

Learning to Live with the Past: Cultural Heritage Preservation in Aksum, Ethiopia

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ethiopia: Sacred Traditions and
Visual Culture

SIT Study Abroad, Spring Semester 2007

Abstract

The powerful Aksumite civilization left behind a great deal of archaeological material in the north of Ethiopia, but current cultural heritage preservation in the modern town is rudimentary. The government, realizing the potential for cultural heritage as an economic resource, has enlisted the work of a number of heritage management experts to not only improve heritage preservation in Aksum but also involve the local community to a greater extent. Especially noteworthy is the construction of a new museum in Aksum to replace the old, insufficient museum. Planners have been striving not only to improve preservation system and the tourism industry, but also to make the new museum a community center sponsoring events and other programs to enrich the lives of Aksum residents and make them feel more connected to their ancient heritage and concerned about its preservation. Interviews with Aksum community members provide insight into perspectives on cultural heritage management, the importance of preserving tradition, what traditions mean for tourism, and the potential success or failure of the new museum within the community. A less than committed Ministry of Culture and Tourism creates worry that the museum will not stay dynamic and make efforts to provide residents with enrichment, resources, and education. Nevertheless, Aksum residents are proud of their heritage and excited about the new facility; only time will tell whether the community can become more involved with their own heritage in the future.

Topic Codes:

Archaeology 503

Cultural Anthropology 504

Regional Studies: Africa 517

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Introduction

Aksum, in the northernmost part of Ethiopia, is indisputably linked to Ethiopian identity and is one of the most-visited sites in the country. Its massive obelisks, relics of the ancient civilization that flourished in the earliest centuries A.D., appear everywhere from music videos to tourist brochures. Visitors to Aksum will discover eight archaeological sites and hundreds of artifacts. The ancient past appears quite obvious to anyone strolling down the main street and happening upon the impressive Stelae Park or venturing a little farther to the foundations of what was supposedly Queen Sheba's Palace.

Despite these links to the past, however, Aksum is also a modern town, facing poverty, development, and other obstacles that do not necessarily allow for attention towards cultural heritage preservation. The archaeological collection remains in poor condition; there is no complete inventory of materials; and many residents do not readily see the value of their ancient heritage except for its potential as an economic resource in the form of tourism.

A new project, funded by the World Bank, has brought a team of experts---archaeologists, museum planners, architects, and others---to Aksum to not only improve the status of cultural heritage preservation but also to foster greater understanding and enthusiasm among Aksum residents for what is essentially their own history. Notably, a new museum is nearing completion.

Still, the future of cultural heritage preservation in Aksum remains undefined in the face of logistical, financial, bureaucratic, and ideological obstacles.

Methodology

In order to understand the specifics of cultural heritage management in Aksum, I first had to gain an extensive knowledge of Aksumite civilization. This I took from lectures by Professors Kassaye Begashaw and Shiferaw Bekele, as well as readings in history books. I also read firsthand accounts of archaeological work in Aksum, published by archaeologists Enno Littman, Stuart Munro-Hay (on the findings of Neville Chittick), and David Phillipson. From these works I gained not only an understanding of the findings of research undertaken in Aksum, but also some indication of these European researchers' relationship to their modern Aksum community and their considerations towards preservation and heritage management.

Because my foci for this research were the Aksum community and the current cultural heritage project ongoing in Aksum, a large amount of field research also proved necessary. During my first four-day visit to Aksum with the group, I was introduced to many of the archaeological sites (i.e. the stelae park, Tomb of the Brick Arches, Sheba's Palace) that make up Aksum's cultural heritage. Fasil Giorghis' expertise during these visits greatly assisted me in initially understanding cultural heritage preservation in Aksum, including obstacles to its development. We also visited the old museum, which allowed me the opportunity both to see Aksumite artifacts and the inadequate nature of current cultural heritage facilities and resources. The tour of the under-construction new museum introduced me to the motivations for and objectives of this new facility. During this period I also engaged in initial observation of the town's dynamics and the role of the ancient heritage within the modern town.

For my primary research period, I returned to Aksum for one week to build on the foundations from written sources and my first visit. While there, I attempted to learn about Aksum's relationship to its cultural heritage from as many perspectives as possible. To understand the current project, I spent time with Jacke Philips, an archaeologist, and Crispin Paine, a museum planner, both members of the consulting team carrying out the construction of the museum and other related cultural heritage projects in Aksum. I attended a portion of a museum cataloging workshop, organized by Crispin and Jacke and attended by cultural heritage specialists from Gondar and the National Museum in Addis Ababa. Thus I learned about the archiving and preservation strategies of the new museum while witnessing firsthand the training that is also a vital part of improving cultural heritage management in Ethiopia.

I also wanted to gain the perspectives of Aksum residents from various stations in life. To this end, I interviewed tour guides, teachers, a waitress, a policeman, a worker at the new museum, and others, with whom I could communicate in English regarding their thoughts on cultural heritage in Aksum and the current project. I began with general questions about heritage and varied the interview depending on the individual subject and his answers. With the aid of a translator, I also spoke briefly with a number of older individuals at the Aksum market. Finally, I spoke with tourists about their perceptions of the relationship between ancient and modern Aksum. I tried to maintain a balance in choosing my interview subjects between individuals involved with either the current project or the tourism industry and those who had little knowledge of these formal cultural heritage considerations.

During my time in Aksum, I also engaged in informal observation of traditional activities, for example by attending a coffee ceremony in a private home. This helped me to better understand the importance of tradition in daily life in Aksum. Additionally, I observed activities in and around the stelae park and tourist souvenir shops.

By involving myself directly both with the current cultural heritage project and the Aksum community, I was able to understand my topic in light of many different perspectives regarding Aksum's cultural heritage.

Aksumite Civilization

The Aksumite Empire, which ruled Ethiopian soil for over eleven centuries, has left behind a remarkable quantity and variety of archaeological remains as testament to its unprecedented power in sub-Saharan Africa. The extensive record allows us to largely reconstruct the rise and fall of this ancient civilization, both as a pre-Christian empire and as the site of Ethiopia's noteworthy transition to a Christian kingdom.

Following the decline of the Damat State in the second century B.C., Aksum emerged as the dominant urban center in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia. Its economy consisted mainly of trade with the Middle East, Egypt, and Persia, and agriculture.¹ Especially when considering the continuity of culture in the region and modern connections to ancient traditions, it is interesting to note that crops, domesticated animals and farming techniques have remained largely unchanged. Aksum produced an agricultural surplus which allowed for the development of greater complexity: minted coins and Ge'ez language inscriptions are among the remaining archaeological material. Ceramics and clay sculptures of people and animals also provide much information about

¹ Kassaye Begashaw, lecture, 20 February 2007

Aksumite civilization; for example, we know that traditional hairstyles, too, have stayed basically the same since ancient times.²

Most obvious to visitors today, however, are the architectural remains. The best known are the six massive stelae, or obelisks, situated over tombs and representing the presence of a funerary cult and the belief in an afterlife in the pre-Christian era. Their size is impressive especially because we have no notion of the technology used to erect them. The obelisks, and other examples of Aksumite architecture, share features common in South Arabia, such as their massive foundations and square corners.³ For the most part, only elite Aksumite structures, like Emperor Kaleb's tomb and the so-called palace of Queen Sheba, have been the subject of study. Still, interest in more common structures and the old city is on the rise.

The construction of obelisks ceased after King Ezana's conversion to Christianity in the fourth century A.D., followed by the first major missionary period in Ethiopian history⁴. The stelae were succeeded by the construction of the first cathedral in Aksum and Christian tombs as Aksum became the center of a powerful Christian kingdom, an influence still plainly visible in Aksum today.⁵

Cultural Heritage Preservation in Aksum

Despite the vast amount of artifacts and sites remaining from Aksumite civilization, the process of cultural heritage preservation remains in a rudimentary stage, hindered by forces as diverse as insufficient funding and Ethiopia's civil war. In fact, it is

² Henz, Paul. *Layers of Time*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

³ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

⁴ Shiferaw Bekele, lecture 15 February 2007

⁵ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

estimated that only 7-8% of the archaeological record is actually known.⁶ Nevertheless, heritage management is in the process of major development in Aksum and with the future can only come improvements.

Cultural heritage protection necessarily begins with a knowledge and understanding of the culture in question. In Ethiopia, this understanding was late in coming to Europe and the rest of the world even as archaeology as a field began to flourish elsewhere in the world. The first European to document the existence of an ancient civilization in northern Ethiopia was Father Francisco Alvares. Upon his visit to Ethiopia in the 1520s, he provided the Western world with detailed descriptions of the stelae and other remnants of Aksumite civilization, but his approach was nonsystematic and did not, for example, provide documentation of inscriptions (which he believed to be in Hebrew). After Alvares' initial account, the Aksumite Empire again faded in European minds for centuries, as rulers beginning with Fasilides in 1632 maintained a policy of isolationism.⁷ Ethiopia's long and proud independence also meant foreign ignorance as to the rich archaeological record of Aksumite civilization awaiting discovery.⁸

In fact, Aksum did not again come to light until the arrival of Europeans such as James Bruce and Henry Salt in the late nineteenth century. With them began a period of relative interest in Ethiopia's ancient past in the minds of Europeans inclined to carry out serious scientific study. The expeditions of Robert Napier and Theodore Bent in 1868 and 1893 respectively featured some excavation and the first real exploration of Aksumite history.⁹ Unfortunately, Napier's expedition also stole a great deal of archaeological

⁶ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

⁷ Henz, Paul. *Layers of Time*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. pp22-26.

⁸ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

⁹ Henz, Paul. *Layers of Time*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. pp. 22-26

material and exported it for display in Britain, suggesting that the distrust of foreigners, especially those responsible for handling archaeological materials, expressed by some modern day Aksum residents is not unfounded.¹⁰ Napier and Bent laid the foundation for Enno Littman's definitive 1906 archaeological investigation into Aksumite civilization.

Littman's study was the first systematic excavation in the region and remains a primary resource for researchers to this day. With a team consisting of archaeologists, an architect, and a draftsman, Littman uncovered Aksumite palace foundations and documented and numbered the stelae. Despite local opinions as to the builders and the honorees of the funerary stelae, the obelisks are still identified by Littman's numbering system today. Littman apparently worked closely with local residents; many of his sites, for example, were originally discovered by locals who led Littman's team to their findings.¹¹ Nevertheless, the expedition remained largely a European endeavor. It therefore defines Aksumite archaeology not only by its informative findings, but also by the relationship between European researchers and the Aksum community.

Littman's study sparked more serious interest in Aksumite archaeology and was followed by some Italian pursuits during the colonial period and, notably, the founding of the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology in 1952. Not surprisingly, this development was largely due to extensive French financial support. More recently, Neville Chittick undertook archaeological research in 1973.¹² His work unfortunately came to a sudden halt with the onset of the revolution, highlighting a major reason for the underdevelopment of the field of Ethiopian archaeology. The Derg period and concurrent unrest along the Ethio-Eritrean border prohibited research in the area for two decades.

¹⁰ Fisseha Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007; Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007.

¹¹ Fasil Giorgis, lecture, 1 March 2007.

¹² Henz, Paul. *Layers of Time*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000. pp22-26

Only in 1991 could archaeologists resume study of Aksumite civilization.¹³ Besides the long hiatus in research in the Tigray region, the unexpected halt to Chittick's work continues to present problems for preservation today. Chittick's findings were hastily stored in Aksum and the work abandoned. Although materials mercifully survived the civil war period, a testament to local pride of ancient heritage, current workers transferring materials from the old museum in Aksum to the new must contend with the resultant disorganization of Chittick's findings.¹⁴ Chittick's abandonment of work was unwitting, but other researchers' findings present similar problems because they did not fully publish their work or paid little attention to concerns of archiving and preservation.¹⁵

After the fall of the Derg, researchers again took an interest in the archaeology of Aksum and surrounding areas. In particular, David Phillipson began work in Aksum in 1993 and continued excavation and analysis for five seasons. His work not only added fodder to the scant knowledge of the archaeological record, it also took into account the notion of preservation in a swiftly changing world. In his introduction, Phillipson notes his commitment to long-term preservation of Aksumite culture and, indeed, his work in Aksum involved a great deal of conservation efforts. For instance, during the 1993 season he reopened the Tomb of the Brick Arches and reconstructed portions of it. His

¹³ Henz, Paul. *Layers of Time*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000. p 25

¹⁴ Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007.

¹⁵ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007.

Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007

Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. Introduction

excavation projects also included attention to preservation: after tombs were excavated and well-documented, their entrances were roofed and sealed for protection.¹⁶

In addition to these concerns of preservation, Phillipson and his team also paid a certain amount of attention to the local community and its relationship to its ancient past. Although it proved ultimately to be infeasible, the project was originally intended to provide archaeological training and experience for Ethiopian students and researchers. Phillipson also tried to develop a community interest in his work by hosting church and government officials, local community members, and schoolchildren at his excavation sites. He further sought to begin filling in the gaps of Aksumite archaeology which had hitherto focused primarily on elite structures and lifestyles; by paying attention also to common dwellings, Phillipson expressed his desire to make Aksumite archaeology more a part of everyday Aksum residents' lives. Phillipson's work is part of a long succession of strictly European researchers, but he recognized the need to foster understanding within the local community of their incredible heritage. This continues to be a struggle today and a major concern of the current cultural heritage project is greater involvement of Aksum residents in what is essentially their own history.¹⁷

In addition to this laudable commitment to the enrichment of the local community, however, Phillipson also makes clear the relationship between his work and the tourism industry. He notes early in his publication the increase in tourism since the new government took power in 1991. He maintains that of the tourist sites in Aksum (such as Sheba's Palace and Stelae Park), "none . . . is yet being conserved or developed

¹⁶ Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. Vol. 1. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. Introduction

¹⁷ Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. Vol. 1. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. Introduction

in a manner which is commensurate with the growth of tourism.”¹⁸ Phillipson’s observation highlights perhaps the biggest impetus for current development of cultural heritage management in Aksum: the tourism industry. With the government’s recognition of cultural heritage as a potential economic resource comes not only potential economic growth for the Aksum community but also questions regarding the purpose of cultural heritage preservation. Although most residents recognize the value of their ancient heritage for bringing tourists to the area, a real relationship with their past is more sketchy. Especially with the construction of the new museum, it is important to ask for whom the materials are being preserved and what purpose they will serve not only for the academic community and tourists but also for the local community.

Cultural heritage development in Aksum faces unique and multifaceted problems. In the face of rapid development, people tend to symbolically respect the ancient but nevertheless cherish anything that is new and modern. Well-intentioned modern city planners were responsible for destroying parts of the old town, an equally important part of Aksumite heritage, in the name of development. Assimilating the modern with the ancient has thus emerged as a challenge for preservation projects and officials—in other words, Aksum’s people must learn to live with their past or it has no chance of preservation for generations to come.

Another obstacle has been the lack of funding and a shortage of trained experts in the fields of cultural heritage preservation and site management. The government has not typically prioritized funding for cultural heritage preservation. Recently, UNESCO established Aksum as a world heritage site, recognizing the value of these sites and the

¹⁸ Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. Vol. 1. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. p i.

need for preservation. Although this recognition has brought both experts and tourists to Aksum in greater numbers, it does not necessarily improve the community's relationship with its ancient heritage. In fact, in some ways it augments the problem. For example, becoming a UNESCO site implies responsibilities to heritage protection that may not be in accordance with local needs; in particular, certain houses are not allowed to install indoor plumbing because they are situated on top of archaeological sites. These kinds of incongruities have led some community members to consider heritage preservation "a curse" and further decrease community involvement in site preservation.

Particularly because of the relative difficulty of life in Aksum, people tend to have more important and immediate concerns than cultural heritage preservation.¹⁹ As a result, changing a widespread mindset towards cultural heritage preservation has become one of the major obstacles facing those experts concerned with preserving Aksum's past.

The Current Project

A few years ago, the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in a renewed realization of the potential for cultural heritage as an economic resource, embarked on a new campaign to improve cultural heritage preservation in Aksum. A Learning and Innovation Loan (LIL) from the World Bank allowed for improved heritage preservation efforts to begin in Ethiopia, focused especially on Gondar, Harar, and Aksum. This loan also makes possible the vital component of bringing expert consultants to work on issues of cultural heritage protection.

¹⁹ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

In Aksum, the current project originally had three main objectives: development of traditional handicrafts to generate income; site preservation; and inventory and documentation of archaeological sites and artifacts in the region²⁰. Although not intended as part of the project, a new museum has become necessary because the church is reclaiming the land on which the current museum is situated. The construction of the new facility has become a sort of hub for the development of cultural heritage management in Aksum. The new museum, set to open for the millennium celebration,²¹ represents a much needed improvement. The current museum, built in the 1960s,²² is a three-room building, with artifacts crammed onto shelves unlabeled. It is a non-participatory space and appears to have been constructed with no attention to creating a space conducive to a dynamic approach to cultural heritage preservation.

The new building, on the other hand, comes as a collaborative effort amongst a team of experts, including architects specializing in conservation, museum planners, graphic designers, archaeologists, and other devoted to promoting not only better heritage management in Aksum but also a closer relationship with the local community. According to the initial feasibility report for the museum, the museum's mission is "To help residents and visitors to enjoy and to understand Aksum. . ." ²³ As very few community members ever visit the current museum, the inclusion of "residents" in this mission is noteworthy. The proposal also notes that "a museum is not a building but a collection of public services."²⁴ In this vein, the museum's goals include a focus on education, resources for researchers, training of Ethiopian museum specialists,

²⁰ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

²¹ Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007

²² Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum for Aksum: A Feasibility Study." Draft 16 June 2005. p. 4.

²³ Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum for Aksum: A Feasibility Study." Draft 16 June 2005. p. 5

²⁴ Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum for Aksum: A Feasibility Study." Draft 16 June 2005. p. 15

documentation of artifacts, and, especially, greater community involvement through ongoing events (films, plays, art exhibits) at the museum.

From the earliest planning stages, Crispin Paine, the museum planner, made efforts to understand what the Aksum community needs from a new museum. By consulting with “community leaders, Regional Government and Municipal officers, secondary and junior school teachers, Technical College staff, hoteliers, tour guides and craft shop owners [and] a wide variety of local people.”²⁵ Without a thriving museum culture in Ethiopia, however, people have little basis for conceptualizing museums. Thus, Crispin created a museum plan based on what he could glean from his conversations, but it remains largely a design imposed from outside, rather than created from within. During this research period, Crispin also held a town meeting which, unfortunately, was dominated by an archaeologist listing rules that must be obeyed in the interest of cultural heritage preservation²⁶---an attitude that is not conducive to fostering community enthusiasm.

Indeed, the construction of the museum encountered obstacles in its earliest phases as a result of this disconnect between the lives of Aksum residents and cultural heritage preservation. Before the project began, a number of families had rented living space on what would become the museum site. Although they had two years’ advance notice of the upcoming construction, they met the proposal with worry—and an ensuing distrust of cultural heritage preservation projects.²⁷ The problem was alleviated when the families were offered work on the museum site (many were previously unemployed); almost every family has had at least one member among the museum workers. They also

²⁵ Paine, Crispin. “A New Museum for Aksum: A Feasibility Study.” Draft 16 June 2005. p. 4

²⁶ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

²⁷ Paine, Crispin, Interview, 21 April 2007.

received 49,000 birr compensation to find new housing.²⁸ Thus, even in the construction phase, planners have found a way to make the museum benefit the Aksum community.

More outspoken opposition to the proposed location of the new museum came from archaeologists worried about unexcavated material that might lie beneath the construction site. Other complaints came from Aksum residents who opposed the location because they wanted a much larger structure outside the town. Numerous meetings with regional authorities resulted, where the planners had to provide good justification for their choice of a site for the new museum---in the center of town, right behind the stelae park. Their reasons included community accessibility, in keeping with their commitment to the involvement of Aksum residents in the new museum, and the proximity to the stelae park and the old town.²⁹ This location effectively puts the new museum where it can act as both a community center and a hub for tourists looking to experience Aksum's archaeological attractions.

In consideration of the features and artifacts potentially lying under the construction site, archaeologists opened numerous test pits. The design of the museum changed four times to accommodate the findings.³⁰ In addition, the museum planner cleverly incorporated one of the test pits, which exposed a fallen obelisk, into the Discovery Room of the museum. This feature makes the museum not only a place to exhibit archaeological findings, but also a testament in itself to the ongoing process of discovery.

After the location was approved, the construction began; although it has been delayed numerous times because of various logistical and bureaucratic problems, it is

²⁸ Fasil Giorghis, Interview, 3 May 2007.; Paine, Crispin, Interview, 21 April 2007.

²⁹ Fasil Giorghis, Interview, 3 May 2007.

³⁰ Fasil Giorghis, Interview, 3 May 2007.

currently nearing completion and should be ready by September. The new museum will feature an exhibition on ancient Aksum, a library and research room, a conservation room, and a large storeroom, as well as an outdoor performance area and a small café.³¹

The exhibition itself will be the main component of the museum obvious to both residents and tourists, and has been designed in a manner that will accommodate different types of visitors. Its design is particularly notable in comparison with the current exhibition at the old museum. The Discovery Room, in addition to the display excavation pit and uncovered obelisk, will include numerous participatory activities. For example, visitors might learn to write their name in Sabean, test the hardness of rocks, erect a model stela, make rubbings of inscriptions, and identify pottery.³² These kinds of activities will particularly help in the museum's aim of reaching schoolchildren from town and the surrounding areas. Although classes do take field trips to the current museum,³³ there is little to spark interest in the artifacts displayed behind the glass. Planners hope that a more dynamic museum will help to engage schoolchildren in their own heritage. The exhibition, although mainly based archaeological findings, also appeals to community members by presenting aspects of the oral traditions which govern many peoples' view of history.³⁴ One resident told me he knew the oral tradition but would like to learn the history.³⁵ In the exhibition, alongside a timeline made up of pottery will be paintings of the traditional version of history;³⁶ this will help to connect

³¹ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

³² Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

³³ Fissehaw Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007; "Tom," interview, 23 April 2007.

³⁴ Fissehaw Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007

³⁵ Dirar Teshele, interview, 22 April 2007

³⁶ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007.

the usually disparate views of history and may make residents more receptive to the museum.

Although the original proposal for the museum suggested that the exhibition change often, limitations of funding and personnel will not allow for an ever-changing display.³⁷ Instead, there will be a glass case to showcase new discoveries. This revision, while unavoidable, throws into question the museum's ability to stay dynamic and interesting for the community. Having a static exhibition does not preclude community enthusiasm, but it does make an active program of events that much more necessary.

The museum will feature an outdoor events venue that will hopefully draw community members to the museum for plays, films, and musical performances.³⁸ This could be one of the greatest assets of the museum and its most important way of connecting with the community, but its successful implementation also remains one of the planners' greatest uncertainties. Originally, the museum feasibility report provided for an "Assistant Director, Public Services and Education,"³⁹ but, again, allocation of government funds will not allow for a staff position devoted only to this task. The current head of the tourism office in Aksum, who will be responsible for this aspect of the museum's services, has experience in organizing plays, but there are worries that he will not be a dynamic events coordinator.⁴⁰ In that case, the museum would become stagnant, negating efforts to make the museum work for the people who actually live in Aksum. The Aksum tourism office received written suggestions from the project planners as to how this program could be implemented, but only time will tell whether it is successful.

³⁷ Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007.

³⁸ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

³⁹ Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum For Aksum: A Feasibility Study" Draft 16 June 2005.

⁴⁰ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007; Fasil Giorghis, interview, 3 May 2007.

My interviewees told me time and again that Aksum is a small town with few cultural opportunities or events for residents to attend.⁴¹ In light of this, if events were scheduled at the new museum, the potential benefits for residents are untold.

The other components of the museum, though less visible, will play an equally important role in fulfilling the objective of improved cultural heritage management. In the wing of the museum opposite the exhibition, facilities will include a conservation room, a library and research room, and a large storeroom.⁴² Each of these represents a vast improvement for heritage management, fostering further research and proper documentation of all the archaeological materials found in and near Aksum. The current museum provides no such spaces, and its storage system is rudimentary—essentially, artifacts are stored wherever there is space. The cardboard storage boxes are decrepit and inconsistently labeled.⁴³ Improved cultural heritage management requires a better system.

While in Aksum, I attended a museum cataloging workshop organized by Jacke Philips and Crispin Paine, during which all the stored materials from the old museum were inventoried and transferred to the new, sufficiently large storage room. Hindering this process are the preexisting shortcomings of cultural heritage preservation in Aksum; for example, Chittick's hastily stored materials, broken bags, and faded labels have all caused considerable frustration in the reorganization process.⁴⁴ The new storage system, in contrast, features both wet and dry storage areas for different kinds of materials, a security alarm for protection of artifacts, plastic storage boxes with fitted lids,⁴⁵ enough storage space for five additional years of excavation, and a complex organizational

⁴¹ Dirar Teshele, interview, 23 April 2007; Zewde Hiyaw, interview, 21 April 2007

⁴² Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007.

⁴³ Personal observation, 20 April 2007

⁴⁴ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007.

⁴⁵ Philips, Jacke, interview. 20 April 2007.

system that will make Aksum's archaeological heritage much more accessible to future researchers. Materials are organized first by excavator (e.g. Chittick, Phillipson) and then by site⁴⁶ and a complete written inventory was compiled during this workshop period. According to Jacke, the cataloging is primarily about control, "knowing what you have and where it is."⁴⁷ This knowledge is a first step towards better heritage management. In addition, the workshop format of the inventory process showcases the museum planners' commitment not only to this project but also cultural heritage preservation in Ethiopia overall. While I was there, I spoke with museum specialists from Gondar and the National Museum in Addis Ababa; training is a vital part of heritage management and will allow similar projects to flourish elsewhere in the country.

Although the museum is the largest project underway, other cultural heritage preservation activities in Aksum surround it. For example, the stelae park will feature new interpretive panels (there are currently none) and new landscaping to make it more accessible. The project is also creating written publications and pamphlets which will be available in the museum. It is certain that current activities will vastly improve heritage management in Aksum, but the effects on the community are less defined.

Community Perspectives

The town of Aksum has a population of roughly 45,000. It acts as a small urban center in the region and as a hub for tourists looking to experience the archaeology and traditional culture of the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Although for visitors the past appears very obviously a part of Aksum, with the stelae towering over the main road, residents'

⁴⁶ Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007

⁴⁷ Philips, Jacke. Interview. 20 April 2007.

connections with their ancient heritage are less clear. During observation at the stelae park and the old archaeological museum, I noticed that the only Aksum residents present were looking for tourists who might need either guides or souvenirs. From an outside perspective, it can be difficult to understand how the community can seem so disconnected from its ancient past. One tourist told me that he saw Aksum essentially as “a tourist town” where “the people who live here don’t seem to care” about their heritage.⁴⁸

In fact, the cultural continuity, even through many centuries, is striking. According to archaeologist David Phillipson, ancient Aksumite civilization is “directly ancestral to recent cultural phenomena in the modern Ethiopian highlands.”⁴⁹ With regard to types of crops and domesticated animals, architectural elements, textiles, and personal adornment and hairstyles, modern times bear resemblance to the ancient civilization. The two are clearly part of the same cultural lineage.

Upon first visiting Aksum, however, I was under the impression that Aksum residents hardly identified with their ancient heritage. Profit from tourism, I supposed, was the main reason they even thought about cultural heritage. When I interviewed residents, however, I found quite the opposite—many people fully understand the cultural continuity that connects them to the past and, in fact, makes Aksumite civilization something of which they can personally be proud. This understanding and pride spanned various age groups and levels of education.⁵⁰ People are generally aware of a basic history of Aksumite civilization; most often, the legendary history prevails over one

⁴⁸ Ericsson, Anders. Interview. 22 April 2007.

⁴⁹ Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. Vol. 1. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. p 486

⁵⁰ E.g. Solomon Kelele, interview, 22 April 2007; Almaze Sarkalem, interview, 23 April 2007; Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007.

based in archaeology,⁵¹ explaining to some extent why archaeology and cultural heritage preservation play such a small role in many people's lives. One of my interviewees had worked extensively with archaeologists, but nevertheless trusted only the traditional account of history.⁵²

Teachers claim that Aksumite civilization is stressed in the curriculum of local schools,⁵³ but even my younger interviewees did not consistently report a formal education about their heritage.⁵⁴ This is discouraging since knowledge is the foundation upon which involvement and enthusiasm could build. If teachers utilize the new museum effectively (class trips have traditionally been free) and if museum administrators make efforts to provide educational programs, children would be more likely to understand the value of preserving their own culture and even to become involved with preservation activities themselves. Still, it is impossible to live in Aksum without at least some understanding of the civilization that came before and people are quite obviously very proud of their ancestors' accomplishments. Nevertheless, the current cultural heritage preservation project in Aksum enters uncharted territory with regard to community involvement and its success remains uncertain.

During Crispin's initial research phase, he reported "widespread enthusiasm" for the new museum among community members.⁵⁵ These responses, however, are tempered by both Crispin's and my impressions that people tend to give answers they think outsiders and experts want to hear. Every person whom I interviewed expressed a

⁵¹ Dirar Teshele, interview 23 April 2007; Fisseha Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007; Anonymous, interview, 23 April 2007

⁵² Fisseha Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007

⁵³ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

⁵⁴ Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007; Dirar Teshele, interview, 23 April 2007.

⁵⁵ Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum For Aksum: A Feasibility Study" Draft 16 June 2005. p. 4

positive reaction to the construction of the new museum, but few were able to explain why the museum was a good thing or what kinds of exhibitions and events they would like to see.

Indeed, throughout my interviews with Aksum residents, I was struck by the conceptual gap between their obvious pride of heritage and their lack of understanding as to what a museum should be and could do. One especially poignant example came from an elderly woman selling onions at the Aksum market. She expressed a strong belief in the importance of the past, noting again and again that people should be interested in Aksumite civilization because it is their country and their traditions. Nevertheless, when I asked her if she knew about the new museum, my translator had to first explain to her what a museum actually was.⁵⁶ Although the contrast was less pronounced in other interviews, the sentiment was similar. Everyone with whom I spoke was excited about the prospect of a new museum, but their reasoning was usually limited to “It will be bigger and new,”⁵⁷ or “The old museum is very old and bad.”⁵⁸ While residents certainly feel connected to the past, the notion of cultural heritage preservation does not generally seem to appear within their mental framework.

From my interviews, I discovered some possible reasons for this significant gap in understanding. Sheer familiarity with the archaeology is the simplest reason. As one interviewee said, “People who live here don’t really think about it, because it’s always here.”⁵⁹ Similarly, when traditions are simply a part of everyday life, people do not consider them of any particular value for active preservation. I attended a traditional

⁵⁶ Anonymous, interview, 23 April 2007

⁵⁷ Dirar Teshele, interview, 22 April 2007

⁵⁸ Solomon Kelele, interview, 22 April 2007

⁵⁹ “Tom”, interview, 23 April 2007

coffee ceremony in a private home and though my hostess knew that coffee ceremonies were important in her own life, she did not seem to connect this value with any need for heritage preservation.⁶⁰ Especially for older women, who have not traditionally been allowed in politics and decision-making processes, terms like “cultural heritage preservation” mean very little.⁶¹ They see the value of their traditions in their own lives, but do not extend this into the official and often bureaucratic realm of heritage management.

Another reason for the disconnect between residents and their cultural heritage appears to be the onset of modern development, which does not necessarily work in tandem with cultural heritage preservation. My interviewees told me that people wanted to build modern-style houses and that, although older residents ardently maintained their traditions, younger people generally follow the styles of the modern world.⁶² Interestingly, Crispin’s initial consultation with schoolteachers indicated that rural children often know a great deal about Aksumite civilization and its artifacts, while children from inside Aksum are less knowledgeable.⁶³ This seems to point to a direct correlation between exposure to modernity, much more likely within the town of Aksum than in rural areas, and disregard for cultural heritage.

One of the most complex reasons for Aksum residents’ sometimes distant relationship with their cultural heritage was not mentioned by my interviewees, but deserves attention nevertheless. Archaeological research in Aksum has historically been dominated by foreign experts, many of whom have shown no interest in the local

⁶⁰ Asted Reda, interview, 23 April 2007

⁶¹ Fasil Giorghis, interview, 3 May 2007

⁶² “Tom”, interview, 23 April 2007; Dirar Teshele, interview, 22 April 2007; Zewde Hiyaw, interview, 21 April 2007.

⁶³ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007.

community, staying only until their research is completed and often not even providing a publication that could contribute to Aksum's cultural heritage preservation efforts. More recent researchers, like David Phillipson, have sought to change this relationship; Jacke, who worked as Phillipson's research assistant for five seasons and has now returned to work on the museum project, feels very accepted within the community⁶⁴ and many people with whom I spoke called her their friend.⁶⁵ Still, she remains an outside expert, as do the increasingly more common Ethiopian specialists working in Aksum. An ongoing excavation of what appears to be a church represents the first archaeological work in Aksum led by an Ethiopian,⁶⁶ and the current cultural heritage preservation team consists of about fifty percent Ethiopian members.⁶⁷ But although Ethiopians involved in Aksum heritage preservation may feel a national duty beyond their immediate research interests, the local community still respects them as experts and not entirely indigenous.⁶⁸ Things are slowly changing, but the fundamental problem remains: Aksum residents are most often not involved with the research and thus are less interested and enthusiastic about preservation efforts.

Distrust of foreigners, while not unfounded, compounds the problem, sometimes hampering research efforts. This distrust is lamentable as it does not benefit either side. Aksum residents may feel that their own cultural heritage is beyond their control. One of my interviewees, a well-informed man who had often worked with archaeologists, told me that he has seen the Ark of the Covenant but that he will never tell a foreigner what it looks like. Other townspeople, he said, also held historical secrets that they would not

⁶⁴ Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007.

⁶⁵ "Tom", interview, 23 April 2007; Dirar Teshele, interview, 22 April 2007

⁶⁶ Fasil Giorghis, lecture, 1 March 2007

⁶⁷ Philips, Jacke, interview, 20 April 2007

⁶⁸ Fasil Giorghis, interview, 3 May 2007.

divulge---all in the interest of protecting their heritage.⁶⁹ Whether or not this is true, it indicates that distrust can sometimes grow to the point where residents' own distorted versions of cultural heritage protection hinder research that might be beneficial to both sides. Meanwhile, detailed research of artifacts becomes impossible when the government prohibits export of archaeological materials, even for short periods of study.⁷⁰ Perhaps if more Aksum residents were involved with archaeological research, or at the very least informed about research happening in their hometown, they would come to feel it was their own and worth preserving in a long-term framework.

Among the residents who did acknowledge the cultural value of both the archaeology and everyday traditions, the tourism industry appeared to be the main motivation for preservation. Interviewees discussed foreign visitors' interest in seeing "traditional countryside"⁷¹ and "traditional houses and old civilization."⁷² Tourist brochures for Aksum declare that "The spirit of the past is very much alive."⁷³ The ancient cultural heritage has become one of Aksum's major selling points for tourists in an industry that has been steadily increasing since the advent of the new government in 1991.⁷⁴ In just two years, between 2003 and 2005, the number of visitors jumped by six thousand.⁷⁵ Aksum has a large number of hotels in proportion to its size as testament to the growing flux of visitors.

⁶⁹ Fisseha Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007

⁷⁰ Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. Introduction

⁷¹ Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007

⁷² Dirar Teshele, interview, 22 April 2007

⁷³ Ethiopian Tourism Commission, "Axum" brochure

⁷⁴ Phillipson, David W. *Archaeology at Aksum, Ethiopia 1993-7*. The British Institute in Eastern Africa: London, 2000. Introduction

⁷⁵ Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum For Aksum: A Feasibility Study" Draft 16 June 2005.

Residents of Aksum are very much aware of tourism's importance in their home town and they see it as one of the main reasons the new museum will benefit the town. The people with whom I discussed the museum almost invariably noted the new museum's potentially enormous contribution to tourism. Interestingly, their understanding of the new museum's benefit in this regard was better developed than their notions of why a museum could be good for the residents of Aksum. They discussed how the museum would be good for advertising⁷⁶ and how it would increase the average length of stay for visitors.⁷⁷ They have seen firsthand how even an underdeveloped museum can attract tourists, but cannot even conceptualize how the museum could benefit them. One particularly bleak perspective caught my attention: "Overall the new museum will be good for the town because of tourism. But it won't change life in Aksum."⁷⁸ Despite all the logistical and bureaucratic obstacles which may limit this museum's success, changing residents' attitude about what it could mean for them may be the most difficult hurdle.

For its part, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Aksum does very little to change this mindset, as its own concerns are basically restricted to cultural heritage preservation in the most concrete sense and tourism, with little thought as to the community's involvement.⁷⁹ Although the current director of the tourism office takes officials on tours to see the progress of the new museum,⁸⁰ this openness does not extend to actual residents of Aksum. Of the people with whom I spoke that were not involved

⁷⁶ Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007; Dirar Teshele, interview, 23 April 2007

⁷⁷ Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007; Zewde Hiyaw, interview, 21 April 2007

⁷⁸ Dirar Teshele, interview, 23 April 2007

⁷⁹ Fasil Giorghis, interview, 3 May 2007

⁸⁰ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

with the museum project, not a single one knew when it would be finished.⁸¹ One person even asked me whether it was finished already.⁸² This is disturbing not only because he was not informed about the project, but also because he could actually envision a new museum opening without the residents even noticing. Some people were even reluctant to talk to me, apparently because they knew very little about the new facility. As an outsider who had been in town only a few days, I found it disconcerting to know so much more about the project than people who might pass the site every day.

The government office's lack of commitment to the community is especially worrisome because it will be in charge of the new museum once the consulting team has finished its work. Planners worry that the new facility will not remain active and some residents feel strongly that the Ministry is creating the museum solely for tourism and not at all for the town.⁸³

One major point of contention between the government office and the consulting team is admission prices for residents.⁸⁴ The original museum proposal suggests one day per week be free for Aksum residents,⁸⁵ but this now seems unlikely. As numerous people informed me, most residents of Aksum cannot afford to pay even a 4 or 5 birr admission charge on any kind of regular basis.⁸⁶ This, coupled with the unchanging main exhibition, may augment what residents already feel----they will visit the new museum once, because it is new, but after that it will be only for tourists.

⁸¹ E.g. "Tom," interview, 23 April 2007; Solomon Kelele, interview 22 April 2007

⁸² Mulgaet Araya, interview, 22 April 2007

⁸³ "Tom," interview, 23 April 2007

⁸⁴ Paine, Crispin and Jacke Philips, interview, 20 April 2007

⁸⁵ Paine, Crispin. "A New Museum For Aksum: A Feasibility Study" Draft 16 June 2005

⁸⁶ "Tom," interview, 23 April 2007; Fissehaw Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007; Dirar Teshele, interview, 23 April 2007

With these predictions in mind, the tourism office's lack of dynamism, creativity, and attention to the local community is particularly worrisome. My own experiences with the office were not encouraging, as I was denied an interview multiple times. Without an active museum that tries also to be a community center, success with the community seems shaky, even if tourism flourishes.

Despite all of these problems, however, Aksum residents' pride of their heritage and excitement about the project are undeniable. Almost everyone with whom I spoke said they would visit and said that the community was truly enthusiastic about the project. People do seem to want to learn about their heritage—one interviewee said he was very interested in Aksumite coinage;⁸⁷ another said she had seen ancient ceramics, but wanted to know the dates.⁸⁸ Almost everyone agreed that the boon of artifacts from Aksumite civilization requires a bigger display space than in the current museum and some noted how important this new museum will be for students, and in stimulating further research.⁸⁹ This desire to learn and these visions for the future are encouraging, but they must be accompanied by an institutional willingness to include Aksum residents in the new museum.

Conclusion

The current cultural heritage preservation project represents only the beginning of what will hopefully become a pattern in coming years. The new museum lays the foundation for future development and, hopefully, a dynamic community involvement. A

⁸⁷ Dirar Teshele, interview, 23 April 2007

⁸⁸ Zewde Hiyaw, interview, 21 April 2007

⁸⁹ Fissehaw Asfaw, interview, 24 April 2007

combination of factors, however, threatens the success of the museum as a community center, potentially relegating it instead to a facility only of interest to tourists.

This museum and associated cultural heritage preservation projects will make the sites more accessible and are certain to attract tourists in increasingly large numbers. But if the community is to become involved, the museum must provide services and events beyond the main exhibition and tools for serious researchers. The possibilities in this regard are almost limitless---historical plays, local artist exhibitions, musical performances, educational programs, and films could all greatly enrich the lives of Aksum residents and help to foster a serious enthusiasm for their heritage. The tourism office, unfortunately, does not currently seem committed to community involvement and poses a bigger threat even than minimal financial resources for such events. The best scenario for the museum's future would be adoption by a cultural association, like the Tigrai Cultural Association. If this does not happen, and the government is reluctant to relinquish control because of its protectiveness of artifacts, the museum could face stagnation.

The future looks bright for both the quality of cultural heritage preservation in Aksum and its tourism industry, but the community's role in the process remains undefined. Only with the grand opening of the new museum in September and a survey of subsequent events will the level of community involvement solidify. Further research on this topic could prove helpful in planning specific events or temporary exhibitions that would be of interest to the community. In addition, a more in-depth look at how Aksumite civilization factors into residents' identity could be useful.

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