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November 21st 1973

Dear Neville,

I am sorry about the delay; it has taken me two weeks to have this typed. I agree we have a problem with the relative dating of the various sites we excavated but I do not believe that a second Ezana will assist us. 560 A.D. is too late to explain the letter from Constantius, which document seems to be genuine, and remember that Palladius, at the end of the fourth century, travels with the Bishop of Adulis to India from Adulis. I see no reason to accept Pirenne's theory and remain convinced that the first Court conversion occurred some time before the middle of the fourth century, and that the king involved was Ezana. Certainly there are difficulties with Saezana or Shaezana, who is said by Constantius in his letter to be a brother of Ezana. Also there are difficulties with the Abraha Atsbeha tradition but in both cases the brothers would be, inevitably, contemporaneous.

I certainly agree that the period of time represented by the Stelae Park collection, and ES, and indeed Kaleb, is very short. The red wares and the burnished wares are very closely related, and some of the forms, and indeed shapes, are represented well in both types and do call into question a chronological interpretation, and demand a discussion of possible difference of function between the sites from which the pottery came. Unfortunately there is no way of telling the distribution according to use of our pottery collection. We excavated in such a way as to severely limit the chances of learning anything about distribution by function. Our sondages were widely scattered, and we did not plan pottery finds within any of the sondages, neither did we subdivide the fill layers related to floors in Geoff's rooms. There was no point in doing so, since we did not make any attempt to do a complete excavation, for instance of the ES structure, and have no detailed idea of its architectural form, or function. The pottery in the Stelae Park is to a large extent washed in, or is in fill composed of wash, and can tell us nothing about the functional distribution throughout the settlement. We have no idea as to whether it is domestic or ceremonial, and until we get off the dramatic concourse areas and into the smaller dwellings and fully excavate those we shall remain in ignorance. I hope you agree that it is not to be assumed at the moment that any of the pottery that we have found has anything 'behavioural' to do with the Stelae, or with the burial, or indeed with anything extra-domestic; this, especially in view of the fact that the wash comes from the town. (ref: Butzer's letter.) Given our decisions to proceed with the big monument and set a series of sondages and to make no attempt to conduct a complete excavation at ES, all of which I believe to have been correct ones, I do not think that we should expect very much in the way of functional interpretation of the pottery. The best we can do, and it is a very important best, is to take advantage of the large sample that we excavated and draw from it an overall typology and general time-sequence.

or eighth, during which period the trade routes suffered such severe set-backs. Do you see any reason to expect good building or good pottery - or good anything - technical, after that? The soil samples of Butzer speak to me at least of severe erosion by this time, if not before, which merely compounds the catastrophe. It is true that the kings of the second Solomonic period went to Axum to be crowned whenever they could but it is also true that they lived in, collected their taxes from and concerned themselves most with the South. The move south into Lasta on the part of the Zagwes has already been referred to.

I think then, that the whole phase that we have been excavating is very short indeed. The THA tomb may be just second-century, more likely third; the fine red material above that may be as early as the third but I suspect is later wash, and I feel that most of the fine red material that we have in the Stelae Park is not only post-Christian but possibly fifth rather than fourth century, and I do not think that the burnished ware goes on much after the tenth century. In the short period between there is the mild change between the two major types of pottery, and I would be surprised if the first burnished wares in the fill at ES were not already there by the early eighth century. I do not have a list of the coins in the fill at ES and it may well be, of course, that I am wrong to wax so poetic without that list. Do ninth- and tenth-century coins appear in the lower part of the fill at ES?

I would be very interested to hear more details about the glass evidence, which I think is not so much at variance with my own feelings about the pottery as you seem to suspect in your letter. Could you let me have a summary?

I have just been approached by three people from the Geological Observatory here concerning the possibility of doing resistivity surveys in the Aksum area and experimenting with magnetic surveys also. This project of theirs appears to be quite independent of our own work or indeed that of anybody else; they were unaware of our expedition to Aksum last year until I brought it up, having heard of their plans. They are now in the process of writing to you, and it seems to me that, while they are interested principally in perfecting their skills at isolating small features for their own geological ends, their use of our archaeological features as experiments would be of very great use to us. We had a meeting last Friday afternoon and discussed in detail your interests and the general interests of an archaeological nature in Aksum, and I isolated for them areas which we would be interested to have surveyed. They showed enthusiasm, and we may well gain a very great deal from this windfall. I suggested a survey of the flat ploughed area at the bottom of the Kaleb track, to the right of that track, and of the Ende Simon building, and of the area between the back of the Sheba Palace and the beginning of the buildings of the town on the Aksum side of the Gondar road. I also suggested a look at the ploughed area to the right of the road between Kaleb and the Stelae Park. If their methods prove accurate enough to pick up large features which can be discerned in plan this will save us a great deal of work and will greatly assist in plans for further excavation. I am sure that they are competent, and hope that you do not disapprove of the fact that I have given encouragement for the idea and have not made any attempt to indicate that it would be out of order for them to operate in an area and on features in which you might be interested. Their names are: Francis M. Dakin, a geologist, Dr. David A. Emilia, a geophysicist, and Dr. Charles A. Wood, a geophysical astronomer whom I believe you have met previously in Nairobi. Since they send a letter this week anyway I will not go into further details.

I have just this moment received your letter of 17th November and am distraught to see that you have not received my letter giving you the information about the late/post-Meroitic sherds. That letter went by return of post and its failure to arrive has doubtless held you up unnecessarily. MTD is certainly Mariam Tsion Dorese and is a false label, since at the time when the labels began to be put on I was under the impression that the principal excavations at Mariam Tsion were also those of Dorese; since the area was unstratified I did not make any attempt to change this. AXBG refers to your surface collection round Beta Giorgis; EHMT is indeed Endaga Hamus Mariam Tsion and JSF is the Judith Stelae Field. Sagas represents a few sherds from Saglaman Amda Tsion. I am slightly puzzled about the photographs; I wanted very small prints, one size larger than the contact prints, and not the full postcard size which I think is too extravagant. In any case, as I said in my previous letter, I am not over-concerned about provenience because a very large number of the photographs are there for ceramic purposes, and if, or when, published, are in that context and also many of them are rather to make sure that our drawings are correct than to publish. ~~in any case~~ Many of the photographs taken in the last couple of weeks were of aspects of the pots which would have taken an unnecessary length of time to draw and would have prolonged our stay in Aksum. I hope Simon has learnt his lesson about being certain with his lists of provenience and photographs for the next trip.

mostly
stone
fragments

There is a
size
amount
Scm 24.

but these pieces
show that area, same

OK
coins
Wofana
2.67-8

If the burnished ware and the fine reds had been contemporaneous, I would have expected both in the fill at the Stelae Park and in the upper levels there below the modern mixed levels and also in the wash collection from Haoulti. It is represented in neither place, although in both places the pottery sample is very large indeed. This suggests to me (using Okham's Axiom) that the two types are not contemporaneous, neither are the associated structures. The two types do overlap at Kaleb and there the stratigraphical evidence seems to me to be firm about placing the burnished material above the red ware. They also overlap at ES in the fill, where the proportion of burnished material to red ware is very much greater than the proportion of burnished material to red ware in the building levels. Concerning the upper levels of the fill and the levels which you regard as containing modern pottery at ES, it seems to me that this modern group of pottery is to a large extent representative of the post-9th or 10th century and is probably Zagwe; it is certainly very different from modern pottery of the area in technique if not in form. This so-called 'modern' (I prefer the word 'late') I have left out of my analysis which I am now in the process of preparing, since we did not keep or record reliable samples. We had no good stratification for this late period, and so no decent analysis would have been in order, but I do have a good range of forms for future reference. The presence of what appear to be Sassanian Islamic sherds as opposed to Sassanian sherds, and of the late- or post-Meroitic sherds, in the fill at ES and in the upper levels in the Stelae Park, combined with the association of red wares at the so-called 'building levels' at ES, again suggests to me that the burnished wares in the fill at ES are later than the red wares below them at ES and comparatively lower than them in the Stelae Park; this merely reflects the much clearer stratigraphical evidence for this chronology available from Kaleb; it is also worth noting that the proportion of coarse wares (after all, the more durable) to fine among the red wares in the upper levels is very much greater, and this proportion increases in favour of the coarse types in the lower levels at ES and Kaleb. I am still unhappy about the grey ware; I am a little sceptical of the stratification in THA (not of the excavation but of the stratification) and still reluctant to be more certain than to say that it appears that the grey slightly precedes the fine red ware, but overlaps with them. // I am not worried about the absence of later pottery in the Shaft Tomb in the Stelae Park, despite the presence of the Hataz coin. I still feel that the presence of that coin in the tomb fill argues an excavation of the tomb at or just after Hataz's time, possibly, if we were to be really romantic, a result of the coming to power of the Zagwes, when respect for the previous dynasty was at its lowest; if this was an excavation as early as that, it would not be surprising that the fill now found in the shaft is back-fill from the original excavation, and provided that we assume that the public nature of the Stelae Park precluded the accumulation of the later material found in the fill at ES, one would least expect to find burnished or other late wares there. While robbers rarely walk around with sherds in their back pockets, it would not be a surprise if they carried coins. In such circumstances, I hope that you agree that the stray coin or two from the time of excavation would be readily comprehensible, and the lack of late pottery equally so. If until the change of dynasty the area remained of importance as a concourse area, and this appears to be the case in view of the lack of later accumulation, and this concourse area was a function of the stelae, an excavation of the tombs before the coming of the Zagwes would be unlikely and the total absence of burnished ware, which I regard as a late Aksumite, pre-Zagwe feature, would be explicable. In this fanciful hypothesis I have conceded a functional difference between the sites which interest us, but cannot regard this areal distinction as over-riding the fact of chronological sequence apparent. I think Aksum suffered a dramatic decline and was by the 10th century economically dead, and the 10th century expedition to Arabia was no more than a desperate and vain swansong. I think a rapid decline in the technical quality of the pottery might thus be expected, and is indeed observed in the manner that I have described. I suspect that while we have no evidence of the destruction of which we are so often told, wrought by the Zagwes, there may have been a sufficiently large population change to explain the very different assemblage of pottery which overlies, and toward the top of the fill layers at ES mixes with, the burnished wares. Traditions speak of the building of Abba Libanos in the 6th century and of the founding of Debre Damo not long after; why not? Nothing we can offer can contradict that; indeed, if anything, what we offer rather supports such a date, since the kind of capital required for the building at ES and for the two churches mentioned, and the kind of skills necessary, would certainly have been available earlier rather than later. Inspirationally, and without firm evidence, I suspect Aksum only had the will, the capital and the ability to cope with such structures, and indeed with the Stelae (that is to say, the dressed stelae) between the fifth century and the late seventh

His work, particularly after you went and after the pressure was on to finish it, was extremely good and I hope that his difficulties over clerical inefficiencies will not be repeated and that you do not think any the less of him for it.

Thankyou very much indeed for the list of 'goodies' attached to your letter; certainly the disposition of these artifacts emphasises a different function of site between ES and the Stelae Park and the presence predominantly in the lower stelae levels of the Sassanian type pottery and of the faence surely argues the kind of late date that I have been suggesting. How late can you make your glass finds from the same area? You are tantalisingly vague about your opinions of the terra sigillata and of the glass in TH.

I will have another look for the glazed handle sherd; the pottery, though I saw it but two days after you sent it, was not released by customs until last ^{we}ek because there has been a long altercation between the University and the customs concerning the ~~import~~ import of materials duty free, and they attempted to levy duty on our sherds. They also held the sherds along with duplicating paper, photographic paper for the Xerox machine and other goodies until the argument was over. I therefore have not yet dived to the bottom of the box; the box was opened in order that it could be proved that neither I nor the University was smuggling peppermints without paying duty, but I hope that the contents were sufficiently unappealing for them to remain ~~to~~ where they were. The University agent who was present during the final clearing of the box, long after I had made my first contact with it, claims that everything came through safely. At the end of this week I will be in a position to unpack the sherds, and I hope that the box of special sherds will be there since that is what I asked for; I will write as soon as I know. Only the completed and recorded ES sherds should be with you and the special sherds and the type series of pastes should be with me. I got hold of a microscope the other day and had another look at the brown glazed sherd, and still cannot work out what the glaze is made of. It is most annoying that this piece should be unstratified.

Let me know as soon as possible when you and David are coming; at present, your own plans permitting, I am hoping that your pottery man will be here by the 28th December because I would like to have a few days with him prior to the beginning of excavations and am due to leave Addis for a trip to the north on the 29th or at the latest the 30th December, and ~~would~~ would like to take him with me or, if it is more convenient, to meet him on the 31st or so in Aksum.

Please send my greetings to everyone at the office, and of course Libby sends her love also.

Greetings to Helen,

Yours,

Richard

Enc: Photostat Wilding/Chittick 16.10.73

" Provenience Code

Copy of Transliteration Key — now generally accepted and already used by Tamrat, Wolde-Aregai, the Cambridge History, Rubenson etc..