Aksumite Burial Practices, the 'Gudit Stelae Field', Aksum

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Aksumite burial customs

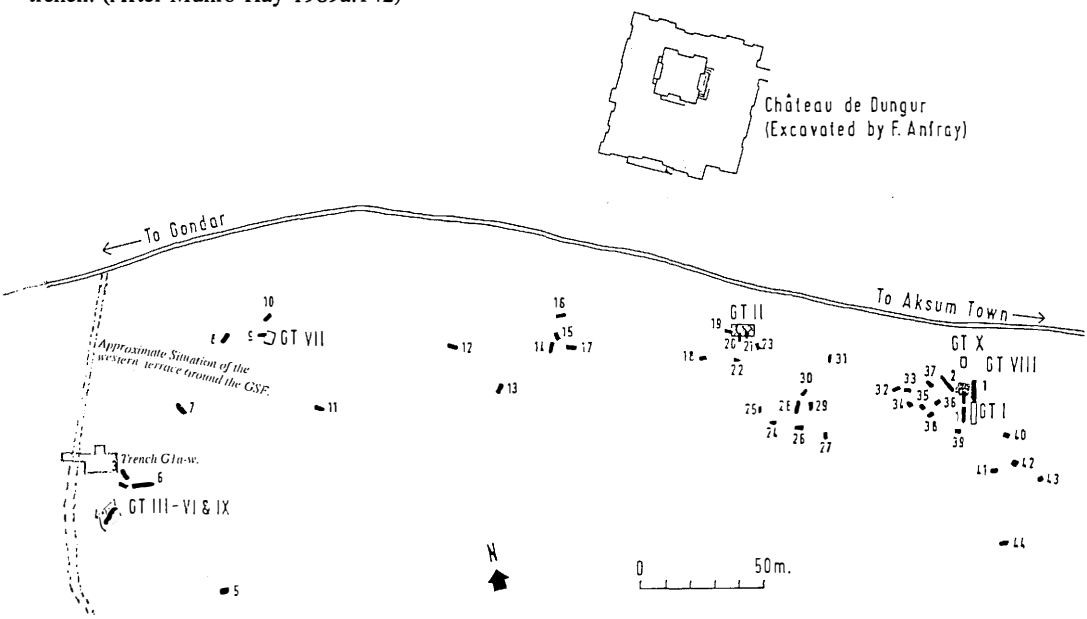
The 'Gudit Stelae Field' (GSF) is one of five major sites flanking the town of Aksum in which there are large concentrations of stelae (Munro-Hay 1989a; Bard and Fattovich 1993). Several hundreds of granite or trachite stelae are found scattered over wide areas in many ancient sites in northern Ethiopia (Godet 1977; Sergew 1972). The stelae in northern Ethiopia and Eritrea range from simple, rough-hewn stones, through rectangular-shaped and smooth-dressed with round or pointed tops, to most elaborately decorated and gigantic monolithic towers depicting multi-storeyed buildings (Sergew 1972).

The presence of massive granite rocks with characteristic wedge marks on them in quarries at Gobedra Hill, combined with signs of horizontally divided tooling areas on the northern, undecorated face of the great standing stela, number 3, give indications of the technology of stelae production while the tripartite typological classification possibly reflects on the relative chronology of the stelae themselves (Munro-Hay 1989a; Phillipson 1994a, 1994b).

A study of stratigraphical and associated finds in Aksum has strongly suggested that some of the small, roughly carved stelae were earlier than the larger, rectangular, dressed and decorated types (Munro-Hay 1989a). However, some of the different types could have been carved and erected more or less contemporaneously. The earliest stelae in the northern regions are tentatively dated to what Anfray (1981) termed the 'South Arabian' period, i.e. between the fourth and the third centuries BC. The bigger and more elaborately decorated stelae in Aksum have been tentatively dated to the late third to fourth centuries AD (Munro-Hay 1989a, 1991).

Preliminary evidence from excavated examples in Aksum seems to suggest that the stelae as a whole were erected to mark grave pits or underground tomb structures, and that at least some of the great decorated stelae are funerary monuments, probably marking the graves of pagan Aksumite kings. Although not yet proven, it is probable that not all the stelae could have been intended as grave-markers, even during the period of the height of stelae production in the third and fourth centuries. In many excavated cases, it has been difficult to directly associate individual stelae with particular tombs. Up to now, only two tombs, i.e. the Mausoleum and the East Tomb, can be directly associated with a particular stela, stela 1 (Munro-Hay 1989a).

Figure 1 Plan of the Gudit Stelae Field. The shaded parts in the plan show tomb areas together with BIEA's 1974 GT I-GT X trenches, the approximate location of the western terrace and that of G1a-w trench. (After Munro-Hay 1989a:142)



The great decorated stelae in Aksum appear to represent the apex of pre-Christian Aksumite mortuary practices (Munro-Hay 1989a, 1991; Phillipson 1994b), and their use of funerary monuments apparently ceased sometime in the early fourth century. The abandonment of the production and erection of giant monoliths to honour deceased Aksumite rulers seems to have been occasioned, as evidenced archaeologically, by an abortive attempt at the erection of the tallest and most beautifully decorated Stela 1, which was apparently never successfully set upright (Phillipson 1994b).

There appears to have been a transition at this time from the tradition of stelae production and erection as grave-marking monuments to that of building elaborate underground megalithic tombs without stelae, in the wake of the catastrophic collapse of Stela 1 (Munro-Hay 1989a, 1991; Phillipson 1994b). Hence, this important shift in the burial customs of the Aksumite rulers does not seem to have been caused by the adoption of the Christian faith and the close contemporaeity of these events seems nothing more than sheer coincidence. Remarkable though the effect of the fall of stela 1 would have been, the more humble and roughly made stelae could conceivably have continued to be carved and erected to mark graves of important people.

Christianity did not seem to be opposed to the custom of employing stelae as grave-markers. Evidence from ethnographic and contemporary burial traditions, coupled with some linguistic evidence linked with the persistent and practical use of the term *hawelt*, the word for 'stela' in some of the local Semitic languages, appears to indicate that Christianity in Ethiopia rather encouraged the marking of graves with monuments in general and stelae in particular. Thus the Aksumite tradition of marking graves with monoliths may not have totally ceased.

There was probably only a transient period when larger stelae ceased to serve as conventional grave-marking monuments, and this apparently only affected the way the rulers were buried. Smaller and rougher stelae could have continued to be employed as grave-markers among some deceased

members of the upper middle-class of Aksumite society, who could afford to meet the costs of having the monoliths erected upon their graves. It may be further conjectured that the abandonment of stelae as grave-markers probably affected only some parts of the Aksumite Kingdom, Aksum itself and the regions in the immediate environs of the political capital.

The history of the GSF

The GSF has been named after a legendary pagan or Jewish Queen of the late tenth century AD. Covering an area approximately 800 metres square, the GSF is situated about 2 kms to the west of the centre of Aksum town at an altitude of 2100 metres above sea level. It is bounded by the Aksum-Shire highway to the north and by cultivated fields to the south, east and west (Fig. 1). The GSF itself appears to have been under cultivation for a long time.

The site consists of over a hundred stelae, mostly small and rough-cut, and only six rectangular-sectioned and dressed. The stelae are concentrated in the northern, north-eastern and south-western parts of the site. The largest of all the stelae in the GSF, stela 1, is rectangular-shaped and dressed, and located near the north-eastern corner of the site. This stela was originally 20 m high and it now lies broken into three disarticulated parts (Chittick 1974). It is probable that the Stelae Field developed progressively from west to east culminating in the erection of the largest stela. It is interesting that no stelae seem to occur in the south-central, eastern and south-eastern sections of the site; here, only shapeless and apparently natural rocks are found scattered around.

As noted by Puglisi (1941), Chittick (1974) and Phillipson (1977), the GSF is rich in red Aksumite pottery as well as in characteristically small steep-sided flaked stone scrapers of a remarkably standardised form which display "signs of heavy use" (Phillipson 1989: 56). It appears that some of the pottery and the stone scrapers were washed down from the Beta Giyorgis Hill to the north of the site (Chittick 1974; Phillipson 1989, 1977). The wide occurrence in the Aksum area of these lithic artefacts is interpreted as evidence for the importance in ancient Aksumite times of the exploitation of animal resources, such as in the working of ivory or possibly the processing of animal skins (*cf.* Puglisi 1946; Gallagher 1972).

The GSF site also has a number of agricultural terraces, some of which could possibly date back to ancient Aksumite times. In addition to the disturbance caused by ploughing, there is evidence that the building of the agricultural terraces by peasants cultivating the area has resulted in some digging and in the burial, breakage and/or displacement of some stelae. Another important feature of the GSF is an earth embankment which goes all around the western, southern and eastern bounds of the stelae.

Two major archaeological expeditions are known to have worked at the GSF. The first was the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition in 1906, which carried out a fairly detailed, if not impeccable, survey and mapping of forty-four of the stelae on the site (Fig. 1) but undertook no excavations (Littmann, *et al.*; Band II, 1913). The second major expedition was that of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) in 1972–1974 which conducted test excavations in the GSF (Chittick 1974; Munro-Hay 1989a).

The BIEA opened a total of ten test trenches near or around eight stelae in 1974 (Fig. 1) (Munro-Hay 1989a). Of three tombs found, only one, GT II, was entirely cleared and is one of the only two tombs in and around the Aksum area which have thus far been completely excavated. Stelae numbers 19, 20, and 21, located immediately to the south of the GT II tomb, appear to have been put up there to mark the grave(s). It is very difficult here, as elsewhere in Aksum, to associate this tomb(s) with any one of the three stelae (Munro-Hay 1989a).

At the GT II tomb, three chambers were found to form "one single more or less oval tomb chamber" (Munro-Hay 1989a). Unlike the elite underground megalithic or rock-cut tombs elsewhere in Aksum, the GT II tomb did not exhibit any built elements, but only a shallow shaft in the subsoil overlying a small roughly cut, low-roofed chamber, filled with earth partly or entirely collapsed from the roof (Chittick 1974). The finds from the tomb, including pottery, human bone, teeth and jaw fragments, six almost identical glass goblets and an iron sickle, appeared to represent a funerary deposit (Munro-Hay 1989a).

The typology of the stelae, the pottery industry and the glass finds from GT II tomb point to a date around the third century AD (Munro-Hay 1989a). Although of little significance by itself, a C-14 reading of a charcoal sample from the excavations indicated a mid third century AD date (Chittick 1976: P-2315). Nonetheless, since similar sites elsewhere in northern Ethiopia have been tentatively dated to the pre-Aksumite period (Munro-Hay 1989a), it is probable that the actual genesis of the GSF may date back to the last five or six centuries BC.

The BIEA did not find any evidence of houses or of domestic occupation during its 1974 investigations at the GSF. The presence of tombs at GT II, GT VIII and GT VI, the lack of any structural evidence so far to show household settlement of the area, and the large quantity of recovered mortuary material evidence coupled with the relatively large concentration of stelae, all seem to point to a discrete cemetery site.

The apparent absence of structural evidence, together with the tomb, stelae and artefact types found at the GSF, appear to indicate that the site was probably a middle-class cemetery (Munro-Hay 1989a, 1991). The GSF probably formed part of the ancient city, particularly during the period between the late third and the late sixth centuries, when the Kingdom of Aksum reached its greatest splendour (Munro-Hay 1989b, 1991; Kobishchanov 1979). Building structures excavated by Anfray (1972) in 1966-1968 at Dungur immediately to the north of the GSF, seem to indicate that the ancient City of Aksum was much larger in size than its modern counterpart, extending as far west as and embracing the Dungur and GSF areas. Thus, the GSF was perhaps an in-settlement cemetery site during the zenith of Aksumite power.

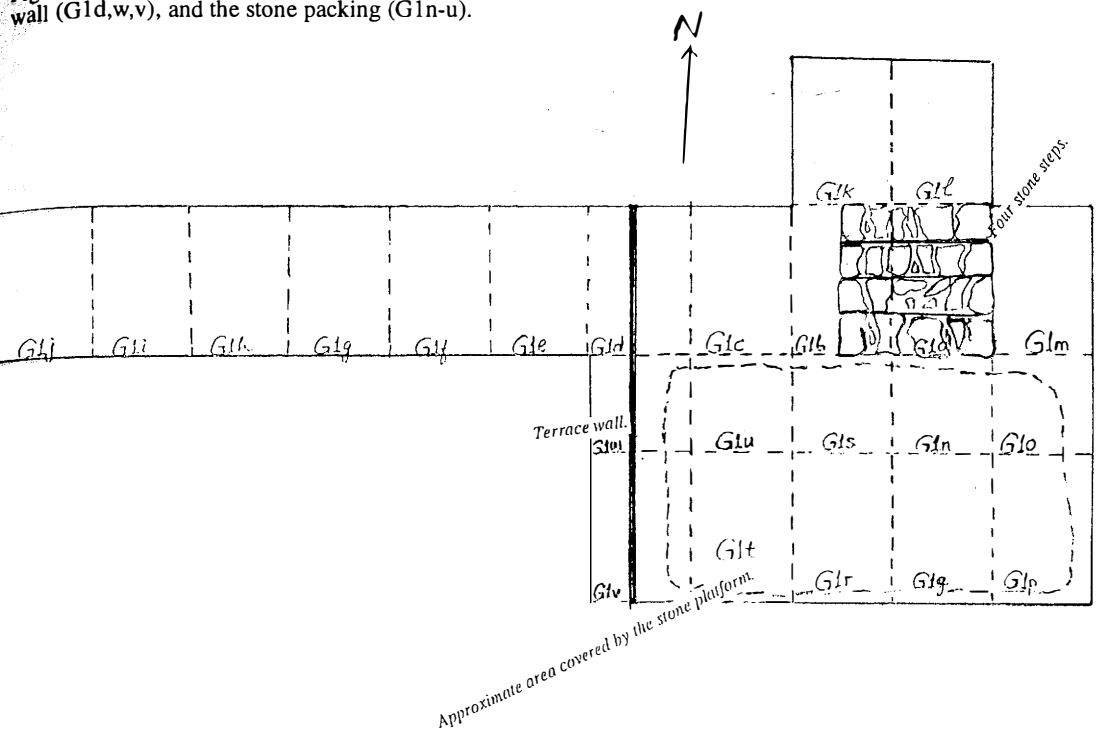
Available archaeological evidence seems to show that pre-Christian Aksumite society as a whole maintained a discrete in-settlement cemetery system. The advent and spread of Christianity from the early fourth century AD would have resulted, through time, in a strengthening of the existing cemetery system with the establishment of Christian cemeteries attached to Churches, as was the case in Europe (Rahtz and Watts 1980).

The 1994 excavations at the GSF

The first of an envisaged two annual seven-week-long fieldwork seasons was undertaken in November-December 1994. This season of excavation was devoted to investigation of the nature of the terrace around the GSF and any associated structures in order to see if there were any features distinguishing the Stelae Field from the surrounding landscape. A 10 m by 1.5 m trench, later extended to the south, east and north and designated as G1a-w (Fig. 2), was opened across a relatively undisturbed and more pronounced part of the earth embankment at the western end of the GSF. The excavations exposed a retaining masonry wall with horizontal rebating in characteristic Aksumite construction.

Immediately to the east of this terrace wall was a stone platform approached, from the northern side by a short flight of four steps (Fig. 3a, b). The foundation of all three structures, that is the retaining wall, the stone platform and the steps, overlay a black clay soil deposit, level 4, indicating their possible contemporaneity. It is possible that the stone platform approached by the steps was connected with the nearby dressed and rectangular Stela number 3 as a foundation to it or to a now ruined superstructure.

Figure 2 Plan of tench showing the location of features i.e. the four stone steps (G1a-b), the terrace wall (G1d,w,v), and the stone packing (G1n-u).



Four main stratigraphic features were discerned. Level 1, a loose, disturbed light brown earth with an average depth of 35 cm, yielded fragments of coarse and fine red Aksumite pottery, white, red and blue glass (probably modern), copper/bronze pieces, wholly unidentifiable bone, and red brick fragments. Most of these finds came from the eastern half of the trench, with some pottery from the western half. In the western half of the trench, the natural yellowish clay soil was reached at an average depth of 35 cm..

Level 2, a dark brown and fairly damp soil with an average thickness of 65 cm, produced coarse and fine red, brown, and some red-orange and grey ware sherds, with burnt bone, white, red and blue glass pieces, brick, and copper/bronze and some iron pieces. The top parts of the terrace wall and of the four stone steps were revealed at an average depth of 50 cm, both structures being orientated on a north-south axis.

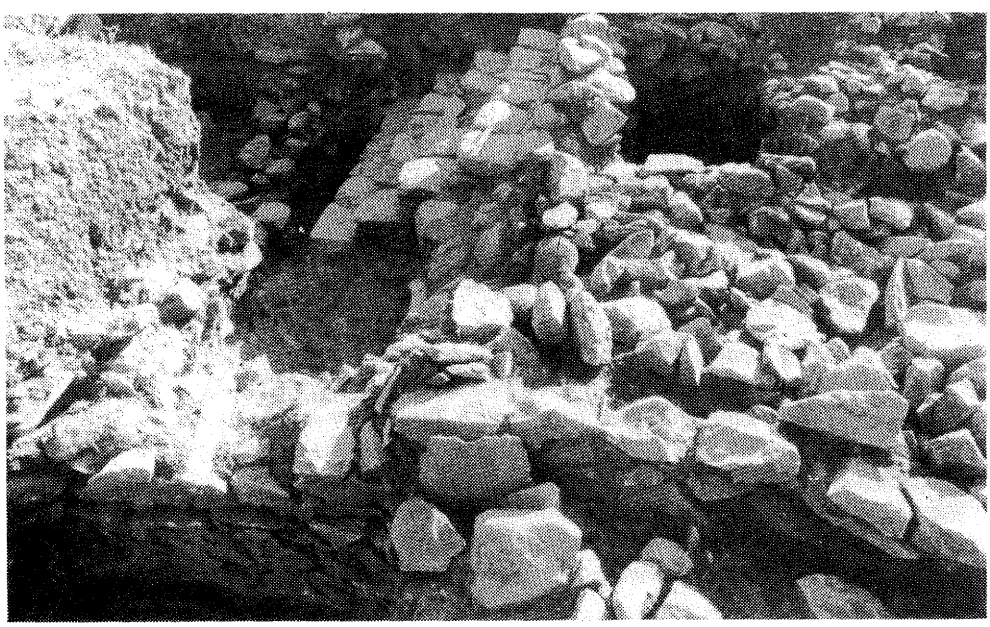
Level 3 was a light reddish brown earth deposit with an average thickness of 30 cm, producing coarse and fine red, brown and some grey Aksumite pottery sherds, burnt bone, brick, copper/bronze, and iron pieces. The most productive trench divisions were in the eastern corner of the trench, where a large amount of pottery was found embedded in a fairly damp deposit in the trench walls of levels 2 and 3. Level 4, a black cotton clay soil about 20 cm thick, produced very fragile or burnt bone material and a small number of pottery sherds in a limited area of the eastern part of the trench. This level was found to be almost entirely sterile in some sections of the eastern half of the trench and it led on to the natural basal soil, which was a yellowish clay.

There was some variety in the fabric, form and style of the pottery industry found from the G1 trench. The majority of the excavated corpus of ceramic material consisted of coarse and fine red ware, with a very limited amount of brown, grey and burnished black and orange and red-orange sherds. The coarse red pottery ware was much thicker and had a rougher surface than its fine red

Figure 3a Trench G1 showing the four steps and the stone platform behind them.



Figure 3b The terrace wall immediately west (foreground) of the steps and the stone platform.



counterpart. This appears to be characteristic of Aksumite pottery thus far known from the area (Wilding 1989). Chronologically, it would appear that the fine red ware preceded the coarse red; more fine red pottery was recovered from the lower levels of the trench compared to the coarse red.

The thinness of the fine red pottery seems to indicate the functional strength of the pots. Its replacement by coarse red ware indicates technological decline in the manipulation of clays in the ancient Aksumite earthenware industry, in line with the historical development of the Aksumite Kingdom. The red ware seems to have been followed by the brown, grey, and finally the black Aksumite ware in the GSF, as observed elsewhere (Wilding 1989). Only half a dozen pieces of burnished black pottery were found, some bearing applied zigzag decoration on the exterior of wide ledge rims. This appears to have an important implication on the general chronology of the site, corroborating other existing evidence that the chronology of the GSF should be placed somewhere in the pre-Christian Aksumite period.

The G1 ceramic assemblage included several kinds of sherds. As far as could be inferred from the available pieces, the forms included bowls, beakers, pots, globular jars, ladles, and probably more. The basic styles of decorations included 'ovoid walk punctate' in vertical or horizontal patterns mostly found on body sherds; vertical or horizontal incisions; shallow corrugations; dots inside diamond-shaped impressions; and shallow or deep horizontal or vertical, zigzag impressions on the body of thick-sectioned and coarse-tempered pottery. Painted pottery, coming mainly from levels 2 and 3, was proportionally significant, roughly about 5 per cent of the total amount.

Further study of the G1a–w pottery will be needed for detailed analysis. All Aksumite pottery that has thus far been found from the GSF as a whole was hand-made, as is the case with that from other Aksumite sites elsewhere. No evidence exists so far for any domestically-produced pottery made on the wheel during the Aksumite period (Anfray 1965, 1968, 1974; Wilding 1989; Munro-Hay 1991).

Large brick fragments were found mostly from the top parts of the terrace wall and the western face of the terrace, suggesting that the top part of the terrace wall and/or the platform behind it, or a now ruined superstructure covering these, had elements of some brick work. All the brick fragments discovered during the excavation were weighed, the total weight being 227 kg. Observation of the brick finds shows that most have a fine fabric, with a lot of large white inclusions. Most of them were fired to a fairly low temperature and to a mainly reddish-orange colour, a few fragments being highly fired to a blackish or blackish-brown colour. An almost complete piece of brick, the largest found from level 2 in trench G1e, measured 28 cm long by 14 cm wide by 5 cm thick.

Further work on the terrace will be needed to illustrate better its nature and associated structures and to help ascertain if the terrace wall does in fact continue to the south and east along the earth embankment. However, in the next full season the research will concentrate on the interior parts of the GSF to investigate stelae and associated structures. Other important research questions which may remain to be addressed from this doctoral research project could be investigated more fully in one of the BIEA's last two annual field seasons at Aksum (Phillipson, this volume).

The present research hopes to amplify the BIEA's findings that the stelae in the GSF are funerary monuments, by excavating trenches near or around those stelae which have not yet been examined archaeologically. It also proposes to address issues relating, among others, to the earth embankment surrounding the GSF, the style of stelae carving and erection, and structures associated with stelae. A comprehensive analysis of material from previous and on-going research is intended to establish the extent of variability and of patterning in Aksumite mortuary dimensions in general.

Acknowlegments

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