

David W Phillipson

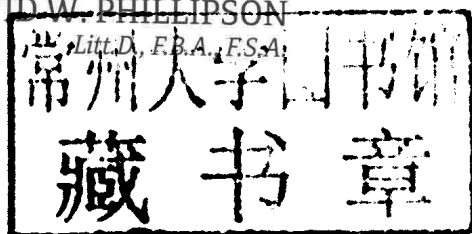
Foundations of an African Civilisation

AKSUM & THE NORTHERN HORN
1000 BC – AD 1300

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DAVID W. PHILLIPSON



 JAMES CURREY

James Currey
is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF (GB)
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620 (US)
www.boydellandbrewer.com
www.jamescurrey.com

© David W. Phillipson 2012
First published 2012

1 2 3 4 5 15 14 13 12

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
is available on request from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84701-041-4 (James Currey Cloth)

Papers used by Boydell & Brewer are natural, recyclable products
made from wood grown in sustainable forests

Typeset in 8.5/9.5pt Cordale
by the British Institute in Eastern Africa
Printed and bound in the United States of America

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
1 General introduction	1
Part One BEFORE AKSUM	
2 The northern Horn 3000 years ago	9
3 The first millennium BC	19
Part Two THE KINGDOM OF AKSUM	
4 Aksumite civilisation: an introductory summary	47
5 Aksumite languages and literacy	51
6 Some written sources relating to Aksumite civilisation	57
7 The emergence and expansion of the Aksumite state	69
8 Aksumite kingship and politics	79
9 Aksumite religion	91
10 Cultivation and herding, food and drink	107
11 Urbanism, architecture and non-funerary monuments	119
12 Aksumite burials	139
13 Aksumite technology and material culture	159
14 Aksumite coinage	181
15 Foreign contacts of the Aksumite state	195
16 Decline and transformation of the Aksumite state	209
Part Three AFTER AKSUM	
17 The Zagwe dynasty	227
18 Epilogue: The future of the past in the northern Horn	245
<i>Bibliographic references</i>	249
<i>Index</i>	283

List of Illustrations

Figure	1	Map of the northern Horn	x
	2	Language distribution map	12
	3	Map of principal archaeological sites	20
	4	Ona plan	22
	5	Yeha Great Temple exterior	25
	6	Yeha Great Temple interior	25
	7	Yeha ibex frieze	27
	8	Grat Be'al Gebri	27
	9	Maqaber Ga'ewa altar	28
	10	Maqaber Ga'ewa inscription & statuette	28
	11	Hawelti	31
	12	Identity marks	35
	13	Inscriptions: monumental and <i>graffiti</i>	37
	14	Bulls' heads	40
	15	Beta Giyorgis shaft tomb	43
	16	Ezana inscriptions	53
	17	Tabulation of inscriptions	58
	18	Cosmas' map of Adulis and Aksum	67
	19	Map of the Aksum area	70
	20	Phasing tabulation	72
	21	Map of Aksumite expansion	76
	22	Chika-Beret sphinx	77
	23	GDR sceptre	80
	24	Tabulation of kings	82
	25	MHDYS gold coin	86
	26	'Stela of the Lances'	86
	27	Plan of 'palace'	89
	28	Ousanas silver coin	97
	29	Abba Garima evangelist	100
	30	Abba Garima canon table	101

31	Map of 'nine saints'	105
32	Tabulation of crops	109
33	Painting of plough	112
34	Bowls with yoked cattle	113
35	Matara plan	120
36	Wall construction	122
37	Metal clamp	123
38	House-model	125
39	Old Cathedral from bell-tower	128
40	Original Cathedral reconstructions	129
41	Screen-pillar at Aksum	130
42	Plan of Enda Kaleb superstructure	131
43	Debra Damo	132
44	Throne-bases	133
45	Thrones reconstructions	135
46	Statue-base	136
47	Stelae Park	140
48	Stela detail	141
49	Stela apex	142
50	Mausoleum	144
51	Brass disc	145
52	Stela 4	146
53	Stela erection	146
54	Nefas Mawcha	148
55	Tomb of Bazen	148
56	Tomb of the False Door	150
57	Inside Tomb of Gabra Masqal	152
58	Matara tomb	155
59	Pottery	160
60	Glass	163
61	Inlaid plaques	164
62	Metalwork	168
63	Carved ivory	170-1
64	Ivory figurine	173
65	Quarry	175
66	Lithics	177
67	Gobedra lioness	178
68	Paved road	179
69	Endybis gold coin	186
70	Gilded silver coin of AGD	186

71	Ezana gold coin	186
72	Anonymous copper coin	188
73	Israel gold coin	190
74	Gersem copper coin	190
75	Armah copper coin	190
76	Amphora	198
77	Map of Tigray churches	213
78	Maryam Beraqit nave	215
79	Plan of Abraha-wa-Atsbaha	216
80	Interior of Tcherqos Wukro	217
81	Gazien ceiling	219
82	Debra Selam exterior	221
83	Debra Selam screen	221
84	Table of Tigray churches	222
85	Gabri'el-Rafa'el façade	230
86	Emmanuel	232
87	Maryam exterior	233
88	Giyorgis window	233
89	Tabulation of Lalibela churches	234
90	Plan of earliest Lalibela features	236
91	Imrahana Kristos exterior	239
92	Imrahana Kristos interior	239
93	Ganata Maryam exterior	240
94	Ganata Maryam interior	241

General Introduction

Aims and sources

The aim of this book is to present a critical outline of current knowledge about the peoples who inhabited the highlands of what is now northern Ethiopia and adjacent parts of Eritrea¹ during the period between about 3000 and 700 years ago (Fig. 1). It devotes most detailed attention to the Aksumite civilisation that flourished during the first seven centuries AD but, in order to provide context, it also provides overviews of earlier and later periods within the same general region. The cut-off point at which the book's treatment ends is c. AD 1270, when major changes accompanied the establishment of the so-called Solomonic dynasty.² Overall, this was the period that saw the gradual development, from a subsistence-farming base established long previously, of a complex literate civilisation whose people erected some of the largest and most elaborate monoliths the world has ever seen, issued a unique coinage in copper, silver and gold, practised sophisticated metallurgy, ivory carving and manuscript illumination, established their rule over extensive surrounding territory including part of the Arabian peninsula, developed trade links extending from the western Mediterranean in one direction to Sri Lanka in the other, and whose Christian rulers were sought as political as well as religious allies by successive Roman and Byzantine emperors, while also maintaining the subsistence-farming, domestic architecture, and stone-tool technological traditions of their local forbears. It is now increasingly recognised that this civilisation in turn gave rise – far more strongly and directly than previously recognised – to the Christian civilisation that flourished in these highlands during more recent centuries.

My discussion focuses primarily – but by no means exclusively – upon the archaeology, but uses this material in conjunction with that derived from numerous other disciplines to compile a composite picture of the past. The beginning of this period represents – very roughly – the time when archaeological evidence ceases to be the dominant source of information that it had been for so-called prehistory, and takes the role sometimes designated as a distinct sub-discipline of historical archaeology.³

¹ For clarity, this book will sometimes refer to the region as 'the northern Ethiopian highlands' or as 'the northern Horn'. Except where the context clearly implies otherwise, references to 'Ethiopia' may be assumed to include Eritrea: occasional avoidance of repeated mentions of Eritrea implies no disrespect or disapproval of that nation's separate identity.

² I have published recent accounts of Aksumite civilisation's immediate predecessors and successors (D. Phillipson 2009c and 2009a respectively). For the changes that took place c. AD 1270, see *idem* 2009a: 22, 197.

³ Confusingly, the term 'historical archaeology' is used with varying connotations in different parts of the world. In North America, Australia and South Africa, and now – increasingly – elsewhere, it is used to designate the archaeological investigation of European colonialism from the late-fifteenth century onwards. This limited, Eurocentric and unhelpful usage is irrelevant to many other regions and is not followed in this book.

Treatment here is based on the view that archaeology is, first and foremost, a method of learning about the human past. While it can be employed alone – as, indeed, it must be in situations where no other sources of information are available – its full potential for illuminating the past can only be achieved in conjunction with all other available sources of information relating to the period and situation under discussion. Such additional sources may include written materials, whether these were indigenous to the society under study or produced by visitors from elsewhere. Knowledge of ancient languages and their inter-relationships is not derived solely from ancient writings, but may also be reconstructed on the basis of more recent spoken forms; indeed the content of many texts may have been transmitted orally for a long time before being committed to writing. Language itself, as well as the subject-matter of both its written and oral manifestations, is thus a valuable source of information about the past,⁴ although establishment of absolute chronologies for pre-literate developments remains problematic and controversial. Ancient populations depended for their food on plants and animals – whether wild or domestic – and these, like the changing environments on which these populations depended, are often the subject of separate studies by specialists working either on fossil or other ancient remains or on more recent evidence including genetics. This book provides numerous examples of the ways such sources of information may complement narrowly defined archaeology in the reconstruction of the past. It includes summaries of established views, but goes into greater detail where new evidence or interpretations require that these be reconsidered.

It is appropriate to compare these sources in terms both of their interpretation and of the information they can yield. Archaeology is based on the recovery and study of tangible remains that can often be dated directly, by comparison, or by reference to the context in which they are preserved. Such material is not restricted to portable artefacts, but may also include buildings or their components, remains of plants and animals whether or not modified or used as food, waste such as ash, slag or dung, or materials illustrative of the human environment. All have in common that – ideally – they should be demonstrably contemporary with the events or processes under study, and undisturbed since that time. In such circumstances, potential sources of error are largely restricted to the archaeologist's own observations and interpretations. Most of the information gleaned by archaeologists refers impersonally to material aspects of daily existence including economy, technology, diet and perhaps to aspects of funerary customs and political systems, but only by implication to the beliefs on which these were based. Rarely, and exclusively in the context of literate societies, can the names or identities of individual people be ascertained. Acts and their results may be reconstructed, but their reasons only indirectly inferred. Neither thoughts nor the spoken word are preserved directly in the archaeological record unless they are committed to writing. In their different ways, archaeology and the study of orally transmitted or written records can all contribute to an understanding of the past.

Inscriptions preserve only what their writer or instigator wished either to have recorded or to be seen by a particular readership. Many so-called historical texts were originally propaganda, and should be interpreted accordingly.

⁴ This is not the place for detailed evaluation of the methodologies by which information about the past can be extracted from linguistic data or from orally transmitted or written texts. For historical linguistics, the reader will find guidance – admittedly sometimes conflicting – in works by Ehret 2000 and Blench 2006, and for oral tradition in Vansina 1985. Written materials are highly diverse, those from Ethiopia giving rise to the additional complication that many texts were transmitted orally for a long time before being committed to writing.

Inscriptions on coinage similarly reflect the views – or at least the prejudices – of those responsible for its issue, although they were presumably intended for a much less narrowly defined readership.

Written documents on less permanent materials are even more difficult to interpret. In most instances, the oldest version extant today was produced long after the period to which it ostensibly relates. This may be because it was copied from an earlier version which itself no longer survives, in which case the possibilities of accidental error, emendation in the light of changed circumstances, explanatory additions which were not necessarily correct, or deliberate falsification all need to be taken into account. Alternatively, the text may initially have been composed a significant time after that period, in which case circumstances of composition and transmission, as well as sources of information, need to be considered. Perhaps information was first handed down orally and subsequently committed to writing, so that evaluation must apply different criteria for each stage. It may well be that a document surviving today combines materials that originated in diverse times and circumstances, each component of which will require appropriate interpretation.

Focus here is on the highlands of Eritrea and those of northern Ethiopia, the latter being today subsumed within the Tigray and the eastern part of the Amhara regional states. It would, however, be highly misleading to treat this area in isolation. National and international boundaries in northeastern Africa are mainly nineteenth- or twentieth-century impositions and do not necessarily have any relevance for earlier times. Furthermore, no community – today or in the past – has been able to exist in total isolation, and it would be misleading to reconstruct its history in such terms. This book will therefore frequently make reference to regions outside – sometimes far beyond – those with which it is primarily concerned. In particular, the highlands and other parts of northern and western Eritrea will sometimes be included, as will more southerly regions of Ethiopia itself and neighbouring Djibouti. Many developments in the northern Horn may only be properly understood through reference to contemporary events or processes in Arabia, the Sudanese Nile Valley, or areas even more distant.

Ambitiously, the book addresses three distinct audiences. I hope that it will prove of interest to my fellow specialists, including those whose prime interests are in areas other than the northern Horn. I have also long been struck by the lack of any reliable textbook suited to the growing numbers of archaeology students at Ethiopian universities and I hope that this work will go some way towards meeting their needs. Likewise, in many other parts of the world, there is increasing interest both in the Ethiopian past and, more generally, in the interdependence of archaeology and other historical disciplines. Finally, there are many less specialised readers – Eritreans, Ethiopians, people originating in those countries but now living elsewhere, foreigners and tourists – who desire a comprehensive account of these topics but may not wish to burden themselves with controversies and minutiae. To facilitate use by this varied readership, all bibliographical references and detailed argument, together with much discussion of disputed interpretations, have been relegated to footnotes. For those who do not wish to consult all the footnotes, I hope that the main text will provide a coherent but concise narrative, with access to detail and further guidance should these be required.

There has long been a tendency for past developments in the northern Horn to be studied in isolation, with inadequate reference to trends or events in other areas, whether neighbouring or distant, with which its inhabitants may have had contact. Equally – if not more – insidious has been the alternative viewpoint that has sought to interpret innovations in the northern Horn as

introductions from elsewhere, without adequate evaluation of the possibility of local development. These distinctions are, of course, rarely simple 'either/or' situations, but ones where far more complex interactions were almost certainly at work. Many passages in this book include discussions and evaluations of such problems which – however necessary they may be if we are to obtain a proper understanding of the northern Horn's true place in human history – are rarely conclusive. To take but one example: the Christian religion originated in the lands bordering the eastern Mediterranean and – by whatever means – must have been introduced to the Aksumite kingdom from that area. Its subsequent nurture and eventual florescence in the northern Horn may now, however, be seen as an essentially indigenous process, but one that did not take place in a complete vacuum, without contact or knowledge of trends in Christian communities elsewhere. Confusion not infrequently arises from changing application of names to the territories of the northern Horn. The name 'Ethiopia' was very loosely employed in ancient times, sometimes with particular reference to Nubia, alternatively to any area lying to the south of Egypt. Other writers divided this area between Libya west of the Nile and Ethiopia on the east. Any region east of the Nile, including the northern Horn, could also be regarded as part of India and not clearly differentiated from the peninsular South-Asian sub-continent of that name.⁵ The term 'Ethiopia', as used more recently in historical and cultural – as opposed to political – contexts, can be a somewhat artificial construct relating to what is sometimes designated culturally as the *orbis aethiopicus* or, geographically, to the greater part of the northern Horn.⁶

The current state of research

The reader of this book will immediately realise that it is based on incomplete research. In parts of the northern Horn, investigations have been restricted by political⁷ or economic factors. Needs to develop infrastructure or tourism facilities may have encouraged or hindered the investigation of ancient remains. Elsewhere such study has not yet even begun. Such research as has been undertaken has had widely varied emphases and project-designs. Epigraphical and numismatic research has sometimes been conducted in virtual isolation, with little attempt at integration with results derived from other methodologies. Results of some important archaeological investigations have remained incompletely published and thus not available either to other scholars or to the wider public. One of the aims of this book is to draw attention to these gaps in our knowledge, whatever their cause, and thus to offer a guide to needs for future research.

Published data relating to this topic are beset by two main problems. First, they are written in a variety of languages and have appeared in a wide range of journals, conference-proceedings and monographs including many whose primary focus is in fields far removed from the study of the northern Horn. Residents of Ethiopia and Eritrea themselves have a particular difficulty, in that a significant proportion of these publications are virtually impossible to

⁵ The problem is surveyed in greater detail by D. Phillipson 2009a: 3 and 2009b. See also Dihle 1964; Crone 1987: 31; Mayerson 1993.

⁶ For a not dissimilar usage of the term 'Nubia', see Adams 1993.

⁷ While political ideologies are not infrequently reflected in archaeological interpretations, related factors may encourage or prevent the conduct of field research. For example, Michels' archaeological survey strategy in 1974 had to be modified in the light of security concerns; the impracticality of excavation in Ethiopia during the 1980s encouraged important research in the adjacent Kassala area of Sudan; and – more recently – researchers from Yemen, at a time of deteriorating conditions there, have turned their attention to Tigray.

obtain in these countries and in some cases employ languages that are not widely understood there. Finally, archaeology in both Ethiopia and Eritrea has suffered disproportionately from excavations – including excellent and important ones – that have been described only in preliminary reports but of which definitive accounts have been excessively delayed, sometimes for several decades. Even more problematic are research projects known only from summaries of their conclusions, with little if any indication of the evidence on which such conclusions are based. For these reasons, this book has been provided with a comprehensive bibliography.

Despite its length, compilation of the bibliography has been selective. For each topic, I have attempted to include the most recent comprehensive account, together with primary works presenting relevant aspects that are not otherwise covered. Preliminary publications have usually been omitted, except where they include important data not subsequently repeated. For the benefit of Ethiopian and Eritrean readers, I have given priority to works published in those countries or to those in English that are likely to be readily available there. Recognising the difficulties in obtaining such African publications elsewhere, the principal foreign publications are also included, despite the duplication that may result. Where background information and comparative material are required, I have – wherever possible – referred to general works containing their own bibliographies. All works cited in this book are in the public domain: I have strictly excluded items such as unpublished university dissertations and conference presentations, reports of limited circulation like those to licensing and funding agencies, and notes in newsletters.

Despite this apparent wealth of published information, any attempt at synthesising knowledge relating to the Ethiopian past is inevitably hampered by its uneven coverage. Many aspects remain unexplored; the distribution of archaeological exploration and excavation is particularly incomplete. Particularly distressing is the amount of research that has been undertaken but of which the full results have never been made public. The account here offered is thus much less coherent than would have been possible if prompt and comprehensive publication had taken place.

Although the book aims to be authoritative, it deals with many areas where the evidence is inadequate to support a firm conclusion, and with others where differing interpretations prevail. While I have not hesitated to indicate my own scepticism and preferences, I have tried to evaluate alternatives. One of the aims of this book is to demonstrate uncertainties and lacunae, thus offering guidelines for future research.

Chronological and territorial division

Several different systems have been proposed for subdividing the period on which this book focuses; on occasion, these systems have been subjected to repeated revision – sometimes without adequate justification of definition. Difficulty has been compounded by the same period-designations being repeated with varied or even contrary definitions. In view both of the confusion to which these schemes have given rise and of the increasing chronometric precision that is now being attained, I have decided not to employ such periodisations in this book, but to set my narrative in the framework of an absolute chronology expressed in terms of years BC or AD.

A number of geographical subdivisions [*e.g.* Akkele Guzay, Agame], relating to parts of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia and dating from before the Italian colonial period are still encountered in historical and archaeological writings. They are no longer in current use and their precise delineations are rarely

understood: they are therefore not employed in this book. All distances cited, unless clearly specified otherwise, are approximate straight-line measurements, not those of routes by which it is practicable to travel.

There are no standardised or officially approved transliterations of place-names or personal names from Amharic or Tigrinya into the Roman alphabet, and numerous variants will be encountered in the European-language literature. Here, I have tried to minimise confusion by simply adopting spellings which follow established English usage and give a reasonably clear indication of how the names are pronounced locally. The symbols and diacritical marks used by linguists have been avoided. Citations in text, footnotes or bibliography of works by Ethiopian or Eritrean authors follow the established practice of those countries, using and alphabetising the first name rather than the patronymic.

Acknowledgements

The lengthy process of preparing the text and illustrations for this book has involved the advice and assistance of very many people spread across four continents. Among others, I am particularly grateful to the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies (Dr Andrew Gillett), Dr Ayele Tarekegn, Ms Eleanor Bedlow, Ms Rosalind Bedlow, Nebur'ed Belai Mersa, Dr Robert Bracey, the late Mr David Buxton, Dr Matthew Curtis, Professor Catherine D'Andrea, Dr Richard Duncan-Jones, the Ethiopian Heritage Fund (Ms Blair Priday), Professor Brian Fagan, Professor Rodolfo Fattovich, Professor François-Xavier Fauvelle-Aymar, M. Pierre Ferrand, Ato Fikru Wolde-Giorgis, Dr Niall Finneran, the late Ato Fisseha Zibelo, Ato Gebre Selassie Gebre Medhin, Professor Michael Gervers, Ato Gigar Tesfaye, Professor Wolfgang Hahn, Professor Mark Horton, the late Dr Bent Juel-Jensen, Dr Kassaye Begashaw, Professor David Killick, Professor Michael Knibb, Professor Manfred Kropp, Dr Marlia Mango, Dr Bill Manley, Dr Andrea Manzo, the late Mr Derek Matthews, Dr Jacques Mercier, the late Professor Merid Wolde Aregay, Professor Joseph Michels, the late Dr Stuart Munro-Hay, Dr Claudia Näsr, Mr Gwil Owen, Mr Crispin Paine, Professor Peter Parsons, Dr Jacke Phillips, Dr Tacye Phillipson, Mr Graham Reed, Mr Eric Robson, Dr Delwen Samuel, Professor Peter Schmidt, the late Dr Roger Schneider, the late Dr Sergew Hable Selassie, Dr Luisa Sernicola, Ato Solomon Tekle, Dr Federica Sulas, Abba Tekla Haimonot Asseyahegn, Ato Tekle Hagos, Professor Steffen Wenig, Mr Vincent West, and Dr Pawel Wolf. None of these, of course, carries any responsibility for errors, omissions or other shortcomings.

I have greatly benefited from the help provided at several libraries, notably those at the British Museum (Department of Coins and Medals), Gonville and Caius College (Cambridge), the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, the Royal Numismatic Society, the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), the Society of Antiquaries of London, the University of Cambridge, the Institute of Archaeology at University College London, the Victoria and Albert Museum (National Art Library), and – until early in 2011 – North Yorkshire County Libraries (Skipton).

Funding for the research on which this book is based has, over the years, been generously provided by the British Academy (including a grant from the Chittick Fund), the British Institute in Eastern Africa, the Trustees of the British Museum, the Master and Fellows of Gonville and Caius College, the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, the National Geographic Society (USA), the Natural Environment Research Council (UK), the Society of Antiquaries of London, and the University of Cambridge.

Lastly, but most importantly, the book has been immeasurably improved by the criticism and suggestions of Dr Laurel Phillipson who has read repeated drafts of the entire text.

Part One

Before Aksum

The Northern Horn 3000 Years Ago

This chapter surveys the lamentably incomplete evidence that is available about the inhabitants of the northern Horn during the period immediately preceding the appearance of literate complex societies early in the first millennium BC. There are indications that at least some sections of the region's population may have practised a farming lifestyle, but much of the evidence is secondary, comprising inferences from later trends. It was not until the 1970s that archaeologists working in the northern Horn began to take an interest in ancient domestic economies, and not until the 1990s that concerted efforts were made to recover materials on which their reconstruction might be based. Economic matters were only rarely recorded in traditional histories, whether transmitted orally or in written form. In the absence of primary information, other sources were perforce emphasised.

Ancient visitors to the region noted relevant details only tangentially, and it was not until the sixteenth century that travellers began to arrive who were interested in recording conditions that prevailed in other than political spheres, and in the day-to-day lifestyles of the rural inhabitants. Such visitors were, in contrast to their predecessors, often particularly concerned with the possibilities of religious conversion, settlement by missionaries or exploitation of natural resources. Plants, animals and foodstuffs were often described by comparison with those about which the visitors were already knowledgeable, and the resultant terminology may be incorrect or difficult to interpret. It is tempting to take the conditions observed between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries as reflecting those of earlier times, but caution is needed. Many travellers to the northern Horn at this time were seeking opportunities for exploitation and settlement by outsiders; they may thus have tended to exaggerate the favourable aspects of prevailing conditions. There is, however, evidence that the local climate from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries was particularly productive, with rainfall and other factors permitting excellent harvests – often more than one per year in some places.¹ An apparent deterioration in productivity during the twentieth century has undoubtedly been linked with the enormous increase in human population brought about by a combination of improved medical facilities and the discouragement of homicidal activities. Caution is thus needed in the application of recent 'ethnoarchaeological' observations to the interpretation of ancient conditions.²

¹ See, for example, Beckingham & Huntingford 1954: 45; Barradas 1996: 12, 119.

² Studies relevant to this area include those by D'Andrea *et al.* 1999, Lyons & D'Andrea 2003 and Lyons 2007a, 2007b. Such research can indeed provide valuable insights into many areas of ancient life – including, but by no means restricted to, economic and technological practices – but changing circumstances may sometimes invalidate their direct application.

It is inappropriate to consider the exploitation of domestic plants and animals as a unitary phenomenon since these activities occupied distinct – not always interconnected – niches in economic practice; consideration of both under the single rubric ‘food-production’ is even more misleading as many of the benefits derived from domestic species were in non-dietary areas.³

Terrain

The northern Horn of Africa has long formed a distinct cultural area, despite being currently divided by a political frontier that is both disputed and increasingly impermeable. One of its defining characteristics is its separateness, and this is partly due to its physical diversity. A detailed description of physical geography falls outside the scope of this book.⁴ It may simply be noted that the region comprises highlands that are bounded on the east by the precipitous escarpment bordering the Danakil lowlands and the Red Sea. To the west, the country descends more gradually to the extensive plains of the Nile Valley but is risen by the rugged valleys of the Takezze and other Nile tributaries. In the north, with decreasing altitude, the terrain becomes progressively more arid as the Sudanese lowlands converge with the Red-Sea coast. It is only to the south that the highlands continue, linking them with the principal mass of the Ethiopian plateau, near the western edge of which lies Lake Tana and the source of the Blue Nile. The greater part of the northern plateau is tilted down towards the west and drains to the Nile, resulting in a network of deeply eroded valleys that still form major impediments to inter-regional communication.

Climatic and environmental conditions in these isolated highlands have for a very long time supported human lifestyles that contrast markedly with those in surrounding areas. Even within the highlands, communication between populations only a few kilometres apart may be so difficult that distinct cultural traditions developed and were maintained. There is thus a danger that incomplete coverage of research may result in underestimated diversity and unjustified generalisations.

People and languages

Most inhabitants of this land have long supported themselves by farming, being both cultivators of crops and herders of livestock, foraging for wild resources – whether animal or vegetable – being of progressively decreasing significance.⁵ It is likely, however, that minority peoples of diverse economy – herders and, perhaps, hunter-gatherers – were also present throughout the period here considered. The different languages that are spoken all belong to the extensive family known as Afroasiatic.⁶ In the northern Horn, these languages fall

³ For discussion of these points in a wider African context, see D. Phillipson 2005: 169.

⁴ Useful accounts have been published by Abul-Haggag 1961 for the physical geography and by Simoons 1960 for the human, but the best way to appreciate the terrain is to view it from the air. Note that the ‘northern Ethiopia’ discussed in Abul-Haggag’s book is, effectively, the modern Eritrea.

⁵ For details, emphasising traditional practices, see Simoons *op. cit.* Innovations that have taken place within recent centuries, while extensive, are not relevant in the context of this book. The possible origins of the domestic plants and animals involved are discussed below and in Chapters 3 and 10.

⁶ For a general treatment of African linguistic classification, see Heine & Nurse 2000. The Afroasiatic languages are considered in chapter 4 of that book (Hayward 2000), in historical perspective by Blench (2006: 139–62), and – with more detailed emphasis on the Horn in recent times – by Bender *et al.* 1976.