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ARCHAEOLOGY IN AFRICA AND IN MUSEUMS

An Inaugural Lecture given in the
University of Cambridge
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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

Aksumite sites themselves and have been recorded in Palestine and Egypt. Foreign coins seem only very rarely to have found their way to Aksum during the period when the local issues circulated.

The coins are one of several sources of information about Aksumite religion. Prior to the adoption of Christianity the Aksumites seem to have adhered to religious beliefs and practices derived in modified form from those which had presumably been introduced from South Arabia early in the first millennium BC. The crescent-and-disc symbol of this religion is depicted on several pre-Aksumite and early Aksumite carvings and monuments, as well as on the first coins. Latterly, as contacts developed with the Mediterranean world, this pantheon assimilated concepts and personifications derived from Graeco-Roman religion. This process in due course provided the context for the adoption of monotheism and Christianity.

The latter process followed a markedly different course at Aksum from that illustrated by broadly contemporary events in the Roman Empire, where a once-persecuted popular movement eventually gained toleration and eventual adherence from the rulers. At Aksum it was the other way round: the rulers adopted the new religion first and only later brought about its acceptance by most of their subject population. Ezana was the Aksumite king who

first adopted Christianity around the mid-fourth century; he is named and the process is documented both by the coins and by a series of stone inscriptions. Both sources suggest that the conversion was at first tentative and that monotheism may have been accepted before other aspects of Christianity. The conversion is also recorded by ancient writers who attribute it to Christians from Syria, one of whom was consecrated in Alexandria as Bishop of Aksum, thus establishing the long-lasting link between the Ethiopian Church and the Alexandrian Patriarchate.

The status of Christianity at Aksum during the later fourth century and much of the fifth remains uncertain. The state was nominally Christian and its rulers were probably firm adherents. Some coinage inscriptions of this time may be interpreted as indicating that the new religion was not yet widely accepted in the countryside. Most traditions attribute the establishment of Maryam Tsion Cathedral at Aksum to King Ezana, but there are indications that it may have been built or enlarged by King Kaleb at the beginning of the sixth century. The arrival of further missionaries from the Byzantine Empire in the late fifth century is sometimes traditionally recalled as a 'second conversion'. These missionaries, the 'Nine Saints' who apparently came from Syria, are said to have been responsible for the establishment of monasteries and Christian centres in several areas close to Aksum

and further afield. Certainly, it is from that time that we have the first archaeological evidence, in the form of numerous crosses scratched on domestic pottery, for Christianity at all levels of Aksumite society.

The technology of the ancient Aksumites was extraordinarily diverse. They employed quarrying, heavy transport, stela-erection and building techniques of great sophistication and achievement; yet they also continued to use flaked-stone tools in an essentially Late Stone Age tradition which have been studied by Dr Laurel Phillipson. The closest known affinities for the former practices are in Roman Egypt; the latter were firmly rooted in the local traditions of the Ethiopian highlands.

The most striking remains from ancient Aksum are the stelae. The largest of these, now fallen and broken, was originally some 33 m long and 520 tonnes in weight; it was probably the largest single block of stone which people anywhere, at any time, have attempted to stand on end. The quarries where they were extracted have been identified, as has the 4-km route to the site where they were erected. Rollers and ramps are thought to have been employed. The motive and lifting power was almost certainly provided by a large human labour-force, perhaps assisted by draught animals; there are persistent traditions that elephants were employed. In any event, the stelae and

related monuments are clear testimony for both the technology and the organisation of the ancient Aksumites.

It was formerly believed that overseas influences dominated in Aksumite technology, but this view is now seen as a serious exaggeration. Although some glass items were undoubtedly imported, it is now almost certain that others were made in Aksum. Most of the pottery was locally produced without the use of a wheel. Metalwork was likewise mainly local: techniques employed, in addition to the basic smelting and forging, included welding, riveting, production of even-thickness plates, drilling, casting, polishing, plating (including both annealing and mercury gilding) and enamelling.

It has long been known that ivory was a significant Aksumite export, but only recently has evidence come to light (through our work and that of Dr Catherine Hills) that Aksum may have supplied a significant proportion of the elephant ivory used in early mediaeval Europe. This material was also locally worked in a highly sophisticated manner. Lathe-turning (also used on metal and hard stone) was employed, as was figurative carving and jointing in a manner probably derived from the working of wood. Some of these techniques and products were probably derived from overseas, but there is now good evidence that they were locally employed.

The decline of Aksum was fairly sudden, being brought about by a combination of factors. Over-exploitation of natural resources, especially timber, may have meant that the area could no longer support its dense population. The establishment of Arab control over the Red Sea effectively cut Christian Aksum off from its co-religionists to the north and deprived it of most of its overseas trading contacts. Much of the settlement was abandoned early in the seventh century, apparently quite suddenly, perhaps when the political capital was transferred to a more southerly location. There are indications that this change may have taken place shortly before the end of the Aksumite coinage series. It is legitimate to consider whether the last two rulers named in the coin inscriptions, despite being designated 'kings of the Aksumites', in fact ruled elsewhere. (The form of these kings' copper coins suggests a certain discontinuity from those of their predecessors.) Shortly afterwards, Aksum ceased to be a prominent feature of the international scene.

A stone inscription at Aksum clearly belongs to this general period. Known as the '*ḥatsani* Danael inscription' and provisionally dated to around the ninth century, it was crudely cut on a stone throne-base which no longer served its original function. Demonstrably in a Christian tradition, it records the protection of Aksum against an incursion from the south. The *ḥatsani* Danael

inscription reflects a time when Aksum's importance had greatly declined, its monuments were in disarray but its former greatness was remembered.

The period of Ethiopian history between the decline of Aksum and the late thirteenth century is particularly obscure. It is widely accepted that, with its decline, Aksum ceased to be a political capital, although it continued as a religious centre. In the ninth and eleventh centuries, Arabic writers record two successive capitals, the precise location of which is not known. Such short-lived capitals were in fact the Ethiopian norm: it was Aksum that had been the exception.

The establishment of a ruling dynasty calling itself Solomonic is quite securely dated *c.* AD 1270. It replaced a dynasty known as Zagwe about which remarkably little is known with any certainty. Traditions name between five and sixteen Zagwe kings with reigns totalling between 130 and 370 years. If we accept the shorter estimate and the concomitant early twelfth-century date for the establishment of Zagwe rule, it follows that this event did not take place until almost five hundred years after the move of the capital away from Aksum. The political history of this period in Ethiopia remains virtually unknown, although some glimpses may be obtained from Arabic writings and through records relating to the Patriarchate of Alexandria. The upheavals which

followed the decline of Aksum are reflected both in the *hatsani* Danael inscription and in the raids attributed to a Queen Gudit for which some archaeological evidence has recently been discerned.

This is the appropriate place briefly to consider the famous text known as *Kebra Negast*: the 'Book of the Glory of Kings', which preserves a traditional account of early events of the Ethiopian monarchy from the time of Menelik, son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Many copies are extant: one that was appropriated by a British Punitive Expedition in 1868 and subsequently returned to Emperor Yohannes by the Trustees of the British Museum is still carefully preserved in Addis Ababa; it is inscribed 'This volume was returned to the King of Ethiopia by Order of the Trustees of the British Museum dated December 14 1872. (signed) J. Winter Jones, Principal Librarian'. Some copies of the *Kebra Negast* include a colophon indicating that the work was translated from Arabic into its current Ethiopic form at Aksum shortly after the fall of the Zagwe dynasty in the late thirteenth century, and there is internal linguistic evidence that the work previously existed in Arabic. It has, however, long been recognised that some of the comprised material dates back as far as the sixth century. Furthermore, although some copies contain 'updated' material, the core of the book does not contain reference to

post-sixth-century events. Thus, the colophon notwithstanding, the *Kebra Negast* seems to reflect a sixth-century view from Aksum. It was revived, after a period of obscurity, in the thirteenth century in order to bolster the position of the post-Zagwe self-designated 'Solomonic' rulers. In evaluating such documents, which clearly present oral testimony in written form, one must consider both the circumstances in which they were transmitted as well as those in which they were eventually committed to writing.

It is in the field of architecture that evidence of continuity from Aksumite into later times is most apparent, although understanding is hampered by the lack of chronological precision for most of the post-Aksumite material. Most of the relevant surviving architecture is ecclesiastical. This is probably due to a combination of factors: as mobility of the political centres became established, the associated structures were of a less substantial and durable nature, whereas churches tended to be of more permanent construction and were less susceptible to abandonment or destruction in times of political change.

A good illustration of these issues is provided by the remarkable complex of rock-cut churches at Lalibela where Aksumite affinities are readily apparent, as was pointed out over fifty years ago by Mr David Buxton of this University. The ages of the Lalibela churches,

contrary to popular belief, are not properly understood and the conventional traditional attribution of them all to the twelfth- or thirteenth-century reign of King Lalibela himself is almost certainly erroneous. At Lalibela, now named in honour of that Zagwe potentate, there are traces, never properly investigated or recorded, of monumental stone buildings and their foundation-trenches; there is no reason to suppose that these are the remains of churches. At least two of the Lalibela rock-cut churches may not originally have served ecclesiastical functions; significantly, they may be the earliest of the local rock-cut features.

Although the tradition of cutting churches from solid rock continues (or has been revived) in northern Ethiopia at the present time, it seems likely that the finest development of that tradition at Lalibela represents the culmination of a long period of practice and development. Although there is clear evidence that the Aksumites were able to cut underground tombs from the rock, and their stone-working capability cannot be gainsaid, there are no rock-cut churches to which, some traditions notwithstanding, an Aksumite date may confidently be attributed. Many of the rock-cut churches of northern Ethiopia may have originated in the mysterious period between the seventh and the thirteenth centuries, to which I have already alluded.

The studies of Ethiopian painting (whether murals, icons or in manuscripts) that have so far been undertaken are, for the main part, based on stylistic and subject-matter comparisons with material from other regions. This means that specifically Ethiopian features and innovations have received comparatively little attention. There is, however, documentary evidence that figurative mural painting of Ethiopian churches dates back to Late Aksumite times. The oldest Ethiopian book bearing a date whose validity is generally accepted belongs to the late thirteenth century. It is remarkable that virtually no attempts have been made to establish the ages of individual manuscripts by radiocarbon or other chronometric means. As a case study, one may cite the manuscript gospels preserved at the monastery of Abba Garima near Adwa. They have for long been bound in two volumes, each containing mixed elements of diverse origin. Often accepted as the oldest Ethiopian manuscripts extant, estimates of their age have generally centred between the tenth and twelfth centuries. Dr Marilyn Heldman, however, has argued that their contents include canon tables and portraits of evangelists, both of which could be as early as the sixth century, bound with gospel text of somewhat later date. More recently, Dr Jacques Mercier has announced two radiocarbon dates which, so far as I know, are the first to be produced for any Ethiopian