

Notes on a Field Trip in Ethiopia¹

THOMAS P. DEAN, Oklahoma A. and M. College

A group of ten foreigners (to Ethiopia) took a lovely trip over the Easter holidays (1954). We made the drive from Addis Ababa to Asmara and return, a round trip distance of 1,000 or so miles. Travel by auto in Ethiopia is somewhat more hazardous and much less convenient than in the United States, but "fair weather" roads are available to most destinations.

Our road meandered back and forth over the steep escarpment facing the Danakil Desert to the east. From luxuriant vegetation in the deeply carved valleys of the escarpment, the road led us alternately through thorn forests and less abundant xerophytic flora. The road changed from a patch-work of asphalt and limestone surface to one of fist-size stones, usually well rutted by large over-loaded trucks. Occasionally bridges and tunnels along the route stood as monuments to progress under Italian domination, but most of the intermittent and detritus-filled streams were easily forded except immediately after a hard shower.

Land use along the Addis-Asmara route is varied and reflects the effective precipitation received. The area from Addis to Debra Sina is a well-watered, cool, temperate grass land of which about 40 per cent is in cultivation. From Debra Sina to Giarrao the vegetation of scrub and poor grasses can only support a poor grazing economy. In this area dwell the Gallas who live mainly on the milk of their animals. From Giarrao to Ualdia the best cultivated land yet seen in Ethiopia is found either spread out to the east of the escarpment or tucked away in one of the many well watered, terraced, mountain valleys. The land between Ualdia and Alomata once again consists of scrub and poor grasses, used mainly for grazing. The road from Alomata to Enda Medani Alem passes through a zone of smaller and more isolated valleys than is to be found in the Giarrao-Ualdia district. The land north of Enda Medani Alem is very arid and can only be used for grazing and limited cultivation near the larger urban centers, such as Asmara. In the vicinity of Aksum, however, the rainfall appears more bountiful and more land is under cultivation. Near the village of Melco, an Arabian-Jew has control of several thousand acres of land on which he is using modern machinery in the production of vegetables for the Aden and Asmara markets.

Most of the Ethiopian towns along our route are small unimpressive villages, but Asmara is one of the most modern cities in Africa. For eight or nine blocks, the main street is lined with multiple-story, modern, Italian-styled buildings. The sidewalks are shaded with graceful fronds of stately palm trees. The shopping district contains many fine shops, cinemas, and coffee houses. The people dress better and seem more prosperous than in Addis Ababa.

One point of unusual interest was our visit in the vicinity of Aksum. In the northern section of this native town of several thousand people, two French archaeologists were conducting excavations at the site of several ancient steles. They dated some of the monuments to the fourth century A. D. The church of St. Mary of Sion was nearby. Here were the crowns of Ethiopian royalty which we were allowed to photograph. In an open field a short distance west of Aksum, we found a number of small steles surrounding a larger one which lay on the ground. According to legend, this marks the site of the grave of the Queen of Sheba.

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