

AKSUM 1973-1974:

EXCAVATIONS BY THE BRITISH INSTITUTE IN EASTERN AFRICA

Two seasons of excavations at Aksum, each of rather over three months, carried out under the writer's direction, have resulted in finds of great importance. The work was on a large scale, with up to 180 men locally employed, and a dozen supervisory and technical staff.

The chief effort was devoted to an investigation of the main area of stelae (or 'obelisks'). This was carried out by cutting trenches against and between selected stelae (always leaving at least half the deposit adjacent to the stelae intact) and following the natural stratigraphy. It was found that before the erection of the stelae a number of stone-built platforms were erected on the basal clay overlying rock. The platforms were revetted with stone, filled with loose rubble, and capped with a layer of red clay, over which is a deposit of white limey material. The purpose of these platforms is uncertain. Hardly any pottery was associated with them, so that it is difficult to form an opinion of their date, though they are obviously relatively early, and probably of the pre-Christian Aksumite period.

Subsequently the monolithic stelae were erected, pits to accommodate their bases being dug into the platforms and into deposits which had accumulated between them. Such stelae were being erected throughout the time that soil and rubble was building up to, or above, the present surface; three small monoliths have been found which, though erect, are completely covered by these deposits. The pottery and coins found in the deposits indicate that most, at least, of the stelae visible above ground are of the Christian Aksumite period.

During a period broadly contemporary with the erection of the stelae a number of systems of galleries or catacombs were cut in the rock below the stelae, generally at a depth of about eight metres below the modern surface. They were approached by way of vertical shafts, and consist of large rooms (up to 6 x 5 m) connected by passages. The most promising of these have yet to be excavated, having been found at the end of the season, and their shafts refilled for security. They would seem certainly to be complexes of tombs, and, while none seems to be associated with a particular

stele, they indicate that the monoliths were funerary monuments.

Another tomb in this area, though also cut in the rock, is of rather different character. It is approached by a staircase leading down in front of the stelae to a depth of some eight metres below the present surface. The tomb is entered through a horse-shoe shaped arch of burnt brick. Partial excavation of this tomb yielded many objects, including some of organic materials, which leads us to hope that more such will come to light in the other tombs when these are excavated.

Excavations at the base of the giant stele (No.1 of D.A.E.) showed that this was erected within (or possibly upon) a massive terrace wall forming a U-shaped enclave. In either side of this enclave is the entrance to very large stone-built subterranean tombs. It has been possible to enter only one of these; filled almost to the roof with soil, it consists of a central chamber, with five large rooms off, and measures 15.7 x 14.8 m. internally. It is orientated roughly east-west, and is largely of megalithic construction, though a brick arch at the western end leads to further, unexplored chambers. This tomb has been provisionally termed the Mausoleum.

West of the main group of stelae was found a further underground tomb, in this case orientated north-south. This is entirely built of fine granite ~~work~~ masonry, without mortar, somewhat in the fashion of the previously-known tombs ascribed to Kaleb and his son Gabra Masqal. The plan however is different. The underground portion has a central burial chamber and ante-chamber, approached by a staircase. Surrounding three sides of this central portion is a passage-like room, approached by a separate staircase, the entrance to which is closed by a large block of stone. The superstructure of the tomb is in the form of a symbolic house, with a false door, of the type found on the larger stelae, over the staircase leading to the tomb chamber. This tomb was completely excavated, but contained no objects contemporary with it, having been totally robbed in antiquity. It is built on, and set into the basal clay, and dates from the conversion of Aksum to Christianity.

On the eastern side of this Tomb of the False Door, parts of a structure having vaults of burnt brick were brought to light. This is probably also a subterranean tomb, with a plan that may prove similar to that of the



Mausoleum.

Excavations adjacent to monoliths at the northern end of the northern (main) stele field, and others in the Yedit field west of the town have also led to the discovery of tombs.

In the main area of the town, Addi Kilte, test excavations brought to light remains of two large buildings, apparently of late Aksumite date. Both incorporated large amounts of timber in their construction. One has cut stone masonry of high quality; this house was certainly built after the time of Kaleb, and, on the evidence of numerous coins of the latest types to be minted (types ascribed by Anzani to Hataza II) was still occupied at the very end of the Aksumite period. There is growing evidence that Aksum remained a prosperous place until a late date - perhaps as late as the tenth, or even eleventh, century. On the other hand, the small quantity of material from Aksum dating from before the Christian period is notable.

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the Ethiopian Government for permission to carry out the work, and my warmest thanks to the staff of the Antiquities Administration, and to the local authorities in Aksum, who invariably afforded us every possible assistance.

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