Axum and the Solomonic Dynasty.
Kingdom of Aksum

- Located south of Kush on the Horn of Africa in what is now the countries of Ethiopia and Eritrea.
- In the third century B.C.E. growth of commercial competition on the Red Sea inspired a trend towards political consolidation.
- This trend culminated in the formation of the Kingdom of Aksum.
Askum’s beginnings

- A key tactic in Askumite commercial policy from the first to the seventh century was the maintenance of a single major port city, Adulis.
- Restricting the activities of foreign merchants to Adulis allowed efficient collection of trade duties.
- Askum used duties collected from trade to build its State and military.
Aksum Trade

- Aksum was hub for caravan trade from Egypt and Meroe.
- Its access to sea trade via the Mediterranean made it an international trading power.
- Traders from Egypt, Rome, Persia, India and Arabia crowded Aksum’s chief seaport, Adulis.
- Aksumite merchants traded salt, rhinoceros horns, ivory, tortoise shells, emeralds, and gold.
- In return they imported cloth, glass, olive oil, wine, brass, and copper.
Ezana

- The Kingdom of Aksum reached its height between 325-360 C.E. when an exceptionally strong ruler, Ezana took the thrown.

- First Ezana captured the part of the Arabian Peninsula that is modern day Yemen.

- Then he conquered the Kushites and burned Meroe to the ground.
I carried war against [them] when they had rebelled. . . .
I burnt their towns of stone and their towns of straw.
At the same time, my men plundered [stole] their grain,
their bronze, their iron and their copper, destroyed the
idols in their homes, their stocks of corn and of cotton;
and they threw themselves into the river.

KING EZANA OF AKSUM, quoted in Africa: Past and
Present
Cultural Exchange

- Merchants exchanged more than raw materials; they shared ideas as well.

- In his youth, Ezana was introduced to Christianity.

- When he unified the kingdom, he made Christianity the official religion of the Kingdom.
This Mural is located on the wall of one of the oldest Christian Churches in Aksum
Pillars of Aksum

• These huge stone pillars were erected as monuments or tomb markers.

• To the left, the towering stone pillar, or stele, was built to celebrate Aksum’s achievements.

• Still standing today, its size and elaborate inscriptions make it an achievement in its own right.
Aksumite decline

- Aksum’s cultural and technological achievements enabled it to last for 800 years.
- Between 632 and 750 Islamic invaders conquered vast territories in the Mediterranean world, spreading their religion as they went.
- The establishment of the capital of the Caliphate at Damascus in the 640’s redirected the main lines of commerce away from the Red Sea.
- Deprived of this trade the Kings of Aksum lost their ability to maintain their state through taxation.
Decline

- In 710 Muslim invaders destroyed Adulis. This conquest cut Aksum off from the major ports along both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

- To escape the advancing wave of Islam, Aksum’s rulers moved their capital over the mountains into what is now northern Ethiopia.

- Aksum’s new geographic isolation—along with depletion of the forests and soil erosion—led to its decline as a world power.
Feudalism Develops in Aksum

- In the ninth century the Aksumite king Digna-Jan sent military colonies south to bring new areas under his rule.

- DJ rewarded his soldiers by endowing them with fiefs known as gwults.

- This system created a military class supported by taxes collected from peasant families of the gwult.

- Taxes were paid through a portion of crops grown by peasant families.
Feudalism Cont’d

- In classical Aksum land belonged to the peasantry.
- The bestowal of a gwult gave local lords the right to a portion of production of the peasants living on that land and also the right to be the ruler and magistrate over the people of that gwult.
- Monasteries were granted gwult rights too.
The Church

- As the old economic and political world of Aksum collapsed, the monasteries, became the sole repositories of learning.
- These monasteries were also responsible for the preserving copying and illuminating of manuscripts.
The Solomonic Era

- The spread of feudalism into territories south led to conflict with the Zagwe of Agaw origin.
- In the 12th century the Zagwe dynasty took control over the feudal system.
- They sought legitimacy by supporting the feudal system and making themselves patrons of Christianity.
St. George at Lalibela, Ethiopia

Zagwe Rulers of Ethiopia commissioned artisans to built this and other churches.
The Solomomic State

- In the 1260’s Yekunno-Amlak, a southern lord took the lead in a campaign against the Zagwe dynasty.
- He succeeded in bringing about the abdication of the last Zagwe King, replacing the Zagwe line with his own.
- Yekunno-Amlak and his successors sought legitimacy through claims of decent from Solomon, and the queen of Sheba.
- In addition, the genealogical claims of the kings traced their ancestry back to early Aksumite rulers.
A Moving Capital

- The Solomonic state lacked a fixed capital until 1636.
- It had a moviable capital town of pavilions and tents, inhabited by courtiers, court officials, aspiring young noblemen, artisans, churchmen and camp followers.
- Moving the capital spread the burden of supporting the court and its vast entourage with food and supplies.
- Also, the moving capital helped remind higher lords in the feudal system to remain loyal to the state.
Amda-Sion

- Amda Sion came to power in 1314. He used his power and influence to consolidate the dynasty’s rule over older Christian feudal areas.

- He conquered more territories in the south and awarded new gwults to soldiers that fought under his command.

- Encouraged the expansion of Ethiopian monasticism in order to spread Christianity.
Religion in Politics

- Amda-Sion developed a tributary system in the rift valley civilizations to the south (Hidiya and Dawaro).

- These Kingdoms practiced self-governing and continued to follow their native religious customs with nominal loyalties to Islam.

- Islam and Christianity were associated with opposing groups.

- Islam was associated with Merchants and commerce; while Christianity remained loyal to the feudal system.
Over the next century the solomonic state engaged in recurrent warfare on its southeastern front over religious and economic differences, but overall the dynasty maintained its indirect lordship until the 1520s.
HW Questions

- How did Ethiopian Feudalism develop?
- How did religion and the interest of kings affect each other in the Ethiopian Kingdoms?
- How does the history of Axum reflect interaction with neighboring civilizations?