

Forgotten kingdom

SEARCHING FOR LOST ROYALTY FROM THE DAYS OF THE AKSUMITE EMPIRE

In 2015, CWA reported on the discovery by **Louise Schofield** of the remarkable grave of a young woman she nicknamed 'Sleeping Beauty'. Now further excavation in Ethiopia's Tigray Province has revealed that 'Beauty' was not alone – and nearby remains, assumed to be a fort, are looking suspiciously like those of a royal residence.

It was the search for a monumental toppled stele – carved on its upper side with a disc and crescent moon and on its underside with an inscription – that first drew us in 2008 to the rugged and picturesque Gheralta Plateau in Ethiopia's north-eastern region of Tigray (see CWA 72). It was the beginning of a great archaeological adventure that has now seen three seasons of excavation at Maryam Anza, some 5km from the small town of Hawzien.

The stele was commemorative rather than funerary. It is dated by its inscription to the late 2nd/early 3rd century AD, and is written in Ge'ez, the language of the Aksumites. It was erected by a king, named as Bazat of Agabo, at the heart of an ancient battlefield known locally as Hawnehaw, which translates as 'brother against brother',

and is presumably in celebration of his victory in that battle.

Lying embedded next to the Bazat stele are three large stone blocks that we excavated in 2016, determining them to be three pieces of a broken stele – perhaps the first attempt to erect a victory stele. It appears that it toppled as it was being erected, falling backwards and breaking into three pieces, just as happened with one of the great funerary stele at Aksum.

Bazat is a king new to the historical record. We can determine from the inscription that he lived in the late 2nd/early 3rd century AD, and that he was victorious in the Hawnehaw battle. We also know that he was king of Agabo. But is Agabo the name of this region in Aksumite times? If so, was he defending it against an enemy, or was he the aggressor from a land further afield?



TOP The Gheralta Plateau in Tigray Province.

ABOVE The three broken sections of a commemorative stele.

BELOW Excavation at KelKel is revealing a large building with finds that suggest this was the residence of the wealthiest and highest-ranking members of society.





LEFT Kahassa (on the right) and the aloe vera plant that marks the boundary of her land on KelKel, where our excavation is taking place.

Our three trenches have thus far merely scratched the surface of this extremely exciting building, which is a real game-changer – both for us as an archaeological team and for the local inhabitants.

So, if we now have the palace, where were the royal dead buried?

Finding the people

Excavation of a rich cemetery on Abreha's farmland at Maryam Anza has uncovered 17 graves of the late 2nd/early 3rd century AD to the 4th century AD. The spectacular grave goods associated with these burials demonstrates not only wealth and sophistication, but also wide trading links with the eastern Roman Empire and with south-eastern India.

Our 2016 excavations found a 4th-century AD 'twin sister' for our Sleeping Beauty grave, which was excavated at the end of the 2015 season. Found to the west of the cemetery, the grave contained rich and exotic artefacts – some locally made, others luxury goods imported from the Roman Empire. The human remains were poorly preserved, but enough survived to demonstrate that she was buried with her hands held up to her face. A triangular stone pendant and glass beads of a variety of types and colours – including one covered in gold-leaf – were found over the skull, under the chin, and ▶

And if we have a king – might we also have a palace? In 2015, we undertook excavations on a high terrace where an imposing building once stood. However, the scanty ceramic evidence was mostly medieval, and the ancient remains had largely been robbed out in the recent past to build the modern church of Maryam Anza some 25 years previously.

Fort or palace?

Then, in 2016, we began excavations at a large mound identified as interesting by our Ethiopian colleague, archaeologist Hailay Teklay. The mound is known locally as KelKel – which is Tigrinya (the local language) for 'lookout' or 'viewpoint'. The archaeology is very shallow on KelKel, with the tops of walls clearly visible in several places.

In addition, local inhabitants had opened up small quarrying areas and were availing themselves of the ancient building materials, exposing rooms with intact Aksumite pots. The centre of the mound is much higher and is, happily, protected under vast prickly pear cacti. Given its local name and the topography of the landscape, our initial interpretation was that it might be a fort, established there with views across the surrounding territory – with the surrounding rooms perhaps living quarters for those manning the fortifications.

Seven different families live on KelKel. We investigated the quarried areas and negotiated with one of those living

there – Kahassa – to begin excavations on her land. On the north-west edge of the mound, we opened up three large adjacent trenches between Kahassa's house and the aloe vera plant that marks the boundary of her land. As we dug, we made the astonishing discovery that what we were excavating was not a fort at all – but rather a large and elaborately constructed palace. Pottery finds give us a date of late 2nd/early 3rd century AD, which is contemporary with Bazat of Agabo and his victory stele.

The finely constructed walls, stone pillars, and podium all were instantly identifiable as elements of the most elite of Aksumite buildings – such as palaces and the large 4th- to 6th-century AD building known as the 'Queen of Sheba's palace' at Dungur, just west of Aksum. Total station theodolite mapping of KelKel has shown it to be vast – at 6,580m², twice the size of Dungur.



RIGHT The substantial and well-constructed walls suggested at first a fort, but then the possibility that this was a rather grander building. A palace, perhaps?



LEFT The skull and bronze mirror, with intact pottery vessels, found in a grave in the cemetery at Maryam Anza. It was remarkably similar to the tomb of 'Sleeping Beauty' excavated the previous year.

ABOVE A pair of 4th-century AD conical beakers (or possibly lamps) found in 2015, now conserved.

ABOVE RIGHT Excavating the shaft grave, a beautifully rock-hewn tomb. Sadly, robbers found it first, but the fragments recovered reveal the former occupant was a member of the social elite.

across her upper chest, indicating that she was buried wearing an elaborate diadem. A beautiful Roman bronze mirror was found placed in front of her face: she was buried, just like our earlier Sleeping Beauty, gazing into it. An imported Roman bronze cosmetic spoon was recovered, leaning against the skull, and a locally made iron version was found elsewhere in the tomb. Kohl eye-liner and quantities of acacia resin incense were also placed in the grave, along with pottery vessels and a conical glass beaker (again of the same type as the two buried with Sleeping Beauty).

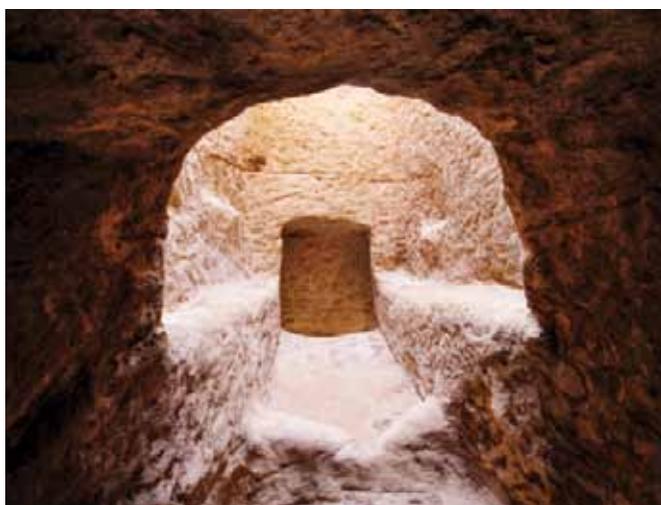
There is little doubt that these burials are those of an elite Aksumite society. But can they be deemed 'royal'? Despite the quantity, quality, and variety of the grave goods, the graves themselves are mostly fairly simple, dug as pit graves into the soft shale and earth of the hillside.

Our excavations in 2016 had one final surprise in store for us: a tomb fit for a king.

Rock tomb

A sloping terrace of sandstone rock was explored in the area of the site known locally as Tsigereda. A monolith serving as a grave marker

RIGHT The shaft grave: a view taken from inside the burial chamber, looking along the ledges to the niche and basin.



drew us to investigate this spot – and Maryam Anza was about to present the last of our great archaeological adventures of the 2016 season.

As we began excavating, we quickly found the entrance to an intriguing rock-hewn shaft measuring 1.3m wide east–west and 0.73m north–south. As we dug, we found ourselves descending ever deeper into the stone of the hillside. Following its rough-hewn walls down to a depth of 1.68m, we hit a lip of natural sandstone, deliberately left in situ, perhaps as a partial capping stone. Below this lip, the shaft measured 1.17m by 0.84m.

Negotiating the lip and descending further, we found that below it huge care had been taken in the carving out of the shaft: the walls were smooth and finely hewn on all four sides of the shaft, with footholds cut into the walls to facilitate climbing in and out.

Digging down a further 1.52m, we finally reached the bottom of the shaft, 3.2m from the opening above. Two ledges ran along the base of the north and south walls. Cut into the west wall was a burial chamber – reached from the base of the shaft by a step. The chamber measured 1.26m wide and 1.45m deep. Opposite the chamber, cut into the east wall, we found a beautifully carved niche incorporating a shallow basin.

As we neared the base of the shaft, we began to realise that the tomb had been robbed – probably in antiquity. The thieves had painstakingly disguised their theft, refilling the shaft and carefully replacing the monolith just as they had found it.

However, we did recover fragments of remains that reveal the high quality of the grave goods the robbers would have found: a sherd of vividly blue glass, beads of glass and stone, a miniature bead in the form of a face, broken pieces of bronze and iron, and remains of pottery vessels made with immense skill. Such a tomb hewn out of the living rock was most certainly designed for the highest echelons of society, and the finds – albeit fragmentary – bear this out. We anticipate more such wonders when we return for our next excavation season. ■

AUTHOR Louise Schofield, archaeologist and a former curator at the British Museum, is director of the Tigray Trust.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visitors can see the finds from Maryam Anza in the recently opened archaeological museum at Wukro, Tigray, in Ethiopia.

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