

Aksum: An African Civilisation

Between 1993 and 1998, on behalf of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, Dr David W. Phillipson directed a five-year programme of field study at Aksum, the ancient Ethiopian capital. In an edited extract from his Albert Reckitt Archaeological Lecture, delivered at the Academy on 22 February 2000, he describes some aspects of one of the most remarkable civilisations of the ancient world.

To many Ethiopians and Eritreans, Aksum's principal fame rests on its religious importance, centred on the Cathedral of Maryam TSION, Saint Mary of Zion; it is the place where Christianity was first adopted on Ethiopian soil in the mid-fourth century. Aksum is also renowned as the centre of an ancient civilisation, remains of its grand monuments contrasting with modern buildings in what is now, in per-capita income terms, one of the poorest countries in the world.

Aksum was the principal metropolis of a major polity which arose during the early centuries AD in the highlands of northern Ethiopia and southern Eritrea. The development of socio-political complexity in this region may be traced directly to the first half of the last millennium BC, although its economy was ultimately based on cultivation and herding practices which had developed in this region long previously. Substantial farming settlements arose in the Aksum area, the example that has so far been most intensively investigated being at Kidane Mehret, a short distance to the north of Aksum. Here, between the eighth and the fifth centuries BC, was a stone-built complex of angular rooms and courtyards, the farming economy being remarkably similar to that employed by the rural population of the area in recent times. Cattle were the principal livestock species; cultivated crops included wheat, barley and, probably, the local cereal teff.

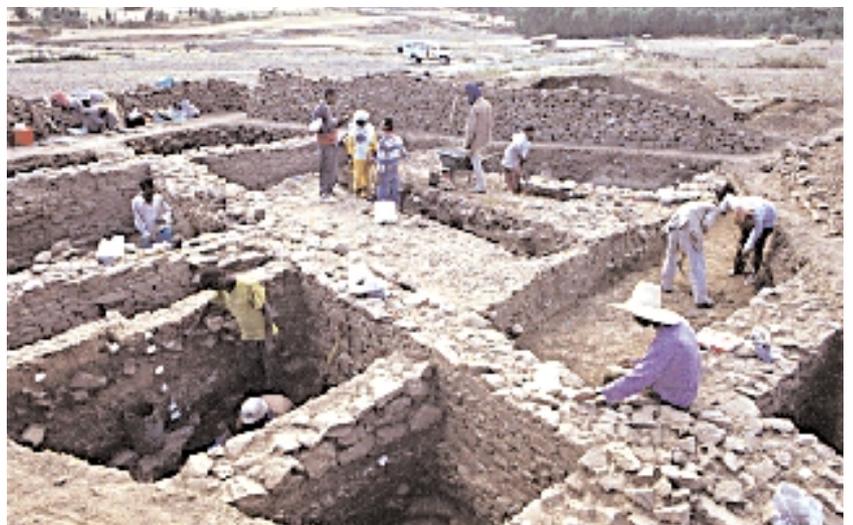
By the third century, Aksum was capital of a powerful centralised kingdom, controller of abundant resources, ruler of extensive territories, trading extensively and, by c. AD 270, issuing its own coinage which circulated both locally and internationally. There is good archaeological evidence for a substantial population enjoying a high level of material prosperity. From at least the second century AD, burials were accompanied by grave goods of varying richness, some of great abundance, which indicates unequal access to resources. This inequality seems to have extended through at least some parts of the Aksumite countryside. Within a short distance of Aksum were sites whose inhabitants seem mainly to have been engaged in the production of food, apparently thereby maintaining a reasonable degree

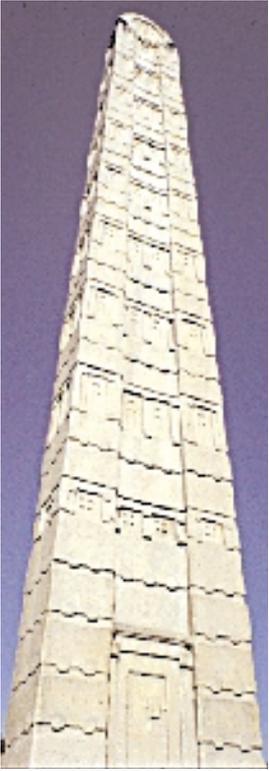
of material prosperity, as did people involved with craftwork and manufacturing.

Although until recently archaeologists and historians have placed almost exclusive emphasis on international aspects of the Aksumite economy, there can in fact be little doubt that this economy was locally based, on the productivity of the land and indigenous agriculture. Our research has indicated that, while sheep and goats were herded, cattle was the dominant domestic species being used both for food and for traction. Donkeys and chickens were also available. Inscriptions indicate that the herds were augmented by capture and tribute in the course of military campaigns. The range of cultivated crops was remarkably similar to that exploited in the region during more recent times, including wheats, barley, teff, finger millet and sorghum as well as chick peas, noog and linseed. Cereals thus predominated, including varieties originating in the Near East as well as local domesticates. Oil was obtained from linseed and from the locally domesticated noog. Grape-pips and both seeds and textile fragments of cotton have also been recovered; in neither case can one be certain whether the plants were grown locally or their produce imported from elsewhere. Grape vines were, however, known to the ancient Aksumites, being represented in contemporary artworks; and rock-cut tanks in the vicinity may have been used for making wine.

The Reckitt Archaeological Trust, which was established by the late Mr Albert L. Reckitt for the furtherance of archaeological research, was transferred to the British Academy in 1950. Amongst other things, a series of biennial lectures was established in memory of the founder. In 1999 the Academy introduced a scheme of travelling fellowships to be financed from the trust fund, and details of the first winners can be found on page 43.

Excavations at the Late Aksumite settlement of Kidane Mehret, on the outskirts of Aksum





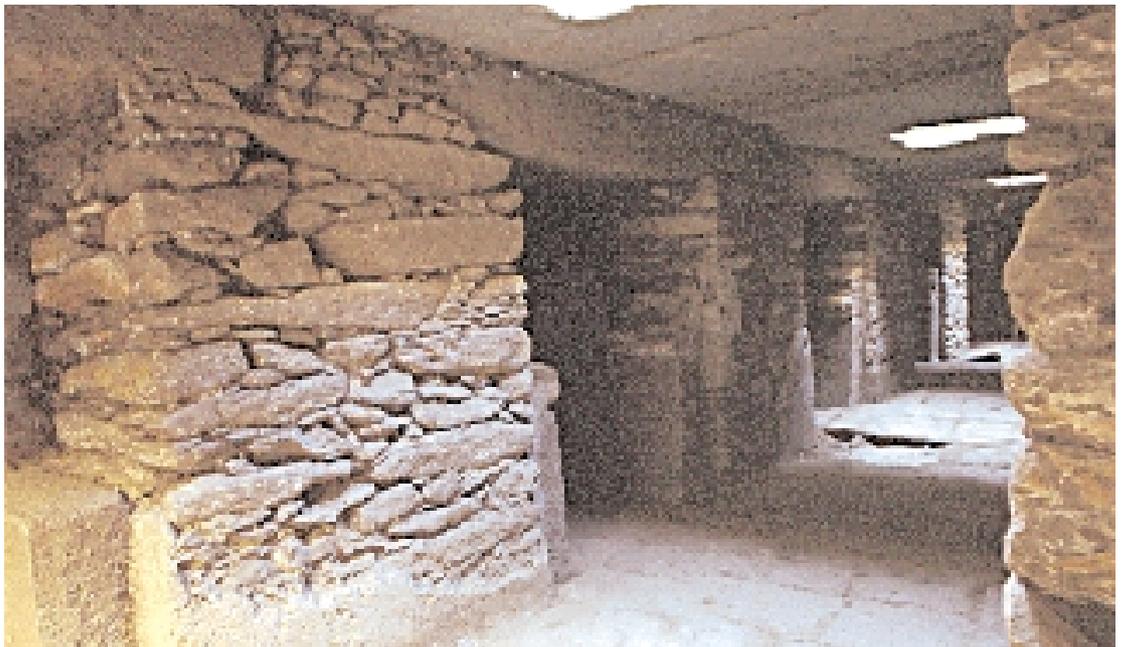
The still-erect Stela 3, now dated to the late third century or beginning of the fourth

The first-century text known as the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea records that ivory was a major Aksumite export; and a fourth-century tomb has yielded quantities of finely turned and carved ivory in the form of boxes, decorative panels and furniture-components that are interpreted as having formed parts of an elaborate chair or throne. At workshops on the outskirts of Aksum highly standardised flaked stone tools were used in enormous numbers to process raw materials such as ivory, timber and hides.

The most famous monuments which have survived from ancient Aksum are the huge monolithic stelae, carved in representations of multi-storeyed buildings; one, which still stands, is 23 metres high and weighs approximately 150 tonnes. Another, which probably fell and broke while being erected, would have been 30 metres high and over 500 tonnes in weight: it may be the largest single monolith which people anywhere have ever attempted to erect. These stelae were quarried about 4 kilometres away from the site where they were erected: their extraction, carving, transport and erection would have required enormous investment of labour. Our project undertook a study of the ancient quarries at Gobedra Hill, west of Aksum, and was able to ascertain the route by which stone may have been transported from there into Aksum.

The largest stela was intended to mark a pair of tombs, at least one being a complex underground structure of great magnificence. It appears to have been built in a pit, then covered with a thick layer of stone rubble behind a retaining terrace-wall. It covered an area 18 by 17 metres, comprising a

Inside the tomb associated with the largest stela



central passage entered through a monolithic portal at either end and with five sidechambers on either side. Inside each portal and at the entrance to each sidechamber had originally been a brick arch springing from massive rectangular slabs of dressed syenite. The walls of the Mausoleum were built of small undressed stones set in mud, the roof was of roughly dressed syenite slabs with three square apertures leading to vertical shafts, and the floor was of small sandstone slabs. All the walls and brickwork had originally been covered with a coarse gritty render, apparently unpainted, which would have given the impression that the entire structure was composed of syenite.

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The history of British archaeology overseas is long and notable. Today, opportunities for British students of archaeology to gain practical experience of work overseas are sadly depleted. What we should offer now is not merely the conduct of research but the training of the local people in whose hands the conduct of future investigations rightly rests. I believe that the Aksum project provides a good example of how British archaeology, with modest financial input, can yield lasting benefits not only to our understanding of a major overseas archaeological phenomenon but also to international collaboration and to a developing country's future ability to develop its own archaeological base. This collaboration has not been a gesture of one-sided generosity: our Ethiopian colleagues have contributed at least as much to the project's archaeological achievements as they have gained

in expertise and experience. I believe that the project's most lasting contribution may prove to be its collaboration with and training of Ethiopian personnel. This will be a contribution not only to

the personal advancement of the individuals concerned but also to the furtherance of knowledge about one of the great civilisations of the ancient world.



Ivory statuette from a fourth-century tomb

Dr Phillipson describes the origins and design of the research programme

In 1989 a two-day conference on Aksum was organised by the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa University. Among the papers presented was one in which I pointed out that most of the research so far conducted at Aksum was concerned with the élite segments of its population, with monumental architecture and luxury imports in particular. Virtually nothing was known about the subsistence base of Aksumite civilisation, about the lives or burials of common people, or about whatever it was that Aksum exported in exchange for its luxury imports.

In May 1991 a new government was installed in Addis Ababa and it became clear that archaeological activity at Aksum would shortly become possible once again. This was confirmed in the following year when I visited Aksum in the company of Dr John Sutton, who was then Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa. This visit permitted the preparation of a Research Design and costings for a project requiring five annual field seasons.

The research design built on the issues summarised in my 1989 paper but recognised that new research should focus on as many aspects of ancient Aksum as possible in order to start obtaining a more rounded picture of its civilisation. The principles and policies on which fieldwork was based may be summarised as follows:

- Since we were excavating in an urban situation, in an area which is of great interest to many Ethiopians and overseas visitors, it was essential that the work did not disrupt access and did not permanently disfigure the area. All open excavations were backfilled at the end of each season; protective coverings for underground monuments were designed and constructed so as to cause minimal visual impact.

- Although the local infrastructure does not yet exist to develop newly discovered monuments for public access, steps were taken which will facilitate such developments as and when it becomes practicable.

- Complete openness was maintained as work progressed. Local people, visiting dignitaries and parties of schoolchildren were welcomed. Tourists were encouraged to photograph the excavations. Every evening a meeting of the professional team was held at which individual members described their work and discoveries. At the end of each season public lectures were given in Aksum (with running translation into Tigrinya), in the Tigray capital Mekelle, and in Addis Adaba. It was thus clear that people and media in our host country knew of our discoveries before these could be announced overseas – a courtesy which was widely appreciated. After one of my public lectures in Aksum, a very old man said ‘white archaeologists have been coming here as long as I can remember, but you are the first who has told us what you are doing’.

- Publication was to be prompt, in media readily available and affordable in Ethiopia as well as in those aimed at the international academic community. Preliminary reports on each of the first three seasons have appeared in British journals with offprints widely distributed. A substantial account of the first four seasons has been published in Addis Ababa University's *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. The detailed report on the Project's work, in two volumes, is now going to press, less than thirty months after the end of the last field season.

- Training, primarily of Ethiopian personnel, was to be provided at several levels. To this end, local trainees were employed to a total of 25 person-seasons in support roles, and 29 person-seasons in professional capacities. In addition, it was possible to arrange for two Ethiopian archaeologists involved with the work to study and obtain postgraduate degrees at the University of Cambridge.

Dr Phillipson is Director of the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and Reader in African Prehistory. He received five Research Grants from the British Academy between 1993 and 1998 to support the fieldwork at Aksum. He is currently President of the British Institute in Eastern Africa.