

THE THRONE OF ADULIS: RED SEA WARS ON THE EVE OF ISLAM

(G. W. BOWERSOCK)

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When we think of Late Antiquity, we usually think of Rome, either its decline in the West or its continuation in the East. When we are feeling particularly adventurous, we may think of the Sassanid Persians, or ponder the stirrings of the Franks in the dark forests of Gaul. We usually don't think of the farther reaches of the Red Sea—Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, and what are today the oil- and blood-soaked sands of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. But in the several centuries after Christ, all these were very much part of the known world, if somewhat peripheral. *The Throne of Adulis* reconstructs, from fragmentary evidence, those centuries, through the prism of wars conducted across the Red Sea.

What this short book offers is a glimpse, a momentary glimpse, of this part of the world before Islam swept over much of it and erased it as it had been. This excellent work, by the well-known classical scholar G. W. Bowersock, is not really meant for the layman. Getting much out of it requires either deep background knowledge of Late Antiquity or a lot of time spent looking up names and places. In sections the book is very dry, not a surprise since it revolves around the analysis and interpretation of monument inscriptions, used because very few other locally-written records survive detailing this area of the world in the relevant time period, roughly A.D. 300 to A.D. 700. It's worth the effort, though—for the attentive reader, Bowersock opens a door to an exotic and little-known past, where the ambitions and deeds of long-dead kings still echo in the present.

Much of what Bowersock offers is fitting together pieces of a puzzle, using clues within inscriptions to tease out facts not themselves obvious from the inscriptions. Thus, if a king uses a particular adjective, such as the Greek *meγas*, meaning great, this places an inscription within a particular time period when that usage was fashionable. References to campaigns or battles that are otherwise obscure can become comprehensible if tied to details in better-known histories or travel accounts written elsewhere. Still, even the names and dates of many of the kings of the areas surrounding the Red Sea are totally unknown; others are

known only from their presence on coinage. Moreover, the areas farther south from the Red Sea are almost utterly opaque, though known of from Ethiopian inscriptions that memorialize wars and campaigns against their rulers. From this thin stock, Bowersock manages to spin a story that is not only interesting to the persistent reader, but to tie it causally to the rise of Islam.

The eponymous throne was an actual throne, of inscribed marble cut from a single block, although it disappeared long ago. It was set up as propaganda in Adulis, a port city in the Gulf of Zula (known until recently as Annesley Bay), in today's Eritrea and across the Red Sea from what is now Sanaa, the largest city in Yemen. Adulis was important because it was the port from which the ancients reached Axum, the capital city of Ethiopia and the seat of its kings (and where, to this day, the Ethiopian Orthodox claim the Ark of the Covenant resides in one of their churches, the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion). We only know about the throne because in the sixth century it was described in detail, including a transcription of its Greek inscription, by a Christian traveler-monk, known to us as Cosmas Indicopleustes (the name, not his real one, means "Indian Voyager," and he is known to us primarily as the maker of important early world maps).

It is not entirely clear which Ethiopian king set up the throne in the late second or early third century A.D.—it may have been Gadra, or another, Sembrouthes. Regardless, the point of the throne was not to be sat on, but to record for public consumption what the king claimed were his conquests and ruled lands. Some of those were merely tribes and petty kingdoms around Axum, but there was also much focus on wars against the powerful Nubian nation of Meroë (confusingly in ancient sources often also called Ethiopia, a reference to the dark skin color of the Nubians), including noting how the king fought his enemies knee-deep in snow. Most important of all, in that time and for our purposes, was the Axumite king's claim to have conquered and ruled across the Red Sea in South Arabia, in the land of Himyar, roughly what is now Yemen. The throne was placed in Adulis because its port was the launching point for invasions of Himyar, and the king boasted how he had restored Axumite power over Himyar.

Long after the throne was set up, in the middle of the fourth century, Ethiopia became Christian, under the king Aezanas. He also commanded

the carving of similar inscriptions boasting of his power over Himyar, now laced with Christian phraseology and giving thanks to Christ, not to Ares. But now, the king lied, for by A.D. 270, the Ethiopians had been driven from Arabia, under circumstances now lost. Regardless, we can see from Aezanas's claim, along with other evidence, that irredentism was important to all the Axumite kings. They desired, very much, to regain their rule across the Red Sea. Again, the history of Ethiopia and Himyar during these times, and of Arabia as well, is largely unknown, and appears to us mostly in Byzantine histories, primarily connected to struggles with the Persians over control of Red Sea trade. But in the sixth century Ethiopia and Himyar briefly assumed broader importance, when the long irredentism of the Ethiopian kings finally became more than talk, in the form of a religious war against Himyar.

For when the polytheist Ethiopians converted, so did the Arab polytheist Himyarites—to strict Judaism, not Christianity. As Bowersock notes, from A.D. 380 onwards polytheism disappeared completely and permanently from both South Arabia and Ethiopia, though it persisted among the Arab tribes in the rest of Arabia. (He rejects the earlier-fashionable idea that Himyar was merely a quasi-Jewish state, where an existing form of pseudo-monotheism adopted some Jewish trappings.) Reinforcing the confessional nature of the Himyarite state, the kingdom developed a sharp focus on persecuting its very large Christian minority, explicitly to force conversions. (How there came to be so many Christians in Himyar is unclear, although it probably has something to do with Ethiopian influence in the region.) The Himyarites were strongly allied to the Persians to their north, who sought support against their Byzantine enemies. And in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, the kings of Himyar, especially their most famous, Yusuf (also known as Dhu Nawas), conducted pogroms against Christians, including the throwing of Christians into pits filled with fire. Unwisely, he publicly boasted of his deeds to both the Byzantines and the Sassanids, as well as representatives of the sheikhs of the desert. It wasn't that he was dumb—presumably he wanted to reinforce Persian support and impress the sheikhs, thereby insulating himself from possible Byzantine reprisals. In retrospect, though, it didn't work out for him.

It was the most spectacular of these pogroms, in the Christian city of Najran, in A.D. 523, killing hundreds or thousands, that provoked

the Ethiopian kings to put force behind their centuries-old claims. The Axumite king, Kaleb, a devout Christian, quickly responded with a massive invasion force, in A.D. 525. In preparation for the invasion, Kaleb asked Cosmas Indicopleustes to transcribe the throne's inscription and send him a copy, which is why we know of it at all. Presumably Kaleb intended to use the earlier inscription as moral support for his military campaign. Only by chance did Cosmas include the inscription in a travel book he later wrote, which is why we know of it.

The invasion was a purely Ethiopian initiative. The Byzantines did not directly assist the invasion, though they were no doubt happy to see it; they were far away and they were Chalcedonian Christians while the Ethiopians were Monophysites, always causing a coolness between them. Kaleb (pictured on the cover of this book) was swiftly victorious, killing Yusuf and restoring a Christian kingdom in Himyar under Axumite control. Then he retired to a monastery, and disappeared from history (and is honored as a saint by the Orthodox Church).

Kaleb's victory didn't last long, however. His nominee for the new king of Himyar was soon overthrown by the Christians there, ending Axumite influence in Himyar almost as swiftly as it was achieved, but not restoring Jewish control. The Byzantines leapt into the power gap, seeing an opportunity to wrong-foot the Persians by further disrupting their influence over Red Sea trade. In 552, with Byzantine support, the successor Christian king of Himyar, Abraha, launched an invasion into central Arabia, towards Mecca, aimed at reducing Persian influence over all of Arabia. (This episode is recorded in the Qur'an, taking place supposedly in the year of Muhammad's birth, and miraculously repelled by birds that pelted Abraha's army with stones.) Whether from clever birds or not, Abraha failed, and the Persians struck back with a large-scale invasion of Himyar, in cooperation with the Jews, that expelled the Axumites for the last time, in 575.

We all know what happened next. Into this chaos of shifting power and multiple confessions stepped Muhammad, offering a new religion to bind all Arabs together. His famous *hijira* in 622, to Yathrib, renamed Medina, was probably in part the result of Byzantine efforts, both directly and through Arab allies, to undermine the Persians and their Jewish allies in the city (not dissimilar to Lenin's journey to the Finland Station). Muhammad succeeded beyond all likely possibility.

Within a few decades, the Sassanids were gone entirely, the reach of the Byzantines irrecoverably shrunk, and Islam began its short golden age followed by its long decline. The throne, like most everything else in this narrative, disappeared from history, subsumed underneath the new order and the movement of peoples—though Ethiopia itself did not change much for the next fourteen hundred years, and remains Christian to this day.

Two history lessons, often forgotten, pop out of this narration. The first is that before Christianity came to dominate the Middle East, Jewish conflict with, and persecution of, Christians was common. Himyar was merely one example. It is often forgotten that the Persians conquered Jerusalem, a Christian city part of the Eastern Roman Empire, in 614—forgotten because in 637 Muslim conquest of Jerusalem made the Persian conquest irrelevant. But when the Persians conquered Jerusalem, as Bowersock records, the Jews assisted, and celebrated as the Persians slaughtered the Christians, just as they later similarly helped the Muslims conquer Christian Visigothic Spain. That's not especially notable, given the rivalry between Jews and Christians, but contradicts the usual stereotype that it's Christians who are solely responsible for problems between Christians and Jews. Later Christian mistreatment of Jews in the Middle Ages, widespread though often exaggerated in scope and impact, has given us the false view that Jews were always and everywhere a sympathetic mistreated minority. In reality, they just lost out in power struggles, first to the Christians, and then to the Muslims. Antipathy between monotheist religions is inevitable; none of this should be surprising, or suggests that Christians are worse-behaved than Jews, or vice-versa. Theologically Christians are supposed to be more forgiving and less aggressive against their enemies, but actual behavior by Christian rulers, with some exceptions, mostly is not all that different from the behavior of all powerful rulers, encapsulated in the Melian Dialogue—"the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

The second history lesson is about the origins of Islam. The mechanics of its formation as influenced by local and regional wars are outlined above, but the ferment around the Red Sea had an additional effect on the creation of Islam. It is often noted, though *sotto voce* nowadays in order to avoid being killed, that the Qur'an is pretty obviously merely

a mashup of Christianity and Judaism, taken from both their sacred scriptures and from their legends and folktales, along with an admixture of creativity from Muhammad. The history narrated by Bowersock makes how this happened clear. All agree that Muhammad, a merchant by trade, must have come into contact with Jewish and Christian merchants, and to that is usually ascribed his knowledge of Judaism and Christianity. But that's only part of it. This book shows how all the pagan Arab tribes were surrounded by far more powerful monotheistic kingdoms, Christian or Jewish, to which they often had to bow. And Arabia was filled with Jews, not just in Himyar, who had lived there for a very long time—according to contemporary belief, ever since the Emperor Vespasian's destruction of Jerusalem in the first century A.D., but perhaps for even longer. The Jews of Yathrib, for example, whom Muhammad exterminated, had been there for centuries, not far from, and supported by, their brethren in the Holy Land and in Himyar. Christians, too, were widespread throughout Arabia.

Thus, the idea that the Arabia of Muhammad was a barbaric polytheistic land, of the Muslim *jahiliyyah*, to which Muhammad revealed a fresh type of religion, monotheism, is a myth. It is easy to see how Muhammad got the detailed knowledge of Judaism and Christianity to cobble together into his new religion, tailoring it to especially appeal to the desert dwellers of Arabia. Between Islam's pull and the power vacuum resulting from the exhaustion of the Sassanids and the Byzantines, it is less surprising that Islam spread as it did. True, we would all have been better off if the Ethiopians had established and kept sway over all Arabia, and Islam had been strangled in its crib. We can see from the world this book compellingly evokes how that could have been the result. But that's not the way it went. Too bad.