some series of Aksumite copper coins, these symbols, and the crown of the king were gilded, presumably for emphasis.\(^6\) This is where literary evidence offers crucial context: in the fifth century, the right of theoretical lordship or hegemony over the non-Byzantine Christian peoples of Arabia, the Persian Empire and East Africa itself was hotly contested. Byzantium possessed the greatest resources militarily and economically, but was also geographically distant from this Christian Diaspora and unable to exert real political control over them. As a consequence, the stage was set for the claims of the Kings of Aksum, who seem to have used their position on the lucrative eastward trade routes (vital for the prosperity of many of the Christian polities whose loyalty was up for grabs), and their claims to have preserved a pure tradition of Christian orthodoxy, to stake a claim for universal Christian kingship.

In terms of modern, and even ancient, notions of territorial expanse and centrality as the bases for power and influence, such political ambition may appear overreaching, even absurd. It must be remembered, however, that Aksum was on the periphery of one world (the Mediterranean) but it was one of the gatekeepers to another (the Indian Ocean). This geo-political location gave Aksum the leverage it required to assert itself on a Byzantine stage: through Aksum, Byzantium could bypass Persian control over the import of luxury and staple products, ranging from pepper and spices to silk and jewels, from the east. Thus Justinian I sent embassies to Aksum to negotiate an alliance against the Persians, which seems to have been motivated by trade

\(^6\) Hahn 2002.
This did not succeed. It seems possible on the basis of Aksumite coin finds in the Indian Ocean, demonstrating contact between the regions, that Aksum did not have any need to engage in such relations (especially at the expense of antagonising the Persian Empire): rejection of the Byzantine offer may have served its political aims at rivalry better than an alliance served its economic interests. That Aksum seriously sought to assert the right of Christian protector in Arabia is clearly demonstrated by the events of 524, when Aksum sent military aid to the Christians of Himyar in response to persecution by the Himyarite state.

**Indian imitations of Aksumite coins**

In the case of the Aksumites, the questions of centre and periphery are both crucial and complex. As the above historical sketch demonstrates, their position in the Mediterranean world was peripheral but centrifugal, at times threatening to generate a separate sphere focused on the Persian Gulf, at the expense of Byzantine hegemony in Arabia and the Levant. In the Indian Ocean, Aksum was once again on the periphery. Coin finds and some pottery provide evidence for an Aksumite presence in India and Sri Lanka, but also demonstrate its small scale. Nevertheless, the use of Aksumite coins in India presents the opportunity to examine local notions of fluidity and differentiation, which underpinned the infrastructure of Indian Ocean trade by providing the evidence for the homogenisation of ‘foreign’ or ‘western’ influence in this region. This feature of local material culture demonstrates a flexibility and ability to absorb distinction, which provides a key to understanding the later transition from politically ‘Roman’ to ‘Arab’ trade from the mid-seventh century onwards.

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8 Boulnois 2005, 234.
The example of the so-called ‘Mangalore hoard’ will be used here to explore two features of coins in local culture: first the question of Indian imitation of foreign precious-metal currency, and second, the uses of such currency in decorative and ritual contexts.\(^\text{10}\)

**Conclusions**

The kingdom of Aksum, despite its long-term impact on the miaphysite Christian culture of Ethiopia, may be considered a somewhat ephemeral political entity.\(^\text{11}\) Its performance on an international stage was short-lived, but its very brevity provides a uniquely time-specific window upon the development of Mediterranean-Indian Ocean links, which at times, by their sheer persistent flexibility, can appear unchanging. With its rapid rise to prominence, Aksum illustrates how, for a brief moment in Late Antiquity, the Indian Ocean trade provided the battleground for emerging ideas of a Christian Roman identity, which sought to maintain (and even expand upon) earlier Roman prerogatives, such as the development of eastern trade, but which simultaneously attempted to use Christianity to extend political influence to areas where Rome had made no claims (including threatening to invade Persia in order to defend the Christians of Armenia).\(^\text{12}\)

Between the fourth and sixth centuries, Aksum was able to exploit these efforts at political reconstruction to achieve enormous prosperity, as demonstrated by the monumental architecture and evidence for consumption at key Aksumite excavation sites. As such, however, Aksum was vulnerable to the change. By the late fifth-century, debasement of Aksumite gold coinage seems to show an economic decline, which may have affected the viability of their coins in the East (in turn deepening economic difficulties). Certainly, from the sixth century coin finds become very scarce in India. This decline may in

\(^\text{10}\) Nawartmal, 1998.
\(^\text{11}\) Phillipson 2009, 366.
\(^\text{12}\) Louth 2005, 112.
the first instance be linked to the Byzantine-Persian wars of the fifth and sixth centuries, and by the seventh century the rise of the Umayyad Caliphate seems to have signalled the effective end of Aksumite power.13

In India, by contrast, the apparently seamless use of Aksumite coins in material-cultural traditions, which had by the fourth century developed a strong ritual and decorative element, illustrates the accommodation built into local reception to foreign goods, which at times makes unpicking the chronology of Indian Ocean trade so challenging, but which also helps to explain how Arab traders in the seventh century (and particularly after the Arab conquest of Alexandria in 6XX), for the first time able to monopolise access to India from the West, were able without apparent rupture to take over and expand trade with the Indian Ocean to the massive maritime network of the tenth century and onwards.

Bibliography


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13 Phillipson 2009, 358.


Phillipson, D. W. 2009. ‘Aksum, the entrepot, and highland Ethiopia, 3rd-12th centuries’ In M. Mango (ed.) Byzantine trade 4th-12th centuries Farnham: Ashgate, 353-68.
