

## Summary

The object of the Institute's excavations has chiefly been to attempt to add to our knowledge of the chronology and trade connections of Aksum, and, in particular, to find more about the date and nature of the famous monoliths or stelae at Aksum.

As regards the stelae, the task was tackled by careful excavations, following the natural stratigraphy in trenches dug against and between certain of the stelae. The evidence resulting from this indicates that many, at least, of the visible stelae <sup>may be</sup> ~~are~~ of the Christian Aksumite period. No evidence of domestic occupation was found in this area (except for foundations of nineteenth century houses) and it is clear that the area was always outside the ancient town. It was evidently a ritual area; the deposits in this region clearly accumulated very quickly, the accumulation being followed by a period of erosion resulting in the base plates of the latest stelae being above the level of the ground as it was when they were erected. The remains of platforms built on the virgin soil have since been found. After the construction of these platforms stelae were erected throughout the period of the accumulation of soil and rubble over and around them. A number of stelae have been found which are still in an erect position but completely buried by the deposits.

A very large shaft tomb was found to the rear of the great standing stelae (No. 3 of Littman<sup>n</sup>, Deutsche Aksum Expedition). The shaft of this tomb measures about four by two metres at the top and is eight metres deep. It leads to a number of chambers (now earth-filled) cut in the bed rock which it was suspected was part of a complex of catacombs. [In a subsequent season of excavation this has proved to be the case and a remarkable labyrinth of large chambers and passages, between seven and nine metres below the surface have been found cut in the rock.]<sup>7</sup> The few objects found in this tomb appear to be of late date and include a Wazena and Hataza

(the latter of types ascribed by Azani to Hataza II (ref. Rivista Italiana di Numismatica e Scienze Affini, Vol.III, third series, 1926. The dating of the Aksumite coins is however problematical.) and believed by him to be the latest coins minted at Aksum). This very late date concurs with the poor quality of the masonry lining of the shaft, and with the fact that this lining extends almost to the modern surface of the ground.

Excavations between the area of the main group of the stelae and the hill named the Beta Giorgis to the north led to interesting results bearing on the ecological situation of ancient Aksum. Here too there was a very rapid accumulation of deposits evidently washed down from the hill behind. Coupled with the evidence of the domestic occupation on the hill-side we can deduce that the forest (probably of juniper) which originally covered the hill was very rapidly cut down. This was followed by the cultivation of the hill-side and the occupation of the slopes by the cultivators. This resulted in a very rapid erosion of the soil on the hill-side (which is now largely bare) and the accumulation of soil at its foot.

Immediately to the west of the main group of stelae a tomb of great interest was discovered beneath the earth which formally ran northwards at this point. The tomb, which is probably that of a pre Christian king was constructed of granite masonry of the highest quality, similar to but better than that to be seen in the tombs ascribed to Kaleb and Gebre Masqal. It consists of an underground portion, the tomb proper, and a superstructure. The underground part consists of a staircase on the axis of the structure leading to an antechamber which in turn gives into a mortuary chamber in which was a plain sarcophagus. This nucleus of the tomb is surrounded on three sides by a narrow room. This room is approached by a staircase situated immediately to the west of that on the axis. The staircase was blocked by a huge slab of stone laid over it.

The superstructure is built in the form of a symbolic house with recesses in each of the four sides. What is more remarkable, however, is a false door (not dissimilar to be seen on those of the



stelae) placed over the axial entrance in the middle of the south side. The only objects found in the tomb are of post-Aksumite date. The tomb had been repeatedly pillaged by robbers who dug down beneath the structure and removed any object there may have been in it. In front of (to the south) the tomb is a large paved forecourt.

I know of no parallels to the curious plan of this tomb. The purpose of the surrounding chamber is not clear; the best guess may be that it was for reception of funery objects. The tomb is ascribed to the pre-Christian period on the evidence that it was built on and in the virgin soil, and the fact that the only objects of certainly pre-Christian date were found in this region, although none were satisfactorily stratified.

Test excavations in the locality known as Enda Sem'on were designed to bring to light a pottery succession throughout the Aksumite period. This was only partially achieved, since in three of the five trenches excavated the greater part of the archaeological deposit was occupied by the remains of parts of a very large building. This building, however, is of great interest since it is evidently of late, and perhaps very late date. The very small deposit antedating the building yielded coins of the anonymous type of Kaleb and successors. Parts of the building survived to a height of three metres below the ground and incorporated carved masonry, including door jambs with square "monkey heads" of the highest quality. Occupation deposits (which may however be of squatters) yielded many coins of the type ascribed to Hataza II similar to those referred to above.

We can deduce from the excavation at Enda Sem'on and of other excavations not here described that Aksum continued to be a prosperous city, until a late date, with large buildings being erected right down to what has hitherto been thought to be not of the Aksumite period. As to the finds a number of objects (mat-impressed pots and an archer's thumb ring) have been found which

certainly derive from the Nile region of the Meroitic or post-Meroitic period. This (taking into account also certain historical references) indicates that Aksum had considerable commercial relations with the Nile valley, even in late Aksumite times. A large number of carnelian beads found are probably of Indian (Cambay) origin, as also was a similar bronze plaque. Very large numbers of glass objects were found; certain distinctive types are similar to those found in X-group graves in the Nile valley.