The Fall of Aksum

Aksum’s cultural and technological achievements enabled it to last for 800 years. The kingdom finally declined, however, under invaders who practiced the religion called Islam (ih•LAHM). Its founder was the prophet Muhammad; by his death in 632, his followers had conquered all of Arabia. In Chapter 10, you will learn more about Islam and Muhammad. This territory included Aksum’s lands on the Arabian coast of the Red Sea.

Islamic Invaders Between 632 and 750 Islamic invaders conquered vast territories in the Mediterranean world, spreading their religion as they went. (See the map on page 261.) Aksum protected Muhammad’s family and followers during their rise to power. As a result, initially they did not invade Aksum’s territories on the African coast of the Red Sea. Retaining control of that coastline enabled Aksum to remain a trading power.

Before long, though, the invaders seized footholds on the African coast as well. In 710 they destroyed Adulis. This conquest cut Aksum off from the major ports along both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. As a result, the kingdom declined as an international trading power. But it was not only Aksum’s political power that weakened. Its spiritual identity and environment were also endangered.

Aksum Isolated As the invaders spread Islam to the lands they conquered, Aksum became isolated from other Christian settlements. 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.

Although the kingdom of Aksum reached tremendous heights and left a lasting legacy in its religion, architecture, and agriculture, it never expanded outside a fairly small area. This is a pattern found in other cultures, both in Africa and around the world. In the next chapter, you will study the pattern as it played out among the native peoples of North and South America.

TERMS & NAMES

1. Aksum
2. Adulis
3. Ezana
4. terraces

USING YOUR NOTES

2. Which of Aksum’s achievements has continued into modern times?

MAIN IDEAS

3. How did Aksum’s location help make it a trade city?
4. Why did the people of Aksum become Christians?
5. Why did Aksum’s leaders move their capital?

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

6. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS How did Aksum’s location and interaction with other regions affect its development?
7. ANALYZING CAUSES Why did the kingdom of Aksum decline?
8. EVALUATING DECISIONS What impact did Ezana’s decision to become a Christian have on the kingdom of Aksum?
9. WRITING ACTIVITY [POWER AND AUTHORITY] Write an opinion paper on the following statement: The kingdom of Aksum would have reached the same heights even if Ezana had not become king.

INTERNET ACTIVITY

Use the Internet to trace the beginnings of the Ethiopian dynasties to the Aksum kings. Then create an Ethiopian dynasty family tree showing the dynasty in power until late in the 20th century.