

Excavations by the British Institute in Eastern Africa carried out at Aksum  
under the direction of H.N. Chittick, 1974.

(Not for publication, or for quotation to the Press or otherwise without reference to the author, please).

Work began on 17th January and excavation finished on 16th April, though the digging had been on a reduced scale for the last week. An average of about 150 men was employed, with 12 supervisory staff. Work on the finds, etc, has continued to the time of writing (26th April).

The chief effort was devoted to further investigation of the main area of the stelae (or 'obelisks'). It now appears that before the stelae were erected (or at least before those stelae visible above ground were erected) a number of large platforms revetted with stone were built on the basal clay in the area, (phase I). These platforms were capped by a deliberately laid layer of red clay, over which is a deposit of white limey material, containing in one instance some charcoal. The purpose of these platforms, at least three of which have been identified, is uncertain, but they may have had a sacrificial function.

The platforms were subsequently extended by the dumping of large quantities of rubble against them, again bounded by a revetment wall (phase II). The revetment walls on the southern side may have been joined to form an east-west terrace wall; this has yet to be established.

The monolithic stelae were later erected, pits being dug into the platforms and into deposits <sup>accumulated</sup> ~~accumulated~~ between them (phase III). We have no evidence of a direct connection in function or data between the stelae and the platforms. On the evidence of coins and pottery in the deposits into which the pits for the stelae were dug, the visible stelae in this area appear to be of the Christian period. There is room, however, for a very slight degree of uncertainty on this point, arising from the presence of a large number of pits of later date (see below); while the very greatest care was taken to distinguish such pits in the course of the investigations, and to investigate them, it is impossible in view of the often similar appearance of deposits of different ages to be certain that all such pits were observed. However, the fact that the excavation of the stelae is preceded by two earlier phases is also agreeable with a comparatively late date for the monoliths, particularly in view of the lack of identified other pre-Christian deposits at Aksum.

During a period broadly contemporary with the erection of the stelae a number of shafts were dug leading to underground galleries and chambers, evidently tombs. These are cut in the bedrock, in general at a depth of about eight metres below the modern surface. Three such complexes have been discovered: Shaft tombs A, B, and C; in addition a fourth large tomb, that of the Brick Arches, may be associated with a similar system.

Shaft Tomb C is certainly earlier than a newly found, fallen and buried stela which butt covers the entrance shaft of the tomb. This complex consists of at least eight chambers; an inaccessible passage off one of the rooms indicates that there are probably more beyond. The chambers average some 4 x 4 metres in size (the largest 6 x 5 m) and are connected by doorways, and sometimes short passages, cut in the rock. The total length of the accessible part of the complex is some 25 metres. There is an unknown depth of soil on the floor; the head-room, however, in general exceeds two metres. No part of the complex underlies any of the standing stelae.

Shaft Tomb B consists of seven accessible chambers (so far identified) all cut in the bedrock and of a character similar to those just described. They are mostly connected by long low irregular tunnels, which have probably been made by robbers, the complex extending over upwards of thirty metres. It has not yet been possible to recover the original plan of this complex; at least five inaccessible or blocked (in one case by a cut stone 'door') tunnels leading off the galleries discovered indicate that there is more of this complex to be explored.

No excavation has yet been carried out in the complexes described above, save in the entrances. <sup>The excavation</sup> This will be a very great task, but should be rewarding; a considerable amount of pottery is visible on the surface, and there is a very good prospect of organic materials (wood, leather and the like) being preserved (as in the case of the Tomb of the Brick Arches described below) since the soil and atmosphere within the subterranean chambers is extremely damp, and has probably always been so.

There is no hard evidence of the date of this tomb in relation to any of the stelae.



Shaft Tomb A was discovered last year. It has a shaft far larger (4 x 2 m at the top) than the others. The chambers at the bottom, which were filled with earth, lead to others, also earth-filled. (It was the realization that this was the case that led me to suspect, last year, that there might be a catacomb-like complex beyond). Seven of the chambers have been excavated to date. They are very irregular in shape, and often difficult to distinguish from the clay in which they are dug, and with which they are filled. Very few objects have been found in them, but coins of Hataza and Wazena indicate that the complex is of very late Aksumite (or possibly post-Aksumite) date, a conclusion which accords with the fact that the masonry lining of the shaft extends virtually to the present-day surface of the ground.

In addition to the shaft tombs already described, a number of earth-filled tunnels were found in other parts of the area. These were not found to be associated with proper chambers; they are extremely irregular, burrow-like in character and thought to be tunnels dug by robbers (phase IV). Though many pottery and some bronze objects were found within them. I think it probable that these were left around (and in most cases broken) by robbers in antiquity.

The Tomb of the Brick Arches. This is different in character to those already described. It lies in the area East of the great standing stela (no. 3) partially excavated by Mr. Jean Dorresse some twenty years ago. Like the others, the tomb is about eight metres below the surface. It is approached by a flight of twenty (surviving) steps, some two or three at the top probably having been destroyed. The staircase is flanked by walls of rubble in <sup>mud</sup>mortar, and was roofed with large slabs of stone (of which a number survive) covered with earth. The steps lead down to an entrance formed by a horse-shoe shaped arch constructed of burnt brick, the arch resting on jambs of stone and mud-mortar. The entrance leads to an antechamber cut in the rock and measuring some 2.3 m square. Two doorways, each also with horseshoe arches of burnt brick, lead off from this room to other chambers cut from the rock, one to the west and one to the north. Each of these latter chambers has two small rooms (or large Loculi) giving off it; each with one entrance spanned by a stone slab. An earth-filled passage leads off the northern chamber; this has not yet been investigated, but may connect with another tunnel complex. The western chamber was partially excavated, but when the magnitude of the task of excavating the northern chamber was realized, the former was blocked off and held

over until the *next* season. In the northern chamber a very large deposit of objects was found; these objects appear to have been thrown out of the loculi by robbers, who were personally only interested in gold or things of high intrinsic value. Over 200 objects have been recovered from this tomb: most are of pottery, but there are many of bronze and iron, and a few of glass and silver, as well as some tiny fragments of gold. Of great interest is the survival of objects of organic material - bone, wood, and leather- such as have not hitherto, I believe, been found in Ethiopia. These objects pose problems of conservation; when it was realized that there were numbers of such objects (and when the magnitude of the cache as a whole became apparent) it was decided to hold over the rest of the work of clearance until next season. Steps were taken to ensure that the atmosphere within the tomb should remain at approximately its original level of high humidity, and the tomb was sealed up.

There is some evidence that this tomb is contemporary with Phase II (the extension of the platforms) described above, and that the tomb may date from about the time of the conversion of the Aksumites to Christianity. The horse-shoe arch is of great interest in itself, and particularly so in view of the apparent comparatively early date of the tomb.

Some work was carried out by way of investigating the terrace walls and associated in this area, and at the western end of the stelae park. The flight of five monumental steps, discovered by M. Doresse and apparently leading up to the terrace (or platform) on which some of the stelae were erected was found to have been destroyed (except for the lowest step) since the time of his excavations, presumably by persons wishing to reuse the fine slabs of which they were built.

#### EXCAVATIONS NEXT TO THE GIANT STELE (No. 1).

An area at the foot of the giant fallen stele was excavated, further to investigate a terrace wall found in a test excavation last year. The excavation was subsequently extended over an area to the west of the lower part of the monolith, and a narrow strip along its eastern side. It was found that the terrace wall, which is very massive and stands to a height of about five metres, forms a U-shaped re-entrant, at the base (or southern end) of which the giant stele was probably erected.\*

\* According to

\*an alternative interpretation, the stele would have been erected behind the line of the southern end of the terrace, with the upper part of the terrace wall,



The western side of the terrace is formed by a rubble stone platform overlying a large subterranean complex, dubbed the Mausoleum. It was entered at its eastern end by a monolithic doorway set in the terrace wall with square 'monkey-head' representations of beam ends at the corners. It thus faced on to the U shaped space found by the terrace wall, which probably originally constituted a courtyard, now filled by rubble and covered by the giant fallen stele. On the opposite, eastern side of the courtyard is a wide entrance, spanned by a massive stone lintel, which almost certainly leads to another vast tomb, completely filled (so far as can be seen) with earth, and not yet investigated.

The Mausoleum measures nearly 15.70 metres by 14.80 metres internally. It consists of a central gallery running in an east-west direction from the doorway, with five chambers, each measuring about 6.40 by 1.60 metres, on each side. At its western end a brick arch leads to a further chamber or chambers. The walls are of rubble set in mud mortar originally faced with a thick layer of lime mortar. The entrances to the chambers are spanned by large cut lintels. The roof is of huge cut stone blocks covering the whole width of the chambers, and in at least one instance, the entire room. There are three shafts on the middle-line of the central gallery, each 90 x 90 cm, constructed in the rubble platform which overlies the roof. These shafts were probably covered by monolithic capstones pierced by a square aperture of the same size; a block found in the clearance some years ago of the upper levels in this region (carried some years ago out by the orders of Leul Ras Mengesha Seyoum) and now set up in the fashion of a doorway is probably such a capstone. The chambers of the Mausoleum filled with earth (apparently washed in by water) to within 50 cm of the roof, so that it is only possible to move about the building on one's belly and the fill reaches to the top of the brick arch at the western end, thus preventing access to what lies beyond. No inscription, nor any decorative or symbolic carving has been observed.

This Mausoleum may be the largest monolithic subterranean structure ever discovered. No clearance of the interior has yet been attempted; its excavation

...

\* (contd) now destroyed by the collapse of the stele supporting it.

presents a formidable task.. We do not yet have any good evidence of the date of the Mausoleum, but on the grounds of presumed stylistic development it is suggested it may date from after the time of the construction of the Tomb of the False Door (see below) and of those ascribed to Kaleb and Gebre Meskel.

#### THE NEFAS MEWCHA.

This is the large structure, whose chief feature is a huge slab of stone, measuring some 17.3 x 6.7 m, which is situated in front of the position of stelae nos 1 and 2 of the DAE. It has previously been investigated both by the German expedition, and by H. de Contenson. In our investigations, all the loose soil which had accumulated under the great slab, and round about was removed. In general, the conclusions marked by Littmann were corroborated. Excavations brought to light sections of three east-west walls which supported the great slab, and the two parallel 'ambulatories' which extended along the northern and southern sides. <sup>There was a single ambulatory at the east and west ends.</sup> Slabs of the floor in the central part of the structure were exposed in position, as well as sections of the pavement outside and to the south of the area of the great slab. The fact that the outermost 'ambulatory' walls were rough on this outer face, and the upper side of the great slab is in part left rough and unfinished, indicates that the whole structure was originally beneath the ground level.

At only one point under the great slab is it possible to gain access to the soil underlying the floor. Excavations here disclosed a small tunnel at a depth of about 2 cm below the floor, and running in an east-west direction. It seems probable that the tunnel (which was not further investigated) was the work of robbers.

The Nefas Mewcha complex shows certain similarities in concept to the Tomb of the False Door, in that there is a central chamber covered with a large slab, surrounded by a sort of ambulatory. But the comparison cannot be said to be close, and the orientation is different.

It has been convincingly suggested by the architect, Ronald Lewcock, that when the giant stele, no 1, collapsed, the uppermost part struck the north-western corner of the ambulatory of the Nefas Mewcha, Thus causing the collapse of the Nefas Mewcha itself, as well as the shattering of the summit of the stele. It may



be added that it is clear that the stele fell after the accumulation or deposition of rubble in the courtyard in front of it, and after the construction of the terrace wall (M<sup>l</sup> of de Contenson).

#### THE TOMB OF THE FALSE DOOR AND ADJACENT STRUCTURES.

This tomb, the entrance of which is surmounted by a large block of stone representing a false door, lies immediately to the west of the 'stele park', in the area known as Addi Sarai. It was discovered last year, when the interior and the greater part of the paved courtyard on its southern side were excavated. This year, further excavation and examination have shown that the tomb proper, with the surrounding 'ambulatory' was constructed in a great pit excavated in the subsoil, the central part being built on a great block of stone, weighing some 100 tons, and brought to the site as a foundation. The superstructure is quite separate from the tomb proper, and is built with recesses in each side, probably somewhat after the fashion <sup>of houses</sup> of the time. The interior of the superstructure was probably filled with rubble (and perhaps with earth partially). Much evidence was found of breaking in by robbers in antiquity, not only by smashing the masonry, but also by tunnelling. (It may be recalled that no bones, or artefacts contemporary with the tomb were found within it).

Further clearance of the courtyard was carried out. The paving is laid directly on the basal clay, except where it overlies the pit cut to bring in the great basal slab, <sup>h</sup> where a packing of rubble and earth has been put in. Consequently little material contemporary with or antedating the building could be found either here or elsewhere.

The upper part of the sarcophagus in the tomb chamber had been deliberately smashed in antiquity. A piece of stone found in the courtyard has been identified as being from the side of this sarcophagus which can now be restored to its full height.

The courtyard extends in a westerly direction beyond the area excavated. The Governor of Aksum and the Antiquities Administration branch have most kindly expressed willingness to acquire the adjacent land, which will enable the excavation to be <sup>further</sup> extended in this direction. | On the western side of the main structure,

a tomb with a stone-lined shaft was found. The entrance to the chamber on the south side at the bottom was still blocked by two cut stone slabs, set vertically. on removal, however, it was found that the tomb was filled with washed-in earth, and had been robbed of any artefacts it may have contained, the robbers having penetrated from the southern end. This tomb is unlikely to have any connection with the Tomb of the False Door; it is probably later in date.

#### THE BRICK-VAULTED STRUCTURE.

Adjacent to the Tomb of the False Door, on its eastern side, is a stone-built wall in the Aksumite style. The western side of this wall is parallel to, and close to, the side of the courtyard; it has been traced for a distance of 18 m to the north (though cut by a very large pit) and may continue further in this direction. There is a return to the west, extending 15.50 m and then a further return to the north. Within the area of the U-shaped enclosure found by this wall, but at a lower level, and dug into the basal clay, is a subterranean structure the upper part of which is vaulted, and built of burnt bricks. These bricks are square, and of a type similar to that found in the tomb of the Brick Arches, measuring 27 - 28 cm square, and 6 cm thick. So far as can be surmised from the area dug to date, the structure consists of a central room, running east-west, with a number of rooms to the north and south. If this surmise is correct, it is similar in plan to the Mausoleum, but on a smaller scale. The vault is of the barrel type, and springs from a string course of thin flat stones; the lower part of the structure is of the usual masonry of rubble set in mortar. Over the vaults (which have all collapsed) comparatively rough stone slabs were found in three locations: these appear to have served to relieve the vaults of some of the weight of the superimposed earth. Such relieving slabs are found over the arched doorways, also of brick, which lead to the side chambers.

So far as I am aware, such a vaulted structure is unique in Aksumite Ethiopia, as is the use of brick on this scale. It is thought that it is somewhat later in date than the adjacent Tomb of the False Door.

#### GEZA AGMAI: THE NORTHERN END OF THE MAIN GROUP OF STELAE.

The main group of stelae extends some 800 m up the valley of the Mai Hijja,



through the area known as Geza Agmai. In this region, beyond the northernmost of the 'storied' stelae, the monoliths are all comparatively small. Five trenches were excavated against and between certain of these stelae. In one case the stele was found to have slipped into a shaft, probably cut by robbers, leading to a chamber, some eight metres down, cut in the rock. This chamber which is filled with earth (and whose excavation has not yet been completed) is probably associated with the stelae.

The pottery found in this region, including that contemporary with the stelae, was entirely of red wares, and comparable to that found in the stelae park. It may thus be of the period from around the fourth to seventh century. The pottery included several good examples of human heads serving as the tops of globular vessels. (Heads of this type seem usually, but not always, to be associated with stelae.) A find of great interest was fragments of at least two models of houses, in terracotta. The houses have rectangular thatched roofs arranged in 'steps'. So far as I am aware, these objects offer the only evidence yet found of the nature of the roofs of Aksumite houses where those roofs were built of temporary materials.

#### THE YODIT STELAE FIELD.

On the Gondar road, about 2 km from the middle of Aksum, is a large group of stelae lying to the south of the highway. This group is associated with the name of the legendary queen Yodit (Gudit in Tigrigna, hence our site designation GT). Test excavations (a total of nine trenches) were carried out in three areas of the field, to investigate the stelae in a similar fashion to that adopted elsewhere. There is much red Aksumite pottery on the surface in this area, and very large numbers of the <sup>characteristic</sup> steep-sided stone scrapers. No evidence of the existence of houses was found in the course of the excavations; it seems not unlikely that much of the surface pottery has been washed down from further up the slope, which rises towards <sup>the</sup> Beta Giorgis hill.

At the foot of one of the small monoliths was found a shallow shaft, cut in the subsoil, and leading to a small roughly-cut low-roofed chamber, filled with earth collapsed from the roof. Clearance of the fill disclosed a large number of pots piled against one side of the chamber, many laid one in another. At the very

back ( and found during the very last hours of the season's excavation) were five tall glass goblets, and a ~~sixth~~ elsewhere in fragments; these, together with two ~~simple~~ beakers, constitute an important find of glassware imported in the Aksumite period. Despite the fact that many of the pots were complete, and some intact, it does not seem that they were in their original position, they had presumably been pushed into the corner in which they were found, though there is no evidence of robbing. Though no significant bones were found, the pottery and glass presumably represent a funerary deposit. This lends support to the view that the stelae are of a funerary nature, as is indicated also by finds in a trench (I) dug at the foot of the largest (fallen) stele in the area. This disclosed a stone and earth filled pit (presumably associated with the erection of the stele) partially overlying a shaft descending downwards. A number of interesting fragments of painted pottery (including ~~painted~~ human heads of the type referred to above, but painted), came to light in this shaft. This led me to believe that it is likely that there are many more objects further into the shaft, and in the ~~presumed~~ tomb below. As our resources were being taxed by finds from other excavations, the work of further clearance was held over to a future season, and the excavation (like the others) filled in.

The pottery from the tomb referred to (and in the Yodit area in general) is not dissimilar from that found in the Tomb of the Brick Arches, and in the tunnels beneath the stele park, but is thought, in view of the resemblance of one of the vessels (a 'fruit stand') to one excavated in the Enda Sem'en area last year to be somewhat later in date, than the former (though not as late as the Enda Sem'en site, as the most characteristic pottery of that site does not occur in the Yodit area).

#### EXCAVATIONS IN THE ADDI KILTE AREA (Site Iw).

In the western part of the modern town, near the area associated with the names Abraha and Asbeha, a hillock had been noted where there was much calcined and vitrified matter, and the soil itself burnt bright red. Test excavations were carried out in this area. They disclosed, not remains of iron working, as had been expected, but the relics of a mansion, the walls of which survive in parts to a height of two or three metres, though in a very unstable condition after the surrounding rubble has been removed. This building had incorporate a great deal of timber reinforcement, both beams set horizontally in the stone walls,



and shorter transverse beams. The structure had evidently caught fire, and burnt at a temperature so high as partly to vitrify the stone. Parts of the beams have survived as charcoal, and samples have been removed for identification of the timber and C-14 analysis.

A large number of fragments of stone bowls were found in this building. These bowls, two of which are half complete, have been turned on the lathe. They are of a <sup>breccia-like</sup> stone somewhat resembling porphyry. These bowls are believed to constitute a unique find in Ethiopia, and no parallels to their form have come to mind.

In view of the violent conflagration in which this large building came to an end, conditions are very favourable to other objects surviving. It is hoped to excavate more of the building (of which only small sections have been examined this year) in the coming season. To enable this to be done, it will be necessary to buy the hut which is situated on the hill, and the surrounding patch of land.

#### DISPOSAL OF FINDS.

All the complete, or reasonably complete pots (mostly from the Tomb of the Brick Arches and from the tomb in the Yodit area) have been placed in the cases in the museum. They are sufficient in number more or less to fill these cases. Some other objects, including a number of coins, have also been put on exhibition. The security of the museum and cases is not however good enough for the more valuable finds to be exhibited, and these have been locked up (as last year) in the Institute's steel chest, and deposited at the Aksum Antiquities Administration office. The sherds of pottery (including some from the tombs which require further work to be done on them) are deposited in labelled bags in the new store kindly made available where the Aksum library formerly was. One waterlogged wooden object has been sent to the Institute of Archaeology in London for expert treatment. It is proposed to take to Nairobi some objects of metal, both bronze and iron, which need further treatment; I would also like to take the glass beads and a number of fragments of glass for study. Permission is sought to take these objects on the understanding that they will all be returned within a year, or such longer period as may be allowed.