

Translation of report on "The Big Gravestone" (Der Grosse Stienplatte) from the Deutsche Aksum Expedition, 1913.

The Big Gravestone.

At the North-West edge of the open place at the East gate of the town, close in front of a modern courtyard wall, lies a pile of rectangular blocks, on which lies a huge flat stone on a WSW-ENE axis, 17.50M X 6.70M X 1.12M in size. The airstream of the valley meets another airstream, and in the dry months often causes big dust whirls which begin here and sweep all over the place. From this originates presumably, the modern designation "The going out of the winds" (Nefas Mawcha in Tigrinya). The Big flat stone and all the stones yet excavated, are presumably a large tomb. The very little excavation done here at the end of our expedition was insufficient, and could not give a satisfactory explanation of this memorial which seems very important.

The illustration gives a top plan of the stones and the extent of our excavations. C section shows a picture of things as they are and further drawings give an attempt at reconstruction of the lateral section (B), and the cross section (D). The latter is shown more clearly through the perspective drawing at the bottom left.

The underside of the big flat stone is completely dressed but the ~~under~~ other sides show unfinished work. Only ~~the~~ half the upper side is horizontally worked and a protuberance of about 40cms remains. Only on the Southern face are the upper edge and the under edge parallel, on the opposite side the unworked rock remains. The E & W sides have straight edges at the top, with the bottom edges cut away.

The stone does not lie at the level it did once and has sunk to a considerable depth and lies obliquely to its original axis. The support walls have probably been robbed because they consisted of little rectangular blocks which were easy to pick out. Under the lateral ends of the stone, and under both sides of its length, juts out a series of rectangular, similar stones (a). They all have a 50cm bedding plane cut on the upper side at both ends. The big flat stone rested on the inner bedding plane and the outer bedding plane served as a support for a second row of rectangular blocks lying yet further out (e). The rectangular blocks jut out obliquely from under the big flat stone which has pressed down the inner support wall (c). Most of the rectangular stones still lie clamphole to clamphole almost in situ; at the Western end the stones lie more tumbled and under both the rows of stones there presumably have been corridors. Section E; shows a short piece of wall (b) which formed the outer support wall of the inner row of rectangular blocks (a). It is about 2M in height, consisting of dressed rectangular blocks of varying thickness (28-11cms), some of which were clamped together. The upper stones of the wall were pushed inwards when the big stone collapsed.

The inner row of rectangular ^{blocks} (a) measure 3M in length and 50 cms in depth, the width varies between 0.90M and 1.20M. At the East ends of the North and South rows of rectangular blocks (a), lie two cornerstones (d), both of which have bedding planes cut on the

East and South edges of the upper face. The faces of the rectangular blocks (a) are very accurately worked and the undersides are smooth. The outer bedding plane on the upper face of the blocks (a) presumably supported the outer row of rectangular blocks (e) because of the way they are lying. These blocks (e) constituted a slab roof over a 1.45M wide passage between the wall (b), which has been proved, and a wall (f) of which 9M of the 85cm wall was found at the South East corner.

The outer row of stones (e) are 2.40 in length somewhat shorter than the blocks (a), but as thick and as wide. They must have been lying in a row as they were tied to each other with two clamps as the remaining clampholes prove. The many signs of bronze clamps are rather important, as they are seldom seen in Aksumite architecture. It has been mentioned several times about ancient Arabic buildings, that the stones were tied "to each other with red hot brass", for example a pond in Ma'rib and the castle of Ghomdan in Saana, Yemen. The stones (a) were tied together at their outer ends by two clamps and the inner ends show one clamphole in the bedding plane which the big flat stone rested on. The proof that there were cross walls under the inner ends of the big stone was shown by a little excavation under the latter which gave us some big flat stones dressed stones (A,B), as strong as the stones (a). These stones seem to have been lying directly adjacent to one another and were tied together at the sides by metal clamps. The width of one of the rows (A,A') was 2.89M, one of the stones being 2.30M. Of the adjacent row (B) only a short piece was seen, one of the stones being only 1.54M wide. From the insignificant width of these stones one can see that these stones must have been lying in adjacent rows, this means there must have been a cross wall under the line (x,y) (longitudinal) where the two crossing walls meet. It further follows that there was not one big room under the big stone, but was divided into different rooms by cross walls. The roofing stone of such a room was 2.89M, and therefore it is possible that there may have been about five rooms under the big stone, each about 2M x 4M.

The north side of the structure seems to have been similarly built with a row of rectangular blocks (a). At the East end where the stones lay without any plan, it seems from the bedding planes in the cornerstone (d) that there has been a row of slab stones similar to the stones (a), creating a passage underneath. And no doubt there was also a passage at the Western end. From a description of the ancient sites in the area, the following passage is taken: "And they say that further out, at the foot of the big broken stele there is a big house And in its four corners there are four rooms. A room in the East going to Maya Sum, one in the West going to Edda Taray, the one in the North goes to Nahaso and the Southern one goes to Mariam Sion. And when one goes in there with a candle, the wind will blow it out, and all will be dark". In the same description it says, probably about the same building: "And a similar house (to the house of Kaleb) is at the foot of the broken stele with doors to the left and right, ie. to the East and West". In this report there is a relatively correct idea of the building kept. Only a systematic excavation could clear up the questions about the entrances and the plan of the building. The supposition that it is a tomb becomes more probable as the building is only about 30M from the great fallen stele. No other monumental tombs have been found in connection with the steles, this

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building is the only one which could be connected with it, and there is probably not only one gravechamber in it, but may be seen as a burial place for all the people to whom the great stele was made. The monumental proportions of the big stone seem to indicate something of the importance of the building. All the burial chambers of Kaleb's tomb ~~were~~ were covered with big flat stones, although they were not this big. Therefore it is not excluded that there may have been a building ~~a-building~~ over it like the tomb of Kaleb, a place for sacrifices and wakes. It is less probable that the big flat stone is to be interpreted as a visible altar for the dead.

The use of a great stone monolith as a cover stone, the technical skill which is much better than other excavated sites in Aksum and the use of bronze clamps makes it likely that it ~~seems~~ was built by the same people who made and erected the big steles. The task for later investigators is to excavate this ruin further and to show the connection between the building and the steles. IT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT OBJECT FOR LATER EXCAVATION IN AKSUM!!.