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Archaeology and Historical Dynamics: the Case of Bieta Giyorgis (Aksum), Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will emphasise the contribution of the archaeological (material) record — integrated with historical (written) evidence — to more carefully reconstruct and model historical dynamics. In my opinion, modelling particular historical dynamics, rather than general cultural processes, is the primary task of archaeologists, historians and anthropologists. For this purpose, I shall use the evidence that the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples (Italy) and Boston University (USA) are collecting at Bieta Giyorgis, to the NW of Aksum (Northern Ethiopia), as part of the joint IUO - BU Aksum Archaeological Project in progress since 1993 under the direction of Kathryn A. Bard (BU) and myself.

My basic argument (and fear) is that archaeology as a ‘scientific’ investigation of the past — despite some apparent signals of growth (e.g. Feinman, Nicholas and Middleton 1992; Sherratt 1993) — is at a crossroad, and the survival of the discipline itself depends on archaeologists being able to redefine their role in society (see also Yoffee and Sherratt 1993: 1-2; Sherratt 1993).

At present, we are witnessing a progressive decrease in public, academic, and political interest about the study of the past. This is clearly reflected in the reduction of research funds, which is occurring everywhere.¹

The public indisputably shows a remarkable curiosity about ancient peoples, but this remains superficial. Archaeology is usually associated with spectacular discoveries, rather than with the reconstruction of human history and an explanation of human diversity.

In academic circles, most scholars of the social sciences and other disciplines — except for those directly practising archaeology and ancient history — think that archaeology is a superfluous discipline which only satisfies an in-

¹ In Italy this is true with reference to the archaeological activity abroad.

AION, 57/1-2 (1997)
tellectual curiosity about the past or provides museums and private collections with artefacts. Historians, in particular, often regard archaeology as a secondary source of information about the past. In turn, many economists, political scientists and sociologists, dealing with current problems of social and economic development and political affairs, consider the knowledge of the ancient and medieval past as irrelevant for understanding the present, and usually restrict their historical analyses of contemporary events and trends to the past few centuries, if not decades. It is not by chance that secondary school curricula tend to exclude the teaching of ancient and medieval history.

The political concern – if any – about archaeology is limited to the economic value of the archaeological heritage, and sometimes to its ideological meaning.

Today, archaeological heritage management is practically imposed as a basic task for archaeologists, and we are more and more required to train technicians for recovering, inventorying and conserving the heritage than scholars analysing and interpreting the past (Fattovich 1991). A radical consequence of this trend might eventually be to prevent field research through excavations (Elia 1993). This already occurs in some countries such as Eritrea.

Finally, the insubstantiality of many theoretical polemics – mainly between processual and post-processual archaeologists – has discredited archaeology as a serious discipline in front of other 'social sciences', such as, for example, linguistics, historiography, economics, which apparently have more rigorous analytical procedures (see also Kohl 1993).

The only way archaeology can avoid becoming obsolete, and eventually disappearing as a proper discipline in a short time, is to stress the link between the study of the past and the present, as well as the contribution of archaeology to reconstructing, modelling and explaining long-term trends which generated the present system of international relations and international political economy, and to development studies (see also Frank and Gills 1996). In other words, archaeology will survive only if the discipline will be able to contribute to the analysis of present political and economic problems. The basic assumptions are: a) the present political and economic world system is the result of a dynamic re-adjustment of the different socio-economic systems to combined environmental and external economic/political pressures, which evolved through time and must be examined from a long-term perspective to be properly understood. b) Past and present are a continuum, which must be investigated in its complexity, if we want to identify the dynamic forces which are active in the present and are modelling the future.

This means that archaeology must be integrated with history, anthropology, and historical linguistics, as well as the environmental sciences in a wide-ranging diachronic analysis of the particular processes which caused the origins and development of the single peoples and their interactions, from prehistory to the present at a local, regional and global scale (see Fattovich 1990a).
In my opinion, this will require the training of a new type of professional, a "historical analyst", who is able to model true historical processes for a more careful explanation of the present and an interpretation of possible future trends (see also Hayes 1993).

1. Archaeology as 'Anthropological History'

From the standpoint of historical analysis, archaeology can be defined as the discipline aimed at reconstructing and explaining particular historical processes which led to the emergence of the present situation, on the basis of the material evidence of past human activities (see also Renfrew and Bahn 1991). This definition stresses that archaeology is both an anthropological and a historical discipline (see also Trigger 1991; Sherratt 1993), as it focuses on the structural history (i.e. ethnogenesis, and socio-economic and cognitive development) of the single peoples, and their interaction as part of larger political and economic systems (see also Champion 1989; Shennan 1989; Schortman 1989). In such a way, archaeology is related to 'anthropological history' as meant by the French school of the 'Annales' (see e.g. Le Goff and Nora 1974; Knapp 1987).

Environmental archaeology is a particularly promising area of research for historical analysis (Butzer 1982, 1990; Joehim 1990; Hastorf 1990). This approach, dealing with changes in man-environment interaction through time, can contribute to a more detailed explanation of recurrent phenomena, such as draughts and famines. Environmental archaeology can also provide a more complete record of catastrophic events (e.g. volcanic eruptions and earthquakes) which occurred in the past for a better understanding of their possible periodicity. In such a way, archaeology may contribute not only to outlining historical dynamics, but also to developing regional planning programs (e.g. Dramis and Fattovich 1994).

2. Reconstructing Historical Processes

A 'historical process' can be defined as the set of particular ecological, socio-economic and cultural transformations that characterised the history of single populations through time and affected their biology and demography (Fattovich 1990a).

These processes basically correspond to the social evolutionary trajectories suggested by Yoffee as a foundation to a 'new social evolutionary theory' (Yoffee 1993). Historical processes consist of the sequence of changes at different spatial scales in the complex system of interactions: a) between human populations and the physical environment; b) between human population and the biotic environment (animal and plants); c) among different populations;
d) among the members of a single population (see also Crumley 1994; Winterhalder 1994). They are characterised by changes in collective behavioural patterns. These changes depend on the choices made by single individuals or small groups. These choices in turn must be accepted in a consensual or coercive way by a large number of individuals to generate new formal behavioural patterns. Changes in the cognitive system of single populations are thus crucial in the dynamics of historical processes as they can modify the peoples’ sense of cultural identity (see also Assmann 1992).

Historical processes can be investigated as a sequence of particular and unrepeatable events, as well as a progressive readjustment of single socio-economic and cognitive systems to internal pressures (e.g. cultural innovations; social strain) and/or external ones (e.g. environmental fluctuations; economic/political changes in other regions; cultural influences from other regions). The former investigation basically pertains historians. The latter one is the area of archaeologists’ research (see also Crumley 1994).

Historical processes can be examined at different spatial scales: a) a global scale (world history), for understanding the rise and decline of global systems of socio-economic interactions through time (e.g. McNeill 1976; Abu-Lughod 1989; Frank and Gills 1996); b) a regional scale, for reconstructing the development of one people or the dynamics of peopling in a specific region through time (e.g. Trigger, Kemp, O’Connor, Lloyd 1983; Kemp 1989; Bard 1997); and c) at a local scale, for outlining the changes in just one community.

Finally, the reconstruction requires a long-term perspective, over centuries or millennia, abandoning the traditional distinction between prehistory and history (see also Lightfoot 1995).

Since the early 1980s three research projects in such a perspective have and are been carried out by the Laboratory for Archaeology of the Department of African and Arabian Studies at the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples:

1. The Red Sea Trade Circuit Project, started in 1982, investigates the development of the interchange circuit between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, from the 3rd millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD (e.g. Fattovich 1996a, b, c).

2. The Gash Delta Archaeological Project, started in 1980, investigates the dynamics of peopling along the Eritrean-Sudanese borderland from the sixth millennium BC to the eighteenth century AD (e.g. Fattovich 1990b, 1994a).

3. The I.U.O./B.U. Aksum Archaeological Project, started in 1993, investigates the development of Ethiopia’s ancient capital city, from late prehistory to medieval times (see e.g. Fattovich and Bard in press).
3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL VERSUS TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Combining archaeological and textual evidence is crucial to reconstruct a historical process for periods when written sources are available. In fact, such evidence provides us with different perceptions of the past (see also Lightfoot 1995).

Archaeological evidence consists of the material remains of past cultures (artefacts; ecofacts; human remains) in their palaeoenvironmental context. This evidence provides a decayed and fragmentary record of ancient human activities (see Schiffer 1987). Yet, today archaeological research procedures are sophisticated enough to allow a reliable reconstruction of the way of life of ancient peoples and their changes through time (e.g. Renfrew and Bahn 1991; contra Shanks and Tilley 1987).

Textual evidence consists of a great variety of documents, ranging from literary texts to chronicles, administrative records, and ceremonial or votive inscriptions. Sometimes, these documentary sources provide a detailed narrative account of past events, and relevant information about socialorganisation, the economy and beliefs of ancient populations and their transformations through time (e.g. Topolski 1975). Written sources, however, are ideologically biased, as they reflect the way the external world and events were perceived and interpreted, and information was selected and transmitted by contemporary people in order to legitimate social order and create a collective memory for consolidating cultural and political identity (Assmann 1992).

Archaeological and textual evidence can be complementary to each other, although sometimes they can contradict each other. They are the two sides of the same coin. Archaeological evidence is the material record of the same culture written sources describe and interpret.

In a historical analysis, archaeological and textual evidence can be combined in different ways:

a) merely integrating both kinds of evidence in one narrative description of the ‘history’ of a region or people (e.g. Grimal 1988; Fattovich 1990a).

b) testing on the archaeological evidence hypotheses derived from written sources (e.g. Fattovich and Bard 1994).

c) devising separate models of the process under investigation based on material and written evidence, and comparing them. Linguistics can provide a third possible model to be compared with the other ones. As far as these models agree, we can presume that they are correct. If they disagree, we must try to understand why they are inconsistent, as the reality is somewhere in between (e.g. Fattovich 1996c).

d) directly correlating archaeological and textual evidence in order to evaluate how much they complement each other. This means i) to treat dated information from written sources as archaeological evidence; ii) to interpolate
it into a well-established archaeological sequence; and iii) to check whether they correspond to each other or not.

4. THE I.U.O. / B.U. AKSUM ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Aksum was the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Aksum (1st millennium AD). The town is still the main religious centre of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and a very important symbol of Ethiopian cultural identity. Aksum is also one of the major archaeological areas in Ethiopia, and is included in the UNESCO ‘World Heritage’ list.

The investigation of Aksum and its hinterland is particularly relevant to understanding the process of state formation in the Horn of Africa, as well as in NE Africa in general. This investigation can also largely contribute to a more detailed reconstruction of the historical dynamics which led to the emergence of modern Ethiopia, as the Ethio-Semitic Christian civilisation, one of the most important cultural components in the Horn of Africa, originated in the Aksumite culture.

Aksum is located in northern Tigray, ca. 25 km to the West of Adua (fig. 1). The town is dominated to the north by the hills of Bieta Giyorgis and Mai Qoho, separated by a narrow valley cut by the Mai Hejja (fig. 2). At present, the remains of the ancient capital city are partly covered by the modern town.

The archaeological area of Aksum (Littmann, Krencker and von Lupke 1913; Monneret de Villard 1938; Anfay 1972; Godet 1977; Munro-Hay 1989) includes:

1) The settlement area of the ancient capital city, with traces of high status residential palaces at the base of Bieta Giyorgis and low to middle status houses along the Mai Hejja valley, between Bieta Giyorgis and Mai Qoho (see also Phillipson 1995; Phillipson and Reynolds 1996).

2) The funerary area with stelae fields and pit or hypogeae tombs, including the monumental royal cemetery (‘Stela Park’), along the Mai Hejja and at the base of Mai Qoho (Pl. Ia).

3) The remains of the ancient Christian cathedral at the centre of the archaeological area.

4) The Gudit stelae field and the so-called ‘Tomb of Menelik’, to the Southwest and west of Bieta Giyorgis, respectively.

5) Bieta Giyorgis hill, with a settlement site (Ona Nagast) and a funerary area with stelae and rock-cut tombs (Ona Enda Aboi Zeuge) on the top of the hill, and the remains of two ancient churches on the south-western slopes (see also Ricci and Fattovich 1988; Ricci 1990).

6) Mai Qoho hill, with two large hypogeae tombs (Enda Kaleb and Gabra Masqal) and other pit-tombs.

Many small sites have been also recorded around the main archaeological area (Michels 1994).
Fig. 1 – Map of North Ethiopia with location of Aksum.

Fig. 2 – Aksum archaeological area.
The origins and development of the capital city, and the kingdom as well, are still uncertain. The kingdom of Aksum surely dominated the northern Horn of Africa from the third to the seventh centuries AD, and was a very important commercial and in the seventh century political partner of the Roman and Byzantine empires along the Red Sea trade route. At present, it seems that the kingdom consolidated in the first-second centuries AD and declined in the seventh century, apparently disappearing in the tenth century. The use of coinage since the late third century AD was a remarkable aspect of the Aksumite kingdom. The introduction of Christianity as a state religion in the fourth century was the most crucial event in the history of the kingdom (Conti Rossini 1928; Kobishchanov 1979; Munro-Hay 1991).


The multi-disciplinary project includes research in geology/geomorphology, archaeology, palaeoethnobotany and palynology, archaeozoology, ethnoarchaeology and ethnology, and history, as well as systematic topographic mapping, and conservation. In the first five years (1993-1997), the project's goal was to investigate the origins and development of Aksum within its environmental setting. The area of Bieta Giyorgis was chosen to test in the field the hypothesis (based on Ethiopian traditional sources) that the hill was an early residence of the Aksumite kings in pre-Christian times (Fattovich and Bard 1993). In the scheduled second phase of five years (1998-2002), the research is designed to include earlier (late prehistoric) and later (medieval and pre-modern) periods in order to outline the process of regional development from the second millennium BC to the nineteenth century AD.

In 1993-97, excavations were conducted at two sites: Ona Enda Aboi Zeuge (OAZ), a funerary area; and Ona Nagast (ON), a settlement area (fig. 3). They confirmed that the top of Bieta Giyorgis was occupied, apparently continuously, from the mid-1st millennium BC to the mid- to late second millennium AD. A reconnaissance of the area, moreover, suggested a possible occupation in late prehistoric times.

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2 Funding for this project has been provided to the Italian partner by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE), Rome; the National Council for the Research (CNR), Rome; the Ministry for the University and for Scientific and Technological Research (MURST), research funds 60%, Rome, and to the American partner by the National Geographic Society, Washington D.C.; the African Studies Center, Boston University, Boston.
Fig. 3 – Map of Ona Nagast and Ona Enda Aboi Zewge.
At present, the results of the excavations at OAZ and ON indicate:

1. Bieta Giyorgis was occupied in the mid-1st millennium BC, when an Ethio-Sabean state arose on the plateau (Pre-Aksumite Phase, ca. 800/700-400/300 BC).

2. Immediately after the decline and/or collapse of the Ethio-Sabean state, a monumental building (pl. I b) and a manmade stone platform with stelae (pl. IIa) and pit-graves (pl. IIb) were erected at ON and OAZ, respectively. They were associated with a pottery already in an Aksumite style (Proto-Aksumite Phase, ca. 400/300-100 BC).

3. In the early first millennium AD a monumental architectural complex was built at ON (pl. III) and large rock-cut tombs associated with stelae (pl. IVa) were arranged at OAZ. At this time, barley, wheat, and teff (*Eragrostis teff*) were cultivated in the area of Aksum (Early Aksumite/pre-Christian Phase, ca. 100 BC-AD 350/400).

4. By the late 3rd century AD OAZ was no longer used as a cemetery. The ‘palace’ at ON continued to be used in the fifth century AD (Transitional Early/Middle Aksumite Phase, ca. AD 370-520; pl. IVb).

5. In the second half of the first millennium AD the ‘palace’ at ON was definitely in use, and possibly restored. At this time, wheat, barley, teff, grapes, legumes, and flax were cultivated in the area of Aksum (Middle Aksumite Phase, ca. AD 520-650).

6. In the late first to mid-second millennia AD only compounds were located at ON and OAZ (Late Aksumite and Post-Aksumite Phase, ca. AD 700-1500).

The occurrence of many imported ceramics and glass has improved our knowledge of Aksum’s commercial role and the progressive inclusion of the kingdom in the Red Sea trade network, between the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean from the first century to the seventh century AD. Finally, a firmer chronology of the Aksumite kingdom is currently established on the basis of calibrated radiocarbon dates (Bard et al. 1997; Bard and Fattovich, in press; Fattovich and Bard 1995, 1996).

These results are largely modifying the previous history of Aksum. The evidence suggests a more accurate sequence of development of the Aksumite culture and a more detailed reconstruction of the history of the capital city.

5. ‘PHASING’ ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

‘Phasing’ and dating the stratigraphic evidence was a primary task of the research team, in order to outline a more careful cultural and chronological sequence of the development of Aksum (Fattovich and Bard 1995, 1996; Bard et al. 1997).
The excavations at OAZ and ON were conducted using ‘Excavation Units’ (EU), 10 x 10 m in area (fig. 3). Each unit was divided into a grid of 25 squares, 2 x 2 m in area, in order to maintain topographic control of the finds. The 2 x 2 m² were recorded by means of an alpha-numerical matrix with A to E along the WE axis, 1 to 5 along the NS axis (from A1 to the NW to E5 to the SW). Plans of the excavation were systematically drawn (e.g. fig. 4).

![Fig. 4 – Ona Nagast, ON V 1996. Plan.](image)

The EUs were dug in conformity with the ‘stratigraphic unit’ (SU) procedure suggested by E. Harris (1989). Each SU was described on a form recording: 1) name of the site; 2) Excavation Unit number; 3) grid number (2 x 2 m²); 4) SU number; 5) SU description; 6) elevations at the top and bottom of the SU; 7) type and density of artefacts and ecofacts; 8) vertical and horizontal position in the matrix.
'Soil strata' (i.e., discrete deposits resulting from the combined action of natural and cultural factors) and 'features' (i.e., all manmade spatially organised structures), as well as their vertical and horizontal relationships, were regarded as the basic components of the stratigraphic sequence. Soil strata over 20 cm in thickness were excavated distinguishing artificial levels, ca. 5-10 cm deep, in order to follow their possible internal stratigraphy.

All artefacts and ecofacts, together with samples of charcoal for radiocarbon dating and soil for laboratory analysis, were collected. The colour of the soil strata, pottery and glass was described by means of the *Munsell Soil Color Charts* (1994).

Different analytical descriptive procedures were adopted for the interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence:

a) The SU sequence was represented with a 'Harris Matrix' describing each unit in order to make easily understandable the relationship among walls, wall collapse, room fill and floors (e.g. fig. 5).

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 5 – Ona Nagast, ON III 1995. Matrix.**

b) The (traditional) profiles of each wall of the trenches were traced to record the vertical correlations of strata and features (e.g. fig. 6).

c) An axonometric view of constructed stone walls was elaborated using the Autocad program, in order to graphically describe the different phases of construction (e.g. fig. 7).
d) Compressed sections of features were drawn in order to generate in a profile the vertical and horizontal relationships of the SUs, recording the possible calibrated C14 dates of the SUs (e.g. fig. 8).

Fig. 6 – Ona Nagast, ON VI 1995. Stratigraphic profile.

Fig. 7 – Ona Nagast, ON V 1995. Axonometric view
chronic changes in the patterns of external contacts through time (Manzo 1996; Bard et al. 1997). This evidence pointed to:

\( a) \) the occurrence of contacts with \( i) \) South Arabia and Nubia in the Proto-

![Diagram](image)

*1) Metal blades and slags
*2) Coins 7th Century A.D.
*3) Coins 7th Century A.D.
*4) Coins 7th Century A.D.

Fig. 8 – Ona Nagast, ON XIII 1998. Compressed section.

In such a way, the diachronic (stratigraphic) correlation of phases of wall construction, floors, room fill, and wall collapse was outlined.

The cultural ‘phasing’ of the SUs was based on pottery occurrences (in terms of types and frequencies) in the units.

The pottery was classified by means of an open attribute list specifically constructed for the Aksumite ceramics, and a typological sequence was inferred from the changes in ‘types’ and their relative frequencies in the stratigraphic sequence (Perlingieri 1996; Bard et al. 1997). Five phases have been distinguished, each one characterised by a quite distinctive set of ceramics: 1. Proto-Aksumite Phase; 2. Early Aksumite Phase; 3. Transitional Early/Middle Aksumite Phase; 4. Middle Aksumite Phase; 5. Late Aksumite Phase.

The absolute chronology was established with cross-dates on imported materials (e.g. fig. 9) and calibrated radiocarbon dates (according to Stuiver and Reimer 1993) from charcoal samples (e.g. fig. 10). The results suggest the following chronology (Fattovich and Bard 1996):

1. Proto-Aksumite Phase, ca. 400/300-100 BC;
2. Early Aksumite Phase, ca. 100 BC – AD 400/420;
3. Transitional Early/Middle Aksumite Phase, ca. AD 400/420-520/550;
4. Middle Aksumite Phase, ca. AD 520/550-650;
5. Late Aksumite Phase, after AD 650.

The relative frequencies of imported materials in the SUs, were also analysed within the phases in order to outline Aksum’s trade network, and dia-
Fig. 9 – Bieta Giorgis. Chronology of the contexts on the basis of imported glass and pottery.

Fig. 10 – Bieta Giorgis 1993-96. C 14 dates and archaeological phases.

Aksumite phase; ii) Roman Egypt from the Early to Middle Aksumite phases; iii) Roman Syria from the end of the Early to the Middle Aksumite phases;
iv) other regions of the Roman/Byzantine empire in the Early and Transitional Aksumite phases; v) post-Meroitic Nubia from the end of the Early to the beginning of the Middle Aksumite phases (fig. 11).

Fig. 11 – Bieta Giyorgis. Cultural contacts on the basis of imported glass and pottery.

b) a progressive decrease in contacts with Nubia beginning with the Early Aksumite phase and a contemporaneous increase in contacts with the Roman and later Byzantine empire (fig. 12).

Fig. 12 – Bieta Giyorgis 1993-97. Frequency of imported ceramic materials.
An attempt to interpolate the Bieta Giyorgis sequence with that recorded by the BIEA Expedition at Aksum in 1973-74, and more recently in 1993-96, was also made. Unfortunately, this was impossible. Data published from the 1973-74 fieldwork are insufficient to correlate the pottery with the stratigraphic sequence (see Chittick 1975; Munro-Hay 1989). The results of the 1993-96 seasons are not yet published in sufficient detail to compare with our materials (Phillipson 1995; Phillipson and Reynolds 1996). Therefore, we could only link the main contexts at the Stela Park and Gudit Stela Field to our sequence using the recalibrated BIEA C14 dates (see Chittick 1976: fig. 13).

The cultural phases at Bieta Giyorgis were then correlated with:

a) the monumental evidence from ON, OAZ and Aksum proper, and historical sources, in order to link the archaeological sequence with the development of the ancient capital city, as reflected by monumental architecture, and the basic information we have about the history of the kingdom (fig. 14). Only firmly dated monuments were selected at this preliminary stage of investigation. Ethiopian traditions were also taken into account as a possible alternative source of historical information to be tested in the field.

b) the sequence of kings, recorded by historical sources and coins, and the evidence of the cross, as a Christian symbol, on the coins and the pottery from the stratigraphic sequence at Bieta Giyorgis, in order to link the archaeological

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**Fig. 13** – British Institute in Eastern Africa C14 recalibrated dates.
a) Aksum. The Mai Hejja stela park (Photo R. Fattovich).

b) Ona Nagast, ON IX-XI, XIV-XV. Proto-Aksumite 'palace' (Photo A. Manzo).
a) Ona Enda, Aboi Zewge, OAZ VI. Proto-Aksumite platform with stelae, beginning of the excavation (Photo R. Fattovich).

b) Ona Enda, Aboi Zewge, OAZ I. Proto-Aksumite pit-grave, feature 3 (Photo K.A. Bard).
Ona Nugas, ON V. The Early Aksumite-Transitional palace at the end of the excavation (Photo A. Manzo)
a) Ona Enda, Aboi Zewge, OAZ V. Stela 3 in the Early Aksumite cemetery
(Photograph A. Manzo).

b) Ona Nagast, ON VI. Traditional-Middle Aksumite palace, feature 1 (Photograph M. Di Blasi).
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<th>PHASES</th>
<th>ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE</th>
<th>HISTORICAL SOURCES</th>
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<td>800 BC</td>
<td>PRE</td>
<td>OAZ II: walls</td>
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<td>&quot;ON IX: man-made floor;&quot; rock-cut pit</td>
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<td>500 BC</td>
<td>AKSUMITE</td>
<td>OAZ VI, OAZ VII: Platform and Stelae</td>
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<td>400 BC</td>
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<td>300 BC</td>
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<td>ON III: walls</td>
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<td>ON IX: Palace</td>
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<td>200 BC</td>
<td>AKSUMITE</td>
<td>ON V: Earliest wells</td>
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<td>100 BC</td>
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<td>ON II: lite workshop</td>
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<td>AD 100</td>
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<td>OAZ. Elite Tomb 2</td>
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<td>c. AD 45-70 - PME: metropolis called the Aksumite</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>ON V, IV, VI, VII, VIII: Palace</td>
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<td>c. AD 150 - Ptolemy: Aksum: the King’s Palace</td>
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<td>AD 200</td>
<td>EARLY AKSUMITE</td>
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<td>c. AD 200-230 - Aksumite intervention in South Arabia</td>
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<td>OAZ II: Double store</td>
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<td>c. AD 274 - Mani: Aksum, &quot;world’s&quot; power</td>
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<td>AD 300</td>
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<td>AD 390 - Frumentius introduces Christianity (according to Rufinus, late 4th cent. AD)</td>
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<td>AD 395 - Athletics: possibly Christian kings</td>
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<td>AD 400</td>
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<td>ON VI, VII-VIII: Palace</td>
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<td>AD 385-431 - Paladius: kinglet in Aksum</td>
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<td>AD 600</td>
<td>MIDDLE AKSUMITE</td>
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<td>AD 700</td>
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<td>c. AD 500 - Nine Saints</td>
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<td>AD 800</td>
<td>LATE AKSUMITE</td>
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<td>AD 900</td>
<td>POST-</td>
<td>B.G.S.: Church, Cemetery</td>
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Fig. 14 – Aksum Cultural phases, monuments and historical sources.
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Fig. 15 – Aksum cultural phases, coins and crosses on pottery. Correlation table.
sequence to the coin sequence and the evidence of the introduction of Christianity in the kingdom (fig. 15). The dating of the kings recorded on the coins was based on a revised chronology of the coins by Pedroni (in press).

Finally, the Aksumite cultural sequence from Bieta Giyorgis was correlated with those of other regions in north-eastern Africa (Egypt, Sudan) and southern Arabia in order to include the development of Aksum into the general historical framework of the Red Sea region (fig. 16).

6. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AKSUM: THE VIEW FROM BIETA GIYORIGS

The preliminary analysis of evidence from Bieta Giyorgis suggests the following reconstruction of the development of Aksum as a capital city (see also Fattovich and Bard in press):

![Chronological sequence of NE Africa and South Arabia.](image)

**Fig. 16 - Chronological sequence of NE Africa and South Arabia.**

a) *Proto-Aksumite Phase (ca. 400-100 BC).*

In the fourth-second centuries BC, when the Ethio-Sabean state was declining or possibly collapsing in northern Tigray (see Fattovich 1990c), a new
hierarchical society appeared at Aksum. This society exhibits a cultural pattern distinctly different from the Sabean one, although some continuity can be observed in the pottery and architecture (Fattovich and Bard 1993, 1994). The ceramics are mostly undecorated, but the shapes are already Aksumite in style (Bard et al. 1997).

A distinctive feature of this culture are manmade stone platforms covering pit-graves cut in the bedrock and marked with monoliths, which developed into the high-status funerary platforms with monumental stelae in Early Aksumite times (see Littmann, Krencker and von Lüpke 1913; Munro-Hay 1989). The remains of a monumental building, constructed in a technique reminiscent of Ethio-Sabean architecture at ON may suggest that some aspects of the earlier state were maintained in Proto-Aksumite times (Fattovich and Bard 1997b). The construction of funerary platforms at OAZ and a monumental building at ON suggests the existence of a centralised authority directing the labour required for large-scale work projects.

The occurrence of a few South Arabian and Nubian potsherds points to some contacts with Yemen and the Nile Valley. In particular, evidence in the funerary ritual similar to that in Nubia suggests strong contacts with the Kingdom of Kush (Napata/Meroe) in the Middle Nile Valley (Fattovich, Manzo and Bard in press).

b) Early Aksumite Phase (ca. 100 BC - AD 400).

In the first century BC – first century AD, the Aksumite cultural pattern solidified. Such a pattern was clearly expressed in the architecture and pottery style as well as funerary monumental complexes with rock-cut tombs, stone platforms and carefully carved stelae (see e.g. Anfray 1981, 1990; de Contenson 1981). In particular, the ceramics are characterised by a specific set of decorative motifs distinguishing them from the pottery of the surrounding regions, including the eastern plateau in present Eritrea (Fattovich 1988).

At this time, Roman 'millefiori' glass was imported from Egypt, and a 'palace' complex was built at ON.

In the second century AD, an elite residence was located at ON and monumental tombs were excavated at OAZ. Roman glass and amphorae were imported from Egypt and Gaul. Contacts with Nubia continued, as well.

Beginning in the second-third centuries, the royal cemetery was located in the so-called 'Stela Park' along the Mai Hejja. In the late third century a middle-to-high status cemetery was located in the Gudit area, to the SW of Aksum. However, to date no evidence of monumental palaces dating to these centuries has been found in Aksum proper.

Imported materials from Bieta Giyorgis suggest regular trade with Roman Egypt, and, beginning in the fourth century AD, with Syria. Coinage was introduced around AD 298, and since the mid-4th century crosses are repre-
sented on the coins, confirming the diffusion of Christianity into the kingdom (Munro-Hay 1984).

c) Transitional Early/Middle Aksumite Phase (ca. AD 400-500/520).

In the fifth century AD, the ceramics progressively changed in style. The Early Aksumite decorated pottery decreased in quantity and disappeared and a pottery with different decorative motifs, including the cross, increased.

An elite residence was located at ON. Imported materials suggest contacts with Egypt, Syria, and possibly Nubia.

The stelae were no longer a funerary symbol. One stela was possibly erected in ‘Stela Park’ in the early fifth century (see Chittick 1975; Munro-Hay 1989). The so-called ‘Tomb of the Brick Arches’, a monumental and very rich rock-cut tomb at Mai Hejja dates to the late fourth - early fifth centuries AD (see Chittick 1975; Munro-Hay 1989; Phillipson 1995).

Most coins dating to this period have the cross, but some maintain the pre-Christian South Arabian symbol of the ‘moon-crescent and sun disc’ (Munro-Hay 1984).

d) Middle Aksumite Phase (ca. AD 500/520-650).

In the sixth-seventh centuries, the urban development of Aksum reached its peak. Large residential palaces were built at Aksum proper, and a palace was located at ON. Monumental hypogeal tombs were excavated at Mai Qoho (Littmann, Krencker and von Lüpke 1913; Anfray 1972). A middle-to-low status domestic area was located between Bieta Giyorgis and Mai Qoho, suggesting a northward expansion of the town (Phillipson 1995; Phillipson and Reynolds 1996). Two churches were built in this period on the eastern slopes of Bieta Giyorgis (Ricci and Fattovich 1988). The whole capital city occupied an area of about 100 ha.

The pottery exhibits new forms and decorations. The cross is a dominant decorative motif on the pottery and the coins (see Bard et al. 1997; Munro-Hay 1984).

Imported materials from Bieta Giyorgis suggest contacts only with Byzantine Egypt.

c) Late Aksumite - Post-Aksumite Phase (after ca. AD 650/700).

The decline of Aksum probably started in the late seventh century. The palace at ON was abandoned after AD 650 (Fattovich and Bard 1996), and coins were not minted after ca. AD 680 (Munro-Hay 1984; Pedroni in press).

The evidence from Bieta Giyorgis suggests that the hill was still densely populated, and compounds were scattered on the north-eastern zone of the hill top in the late first to mid-second millennia AD. A small church was located on the south-eastern slope of the hill (Fattovich and Bard 1997a; Ricci and Fattovich 1988). Ruins of the ancient structures were frequently reused.
At Aksum proper, in Late Aksumite times (ca. eighth-tenth centuries AD) the settlement occupied a much smaller area and was apparently concentrated around the cathedral. No definite evidence of monumental architecture dating to this period has been recorded. In Post-Aksumite times (ca. tenth-fifteenth centuries AD), most likely, the settlement did not exceed 40 ha in size and was mainly concentrated between the cathedral and the slopes of Bieta Giyorgis (see Michels 1991).

The ceramics were mostly domestic wares, and the cross was the dominant decorative motif (Perlingieri 1996; Bard et al. 1997).

7. THE DEVELOPMENT OF AKSUM: A PRELIMINARY OUTLINE

On the basis of the archaeological evidence from Bieta Giyorgis and Aksum properly, and available evidence from written sources and the coinage, the developmental process of Aksum can be tentatively outlined as follows:

a) A local community at Aksum and the immediately surrounding area, originally part of the Ethio-Sabean state, emerged as a new polity in the 4th-1st centuries BC. Possibly, an Ethio-Sabean ceremonial centre still survived at Yeha, about 50 km to the east of Aksum (see Fattovich 1990c). Both archaeological and ethno-historical sources are consistent and suggest that Bieta Giyorgis was the core of this polity (Ricci 1990; Fattovich and Bard 1993).

The Proto-Aksumite polity distinguished itself from the former Ethio-Sabean one, focussing ideologically on platforms with stelae and pit-graves for the funerary cult of the elite rather than on monumental cult temples of the gods (Fattovich and Bard 1994).

Although direct evidence is still very scarce, plow agriculture and livestock formed the subsistence base of the Proto-Aksumite society.

External contacts were apparently limited to southern Arabia and Nubia.

b) In the first century BC – first century AD, Aksum was progressively included into the Roman trade route along the Red Sea, as can be inferred from the archaeological evidence at Bieta Giyorgis and contemporary written sources (Bard et al. 1997; Fattovich and Bard 1997a; Casson 1989; De Romanis 1996). Most likely, Aksum became a gateway in the trade from the African hinterland to the Red Sea coast (see also Butzer 1981).

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (ca. AD 40-70) records the existence of a ‘metropolis’ called the ‘Aksumite’, suggesting the existence of a town at Aksum (Casson 1989). Ethno-historical sources stress that Ona Nagast was the residence of the earliest Aksumite kings, before the foundation of the town in the plain of Aksum in the fourth century AD (Fattovich and Bard 1993; see also Monneret de Villard 1938). This information seems consistent with the construction of a ‘palace’ on the top of Bieta Giyorgis at the beginning of the first millennium AD.
The very distinctive decorative style of the pottery, which appeared at this time, possibly had a social meaning as a medium to distinguish the cultural identity of the Aksumites from that of the surrounding communities and foreigners. Classical sources and Greek inscriptions from the Aksum region suggest that Aksum was still a local polity with a strong ‘tribal’ or ‘ethnic’ identity in the first-third century AD (Mazzarino 1974). Such an ‘ethnic’ base to Aksum was surely still felt in the fourth century, as can be inferred from the inscriptions of king Ezana (ca. AD 330-50) who clearly stated that he was the King of Aksum and of other ‘Ethiopian’ (Habashat) and foreign peoples (Conti Rossini 1928; Munro-Hay 1991).

c) In the second century AD a relevant transformation occurred at Aksum.

Imported materials from Bieta Giyorgis indicate significant involvement of Aksum in the Roman trade along the Red Sea. At OAZ the earliest monumental rock-cut tombs, associated with carefully carved stelae up to 9 m high, date to this time (Fattovich and Bard 1995, in press b). Most likely, a ‘royal’ cemetery was established at Mai Hejja, although a firm chronological sequence of the tombs in the ‘Stela Park’ is not yet available (see Munro-Hay 1989). Ptolemy (ca. AD 150) records the existence of a ‘king’s’ palace (Conti Rossini 1928; Munro-Hay 1991).

This evidence suggests a strongly centralised polity with a definite social hierarchy.

d) In the third century, Aksum became the capital of a large territorial state, with an active and aggressive foreign policy.

Textual evidence clearly suggests that in this century the Aksumites imposed their control over the whole plateau in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, as well as in southern Arabia (Conti Rossini 1928; Munro-Hay 1991). In the early third century (ca. 200-30), the Aksumite military intervened in Southern Arabia (Robin 1988). In the late third century, an Aksumite king made a raid in the Nile Valley as far north as Meroe (see e.g. Kirwan 1981).

Archaeological evidence shows that the royal cemetery was definitely established along the Mai Hejja at this time (Munro-Hay 1989).

The process of consolidation of Aksum as a territorial state culminated in the late third-early fourth centuries, most likely when impressive hewn stelae, up 33 meters high, were erected in the royal cemetery (Littmann, Krencker, von Lüpke 1913; Munro-Hay 1989). According to Mani (ca. AD 276), at this time Aksum was a ‘world’ power (Munro-Hay 1991). Coinage was also introduced around AD 298 (Munro-Hay 1984; Pedroni in press).

The evidence of a high status cemetery to the SW of Aksum (Gudit Stela field), with tombs dating to the late third century, points to the existence of a powerful and wealthy elite (Chittick 1975; Munro-Hay 1989; Phillipson 1995).

Imported materials from Bieta Giyorgis and Gudit confirm the direct involvement of Aksum in the Roman trade network (Manzo 1996; Munro-Hay 1989).
The evidence from Bieta Giyorgis suggests that the cultivation of emmer wheat, bread wheat, barley and teff, as well as livestock breeding, formed the subsistence base of the kingdom.

e) The introduction of Christianity in the fourth century was a crucial change in the cultural and political history of Aksum. Later textual evidence (Rufinus, early fifth century) and Ethiopian traditional sources state that the royal court at Aksum was converted to Christianity by two Syrian young men, and one of them, Frumentius, was appointed as the first bishop of ‘Ethiopia’ by the Patriarch of Alexandria in the early fourth century AD. Epigraphic and numismatic evidence suggests that this happened during the reign of Ezana (ca. AD 330-50). Ethiopian traditions, however, state that the eventual conversion of the population by Byzantine monks from Syria (the so-called Nine Saints) occurred in the late fifth-early sixth centuries (Conti Rossini 1928; Munro-Hay 1991; see contra Marrassini 1990).

Imported materials from Bieta Giyorgis and Gudit suggest that Roman Syria was included in a trade network with Aksum in the late third-fourth century AD, but Egypt maintained a dominant role in the Red Sea trade. This explains the Syrian origin of Frumentius and the dominant role of Alexandria in the early stages of Ethiopian Christianity. The evidence from Bieta Giyorgis suggests that trade contacts with Syria continued in the fourth and fifth centuries, and provides a firmer background for the tradition of the Nine Saints.

The archaeological record from Bieta Giyorgis also suggests that the period of transition to Christianity lasted at least 150 years, from the mid-fourth to the early sixth centuries, as can be inferred from the progressive change in pottery styles in the Transitional Early/Middle Aksumite Phase. Most likely, this change reflects the progressive shift of the population from the earlier pre-Christian cultural identity to a new identity stressing membership in the Christian community. This interpretation is supported by ethno-archaeological research on the ‘social meaning’ of pottery conducted by the IUO – BU expedition in the Aksum region (Perlingieri 1997). Moreover, in the fifth century, the cross is found on coins, which were used as a propaganda medium by the kings, but not on the pottery. This suggests that in the beginning Christianity was a state religion imposed by the king, but not yet completely accepted by the population.

On the whole, this evidence relates well to the tradition of the Nine Saints, who converted the Aksumite people to Christianity at the end of the 5th century.

f) In the sixth-seventh centuries Aksum was the capital city of a powerful kingdom, at the peak of its development, and Christianity was definitely established in the kingdom.

Ethiopian traditions state that the liturgy of the Christian church was defined at the time of King Kaleb and his son Gabra Masqal (ca. AD 500-50), and the cathedral of Aksum (Enda Maryam Tsion) was built or enlarged by
Kaleb (Monneret de Villard 1938; Hable Sellassie 1972). Textual evidence records direct diplomatic contacts with the Byzantine empire, and the conquest of South Arabia in the early 6th century. Textual evidence also states that at this time Aksum controlled the trade with the African hinterland as far as northern Somalia, western Ethiopia, and eastern Sudan (Conti Rossini 1928; Munro-Hay 1991).

Archaeological evidence at Aksum indicates a highly stratified society and an important position for the church. The royal palace (*Ta’aka Maryam*) was about 100 × 125 m in size, and the cathedral was a large basilica with five aisles, about 60 × 42 m in size. The kings and nobles were buried in large hypogeae tombs, sometimes inside a church similar in plan to the Byzantine *martyria*. The ceremonial funerary areas with stelae were no longer used (Littmann, Krencker and von Lüpke 1913; Anfray 1972).

The cross became a dominant decorative motif in the architecture and in the pottery, stressing the new cultural identity of the Aksumites (e.g. Anfray 1990).

Imported materials from Bieta Giyorgis confirm a continuity of trade contacts with the Byzantine empire. The subsistence economy relied on the cultivation of wheat, barley, teff, legumes and grapes, as well as livestock breeding. Flax was also cultivated.

2) In the 8th–9th centuries Aksum declined as a capital city, although the kingdom still survived. Coins were not minted after ca. AD 680 (Munro-Hay 1984; Pedroni in press). In fact, since the late seventh century the kingdom was progressively isolated from the Red Sea trade by the spreading of Islam through NE Africa (Munro-Hay 1991).

Textual evidence states that in the late 9th century the kingdom occupied a very large territory, but the capital was no longer located at Aksum (Conti Rossini 1928; Munro-Hay 1991).

Archaeological evidence points to a dramatic reduction in the size of the city, with the cathedral as a focal point in the settlement; the population reverted from a urban society to a farming society (see Michels 1990, 1994).


Finally, Ethiopian traditions claim that Aksum was destroyed in the early tenth century by southern invaders led by a pagan queen, Guedit (Hable Sellassie 1972).
8. Aksamite Historical Dynamics: A Tentative Overview

A tentative and very simplified interpretation of the above reconstruction suggests that different factors affected the rise, consolidation, decline, and eventual fall of Aksam (see also Fattovich, in press):

a) With the decline or collapse of the Ethio-Sabean state in Tigray a local community was able to emerge as a new polity with a centralised authority and specific ideological features. This polity most likely maintained some traits of the earlier state (ca. 400-100 BC).

b) The expansion of Roman trade toward the Indian Ocean included this polity in the Red Sea commercial network, and stressed the role of Aksam as an intermediary between the African hinterland and the coast (ca. 100 BC-AD 100).

c) The increased commercial role of Aksam reinforced the internal social hierarchy and sense of cultural identity, and a ‘state’ emerged with a strong ‘ethnic’ connotation (ca. AD 50/100-200).

d) The political expansion of Aksam to control the trade along the southern Red Sea region reinforced its role as a regional power, with a strongly centralised authority dominating a large territorial state (AD 200-300).

e) The need to fit into the new politics and ideology of the Mediterranean World (after the Edict of Constantine in AD 313) induced the Aksamite kings to introduce Christianity as a state religion (AD 300-400).

f) The introduction of Christianity progressively generated a new social and cultural identity, and reinforced the links with the Byzantine empire (AD 400-550).

g) The renewed role of Aksam as a regional political and economic power reinforced royal and elite authority and prestige, and consolidated a stratified urban society relying on intensive agriculture and livestock breeding.

h) The Arab conquest of Egypt (AD 647) and the progressive Islamic expansion along the African coast of the Red Sea isolated Aksam from the main trade circuit. This was the beginning of its decline as a polity (ca. AD 650-800).

i) Environmental degradation, possibly accelerated by soil exhaustion due to intensive agricultural activities, and environmental stress accelerated the collapse of the urban society at Aksam (ca. AD 800-900).

j) Finally, a foreign invasion caused the collapse of the state.

9. Conclusions

The process of development of Aksam, which I have outlined in a cursory way, is still incomplete and fragmentary. My interpretation is based on the
preliminary results of research in progress and our present state of knowledge about this kingdom, which will certainly be modified by future investigations. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this exercise can suggest some remarks:

\( a \) In the Ethiopian case, archaeological and textual evidence are consistent. This means that archaeology can provide reliable 'historical' information about the past, and thus careful reconstruction of 'prehistoric' socio-economic and cultural transformations could be accepted as basically valid.

\( b \) The reliability of archaeological information largely depends on the carefullness of excavation procedures and recording.

Only a detailed control of the stratigraphic sequence and chronology, prevents the collected evidence from being open to subjective interpretations. Excavation procedures must be explicit in field reports, as they are the only means we have to properly evaluate the validity of a research and the interpretation of the results. An archaeologist must firstly be an 'archaeologist', i.e., a person who excavates to collect the data, and then a 'philosopher' reading, thinking and writing in order to intervene in sophisticated debates about social theory.

\( c \) Analysis and synthesis must be constantly combined at any stage in the research – from fieldwork to laboratory study to the final report – in order to provide a firm reconstruction of past processes.

The analysis of diachronic (temporal) and synchronic (spatial) changes in the patterning artefact assemblage (from stratigraphic units to sites) – in terms of site formation processes, typological sequences of artefacts, cultural and environmental contexts, settlement patterns, etc. – is crucial for the establishment of a solid framework for reconstructing the process under investigation. The constant synthesis between the results of the analytical work and other kinds of evidence (historical, linguistic, ethnographical, environmental, etc.) at a regional and interregional scale is basic to evaluate their correspondence and more carefully outline the process. The resulting reconstruction of the process can be then analysed and interpreted in order to identify the particular factors affecting its dynamics through time, and to suggest an explanatory model of these dynamics.

Finally, we can operate at an higher level of synthesis in two ways:

i) correlating different regional processes in order to reconstruct and model historical dynamics at a larger scale (archaeology as history);

ii) comparing different regional processes in order to formulate general statements about the socio-economic and cultural development of mankind (archaeology as anthropology).

This means that the archaeologist must have much competence in the research procedures of her/his discipline, a solid knowledge of the history, culture, and environment of the region under investigation, and general training as a social scientist.
d) Research projects must be designed to solve historically oriented problems, rather than anthropologically oriented ones.

The research must be aimed at i) identifying the people/peoples who occupied a region through time; ii) reconstructing their socio-economic and cultural systems within the environmental context; iii) outlining changes in the socio-economic and cultural systems through time; iv) defining the specific factors which affected the changes.

e) Last, but not least, research projects must be carried out from a broad multidisciplinary perspective, having specialists in disciplines ranging from geology and geo-archaeology to archaeology, bio-archaeology, ethno-archaeology and ethno-history. Investigations, moreover, must be conducted in close collaboration with philologists and linguists, as well as historians, social anthropologists and possibly geographers with competence about the region under investigations.

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