

ETHIOPIA

The B.I.E.A. Aksum Excavations, 1995

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The third season of research for the British Institute in Eastern Africa's archaeological investigation of the ancient Ethiopian capital at Aksum was undertaken in 1995. The Institute received additional financial support from the Society of Antiquaries of London, the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in the University of Cambridge, the British Academy, the British Museum and the National Geographic Society. The aims and achievements of the current project have been summarised in previous reports (Phillipson 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b).

The project's work continued to be greatly facilitated by the active encouragement of the Ethiopian authorities, national, regional and ecclesiastical. The involvement of the Centre for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (CRCCH) and of the Tigray Culture, Tourism and Sports Bureau (TCTSB) is once again warmly acknowledged. The 1995 professional team comprised 15 people from Ethiopia and 13 from overseas. The locally employed labour force was steadily increased through the season to a total of 96.

During 1995, excavations were conducted at several locations in and around Aksum during the period 22 October - 22 December, with post-excavation work continuing until 13 January 1996. Highlights of the 1995 season were the completion of the archaeological investigation on the monumental complex formed by the largest of the Aksumite stelae and its associated tombs, together with further excavation in the third-century Tomb of the Brick Arches. Continued research in the 'Gudit Stelae Field' located a low-status burial. Large-scale excavation was conducted in an area of sixth-century domestic occupation on the northern edge of Aksum, where archaeobotanical research also yielded important results. Survey in the

hinterland of Aksum revealed numerous rural sites, some extending back to late prehistoric times, which it is hoped will be further investigated in 1996. At the request of the Aksum municipal authorities, an evaluation was made of two intended building sites within the urban area. The 1995 season was the first occasion that archaeobotanical research was undertaken as part of the Aksum Project.

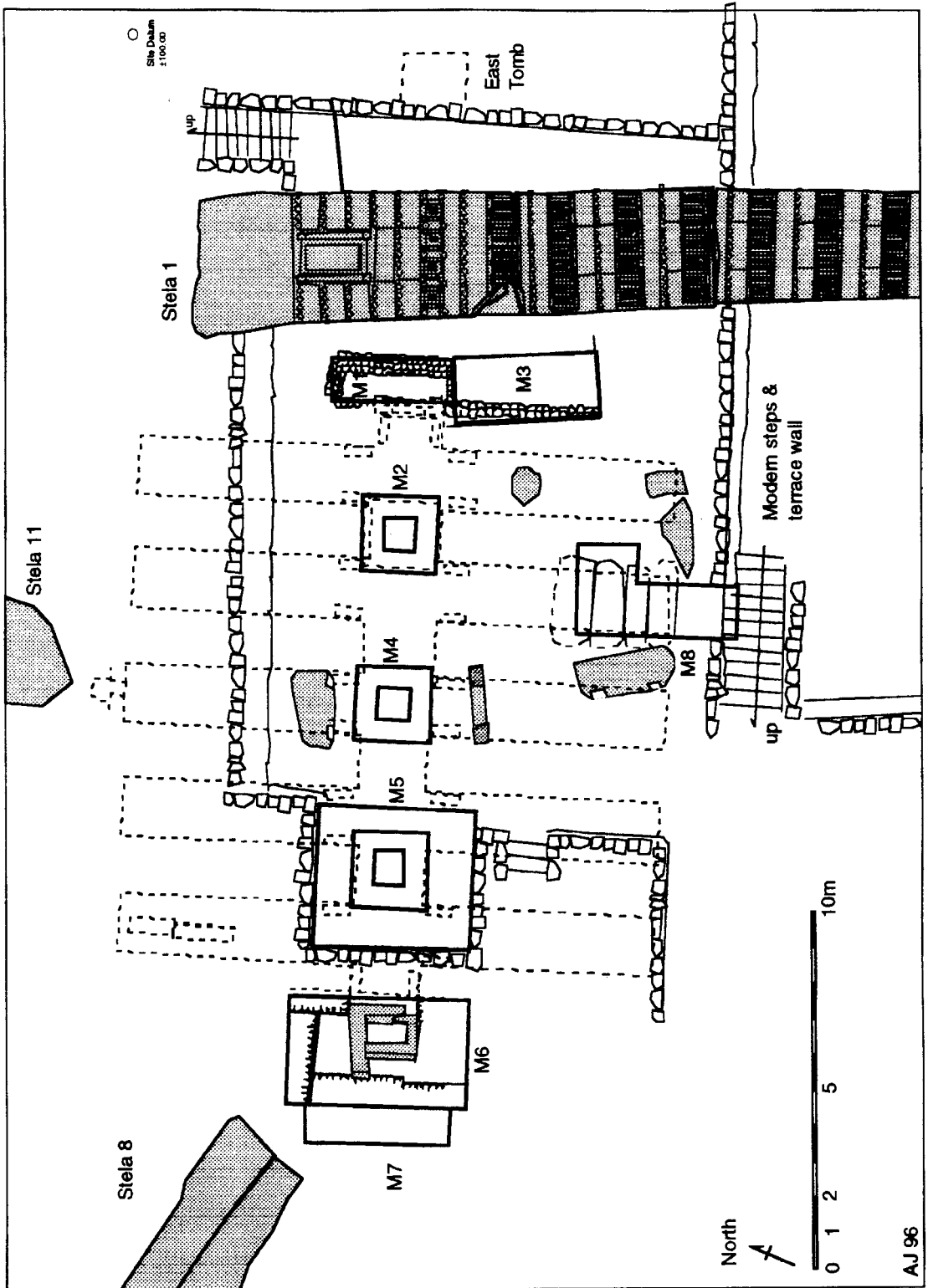
The Mausoleum

This tomb is a complex stone structure, associated with the largest of the Aksumite stelae (Stela 1), perhaps dating to around the early fourth century AD. It covers an area some 17 x 15 m, comprising a central passage with five sidechambers on either side (Figure 1). Following intensive work in 1993 and 1994, its investigation has now been completed, the work having been supervised by Mr Michael Harlow in all three seasons.

Four of the sidechambers have been totally excavated, as has part of a fifth. Those sidechambers not fully excavated have been walled up for security and to maintain the humidity of the deposits. A trench was excavated from the modern surface in order to investigate the external structure of the Mausoleum and its relationship with the Aksumite terrace wall which demarcates the main stela area.

The major development of the season was the elucidation of the original configuration at the western end of the Mausoleum where an intact brick arch had been fully excavated in 1994 and found to have abutted on a monolithic portal, now fallen and broken. The original outer wall of the Mausoleum was exposed, extending northwards from the brick arch. Some 0.9 m north of the arch an east-west wall abutted onto it at approximately 90°. This wall was preserved to a total height of 3.3 m (Figures 2, 3). Its junction with the outer wall of the Mausoleum had been disfigured by robbers. The excavation was extended southwards as far as was considered safe, but no sign was found of a southerly east-west wall: if such was indeed present it must have been further from the Mausoleum's western arch than was its northerly counterpart. Such asymmetry is considered unlikely, and it seems possible that this western entrance to the Mausoleum was originally reached by a re-entrant of the main Aksumite terrace. On conclusion of the 1995 investigations the robbed walls were consolidated and a new reinforced

Figure 1: Plan of the Mausoleum, as revealed by the end of the 1995 excavation season.



metal roof installed at a depth of 2.0 m below the modern surface, which was then reinstated. Suggestions and recommendations are being prepared for the Ethiopian authorities concerning the long-term conservation and presentation of the Mausoleum, and the means by which visitors may in due course gain access. Meanwhile, the monument is securely sealed.

The Tomb of the Brick Arches

This tomb, located some 25 m east of the standing Stela 3 but not apparently associated with any particular stela, was further investigated in 1995 under the supervision of Mr Jess Tipper. The disturbed artifactual deposit previously investigated was

Figure 2: Outside the western end of the Mausoleum, showing the fallen portal, the external wall extending southwards from the entrance arch, the east-west wall abutting it, and the robbers' trench cutting diagonally through both walls into the tomb. Scale: 50 cm.

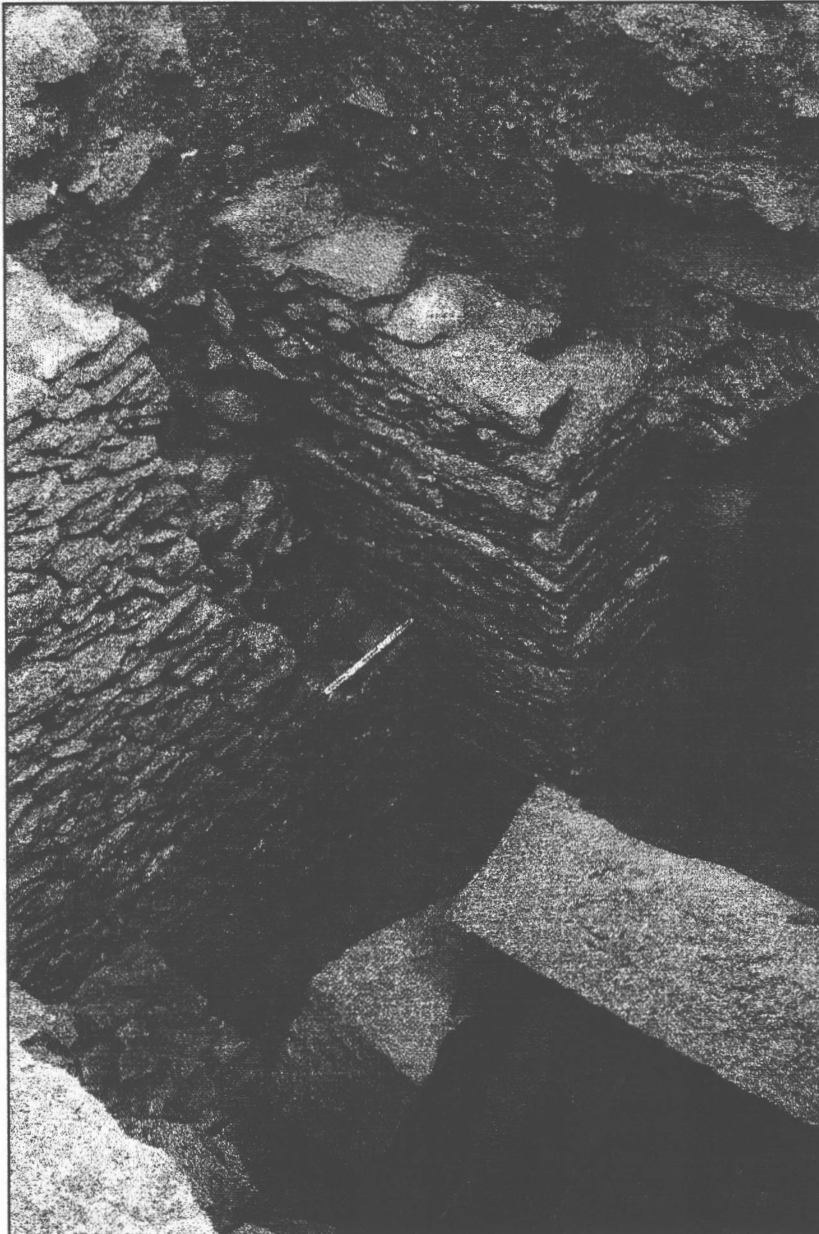
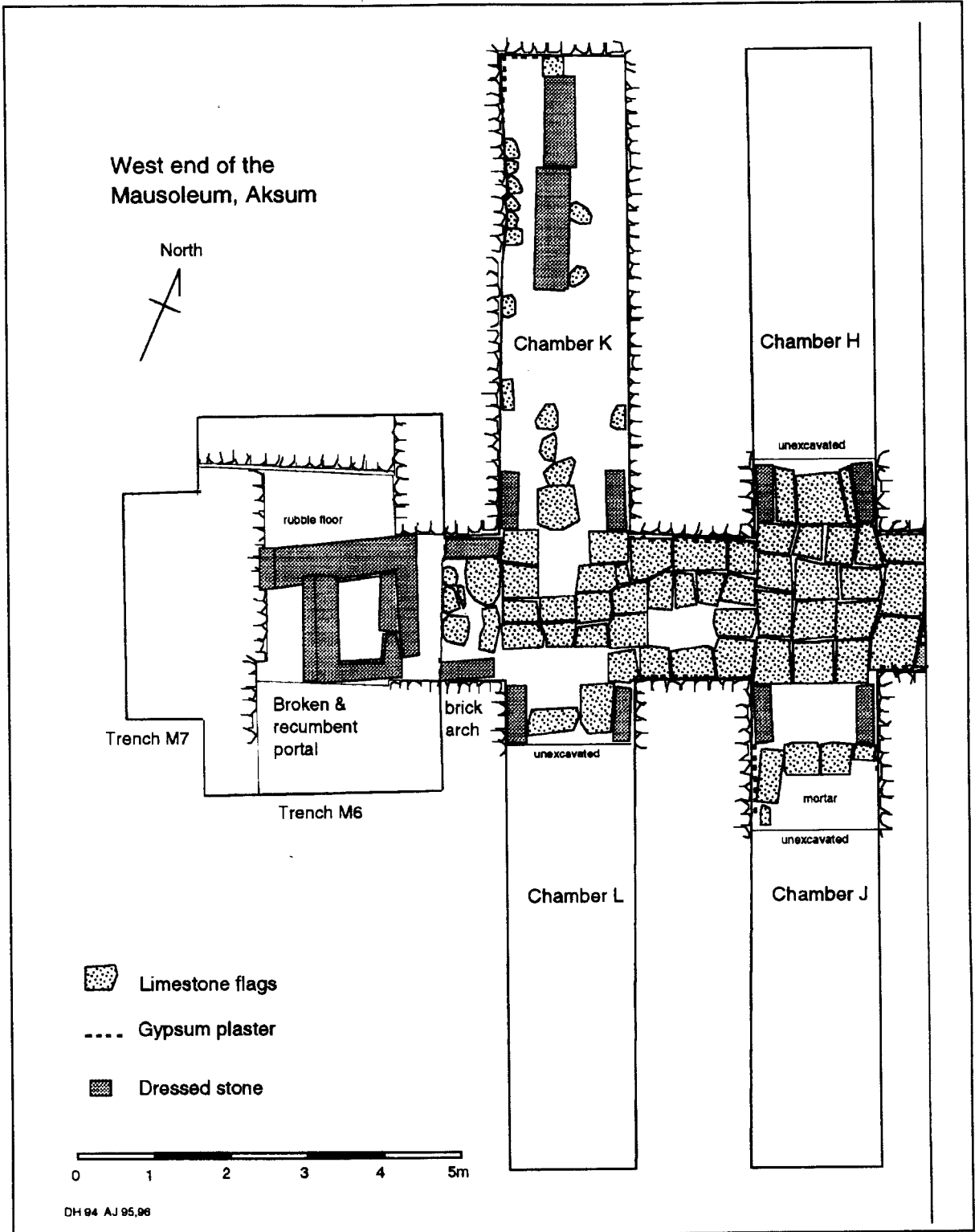


Figure 3: Plan of the western end of the Mausoleum, as excavated in 1995.



found to continue to the northwest, consisting of pottery including a human-headed jar and other complete vessels, disarticulated human skeletal fragments, ivory slats and glass sherds. Excavation in the furthest chamber revealed a stone wall with entrances to two loculi, of which the more westerly was selected for first investigation (Figure 4). Along the south side of the loculus was a stone-built bench on which were preserved eleven bowls, as originally placed within the tomb (Figure 5).

Further ivory artifacts were recovered from the Tomb of the Brick Arches and additional cleaning and conservation was undertaken on specimens recovered during previous excavation seasons. Particular interest attaches to a series of rectangular-

sectioned slats which lend support to the view that an ivory chair may have been present, its back decorated with the pair of elaborately carved panels previously illustrated (Phillipson 1995a, 1995b). A small ivory figurine of a naked woman was also revealed, the feet and arms being unfortunately missing (or not yet identified), as was the head although long hair is visible over the shoulders. A large iron object block-lifted in 1994 was also cleaned and shown to comprise a 69-cm-long tanged spear- or lance-head of elaborate shape (Figure 6); it appears unserviceable as a weapon because of its thinness, waisted shape, and tiny tang. It is planned that investigation of the Tomb of the Brick Arches will be completed in 1996; it will not, however, be cleared completely, so that part is left for future investigators.

Figure 4: The northwesternmost chamber in the Tomb of the Brick Arches, showing loculi prior to excavation. Scale: 50 cm.

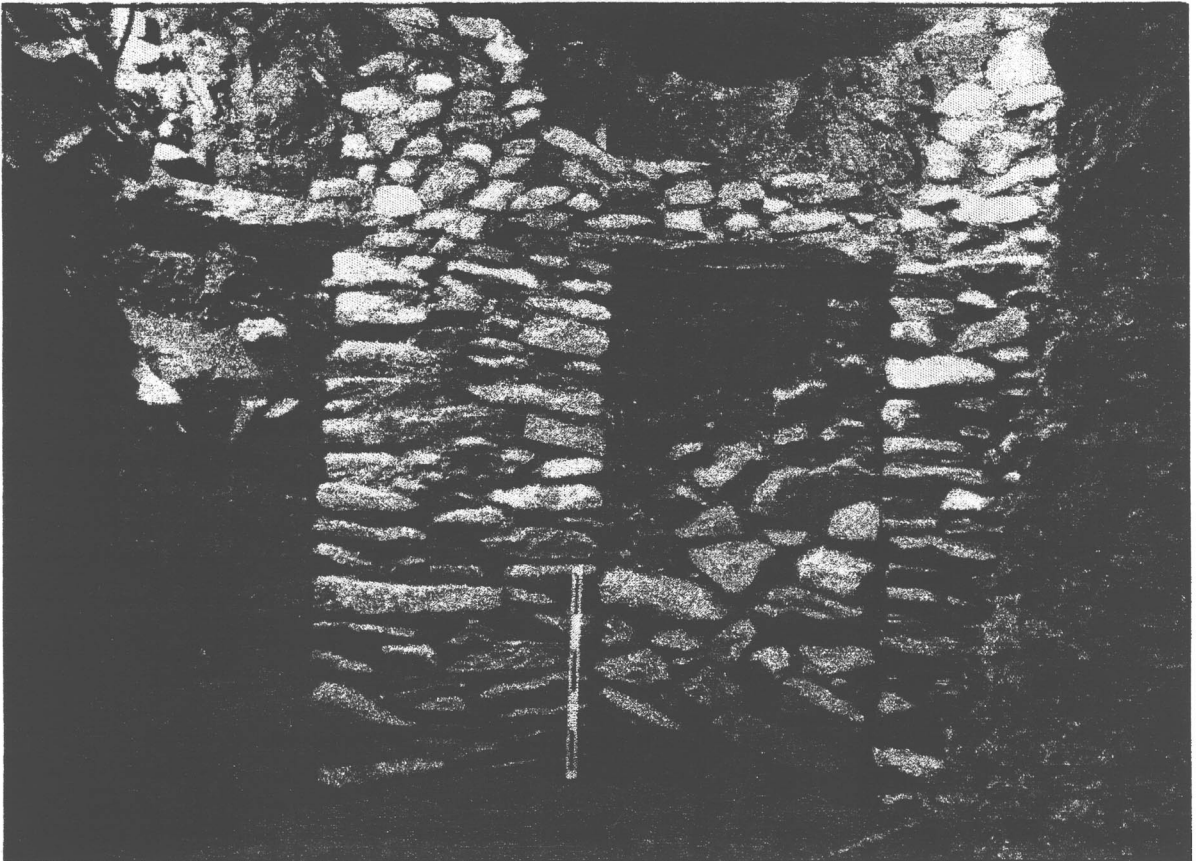


Figure 5: An excavated loculus in the Tomb of the Brick Arches, showing the stone-built bench. Scale: 50 cm.

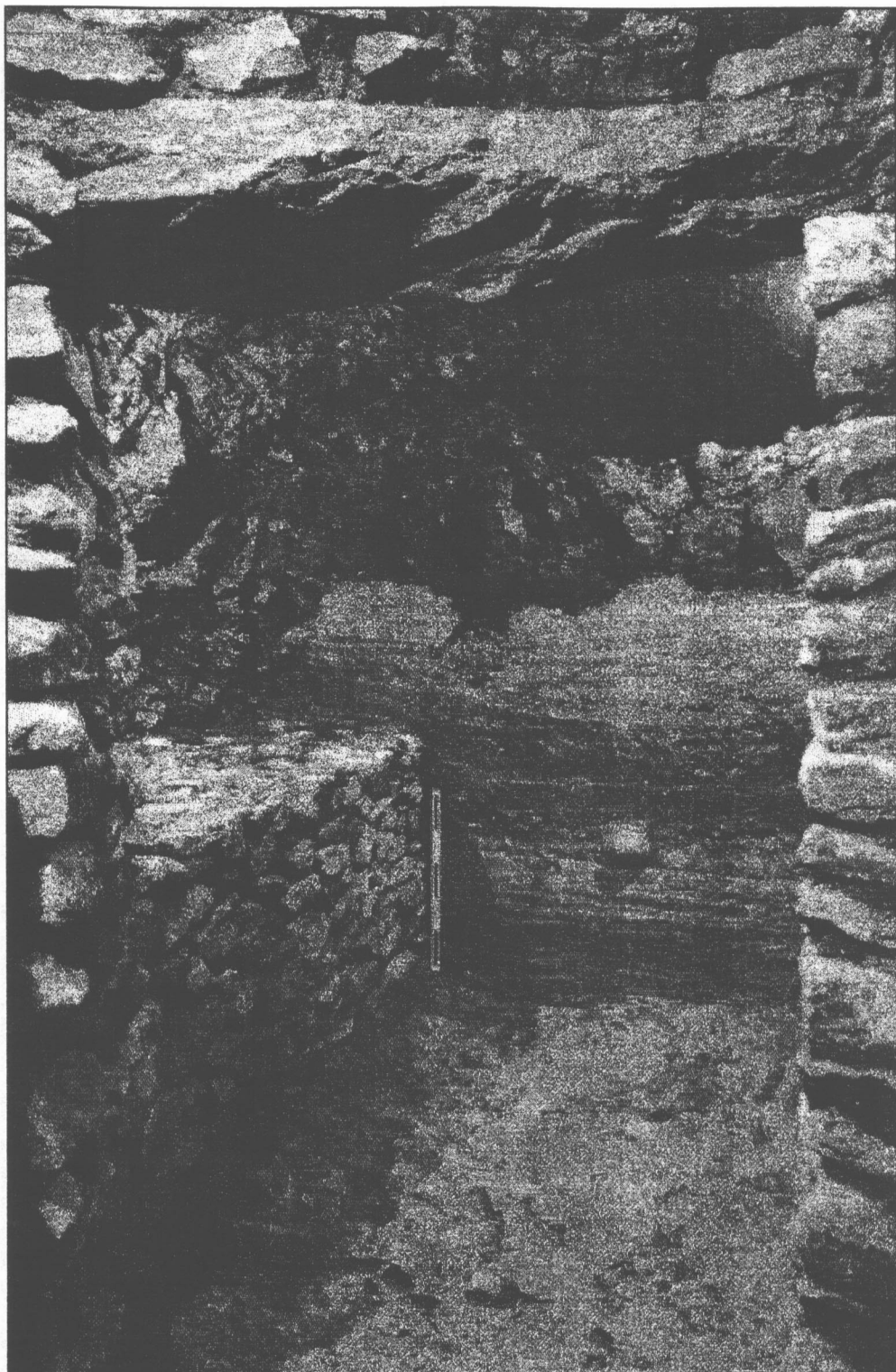
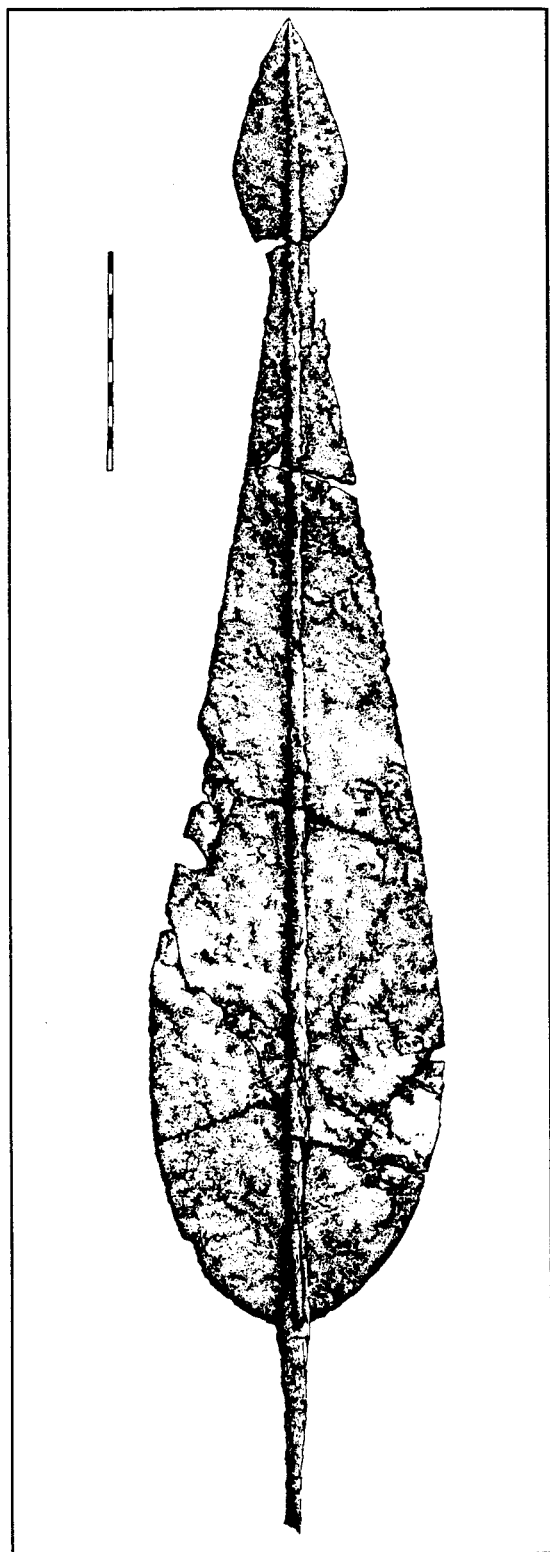


Figure 6: Iron spear - or lance-head from the Tomb of the Brick Arches. Length: 69 cm.



The 'Gudit Stelae Field'

Excavations continued at this site on the western edge of Aksum, under the supervision of Ato Ayele Tarekegn who is researching Aksumite burial customs as a Ph.D. project at the University of Cambridge. Two trenches were excavated adjacent to small stelae in the northeastern sector. The archaeological deposits were found to attain a depth in excess of 4 m, and artifacts of considerable interest were recovered. A low-status burial was located late in the season and will be investigated further in 1996. A detailed survey of the entire site (apparently the first such yet attempted) was prepared by Mr Alistair Jackson.

The 'Domestic Area'

Excavations were undertaken in the area approximately 1 km north-northwest of Aksum town, where exploratory excavations in 1994 had revealed traces of domestic occupation and masonry buildings. The 1995 programme, supervised by Mr Andrew Reynolds, revealed detailed plans of late Aksumite domestic buildings. The well defined stratigraphy, with substantial artifactual and ecofactual assemblages, allowed changes in the morphology and function of domestic units to be observed with particular clarity. Use of flotation equipment by Ms Sheila Boardman permitted plant remains to be recovered.

An elite structure, perhaps resembling the Dungur palace at Aksum (Anfray 1972), had been erected in this area, perhaps during the fifth century; excavation revealed a flight of granite steps (Figure 7) and a fragment of paved forecourt. Investigation of this apparently short-lived structure was limited to establishing its stratigraphic relationship to the domestic sequence. Following the demise of the elite structure, a large rectangular masonry building was erected, comprising at least three rooms on an alignment from northwest to southeast (Figure 8). The walls were composed of roughly hewn sandstone laid in random courses and bonded together with a weak mud mortar. Floors were of earth or paved with stone flags including granite slabs presumably robbed from the elite structure. Subsequent phases saw many structural alterations, apparently accompanied by a reduction in prosperity. Twenty-five coins were recovered in the 'Domestic Area' excavations of 1995; they

Figure 7: The elite structure, at the 'Domestic Area', showing the staircase and, behind it, a stepped wall with dressed cornerstones. Scales: 50 cm.

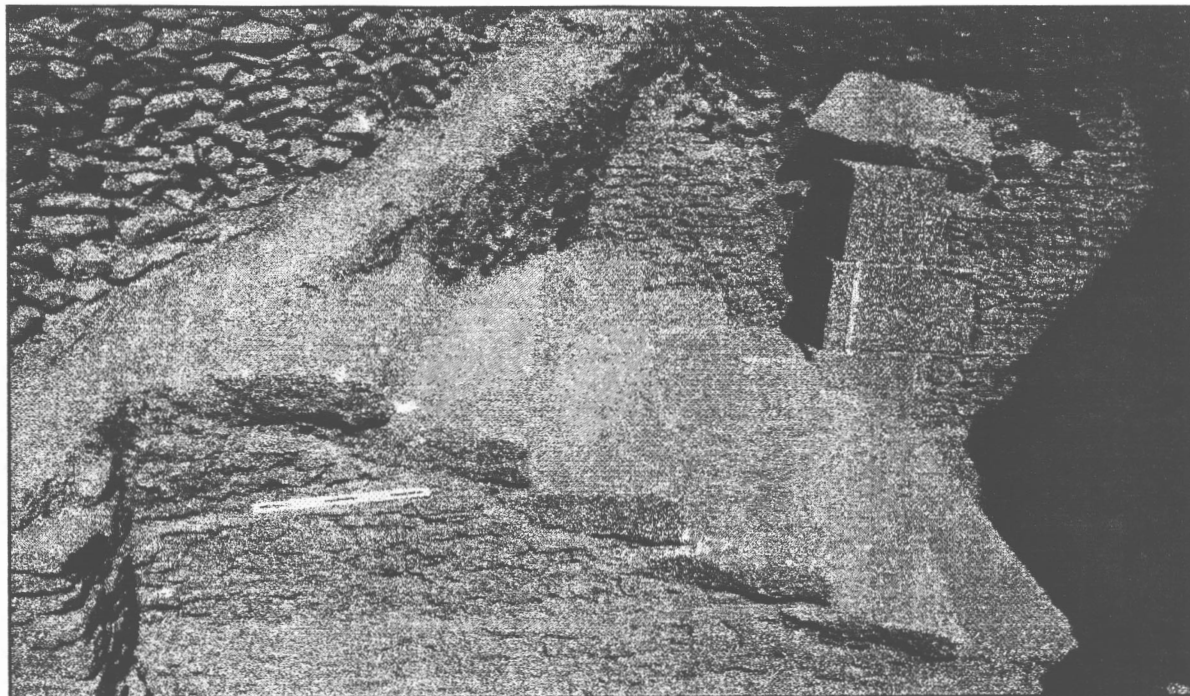


Figure 8: General view of the 'Domestic Area' excavation.



suggest that much of the non-elite occupation took place within a comparatively short period, centred on the sixth century AD.

The remains of cultivated plants so far identified in the 'Domestic Area', include wheat, barley, a range of pulses, linseed, noog, grape, cotton and gourd. As would be expected, they suggest broad-spectrum agriculture, including several crops of probable Near-Eastern origin, with important local additions. In addition to a range of crop staples, represented by the various cereals and pulses, the number of potential oil plants is also of interest. Noog is an indigenous Ethiopian plant which, like linseed, may have been used for its oil. The presence of cotton is also noteworthy. The extent to which cotton and flax/linseed may have been utilised for the production of textiles remains to be investigated. These preliminary data complement those recorded from a nearby site by Bard and Fattovich (1995).

The nature of high-status Aksumite architecture has been known for some years (e.g. Munro-Hay 1991: 118-25); and the newly located elite structure conforms to this. Three distinct styles of lower-order domestic architecture have been revealed in the current excavations. In general terms, it seems possible to discern a process of refinement from megalithic buildings to multi-cellular buildings with coursed, mortared walls.

In its broadest sense, probably the most important result of the 1995 excavations is that a new category of settlement site has been revealed. Various authors have speculated on the nature of Aksumite social organisation, land allotment and sub-elite settlement but, apart from Michels' (1990, 1994) study based upon surface data, there was no concrete or readily interpretable evidence for a class of occupation site below that of the elite residences. The 'Domestic Area' has, therefore, provided evidence for a previously unknown aspect of Aksumite settlement archaeology. The evidence from the 'Domestic Area' would appear to represent a middle-rank settlement close to, but set apart from, the town. Its status was well above that of a peasant farmstead, although it should be emphasised that no traces of the lowest level of occupation have yet been found. Non-organic evidence for substantial processing of crops was found in the form of a large and varied assemblage of

grindstones; and extensive soil sampling yielded evidence of a wide range of both staple crops and possibly some non-local plants. Traces of glass and copper working suggest non-agricultural activity. The 1995 excavations at the 'Domestic Area' have succeeded in revealing a class of site and a range of associated material that can contribute significantly to an understanding of the social and economic organisation of late Aksumite society.

Survey

For three weeks during the 1995 field season, a small team undertook a systematic surface survey of areas within a 10-km radius of Aksum. The primary goal was to locate late prehistoric sites which might form a basis for more detailed study of pre-Aksumite (*sensu lato*) economies and settlement strategies in the region and, possibly, of the earliest agricultural communities in this part of highland Tigray. Particular interest attaches to the rockshelter of Anqer Baahti, located some 2 km west of the monastery church of Abba Pantaleon. A preliminary examination of the deposits within the chamber and on the talus indicated the presence of abundant lithic artifacts including numerous blades but no backed microliths; it is hoped that excavations at the site may provide valuable economic information and form a focus for an investigation of local prehistory.

The results of this preliminary survey have highlighted the considerable archaeological potential of the prehistoric sites around Aksum, as well as revealing a number of later sites which had not previously been recorded. It is hoped that future work will expand our knowledge of the prehistoric economy of the region, and help illuminate on a grander scale the nature of early agricultural societies in Ethiopia.

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