

Empires, Capitals and Landscapes of Ancient Ethiopia

by KARL W. BUTZER

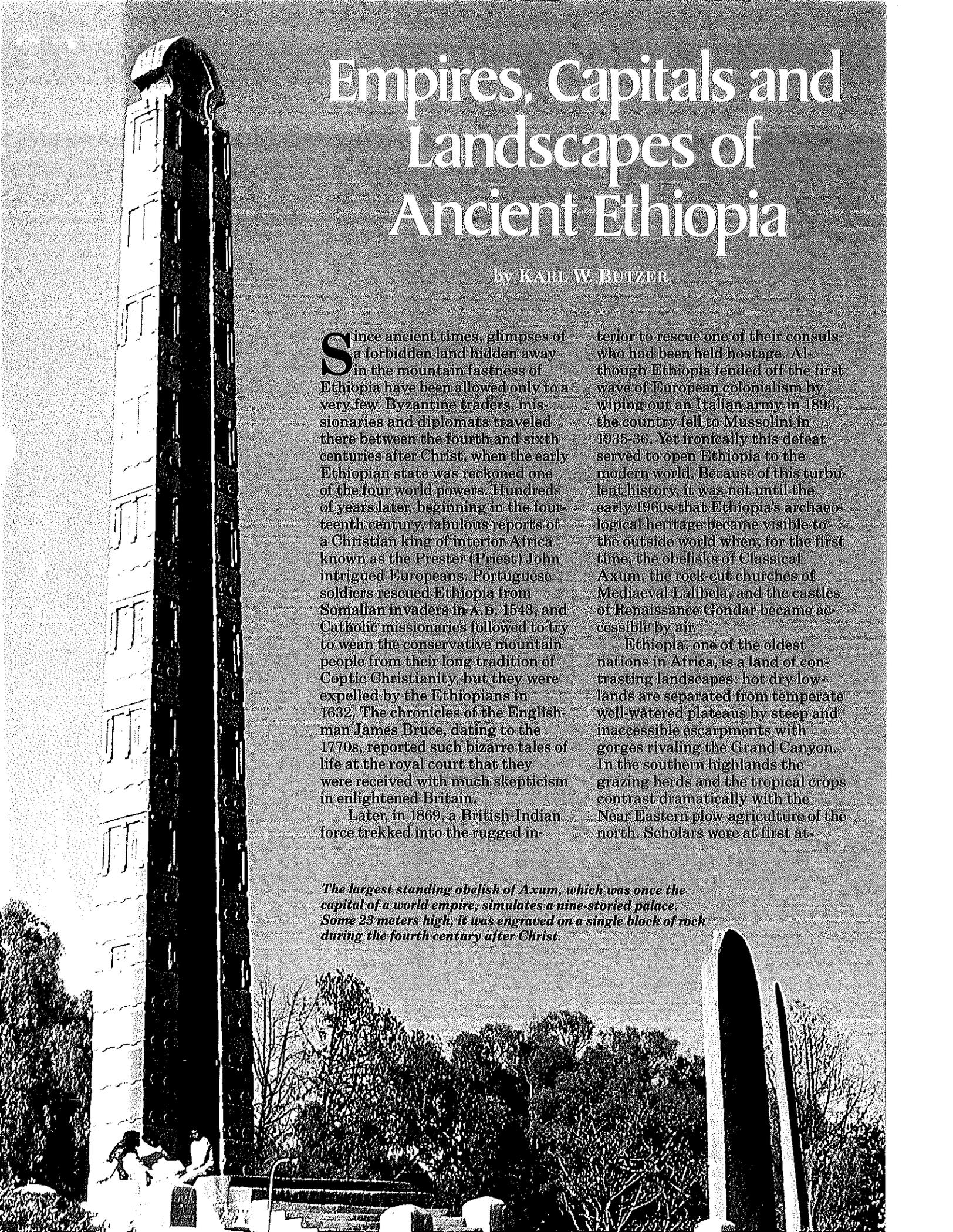
Since ancient times, glimpses of a forbidden land hidden away in the mountain fastness of Ethiopia have been allowed only to a very few. Byzantine traders, missionaries and diplomats traveled there between the fourth and sixth centuries after Christ, when the early Ethiopian state was reckoned one of the four world powers. Hundreds of years later, beginning in the fourteenth century, fabulous reports of a Christian king of interior Africa known as the Prester (Priest) John intrigued Europeans. Portuguese soldiers rescued Ethiopia from Somalian invaders in A.D. 1543, and Catholic missionaries followed to try to wean the conservative mountain people from their long tradition of Coptic Christianity, but they were expelled by the Ethiopians in 1632. The chronicles of the Englishman James Bruce, dating to the 1770s, reported such bizarre tales of life at the royal court that they were received with much skepticism in enlightened Britain.

Later, in 1869, a British-Indian force trekked into the rugged in-

terior to rescue one of their consuls who had been held hostage. Although Ethiopia fended off the first wave of European colonialism by wiping out an Italian army in 1893, the country fell to Mussolini in 1935-36. Yet ironically this defeat served to open Ethiopia to the modern world. Because of this turbulent history, it was not until the early 1960s that Ethiopia's archaeological heritage became visible to the outside world when, for the first time, the obelisks of Classical Axum, the rock-cut churches of Mediaeval Lalibela, and the castles of Renaissance Gondar became accessible by air.

Ethiopia, one of the oldest nations in Africa, is a land of contrasting landscapes: hot dry lowlands are separated from temperate well-watered plateaus by steep and inaccessible escarpments with gorges rivaling the Grand Canyon. In the southern highlands the grazing herds and the tropical crops contrast dramatically with the Near Eastern plow agriculture of the north. Scholars were at first at-

The largest standing obelisk of Axum, which was once the capital of a world empire, simulates a nine-storied palace. Some 23 meters high, it was engraved on a single block of rock during the fourth century after Christ.



conclude that these points were chipped by specialists. Similarly, production of ceramics by specialists is hinted at by pottery manufacturing areas, increasingly standardized forms and decoration, and extensive quarries for mica temper. Such specialization seems to continue into the Classic period as the designs of pottery, shell jewelry and stone artifacts become more standardized.

The Hohokam built their most enduring monument, the four-story Casa Grande, around A.D. 1350, probably in a major burst of building activity. The most recent interpretations suggest that this structure was multi-purpose, serving as an elite residence, perhaps a storehouse, and an observatory. In fact, there are several "observation holes" in the building through which celestial events of interest to an agricultural people, such as the summer and winter solstices, could be tracked.

Society also grew more complex as variations in the compounds and villages suggest. Obviously their occupants differed in wealth, power and lifestyle. At Escalante, a village only a few miles from the Casa Grande, most individuals lived in compounds consisting of several living and storage rooms arranged around a plaza. Not all compounds, however, were equal in their labor investment; usually at least one rested two to three meters above the others on a large platform mound. In addition, not all villages were equivalent. The main village at the Casa Grande contrasts sharply with Escalante. The great house itself is a huge residence built atop a platform mound, and at least one other multi-storied building existed. Casa Grande appears to have been an administrative and religious center housing an elite that may have controlled numerous villages like Escalante. Los Muertos was perhaps a similar center. On the basis of just such differences, archaeologists have made the case that Classic society consisted of elites and peasants. Villages may have been governed by local elites, while suites of villages, perhaps those located on the same canal system, fell under the jurisdiction of a principal village. Future studies may help to determine if there was a paramount authority—perhaps at Casa Grande or Los Muertos—for an entire river valley or even the Gila-Salt Basin.

The rise and fall of the Hohokam presents an intriguing case for students of civilization to ponder. The Hohokam archaeological sequence encompasses an evolutionary development of increasing complexity, culminating in the trappings of a complex society. Like all early civilizations, the Hohokam underwent a process of growth—more and larger settlements, a greater variety of artifacts and types of architecture, and integration of villages into ever larger regional systems. Somewhere along the line, however, the Hohokam stalled on the path to civilization. A considerable gulf still separates Classic Hohokam society from what is usually considered "civilization." Although a few village-size colonies may have been established, the Hohokam possessed no farflung empire. They were artisans and traders, but with the conspicuous exception of shell, most of their craft items are not found outside the Gila-Salt Basin. Foreign

trade objects are also scarce. And other hallmarks of civilization, such as a writing system, cities, and standing armies, seem to be absent.

When Lieutenant Manje first heard of "casas grandes," the Hohokam were the stuff of legends. Their majestic villages along the Salt and Gila stood empty. And the probable descendants of the Hohokam—the unassuming Pima—lived in modest pithouse villages, much like their ancestors a millennium before. Floods and drought, revolution, population pressures, political upheavals in Mexico, and salinization of fields are among the explanations espoused by archaeologists for the decline of the Hohokam. Although all of these hypotheses have champions, even today the causes of the Hohokam collapse remain elusive. If archaeologists could identify the reasons why the Hohokam and many other societies around the world could not sustain growth, then perhaps we would be closer to explaining why a few societies *did* reach civilization.

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tracted to Ethiopia to study its written Semitic languages—Sabaean, Gheez, Tigre, and Amharic. The traditional view saw Ethiopia as a derivative sphere of the Near Eastern world. More recently, however, archaeologists and anthropologists have begun to project a new image of a rich indigenous culture. Although the early religious and political beliefs as well as irrigation techniques were evidently introduced from the area now called Yemen, many other aspects are uniquely Ethiopian. The domesticated plants are clearly native to Ethiopia, and such characteristic Ethiopian features as plow farming and the Semitic languages are very much older than the South Arabian colonists of the last millennium B.C.

German and Italian explorations conducted in Ethiopia since 1906 and French and British excavations since the 1950s placed the earliest political and urban centers in northernmost Ethiopia. A systematic survey of the north by Joseph Michels of Pennsylvania State University in 1974 identified strong Sabaean influences from South Arabia during a first period of sedentary settlement between 500 and 300 B.C. These early settlements were dispersed and small. Subsequently, from 300 to 100 B.C., settlement coalesced into larger towns centered amid irrigated lands. This integrated socio-political system later disintegrated, but a new cycle of urbanization began once again during the second century after Christ.

By A.D. 300 a powerful kingdom had emerged in northern Ethiopia centered at Axum. Coins were minted, much of the Sudan to the west was conquered, and a dynasty of Axumite kings began to establish strong commercial links via the

(Above) The steep and forbidding forested escarpment of the plateau near Adulis defended Axum and the later Ethiopian Empire during the last 2,000 years. (Below) Rounded wooden houses and storage buildings nestle in the luxuriant countryside of Begemder, a little north of Gondar. This humid environment, with its bountiful soils and two or three crops per year, supplied the new Ethiopian Empire emerging during the Mediaeval period.

Red Sea with the Mediterranean world, Arabia, Persia, and even distant India. By A.D. 400 Axum had been Christianized and grew from a small ceremonial center to a populous city. This metropolis reached its zenith of political prestige in A.D. 525, when the neighboring Arabian state of Yemen across the Red Sea was incorporated as part of Axum. Axumite kings continued to meddle in Arabian affairs on and off until A.D. 769. Axum's unsuccessful attack on Mecca in A.D. 702 was followed by Arab retaliation. They destroyed the crucial port of Adulis and seized permanent control of the adjacent Red Sea islands by A.D. 715. Within a short time coins ceased to be minted, and after A.D. 765 Axum was largely abandoned. Herders from the lowlands to the north and west took advantage of

this instability, raiding villages at will and settling much of the northern Ethiopian highlands before A.D. 870. Even the king gave up his residence at Axum, moving further south, and a little later the metropolitan bishop also took refuge in the distant mountain interior.

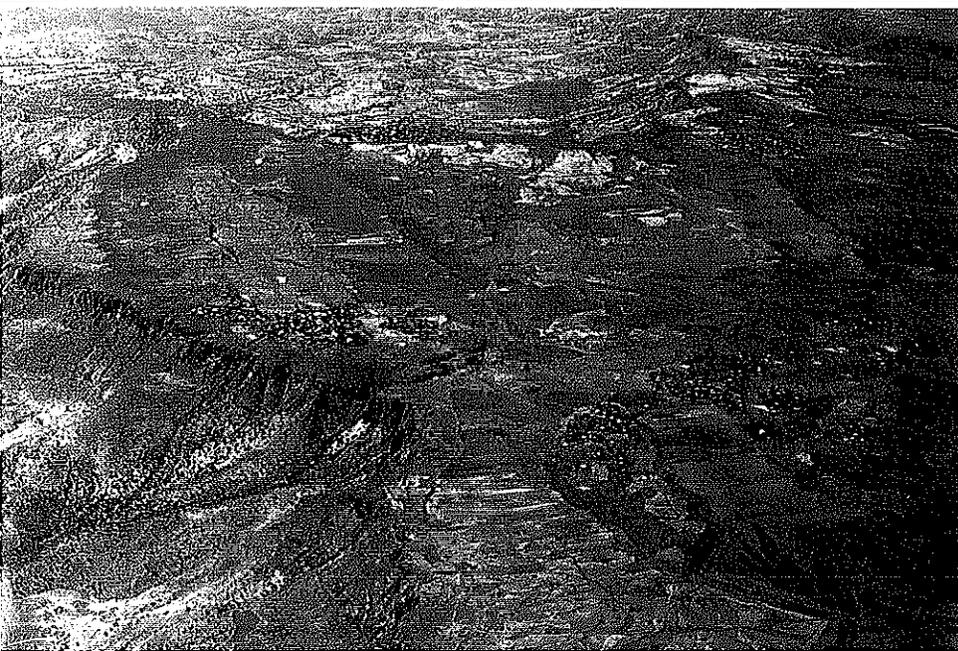
The rise and fall of Axum can only be properly understood in an economic context. By 2500 B.C. the pharaohs of distant Egypt were already seeking gold and ebony from inland areas south and east of the Red Sea. As early as the first century the Roman Pliny mentions Ethiopian trade; the third-century maritime manual *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* lists ivory, rhinoceros horn, hippopotamus hides, and slaves as exports from the Red Sea harbor of Adulis. Byzantine accounts of A.D. 525-30 specify large-tusked elephants, ivory, gold dust, and hides from Axum that were shipped out via the port of Adulis. During the same period, Axum also controlled trade in frankincense, a tree gum burned

in Roman rituals; to this day extensive stands of incense trees survive along the escarpments of the northern plateau. Musk, extracted from the wild civet cat to make a perfume base, was probably exported from Axum just as it was during the nineteenth century. Incense, timber and elephants came from areas around Axum while ivory, horn, hides, civet, and slaves were obtained from the interior plateau; gold was mined near the distant Sudanese border. Since direct political control was limited to the northern plateau, it is probable that within Ethiopia many of these commodities were exchanged for the cattle, sheep and salt that Axum had obtained as tribute from lowland herders, or in exchange for the iron bars, metal tools and ornaments, and brightly dyed Egyptian textiles that had been processed in Axum.

The metropolis of Axum flourished as a gateway city that funneled materials from the continental hinterland into a maritime exchange network, reaching as far as Spain, the Crimea and China. But

Beit Gabriel, one of the younger Medieval rock-cut churches at Lalibela, is literally cut down into red sandstone. Four "monkey heads" frame the door in ancient Axumite tradition, but the windows and their frames recall Gothic counterparts.





this maritime trade could function only while the sea lanes remained open, either through good international relations or naval strength, and only as long as Axumite luxury goods found demand in foreign empires. Axum's role as a leading entrepôt of the classical world was severely weakened by the long Byzantine-Persian wars of A.D.

540-61 and 602-32, which impoverished all of Byzantium and left hostile Persian fleets in control of the seas. A century later, it was the Arabs' turn to dominate the coast, and Ethiopia was once again landlocked with only intermittent authority over Adulis. As soon as international profits from its exchange network declined, Axum lost its ability to dominate its disparate raw material suppliers.

But the eclipse of Axum represents more than the collapse of a gateway city severed from international trade outlets. The archaeological record in and around Axum documents several periods of building and population growth ending a little after A.D. 600. At its height Axum covered an area of 75 hectares (compared with only 53 in 1973), with numerous multistory stone buildings and even a suburban fringe of elite villas. Here resided at least 10,000 inhabitants, and possibly as many as 20,000. Yet by the eighth century after Christ, Axum had ceased to exist—except for a cathedral compound, a few satellite villages, and a temporary cluster of well-protected elite villas around the periphery. It was not until about 700 years later, during the fourteenth century, that building activity resumed.

Traditionally, the decline in trade has been cited as the cause of Axum's decline. But in 1971 and 1973, geoarchaeological investigations in the area around Axum uncovered evidence of another cause. The striking population changes were as

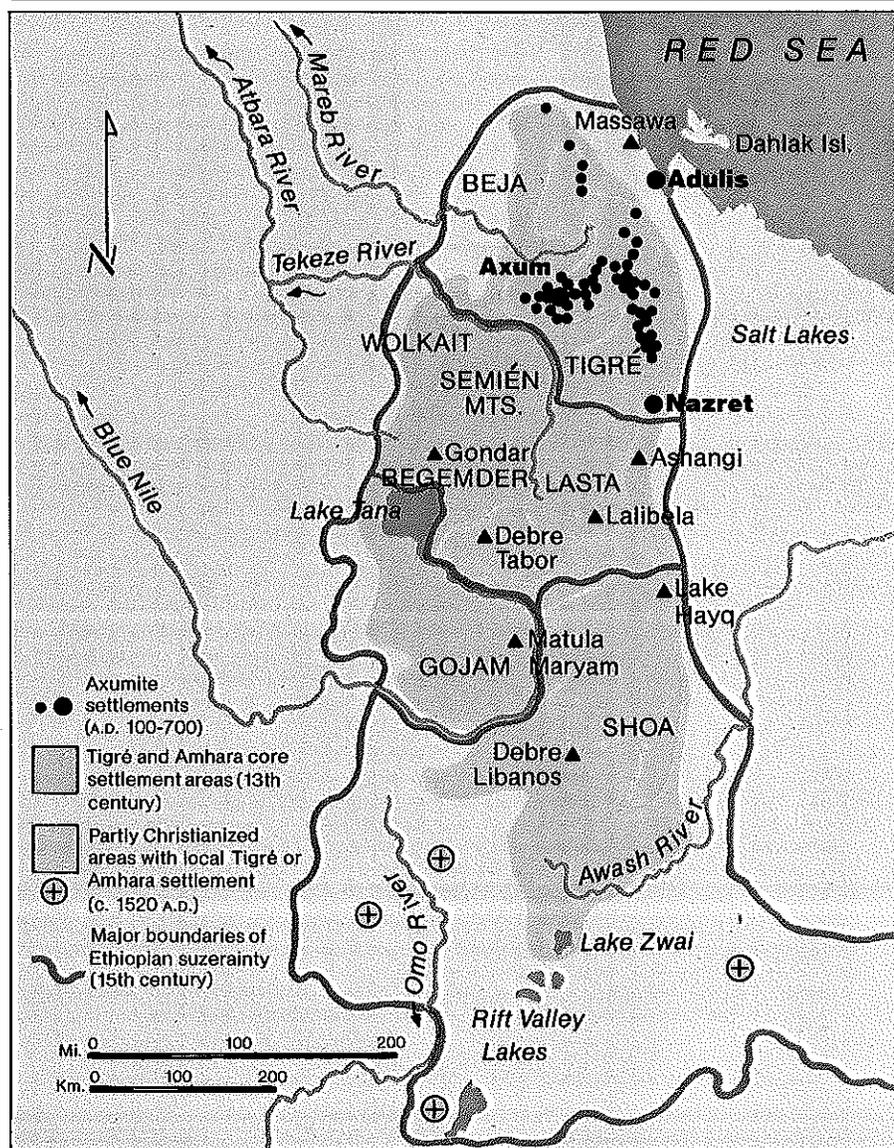
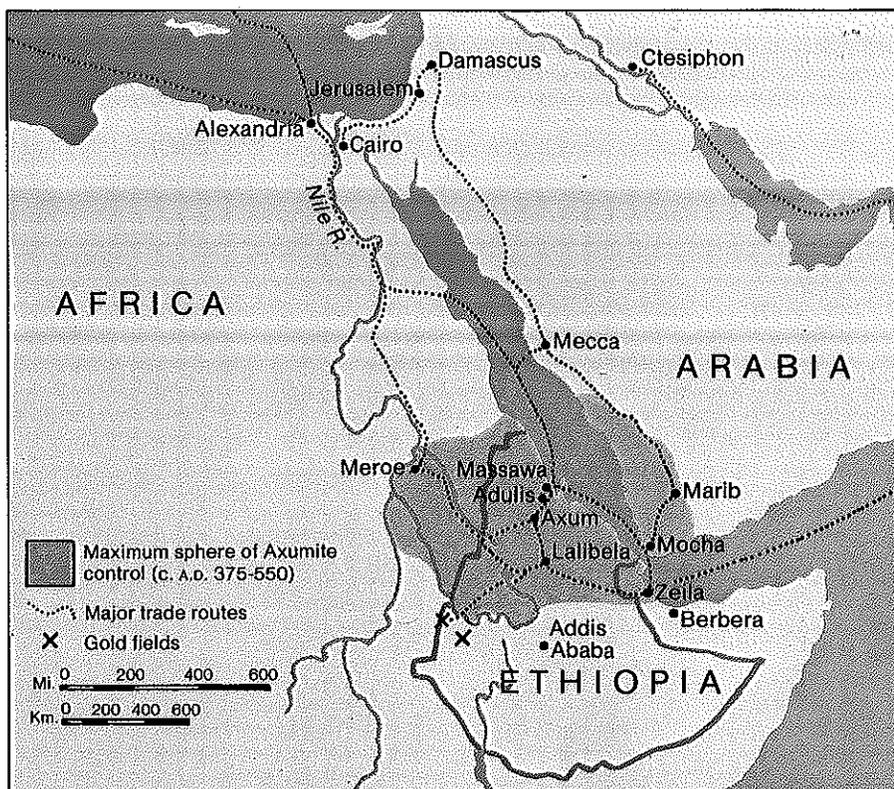
(Above) A 1640 castle at Gondar, built with battlements, sloping towers, arched doorways, and balconies, is suggestive of Portuguese architectural style. (Below) Soils commonly are thin on the lava plateaus that form the core of the Axumite Empire that once dominated Arabia and the Sudan. Climate today is marginal for agriculture in some years, but tropical woodlands thrived here prior to ecological deterioration.

much a matter of agricultural productivity as they were of external trade relations. This explanation is substantiated by the soils that cover the ruins of Axum.

Today the humid plateau of northern Ethiopia is a denuded landscape. Its stony slopes, stripped of soil by erosion, are covered only by shrubs and bush. Although this ecological degradation has not yet been documented by botanical work, the soil and geomorphic record serves instead. Vegetation, soils and erosion are interlinked by the hydrological cycle of ground cover, rainwater infiltration into the soil, and surface water runoff. Changes in hydrology affect soil formation and can cause erosion which redeposits the original soil downslope or downstream. By studying the profile of disturbed or truncated soils, rainwash or stream beds, and erosional gullies in archaeologically controlled situations, it is possible to identify the deterioration of the landscape caused by human activities.

The cumulative impact of land use, direct or indirect, is clearest in and around major occupation sites such as Axum. In abandoned living quarters or ceremonial areas refuse and rubble accumulated rapidly even prior to collapse. The cave-in of a roof or a wall—whether gradual or sudden—will eventually create large masses of stone, brick, adobe, and other rubble. Subsequent rainwash and soil movements further erode the ruins, progressively reducing the site's slopes and spreading surface sediment from the center to its peripheries. Sloping surfaces of soil wash may feed into nearby stream channels, carrying with them debris that can be studied today as a stratigraphic aid as well as an index, far downstream, of indirect human activities. Such archaeological sediments in and around a site, and in combination with buried or truncated soils, offer an overview of the distribution of human occupation during specific periods.

At Axum this geoarchaeological record is exposed in three different settings: on the banks of the small stream that cuts through the settlement center, in the faces of numerous natural excavations near the watershed within Axum, and along the foothills on either



side of the city. These many "cuts" document two phases of active soil erosion, the first between about A.D. 100 and 350, and the second from about A.D. 650 to 800.

The first phase (called *Aggradation I*) left a meter or two of dark clayey soil wash and related stream beds spread out along the foothills and filling the broad valley bottom; Axum's cathedral was built on top of this soil level during the late fourth century after Christ. Floods were unusually high during this period, and some slope soils show traces of viscous movements which could only have been caused by substantial amounts of water. This evidence suggests that topsoil erosion was partly due to unusually heavy or protracted rains. Yet the amount of erosion within a few centuries is too great to be explained by physical processes alone. Clearing of the original forests and cultivation and grazing of adjacent slopes and hill-tops were certainly also involved.

The second soil erosion phase (*Aggradation II*) includes one or two meters of light-colored, sandy soil wash spread out along the foothills, or locally concentrated in sheets of stony sediment or lobes of large rocks; these formations indicate strong flash floods and soil gravity movements, which were not impeded by ground vegetation. At this time, upland soils had evidently been largely destroyed, exposing the underlying rocks over wide areas. Within Axum, debris from deteriorating buildings was incorporated in rainwash beds that now buried the abandoned villas and churches. These soil erosion phenomena as seen in Classical Axum are very similar to those documented in many parts of the Mediterranean Basin in Late Classical or Mediaeval times from episodes of widespread land abandonment, or resulting from the devegetation of fragile environments.

At Axum the two soil erosion phases had different implications for agricultural productivity. Although the first period endangered the slope soil balance, it probably did not change overall soil quality significantly. But the second phase was generally disastrous, removing soil and rock from uphill and burying the fertile topsoils further downslope under stony and sandy material. The soil mixture of con-

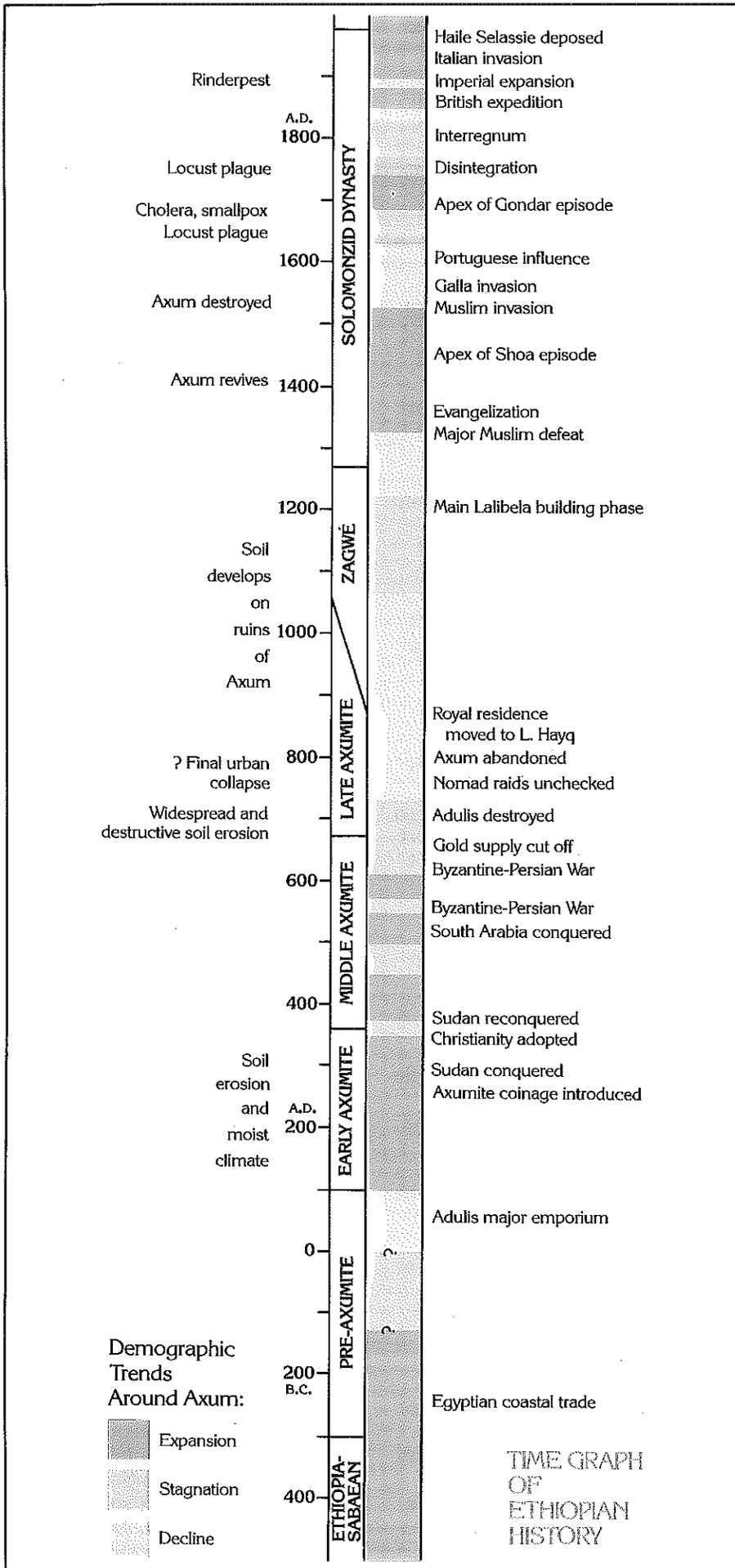
structional debris from abandoned living quarters, eroded soils, and rubble from monumental buildings link the final stages of this second phase with depopulation and land abandonment. Unused fields are particularly susceptible to soil erosion, especially during the heavy rainfalls experienced in northern Ethiopia during July and August. A switch from crop cultivation to goat or sheep grazing would also increase pressure on the fragile hillside ecosystems. But we know that the second erosion phase followed directly upon a major period of building activity and urban expansion at Axum. This historical fact implies a link between the soil erosion and ecological stress. The second erosion phase may have been triggered by overintensive land use, although the cumulative and disastrous impact was also heightened by the ensuing land abandonment. There can be little doubt that the final erosion phase exacerbated Axumite economic decline.

Looking beyond these developments at Axum, the two erosion phases also had dire consequences for the surrounding region. The heavier rains during the first erosion phase meant that the lowland desert lakes held more water during most of the first millennium after Christ. The Nile floods, derived primarily from the Atbara and Blue Nile drainage of the Ethiopian plateau, began a long-term increase early in the Christian era, followed by a decline after A.D. 760 and abnormally low levels from A.D. 930 to 1080. The low water levels of the Nile itself, which are partly related to the early spring rains over Ethiopia, already averaged below normal from A.D. 730 to 805. Today in the area of the Axumite core settlement only one harvest can be cultivated per year on unirrigated land after the big rains of July and August. For the central and southern plateau, however, where reliable early rains fall during March and April, two or even three crops can be planted annually on a single plot.

A traveler's report of about A.D. 300 alludes to heavy snows in the high Semien Mountains, a condition normally associated with spring rather than summer moisture. This report and the phenomena discussed here suggest that rainfall

once was heavier, with more reliable spring rains during the heyday of Axumite power until the early eighth century. If this is true, the length of the rainy season would have been doubled, vastly improving the water supply and soil moisture. Such a subtle environmental shift explains how one of the marginal agricultural environments of Ethiopia could support the large populations of the farflung Axumite commercial empire. It is equally plausible that the same rainfall anomaly ultimately accelerated soil erosion during the seventh-century population expansion. But it is impossible to demonstrate whether or not increasingly unreliable rainfall patterns during the eighth century actually created a crisis in Axumite agriculture and reduced its carrying capacity, precipitating population decline.

Whatever the detailed causal interrelationships, at the time Axum was abandoned environmental productivity in terms of crop yields, grazing, timber and fuel, as well as wildlife had been catastrophically reduced. Before the eighth century, there was no attempt to colonize the moister, more fertile, and naturally more productive lands of central Ethiopia, judging by the absence of Axumite coins and pottery south of Nazret. By contrast, according to traditional Ethiopian histories reworked during the late thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, royally sponsored, large-scale missionary activity took settlers into central Ethiopia as early as the mid-ninth century. A new royal residence and a major monastery with 300 clerics from Axum were established deep in the interior around Lake Hayq, probably before A.D. 870. At the same time, much of the Axumite core area seems to have been abandoned to invading sheep herders, judging by the almost total absence of ninth or tenth-century rock-cut churches in what is today Eritrea. Axum itself is again mentioned by Coptic-Arabic sources in A.D. 978 that record the destruction of the town by a pagan queen from the interior plateau, but this has not been verified archaeologically. Royal power was in fact assumed in the mountain region of Lasta by a non-Semitic dynasty, the Zagwé, at some unknown point after A.D. 940. During this period the non-Semitic tribes



of Lasta became Christianized, while Semitic agricultural expansion continued southward along the densely forested spine of Ethiopia to modern Addis Ababa, and westward to the shores of Lake Tana, where a radiocarbon-dated cave sequence records colonization by A.D. 1100.

Mediaeval Ethiopia rose on a new interior power base, initially led by the tribes that supported the Zagwé in Lasta and later, after A.D. 1270, centered in the modern Amhara heartland of the fertile, rolling uplands of Shoa. Lamentably little is known about the Zagwé era because later manuscript copyists failed to preserve many contemporary records of what was considered a "usurping" dynasty.

The 11 monumental rock-cut churches of the capital of Lasta are all attributed to a single king, Lalibela (ca. A.D. 1195-1235), who gave his name to the town. They include a variety of architectural styles ranging from such late ninth-century Axumite elements as alternating, recessed and projecting wall levels and protruding stone "monkey-heads" at window corners, to mid-fifteenth-century painted walls and a single, non-basilica cruciform ground plan which possibly dates to the fourteenth century. Traditional Ethiopian documents claim that King Yimrha-Kristos, who is linked with the Egyptian Coptic patriarchs Cyril II (A.D. 1077-92) and Michael IV (A.D. 1092-1102), imported Egyptian artisans and special materials for church construction. This chronology implies that building activity was underway before A.D. 1100. Although Lalibela himself is also said to have welcomed Egyptian Coptic refugees, his rock-cut churches and those at other sites in Lasta and Tigré reflect a logical indigenous development based on Axumite prototypes. What Lalibela did attempt was to fashion his holy city as a "new Jerusalem," presumably modeled on the reports of Ethiopian monks returning from the Holy Land: juniper trees were planted in place of cedars, the stream running through Lalibela was named the Jordan River, and a grove of African olives became the Mount of Olives.

During the twelfth century, the Agaw of Lasta gave Ethiopia an unparalleled cultural heritage, but the political fortunes of the Zagwé were inauspicious. Little more than

nominal control was exerted over Tigré and Shoa, and during the thirteenth century both areas were penetrated by Islam. The eventual displacement of the Zagwé by a Semitic Amhara dynasty from Shoa signaled the beginning of a new extroverted political role. Emperor Amda Siyon (A.D. 1314-44) began to subjugate the south, and then decisively defeated the Muslims of eastern Ethiopia in A.D. 1332. A reformed monastic movement under royal protection evangelized the frontier districts from Tigré to the Rift Valley. Round wooden and stone churches, emulating rural domestic architecture, were built on mountain tops overlooking the hot lowlands or on islands in the fever-ridden lake basins such as Tana or Zwai. Political subjugation accompanied these Christianization efforts. Throughout the fifteenth century, Amhara colonists continued to trickle into southern Shoa, Gojam and the area between Lake Tana and the Semien Mountains. By the 1520s a Christian Amhara nation dominated the Ethiopian plateau and sustained a flourishing ecclesiastical art.

But by this time a new constellation of political forces had emerged. The strong Islamic urban culture of eastern Ethiopia, supported by Somali tribesmen, found a charismatic leader in Ahmed Gragn, who routed the Christian emperor in A.D. 1527. Subsequently Gragn ravaged one upland district after another, destroying the province of Shoa and all its priceless church art. Tigré and Axum were put to the torch four years later. After a Portuguese musketeer killed Gragn in A.D. 1543, the reunited Ethiopian armies were able to break the power of the Islamic East in A.D. 1577. But at the same time, pagan pastoralists from the south, the Galla, invaded the disorganized empire and uprooted Amhara agricultural settlement in most of Shoa during A.D. 1545-70.

In the early 1600s the Ethiopian emperors began to reconsolidate their power among the fertile plains and lush hillsides of Begemder, developing a permanent royal residence at Gondar after 1636. Although a splendid secular city rose here, it was at the sacrifice of the traditional royal mobility and effective frontier control. Today the seventeenth-century walls of the residence still enclose a myriad of partly ruined castles. Several new monasteries

were built around the town. At the monastery of Debre Berhan, artists recently recreated the incomparable Coptic paintings lost in the A.D. 1531 destruction of the Shoan monastery of the same name. This mural art is perhaps closest to the thirteenth-century Christian frescoes uncovered in 1961 at Faras in Nubia. Yet Gondar architecture has a strong European flavor: during the first hundred years of construction, a water castle and a library were erected, all reminiscent of fifteenth-century prototypes near Lisbon in a style that is sometimes attributed to the descendants of the Portuguese. The interiors and particularly the sumptuous rectangular hall of Bakaffa (built in the 1720s), however, are in the Renaissance style. But the whole is unmistakably coherent, individual, and most of all, distinctly Ethiopian.

The political power of the Gondarine emperors was eclipsed in 1735 when Galla tribesmen penetrated the countryside and looted at will. It

was not until 1889, with the coronation of Menelik II, that Ethiopia reemerged as a modern nation and resumed its historic role as a colonizer. Amid woods of freshly planted Australian eucalypts the modern Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa was laid out in 1893 on a hillside below a destroyed Mediaeval monastery.

The history of Ethiopia unfolds through a succession of new landscapes. In each phase, church and state collaborated in evangelization, agricultural colonization, and the subjugation and assimilation of non-Semitic border peoples. Each new landscape became the focus of different cultural and artistic expressions—the ostentatious obelisks, palaces and basilicas of Classical Axum; the rock-cut churches of Early Mediaeval Lasta; the now lost monasteries of Late Mediaeval Shoa; the castle complex of Renaissance Gondar; and finally, the diversified modern capital of Ethiopia.

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Understanding Aztec Human Sacrifice

by PATRICIA R. ANAWALT

If ever there was an ancient culture in need of further explanation it is the sixteenth-century Aztecs of prehispanic Mexico and their practice of large-scale human sacrifice. In recent years, the Aztecs all too often have been associated in the popular press with wholesale rites of blood lust, sadistic torture and insatiable cannibalism. Human sacrifice has come to be regarded as something of an Aztec specialty, rarely equaled in

the New World, let alone in the Old World. Actually, the ritual sacrificing of human life occurred in both areas. Examples come not only from Middle America but also from Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. The difference is that the practices of the Aztecs were extensively recorded, while multiple human sacrifice in ancient Old World cultures has only come to light recently as a result of twentieth-century archaeology.

In 1927 when Sir Leonard Woolley unearthed the Royal Cemetery of Ur in Mesopotamia, he caused quite a stir. The excavation revealed startling new facts about Sumerian culture never mentioned in the ancient cuneiform texts of that area. Sixteen royal tombs, dating from 2800 B.C., contained human sacrificial victims numbering from a mere half dozen to between 70 and 80. From artifacts found with the skeletal remains Woolley was able to ascertain that the victims were not lowly slaves, but rather persons of honor wearing the robes and trappings of high office.

In contrast, at one time ancient Egyptians appear to have entombed slaves with their masters. This was the deduction of the French Egyptologist Georges Maspero, who based his contention on the fact that from 2300 B.C. on and for the next 2,000 years, countless tiny figures known as "Shabti" were buried with the dead. Maspero was convinced that this custom could only mean that the shabti were a later substitute for the slaves who had been buried, dead or alive, with their masters.



Modern archaeology also provides striking evidence from ancient China of multiple human sacrifice. This came to light in the 1950s with the excavation of graves from the Shang Dynasty, dating between 1523 and 1028 B.C. In the Honan

Province alone, eight great kings' burials were found; the most remarkable of all was in Wukuang, about 322 kilometers south of Beijing. Just as in the Mesopotamian

Royal Cemetery of Ur, the king was found at a lower level than his attendants, who were buried complete with arms and equipment in chambers grouped around the main tomb. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, no written text recorded these large-scale human offerings. In sharp contrast, the sacrificial practices of the Aztecs were documented extensively from two very divergent points of view. To the Aztecs human sacrifice was a deeply religious and sacred practice upon which the continuity of the entire cosmos depended. This world view is made strikingly clear from information supplied by sixteenth-century Indian informants and their extant indigenous pictorial documents. To the conquering Spaniards, however, human sacrifice was clearly the work of the devil, and as Christians it was their duty to abolish it.

The conquest of the 15 to 20 million inhabitants of central Mexico in A.D. 1519-21 by Hernan Cortés and his expedition of less than 500 Spaniards is one of the most dramatic and improbable episodes in history. The conquistador accounts still seem as vivid and incredible today as they did to the home folk back in Spain 450 years ago. And no aspect of the confrontation between the European invaders and the indigenous inhabitants is more controversial than the issue of human sacrifice and the reliability of the Spanish accounts.

The Spaniards first became aware of the