Stelae of Aksum

Grade Range: High School          Lesson Time: 40 minutes

Key Terms
- Aksum
- Ethiopia
- Ezana
- Obelisk
- Stele
- Washington Monument

Activity Overview
The Kingdom of Aksum was one of the great empires of East Africa. Reaching its height of power under King Ezana of the 4th century C.E., the empire dominated its region by hosting and controlling a set of major trading hubs at the western end of the Indian Ocean. In this activity students examine one of the most famous and studied relics of Aksumite society, the column-like burial monuments known as stelae. The goals of examining these artifacts are to understand how the Aksumites memorialized their rulers and to recognize similarities between monuments in the African and non-African worlds.

Essential Questions
1. What was the Kingdom of Aksum and where was it located?
2. What is a stele (plural: stelae) and how does it reflect the characteristics of the Aksumite Empire?
3. How do the Aksumites’ monuments compare to those from other places and times?

Objectives
- Describe a burial stele from the Aksumite Empire
- Explain how stelae were used to honor Aksumite kings
- Compare the stele of Aksum with the Washington Monument
- Hypothesize about why memorials are often similar across societies

zSpace Activity
Activity Questions Provided in Studio
Answers may vary. Sample answers are provided below.

1. This map shows the location of the Kingdom of Aksum, which was located mainly in modern-day Eritrea and the northern part of Ethiopia. Take a look at the map and analyze the positioning of the Aksumite Empire. What advantages might its location have had? Name at least two.
   The access to the Red Sea and the Nile River would have been an advantage for transportation. Related to this, this location was ideal for exchanging goods, and several major trade routes passed through the region controlled by the Aksumites.
2. Given what you have learned about this region of the world, what might have been some of the political or cultural influences on the Aksumite Empire around the 4th century C.E.? With which other societies might the Aksumites have been interacting at the time?

The Aksumites traded with and were influenced by people from across the Arabian peninsula, the eastern coast of Africa, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. The largest major power with which the Aksumites had to contend was the Roman Empire, although the Romans had their own internal struggles at the time. Famously, King Ezana converted to Christianity in the 4th century, although the reasons for his conversion are not entirely clear. The Aksumite Empire would weaken with the rise of Islam in the 7th century and the creation of large Muslim states that would take control of trade routes in the region.

3. Although simple in form, the stele of Aksum has some interesting features. Use the Camera to take a closer look. Describe as many physical details of the stele as you can.

The stele is extremely narrow and tall, and is made of stone. There is a small arc at the top that creates a rounded point, and there are some small carvings along the columns. There is a false door at the base of the stele. The stele is generally symmetrical.

4. The stelae were used to mark the tombs of Aksumite kings. Some scholars believe that the stelae were designed to symbolize royal palaces so that the kings might be comfortable in the afterlife. What aspects of this stele mimic the architecture of a palace? Name at least two.

The multilevel structure of the stele imitates the multistory structure of a royal palace. The carvings at each level of the stele are similar to columns that would be seen in a palace. Additionally, the stele has a false door at its front, as if someone might be able to enter it as she would a royal residence.

5. Why might a stele be used to honor an Aksumite king who has died? Give at least two hypotheses explaining how a stele honors the person whose tomb it marks.

The stelae clearly required a great deal of resources to construct, so the presence of a stele indicates that the person buried there had great wealth and power. Additionally, the symbolism of the stele is important. It points upwards to the heavens, for example, which indicates the ruler’s connection to a god or gods.

6. This is the Washington Monument, which was built to memorialize George Washington and was completed in 1884. How does it compare in size with the stele of Aksum? Use the Ruler to compare the sizes of these obelisks.

The Washington Monument is nearly 555 feet tall, and is much larger than the Aksumite stele.

7. The Washington Monument and the stele of Aksum share many features in common. Describe at least two ways in which these famous structures are physically similar.

Both are obviously very tall and narrow, and both are made primarily of stone. They both have many levels, as they were constructed by stacking consecutive layers of stone. Both reach points at the top, although the point on the Washington Monument is much sharper than the curved tip of the Aksumite stele.

8. One of these memorials is from East Africa of the 4th century C.E. and the other is from the United States of the 19th century, and yet they are so similar in form. Why might societies from such different times and places use similar structures to memorialize their leaders? Propose at least two different theories.

One theory is that there is something inherently impressive about a tall structure that points to the sky, and it is therefore not surprising that we see this architectural form across many societies in history. Another theory is that the shape of both the stele of Aksum and the Washington Monument was derived from the same historical sources. Both would have been influenced by classical Greek and Roman architecture, which is why they have so many features in common.
Closing

Extension Activity: Students could use the Internet to find examples of burial sites from other societies in world history, and they could then write short paragraphs comparing those sites to those of Aksum

Differentiation

- Group students heterogeneously to allow students with a strong command of the English language to assist in reading or interpreting questions
- Provide a handout with a list of vocabulary terms and definitions that will appear in the activity
- Allow students to provide answers that are handwritten, typed, or verbal
- Give students a variety of presentation styles to choose from (using charts/graphs, PowerPoint, making 3D presentations, creating videos/movies, making posters)
- Have students work as partners or in small groups (younger children could partner with older buddies)
- Enrichment: Students could research King Ezana’s conversion to Christianity to learn more about how his conversion changed Aksumite culture, and they could give a brief report on this to their classmates

Resources

http://media-2.webbritannica.com/eb-media/03/93203-004-CE9B39C5.jpg
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/aksu_2/hd_aksu_2.htm