

The Archaeology of Ethiopia, the Far-Off Land

In line 22 of Book 1 of the *Odyssey*, Poseidon has gone to visit the Ethiopians, ἔσχατοι ἄνδρῶν, who live in a far-off land where he and the other Olympian deities enjoyed a hecatomb of bulls and of sheep. Most scholars agree that *Aithiops* was not a geographically or ethnically specific term among all ancient authors, but generally referred to dark-skinned people from the remote areas of the earth. The assumption that ancient writers were confused about the location of the Ethiopians has led to the notion that Egypt and Nubia are as far as we need to look to find the ‘farthest of men.’

Thus, the richness of the archaeology of Ethiopia, a land surprisingly isolated from the rest of the world in the highlands of East Africa, has been largely ignored by classicists and Aegean archaeologists. This ignorance impoverishes our understanding of Homer’s words. Ethiopia, source of the Blue Nile, a largely Orthodox Christian country still on the Julian calendar, is an untapped source of ethnological and archaeological study relevant to the Classics, and to the history of the Greek world from the Bronze Age through the Byzantine era.

Most of the work on archaeology in Ethiopia has focused on paleontology or the well-known kingdom of Axum, with its famous carved stelai. Rarely mentioned, even in the most thorough studies of African contacts with the Mediterranean, is the abundant and tantalizing art historical and epigraphical evidence of significant contact with Greece over many centuries which makes Ethiopia a worthwhile destination for classical scholars, archaeologists, and students. An examination of the archaeology of Ethiopia, informed and illustrated by recent trips with students, demonstrates that the ancient image of Ethiopia is credibly compatible with the location of modern Ethiopia.