ARCHAEOLOGY IN AFRICA AND IN MUSEUMS

An Inaugural Lecture given by
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When one considers the impact that Cambridge-trained scholars have made on our growing understanding of archaeology in the African continent, it is perhaps surprising that there has not previously been a Professorship of African Archaeology here or, indeed, at any other British university. This realisation heightens my appreciation of the honour represented by the appointment which permits me to deliver this Inaugural Lecture. My primary appointment in the University is that of Director and Curator at the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology; since the importance and the role of university museums requires emphasis, I propose to devote part of my lecture to that topic.

African Archaeology is a simple and convenient term, but my first topic in this lecture distinguishes between 'Archaeology in Africa' and 'Africa in Archaeology'. There is an important difference which becomes apparent when we consider relevance. Africa accounts for

approximately one-fifth of the area of the globe where human habitation is practicable. Its archaeological record is longer than that of any other continent since it was there, we can be almost certain, that hominids first evolved. Recovery and interpretation of evidence for the development of anatomically modern people is a study of direct relevance to humankind as a whole. Possession of the sites where this evidence has been preserved is, however, a source of justifiable pride to African nations in particular, notably Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania; it is also a heavy responsibility, as is the curation in their museums of the fossils and artefacts that are recovered.

At the other end of the timescale, archaeology is one of many sources of information about the comparatively recent past. It does not become irrelevant to the study of societies for which we also possess written records. On the other hand, it is undeniable that, in the absence of such records, the importance of archaeology is paramount. In much of Africa, indigenous literacy began comparatively recently – indeed, for large areas south of the Sahara, less than two centuries ago. Archaeology is thus a prime source of information about even relatively recent periods of the African past.

The value and relevance of this information extends far beyond studies of the past. In the developing nations of today's Africa, archaeology *per se* cannot be a top priority.

It does, however, help with understanding and determining policies for those priorities: health, food, sustainable exploitation of natural resources, and in fostering a sense of pride and self-reliance in a world which all too often seems to be forgetting Africa, albeit that is believed to be the continent whence we all ultimately derive.

But the archaeology of later times in Africa is also of wide relevance, for its discoveries and methodologies provide vital insights to the interpretation of the archaeological record of other continents and periods. In Africa, the countryside has for the most part suffered less modification through glacial and post-glacial environmental change or through intensive farming or industrialisation than has that in many other regions. This circumstance offers enhanced archaeological site-preservation and opportunities for survey, with the result that it is often possible to obtain a more comprehensive view of past landscape exploitation patterns than is practicable elsewhere. Traditional lifestyles and technologies, also, have been maintained in many rural areas, offering valuable insights which can assist in the interpretation of archaeological materials. A highly significant development which I have observed over the past quarter-century has been the growing extent to which African archaeology has ceased to be regarded as a purely localised discipline and become accepted as a vital component of mainstream academic

archaeology. There is thus increasing appreciation of the importance both of 'Archaeology in Africa' and of 'Africa in Archaeology'.

Some recent developments in the archaeology of Ethiopia provide informative examples which illustrate these points. Ethiopia possesses some of the most significant early hominid sites yet known, and much research effort has been devoted to them during the past quarter-century. My own involvement, however, has been with later periods, when cultural developments took place which gave rise to the civilisations of mediaeval and modern Ethiopia. These are studies that are directly relevant to Ethiopians today as they strive to cope with pressing problems such as those of subsistence, health, transport, education, cultural integration, cohesion and national identity. I emphasise that these studies have been carried out in close collaboration with Ethiopian scholars, have received much support and assistance from the Ethiopian authorities and have involved the provision of training for Ethiopian personnel both here in Cambridge and in the field.

Ethiopian agriculture exploits today, as has long been the case, crops which are indigenous to that region as well as others that have been introduced from further afield. Some of the indigenous cultigens, such as *teff* and *enset*, are ideally suited to local conditions and also

provide highly nutritious food. Several foreign crops, including wheat and barley, have developed unique Ethiopian varieties which are likewise well adapted to local needs and circumstances. Largely as a result of these crops' availability, modern subsistence farmers in many parts of Ethiopia often enjoy a far higher standard of nutrition than economists' calculations of *per capita* Gross Domestic Product would imply, although this standard is increasingly at risk through rapid population growth and through unpredictability of rainfall in terrain where inter-regional transport is often extremely difficult. This local agriculture is increasingly recognised as the best basis for sustainable development, and knowledge of its antecedents and past adaptations will greatly facilitate this. Until recently, only circumstantial evidence could be cited in support of the view that Ethiopian agriculture had a history extending over several thousands of years; now archaeological traces have been recovered, both by my colleague Ms Sheila Boardman and through parallel studies by Italian and American investigators, which show that the range of crops cultivated in the northern Ethiopian highlands during the last millennium BC was remarkably similar to that which is traditionally exploited there today. Further research, including genetic studies, will probably demonstrate an even greater antiquity and will undoubtedly also permit a better understanding of

how Ethiopian agriculture can be developed to meet the country's modern needs.

Next, I shall consider the civilisation of ancient Aksum which arose some two thousand years ago in what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea. Two themes will recur through this section of my lecture: continuity and interdependence. It has often been supposed, by Ethiopian as well as foreign scholars, that the Aksumite achievement owed much to contact with regions on the other side of the Red Sea. Such contact undoubtedly took place, but the indigenous African elements (as I shall show) were also extremely strong.

The heyday of ancient Aksum lasted from the third to the seventh centuries AD. During this time, it was the capital of a prosperous centralised kingdom that was recognised internationally as an important political, religious and trading element in the contemporary affairs not only of northeast Africa and Arabia, but over a much wider area of the ancient world.

At the head of the Aksumite state was the king. From the third to the seventh centuries the coinage provides us with the names of successive monarchs, two of whom – Ezana in the mid-fourth century and Kaleb early in the sixth – are also known from stone inscriptions. Both these sources present a view which reflects the state's own projection of reality. The stone inscriptions, for example,

emphasise both the religious and military aspects of the Aksumite kingship, noting in particular numerous peoples who had been made subject and/or tributary to it.

The extent of Aksumite-ruled territory clearly varied through time. The core was the highlands in what is now northernmost Ethiopia and southern Eritrea. The principal port was at Adulis on the Red Sea coast. At times the influence of the Aksumite kings, if not their undisputed rule, extended as far inland as the Sudanese Nile Valley. On at least one occasion Aksum controlled parts of southern Arabia, on the other side of the Red Sea. To the north and south, the extent of its hegemony remains unknown, although at times it probably extended as far as what is now northern Eritrea. Perhaps from as early as the sixth century an Ethiopian presence was maintained at Jerusalem. Aksum's trade contacts and cultural influence extended over a very much wider area.

Living conditions in ancient Aksum are only incompletely known from the archaeological work so far undertaken. Despite increasing evidence for slavery or coerced labour, this element of the population, like the peasantry, remains to be fully illustrated archaeologically. More prosperous farmers and artisans lived in rectangular buildings of undressed stone, generally of a single storey, comprising interconnecting rooms and courtyards

where crafts and food processing appear to have been undertaken.

The grandest non-funerary buildings of ancient Aksum made use of finely dressed stonework. Each comprised a square structure sometimes approached on one or more sides by monumental steps; the corners of these structures incorporated internal stairs leading to an upper storey or storeys. These square structures stood in courtyards which were themselves surrounded by ranges of rooms, pierced by one or more monumental entrances. The largest and grandest of these buildings covered more than two and a quarter acres. Their function remains unknown, but there can be little doubt that they were used by the Aksumite élite.

The most magnificent burials are those marked by the great stelae which occupy a central position overlooking the conurbation. The largest stelae appear to mark the graves of the kings of Aksum immediately prior to their adoption of Christianity in the mid-fourth century. (It is not commonly realised that Ethiopia was officially Christian before the Roman Empire.) These graves comprised elaborate monumental subterranean structures which, like the stelae, clearly represent enormous expenditure of wealth, manpower and other resources. After the adoption of Christianity, royal burials were no longer marked by stelae, although the monumentality of the

tombs themselves continued and they retained several features of their earlier counterparts.

The Aksumite economy was highly complex and ranged from the subsistence production of food, to the procurement of raw materials, to international trade and exchange. As I have noted, the principal features of Aksumite farming show strong continuity with those of earlier times. There can be little doubt that it was on this ancient subsistence base that the prosperity of Aksum was originally based. This prosperity grew with conquest: the royal inscriptions refer to livestock and other captured items and to tribute payments. Additional raw materials were obtained through trade with peripheral or more distant regions: salt, gold and other metals for example. The expansion of exploited territory is reflected in the increased use of plants which originated in neighbouring regions, such as sorghum and finger millet from lower-lying lands to the west and southwest. Cotton also came into use, although whether it was grown around Aksum itself we do not know. Grapes, known long previously in the Nile Valley, were probably made into wine.

The main route linking Aksum with the outside world led not to the Nile Valley but to the Red Sea coast. It was from this direction that most overseas visitors approached Aksum, and whence most of its luxury imports also came. It may also have been by this route that

contact was maintained, at least initially, with the Ethiopian monastic establishment in Jerusalem (which still exists and which I had the honour of visiting earlier this month). Fortunately, historical sources, including the first-century *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea,* supplement the incomplete evidence derived from archaeology. Imports included textiles, metalwork, glassware, pottery (and its contents). It must be assumed that exports took the same route, but we know much less about them other than that ivory was particularly important.

Coins were issued in the names of the kings of Aksum from about the third quarter of the third century until the first half of the seventh, being struck in gold, silver and copper. Aksum was unique in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa for issuing its own coinage at this time. The first coins were inscribed in Greek and the weight-standard of the gold ones was based on that prevailing in the Roman Empire – both clear indications that the coinage was intended to facilitate international trade. These features continued in the gold coinage throughout the Aksumite series but the base-metal issues soon adopted Ethiopic inscriptions compatible with their mainly local circulation. These factors are reflected in the distribution of the coins' findspots: Aksumite gold coins but no others are common in South Arabia and are also reported from India, while copper coins are numerous at