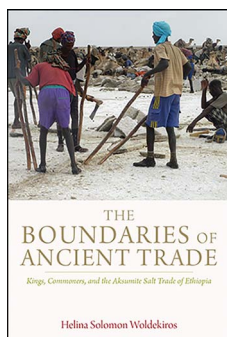


bronze statuette of Buddha that was made in the Swat Valley, now Pakistan, in the sixth century AD and was discovered in an excavation on Helgö, Sweden, in 1956 is used by Jens Schneeweiß as an example of how artefacts arrived there from 6000km away—possibly, he believes, through the Viking silver trade. Jutta Kneisel delivers a surprising but stimulating comparison between the mermaid symbol of the coffee empire Starbucks and urns shaped like faces, boxes or houses in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age from northern Germany and Denmark; she demonstrates the meaning of a logo or symbol, as an abbreviation for a concept or company or way of life, and the visible interconnectivity between areas of contact.

These and more brief chapters deliver a wealth of ideas and new perspectives from which to consider routes, paths and riverways in the past and how many of these are still connected to communities in the present. The diverse topics are sure to inspire many interested readers and give valuable insights into the multi-faceted ROOTS programme, which one can expect to deliver more stimulating outputs in the future.

HELINA SOLOMON WOLDEKIRO. 2023. *The boundaries of ancient trade: kings, commoners, and the Aksumite salt trade of Ethiopia*. Denver: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-64642-472-6 hardback \$68.



Helina Woldekiros has investigated, and even participated in, one of the last economically significant caravan-based trade routes in the world, the salt route between lowlands and highlands in East Africa, still frequented by about a quarter of a million people and pack animals each year. This salt route reaches far back in time and, while the focus here is on the Aksumite kingdom (450 BC–AD 900) located in modern north-east Ethiopia and Eritrea, the author suggests it has earlier origins.

The reason this trade route is still undertaken using camels and donkeys, instead of being replaced by trains or trucks, is that the three routes (approx. 130–220km roundtrip) have extremely challenging climates and rapidly changing altitudes. The salt is mined from Lake Asale, a saline crater lake in the Afar depression (155m below sea level), Ethiopia, which is one of the hottest places on earth—temperatures of 50–55°C are not uncommon. It is then transported to the Tigray Highlands whose farmlands are up to 3000m above sea level. Research on trade in East Africa has typically focused on elite goods such as gold, emeralds, ivory and incense but this book is solely about the regional salt-trade. As the author points out, little is known of the internal organisation, power relations and economics of this exchange.

The book seeks to challenge the notion of highly centralised and stratified polities in both studies of ancient trade as well as in the Aksumite kingdom. Woldekiros describes how she formed her own caravan of donkeys and camels and walked over 100km together with trading groups, interviewing many of the participants. Furthermore, she conducted excavations of several sites of past salt-trading communities. All this sheds new light on the complexities

and diversity of the salt trade, combining anthropological, archaeological and, crucially, ethnoarchaeological methods.

The volume is written in an engaging style, it is well organised and consists of an Introduction, six chapters and a brief Conclusion, followed by an extensive bibliography and a useful set of appendices. Sadly, the figures and especially the maps are not produced to an equally comprehensive standard. The Introduction deals with challenging the dominance of the elite-orientated trade model, then Chapter 2 guides the reader through definitions of the niche economy and markets, which have become widely used as a concept in African archaeology and history. These place the nuanced organisation of production and producers within their social contexts at its heart, which are flexible and much more relevant to the salt trade rather than to Western neo-capitalist concepts. Furthermore, the chapter provides a pan-African overview of salt trade and caravans. Chapter 3 delivers an excellent up-to-date summary of the Aksumite State and its economies and it emphasises the network of towns and cities stretching from Adulis on the Red Sea coast to Aksum in the Tigray Highlands. The author's fieldwork undertaken between 2009 and 2012 is detailed in Chapters 4 to 6, and it is placed in the context of the archaeology, geography and history of the region.

Chapter 5 is perhaps the most compelling part of the book because it details the experience of joining a caravan of up to 1000 people and 6000 camels and donkeys. The interviews reveal how the caravaners work within a wide network of people participating in the salt trade, such as miners, dealers, tax collectors and sellers. Work in the caravan is a male-only occupation; the men must be related to at least one other person in the trade and they all come from the towns and villages of the region and range in age from 15 to about 65 years. They are fluent in at least three Ethiopian languages, with those in the highlands being mostly Christian and those from Afar being mostly of Muslim faith. It is a highly respected profession but requires strength and endurance to cope with trips that last four to six weeks each, made several times a year.

Turning from the fascinating workings of the modern trade to the Aksumite times, the author undertook small-scale excavations. These included three sites in Agula, a highland traders' town, of a settlement site, a caravan camp and a church, with all sites revealing pre-Aksumite, Aksumite and medieval occupation. There are further excavations of a settlement and camp at Desi'a, a foothill town dating back to at least the medieval period. The excavated evidence, though a little underwhelming, is incorporated into a broader discussion of foodways on trade routes, by analysing different ceramic types and cereal crops. Chapter 7 brings the different strands of evidence, modern and ancient, together and explores the largely heterarchical organisation of this long-distance trade during the Aksumite kingdom.

The study shows not only the deep cultural heritage of this salt trade but also the importance of approaching trade in the past from a broader perspective. It is not simply to be understood as an elite-controlled and top-down system but rather a network of co-operation, interdependence and power that spanned communities of lowland pastoralists, highland farmers and urban salt merchants. This highly recommended book will appeal to a wider audience interested in ancient states, trade communities and modern ethnoarchaeology. Woldekiro also uncovers fascinating insights into the life and experience of the hardy caravaners who still travel the same routes as their distant ancestors.