

Excavations at Aksum - 1973

by

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The following gives a brief account of excavations carried out by the British Institute in Eastern Africa under the writer's direction during the first four months of this year. The work was carried out under licence from the Imperial Ethiopian government and with the wholehearted co-operation of the Antiquities Administration; I am particularly indebted to H.E. Ato Tekle Tsadik Mekouria and Ato Mekbeb Makonnen for help and encouragement.

The main effort was directed to investigating the date and nature of the famous monoliths, or stelae, which have generally been taken as being of the pre-Christian period, and have been regarded as funerary. A number of those in the main group (that including the largest monoliths) were selected for examination. Trenches were cut against the sides of, and between, the stelae and dug so far as possible to the natural soil or rock, occurring in general at a depth of 3 - 4 metres. The finds were kept separate according to the natural stratigraphy, the dating being based on the included artefacts. In all cases at least half of the soil against the stelae was left intact, so that future generations will be able to check on the results obtained.

The conclusion arrived at is that the stelae examined must be assigned to the Christian Aksumite period¹, and it

¹ unless they date from a time of reversion to paganism after the time of the Aksumite kings, which would hardly fit into the general historical framework.

would seem many of them date to a time well after the conversion of her rulers. This is deduced from the presence of pottery having crosses, both painted, and applied to the surface of the vessels; these were stratified far below the level of the land surface at the time when one of the stelae was erected. Coins of Christian kings of Aksum similarly occur in strata pre-dating the stelae. The coins include two of Wazena and one of Ioel ascribed by Anzani to the seventh or eighth century. No coins of the pre-Christian period were found. The soil in this region appears to have accumulated at a remarkably fast rate, the pottery being pretty well similar all through the deposit.

The conclusion that the stelae are of the Christian period accords with the view recently put forward by G. W. Van Beek³ whose conclusion, however, is based on very different grounds. First that had the great 'storied' stelae been of the pre-Christian period one would expect that their architectural form would have diverged to a lesser degree from the styles of South Arabia. Secondly and more cogently he maintains that the sockets for the attachment of a presumed metal ornament at the top of the stelae are not arranged in a fashion suitable for a disc and crescent, which is what one would expect if they were pagan monuments; they are however adept for the support of crosses. There are no inscriptions on any of the monoliths at Aksum but it appears to have escaped attention that on stele No. 7 of Littmann⁴ there is a cross incised in the volute of the curious capital depicted on the front side; that on the other volute has been hammered out. The ankh 'life' sign on a monolith at the eastern end of the main stele field⁵ is a symbol employed by the early Copts in Egypt (although of course also a pre-Christian symbol).

² Rivista Italiana di Numismatica e Scienze Affini, Vol. III, third series, 1926. The dating of the Aksumite coins is however problematical.

³ G. W. Van Beek, "Monuments of Aksum in the light of South Arabian Archaeology", Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 87, 113-122.

⁴ Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, Band II, Tafel XI. It is, however, possible (but I think unlikely) that the crosses are additions.

⁵ F. Anfray, "L'archéologie d'Axoum en 1972", Paideuma, Vol. XVIII, 1972, Pl. IV.

The view expressed above does not mean that none of the stelae at Aksum are pre-Christian. Others remain to be examined, especially those to the west of the town; though the pottery on the surface of that area seems to be of the Christian period also. At least two stelae elsewhere (at Anza near Hausien and at Matara) are, it should be added, certainly pre-Christian.

The purpose of the stelae remains arguable. They have generally been held to be funerary monuments, but there is little evidence to support this view. To discuss the question at length would take up a space inappropriate to the present paper.⁶ I am inclined to interpret them as ex voto monuments, dedicated to the Almighty, a view not dissimilar from that of Van Beek.⁷ The recesses, usually of kylix-like form, carved in the platform-slabs in front of the large 'storied' stelae must have been for offerings; this perhaps indicates an amalgamation of Judaic customs with the Christian religion.⁸

A very large shaft tomb was encountered between the two monoliths behind the great standing stelae. This tomb not only differs from those hitherto known in the size (nearly four by two metres) and depth (eight metres) of its shaft, but in the nature of the chambers cut in the rock at its base. These are rough and irregular, and lead to further chambers which have yet to be excavated (the shaft has meanwhile been refilled). The chambers contained nothing in the way of objects, or of burials, in situ, but the fill included a number of late coins, including one of Hataz (II) of the type held by Anzani to be among the last to be minted at

⁶Very briefly: there are no monoliths undoubtedly associated with tombs, while there are many tombs known without monoliths. The two (non-Christian) stelae with inscriptions, at Anza (Hausien) and Matara, near the eastern edge of the plateau have texts which can hardly be described as funerary, though one does refer to or commemorate an ancestor. A number of small rough monoliths are known which have been set up at the angles of buildings (the Dungur mansion at Aksum, Ouchatei Golo not far from the town, and one at Matara); these (all of the Christian period) seem unlikely to have been funerary.

⁷"Monuments of Aksum", 122.

⁸cf. H.A. Stern, Wanderings among the Falashas in Abyssinia, reprint, London 1968, 188-190.

Aksum. The lining of the tomb extends almost to the modern surface of the ground, and it seems probable that it post-dates the stelae.⁹ This might also accord with the poor standard of masonry of the lining of the shaft and the indifferent workmanship of the chambers below.

A trial excavation in a road immediately west of the group of stelae led to the discovery of a tomb of very different character. This consists of a complex which appears to have been constructed just beneath the ground level of the time. It consists of a small mortuary chamber, preceded by an ante-chamber, to which a flight of steps descends. A further and adjacent flight of steps leads to a long narrow passage-like chamber which extends around three sides of those just described. It is built of fine ashlar granite masonry, with enormous roof slabs, after the manner of the only other large built tombs of this character, those of Kaleb and Gebre Masqal outside the town. The plan however is quite different to the latter, and parallels have yet to be found. The tomb had been totally robbed, only a *caricature of a broken in antiquity* in the inner chamber remaining. The objects found in the fill above and around the tomb (notably the glass) suggest a pre-Christian date for this structure. A more certain judgement on this however must await further excavation next year of strata antedating the tomb.

Trial trenches excavated in the area between the main group of monoliths and hill behind, Beta Giorgis, disclosed an accumulation of soil, mainly clays, apparently washed down from the hillside. A preliminary analysis of the pottery found indicates that these deposits, which are three to four metres deep, built up over a comparatively short period, perhaps one or two centuries. This accumulation was probably subsequent to the cutting of the timber on the hill, followed it may be surmised by cultivation and occupation of the slopes (on which there is

⁹If the tomb is contemporary with the nearest monolith, then that stele and the great standing storied stele in front thereof (No.3 of Littmann) must be at least as late as the time of Hataz. The only escape from this conclusion would be that the coins are not contemporary with the tomb, but dropped by tomb robbers, an explanation that cannot on the present evidence be substantiated.

much pottery to be found). The rapid erosion thus evidenced in the Christian Aksumite period is also likely to have taken place on the other now barren hills in the vicinity.

Test excavations were carried out in an area near the palaces excavated by the German expedition in 1906. The main object of these was to obtain a conspectus of the stratification and pottery in what was believed to be the centre of the ancient town, from virgin soil upwards. In the event most of the deposit was found to be of a comparatively late period. Three of the five trenches have proved to be within the area of a large building, with very little deposit beneath it. The standard of the masonry of this building, including fine cut stone work with representation of square beam ends, is as good as any known at Aksum. The fill of this building yielded large numbers of coins of types ascribed to Hataz II (Anzani, Nos. 282, 284, 291, 294); in a deposit which appears to be contemporary with the building they number thirty, as opposed to seven of all other rulers.

It is concluded that this building is contemporary with these types of Hataz coins, which according to Anzani were the latest minted at Aksum, a view with which our findings do not disagree. It may be added that the only coins found in strata antedating the building were of Christian type (anonymous, of Kaleb and successors).

From the evidence of this year's excavations, it would thus seem that Aksum remained prosperous until the time of the last of its recorded kings. This evidence is corroborated by the dating of around the seventh century ascribed by Francis Anfray to the mansion which he excavated in the area known as Dungur on the western side of Aksum. It also seems probable (to judge from the pottery illustrated in Littmann's great work) that the 'palaces' excavated by him in the centre of the modern town were also of the Christian period. It has been generally thought that after the time of Kaleb in the sixth century Aksum declined greatly. Though the (intermittent) control of southern Arabia was lost, this may not have been economically damaging. The occupation by the Beja of northern Aksumite territory was no doubt serious, but relations with the Muslims on the east appear to have been on the whole friendly, and Aksum retained control of much of the coast. To the west, kingdoms sharing a common mono-physisite Christian religion with Aksum were coming into being.

In the writer's view, to a large extent the wealth of Aksum was based on her trade with the Nile Valley. We are told as early as the time of the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea of her trade in ivory with the lands beyond the Nile; there is also evidence of trade in gold with the Fazugli region (Blue Nile).¹⁰ That this trade was important might also explain the geographical situation of Aksum, the westernmost of all the important Aksumite sites: had she been dependent on the products of Ethiopia itself, one would have expected the capital to have been situated near its port, Adulis, on the Red Sea. Moreover Aksum is situated between the rivers Takaze (Atbara) and Mareb (Gash); the latter is less than a day's journey northwards from Aksum. Both, in their lower reaches, offer convenient access to the plains on the western side of the Nile Valley; and it is worth remembering that Kassala is nearer to Aksum than it is to the Nile. Hitherto, material evidence of trade with the Sudan has been confined to isolated finds of copper objects of Meroitic origin in Ethiopia, an Aksumite coin at Meroe, others at Hawara and Qau el-Kabir in Upper Egypt, and one or two Ethiopic graffiti at Meroitic sites. In the course of our excavations, however, we found further indications of such trade; notable is the find of an archer's loose (thumb ring) such as is characteristic of Meroitic and X-group (post-Meroitic) times on the Nile. A type of mat-impressed pottery, which is certainly also imported from the Nile Valley, also occurred in the excavations. It has been suggested that this pottery of post-Meroitic date is to be associated with the black Nuba who, according to an inscription ascribed to Ezana, were overrun in the course of one of his expeditions.¹¹ Stamped motifs of crosses in the centres of bowls apparently of the latest period at Matara/must surely be related to comparable medallions on bowls from the Sudan,¹² though in this case it is not a question of imports, the wares being different. Glass vessels from

¹⁰ L.P. Kirwan, "The Christian topography and the kingdom of Axum", Geographical Journal 138, 2, 166-177.

¹¹ L.P. Kirwan, "Tanqasi and the Noba", Kush V (1957), 37-41. In a recent unpublished paper, J. Pirenne ascribes this inscription to Nezana, and dates it to the end of the fifth century.

¹² F. Anfray, "La poterie de Matara", Rassegna di Studi Etiopici, XXII (1966) Plates XLI-XLVI. Rare examples of similar stamps have been found in our excavations at Aksum.

¹³ P.L. Shinnie and H.N. Chittick, Ghazali, a Monastery in the Northern Sudan, Khartoum 1961, figs. 31 and 32.

the Mediterranean world, amphorae and also beads continued to be imported to Aksum in quantity. Of the beads some are of carnelian and were probably imported from India. Those of glass are very different from those which have been found on the East African coast further south, and may have come from the Mediterranean area; some distinctive types resemble beads found in X-group graves in the northern Sudan. It is in any case clear that a substantial amount of trade continued through the Red Sea ports and by the land route north-eastwards. This accords with the historical information recently assembled by Sergew Hable Sellassie.¹⁴

The lack of remains of the early Aksumite period (other, probably, than the great tomb described above) is remarkable; other excavators at Aksum have also found very little of the pre-Christian Aksumite period. This of course is not to say that Aksum was not an important place before the conversion of her kings in the fourth century (or the end of the fifth century if we accept the new data proposed by Mlle. Pirenne), but it does seem that the main centre of the early town was outside the areas investigated up to now. One of the objectives of our next year's excavations will be to attempt to find the early area of settlement.

¹⁴ Ancient and Mediaeval Ethiopian History to 1270, Addis Ababa 1972: note Aksumites at Alwa in 580 (p.177); friendly relations and connections between Aksum and Nubia in the eighth century (pp. 196 ff.) and in the ninth (p.208). In the Red Sea the Aksumites appear to have remained the dominant maritime power after the loss of their Arabian possessions (pp. 175-6). In the ninth century Dahlak was still an Aksumite possession, and Zaila may have been (pp. 205-6); both according to al-Mas'udi (tenth century) belonged to the 'Kingdom of the Najashi', with Muslims tributary to the Abyssinians. There was also substantial traffic by the land routes to Egypt, which may have followed the same routes as described in the fifteenth century (see O.G.S. Crawford, Ethiopian Itineraries circa 1400 - 1524, Hakluyt Society, Cambridge 1958).

The East African Coast

Excavations at a number of coastal sites, coupled with a re-examination of the meagre documentary sources, has led the writer to put forward considerable amendments to the formerly received early history and chronology. The new interpretations are founded largely on the evidence of excavations at the site of Kilwa, supplemented by work at Kisimani Mafia (a town contemporary with Kilwa on Mafia island) and in the Lamu region.

Traditionally the Sultanate of Kilwa and other trading towns on the East African coast south of Mombasa were founded in the tenth century A.D. by immigrants coming directly from the land of Shiraz. This aspect of the legend among others is now rejected. The pattern is now seen as a succession of groups of immigrants from the Persian Gulf region from the ninth century onwards founding isolated trading settlements in Pemba and the Lamu archipelago, and probably also in Zanzibar and the southern Somali coast. The town of Manda, on an island north of Lamu, where excavations have been carried out by the writer, is probably representative of these few settlements, though it is the only one to be investigated. The town, evidently wealthy from the time of its foundation, probably in the ninth century, gives the impression of having been in the nature of a colony, relying largely for its goods of everyday use on imports (pottery and glass of foreign origin being much more plentiful than on later sites), and closely tied, commercially at least, to the Persian Gulf. Later, further immigration is associated with the growth of towns on the Benadir coast, with Mogadishu pre-eminent among them; there were now closer relations, and no doubt intermarriage with, the Bantu (Kashur) who then inhabited the region, which is associated with the name of Shungwaya.¹⁵

¹⁵Traditional accounts tell of a town of this name, to be identified with Bur Gao on the coast in the extreme south of Somalia. An examination of the site of the early settlement there was carried out in the course of an archaeological reconnaissance of the southern Somali coast. To judge by the style of the buildings, the types of pottery, and the small depth of archaeological deposit, it is unlikely that this town dates from before the fifteenth, and more probably sixteenth, century. There is grave doubt about the true provenance of the coins reportedly found there (Chittick 1969). A critical examination of the documentary evidence suggests that there may never have been a town (as opposed to region) named Shungwaya before this time.

In the twelfth century Mogadishu developed the gold trade with the Sofala country. In furtherance of this trade merchants, remembered as of 'Shirazi' origin but probably already of mixed blood, settled at Mafia and Kilwa. These had previously been settlements of little importance, but were now rapidly developed as entrepôts of the gold trade. Soon, probably at the end of the twelfth century, a family of these 'Shirazi' merchants established themselves as rulers of an independent sultanate, initially, it seems, at Mafia, and subsequently at Kilwa.

Kilwa now controlled the trade in gold and ivory herself; through the thirteenth century her connections were mainly with the Persian Gulf (and through entrepôts there, with India and the Far East. In the fourteenth century this connection shifted to the southern Arabian coast, probably Aden in particular, and in addition to more traditional exports we are told of rice being sent to that place from Kilwa. This commodity may have been a re-export from Madagascar, with which Kilwa developed a considerable trade (evidenced by objects found which undoubtedly originated in Madagascar) in addition to her commerce with the mainland coast.

According to the Chronicle of Pate (close to Manda in the Lamu archipelago) this town was a rival of Kilwa in the fourteenth century. Excavations there, coupled again with a re-examination of the documentary and epigraphic evidence, have led to the conclusion that this cannot be the case. The town was non-existent, or very unimportant, before the fifteenth century; it flourished in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (more particularly in the latter part of this period, when under Portuguese and Omani domination Kilwa was in decline and its gold trade had effectively come to an end (Chittick, 1967)).

Further field-work on the coast is not contemplated for the time being.

The Interior

Archaeological work in the interior of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda has chiefly been directed towards research into the Early Iron Age, with particular reference to possible connections with the spread of the Bantu-speaking peoples. This work, initiated by B.M. Fagan, was for the most part carried out by, and under the direction of, R.C. Soper. Extensive archaeological surveys were carried out in areas of south and central Kenya, in parts of Uganda, and in northern Tanzania. Numbers of sites were found where the characteristic pottery is of the type originally dubbed 'dimple-based', now termed Urewe ware, and others related to this. This pottery is associated with evidence of the working of iron and of a settled way of life indicative of agriculture. Its distribution shows that large areas east and west of the eastern rift valley were settled by sedentary agriculturalists by about A.D. 300; the northernmost known extension of this is in the Chobi region on the Victoria Nile, Lat. 2°N. It has been demonstrated that there are resemblances in the pottery from these sites to that found on numbers of sites through Zambia, Rhodesia, into the northern part of the Republic of South Africa. Though there is a gap in southern Tanzania in what may loosely be described as a ceramic continuum, the wares north and south of this gap show a great degree of stylistic resemblance, and it is highly probable that further sites remain to be discovered between the two. Some pottery from the Kasai province of southern Zaire also appears to be related to this group of wares. The generic relationship between these early iron age wares, making their appearance in the first centuries A.D. over a wide area, is in marked contrast to the very wide variation in pottery types found in the succeeding period over most of the area concerned.¹⁶ The appearance of Early Iron Age wares seems to be associated with the first iron technology in the areas concerned, and with a settled agricultural and pastoral way of life. It is probable that this phenomenon is to be associated with the spread of the Bantu-speaking people, but this is not susceptible of proof on archaeological evidence.

¹⁶ A survey of the whole field is attempted by R.C. Soper in volume VI of Azania, which volume is devoted to the Iron Age in Eastern Africa.

Before the appearance of these iron-using people most of the region concerned had been occupied by peoples living by hunting and gathering, and having a microlithic technology of later Stone Age type. In certain areas, however, more advanced cultures had been evolved, on which work has also been carried out.

The first of these cultures is associated with a type of pottery known as Kansyore ware after the name of a site on the Kagera river excavated by S. Chapman. The makers of this pottery were certainly hunters and fishermen, but it is not yet known whether they had domestic animals or practised agriculture. The pottery concerned has been found in the area round Lake Victoria and south-east thereof, near Lake Eyasi. It appears to be contemporary with the 'neolithic' culture characterised by the use of stone bowls. The area of the latter culture is east of the Kansyore zone, though there is a slight geographical overlap; it extends, so far as is at present known, along the eastern rift valley zone from about the line of the equator to 2° South, and flourished through the first millennium B.C. into the Christian era. This area was not settled by the Early Iron Age peoples, and divides the zones in East Africa occupied by the latter. Recent excavations by K. Odner at Naresura, in Lat. 1°32'S. have disclosed an extensive habitation site of this culture with plentiful remains of cattle and sheep/goat, together with a characteristic pottery and occasional stone bowls. The people responsible for this culture were primarily pastoral; it is still uncertain whether they practised agriculture. In the case of the most westerly of these sites, Seronera (Long. 35°E.) the association with domestic animals is more doubtful. It is possible that the makers of the stone bowls are to be identified with the Rift group of south-Cushitic-speaking peoples having a pastoral economy postulated by Ehret¹⁷ and Sutton.¹⁸

¹⁷C. Ehret in Zamani, a Survey of East African History, Nairobi 1967, 163

¹⁸J.E.G. Sutton, The Archaeology of the Western Highlands of Kenya, Nairobi 1973, 81.

Looking to the future, the most urgent need in regard to the Early Iron Age and the cultures that preceded it is investigation of the belt lying north of the Ubangi/Uele rivers and eastwards through the southern Sudan and Ethiopia. It is encouraging in this connection that F. von Noten has already begun work in the region north of the equatorial forest in Zaire; it is proposed that D. W. Phillipson, R.C. Soper's successor at the British Institute, shall shortly carry out survey work in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia.

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