

June 19, 1969 – Ancient Coins of Ethiopia

There are many Axumite coins. We know of several thousands, kept in public collections at Addis Ababa, or in European Museums; others are in private collections. These coins are of great importance for knowledge of the history of ancient Ethiopia, because the names of the greater of the Axumite kings are known only by them. They are made of gold, silver and bronze. Their dimensions vary from 22mm in diameter to 8mm for the smallest of them. Very often the figure of the king, crowned or uncrowned, appears either on one face or on both, as a bust or only in profile turned to the right.

With Ezana (IVth century) the cross makes its appearance on the coins, taking the place of the astral symbol – a disc on a crescent – of the Ethio-Sabeian religion used before Christianity. The legends are either in Greek or in old Ethiopian.

As these coins are not dated, their classification is very uncertain. They give us the name of 24 kings, the first of whom was probably Endybis (IIIrd century A.D.), and the last one Hataza (VIIIth century).

Endybis: IIIrd century A. D.

This silver coin, with marked relief, is the most beautiful of the Axumite coins. Inscription in Greek; obverse: "Endybis king"; reverse: "of the Axumite's of the race of Dakhu". Above the king's head is the astral symbol, a disc on a crescent.

Ezana: IVth century.

This coin is made of gold. Ezana was the most famous of the Axumite kings. We know many events of his reign thanks to lapidary inscriptions in Axum. One may think that during his reign this king exercised some sort of supremacy over foreign countries. It is known that Ethiopia ruled South Arabia around 335 A.D. The adoption of the Christian religion was an important event of Ezana's reign. With this king the cross makes its appearance on the coin, instead of the disc on the crescent. The old traditional religion of South Arabian origin was, at least at the court, abandoned and Christianity took its place. During the days of Ezana, the royal town of Axum was probably embellished with a number of monuments, some of those, we still see, may date back to this period.

Kaleb: VIth century.

This coin is made of gold. Kaleb was, with Ezana, one of the most famous kings of ancient Ethiopia. Kaleb is known in some Greek texts under the name of Ellesbaas, which derives from the Ethiopian Ella-Atsbeha, one of Kaleb's names, called also, according to tradition, Kostantinos and Dawit. Around 525, backed by Byzantium, he led a military expedition to Arabia in order to end the persecution of the Christians by the Jewish king of south Arabia. Kaleb may also have wanted to recover a country that, long ago, was under Axumite influence.

Armah: VIIth century.

This coin is made of bronze. The legend "King Armah" is in old Ethiopian. On this coin the king is shown seated on his throne, in profile, wearing his crown. During his reign this king had good relations with Mohamed and Islam in its early beginning.

Wazena: VIIIth century.

This coin is made of bronze. King Wazena is known only by his coins. For several Axumite kings, known only by their coins, such as Wazena and Gerssem, the dates mentioned are probable but not absolutely certain.

Gersem: VIIIth century.

This coin is made of gold. Gersem is only known by the coins bearing his name. Some of these bear, on the reverse the following legend in old Ethiopian: "By Christ you will win".