

In the Land of Sheba



DISCOVERING A LOST CENTRE OF THE AKSUMITE KINGDOM

Louise Schofield recalls how a passing mention of a carved stele led to an archaeological adventure, an ancient battlefield, Roman trade goods, and the 2,000-year-old grave of Ethiopia's 'Sleeping Beauty'.

What began with a chance reference to a carved monolith ended with the discovery of a 'Sleeping Beauty' buried high in the beguilingly picturesque Gheralta Plateau of north-eastern Ethiopia, where she had lain undisturbed for nearly 2,000 years. The young woman had been buried in her finery, her chin cupped in one hand, and a bronze mirror placed close to her face, so that she could gaze at her reflection for all eternity.

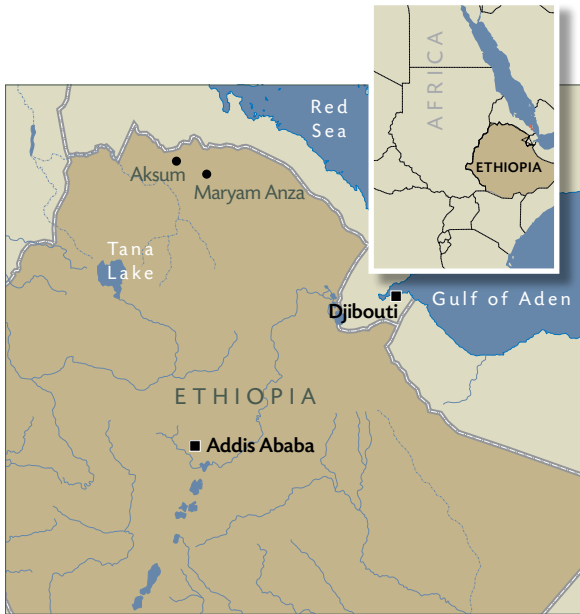
Though we came across our Sleeping Beauty earlier this summer, 2015, the find was the culmination of a seven-year story

that began in September 2008, when, following a clue in an obscure article, fellow archaeologist Jerry O'Dwyer and I travelled to the highlands of Ethiopia's Tigray Province. We went in search of a large stele on which, it was said, there was a carved inscription with a disc and crescent moon motif.

And we found it, lying where it had fallen, on the side of a hill close to the modern church of Maryam Anza, about 5km from the small town of Hawzien. This stele was our first clue to Maryam Anza's exceptional past, and it set us on the road that eventually led us to the exceptional finds unearthed here in May this year.

Written in stone

The fallen monolith, about 6m tall and slightly damaged at its tip, had toppled over in such a way that the disc and crescent emblem carved at its apex was clearly visible. This symbol characterises monuments of the land of Saba (Sheba) and of the early (pre-Christian) Aksumite kingdom. The way the stele had fallen allowed us just enough room to lie underneath it and see that on its underside there was an inscription in early Ge'ez, written in the late 2nd/early 3rd century AD. It records that a king – Bazat of Agabo – gave bread and beer to the people. This, then, is clearly a commemorative stele, rather than a grave stele such as those found at Aksum. It had been erected at the heart of an area strewn with human remains and known locally as 'Hawnehaw' – meaning 'brother against brother'. Hawnehaw is believed by the local community to be a battlefield, and



MAIN IMAGE, LEFT View towards the sacred mountain of Enda Tsion from the ceremonial entrance on the 'Palace' Terrace at Maryam Anza.

INSET A delicate glass perfume flask from a 2nd-/3rd-century AD workshop in the east of the Roman Empire.

certainly its name suggests a civil war or even a conflict literally between brothers. Bazat clearly won the fight, and he recorded his victory in this monumental way. More pieces of stele lie nearby, embedded in the hillside, and yet to be excavated.

Further up the hill above the stele we could see the brightly painted modern church of Maryam Anza. It clearly had been built on a man-made mound, and dominated the surrounding landscape. We asked the local priest whether the community had constructed the mound for the modern church. He explained that

it had always been there, and that when they dug the foundations for Maryam Anza they uncovered an earlier church. According to legend, this early structure was attacked by Queen Yudit in the 10th century, and, so the story goes, to defend itself, it sent out first a swarm of bees and then a spell to make its attackers fight each other. Finally, when both failed, the church sank itself below the ground to safety.

The priest showed us architectural elements recovered during construction of the church, and now lined up along one side of the new building. From these, it was evident that what the people had unearthed was, in fact, an ancient pre-Christian temple, perhaps dedicated to the moon god Ilmuqah. More ancient architecture was exposed last year when a concrete podium was built around the church: a block of dressed stone carved with an early Aksumite cross, suggesting that the temple was later taken over for Christian use after the religion was adopted by the Aksumite kingdom in AD 343/344, during the reign of King Erzana.

These initial clues as to the importance of the site in ancient times were reinforced in December 2012 by an extraordinary surprise find that was to change the fortunes of the site and with it, ultimately, the fortunes of the people who live there.

A farmer named Abreha, walking his land on a north-facing terraced hillside after a violent thunderstorm, saw something glinting as the watery sun came out from behind the clouds. He was passing a bank of red earth washed by the torrent of rainwater, and had spotted what at first he took to be a hand grenade embedded within it. But, having once been a soldier, he quickly realised that it was not a grenade, and carefully freed it from the soil.

Abreha knows me: his land is one of the original 200 farms (now 1,092 in number) being supported by agricultural sustainability and water projects instigated by the Tigray Trust, a British non-governmental organisation (NGO) set up in 2009 by me, along with a group of friends in London, to support the local community. He also knows I am an archaeologist, and that therefore I like 'old things'. So he carried his precious find home and reburied it in the earthen floor of his farmhouse for safekeeping. Two years passed before Abreha and I were to meet. I was back at Maryam Anza visiting the farmers with Benjamin Morse, from the Peace Corps. One of our friends told me Abreha had found 'something old' that he wanted to show me, so Benjamin and I made the long, hot, and dusty trek across rough terrain to his farm. Apologising for ▶



FAR LEFT The 6m-tall stele that started the archaeological adventure to Ethiopia lies as it fell, on the hillside on the Gheralata Plateau.
LEFT The modern church of Maryam Anza, built on an ancient temple mound.
BELOW The priest who told us about the early church at Maryam Anza, that 'buried itself' beneath the mound to save itself from attack in the 10th century.





ABOVE Some of the architectural elements salvaged from the earlier temple structure beneath the new church.

the hike at the end of what had already been a long day, I remember commenting that it would probably just turn out to be an old coffee pot, adding: ‘On the other hand, you never know, it might turn out to be the Queen of Sheba’s perfume flask.’

Lucky find

What the farmer retrieved from its hiding place and put carefully into my hands turned out, strangely enough, to indeed be a delicate, beautiful, and extremely rare glass perfume bottle, an import in ancient times into Ethiopia from a distant region of the Roman Empire.

The perfume bottle is just 9cm tall, and made of thin, fine, coloured mould-blown glass, iridescent from the centuries it has spent buried in the soil of Tigray. The flask is janiform (double-faced), with its two similar-looking faces back-to-back and framed by rows of curly hair. It was probably made in a Syro-Palestinian workshop of the Roman Empire during the late 2nd century or early 3rd century AD, when this part of the Roman world produced some of the very finest works of art. This particular beautiful little perfume flask, which perfectly reflects the high level of craftsmanship seen during this era, has a close twin in the Corning Museum of Glass in New York State, and two more in the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, USA.

The find was the catalyst we needed to transform the long-held wish to excavate at Maryam Anza into a reality, and we were able to raise funds to begin digging.

The first season’s excavations at Maryam Anza took place in May 2014, with a British and Irish team working alongside Ethiopian colleagues from the Authority for Research

and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCCH) in Addis, and from the Tigray Office for Culture and Tourism in Mekelle, the region’s capital. During this first season, we undertook geophysical survey, field survey, and a rescue excavation of four graves in one of the site’s cemeteries.

The geophysical and field surveys identified several areas that looked particularly interesting, and our colleague Hailay Teklay interviewed local farmers to collect oral histories for the region.

BELOW The farmhouse that was built on the site of the original ‘Palace’.

RIGHT This tiny, delicate perfume flask, found by the farmer, is evidence of trade with the Roman Empire.

PHOTO: Benjamin Morse



KINGDOM OF AKSUM

The kingdom of Aksum, in modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, was a trading nation and naval power in the 1st-7th centuries AD, exporting ivory, rhino horn, hippo hides, tortoise shell, monkeys, and slaves to the Roman Empire, Egypt, and India. Aksum minted its own currency, the only sub-Saharan African coinage until the 10th century. Its Solomonic dynasty, from which all rulers of Ethiopia until the 1970s were descended, was founded by Menelik I, son of the Queen of Sheba (known as Makeda) and King Solomon.

RIGHT Archaeologist Hailay Teklay excavates the grave where farmer Abreha had found the perfume flask (shown on the opposite page) after a rainstorm.

be a ceremonial entrance oriented due north towards Enda Tsion, the sacred mountain that dominates the valley. The current occupant, a farmer, told Hailay that his family had taken over the plot seven generations ago, and that they had moved into a 'palace' that was still standing but missing its roof. Just 25 years ago, he said, the building was dismantled and the stone used to build the new church of Maryam Anza. The combination of the remains and his story was so tantalising that we identified the 'Palace' Terrace as a priority for Season Two in 2015.

Another area that particularly interested us we dubbed the Industrial Zone. Our geophysics kit went off the scale here, as the earth was densely littered with metallic iron slag. We took samples back to the UK, where they were analysed by Dr Gerry McDonnell who found them uniquely high in iron content – and thus of international importance. As a result, this zone was also designated a priority for 2015.

Then, on the very last day of our 2014 season, we found Kelkel, an aptly named large mound (in the local language, *kelkel* means 'look-out point') containing intact architectural features and complete pottery vessels. It lies about 2km from the church, with commanding views of the surrounding landscape, and, as its name implies, was probably some kind of strategic observation post, perhaps a small fort built to keep watch over the valley against possible approach by an enemy. Kelkel will be a focus of excavations during Season Three in 2016.

As well as initial surveying of our project terrain in that first season in 2014, we



also undertook rescue excavation in the cemetery. This involved excavating four graves that had been broken into during over-enthusiastic digging of irrigation ditches into the terraced hillside. All four graves yielded extraordinary finds.

The first contained a woman buried with seven pottery vessels. She was wearing a necklace of two small yellow glass beads either side of a faceted pendant bead of pink-red crystal, and a matching crystal bracelet bead. The cemetery lies within the boundaries of the farmland belonging to our friend Abreha, who showed us exactly where he had found the perfume flask. This meant we were able to identify the grave from which it came. There, we discovered the skeleton of a woman and a considerable number of pottery vessels contemporary with the flask. Two further

graves, though badly damaged by the ditch-digging, nevertheless also yielded up their own surprises. In one we found a beautiful Roman bronze cosmetic spoon; and in the other an elaborate and unique pottery vessel that has a terracotta figurine of a horse and three strap handles. The finds all appear to date to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD. The rich grave goods and interesting skeletal remains recovered during the rescue excavation in the cemetery, coupled with the risk posed by further ditch-digging by local farmers, showed there was an urgent need for further investigations before yet more was irretrievably lost. ▶

FAR LEFT A unique carinated bowl, with three strap handles surmounted by a horse figurine, recovered from one of the graves.

MIDDLE Team member Behailu Habte holds a large pottery bowl just lifted from a grave.

LEFT A Roman bronze cosmetic spoon found during the 2014 rescue excavation in the cemetery.

PHOTOS: Graeme Laidlaw, Benen Hayden



PHOTO: Benen Hayden



LEFT Sleeping Beauty with some of her grave goods *in situ*. She lies on her side, with her chin in one hand, and a bronze mirror in the other held up to her face.

So, we had three clear excavation targets identified for 2015, and we returned to the site in April this year to dig for six weeks on the 'Palace' Terrace, the Industrial Zone, and the cemetery.

Three trenches were opened on the 'Palace' Terrace. Two of them were disappointing and revealed the extent to which later building and rebuilding activities had disturbed or destroyed much of the archaeological remains within them. However, a third trench, dug to investigate the possible ceremonial entrance, revealed three phases of finely built walls. The farmer described to us the impressive stepped entrance originally there, but which was also taken down to provide fabric for the modern church. A piece of charcoal retrieved from the cut of the earliest wall will be radio-carbon dated to establish the date of this first building phase.

We devised a sampling strategy for the Industrial Zone, and collected metallic iron slag from trenches dug into intact archaeological deposits and from surrounding ploughed farmland. These have been brought back to the UK and are currently being analysed.

Meanwhile, the first week of digging down in the cemetery went by without much incident. The conditions down here were tough: hot, dusty, the sun was fierce, and there was not even a hint of a breeze. Then, about ten days into the excavation schedule, each of the graves we were excavating began to give up their secrets, and we were on a roller-coaster ride of discovery. Often, we worked long and unpredictable hours, racing gathering thunderclouds and failing light to safely excavate and lift the extraordinary treasures before day's end. We investigated seven graves. All but one were used for multiple burials – indeed, one contained the burial of six individuals.

Several large male skeletons each wearing a single iron bangle were found in the cemetery, apparently buried without grave goods in the last use of the tomb. They may have been warriors who died in battle – perhaps even the battle commemorated by the Hawnehaw stele.

Skeletal remains of women were found with precious cosmetic items and elaborate jewellery, including in one case a necklace made of 1,065 beads of glass in a variety of colours and one that is striped.

Sleeping Beauty

But it was the last of the graves we excavated that perhaps told the most poignant story. Our Ethiopian Sleeping Beauty was the only burial in the grave. She had been carefully positioned curled up on her side, her chin cupped in her hand, her face tilted towards a Roman mirror made of bronze. Thousands of tiny beads, which probably once made

BELOW Some of Sleeping Beauty's grave goods *in situ*: (TOP) pottery vessels and a bronze cosmetic spoon; (BOTTOM) a conical Roman glass beaker and two pottery vessels.



up a broad-collar style necklace, were found around her, with more, probably from a beaded belt, around her pelvic area. Placed in the grave with her was an elaborate Roman bronze cosmetic spoon together with a lump of kohl, three extremely elegant Roman glass vessels – one a *lacrymatorium*, or 'tear flask' – and several intact pottery vessels. She was aged between 17 and 25 at the time of her death, and the manner in which she was buried with such riches suggests that she was of high social status.

That there was such a wealthy and cosmopolitan early Aksumite centre here in the Gheralta Plateau is a major discovery. These people were clearly trading with the Roman Empire, and so had access to high quality goods – some very fragile that had survived being transported the great long distances from where they were manufactured. In return for such luxury items, we know the Aksumites traded goods such as frankincense, ivory, and gold. And herein may lie the reason for this extraordinary site at Maryam Anza: gold prospectors have identified a rich vein of gold running down the valley, and have uncovered ancient goldmine-workings.

The delicacy and fragility of our exceptional finds meant that they had to be lifted from the graves and immediately packed on site to prevent deterioration. They currently are undergoing conservation treatment by skilled experts before going on display in a newly built German-funded museum that opens in October this year, in the town of Wukro, an hour's drive from Maryam Anza. And we will bring you a follow-up article, with illustrations, devoted to these fabulous and intriguing artefacts to be published in *CWA* later this year. ■

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