

PRE-HISTORY

The earliest hominoid remains in Eritrea date from two million years ago, placing the land near the dawn of humankind on the planet. Stone tools from Abdur at 125,000 years old are the earliest, best-dated evidence for human occupation of a coastal marine environment. Tools found in the Barka Valley from 8000BC are the first evidence of human settlement here. Rock paintings have been found in several sites dating from 2000BC. So far, fifty-one prehistoric sites have been identified across Eritrea, from Karora in the north to Beylul in the southeast, but many more are expected to be discovered in the coming years. The earliest inhabitants of Eritrea were probably related to the central Africa pygmies. They later co-mingled with Nilotic, Kushitic, and Semitic peoples who migrated here from as far away as the Nubian lowlands. The legendary land of Punt so referred to by the Egyptian pharaohs was the target of major expeditions during 2920-2649 BC; for the area was rich in gold, frankincense, myrrh, ostrich feathers, ebony, ivory and other precious commodities.

Ancient Empire

The Adulite Era (9th Century BC- 5th Century AD): For nearly 1,400 years, the Red Sea coastal city-state of Adulis functioned as a major regional centre for commerce and trade. Other important cultural centres also arose during this period in the Eritrean interior, linked by trade with each other and the African hinterland and only now coming under archaeological scrutiny. Among them were extensive settlements circumscribing modern-day Asmara and large sites at Qohaito, Tekhonda'e and Keskse (near Adi keih), at Metera (near senafe) and at Der'a (near Halhal), with more discovered each year.

Greek and Egyptian hunting and trading posts were established on coastal and highland Eritrea in the 3rd century BC and later. Obsidian (volcanic glass) taken from the coastal waters and Red Sea tortoise shell were among the most highly valued items in regional commerce, which also included rhino horn, elephant tusk, frankincense and hippopotamus hides from the interior.

The Axumite Empire (1st-9th century AD)



The Axumite Empire, centred in the Eritrean highlands and what is now northern Ethiopia, flourished for nearly a thousand years. At its height in the 3rd and 4th centuries, Axum's domains stretched across the Red Sea to include much of modern Yemen. This kingdom, at times allied with the Byzantine Empire, was the avenue through which Christianity penetrated northeast Africa in the 4th century. In 615, prior to his victory at Mecca, the prophet Mohammed also sent fifteen of his followers to Adulis in an attempt to counter Byzantine power in the region, making Eritrea one of the earliest non-Arabian sites for contact with Islam.

Axumite power began to decline in the 7th century and collapsed under the strain of internal and external pressures over the next 200 years. Much of its territory in Eritrea was conquered by the Bejas, who were expanding southward from Sudan. An independent Islamic kingdom also arose

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Written by shabait Administrator
Wednesday, 14 October 2009 08:01 -

in the Dahlak islands during this period. As Axum's authority disintegrated, its main language, Ge'ez, evolved into two of the widest spoken languages in Eritrea, Tigre, and Tigrinya.

The Five Beja Kingdom (8th-13th Century):

Starting as early as the 4th century, the Beja, a Cushitic people, originating in Sudan, began making incursions into Axumite territory along the sea coast and in the highlands of north-western Eritrea. Five distinct but interrelated Beja kingdoms at their height stretched from southern Egypt to north central Eritrea. An offshoot, known as the Bellou kingdom, flourished from the 13th to the 16th century in parts of western Eritrea and eastern Sudan. The descendants of another, the Hedareb (also known by their language, T'bdawe), inhabit northern Eritrea today.

The Bahre Negash 14th-18th Century)

The kingdom of the 'Sea kingdoms' or Bahre Negash, arose in highland Eritrea in the 14th century and stretched from the Mereb River to the seacoast, encompassing the core of modern Eritrea. Its ruler, confirmed by a Council of Elders, presided and paid tribute to the Abyssinian king to the south.

The authority of the Bahre Negashes declined in the 18th century, as the region descended into clan warfare that lasted more than 100 years. Abyssinian kings from neighbouring Tigray brought sections of the Eritrean highlands under their rule during the last half of the 19th century, but their dominion ended with the entry of the Italians in the 1880s.

The Ottoman Turks (15th-19th centuries) arrived in the Eritrean coast at the start of the 16th century, carving out an enclave from the realm of the Bahre Negash. For the next 300 years, they controlled large sections of the northern Eritrean shoreline, including the port of Massawa, which became the capital of what they called Habesh province, but they failed to sustain control of lands in the interior, despite several attempts to penetrate the plateau.

Egypt (1846-85): In 1846, Mohammed Ali's forces took control of Ottoman Habesh and enlarged it by annexing adjacent independently-ruled Eritrean regions in Bogos and Danakil. Egyptian forces also expanded into western Eritrea from the Sudanese town of Kessala, though they suffered major losses when they tried to drive further inland. After Egyptian rule was toppled in Sudan during the Mahdist uprising of 1888, Cairo's authority in Eritrea collapsed.

MODERN COLONIAL RULE

Italian Colonization (1881-1941): The Italians established an outpost at Assab in 1881, which they used as a base to move northward toward Massawa as Egyptian power declined. Four years later, they annexed the province of Habesh. On January 1st 1890, the Italian king proclaimed the colony of Eritrea, with the port of Massawa as its capital.

Italy's attempts to drive south into Abyssinia were repelled by the Shoan King Menelik II at the 1896 Battle of Adua. Soon after this, Menelik and the king of Italy signed the Treaty of Addis Ababa, recognizing Italian claims in Eritrea up to the Mereb River. A year later, Italy moved Eritrea's capital to Asmara.

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