THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ETHIOPIA

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PREFACE

The limits of social memory

Addis Ababa, 2 November 1930

The lavish coronation ceremony of Emperor Haile Sellassie marked an important social, political and cultural turning point in the history of the Empire of Ethiopia (known then as Abyssinia). This paramount leader stood at the apex of a complex feudal bureaucratic pyramid, governing a cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic Empire which as recently as the late nineteenth century under the conquests of Emperor Menelik had grown rapidly beyond the boundaries of its ancient highland Christian home. Here was an African nation state which had resisted European colonialism, the home of a people who had been 'officially' Christian at a time when the Christians of the Roman Empire were only beginning to enjoy a degree of freedom from religious persecution. Here was a state which was at once diverse, yet recognised primarily for its strong highland Christian heritage, witnessed by a brilliant and distinctive African material culture and a Semitic identity which conversely rather disconnected the place from the rest of Africa. Haile Sellassie's coronation ceremony was at once a statement of change, yet also an affirmation of a strong social memory.

The new Emperor would have been finely attuned to the rich heritage of his realm; behind him stood the certainty of a dynasty rooted in the kings of ancient Aksum – and even before that a lineage which extended back to King Solomon himself. This awareness of the past, this social memory, was the glue that held the country together, ideologically, socially and politically. Ethiopia's first written constitution of 1931 declared the king to be the collateral descendent of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Pankhurst 1998: 216); to him absolute powers were accorded. His body was declared sacred, giving a modern context to the ancient African notion of semi-divine kingship. In a sense the spirit of the Aksumite monarchy lived on; the Ethiopian past was (and indeed is) very much part of the Ethiopian present, serving to shape a very definite concept of identity. This then is our starting point, the contention that the study and narrative of the archaeology of Ethiopia has important social, cultural and ideological

implications (Phillipson 2003: 4). This perception of the past is not, in the classic post-structuralist paradigm, a text to be read; it is a text that is being constantly rewritten just as it was when Ras Tafari played his part in that historic rite of passage, so redolent of the ghosts of an idealised past, on that November day in 1930.

The framework of the study

The present study seeks to investigate three interrelated strands. First, it attempts to present a balanced and up-to-date synthesis of the archaeology of Ethiopia; second, it aims to emphasise some areas of this archaeological heritage which have hitherto escaped the attentions of mainstream academic archaeology; third – and taking a cue from the passage above – the study considers how this past has been used to create and maintain a distinctive 'Ethiopian' identity: the idea of social memory. The study takes on a narrative structure dealing with the data in chronological order, yet also isolates important theoretical ideas that can be placed in a wider African and global archaeological context. The scope of this book, then, whilst seemingly straightforward, is actually more complex than first appearances suggest: before attempting to synthesise some *2 million years* of Ethiopian archaeology we need to be absolutely clear about the parameters of our study.

The geographical problem

Arguably more than any other *geographically* based archaeological overview, Ethiopia presents a number of contradictions and problems. Where it is certainly possible to write an archaeology of, say Britain, France or Germany, this approach has obvious weaknesses in an African context where on the whole broader regional treatments tend to predominate. Arguably beyond Egypt – which has its own unique history of archaeological research and problems – few archaeologists have tended to tackle archaeologies of specific African nation states. Why should this be the case? Ethiopia, along with many African countries, is largely an arbitrary geo-political creation with all the attendant problems that it entails (see Davidson 1992). Its political borders, shaped by the process of nineteenth-century European colonial expansion in neighbouring regions, cut across ancient and diverse socio-cultural, economic, ideological and linguistic landscapes. Also, as an African nation state, Ethiopia suffers something of an identity crisis. There are two key points to stress in this connection which have important implications for its archaeological study: first, universalist rather than cultural-relative attempts at defining Ethiopian identity have tended to stress the highland, Christian, Semitic agriculturalist society at the expense of other cultures of Ethiopia. In turn, this idealised creation of a monolithic

cultural identity (paradoxically a trap into which Donald Levine in his 1974 book *Greater Ethiopia* rather falls) has actually rather disconnected Ethiopia and its cultural heritage from its African context (Finneran 2003a), a scenario akin to the traditional constructs of the study of ancient Egypt or Nubia (cf. Edwards 2004: x) where certainly a more 'Asia-centric' perspective traditionally prevails (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 1).

There are also important and far-reaching geopolitical implications to consider in connection to the problem of physical boundaries, and this is actually a very sensitive issue. From an archaeological perspective it makes sense to consider the Eritrean material here. Southern Eritrea shares (arguably) the same Aksumite heritage, Christian faith and also language (Tigrinya) with large parts of northern Ethiopia, yet the Italian colonial occupation of the coastal strip and its mountainous hinterland from the 1880s to 1940s actually shaped a very different identity. When Eritrea proclaimed its independence, it unusually sought to emphasise rather than deny its colonial past; to 'be Eritrean' now meant to break with Ethiopia. The emphasis upon 'otherness' meant a denial of common social memory (Gilkes 1991), even resulting in the creation of an independent Eritrean Orthodox Church (Seraphim 1999). A recent conference on the archaeology of Eritrea held at the University of Southampton in May 2005 illustrates the problem. It became apparent that whilst some of the European archaeologists essentially accepted a degree of social and cultural unity in the region during the first half of the first millennium AD, the Eritrean scholars sought to emphasise *difference* between the coast and hinterland, emphasising an 'Eritrean Adulis' and an 'Ethiopian Aksum'. This observation is not made in a negative or judgemental manner, just as a warning that the creation of a 'past for the present', a social memory, can be problematic, yet ultimately within a post-modern archaeology is also wholly valid.

It also makes archaeological sense to consider closely, to some extent, the material derived from the archaeological excavation or survey in the nation states of Djibouti as well as Somalia (if we can talk of a functioning political entity there). This is done, it must be stressed, with pragmatic rather than any political or irredentist motivations. These national boundaries did not exist in the past, and to some extent archaeology should not respect them. In short, following the advice of the historian Christopher Clapham who has called for a reframing of the approaches to the Ethiopian history, I try to follow the path where the 'main unifying theme is to be found neither in culture nor in conquest, it must be found instead in geography' (Clapham 2002: 47). The title of this book, then, is something of a misnomer. It is problematic on many levels, but it should be read more as a regional treatment (the term Horn of Africa would have been better for a study which claimed to deal in more detail than I have attempted here with the Somalian material) which although centred in the main upon the region from which we

have the most archaeological data – the Ethiopian–Eritrean highlands – has to contextualise these data with reference to neighbouring regions.

The methodological problem

The underlying philosophy of this work is to attempt where possible to dispense with the idea of a monolithic cultural identity that is Ethiopia, and to highlight the many and varied strands of the archaeology of the region from the early stone age into the post-medieval period; this demands, to use postmodernist cliché, a fracturing of the grand, evolutionary biography, or a metanarrative of the place (this is a term to which we shall return). This also demands a reassessment of the nature of the evidence. To some extent some Africanist archaeologists view archaeology as being objects that have been dug up and artefacts that can be tied into a traditional cultural-historical analytical framework (for a provocative reassessment of the notion of the culture area and an attempt to define a more nuanced approach see Rowlands 2003). Here I seek to broaden the methodological scope, to consider the nature of cultural and symbolic landscapes, architectural space and even iconography, thus combining archaeological, anthropological, historical and art-historical approaches. Where we have a chronologically and geographically uneven archaeological *sensu stricto* coverage, such a multi-disciplinary scope makes sense, moving beyond what I feel is a very narrow and blinkered definition of what 'archaeology' means. We shall see that the range of material covered here is diverse, and for the most part little appreciated beyond African archaeological specialists.

In attempting to give voice to some of the poorer-understood aspects of Ethiopian archaeology, I have utilised a number of non-English-language primary sources. Inevitably the bibliography could have run to many thousands of entries, but in the interest of economy I have listed those which have provided the most essential information. With the advent of internet publishing, many of these sources have become available to a wider readership, and in the best traditions of the post-modernist approach to archaeology which is highlighted here, many web-sites written by Ethiopians themselves bear witness to the power of social memory and the meaning of the past (of particular value are Richard Pankhurst's archived articles for the *Addis Ababa Tribune* which chronicle the problematics of the repatriation of Ethiopian cultural patrimony; see epilogue). The internet sources, however, obviously have clear limitations which should be borne in mind. I have only cited those which I feel add an extra dimension to the study (primarily in the epilogue). In many cases it will become apparent that there are large gaps in the picture; some areas or periods are well represented in the archaeological and cognate literature; the northern-central highlands, the Aksumite period, medieval church architecture and art

history and the early stone age in particular. Other areas and themes offer tantalising glimpses for future research directions. With these limitations in mind, I have tried to present as balanced a picture as possible.

Conventions for citations of dates and transliteration

Where dates are presented, usual conventions in regard to the citation of calibrated and uncalibrated radiocarbon dates apply; in broad terms the more 'prehistoric' material is referred to in terms of years ago (mya or kya); when we move into the later periods, and absolute dates can be confidently tied into regional chronologies, it makes sense to use BC and AD. I have also tried to be consistent in the transliteration of terms and proper nouns derived from Ethiopic sources; for instance one may see the name of the province commonly written as Shawa on most European maps rendered as Shewa or Shoa; using strictly phonological spelling – which has become the editorial standard of the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* – this would be transliterated as Šäwä. Purists may disagree with my having dispensed with the phonological spelling; I merely plead that for the sake of consistency the more traditional approach has been used which should enable readers to effect a swift identification of people and places.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present work charts a personal sea change in my approach to the archaeology of Ethiopia, from a prehistoric, environmental and ethnoarchaeological perspective of my PhD work at the University of Cambridge (1999), towards a more integrated art-historical, historical and archaeological orientation which I developed as a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the department of art history and archaeology, SOAS, London (2000–2003), and subsequently as a lecturer at both SOAS and at the University of Southampton. To my colleagues and students at these institutions, past and present, I owe a debt of thanks for helping me to shape my ideas over the last 12 years.

This book is based upon extensive fieldwork in northern Ethiopia; generous funding support by the British Academy, Gonville and Caius College Cambridge and the University of Cambridge, the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, the British Institute in Eastern Africa and the Society of Antiquaries of London is gratefully acknowledged. Two libraries deserve special mention: the SOAS library has, as ever, been an unmatched source of information and help (and long may it continue to do so without interference), as too has the library of the Society of Antiquaries of London, especially in the person of the Assistant Librarian Adrian James.

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Note: All photographs are my own except where the name of the photographer and/or copyright holder is given.

1

A SENSE OF PLACE

Ethiopia, Africa and the World

Contexts

In the preface two key contentions regarding the formulation of Ethiopian identity were raised, first the popularist tendency to regard 'being Ethiopian' from a socio-cultural perspective in narrow and somewhat monolithic terms, and second the disconnection of this identity from its African roots. In this chapter these ideas come under scrutiny. By way of providing a broad introduction to the region (its peoples and landscapes) and an overview of how Ethiopia *sensu lato* has been perceived from external historical sources, the emphasis will fall upon stressing diversity and also the problems of blurred and shifting identities. David Phillipson's statement encapsulates the issue: 'socio-political differentiation is largely a matter of an individual's sense of identity. This may not only change through time, it may also vary according to the circumstances in which people find themselves. There is often a tendency for this degree of fluidity to be underestimated' (Phillipson 1998: 15).

By way of framing a general historical context for the archaeological study we shall also pay close attention, in the second part of this chapter, to the types of external and internal historical sources which may be critically utilised to augment the archaeological evidence, but which also betray tendencies to place the region in the category of the exotic and tend to 'de-Africanise' its identity. Ethiopian internal historiographic sources by their existence have played a part in this; no other African country outside Egypt and historical Nubia have such a rich wealth of autochthonous historical source material as Ethiopia. We shall begin with a consideration of geographical diversity of the study area and will move on to consider the problematics of defining what it means to be 'Ethiopian'.

'Being Ethiopian': the problematics of socio-cultural identity

Land and environment

Ethiopia and Eritrea together occupy approximately 1,220,000 square kilometres of the Horn of Africa, and are bounded on the west by the

steppic plains of the Sudan, to the south by the savannas and highlands of Kenya and to the east and north-east by the desert and Red Sea coastal strips of Somalia and Djibouti (Figure 1.1). Modern political boundaries are meaningless in the context of the past; for many Ethiopians (and indeed many foreigners) their country is the high mountainous plateau, where accidents of geography and geomorphology have played a major role in informing national consciousness. The national psyche of Ethiopia – if such a thing exists – is tied uncompromisingly to place; the highlands not only offer ample scope for economic exploitation, they also form a powerful centralising symbolic force in their own right: a place of fertility, refuge, and dramatic landscapes. The highlands of Ethiopia do deserve a special consideration; to relegate them would be akin to ignoring the impact of the Nile upon ancient Egyptian culture and psychology. They are physically unique within the wider African perspective. Being a 'highlander' has thus dominated the idea of 'being Ethiopian' and the landscape carries considerable symbolic resonance. This psycho-social attachment to place is almost unique within the African socio-cultural context, but is something that we can appreciate universally: 'national identity... would lose much of its ferocious

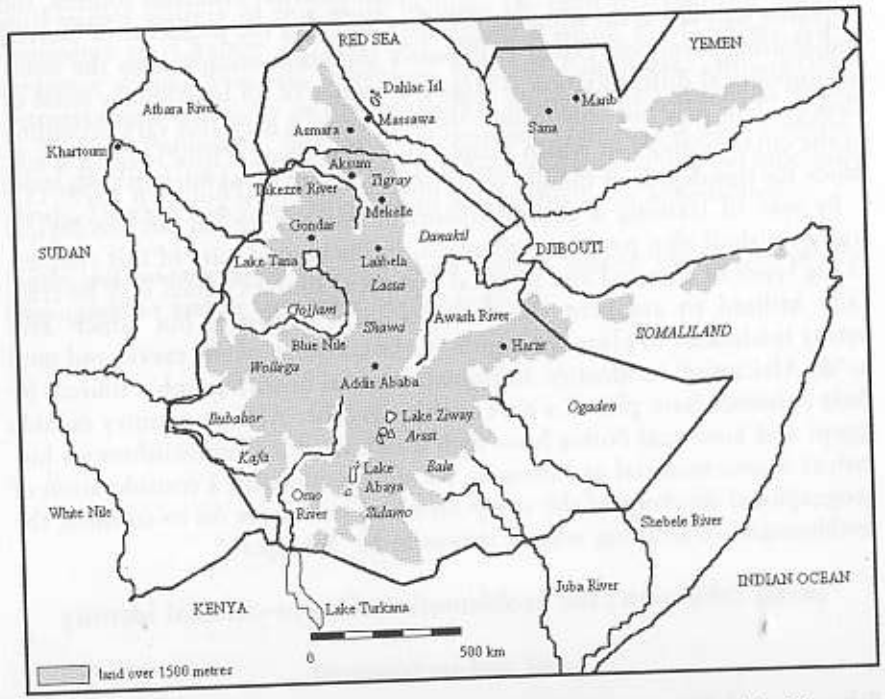

Figure 1.1 Map of the study area showing key settlements, geographical features and historical regions.

enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition' (Schama 1995: 15).

The Ethiopian–Eritrean highlands are a remarkable African geomorphological phenomenon. To the north of the plateau, in the Simien Mountains, is found the highest point, Ras Dashen (4,600 metres), and extensive tracts of the plateau lie above 2,000 metres. East of Asmara the highlands descend sharply towards the Red Sea littoral; to the west they merge into the eastern Sudanic steppes, and to the north-east they fall away into the Danakil depression, an arid region inhabited by a few hardy nomadic pastoralist groups. Around the south-east of the massif a projection of highlands around Harar merges to the south with the Ogaden desert. On the south-western fringes of the high massif, in Ilubabor, one finds tropical rainforest *par excellence*. The Rift Valley bisects the plateau in a south-west – north-east direction, opening out into the Danakil; the line of this feature is marked by the course of the Awash River and a string of lakes, the largest being Ziway, Besaka and Abiyata.

The hydrology of the massif has important implications for understanding the culture history of north-eastern Africa. In the north the Mareb and Takezze rivers flow north-east from the highlands to join the Atbara and then the Nile rivers some 300 kilometres north of Khartoum.

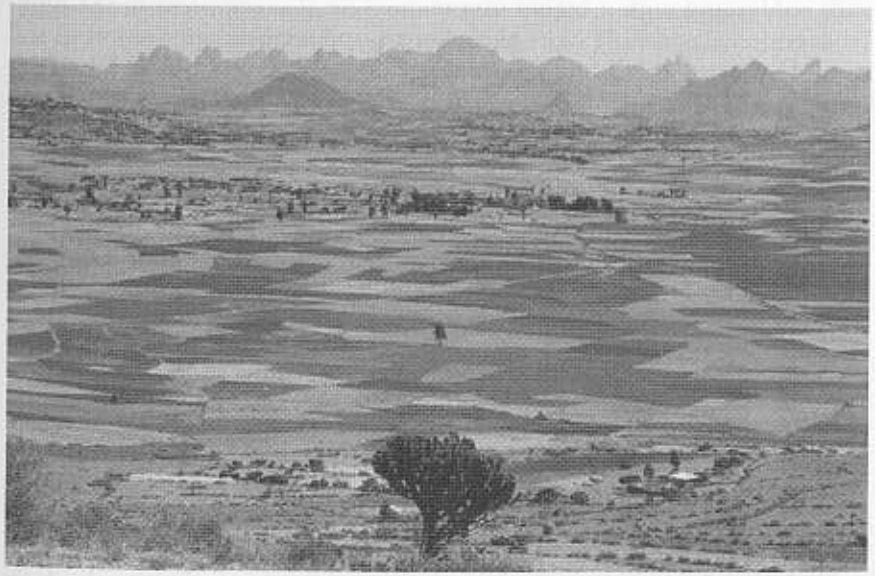

Figure 1.2 Classic northern highland (*woina dega*) landscape: the Adwa Mountains from Aksum (Michael Harlow).

From Lake Tana the Blue Nile – laden with the rich silt that nourished the civilisations of Nubia and Egypt – flows west to its confluence with the White Nile at Khartoum. Draining from the south-western highlands, the Omo River flows into Lake Turkana in northern Kenya and from the south-eastern highlands the Juba and Shebele Rivers pass through the arid Ogaden to the Indian Ocean at Kismaayo, Somalia. These river courses allow for relatively easy access into the highlands from outside; millions of years of intensive erosion have cut deep river gorges through the massif, leaving isolated, flat-topped *ambas* – good defensive sites for settlements. The fractured nature of the massif has important implications for the archaeological and historical reconstruction of patterns of human settlement and cultural development, as well as strategies for political domination. It needs to be emphasised that these highlands are not a unified geographical feature, contrary to popular imagination.

The highland landscapes owe their dramatic appearance to volcanic action. Igneous rocks (mainly pre-Palaeozoic granites and schists) form the base geology of the plateau, and underlie cretaceous sandstones and Jurassic limestone capping complexes. The volcanic soils that derive from these rocks are known as vertisols, and are generally very fertile, but such is the exposed nature of the highland slopes that in certain areas the continuing removal of natural deep-rooted floral coverings has resulted in severe problems with soil erosion (Hurni 1990). Another major type of soil, redder and with a higher clay content, is also prevalent in the highlands; this soil generally lacks phosphorous and farmers often resort to soil burning to restore the mineral content and ameliorate its pH balance (Huffnagel 1961: 141). Settlement is geared towards optimum soil conditions as well as access to water. The basic physical ingredients exist to form the foundations of a dependable and unusual range of agricultural systems, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

The climate of the plateau is equable, contrasting harshly with the lowland steppic and desert zones around its fringes. Rainfall is predictable and plentiful enough to support rain-fed agriculture often without recourse to advanced irrigation techniques (as distinct from soil-management terracing best exemplified by the Konso peoples of the south-west). The rains generally arrive from a south-westerly direction, and are thus heaviest in that quarter of the highlands; 'small rains' (Amharic: *belg*) fall between February and March, and the heavier, 'large rains' (Amharic: *keremt*) fall from late June to early October, and the scale of these rains will naturally have far-reaching consequences for the agriculturalists of the Nile Valley fringes further north.

Highland farmers have had to evolve a system of planting back-up drought-resistant crops which can offer a safety net during these times; this flexibility has important implications for our understanding of economic

change in antiquity, as we shall see (Holt and Lawrence 1993). The highlands embrace a range of different landscapes, and it is this ecozonal mosaic that has had a major impact upon the history of human settlement in this region. This diversity is illustrated in the table below which summarises the traditional definition of Ethiopian/Eritrean agro-climatic and biogeographic zones (after Ullendorff 1960: 26–30). These ecozones may be situated in close proximity to each other, especially where, for instance, deep river gorges cut through highland areas, and as such a wide range of food and animal resources may be exploited in a very small region. A sense of place is of course important in the creation and maintenance of social memory, but this is just the start of the problem. There are other factors to consider and perhaps the most obvious starting point is social memory based upon linguistic identity.

Table 1.1 Traditional agroclimatic regions of Ethiopia/Eritrea

Name (Amharic)	*Height range asl.*	*Average diurnal temperature*	*Vegetation*
Wurch/ Urec	Above tree-line at c.3,400 metres	*c.*< 10 degrees C	Sparse; marginal exploitation by herders in the High Simien.
Dega	2,400–3,400 metres	*c.*16 degrees C	Afro-alpine vegetation and juniper stands. Limited small holding and herding.
Woina Dega	1,800–2,400 metres	*c.*22–25 degrees C	Optimal agricultural conditions, mixed woodlands.
Qolla	500–1,800 metres	*c.*25–30 degrees C	Grassland and steppe, pastoralist zones.
Berha	0–500 metres	*c.*> 30 degrees C	Arid lowland zones such as the Danakil and Ogaden. Very marginal pastoralist activity.

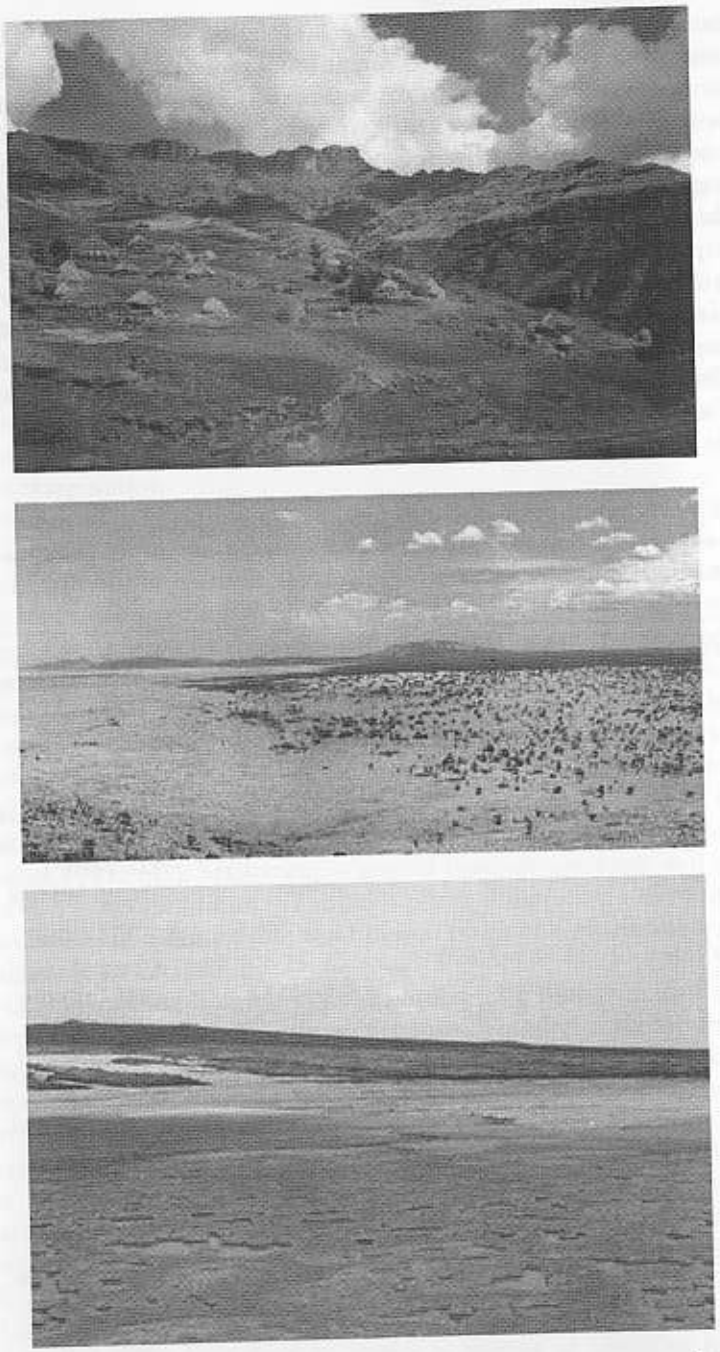

Figure 1.3 Extremities of landscape: (a. top) the High Simien *wurch* (Michael Harlow); (b. middle) the *qolla* of the Omo region; (c. bottom) volcanic springs in the *berha* of the Danakil.

Language and identity

The distribution of language types in Ethiopia and Eritrea has clear implications for the archaeological and historical reconstruction of the Ethiopian past. Ancient population movements, which have had profound social and cultural consequences, are fossilised in the language distribution map (Ehret 1988). This becomes important, for instance, when we try to understand the prehistoric roots of the different economic strategies in the region (see Chapter 3). Ethiopia and Eritrea comprise a patchwork of disparate linguistic populations (Ullendorff 1960: 116–35); the core highland massif is mainly the home to speakers of Semitic languages of the Afro-Asiatic language phylum. Amharic, Tigrinya and Tigre are the most widely spoken of these Ethio-Semitic languages and all stem from the classical Ethiopic language (in fact the liturgical language of the Church) Ge'ez, which evolved during the Aksumite period. Amharic (the *lingua franca* of Ethiopia) has absorbed loan-words from a number of neighbouring Cushitic languages (especially Agau), and has thus diverged further from Ge'ez than Tigrinya which is spoken widely in the northern provinces of Ethiopia, and which is also the official language of Eritrea. Tigrinya is

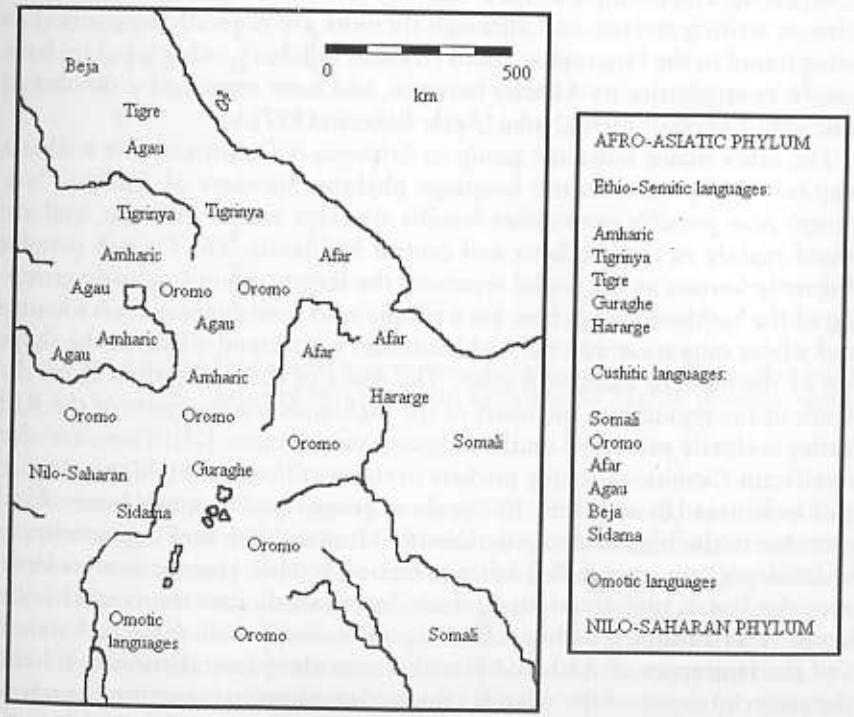

Figure 1.4 Distribution of languages in the study area.

spoken in the former heartlands of the Aksumite state and the third major Semitic language, Tigré, is spoken exclusively in western Eritrea (Ullendorff 1960: 124–32). Nine other major Semitic languages belonging to the southern Ethio-Semitic linguistic grouping are also spoken. Special attention attaches to the status within this grouping of the language Ongota, which is only spoken by some six individuals in south-western Ethiopia (Blench 2006: 148) and whose status is problematic. This language may actually represent a survival of an ancient tongue spoken by hunter-foragers in the region.

Ethio-Semitic is subsumed into the general South-Semitic linguistic subgroup along with the (now extinct) South Arabian languages which have been overwhelmed by the spread of Arabic in that region. Contrary to conventional models (see Blench 2006: 150) historical linguists now posit that the original homeland of the Afro-Asiatic language phylum was in fact centred on a region in what is now south-western Ethiopia. The linguistic prehistory of the region is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. The Semitic languages of Ethiopia and Eritrea are written in a script based upon the Ge'ez syllabary (Figure 1.5) which has antecedents in the Epigraphic South Arabian language of the mid-first millennium BC (Chapter 4). The Ethiopic script is the only known indigenous sub-Saharan African writing system, and although its roots are generally recognised as being found in the Epigraphic South Arabian syllabary, other scholars have sought to emphasise its African heritage, and have suggested a (doubtful) link with Egyptian hieroglyphs (Ayele Bekerie 1997).

The other major language group in Ethiopia is Cushitic and it is also a member of the Afro-Asiatic language phylum. Speakers of Cushitic languages now possibly outnumber Semitic speakers within Ethiopia, and are found mainly in the southern and central highlands. The Oromo peoples (formerly known as the Galla) represent the largest ethno-linguistic grouping of the highlands, and these are a people who have guarded their identity and whose migration into the highlands had a profound effect on the shaping of the modern Ethiopian state. The route of their migration from the south of the region into the heart of the highlands via the route of the Rift Valley is clearly preserved on the language map (Figure 1.5). There are also significant Cushitic-speaking pockets in the north/central highlands (Agau) and in Eritrea (Beja) (Ehret 1976); these groups have a much longer-lived presence in the highland region than the Oromo. Note how Agau exists in isolated pockets surrounded by speakers of Semitic languages who have, over the last 1,500 or so years, thrust southwards into the central highlands. Also subsumed within this group are varied Somali dialects, Sidama, and the languages of Afar and Danakil nomadic pastoralists who inhabit the eastern fringes of the massif. Omotic languages are another branch of the Afro-Asiatic phylum and their speakers are distributed – as the name would suggest – along the Omo River in the south-west of Ethiopia.

Figure 1.5 The Ethiopic writing system, evolution from the Epigraphic South Arabian alphabet (left) and approximate English phonetic values (right).

The fourth linguistic grouping is represented by Nilo-Saharan-speaking populations. These languages are unrelated to those of the Afro-Asiatic phylum, and are popularly associated with cattle pastoralist populations inhabiting the western fringes of the massif straddling the borders of Sudan and Kenya. The main Nilo-Saharan speaking groups of Ethiopia include the Anuak and Nuer around the lowland south-western areas, and outlying northern populations such as the Kunama and Gumuz. Classification of language also reflects, to some extent, ingrained assumptions of ethnicity. The Afro-Asiatic language phylum was established by

the linguist Joseph Greenberg in 1966 to replace the classificatory label 'Hamito-Semitic', which the British scholar Roger Blench suggests had a 'slightly bizarre racist undertone' (Blench 1993: 134). This term actually had very overt cultural connotations; lighter-skinned 'Hamites' lived in north-eastern Africa, close to Asian cultural paradigms, and for the most part were pastoralist peoples. Physically, economically and geographically they contrasted with their neighbouring Bantu populations, and they tended to be viewed as 'culturally' superior peoples in older African archaeological and historical literature (cf. Sanders 1969; Blench 2006: 141). The Rwandan Genocide of the 1990s has its roots in this historical linguistic and economic dichotomy (Reid 2001). The historical predominance of Ethio-Semitic languages in the region has thus historically had implications for how Ethiopian identity was perceived, and has also strengthened the notion of a monolithic national culture. 'Being Ethiopian' is also arguably associated with identification with a singular economic lifestyle, highland farming, but as ever the boundaries cannot be neatly defined.

Economic identity

In highland Ethiopia mixed agriculture predominates, and this is mainly the preserve of the speakers of Semitic languages. In the eastern and northern lowlands Cushitic-speaking pastoralists are most numerous; whilst in the south and south-west of the country diverse economic strategies are the preserve of Omotic and Nilo-Saharan speakers. In very general terms we may divide the core economic strategies of the region into two types: specialists – who tend to utilise a single major economic resource (such as pastoralists) – and generalists who engage in wide-ranging subsistence strategies (farmers). The two systems do not exist in isolation: symbiotic relations (mutually beneficial links) are part and parcel of the wider economic system, and many of these linkages are clearly of significant antiquity.

On the plateau regionally varied agricultural systems predominate (Huffnagel 1961; Westphal 1975). The most widespread variant is a plough/cereal complex based on small-scale livestock keeping and cultivation of cereals; in the south-eastern highlands the 'hoe/cereal complex' is favoured and a third highland variation – what may be termed a hoe/vegeculture complex – is practised around the Ethiopian southern plateau among Omotic and Cushitic-speaking populations, with an emphasis on Enset (*Ensete edule*: otherwise known as 'false banana') cultivation. The three major variants of the highland agrocomplex focus are all based equally upon cultivation and stock keeping (outlined in more detail in Chapter 3), and here wealth and status are identified with cattle ownership, as is also recognised in pastoralist societies on the fringes of the highlands.

These agricultural systems do not exist in stasis; adaptability is the key, and farmers are open to experimentation. A useful historical example is found in the case of the Kafa kingdom of southern Ethiopia. Here a traditional agrocomplex based upon hoe cultivation was rapidly replaced by plough-based agriculture more indicative of the practice of the northern-central highlands. This change was not occasioned by ecological stress, rather a demand to increase production to meet increased tribute demanded by the King himself. The creation of more feasting days (presumably as a means of maintaining group cohesion) impacted upon the traditional agricultural technology, demanding a more efficient system of production (Orent 1979).

The agricultural systems of the plateau are also exceptionally advanced in terms of technology. The Konso cultivators of southern Ethiopia are well known for the care and effort they take in maintaining an elaborate irrigation system, utilising advanced fertilisation techniques and extensive terracing and channelling to assist in maintaining the economic potential of the fields. The well-built terrace walls increase available slope surface area for cultivation, assist drainage and counteract soil erosion (Amborn 1989). The Konso are unique in their economic and landscape planning; fields are zoned and a strict fallowing cycle is maintained, and with the planting elaborate intercropping is practised. Within the core Konso area, there is an exceptionally large population density, clustered in nucleated village/town centres; all the inhabitants being dedicated cultivators engaged in a highly labour-intensive activity. The archaeological implications of this highly managed subsistence strategy are clear, and not just within an Ethiopian context. The extensive agricultural complex at Engaruka, northern Tanzania would seem to offer a useful archaeological model for comparison (Sutton 1989a).

Economic symbiotic relationships are more visible in the western tropical lowland region, the home of hunting, gathering and fishing groups (of predominantly Nilo-Saharan speakers) who also occasionally practice occasional shifting cultivation (Matsuda 1996). These people are not tied to a single resource exploitation strategy. Nuer pastoralists, for instance, obtain grain from Anuak/Anywaa agriculturalists in return for livestock expertise (Kurimoto 1996). Arssi pastoralists admit that they are too lazy to cultivate, and enter into a symbiotic relationship with specialist Tulama cultivators to provide grain in return for livestock (Blackhurst 1980). Burana people have the monopoly on controlling wells and water sources and use this to exercise economic control (Helland 1980: 40). Such is the social and economic cachet of being a pastoralist, even a change in economic circumstances does not impact upon the self-perceived identity of the group. The Kara of the Omo region 'wish' to be known as pastoralists and describe themselves thus, even though they are engaged in riverine agriculture (Matsuda 1996). Linguistic and economic identities are closely entwined, even though boundaries often become blurred. In adding another variable – ideology – the diversity of Ethiopian identities become even more apparent.

Ideology and identity

Historically the plateau has tended to be regarded culturally as a Christian entity; although today there may be as many as 20 million members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church – *Tewahedo* means professing the unification of natures in Christ by birth, a theological issue considered below (Kropp 1999) – there are also perhaps as many Muslims living on the plateau, where their material culture is more assimilated and less overt than in the lowlands where Islam is overwhelmingly the dominant religion of the lowland farmers and pastoralists. The historical sources associated with the emergence of Christianity in the Aksumite Empire during the mid-fourth century AD are discussed in more detail later in this chapter, but in general terms the Orthodox Church of Ethiopia is a non-Chalcedonian, miaphysite or Oriental Orthodox Church, theologically related to the Coptic Church of Egypt, and the Armenian, Eritrean, and Syrian Orthodox (west-Syrian rite) congregations (erroneously referred to as 'monophysite' churches). This degree of ecclesiastical (and physical) isolation resulting from the theological position of the Ethiopian Church relative to those of Rome and Constantinople has contributed to a very distinctive and vibrant Christian material culture (Finneran in press (a)). The core institution of old Imperial Ethiopia, the Church still retains a very strong socio-cultural role in the modern state of Ethiopia, perhaps less so in its newest incarnation in Eritrea where Islam dominates.

The Church represents a distinctive *way of life* and it has permeated all levels of social and material culture organisation, factors which, as we shall

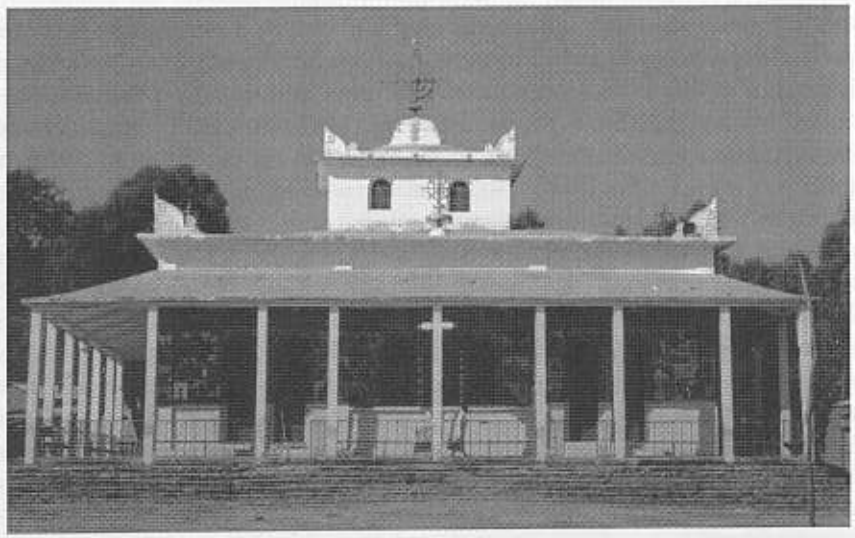

Figure 1.6 Ethiopian Orthodox Church architecture: Aksum.

see later, have clear archaeological correlates. The liturgy of the Church is highly distinctive and reflects its diverse eastern Christian heritage, as indeed does its material culture, with a rich tradition of painting, icon writing, manuscript illumination and ecclesiastical architecture that also embraces a number of distinctive indigenous motifs. The typical church is based upon a tripartite plan that bears little relation to Byzantine or western Christian liturgical space, and is often circular or square rather than classically basilican in form (Figure 1.6). Christians engage in weekly fasts to the extent that their daily diet is almost vegetarian. The consumption of pork and shellfish is also forbidden; Coptic Christians of Egypt would also, to some extent, subscribe to these proscriptions, but they live in an overwhelmingly Muslim society. These are clearly food taboos that owe much to the general Semitic religious substratum, mirrored in *Halal* or *Kashrut* prohibitions. In addition, different approaches to male circumcision, elements of marriage and the celebration of the Sabbath make for a form of Christianity that has appeared to outsiders to be redolent of some archaic Judaic influence (Ullendorff 1956; Pawlinkowski 1974). This rich syncretic heritage reflects the reshaping of Christianity into a local cultural template; a continuous and evolving process and a motif of the wider African encounter with Christianity (Finneran 2002: 179–80; Kaplan 1986a).

The case study of the *Beta Israel* (Falasha) illustrates the problematics of understanding Ethiopian identity with reference to traditional approaches to culture and ethnicity. Internal Falasha tradition states that their Jewish religion was introduced into Ethiopia by Menelik, the founder of the Solomonic dynastic lineage and the son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (for traditional overviews see Stern 1862; reprinted 1968; also cf. Amakeletch 1997). The *Beta Israel* (the name means House of Israel) lived in fairly large numbers until relatively recently in the Lake Tana region, although many have since emigrated to Israel. From a material culture perspective their study raises some important questions as to the archaeological recognition of religious systems. The *Beta Israel* appears to have subscribed to a very archaic form of Judaism; lacking synagogues they worshipped in huts known as *mesgids*, recognisable by the Star of David on their roof and there were no rabbis, but priests (*kahenat*) (Kaplan 1994). Superficially this might be explained away as a local syncretic response to an earlier Jewish penetration (the historical records do not bear this out, but many models have been proposed to explain how Judaism may have gained a foothold in the highlands), but it is not as clear cut (Kaplan 1992a: 160).

The label '*Falasha*' would imply a derivation from the Ge'ez noun *fellese* meaning 'stranger' or 'wanderer' (Dillman 1865; reprint 1970: 1340), indicating perhaps that they had already constructed an identity based upon 'otherness' many hundreds of years ago, but this terminology actually dates from the sixteenth century when against a period of renewed Christian

domination of the regions around Lake Tana, the *Beta Israel* sought to create an identity of difference, rather as Eritreans have recently attempted. The *Beta Israel* mythology emphasised a strong Judaic identity based upon a reading of the ancient Solomonic legend, legitimising their presence with reference to an idealised Christian past tied to a powerful mythical figure (Kaplan 1992b). The neighbouring Qemant peoples of the regions to the north-west of Gondar, in contrast, appeared to frame these Judaic elements within an overwhelmingly animist cosmology – their ideological focus was the sacred grove of trees, or *qole*. In the words of one scholar – and again betraying the sort of prejudices historically inherent in Ethiopian studies – the Qemant 'speak a dialect of the Cushitic language, are Caucasoid and practice a religion of syncretised pagan and Hebraic elements with a few Christian features' (Gamst 1969: vii). Apart from the language used, such a statement shows how difficult it is to categorise Ethiopian ideological identities with reference to Eurocentric constructs (Kaplan 1992b).

Islam is the other major religion in modern Ethiopia and Eritrea, and is concentrated primarily on the lowland areas albeit with a significant presence in the highlands. The settlement of early Muslim communities in the region originates in the Red Sea trade system with Arabia; according to tradition the Prophet Muhammad's nurse may have been an Ethiopian (Ehrlich 1994a: 4–5), and as late as the seventh century the Aksumite king offered sanctuary to Muslims fleeing persecution (some traditions state that the Aksumite king Ashama may have actually converted to Islam (Pankhurst 1998: 40). We shall return to this later in this chapter, and also in Chapter 6). Muslim political and economic power tended to focus upon the littoral and lowlands, where in the sultanate of Adal the city of Harar became a major cultural force from the fifteenth century. Islam impinged upon the eastern highlands of Shawa, and in the sixteenth century, the Harari warlord Ahmed Gragn ('left-handed') orchestrated a *jihad* aimed at the destruction of Christian Ethiopia. Ever since this time Muslims have been a feature of highland life, coexisting with Christians and sharing a number of socio-cultural traits.

Inequality

These different and multiple identities have clear archaeological implications, none more so when we look at the archaeology of inequality or the archaeology of gender. Most obvious examples of gendered space are found in the domestic environment: food preparation and also pottery making, for example, are mainly the preserve of females (Dejene 1994). Exogamic patterns of marriage in highland farming societies have historically had correlates in the distribution and innovation of ceramic technology and design. As we shall see in Chapter 6 there are also strong correlates of gendered space within the Christian monastic system, for instance. Ethiopia has, until fairly recently, been a rigid feudal society with finely grained perceptions of

class and caste. This too has clear correlates in the organisation of space and material culture (Haberland 1979). One important example is the role of ironworking artisans (in Africa as a whole one finds that ironworkers or blacksmiths are regarded as possessing magic powers and are often avoided, living as social pariahs). Many other artisans are similarly marginalised, and do not interact beyond their own circles, and possess different ideological or even linguistic identities of their own (Qurin 1978).

In Ethiopia the creation and maintenance of distinct castes is underpinned by the commonly held belief of the evil eye (Finneran 2003b) which embodies the artisan's 'jealousy' of his place in the client-master relationship; 'castes' were often kept at a distance from society or were segregated. In the city of Gondar in the eighteenth century Muslim artisans were

Table 1.2 Historical framework (after Pankhurst 1998)

Period	*Major rulers and events*
*c.*800 BC–*c.*100 BC 'Pre-Aksumite' phase. *DMT* polity (chapter 4)	'Kings': *W'RN HYWT* (unvocalised inscriptions) *RD'M* *RBH* *LMN*
*c.*AD 100–700 Aksumite phase (chapter 5)	*c.*100 Zoskales mentioned in *Periplus* *c.*290 Endybis; beginning of coinage issues *c.*340 Ezana's conversion to Christianity *c.*519 Kaleb; expedition to south-western Arabia *c.*630 Death of Ashama bin Abjar
*c.*AD 700–1137 Post-Aksumite phase (chapter 6)	*c.*872 Al-Yaqubi's *Kitab al-Buldan* mentions capital of Ethiopians at Kubar *c.*950 Queen Gudit's raids
*c.*AD 1137–1225 Zagwe Dynasty (chapter 6)	1137 King Marara Tekla Haymanot *c.*1150 King Yemrehane Krestos *c.*1210 King Lalibela *c.*1225 King Na'akweto La'ab
1270–1769 Solomonic Period (chapter 6; Gondarene sub-period 1632-)	1270 King Yekunno Amlak; Solomonic restoration 1314–1344 King Amda Seyon 1434–1468 King Zar'a Ya'qob 1508–1540 King Lebna Dengel 1530s Ahmed Gragn's *Jihad* 1607–1632 Susneyos 1632–1667 Fasilidas; expulsion of Jesuits
1769–1855 Zemana Mesafint, 'Era of the Princes'	Political fragmentation
1855–1974 Later Imperial Period	1855–1868 Tewodoros II 1889–1913 Menelik II 1930–1974 Haile Sellassie
1974–1991 Dergue	Marxist military government; civil war
1991–present Democratic government	Eritrean independence

separated from the rest of society and this may be a model for urban planning which, as we shall see in Chapter 5, could also be applied to ancient Aksum. Having now disabused the idea of a monolithic and fixed Ethiopian cultural identity we now consider, through reference to internal and external historical sources, how this singular identity was created, perceived and contextualised within a global discourse.

Inventing Ethiopia

> 'For the early Greek writers Ethiopia was less a geographical location than a state of mind'
>
> (Levine 2000 ed.: 1)

The 'Ethiopian metanarrative'

The definition of the verb 'invent' means to discover as well as to 'create'; both senses of the verb apply equally in this section which considers how Ethiopia has been revealed to the western mind (with its attendant misconceptions, myths and stereotypes) through travellers' accounts, political and religious contact, internal historiography as well as archaeological study. We have already met the concept of the 'metanarrative' (the 'big picture', the clichéd 'broad sweep of history'); the Ethiopian metanarrative has tended to emphasise a monolithic identity, yet, as we have seen, this is a flawed premise; it has also stressed a physical displacement from the African context. For the purpose of this study, we need to deconstruct this metanarrative in order to contextualise the archaeological study of identity in an Ethiopian framework. This demands a consideration of the historical and archaeological accounts which have been used to create this identity.

For the sake of simplicity, historical sources relating to the shaping of Ethiopian identity may be divided into foreign and indigenous accounts. Foreign sources tend to reflect Ethiopia's unique place in the wider continental history of Africa, and they may be defined as follows: Egyptian accounts (dating from the Old Kingdom to the Ptolemaic periods, thus spanning a period of 3,000 years); Biblical references; Classical sources (Greek and Roman); late antique sources (specifically early Christian histories); Arab sources (mainly geographers) and late medieval travellers' accounts which mark the beginning of colonial contact between Europe and the Ethiopian court. Revealingly, one of the most dependable and impressive pieces of original Ethiopian indigenous historical scholarship, Sergew Hable Sellassie's 1972 work *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270,* presents this material in a chapter entitled 'Ethiopia and the

civilised world'. Indigenous historical sources include: early monumental inscriptions from the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite periods; medieval (post-Aksumite) ecclesiastical writings, which are mainly hagiographies (*gadlat*) and assorted histories based primarily upon oral-historical sources; miscellaneous court manuscripts, royal chronicles, letters and finally legal documents and land charters (pertaining to the *gult* landholding system).

Ancient Egypt and the Horn of Africa

To understand the foundations of an external creation of Ethiopian identity, we need to begin with ancient Egypt. Early Egyptian textual sources refer only to regions which may be identified broadly with the coasts of the Horn of Africa, and are given the name 'Land of Punt'. Maritime travel southwards along the Red Sea corridor was governed by prevailing wind conditions; during the summer months the winds blew southwards, and reversed in November. These patterns thus gave a very limited window of opportunity for Egyptian ships engaged in trade in that area. The coastlines southwards and eastwards beyond the Bab el-Mandab straits (which separate Africa from Arabia) would probably have been beyond the range of the Egyptian sailing vessels, thus suggesting that the Land of Punt, on the African shore of the Red Sea, should be identified with the southern Sudanese/Eritrean coasts rather than northern Somalia (Kitchen 1971). This identification is given additional credence with the observation in a 26th Dynasty (*c.*664–525 BC) text from the site of Tanis in the Nile Delta that rains in the Land of Punt (referred to as God's Land, or Ta-Neter) caused the Nile to flood (Petrie 1888: 107).

During the Egyptian Old Kingdom (*c.*2686–2181 BC) Punt assumed importance for its myrrh, a luxury aromatic much in demand across Egypt and the near east. At this stage it is possible that the trade was largely landward, via the Nile corridor and Elephantine Island at Philae, thence overland to the port at Quseir. To obviate Red Sea maritime trade, a port was constructed at Wadi Gawasis (to the north of Quseir on the Egyptian Red Sea coast) by the 11th Dynasty Pharaoh Mentuhotep IV (1983–1976 BC) and a canal was built connecting the riverine Nile system to the Red Sea by the 12th Dynasty Pharaoh Sesostris III (1862–1843 BC). The types of imports from Punt were varied. Puntite slaves were owned by both the son of the 4th Dynasty (*c.*2613–2494 BC) Pharaoh Khufu and the 6th Dynasty (*c.*2345–2181 BC) Pharaoh Pepi II (this slave's name was Tenq, not a recognisably Egyptian ethnic name). Pharaoh Sahure (5th Dynasty; *c.*2494–2345 BC) attempted the first direct sailings to Punt, and among the goods listed as traded were myrrh and wood.

Egyptian sources from the Middle and New Kingdoms (respectively 2106–1633 BC; 1550–1070/69 BC) are more explicit about the nature of materials derived from the Land of Punt. The reliefs on the walls of the

temple of Queen Hatshepshut (1479/73–1458/57 BC) at Deir el-Bahri are especially informative; the meeting between Egyptian representatives and a local ruler named as 'Perehu' and his wife 'Atiya' is recorded in detail (the names themselves do not indicate any geographical origin). Jacke Phillips (1997a) notes that the landscape depicted in the reliefs is flat and desertic rather than mountainous, suggesting that Punt was located upon the coast rather than hinterland. The imported items listed on the Deir el-Bahri reliefs include gold, incense, ebony, ostrich feathers, pelts and cinnamon (the latter is not actually to be found in Ethiopia, Pankhurst 1997: 12). Contemporary Levantine accounts of trade with the 'Land of Ophir' (cf. King Solomon and Hiram of Tyre) may refer to the same general area as Punt; the imported luxuries sourced from Ophir include gold and incense, materials consistent with an African origin (Pankhurst 1998: 16). According to inscriptions on the reliefs of a tomb dating from the time of the 18th dynasty Pharaoh Amenhotep II (1427–1393 BC), a party of Puntite chiefs was received in Egypt; this is evidence perhaps of a more formalised diplomatic contact between the two regions. The exchange dynamic, of course, worked both ways for, according to textual sources rather than archaeological finds, Egyptian jewellery and metalwork were imported into Punt (Kitchen 1971); distinctive Puntite boats are depicted in inscriptions on an 18th dynasty tomb at Thebes (Säve-Soderbergh 1946).

Contacts with Punt continued intermittently for a thousand years. At the time of the reign of Ptolemy I Soter (332–282 BC), Egypt was engaged in conflict with its Hellenistic neighbour, the Seleucid satrapy of Mesopotamia whose army used Indian elephants. In order to counter this threat, expeditions were dispatched to Punt to collect African elephants. Special elephant-carrying boats known as *Elephantegoi* were used, and a commander of one of these elephant hunting expeditions known as Philon later wrote up his experiences in a book entitled *Aethiopica*, which has not survived (Sergew 1972: 47). Archaeological evidence does not as yet support the contention that the later Aksumite royal port of Adulis was actually founded by the Ptolemies as some historical sources have suggested (Krebs 1969; McCrindle 1897: 57–8) and evidence for Ptolemaic penetration beyond the Bab el-Mandab straits is thin (Desanges 1978). We do know that the volume of Egyptian riverine and maritime traffic was sufficient to demand the reopening in 270 BC by Ptolemy II Philadelphus of the canal that formerly connected the Red Sea to the Nile via the Wadi Tumilat and Bitter Lakes, and the construction of fortifications to protect the maritime trade is also witnessed (Burstein 1989: 5). It is also clear that the areas favoured for hunting elephants changed during the reign of Ptolemy III (Euergetes I) (246–222 BC) when expeditions turned their attentions to a region known as Trodytice, presumably the hinterland of the Red Sea coasts of Eritrea. From the late Ptolemaic period Punt effectively disappears from the scene; the writings of the historian Diodorus Siculus suggest that elephant hunting died out at some point during the

second century BC, and during this period Egypt began to turn her attention to developing more formal contact with Rome. (Interestingly, the name of Punt has since reappeared on the map, albeit in a different guise as an autonomous region of the former Somalia.)

Archaeological evidence of Egyptian material in the Horn of Africa is very sparse. One of the most enigmatic of Egyptian finds in the Ethiopian highlands is the *Cippus*, a stela of Horus, presented to the Scottish traveller James Bruce in the late eighteenth century upon his visit to Aksum (Phillips 1996). This artefact, currently in the National Museum of Scotland is, alongside an amulet figurine of Harpocrates/Horus discovered at Matara (Leclant 1965), one of the surprisingly few Egyptian objects to be discovered in Ethiopia, although it is probable that the latter is actually of Nubian origin (Phillips 1995). Cosmas Indicopleustes, a sixth-century AD traveller, noted a Greek inscription at the Aksumite port of Adulis supposedly describing the exploits of Ptolemy III, although this inscription has since disappeared (Kirwan 1972; Figure 1.8). The recent spectacular find of a ship in a cave at the Egyptian Red Sea site of Wadi Gawasis would certainly add to the picture; its discoverers, Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn Bard, are of the opinion that the ship and its goods were designed explicitly for Puntite trade, and if this is the case then the historical and archaeological ramifications of this find would be considerable (Fattovich and Bard 2006).

The eastern Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa

From the later first millennium BC Greek became the language of Red Sea trade, and remained so for almost 900 years. The translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek gives us for the first time the term 'Aethiopia'. The Hebrew version of the Old Testament uses the term 'Kush' for the region south of Egypt; this was rendered into the Greek as *Aethiops*, a noun which means 'burnt faces'. Kush is actually the label used to denote the Napatan and Meroitic kingdoms that dominated the middle Nile region of the Sudan during the mid-late first millennium BC until roughly the fourth century AD (Edwards 2004: 78–9), so the implication is clear: many (but probably not all) mentions of Ethiopians obviously refer to Nubians. The Greek author Homer, writing in the ninth century BC (*Odyssey* (1.22)) refers to 'blameless Ethiopians' as *eschatoi androi*, the most distant men. In the fifth century BC the historian Herodotus (not usually regarded as a reliable source) refers to Ethiopians inhabiting the ends of the earth; this is to some extent true given the classical world view centred as it was on the Mediterranean (Levine 1974: 1–5). The capital of the Ethiopians is specifically mentioned as Meroë, clearly a Sudanic place name (Herodotus 11.29).

The themes of otherness, distance and the exotic are reinforced in Biblical imagery in the Old Testament; the first mention of the land is in *Genesis* 2:13 which refers to the River Ghion 'which encompasseth the whole of Ethiopia',

Figure 1.7 Bruce's *Cippus* (after Bruce 1790).

although this is the only purely *geographical* reference to the place. In the New Testament (*Acts* 8.27) explicit reference is made to Kandace, Queen of the Ethiopians; this personality is in all likelihood a Nubian; similarly an Old Testament mention of Tirhakah, King of Ethiopia in *Isaiah* 37:9 must refer to the Napatan founder of the 25th (Egyptian) Dynasty Taharqo. On the whole biblical accounts of Ethiopia tell us relatively little and in many cases refer in very general fashion to the lands to the south of Egypt's borders: the Nubian, middle Nile and Sudanic zones (for a more exhaustive consideration of these references see Sergew 1972: 42–4).

Figure 1.8 The Adulis throne and inscription as reproduced by Cosmas Indicopleustes in his *Christian Topography* (after McCrindle 1897).

Another important Greek source is Agatharchides of Cnidus' *De Mare Erythraeo* (*On the Erythraean Sea*) which was written around the end of the second century BC. It is not perhaps the content which interests, rather the manner of enquiry. The general flavour of the work is scientific; whereas Egyptian sources rather matter-of-factly dealt with commerce, Agatharchides turns almost an anthropological eye to the coastlines he is investigating. As a recent editor of the text notes, he emphasises the *bios*, how the studied societies interacted with their environments and above all how they perceived the economic benefits of their world (Burstein 1989: 27). Above all, Agatharchides was an ethnographer, he detailed the ways of life of an exotic variety of peoples who lived on the coast.

By the end of the second century AD more classical sources become available and the level of detail contained in them is generally sufficient to identify specific locations and personalities (Huntingford 1989: 36ff.).

Strabo's accounts (Strabo XVII 820, 789, 827) are based upon those of Agatharchides and Erastothenes, and he divides 'Ethiopia' into three kingdoms: the Kingdom of Candace, Upper Ethiopia and Southern Ethiopia, and identifies the source of the Blue Nile river as a lake called Psebo. His 'Saba' probably accords with Adulis. Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* (V 10: 53–4) mentions Adulis by name and also names three major eastern tributaries of the Nile: Astapus (Blue Nile), Astaboras (Atbara) and Astasobas (White Nile). Later, in the mid-second century, Ptolemy reports that the seat of the king was at Aksum (IV: 7–8). An unusual *eastern* mention of Aksum may be found in a Persian source when Mani (d. AD 276–277) describes it as one of the most important kingdoms of the world that he has conquered alongside Persia, Rome and China.

Perhaps the most important classical source is the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (Huntingford 1980). Essentially a trading manual written by a first century AD anonymous Alexandrian (the dating of the document has been debated; present consensus has settled upon a mid-first-century date based upon the mention of a recognised Nabataean king; Mathew 1975), it explicitly notes that the king (using the Greek term *basilieus*) of Aksum was named Zoskales, and was well versed in Greek language and culture. Taking Pliny's observations together with those of the *Periplus*, the historical sources would seem to confirm that a wide range of items was being exported from the port of Adulis and its hinterland. Special mention is made of an intermediate trading post between Aksum and Adulis: Koloë, which may be identified as the modern town of Qohaito and was located three days' journey away from Adulis up the escarpment (Voigt 1999). The main items traded are listed as: ivory, tortoise shell, rhino horn and ivory, hippopotamus hides, apes and slaves, broadly the sort of luxuries that were in demand from Punt over a thousand years earlier.

With the conversion of the Aksumite kingdom to Christianity in the mid-fourth century, Aksum becomes part of the economic and ideological network centred upon the Byzantine eastern Mediterranean. Rufinus of Aquilea's (*c.*AD 345–410) *Historia Ecclesiastica* gives a detailed, contemporary account of the work of Frumentius, a Christian from Tyre, Syria, who was instrumental in the conversion of King Ezana (it is probable that Rufinus heard the story first hand, making his account credible). Emperor Constantine (Constantius II; AD 337–61) wrote to the king of Aksum to ask for his support in the Arian theological controversy, indicating that Aksum was perceived as an important Christian ally. Byzantine writers soon begin to take an interest its affairs; a sixth-century Byzantine ambassador to Aksum named Nonnosus has left us an account via the historian John Malalas of the court at Aksum.

The sixth-century *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes is another source often cited in relation to outsiders' accounts of the Aksumite kingdom; part astronomical/theological speculation and travelogue of the

Christian communities in and around the Indian Ocean, the *Christian Topography* gives us some insight into many aspects of Aksumite life. In the words of one scholar, the Christian Topography is 'largely composed of turgid theological arguments' (Kirwan 1972: 169), but between these speculations, we learn about trade in the region and the names of some of the main peoples in the area. It is related that the port of Adulis is shared between the Trogodytes and Ethiopians, the former presumably should be identified with coastal pastoralist peoples mentioned in the *Periplus* as inhabiting the country between Adulis and Berenike. Interestingly the peoples of the Adulis region are named as Tigretes, from which we presumably get the name of the modern northern Ethiopian region of that name (Huntingford 1989: 43). Procopius tells us that the Byzantine Emperor Justinian wrote to King Kaleb of Aksum asking him to take military action against Dhu Nuwas, King of the Himyar in south-western Arabia, who was persecuting Christians there. The writer Stephanos of Byzantium included Ethiopians in his geographical encyclopaedia *Ethnikon*, a testament to the fact that they were now regarded as more than human curiosities (Levine 2000: 3; the Greeks had always seen Ethiopians as being primitive, Sergew 1972: 51).

Arabia and the Horn of Africa

During the seventh-century relations between Aksum and Arabia, facilitated by Red Sea trade, remained important (Christides 1994) and Arab geographers' accounts of Ethiopia are now some of the most useful for helping us understand the decline of Aksum (Husein 1992; Trimingham 1975). According to the biography of the Prophet by Ibn Ishaq (d. 772), Muhammad reputedly had an Ethiopian nurse, and it has been suggested that his grandfather had visited Aksum (Pankhurst 1998: 39). The persecuted family of the Prophet found ready sanctuary in the court of the Aksumite king in 615, the refugees included the future Khalif Uthman and Muhammad's own daughter Ruqayya. The Aksumite king at this time is referred to as Ashama ibn Abjar, who may possibly be identified with King Armah and who, in some sources, is alleged to have converted to Islam. Ibn Hawqal (*c.*977–8; De Goeje 1873) refers to a queen of the 'Habasha'; she might be identified with the pagan queen Gudit/Judith of popular memory who was allegedly responsible for the destruction of Aksum. Severus' *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* (Evetts 1904) and Al Masudi in 935 (De Goeje 1894) refer to a new capital city called Kubar rather than Aksum, although the Geographer al-Yaqubi, in the *Kitab al-Buldan* (*Book of the Countries c.*891–2; De Goeje 1876), mentions the *najashi* of Aksum. This must be a corruption of the Ge'ez term for King *Negus*.

A twelfth-century Christian Arab source known as Abu Salih the Armenian – although probably compiled by a thirteenth-century Coptic

priest by the name of Abu al-Makarim (Atiya 1991) – mentions churches in Ethiopia in relation to its central theme of the monasteries of Egypt (Evetts 1895). A passage in folio 105 explains that Abyssinia was the same as the Kingdom of Sheba and was contiguous with Egypt. The following passage in folio 105b mentioning that all the kings of Abyssinia were priests anticipates the popular European legend of Prester John. We may be sure that Ethiopian contacts with Egypt never really diminished over the centuries (Meinardus 1965), hardly surprising given the fact that the Coptic Patriarch was also the head of the Ethiopian church. We also know that the region was still engaged in substantial long-distance Indian Ocean trade; although there are no specific references to Ethiopia, we know that the Chinese, during the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–906) and the Southern Sung period (1127–1279), sought African slaves (Wheatley 1975). The possibility of an earlier Chinese contact with the Aksumite court is raised by Wolbert Smidt (2001); a certain Gan Ying, a Chinese envoy to Rome, is said to have visited a place known as 'Dou-Le' at the end of the first century AD. This *could* be a reference to Adulis. Smidt also draws our attention to a later eighth-century source of Du Huan, whose accounts of his travels (*Jingxingji*) tell of a visit to a country in Africa called Molinguo, which Smidt identifies as the lowlands of Eritrea and Somalia; to the south lay a country known as Laobosa which he argues may be a corruption of the generic Arabic term for Ethiopia 'al Habasha'.

Europe and the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia now begins to re-enter the European consciousness. Ethiopian monks were probably encountered by the Europeans of the first crusade (if not earlier) in Jerusalem (Pedersen 1980); upon the recapture of the city by Salah-ad-Din in 1189 the Ethiopians, as neutrals, attained favourable concessions from the new regime. With the geopolitical struggle against the armies of Islam continuing, European kings sought in vain to find a powerful ally in the east to help them in their military campaigns. During this period the legend of the Land of Prester John was born. Here was a powerful Christian monarch of a mysterious 'east Indian' realm, a man of immense piety, with powerful armies ready to assist in the reconquest of Jerusalem. From this legend (based in fact upon a fictitious mid-twelfth-century letter; Pankhurst 1998: 76), European fascination with Ethiopia was fired. The Ethiopian emperor Wedem Arad (1297–1312) sent an embassy to Europe (Richard 1960); in 1390 a Florentine trader Alberto Bartoli visited Ethiopia and he was followed in 1407 by a Sicilian named Pietro Rombulo, who would return 43 years later accompanied by an Ethiopian priest. In the late fifteenth century the Venetian artist Nicolo Brancaleone arrived in Ethiopia; their influence upon traditional Christian iconography, especially in the depiction of the Blessed Virgin Mary, was profound.

Other western European travellers made their way to Ethiopia, and often stayed for many years in relatively high positions, yet sadly a number of their accounts have been lost. Ethiopia had been rediscovered, reinvented; it was shown on Pizzigiani's map of 1367, De Massaso's of 1454 and Fra Mauro's *Mappamundo* (1460), still occupying a liminal position at the end of the civilised world. One of the most quoted of the late medieval European sources is that of Francisco Alvares, chaplain to the Portuguese mission of Joao Sanchez, which arrived in Ethiopia in 1508, and who described Ethiopia during the reign of King Lebna Dengel (1508–1540). Alvares' account of 1540 (Beckingham and Huntingford 1961) is truly valuable as it describes the country before the destruction visited by Gragn; an eye-witness account of the cathedral at Aksum is especially useful.

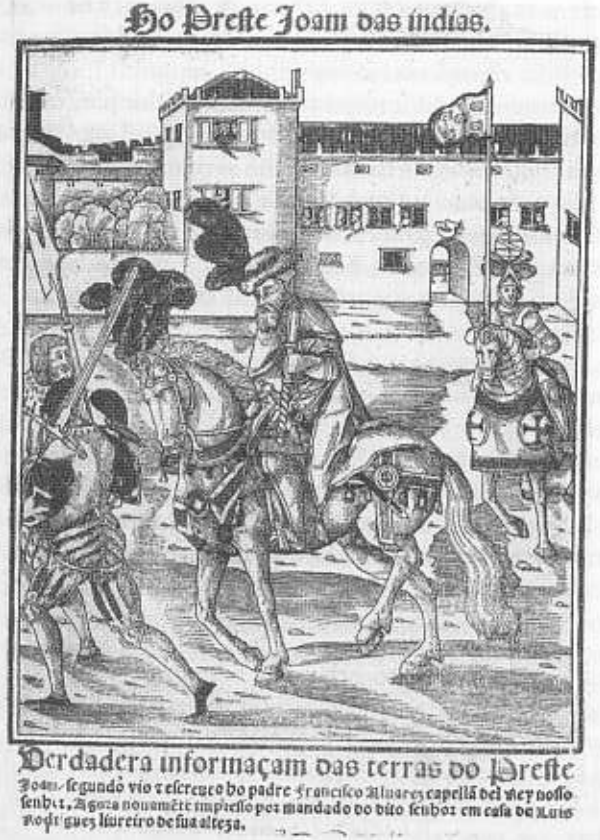

Figure 1.9 The original frontispiece of Alvares' *Verdadera Informaçam das Terras do Preste Joam das Indias* (Lisbon 1540) showing Prester John in an idealised European setting complete with mounted knights and castle.

The Portuguese military intervention in Ethiopia in 1541 safeguarded the survival of Ethiopian Christian culture, and was yoked with a programme of missionary activity. Over the years the Jesuits became a powerful force at Court; from this period of Jesuit ascendancy we have the accounts of Manuel de Almeida in the 1620s (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954), and those of Jéronimo Lobo in the 1640s (Lockhart 1984). Lobo writes about the prevailing economic conditions of the country, and offers observations on local farming resources and techniques. The Jesuits' attempts to convert the King unleashed a great deal of latent hostility, and during the reign of Fasilidas in the early seventeenth century they were expelled from the country, marking a hiatus in first-hand European accounts of the country. From this period a German scholar by the name of Hiob (Job) Ludolf, along with an Ethiopian priest resident in Rome, created some of the earliest detailed works on Ethiopia, among them the compendious *History of Abyssinia* (1681). Ludolf was the founder of Ethiopian studies, and was, more than anyone, responsible for 'inventing' Ethiopia for European academic consumption in a post-renaissance context.

First-hand European and foreign accounts of Ethiopia over the next 200 years now become more common. The new capital of Gondar was first described by a Yemeni ambassador in the seventeenth century (Pankhurst 1998: 62); his visit was followed by a French chemist named Charles Poncet, and in the mid-eighteenth century by a Bohemian priest named Remedius Prutky (Arrowsmith-Brown 1991). The late eighteenth-century Scottish adventurer, James Bruce 'ranks after the Jesuits and Ludolf and Gregory among the monuments of Ethiopian historiography' (Pankhurst 1998: 63), but his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile*, finally published in 1790, is a mass of poor observation and often prejudice; it was 'disappointingly cursory....manifestly inaccurate', ascribing Egyptian influence to the Ethiopian cultural achievement (Phillipson 1998: 29). Another traveller of note in the nineteenth century was Henry Salt who left us excellent lithographs of the country and its monuments (Salt 1814). Unlike Bruce, he considered the stelae of Aksum to be the work of the Greeks.

Indigenous historical sources

Ethiopia possesses a rich autochthonous historiographic tradition without parallel in sub-Saharan Africa. The earliest indigenous historical sources are the pre-Aksumite inscriptions of the mid-first millennium BC, written in unvocalised Epigraphic South Arabian. These inscriptions (mainly ideological in nature) have been found in all the major urban centres of this period, although they are generally limited in their value. During the succeeding Aksumite period, monumental inscriptions tend again to be religious or political in character, dealing with the heroic deeds of kings. Now the language takes on a distinctive Ethiopian flavour with the development of Ge'ez; the Ge'ez syllabary is clearly derived from the inscriptions of the *DMT* or

'pre-Aksumite' period (Figure 1.5), and it is not surprising that the names of gods and goddesses in the Aksumite pantheon are analogous to the Sabaean deities of the last few centuries BC. Undeniably the linkages between Ethiopia and South Arabia as evidenced by textual evidence alone are strong.

The adoption of Christianity by the Aksumite state sees a new development in terms of historiographic evolution. The strong eastern Mediterranean influences on the court and polity resulted in the emergence of Greek as a major written source, and it was through this medium that the Bible, based upon the Septuagint, was first translated into Ge'ez. Christianity impacted profoundly upon the style of writing (Pankhurst 1998: 24ff.) as well as in manuscript iconography (Heldman 1979); Greek numerals came into use, and the *boustrophedon* manner of writing (by which sentences were read alternately from right to left and then left to right; the so-called plough style) was replaced by the more familiar left-right sentence structure (cf. written Arabic and Hebrew). A number of Biblical texts were now translated from the Greek, many of them, from the western viewpoint, being fairly obscure; the Ethiopian Bible incorporates books of the Apocrypha such as the *Book of Enoch*, *Book of Jubilees* and *Ascension of Isaiah* and it is clear even at this early stage that early Ethiopian Christian literature was marked by a very strong individual character which was reflected in its material culture.

The seeming lack of any textual sources from the end of the Aksumite Empire through the Zagwe period has resulted in the creation of an Ethiopian 'Dark Ages' which is probably more imagined than real; certainly archaeologists have tended to write off this period (Chapter 6). Many of the sources that comment upon this period are foreign, and the indigenous material is often secondary; the key written sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries are hagiographies, biographical pieces of kings and eminent saints known as *gadlat* (meaning struggles; singular *gadl*) which relate, often in miraculous style, the deeds of these individuals. The Solomonic 'restoration' of Yekunno Amlak in *c.* AD 1270 is marked by an important development in indigenous historiography, the creation of a set of myths, an idealised past, which sought to legitimise the new dynasty. The emergence of a divine form of Ethiopian kingship in the medieval period is something that arguably has its roots in the pre-Christian Aksumite court, and literary production during this period seeks to strengthen the idea of a core Ethiopian social memory, deep-rooted in Old Testament Biblical tradition, with the king as a centralising force. This literary tradition is paralleled, as we have seen, with the creation of a distinctive Judaic identity among certain segments of society.

A formal attempt to create a collective social memory on the grand scale is articulated in a work entitled the *Kebra Negast*, ('the Glory of Kings'), attributed to the reign of Amda Seyon (1312–1342), and compiled by an Ethiopian priest named Yeshaq who was the Nebura'ed (secular governor) of Aksum. As with many of the great national

chronicles of Ethiopia (and in fact we may compare this to similar literature in the canon, such as the Arthurian myths of medieval Europe) it is certain that this grand metanarrative embodies earlier textual material from the sixth century (Munro-Hay 2001). The *Kebra Negast* should not be read as a document of history; its true worth lies as a testament to how the ruling classes of the post-Zagwe period sought to create and build an identity through reference to social memory and a deep Christian inheritance. The account recasts the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and their son Menelik; Sheba becomes an Ethiopian Queen Maqeda, and Menelik, through his theft of the Ark of the Covenant, carries the legitimate symbols of leadership of the House of David and Israel to Ethiopia. The monarch is thus marked out as semi-divine and possessing of impeccable historical credentials, and the people too are shown a mirror which reflects to them a feeling of order and also divine approval. This view has implications for the way in which the archaeologist or historian approaches the symbolic and physical meaning of kingship in medieval Ethiopia and its underlying cultural mechanisms.

Also belonging to this tradition of what may be termed 'royal propaganda' is the *Liber Axumae* (Book of Aksum) a fifteenth-century work attributed to the reign of Zar'a Ya'qob (1433–1468). Essentially a collection of general documents about the history of Aksum and the Cathedral of Maryam Zion, a number of land (*gult*) charters and other diverse historical and judicial documents, this work represents an attempt to re-connect the heritage of ancient Aksum with the medieval court (Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2001). Where the *Kebra Negast* dealt in more international and far-reaching matters, the Book of Aksum has more immediate cultural resonance. Moving away from notions of psychology and social memory other medieval Ethiopian sources are more obviously useful for understanding ecclesiastical, social and economic change in Ethiopia during the medieval period. The Royal Chronicles of Amda Seyon are the first in a series of collected royal biographies which detail the military and political activities of the rulers (Pankhurst 1998: 57; Huntingford 1965a). These chronicles, however, by the nature of their creation, often present an idealised, or false picture of contemporary circumstances (McCann 1979). Certain elements of the Ethiopic Synaxarium, *Book of the Saints* (*Mashafa Senkesar*) date from this period although it is clear that earlier foreign material is incorporated (Budge 1928). The work is a calendar of feast days of holy individuals from across the eastern Christian world and although containing a heavy Coptic influence occasionally gives some insight into contemporary Ethiopian saints such as Tekla Haymanot as well as the activities of the Nine Saints from a much earlier period.

Useful economic sources at this time are connected to the system of land tenure known as *gult*, a framework that survived until the Marxist revolution of 1974 and the destruction of feudal Ethiopia (the term is derived from the Ge'ez verb *galata* meaning 'he who is assigned a fief'; Crummey 1999: 9). The Emperor was free to award areas of land and other gifts to favoured nobles and especially to monastic foundations, which rapidly acquired a great deal of wealth. These awards were essentially tax breaks, monies owed on taxation of these lands would be payable to the *gult* holder rather than the Emperor himself. The awards were enshrined in detailed charters, which can help provide a picture of local rural economies based upon projected agricultural productivity (Huntingford 1965b; see Chapter 6). A number of charters are of doubtful chronological attribution; the six claimed pre-1342 charters (two dated to *c.*350 and awarded by Abreha and Atsbeha; two sixth-century charters awarded by Gebra Masqal and two ninth-century charters awarded by Anbassa Wedem; Huntingford 1965b: 9) although probably not original, may preserve elements of the earlier legal relationship between church and state in Aksumite and Zagwe times (Crummey 1999: 24). These Gult charters will, as we shall see in Chapter 6, have implications for the archaeological reconstruction of monastic systems, landscape organisation and political expansion in the medieval period. The invention of Ethiopia is not something that historians alone have helped create; the place of archaeology naturally demands some consideration, a subject to which we now turn.

Creating an archaeological narrative

The narrative of archaeological research in Ethiopia reflects wider debates on the African stage (Brandt and Fattovich 1990). The first efforts at pure 'archaeological' research were framed within a decidedly colonialist context; in fact the first archaeological excavations in Ethiopia are associated with General Napier's Anglo-Indian military expedition sent to rescue European hostages held by King Tewodoros at his capital of Magdala in 1867. The object of their attention was the Aksumite port of Adulis, and in common with methodologies current in British antiquarian practice at the time, the Royal Engineers of the party basically engaged in wall clearance. These excavations provided the foundation of work by the Italian colonial archaeologist Paribeni in the early twentieth century (Paribeni 1907), whose work in turn underpinned the creation by Italian archaeologists of a useful archaeological map of the colony of Eritrea (Danelli and Mannelli 1912).

Inevitably, given the popularity of accounts by Bruce *inter alia* and Henry Salt's evocative lithographs, attention soon turned to Aksum.

Limited survey work by the British traveller Theodore Bent (Bent 1893), was succeeded by the Deutsche Aksum Expedition of 1906 led by Enno Littmann, and accompanied by the architect Daniel Krenker. The German team stayed in the town for almost three months, during which time they exhaustively photographed and drew to a high standard all the major archaeological sites in the town and its surrounding region as well as recording a number of inscriptions. The massive and lavishly illustrated four-volume set produced by the team is of immense value today (Littmann *et al.* 1913; also Phillipson 1997). It is also important to highlight the contribution made by the French scholars François Azaïs and Roger Chambard (1931) to our knowledge of the archaeology of southern and eastern Ethiopia. The geographical focus of their survey work conducted in the early 1920s did not fit the traditional, northern-centred studies of Ethiopian heritage, and certainly their impact has been overlooked by Anglophone scholars.

From the Italian occupation of early 1936, Ethiopia became part of *Africa Orientale Italiana*, merged with the colonies of Eritrea and Italian Somalia. This period of occupation is rightly portrayed as a brutal time, yet the system produced on rare occasions a number of sympathetic scholars, the forerunners of a rich tradition of Italian Ethiopian scholarship. Unfortunately this did not always translate into ethical archaeological research; Italian archaeologists removed stela two from Aksum to Rome on the orders of Mussolini, an act laden with huge symbolic intent (Von Henneberg 2004). Significantly the colonial authorities wasted little time in the compilation and publication in 1938 of the *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana*, designed as a popular travel guide which nevertheless still has a certain value today as a social document, producing as it does a very coloured perspective on a 'barbarian' Ethiopian history prior to 'enlightened' Italian colonial domination. Its plans and maps are still useful.

The liberation of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia by the British introduced another colonial factor into the equation. By happy accident the campaign brought a young English archaeologist, who had made a name for himself in southern Africa, to Ethiopia where the possibilities of the study of prehistoric material presented itself for the first time. J. Desmond Clark (1916–2002) would later go on to a distinguished career as an African archaeologist, and one of the many legacies of his work was the compendious *Prehistoric Cultures of the Horn of Africa*, a work which demonstrated the immense importance of the Ethiopian prehistoric cultural sequence (Clark 1954). From the 1960s onwards Ethiopian, European and American expeditions successively uncovered fossil and archaeological evidence for the antiquity of humanity, a process that continues to this day in the Rift Valley and Afar regions.

The establishment of the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology in 1952 under the direction of Francis Anfray was another important step in the development of an indigenous antiquities' service, and soon excavations were taking place at important pre-Aksumite and Aksumite sites in the north. The geographical and chronological scope also emphasised the study and cataloguing of the rock art of the northern and southern plateaux, and the study of the hitherto poorly understood 'megalithic' cultures of the central-southern highlands. Through the 'house journal' of the Institute, *Annales d'Éthiopie*, a number of preliminary and interim observations of the work of the Institute was published, but crucially, as David Phillipson notes (Phillipson 1998: 31) 'in no single case has a detailed, definitive report (of the excavations) been made.' In a sense the *lack* of a colonial history militated against the sort of development of a museums/archaeology culture prevalent in other African countries and resulted, initially at least, in a very *ad hoc* approach to heritage planning (see Epilogue).

From the 1960s French archaeologists were joined by numerous American archaeologists (who largely tended to concentrate on prehistoric material; Desmond Clark now being Professor of African Archaeology at the University of California Berkeley), Italian scholars, as well as a British team at Aksum assembled by the late Neville Chittick, the Director of the British Institute in Eastern Africa, who had already made a name for himself with his investigations of east African coastal settlements such as Kilwa and Manda. His research interest in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea in antiquity found a natural extension to Aksum where he worked from 1972 to 1974 until the revolution of November that year saw all archaeological work in the country suspended. Happily Chittick's planned programme of work was largely completed and amplified by a successor BIEA team under the direction of David Phillipson from 1993 to 1997 (Phillipson 2000). At the same time a joint Italian-US team under the direction of Rodolfo Fattovich of the University of Naples and Kathryn Bard of the University of Boston excavated on the Beta Giyorgis hill above the town, with the result that the Aksumite archaeological landscape became arguably one of the most intensively researched in Ethiopia.

The biases of archaeological research in Ethiopia (and to some extent Eritrea) reflect the external creation of Ethiopia from a Eurocentric perspective, emphasising the northern, Semitic, international outlook. There is an uneven coverage of periods and areas; archaeological outlines of Ethiopia are still rather addressed from a relativist position and in many cases the Ethiopianist archaeologist is still often the Nubiologist or Egyptologist manqué; students of linguistics – with strong Asiatic backgrounds – find riches in the study of the Semitic languages and literatures of Ethiopia. The *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* is still often an outlet for scholarly research on Ethiopia. Ethiopia thus occupies this very odd

liminal *intellectual* position on the cusp of the European, African and Asian worlds.

Overview

> 'In opening up towards Africa, Ethiopia managed...to rid herself of the burden of uniqueness. Until that time Ethiopia's image was neither wholly oriental nor wholly African'.
>
> (Ehrlich 1994b: 639)

The foregoing chapter, whilst setting out a descriptive overview of the study area, has also drawn attention to the problems inherent in the definition of Ethiopian identity. External and internal creations informed by a range of different historical sources (as well as what appears to be a very biased and uneven archaeological coverage) have combined to form an idealised metanarrative of the Ethiopian past, a past somehow removed from the African context, a past which ignores the diversity of Ethiopian peoples and landscapes; diverse identities which often defy easy classification in the context of economic, linguistic or ideological criteria and which defy the usual stereotype. Historically universalist rather than cultural relative approaches have been utilised; *in extremis* this has resulted in some rather odd observations: 'physically, the Hamito-Semitic union has produced a handsome race, elegant, subtle, and nervous...everyone will agree that the Abyssinian is exceptionally intelligent, mentally agile, and extraordinarily eager to learn' (Ullendorff 1960: 46).

In essence our approach demands a new level of analysis – a post-modern Africanist archaeology – which moves beyond the traditional conception of the 'culture area' (e.g. Murdock 1959; and see Levine 1974: 25), towards a more nuanced consideration of ethnicity and identity (Stahl 2005: 10) and embracing a plurality of Ethiopias (Clapham 1993). Whilst one might argue that this idealistic approach founders on a paucity and uneven coverage of empirical 'hard' archaeological data, a more nuanced and multi-disciplinary theoretical and methodological perspective – also utilising cautiously and critically suitable analogues drawn from other world archaeological case studies – can add to the picture.

2

FROM 'LUCY' TO THE LSA

Technological development from the Pliocene to the mid-Holocene period

Contexts

In this chapter we will consider the evidence for technological development from approximately 2.5 million years ago (mya) to about 3,000 years ago (kya). It will become apparent that the term 'prehistoric' is not satisfactory; in fact the fabrication and use of stone tools is recognised in the Aksumite period (and in some areas of Ethiopia the manufacture of stone tools in very circumscribed industrial contexts is still attested today). This overview of cultural development also includes, towards the later end of the period, an outline of the earliest pottery-using groups of the region as well as the evidence for early metallurgy. There remain considerable shortcomings in our chronological schemes; we cannot really speak, in Ethiopia, of an 'iron age' as one might recognise in the broader African picture. Also any notion of national boundary is meaningless within the context of 'prehistoric' material, especially for the archaeology of the very earliest humans. An accident of geomorphology means that most of the richest hunting grounds in the world for early fossil hominins just happen to be found in the Middle Awash and Hadar regions of the Afar Rift, and in the Omo region in the south-west. These issues need to be borne in mind in the light of the foregoing discussion.

The central position of Ethiopia in the archaeology of human origins has not been lost on its people or on those responsible for the protection and promotion of Ethiopia's heritage. The skeleton of *Australopithecus afarensis* (named 'Lucy' by her American discoverers) is not now Ethiopia's oldest set of hominin remains, but is certainly the best known globally. Her identity has been seized upon as the 'first Ethiopian', and her Amharic name *Dinqinesh* means 'she who is wonderful'. Her skeleton, about 40 per cent complete, takes pride of place in the National Museum of Addis Ababa alongside stone tools, Aksumite pottery and Christian icons. The biography and symbolism of 'Lucy' as an artefact is woven into the wider sweep of the Ethiopian metanarrative, but physically, of course, she is not Ethiopian, she merely contributes to a later *creation* of Ethiopian-ness.

Table 2.1 Simplified features of the mode system of lithic typology

Mode/tool forms	*Chopper*	*Hand axe*	*Flake-tool dominated*	*Bladelets and blade tools*	*Microliths*	*Cultural record*
1	+					ESA
2		+				ESA
3			+			MSA
4				+		MSA & LSA
5					+	LSA

This chapter begins with the archaeology of early humanity and looks at the broad sweep of technological change and development in lithic industries over a period of about 2.5 million years, but before considering the archaeological picture brief mention needs to be made of the terminology which is used here.

Conventionally in an Africanist archaeological study one might use the standard 'three age' Early Stone Age-Middle Stone Age-Late Stone Age system for describing lithic development, but this scheme is not nuanced enough to take into account such a vast range of material, and rather implies a neat evolutionary and compartmentalised development which in reality is not present. The use of the 'mode' system commends itself as it has the benefit of not confusing technological terminology with chronological criteria (the use of the word 'age' in the three-age system is obviously misleading).

Lithic technology

Pliocene and Pleistocene antecedents: Early stone age (mode 1 and 2) industries

The study of the fossil evidence for human evolution – palaeoanthropology – obviously occupies an important niche within the wider sweep of 'archaeological' studies of the Ethiopian past in terms of public visibility as well as international funding, but a detailed overview of this material is beyond the scope of this book. New discoveries, advances in geochronological dating and reassessments of existing data mean that this is a dynamic and fast-changing field of study. Readers are referred to Klein (1999) for a detailed overview, and the following discussion, whilst not claiming to be comprehensive, only highlights some of the key issues that have been revealed in the research into the earliest archaeology of humankind in the Ethiopian–Eritrean sections of the Rift Valley and adjacent areas. An outline of the major fossil hominin finds in the study region is presented in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Selection of major fossil hominin discoveries within the modern borders of Ethiopia and Eritrea

Name	*Estimated date range mya/kya*	*Find spot(s)*	*References*	*Remarks*
Ardipithecus ramidus	*c.*5.8–4.4 mya	Aramis, Middle Awash	Yohannes Haile Sellassie *et al.* 2001; White *et al.* 1994	Miocene hominin
Australopithecus anamnesis	? 4.1 mya	Aramis, Middle Awash	Gibbons 2005; White *et al.* 2006	Earliest australopithecine?
Australopithecus afarensis	*c.*3.9–3.0 mya	Hadar, Middle Awash	Kimbel *et al.* 1994; Drapeau *et al.* 2005	Includes 'Lucy'
Australopithecus garhi	*c.*2.5 mya	Bouri, Middle Awash	Berhane *et al.* 1999	Gracile australopithecine
Paranthropus sp.	unclear	Shungura, Omo; Konso-Gardula formation, south-western Rift	Zeray *et al.* 2002 (Omo); Suwa *et al.* 2003	Robust australopithecine; probably *A. boisei* at Konso
Homo ergaster	*c.*1.75 mya	Bouri; Bodo, Middle Awash Buia (Eritrean Afar)	Berhane *et al.* 2002 (Bouri); Rightmire 1996 (Bodo); Abbate *et al.* 1998 (Buia);	Buia and Bodo forms possibly later transitional forms

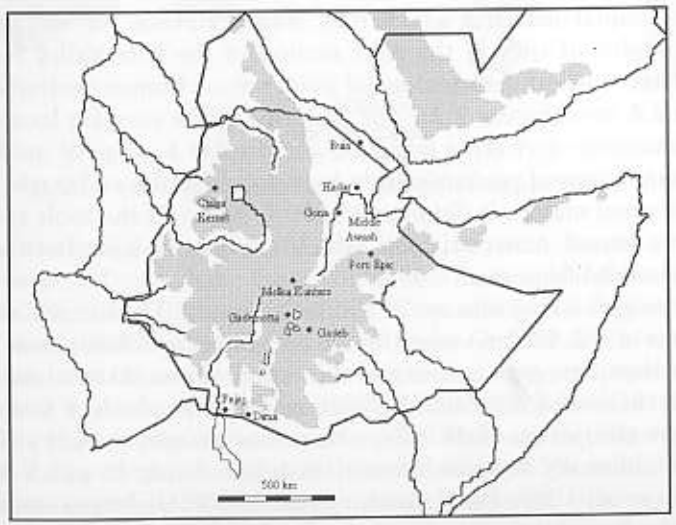

Figure 2.1 Map showing locations of main ESA (mode 1 and 2) sites in the region.

The earliest evidence for human material culture anywhere in the world derives from the Ethiopian section of the East African Rift Valley. These mode 1 industries, which date broadly in the period of 2.6–1.6 mya, are represented by chopper tools and are analogous to similar material from sites in northern Kenya. In general behavioural terms, the hominins who fabricated these tools developed over time the sort of traits that one would associate with behaviour that betokens emergent complex cognition (Plummer 2005). In economic terms this might be reflected by some form of delayed food consumption, strategies for very local transportation of resources and probable scavenging of carcass parts of larger animals (although recent studies of the Gona material (below) suggest that hominins actually had access to good-quality carcass portions, which implies at least a limited hunting strategy). Behavioural traits should also be reflected in distinctive site signatures in the landscape. From the technological perspective, choices in raw material ('locals' and also transported 'exotics') may reflect a developed strategy for 'least effort' tool fabrication (i.e. ease of manufacture), as well as the ability of the raw material to fracture in a predictable manner to yield a sharp cutting edge (cf. Toth 1985).

Archaeological sites containing mode 1 material are naturally circumscribed in their distribution, occurring as they do in the Rift Valley which bisects the highland plateau (Figure 2.1). The two major zones of exploration are in the northeast (Afar; Middle Awash), and the southwest, (Omo) where favourable geological circumstances have facilitated the discovery of sites dating as far back as 2.5 mya. In general terms these sites consist of stone tools either alone or associated with modified fossilised faunal material which may show evidence for butchery. The Gona complex of sites in the Afar section of the Rift Valley represents some of the earliest archaeological evidence of human technology and dates to 2.6 mya (Figure 2.2). The majority of the sites are located upon stream channels or riverine margins, and display a range of mode 1 tool forms manufactured predominantly from local basalts and trachytes with some imported materials (Stout *et al.* 2005). Many of the tools are associated with faunal material upon which cut marks have been detected (Dominguez-Rodrigo *et al.* 2005).

Many neighbouring sites are of similar antiquity. The site of Kada Gona 2.34 dates to *c.*2.58–2.63 mya (Roche and Tiercelin 1980); those at West Gona perhaps date even earlier and show similar raw material use (Harris 1983; Sileshi *et al.* 1997; Sileshi 2000), while to the south of Gona, in the Middle Awash section of the Rift, a lacustrine margin site has yielded evidence of culturally modified faunal material dating to *c.*2.5 mya (De Heinzelin *et al.* 1999; De Heinzelin *et al.* 2000). Slightly younger (*c.*2.3 mya) is the material from a site at Hadar, to the north of Gona (Hovers *et al.* 2002; Kimbel *et al.* 1996). Southwards, still roughly in the central

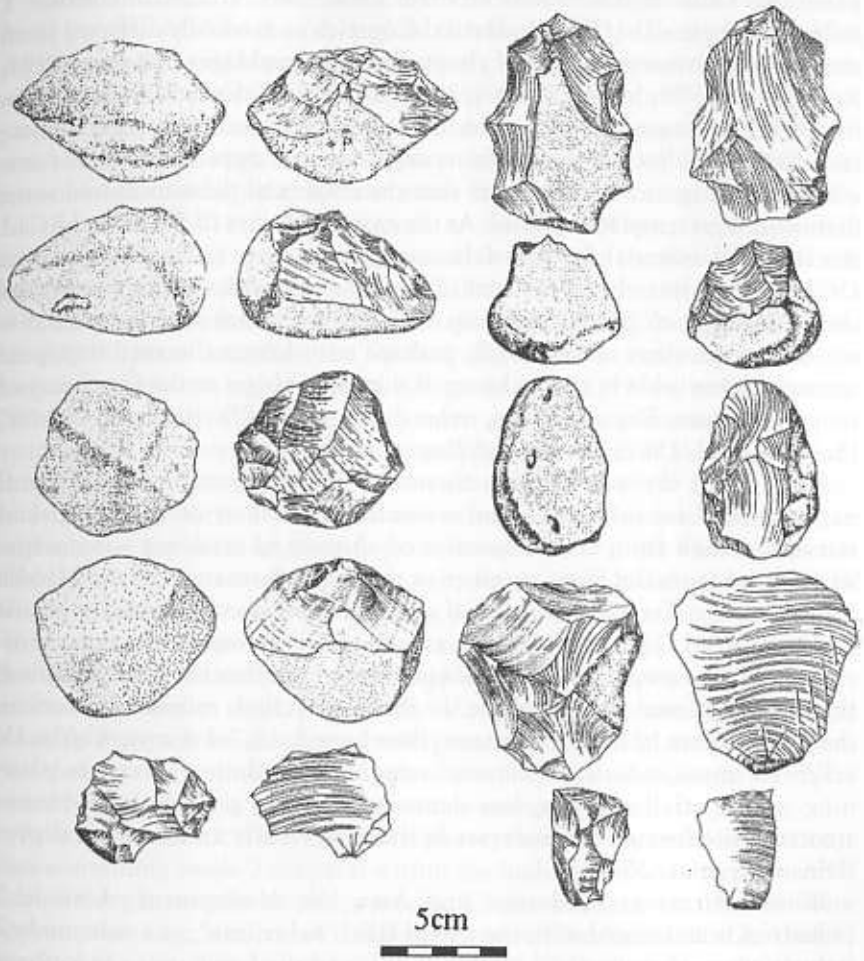

Figure 2.2 Mode 1 cores and flakes from Gona (after Sileshi 2000).

section of the Ethiopian portion of the Rift Valley, mode 1 artefacts dating from around 1.7 mya have been found at the site of Melka Kunture (Gombore 1B; Chavaillon *et al.* 1979; Chavaillon and Piperno 2004). Moving south-westwards into the Omo region on the northern Kenyan borderlands, the Omo Shungura sites contain a range of predominantly quartz mode 1 artefacts dating from *c.*2.3–2.4 mya (Howell *et al.* 1987; Chavaillon 1976a), whilst those at the site of Fejej are slightly younger at around 1.8 mya (Berhane *et al.* 1991; De Lumley and Yonas 2004).

Although superficially seemingly unsophisticated, these industries appear to embrace a great deal of functional – if not regional – variation. At least one scholar has argued that the earliest archaeological material

from the Omo region constitutes an early, and 'competent' mode 1 industrial phase – the 'Omo Industrial Complex' – markedly different from the later, Oldowan-style mode 1 chopper-core assemblages (Kibunjia 1994; Roche *et al.* 1999; but see Ludwig and Harris 1998). Criteria for recognising what constitutes 'advanced' technological behaviour are surely subjective, but an analysis of the Gona mode 1 material appears to show some consistent patterns which indicate that the makers of these tools had some definite design template in mind. At the east Gona sites of EG10 and EG12 the favoured material for tool fabrication is trachyte (a 'local') whilst at OGS-7 approximately 12 per cent of the debitage comes from transported chert (Sileshi *et al.* 2003). Evidently there is some measure of favoured raw material acquisition taking place; perhaps even longer-distance transport strategies are visible in the make up of the assemblages at the Omo sites of Omo Shungura Fm and Fejej, where quartz was a preferred 'exotic' (Berhane *et al.* 1991; but see also Rogers *et al.* 1994).

Apart from the actual tools themselves, early hominin behavioural patterns may be inferred from associated faunal evidence; of special interest – albeit from the perspective of *absence of evidence* – is the fossil material from the Hata member of the Bouri formation of the Middle Awash valley (De Heinzelin *et al.* 1999). Here in-situ faunal remains show cut marks, yet they are not associated with any stone tools, indicating that the tools were not discarded when the butchery was finished; they were retained for future use. In this connection, recent GIS work in the mode 1 sites of Melka Kunture (Gombore 1 *c.*1.7–1.6 mya; Garba IV *c.*1.5–1.4 mya), which emphasises very high resolution intra-site planning and spatial analysis, has demonstrated the potential for reconstructing site formation processes in these very early archaeological sites (D'Andrea *et al.* 2000).

Within Africa as in Europe and Asia, the development of mode 2 industries is associated with the useful label 'Acheulean'; as a rule mode 2 industries are characterised by the presence of the hand axe, a functional term which may hide a range of possible uses, technological limitations and indeed human agency. Also characteristic of African mode 2 industries as a whole are 'cleavers' and a range of flake preparation techniques (Phillipson 2005a: 52ff.). Some of the earliest African finds of mode 2 industrial material are to be found at the sites of the Konso-Gardula formation of the south-western Rift of Ethiopia dating from around 1.7 mya (Berhane *et al.* 1992). The earliest mode 2 material from the major site of Melka Kunture is associated with a mandible tentatively identified as that of *Homo ergaster/erectus* (Chavaillon 1976b) and dates to *c.*900 kya (Garba XII; final phase at 250 kya at Garba IV shows a trend to tool miniaturisation); an important feature of this material is the widespread use of obsidian which gives a very predictable tool form and sharp edge (Agazi *et al.* 2006).

A similar association of mode 2 material with human remains is noted at Bodo in the Middle Awash region (Berhane 1983; Clark *et al.* 1994) although this cranium probably represents an early archaic *Homo sapiens* with a defined brow ridge, prognathic facial structure and a robust postcranium. Cut marks on the surface of the cranium suggest that the skull was defleshed through human agency (cf. Herto below). The geological contexts surrounding the Kibish crania from the Omo region (originally discovered in 1967) have been recently re-dated to 196 kya; the Omo I skull appears to represent a modern *Homo sapiens*, whilst the Omo II skull is a more archaic form (Macdougall *et al.* 2005).

The Herto skulls from the Middle Awash region (dating to around 160 kya, i.e. 30,000 years later than the Omo skulls) are sufficiently different to be assigned a separate subspecies of the genus Homo: *Homo sapiens idaltu* (White *et al.* 2003). The Herto finds merit special consideration. In the first instance the discovery of very modern *Homo sapiens* at this date would clearly support the contention that anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* evolved on the African continent and subsequently dispersed globally (the implications for multi-regional hypotheses are clear; if the Herto finds are dated correctly, then modern European humans certainly did not evolve from Neanderthals). A second point has very definite behavioural implications for the emergence of nascent symbolic structures (Clark *et al.* 2003). Like the Bodo skull, two of the Herto crania displayed evidence of post-mortem excarnation. The smaller skull, presumably of a juvenile, was also polished, and crucially there was no association with postcranial material. It appears, then, that these crania were being transported around the landscape and were presumably being used in some sort of commemoration ritual.

Apart from the localities discussed above, there is very scant evidence for sites containing mode 2 material within the highland zone. On the western side of the plateau the localities around Chilga Kernet west of Lake Tana appear promising, and await a full publication (Todd *et al.* 2002). Gadeb, overlooking the Rift Valley lakes above the Webi Shebele valley in the south-eastern highlands, represents an exception to the rule (Clark and Williams 1978); here the mode 2 material excavated from the sites of Gadeb 2 and Gadeb 2D is clearly different from that recovered from the sites of Gadeb 8 and Arba (Figure 2.3), implying either functional specialisation or chronological separation. Further north Laurel Phillipson noted during a survey at Aksum probable Acheulean-type bifaces in a few localities in the landscape, but their surface condition suggested that they had been redeposited (Phillipson 2000: 17). Similar material was noted at Inda Sellassie, Shire, north-western Ethiopia, but again its condition suggested it was derived (Finneran and Phillips 2003a). There are also vague reports of surface finds of 'bifaces' in the Sakala region of Gojjam to the south of Lake Tana (Anfray 1970: 34). It is possible that the northern highland material – which Clark initially recognised as a distinct facies of

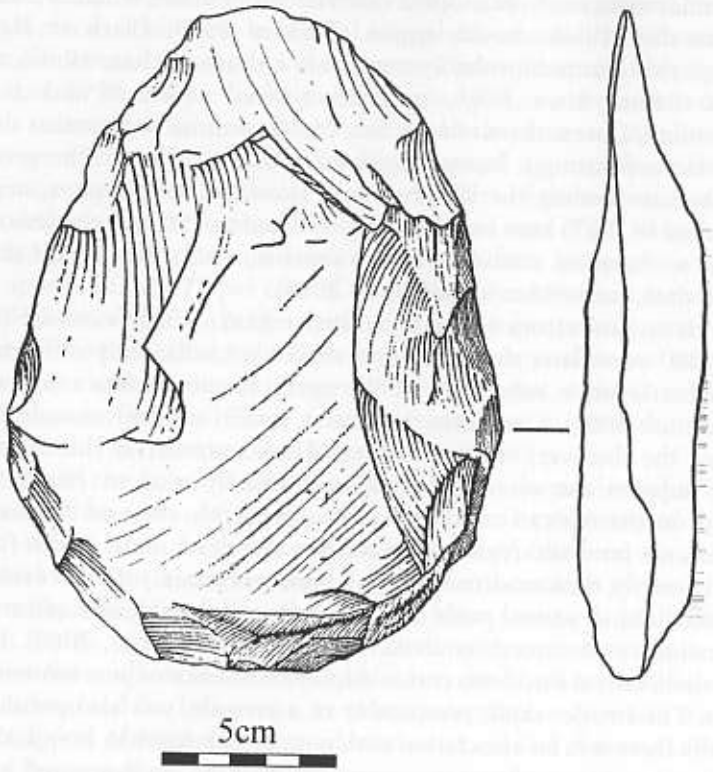

Figure 2.3 Mode 2 handaxe from Gadeb (after Clark and Williams 1978).

the broader Acheulio-Levalloisian complex which he termed the 'Abyssinian Fauresmith' – may represent some of the latest manifestations of mode 2 industries in the region.

Mode 3/Middle Stone Age industries of the middle-late Pleistocene

The emergence of mode 3 (MSA) industries in Africa is a poorly understood phenomenon, yet must in some cases imply a degree of regional continuation. Within the wider regional context the transition to MSA industries belongs to the period of around 300–200 kya as suggested by the regional sequence in northern Kenya (Tryon and McBrearty 2002), but this is much earlier than mode 3 material from the site of Gademotta in the central Rift of Ethiopia, where K-Ar dates from the relevant horizons give a range between 181 kya and 149 kya (Wendorf and Schild 1974). The emergence of prepared-core technologies in Ethiopia, whilst probably rooted in earlier ESA complexes, is a relatively late phenomenon, yet more importantly is seen to signal the emergence of some *degree* of regional specialisation, as

suggested by Desmond Clark in his still authoritative overview on the East African Middle Stone Age-mode 3 material and sites (Clark 1988).

In his recent reassessment of the later Pleistocene-early Holocene archaeology of the Horn of Africa, Steven Brandt highlights the problem of selective sampling (Brandt 1986). Clark's general scheme for three phases of MSA technological development may, as Brandt suggests, have been formed by biases in the collection or in some cases by misunderstood stratigraphy. There does appear within Clark's breakdown of tool types to be a rather high proportion of formal, retouched elements; recent work at Aksum on mode 4 and 5 industries – which are clearly derived from the local mode 3 technology (Finneran 2000a; 2000b) and in the Inda Sellassie region of northern Tigray (Finneran and Phillips 2003a) would suggest that utilised flakes are dominant form of tool, and in many cases retouch is confused with heavy use patterns.

In terms of site distribution and typology, our focus again is upon the relatively well researched areas of the Rift Valley (Figure 2.4) and in general technological terms mode 3 material from the Ethiopian section of the Rift Valley (the highland material will be considered separately) is characterised by prepared-core technology, with significant use of bifacial (and occasionally Levallois) points. The major sites which have yielded mode 3

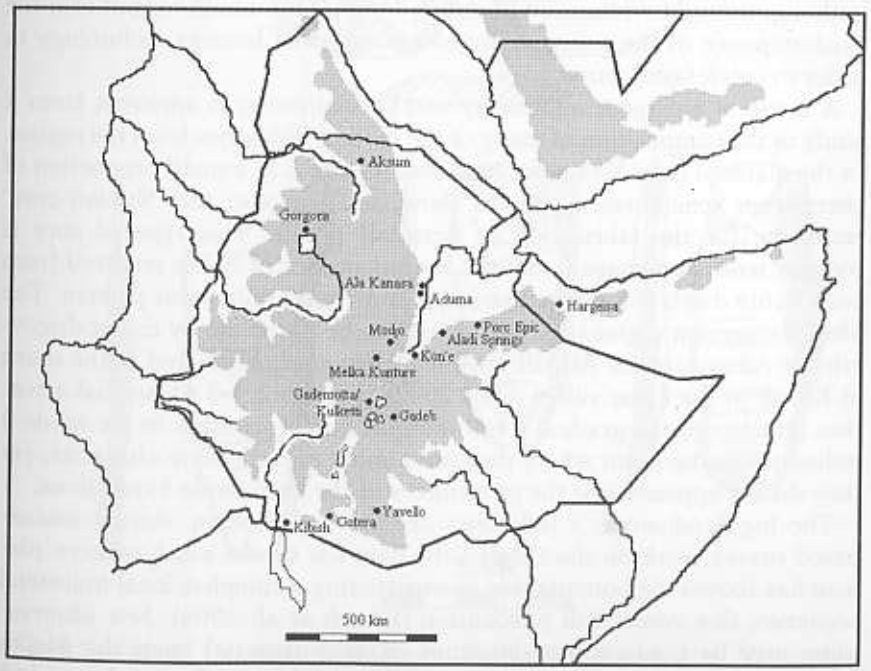

Figure 2.4 Map showing locations of main MSA (mode 3) sites in the region.

material include: Porc Epic (Clark and Williamson 1984; Pleurdeau 2005); the Lake Ziway complex of sites (Kulketti; Gademotta; Wendorf and Schild 1974); K'one and Aladi Springs (Clark and Williams 1978); Ala Kansara (Clark *et al.* 1984); Gotera (Chavaillon and Chavaillon 1985); Modjo (Blanc 1938); Anderlee (Kalb *et al.* 1982); Kibish (Shea *et al.* 2002) and Aduma (Yellen *et al.* 2005). Even a broad consideration of this material highlights a number of interesting themes.

The Porc Epic mode 3 material dates between 77 kya and 60 kya and is characterised by a high proportion of points; the extensive utilisation of obsidian characterises this industry and allows for excellent finishing of the final form of the tool. The obsidian itself, however, is not found locally and would appear to be sourced from sites up to 250 kilometres away; this is clearly long-distance raw material acquisition under any circumstances (Agazi and Shackley 2006). The Anderlee mode 3 material, in contrast, is more robust and heavier and is described as having strong Sangoan affinities. This implies an emphasis on the sorts of heavy-duty 'pick-like' tools seen in the Sangoan industries of central Africa (although Clark suggests that these pieces could be later macrolithic forms; Clark 1988: 258). The design of mode 3 tool forms are clearly (although not exclusively) affected by the environment in which they will be used; at Porc Epic the lithic material was associated with remains of small-medium-sized animals consistent with a grassland environment (Zelalem 2006). This would suggest that the predominance of the points reflected an improved hunting technology in order to catch faster game.

A sense of emergent regionality and specialisation is apparent from a study of the composition of many of the mode 3 industries from the region. In the material from K'one, for instance, (Figure 2.5) a small proportion of cores from zone three appear to show similarities to the 'Nubian core' technique for the fabrication of Levallois points. This type of core is roughly tear-drop-shaped, and the ventral surface of flakes removed from such a core displays a distinctive steep, convergent radial scar pattern. The idea of emergent regionality would seem to be borne out by recent discoveries at Aduma, in the Middle Awash (Yellen *et al.* 2005) and in the south at Kibish in the Omo valley (Shea 2002) (Figures 2.5–2.6); special attention attaches to the gradual trend towards miniaturisation in the mode 3 industries to the point where they are almost microlithic in character, yet they do not appear to be the progenitors of the later mode 5 traditions.

The highland mode 3 industries are less well known. Recent rescue-based survey work on the Gilgel Gibe dam site on the south-western plateau has shown the potential for reconstructing a complete local industrial sequence; this awaits full publication (Brandt *et al.* 2004). Few observations may be made about the scant mode 3 material from the Melka Kunture, although in general terms it appears to be based upon the mode 2 industries there (Chavaillon *et al.* 1979). In the south-eastern highlands

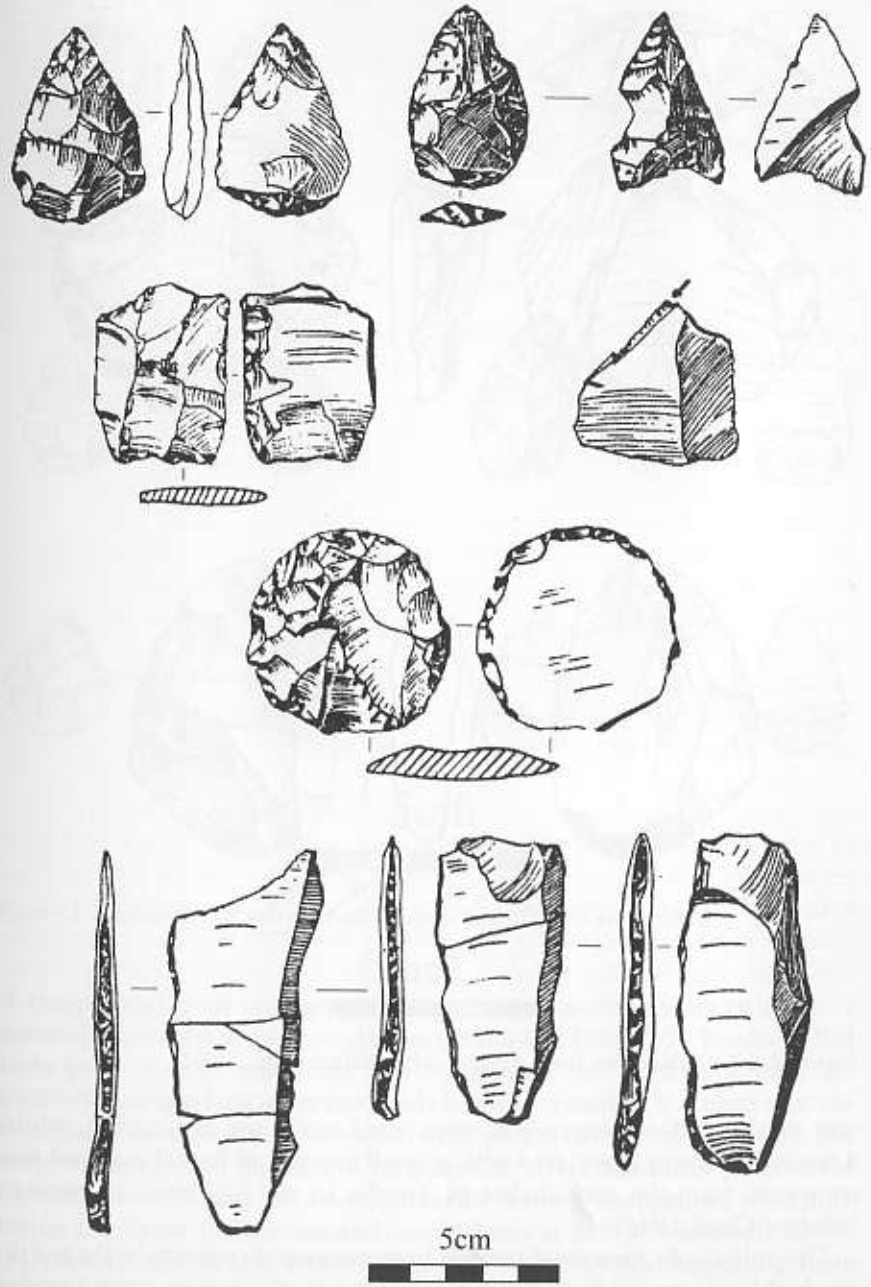

Figure 2.5 Mode 3 material from Kon'e (Garibaldi Caldera). Top, left to right: Proto-bifaced and unifaced points. Row 2: inverse scraper; burin. Row 3: discoid core with radial backing. Bottom: backed blades (after Clark and Williams 1978).

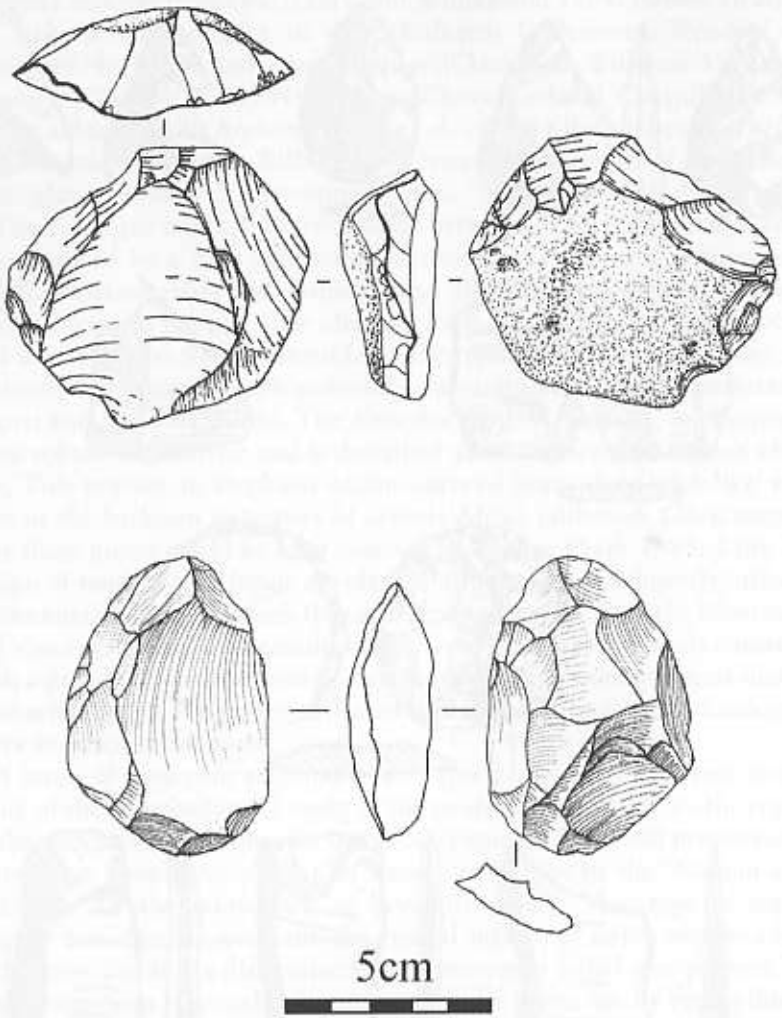

Figure 2.6 Levallois core from Aduma (after Yellen *et al.* 2005).

very patchy surface occurrences were noted at the site of Gadeb 8, whilst a mode 3 industry associated with a small amount of faunal material was recovered from the rock-shelter of Yavello in the highlands of western Sidamo (Clark 1945).

The only mode 3 material derived from excavated contexts in the northern highlands comes from the rock-shelter site of Gorgora, near Gondar (Leakey 1943). The industry is characterised by a high proportion of points which has led Clark to suggest (1988: 265) that the site was, like Melka Kunture, a specialised hunting camp, although again we should be aware

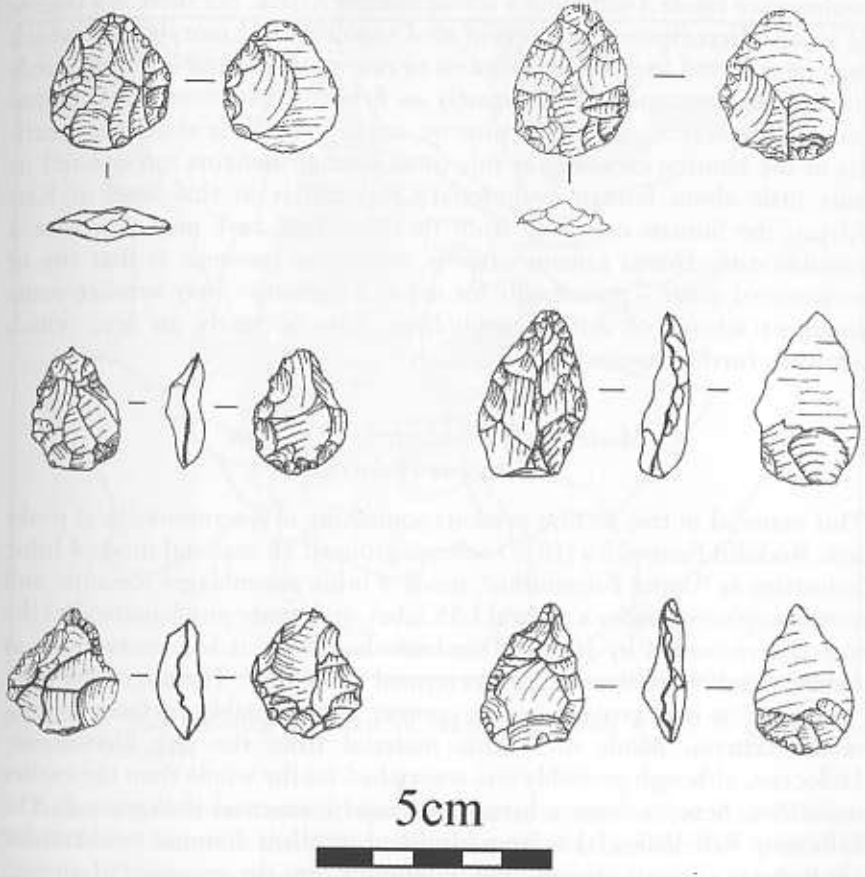

Figure 2.7 Mousterian points from Aduma (after Yellen *et al.* 2005).

of the possibility of stratigraphic disturbance. Surface finds of mode 3 material from further north at Aksum (Phillipson 2000: 20), Tembien (Raf Aerts pers. comm.) and from Shire (Finneran and Phillips 2003a) are sparse. Where analysis of surface finds has been possible, it is clear that the prepared-core industry associated with points is the general rule for mode 3 industries in this area. One must also stress that many parts of the highlands would have been untenable for human occupation, especially during the Upper Pleistocene arid, cool phases at 115–105 kya and 72–58 kya (Brandt and Brook 1984; Gasse and Street 1978), suggesting little scope for long-term human settlement in these areas.

In summary, the mode 3 industries of the middle-upper Pleistocene periods of the Ethiopian sections of the Rift Valley and highlands remain imperfectly understood. General traits are comparable with the broader

evolution of mode 3 technology across eastern Africa, but there is a degree of local differentiation in terms of tool typology and morphology which may be reflected in differential access to raw materials and differing needs for hunting strategies. Unfortunately as Brandt (1986) concludes, faunal remains are scarce, and at this time we can say very little about the specifics of the hunting economy at this time. Human remains too can tell us only little about human evolutionary trajectories in this zone of East Africa; the human mandible from the Porc Epic cave may represent a possible early *Homo sapiens sapiens*, whilst the presence at that site of transported ochre – presumably for use as a pigment – may betoken some emergent scheme of artistic symbolism. This is clearly an area which demands further research.

Mode 4 and 5 industries of the late Pleistocene-Holocene

This material in this section presents something of a terminological problem. Rodolfo Fattovich's (1977) scheme grouped all regional mode 4 lithic industries as 'Upper Palaeolithic', mode 5 lithic assemblages (ceramic and aceramic phases) under a general LSA label, and (more problematically) the material recovered by Joanne Dombrowski (1970) at her excavations at Lalibela and Natchabiet caves was termed 'Neolithic'. The use of the term 'Neolithic' is best avoided in this context as it arguably pertains to economic criteria. Mode 4–5 lithic material from the late Pleistocene-Holocene, although probably less researched on the whole than the earlier industries, benefits from a better palaeoenvironmental background. The Ethiopian Rift Valley lakes have furnished excellent diatomic evidence for Quaternary climatic change, and where tied into the sequence of ancient lake shores can provide a useful insight into far-reaching climatic shifts. Without emphasising overtly deterministic explanations to account for cultural innovation, environmental change is undoubtedly a key variable in the equation of both technological advancement and economic change, and as such we need to consider it in outline here.

At the end of the Pleistocene epoch Africa's continent was generally wetter than today (this period would include the early and middle Holocene, i.e. 12–4.5 kya), and this picture is borne out by the presence of well-dated high strandlines on eastern African lake shores (Grove 1993). Within the general early-middle Holocene wetter phase, a number of intense episodes of increased cooling and aridity are noted; these periods generally varied in severity and duration, but noteworthy arid events are recognised at: 10.5 kya (the 'Magdi event'); 7.5 kya ('Abyata event') and at 6 kya ('Oyo event') (Hassan 1997). The generalised warm/wet phase was also accompanied by a glacial retreat from the high eastern African mountains, opening up many areas of the Ethiopian plateau for human settlement.

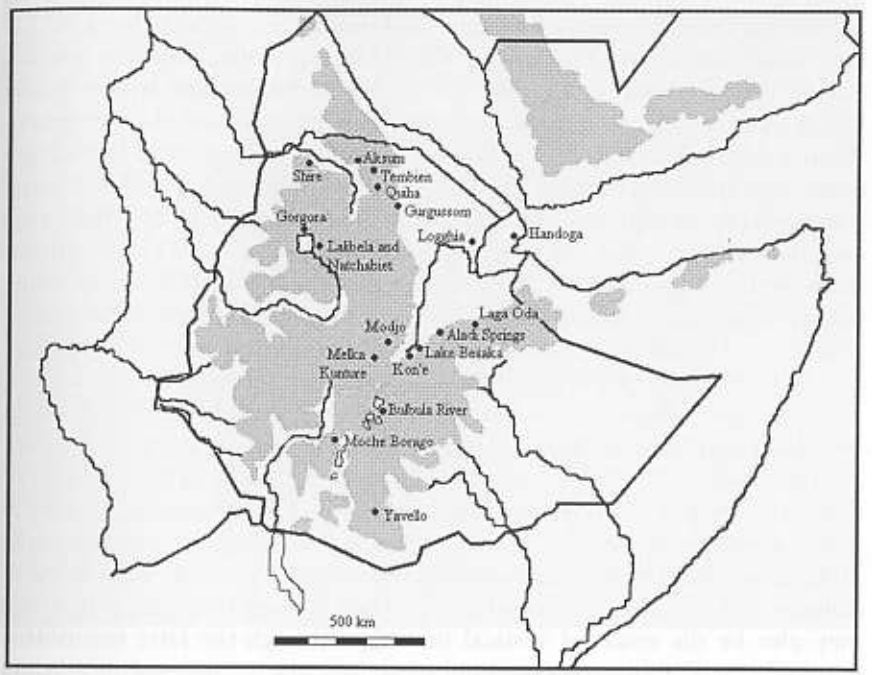

Figure 2.8 Map showing locations of main LSA (mode 4 and 5) sites in the region.

Pollen cores from Lake Abiyata in the southern-central Rift (Ziway-Shala basin) support the contention that, after a considerable period of terminal Pleistocene aridity, a wetter and more humid phase marked the onset of the Holocene. The advent of this phase at about 12–11 kya is attested by new diatomic activity associated with increased floral coverage, and a melting of glaciers on the high plateau (Gasse and Street 1978). Within this warmer wetter phase, however, there was a succession of increasingly arid, colder periods (Lezine 1981). It would thus be too simplistic to suggest that Holocene conditions did not retain capacity for dynamic change over relatively short periods. Being a closed lacustrine system, the Ziway-Shala basin has provided some of the best data for understanding Holocene climatic change in the East African region as a whole, and a sequence of over forty radiocarbon determinations points broadly to a period of lacustrine expansion from around 12 kya, with particularly sharp regressions (indicating a cold, arid period) at *c.*10.4–9.8 kya (Magdi event) 7.8–7.2 kya (Abyata event) and 4.5–2.5 kya (Gillespie *et al.* 1983; Bonnefille and Mohammed 1994).

Regionally, neothermal conditions generally predominated from about 5 kya (Williams and Clark 1977). This picture is reflected in environmentally

more sensitive evidence from high mountain peats, where a brief moist period (indicated by renewed pedogenesis) may be recognised at around 2.5 kya (Mohammed and Bonnefille 1998). The early-mid Holocene period, during which microlithic, mode 5 lithic industries become widely established on the plateau and in the lowlands, was thus a period of environmental flux rather than stability; within an overall trend initially of warm, wet conditions we find a number of sharp, brief cold and arid episodes. During these periods the highland zones above 2,000 metres would have been very cold indeed, and could not have been settled continuously. These climatic shifts would also naturally have impacted upon the availability of many faunal resources; it would be hypothesised that the relatively stable lacustrine regions would have presented the best opportunities for broad-spectrum resource exploitation and thus longer-term human settlement.

Before the Holocene, transitional mode 3–4 industries were defined by Desmond Clark (in the Horn at least) as the Magosian industry of southern Somalia and the Ogaden Desert (this material was noted at Porc Epic), and the northern Somalian variant, the Hargeisan. The Magosian, as Brandt (1986) posits, is the result of mixing between mode 3 and 4/5 material; the Hargeisan – essentially what would be recognised as a mode 4 blade/burin industry – is similarly problematic. The Aladi Springs transitional material may also be the result of vertical mixing, although the later microlithic material is probably more secure.

Recent excavation at Aksum has begun to shed light upon the continuum of lithic development from mode 3–4–5 technologies. A number of large blades – associated with discoidal scrapers and thus clearly a mode 4 industry – were noted in extensive surface scatters around D'aro Adi Kilte, south of Beta Giyorgis by an Italian archaeologist in the late 1930s (Puglisi 1941). Excavations at the rock-shelter of Gobedra west of Aksum in 1974 (Phillipson 1977a) identified the earliest phase of lithic development at that site as belonging to a mode 4 or blade industry. In his 1986 synthesis Steven Brandt suggested that the length: breadth ratios of Gobedra did not appear to confirm what would be recognised as 'blade-like' morphology. In the 1990s excavations at the nearby rock-shelter sites of Anqqer Baahti (Finneran 2000a) and Baahti Nebait (Finneran 2000b) confirmed Phillipson's initial observations. These distinctive blade forms were fabricated from either mudstone or siltstone, and directly underlay mode 5 industries (Figure 2.9a).

This industry was subsequently named the 'longblade' industry (Finneran 2001) and is characterised by a very definite blade-like morphology, preferential raw material selection towards very fine sedimentary rocks, and surprisingly minimal utilisation (these blades were not backed, as has been described for the Gobedra material). At Gobedra this industry is associated with a date of 10,110 +/– 140 bp ('levels' 4, 5 and 6), and slightly earlier at Baahti Nebait where associated AMS determinations of the material from

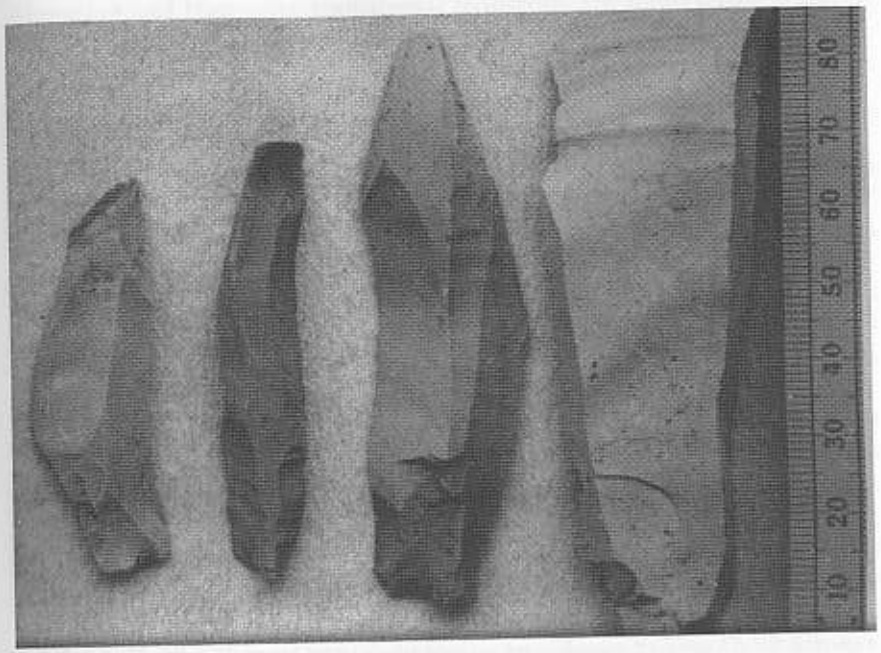

Figure 2.9a Selection of mode-4 mudstone long-blades from Anqqer Baahti, Aksum (scale in mm).

contexts 5 and 6 yielded age estimates respectively of 9,595 +/– 50 and 9,975+/– 55 bp. From a behavioural perspective, the choice of material – and perhaps potential for curation – was interesting. Edge wear analysis failed to yield any clues as to the possible use of these blades (cf. Clark and Prince 1978; Figure 2.9b), and they appear to have been discarded when blunted and not retouched or re-sharpened in any way. It is clear, however, that they were not suitable for butchery tasks, an observation which will have implications for our discussion of economic change on the early Holocene presented in Chapter 3. The blades were usually associated with a small proportion of variform scrapers and the morphology of the flakes would seem to suggest an element of continuity with earlier local mode 3 and later mode 5 industries.

In general the phenomenon of an intermediate mode 4 blade industry is based upon Graeme Clark's very European-orientated 'mode' scheme, but can be seen to fit the north-east African material. A hitherto unpublished collection (A.T. Curle collection), now lodged in the British Museum, London, appears to show a very early mode 4-type industry (based on large blades), from the vicinity of the Dagah Bur river near to the northern Somalia border (Tim Stevens, pers. comm. and personal observation; the catalogue describes this material as 'Stillbay'). Northwards into Eritrea

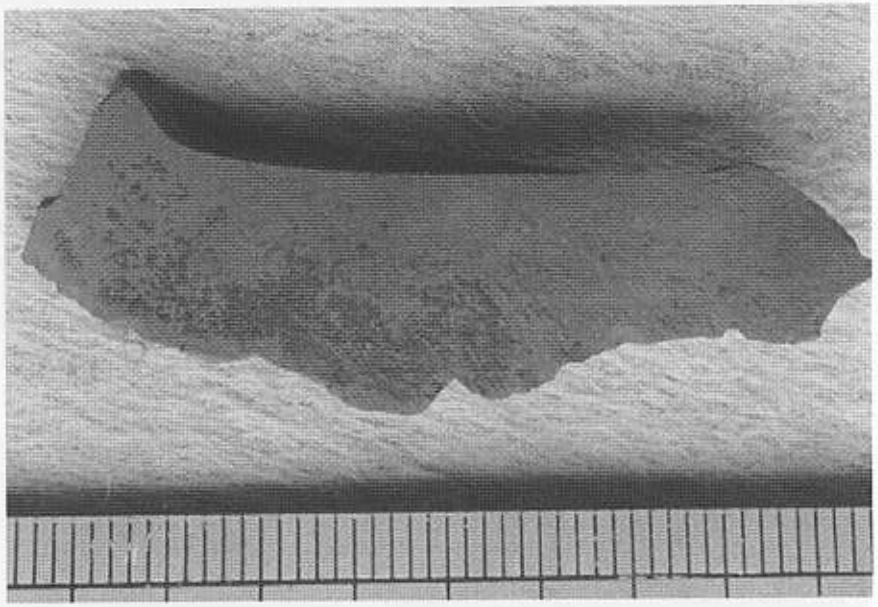

Figure 2.9b Close up of edge damage on long-blade from Anqqer Baahti. The accretion is probably a result of post-depositional processes (scale in mm).

extensive open sites containing mode 4 have been noted around Mehrad Tiel (Franchini 1971); this industry contains a large sample of blade/burin forms. A late-surviving mode 4 sandstone blade-based industry, associated with circular scrapers, has been collected from surface scatters at Logghia (Lake Abhe) and dates from around 10–6 kya (Faure *et al.* 1976); a similar industry, though largely mixed, has been noted from surface scatters all along the central Rift (Jeschofnig and Humphreys 1976). Also in the Rift Valley, the K'one material, as we have seen, is overwhelmingly mode 3 in character, yet at the very top of the sequence a date on ostrich shell gives an estimate for *c.*14.5 kya for what appears to be a transitional mode 3–4 industry. The index of formal retouched tools is small, and the blades are comparable broadly to the forms noted at Aksum. Similar material has been recovered from three sites in the environs of Melka-Kunture (Kella; Wofi and Balchit; Hivernel-Guerre 1972; 1976).

It is possible that the late survival elsewhere of mode 4 blade forms may reflect vertical stratigraphic mixing. Exceptionally mixed and obviously disturbed mode 4/mode 5 lithic material has been recovered from the upper contexts at Porc Epic (Clark and Williamson 1984) and Gademotta, but at the latter its chronological attribution must be questionable (Wendorf and Schild 1974). Within the wider regional context, the mid-Holocene Eburran blade industry of the east Kenyan Rift Valley does provides a useful analogue, and even if we (rightly) take issue with the integrity of the

Magosian and Hargeisan transitional industries, the more secure material from early Holocene contexts in northern Ethiopia may help us begin to re-evaluate the wider problem of the integrity of 'mode 4' industries in north-eastern Africa.

The emergence of mode 5 (microlithic) industries is a problematic phenomenon, which is largely associated with the onset of the Holocene, suggesting a causal correlation between environmental change and technological development. This issue was first raised by David Phillipson (1980), who postulated that mode 5 backed-microlithic technology developed during a period of increasing humidity which saw the displacement of large, slow – and hence easier to catch prey – by smaller, faster game. Microlithic technology provided a technological advantage for hunting in more closed, wooded environments. This is a useful starting point, but inevitably the picture must be more complex; mode 5 industries appear at different times across Africa. The much-debated Howeison's Poort industry of Klasies River Mouth cave, Republic of South Africa, may date to around 70 kya; material with mode 5 affinities has been recognised at Enkapune Ya Moto, Kenya (50 kya) and Matupi cave in Congo (40 kya). The earliest mode 5 material from the Ethiopian highland/Rift Valley zone was found in a palaeosol within a section near the Bulbula river in the Lake Ziway region of the Rift, dated to *c.*27.5 kya (Gasse and Street 1978); the main raw material was local obsidian, the main types of tool were backed blades, end scrapers and burins.

Investigations nearby at the Macho and Waso areas around Lake Ziway (Humphreys 1978) identified sites which may be recognised as distinct lithic manufacturing localities (Gallagher 1972); a single radiocarbon date from an occupation site gives an estimate of 10,300 bp for an industry based upon non-geometric microliths, burins and blade cores. At the top of the archaeological sequence at Aladi Springs (Williams and Clark 1977), and overlying the mode 3 material, is found a tufa matrix containing a mode 5 microlithic industry. Its context would suggest deposition during a wet/warm period *c.*12 kya, and bears comparison with the lithic material from phase B at Lake Besaka (below) (Williams and Clark 1977).

Excavation at four midden and open sites at Lake Besaka has furnished one of the most detailed late-Pleistocene-Holocene cultural sequences for the region. The 'Ethiopian Blade Tool Tradition' as defined by Brandt (Brandt 1980: Clark and Williams 1978) comprises three cultural phases dating from *c.*20 kya, and is based upon a good-quality local green-banded obsidian. Phase A is associated with a transitional, yet recognisably emergent microlithic industry characterised by heavy utilisation of local obsidian and the manufacture of backed geometric microliths and scrapers from opposed and single-platform core forms. On the basis of dates obtained from ostrich eggshell it would appear to date within the period 22–19 kya. Phase B – which is defined by an increasing frequency of microlithic

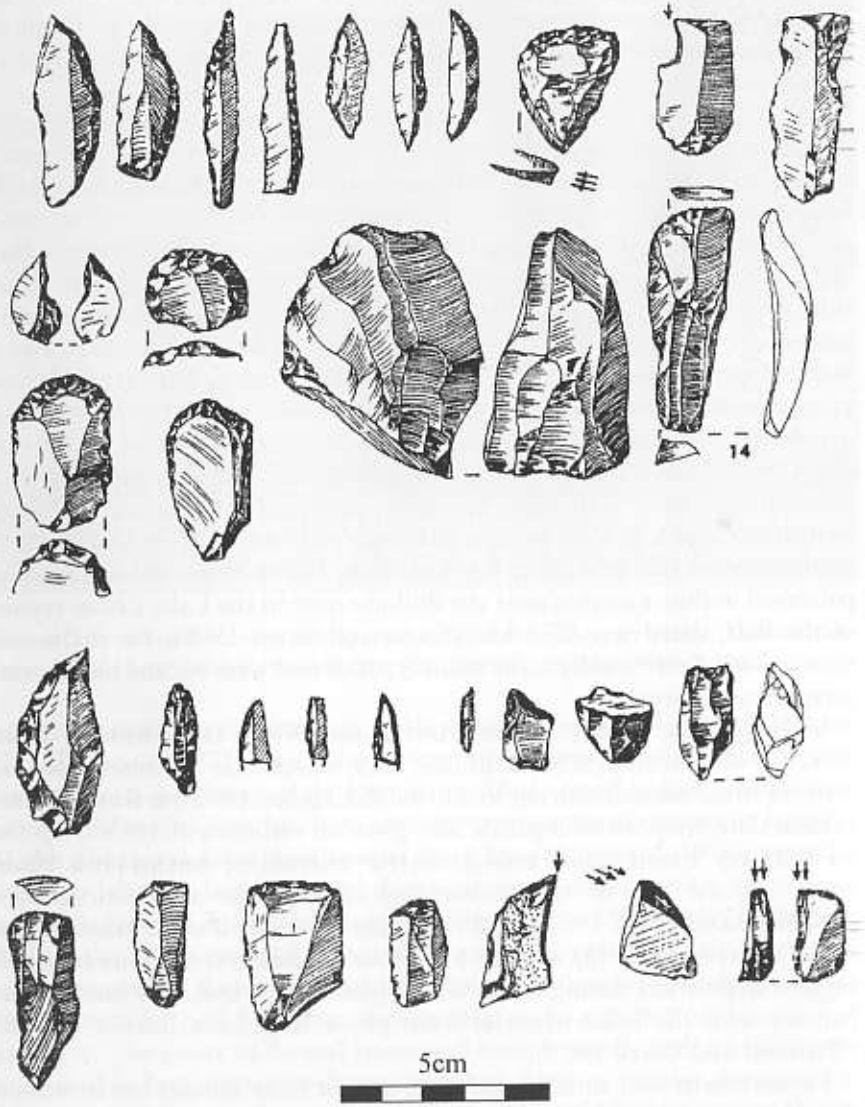

Figure 2.10 Material from Lake Besaka. Top two rows showing obsidian material (backed blades, scrapers and cores) from Phase B of the 'Ethiopian Blade Tool Tradition'. Bottom two rows showing more miniaturised obsidian material (backed bladelets, end scrapers and burins) from Phase A 'Ethiopian Blade Tool Tradition' (after Clark and Williams 1978).

material and a trend towards the fabrication of burins and awls – dates from *c.*11–5 kya. The first ceramics emerge at about 4,700 kya, and the presence of grinding stones may indicate that wild grasses were processed at this time, and the discovery of a number of Red Sea gastropods could

indicate the existence of some limited and localised exchange network. The most profound economic change is seen during phase C. Technologically this material is characterised by the dominance of end and convex scrapers, and the decrease in the use of blades and burins; it may also be associated with a possible shift to stock-keeping.

The nature of early-mid Holocene technology in the highlands – with the exception of the Aksum region – remains in comparison to the Rift Valley poorly understood, although the sites that have been investigated here largely through excavation rather than survey are mainly rock-shelter sites, which have their own idiosyncrasies in terms of taphonomic problems. In the southern/south-eastern highlands mode 5 industries have been observed from Darassa/Midjidja (Roeder 1939); Moche Borago, Wolayta (Gutherz *et al.* 2002); Yavello (Clark 1945); and Laga Oda rock-shelter, Dire Dawa (Clark and Prince 1978) which yielded five radiocarbon dates pointing to occupation from *c.*15 kya with a hiatus at around 8 kya. The mode 5 industry here is based upon local cherts with some imported obsidian. Gorgora rock-shelter (on the northern shore of Lake Tana) yielded a long sequence of mode 3 to mode 5 (aceramic and ceramic) material (Leakey 1943); the so-called transitional industry in level three is defined by the presence of Levallois points and microlithic material; this may be the result of vertical mixing of deposits. Levels one and two at this site yielded a mode 5 industry with the use of backed blades and variform geometrics. On the east shore of Lake Tana, excavations at Lalibela and Natchabiet caves gave inconclusive findings (Dombrowski 1970). The earliest phase (2) at Natchabiet yielded a mode 5 lithic industry associated with undiagnostic bovid remains and grinding stones; a single radiocarbon sample from this stratum dated to just under 3 kya.

In the Aksum region, Puglisi (1941) identified mode 5 material in surface scatters around the central area of the town, especially in the vicinity of the Tomb of the False Door to the west of the Central Stelae Park. These pieces have not been described in detail, but the majority of the finished pieces appear to be small discoidal scrapers of macro-crystalline quartz (Anfray 1972a; Munro-Hay 1989a: 186). Puglisi also noted large scatters of rather standardised, steeply retouched scrapers in the vicinity of D'aro Adi Kilte (Puglisi 1946). Puglisi rightly hypothesised that these very standardised tools were of an Aksumite date, but few conclusions regarding their function could be made. These scrapers were noted by David Phillipson in the late 1960s, and were subsequently named Gudit scrapers in recognition of their seemingly highly circumscribed area of distribution (Phillipson 1977a). We shall return to this material shortly.

At Gobedra rock-shelter an aceramic microlithic industry emerged at around 9 kya (stratum 3). The lowest ceramic-bearing deposits were associated with a radiocarbon date of 9080 +/– 165 bp; this date was yielded from a sample of bone apatite, and is thought to be unreliable (David Phillipson, pers. comm.). It is suggested by the excavator that the (earliest)

Figure 2.11 The site of Anqqer Baahti rock-shelter, Aksum, from the south in 1996. The frontage and talus, beneath the granite inselberg at centre right, extends over 20 metres.

thin, coarse ware emerged at this site *sometime* after 6,000 kya. Gudit scrapers only appeared in the topmost stratum, associated with small pieces of iron slag. It would appear that this stratum is broadly contemporary with the Aksumite period. This sequence is broadly reflected in mode 4–5 material excavated at the nearby rock-shelters of Anqqer Baahti and Baahti Nebait (Finneran 2000a; 2000b), and these data, allied to the material noted during surface survey (Finneran in Phillipson and Reynolds 1996), can paint a generalised picture of mid-late Holocene settlement in the region.

Surface sites containing material with mode 4 affinities were located primarily upon perennial watercourses. It is probable that site situation here was dictated by the source of the mudstone and siltstone used for the ubiquitous blades. Mode 5 material was also exceptionally plentiful, although sites were neither particularly large nor dense, and detailed examination of surface scatters was unable to determine any clues as to site function. Excavations at Anqqer Baahti confirmed a similar picture: the lowest occupation (context 14) yielding mudstone blades associated with circular scrapers, and in later occupation phases a trend towards a predominantly microlithic industry, with a very low index of formal retouched tools (utilised flakes were the norm; backed geometrics were present) was noted (Figure 2.12). This picture was broadly reflected at Baahti Nebait; the uppermost occupation layers here (contexts 1 and 2) yielded a mode 5 industry associated with ceramics. Underlying, a sterile layer (context three) sealed successively a mode 5 aceramic occupation and at the base of the

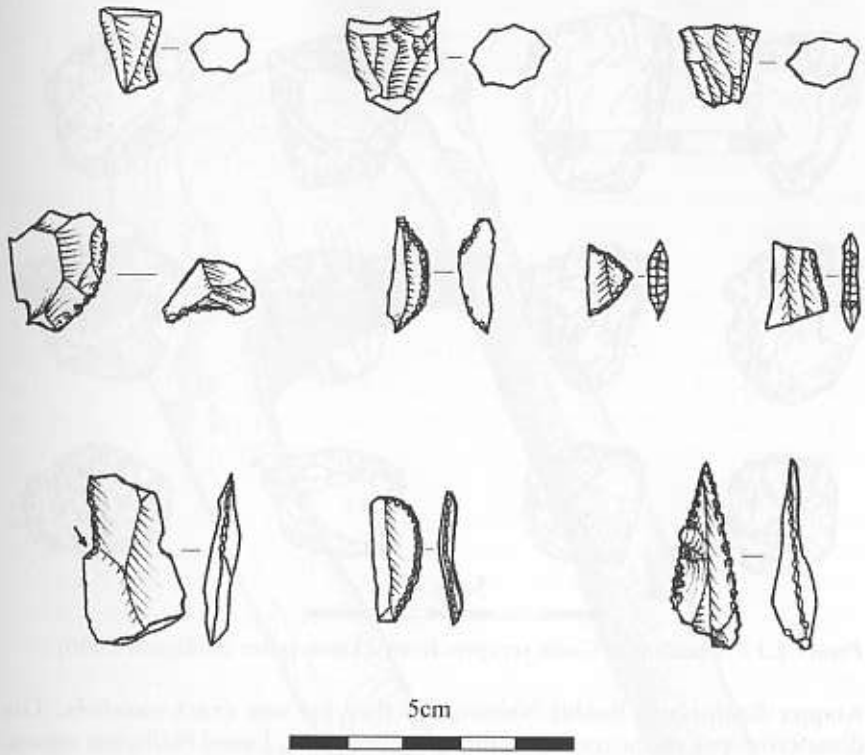

Figure 2.12 Mode 5 material from Anqqer Baahti. Top row: unipolar bladelet cores. Middle row: side scraper and three backed geometrics. Bottom row: burin, backed segment and point (after Finneran 2000a).

sequence a mode 4 blade industry analogous to that from Anqqer Baahti and Gobedra. The mid-late Holocene lithic industries from Aksum show a long developmental continuum; the mode 4 long-blades from Baahti Nebait in particular clearly provided the template for smaller, more heavily utilised pieces in the aceramic mode 5 phase. In all cases, raw material was local, with macro-crystalline and micro-crystalline quartzes predominating.

The fabrication of stone tools continued, however, into the Aksumite period, as evidenced by the use of the 'Gudit scraper'. Laurel Phillipson has demonstrated (L. Phillipson 2000; D. Phillipson 2000: 450; also Usai 1997) these are highly standardised scrapers forms found in very discrete localities (i.e. on the west side of the town) and are generally found associated with classical and late Aksumite ceramic forms which date from the fifth–sixth centuries AD. In its 'classic' form it takes the form of a very steeply retouched end-scraper based upon a roughly circular flake (Figure 2.13). The technological antecedents of the Gudit scraper may be found in larger horseshoe scrapers excavated at

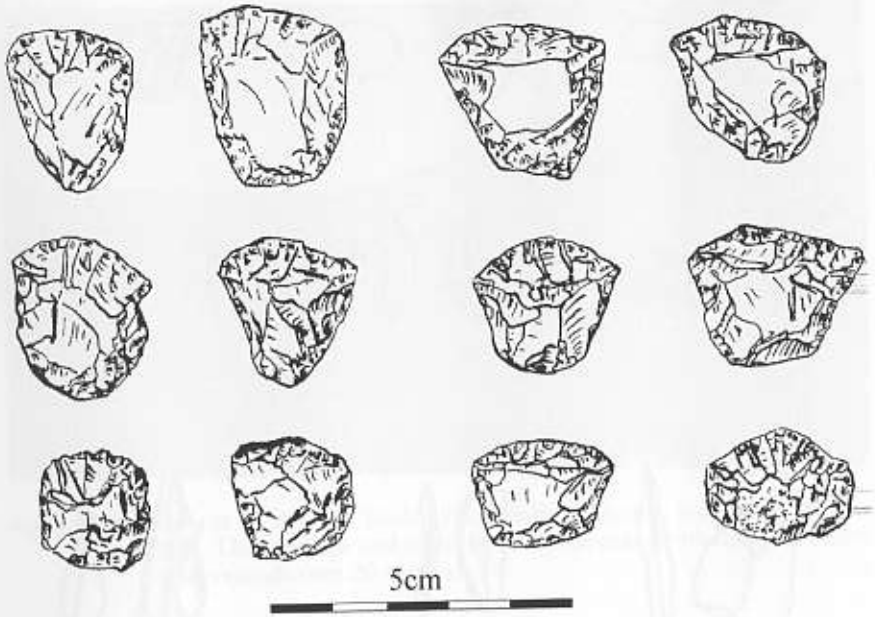

Figure 2.13 Selection of Gudit scrapers from Aksum (after Phillipson 2000).

Anqqer Baahti and Baahti Nebait, but they are not exact parallels. The distinctive spur on the corners of the retouched edges, Laurel Phillipson argues, are a by-product of the re-sharpening process. Raw material choice also appears to play a part; they are often fabricated from a very distinctive ochre or yellow chert. For what purpose were these scrapers used? Ethnographic analogy may actually *confuse* the picture.

Prehistoric investigations of the 1970s in the Rift gave impetus to a number of ethnographic projects focusing on modern stone tool use. As early as the 1940s, Desmond Clark noted the use of bored ground stones as digging stick weights in southern Ethiopia (Clark 1944). Subsequent studies in southern Ethiopia of hide-preparation techniques using scrapers (e.g. Brandt 1996; Gallagher 1977), have shed light upon the technological facets of lithic fabrication (and use, wear and discard patterns) as well as the social organisation of the artisans who used them. The use of the scraper has been thus seen in the context of hide preparation, yet Laurel Phillipson has actually stressed the point that Gudit scrapers would have been unsuitable for hide preparation; this would have been better served, as her edge wear experiments appear to have confirmed, with using steeply retouched convex scrapers. Another very distinctive tool used in the Aksumite period is the 'Liqanos flake', a bipolar obsidian flake, which could have been used as a hunting knife. The implications of Laurel Phillipson's studies are important within the wider context of technological

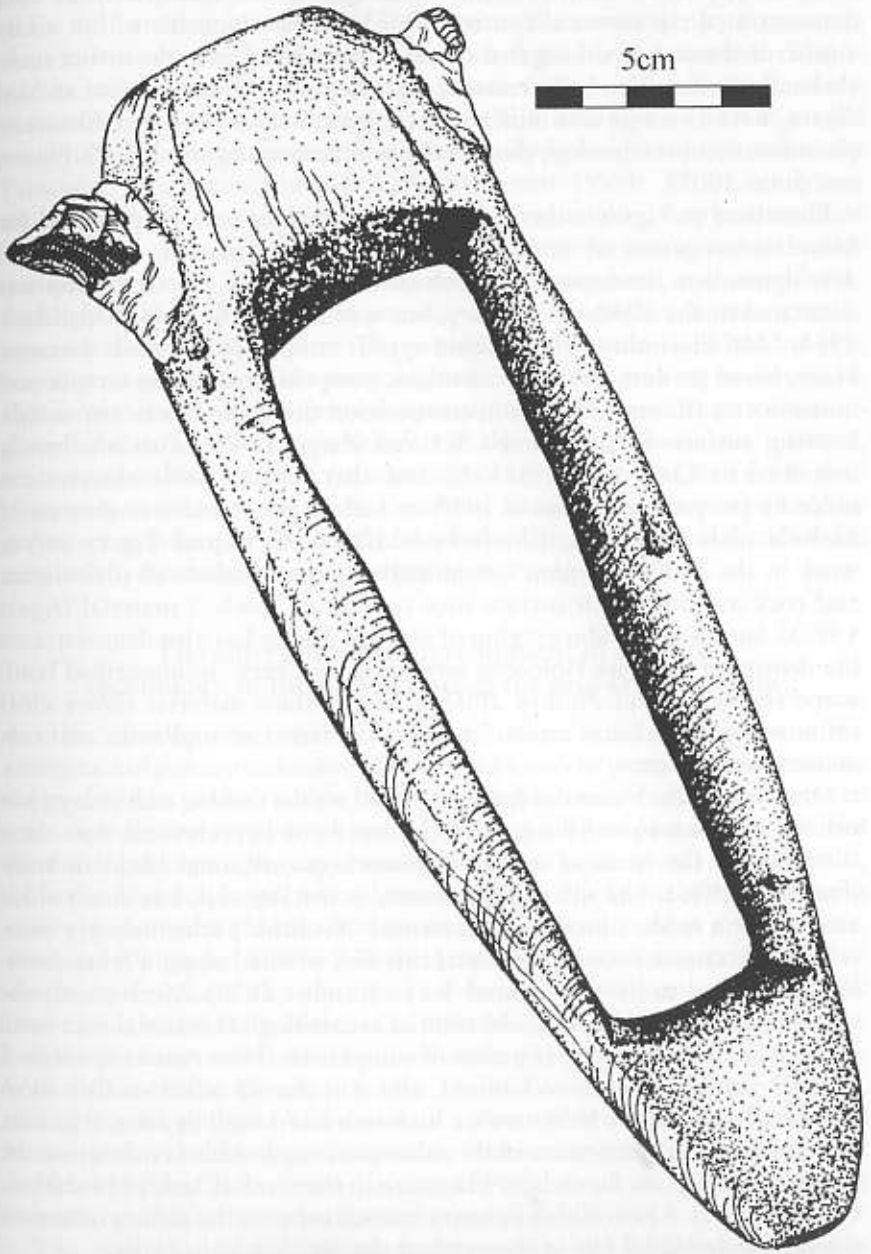

Figure 2.14 Modern stone tool use: hafted scraper used for hide preparation (after Clark 1981).

evolution and give even greater cause to counsel against the 'three-age-system' being used, paradoxically enough, as an age system. Phillipson has thus demonstrated the essential continuity of lithic development within a circumscribed area (something that can also be deduced from the earlier rock-shelter sequences), and the recent excavation of a workshop site at Mai Agam, Beta Giyorgis also hints at greater cultural diversity in Aksumite period stone tool technology than has been hitherto recognised (L. Phillipson and Sulas 2005).

Elsewhere in Tigray, other studies have demonstrated the potential for future investigation of mid-late Holocene socio-economic and cultural developments in the region. The rock-shelter of Quiha, eastern Tigray was excavated in the 1940s by Moysey, but was never fully published (Clark 1954: 324). The industry here would appear to be a typical mode 5 assemblage, based predominantly on obsidian, comprising variform scraper and lunate forms (Barnett 1999a); in composition this is similar to two neighbouring surface sites of Amba Sel and Zergnat. The sites are briefly described in Clark (1954: 353–5), and also concord with observations made by the present author in 1997 on surface occurrences to the east of Mekelle (Adi Ainawalid; Chinferas localities). In central Tigray survey work in the Tembien region has identified large numbers of rock-shelter and rock art sites, with surface sites containing mode 5 material (Agazi 1997a). Survey in the Shire region of western Tigray has also demonstrated the density of mid-late Holocene settlement in a very circumscribed landscape (Finneran and Phillips 2003a); here surface material shows clear affinities to the Aksum mode 5 material in terms of tool form and raw material utilisation.

Obsidian mode 5 material has been noted on the Dahlac archipelago just off the Red Sea coast (Blanc 1952); it has been hypothesised that these islands were the focus of a later-prehistoric pan-regional obsidian trade (Fattovich 1996). The site of Gurgussom, in the Danakil, has also yielded evidence of a mode 5 (in the report termed 'Neolithic') lithic industry associated with coarse ceramic elements; this site, situated along a relict coastline, is posited to date to around 4 kya (Roubet 1970). Moving into the eastern lowlands, a brief consideration of archaeological material excavated in Somalia offers some clear points of comparison. Here two early mode 3 cultural components are recognised, and it is the so-called smaller MSA (Gresham and Brandt 1996) with a high index of Levallois cores that may be regarded as the progenitor of the subsequent mode 4 blade industries: the Hargeisan in the north, and the Magosian in the south (Clark 1954: 207–8; Graziosi 1940). A microlithic industry (associated with the earliest ceramics) emerged at around 9 kya in the south at the site Gogoshiis Qabe.

In conclusion, future research on the lithic industries of Ethiopia might profitably focus upon the 'transitional industries', and the related problem of rock-shelter taphonomy. The foregoing discussion also highlights the

need to rethink our general terminological and typological approach. Mode 3–5 industries in this area of Africa are unremarkable in terms of the low index of formal, retouched tools. Claims to the contrary may suggest an approach to sampling or excavation which demands reassessment. This is particularly true of the Ethiopian LSA (mode 4–5) material; Tertia Barnett's contention that Brandt's 'Ethiopian Blade Tool tradition', which is a valid entity in a Rift Valley context 'forms a broadly homogenous unit across the Ethiopian Highlands and Rift Valley' (Barnett 1999b: 99) is clearly not tenable. I would argue for more stress upon regionality, emphasising local industries in their own right rather than with reference to a notional wider eastern African – let alone Ethiopian – culture-sphere, and would also highlight that good excavation practice demands sampling in stratigraphic contexts rather than layers. The emergence of mode 5 industries also requires attention; from the foregoing evidence it appears that in some cases this is associated with a general climatic warming, resulting in shifts in game habitat. The mode 5 material at Baahti Nebait, Aksum, for instance, was associated with faunal remains which were much smaller in size than those associated with the mode 4 material from which is was separated by a distinct stratigraphic hiatus. Although the sample of animal remains was very small, this factor might be significant (Finneran 2000b).

The emergence and development of ceramic technology in the region during the mid-late Holocene

Another development which requires more archaeological focus is the emergence of pottery technology in the mid-Holocene period. Conventionally the presence of pottery within the archaeological record is taken to betoken a food-producing economy; it would be recognised as part of the so-called Neolithic package. This simplistic link between pottery and agriculture is, from the African perspective at least, exceptionally fragile. Ceramics make their appearance within the north-western African record at an early date, *c.*9.5 kya (Phillipson 2005a: 151–2). At around 9 kya, for instance, distinctive 'wavy line' ceramics are found on the so-called Khartoum Mesolithic sites of the Middle Nile (Edwards 2004: 32–3), and have a broad distribution across west-central Africa as well as further south in the Lake Turkana region of northern Kenya. Here the site of Lowasera (Phillipson 1977b), dating to *c.*8 kya appears to represent an exemplar of the sort of advanced hunter-gatherer-fisher, predominantly lacustrine-based, semi-sedentary community that John Sutton in the 1970s defined as belonging to the so-called pan-Saharan 'aqualithic' culture (Sutton 1977).

The emergence of the earliest pottery within the highlands and in the lowlands of Ethiopia is still poorly understood. From such a limited corpus it is difficult to attempt, as some scholars have tried, to draw analogues in vessel shape and design across time and space using detailed attribute

analysis. Within the Rift Valley region, pottery has been found in the very latest occupation horizons of Porc Epic (Clark and Williamson 1984), Laga Oda (Clark and Prince 1978) and the Macho and Waso sites of the Lake Ziway area (Humphreys 1978). Their condition and contextual affinities preclude any further meaningful observation. The Lake Besaka material is more encouraging (Figure 2.15); the earliest ceramics are associated with the Phase B 'Abadir' material and are represented by variably decorated sherds with linear and/or cord impressions, or simple fingernail impressions. Phase C material is associated with fragments of stone bowl, reminiscent of those fabricated in Pastoral Neolithic cultures of the East African savannas.

The highland ceramics offer us a little more basis for analysis. Excavations at Melka Kunture have yielded only fragmentary coarse undecorated ceramics in the locality of Wofi 2 (Makonnen 1984), as has Yavello. Pottery at Moche-Borago, Soddo, has been dated to 2255+/– 80 BP (Gutherz *et al.* 2002). Moving northwards, the Lalibela and Natchabiet material is fairly modern, that is, dating from the last millennium or so. The Gorgora pottery was recently re-examined by Tertia Barnett but the corpus of material was very small (n 48) and no real conclusions about the origin of these pieces may be inferred (Barnett 1999b: 106–12). A similar re-evaluation of the material from Quiha, near Mekelle, (Barnett 1999a) suggests the *possibility* of contact with the eastern Sudanic zones of the Butana and Gash Delta areas from the 5,000 kya to 3,000 kya (cf. Fattovich 1990a), although on the whole, taken with her assessment of the Lake Besaka material (Barnett 1999b: 115–16) she seems to indicate that

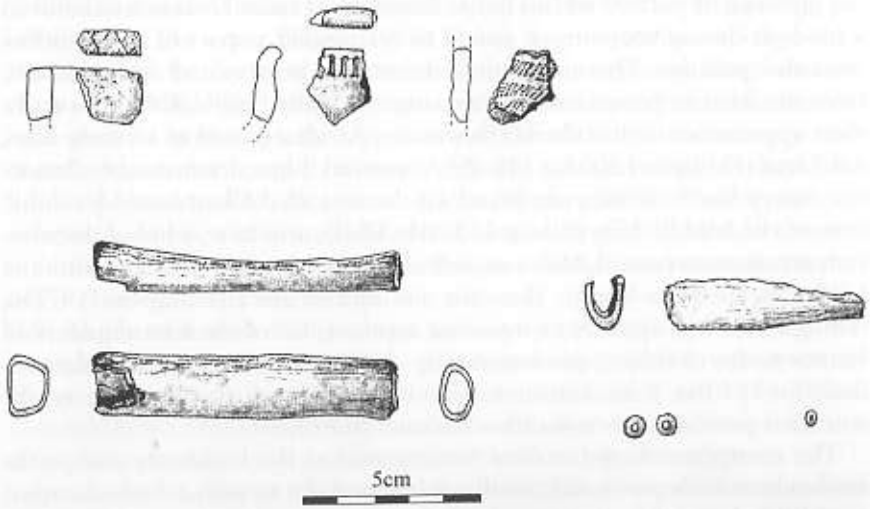

Figure 2.15 Pottery and bone items from Lake Besaka (after Brandt 1986).

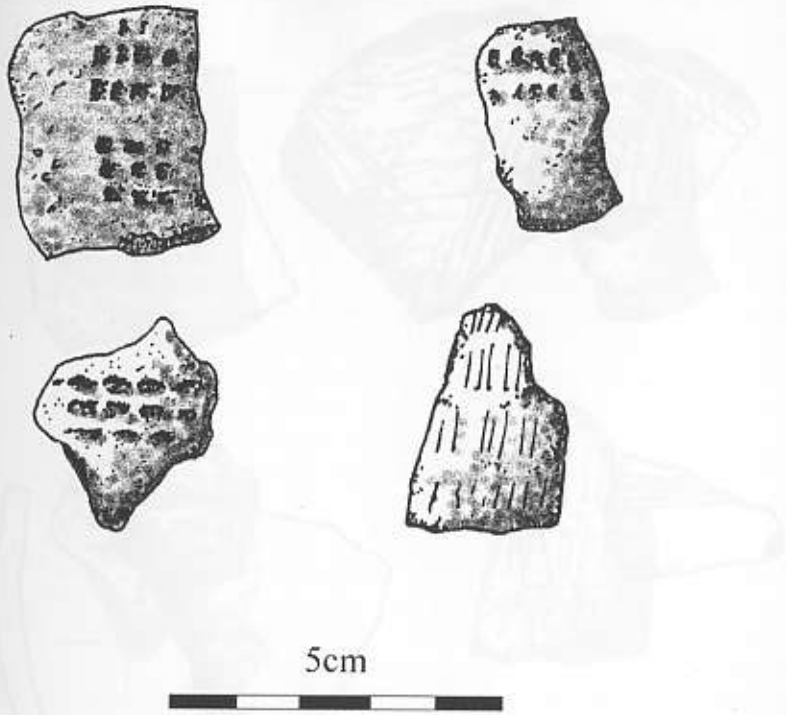

Figure 2.16a Early ceramics from Quiha (after Barnett 1999a).

the earliest Ethiopian ceramics very strongly suggest a degree of local innovation in terms of design and vessel type.

We might add to these observations with a brief consideration of the earliest ceramic sites of the Aksum region. At Gobedra pottery appeared in stratum 2b (a thin, coarse ware). This level was dated to 6,875 +/– 165 BP. In stratum 2a a thick, fine ware appeared alongside the earlier coarse variety, and this stratum is associated with a radiocarbon date (bone collagen) of 2,856 +/– 53 BP. This picture is broadly borne out by the admittedly sparse material from the rock-shelter sites of Anqqer Baahti and Baahti Nebait; at the former site a large quantity of clearly Aksumite pottery overlay an earlier ceramic mode 5 industry which showed affinities to the coarse ware of Gobedra 2b. The decorative scheme-which was also noted from the lowest ceramic-bearing levels at Baahti Nebait (context 2) are decorated using very simple thumb or fingernail impressions. It has been suggested that these decorative attributes show affinities with those in use by the Butana culture groups of the early second millennium BC. (Fattovich 1997a), but also show striking similarities to similar decorative

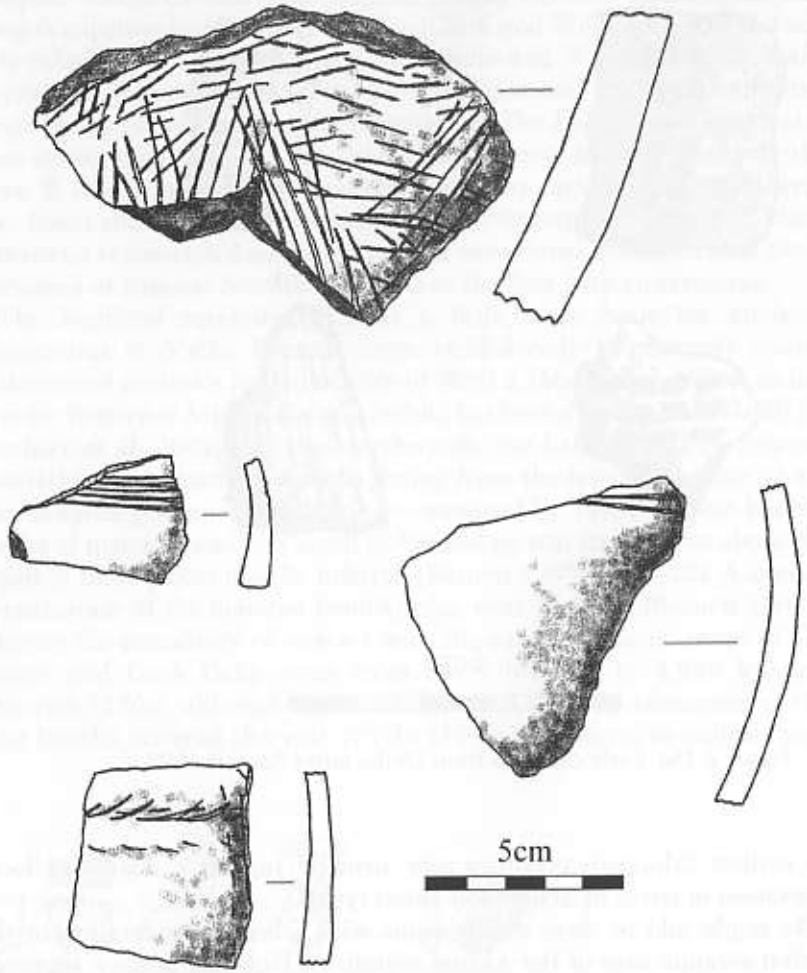

Figure 2.16b Early ceramics from Gorgora rock-shelter (after Barnett 1999b).

attributes observed on ceramics from the site at Handoga, Djibouti, which probably dates from broadly the same period (Grau 1989).

These design attributes (and to some extent vessel shape), taken with a general trend towards a later adoption of pottery southwards would seem to indicate that the highland ceramics derived ultimately from contacts with the eastern Sudanic steppes, and perhaps the Nile Valley. To the south the emergence of pottery, especially on the sites that line the Rift Valley, is suggested to be a later phenomenon and perhaps one associated with contact with East African pastoralist groups, but this should not preclude, perhaps, an earlier contact with pottery-using semi-sedentary hunter-fisher

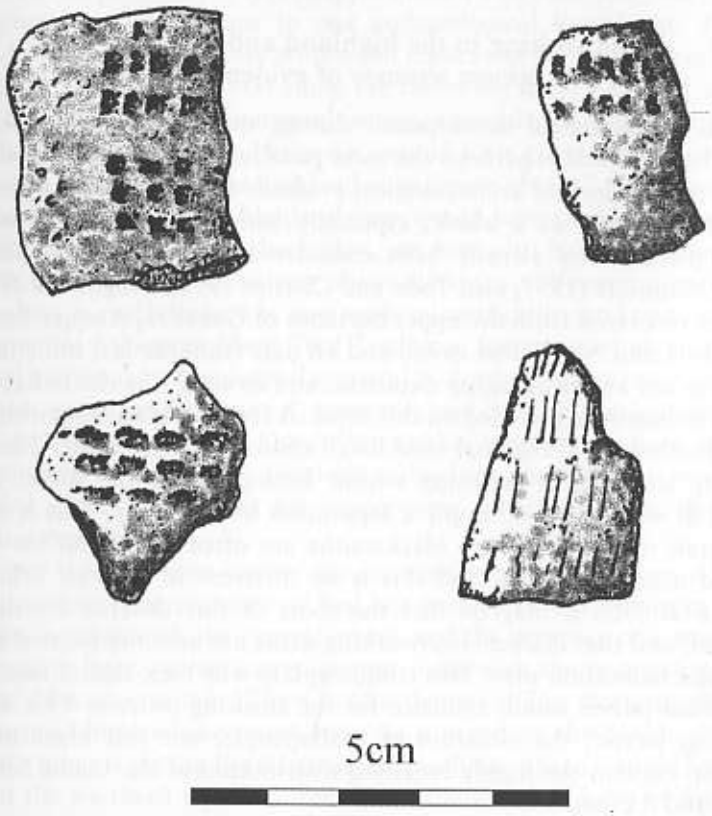

Figure 2.17a Early ceramics from Gobedra, Aksum (after Phillipson 1977a).

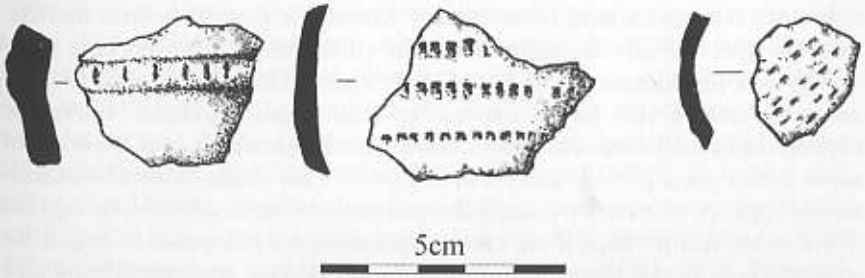

Figure 2.17b Early ceramics from Anqqer Baahti, Aksum (after Finneran 2000a).

groups on the shores of Lake Turkana (this contention is discussed more fully in the next chapter).

Ironworking in the highland and lowland regions: absence of evidence

The final technological development during the late Holocene which needs to be discussed is perhaps the most puzzling of them all: iron working. The relative lack of archaeological evidence for early ironworking in the Horn of Africa as a whole, especially when set against the wider regional picture, has already been considered in a detailed paper by Bertram Mapunda (1997; also Todd and Charles 1978). Fragments of slag have been recovered from the upper horizons of Gobedra, Anqqer Baahti, and Lalibela and Natchabiet caves, and all date from the last millennium BP. This is not an encouraging database, and as such it is clear that new research is desperately needed on this topic. A few observations within the wider ethnohistorical regional (and local) context may be made. There is a thriving tradition of smithing within Ethiopia, and the social rules attached to artisanship do imply a separation from society. This is not a unique trait in Africa, where blacksmiths are often distrusted for their perceived magical powers, and this is no different in modern Ethiopia (Finneran 2003b). It may be that the roots of this distrust are deeply embedded, and that discrete ironworking areas are actually located away from major habitation sites. This could explain why rock-shelter localities have yielded (albeit small) evidence for the smelting process. This social 'distancing factor', the isolation of craftspeople, not just blacksmiths, could also explain the highly localised distribution of the Gudit Scraper sites around Aksum.

In terms of a wider regional perspective, the greater Ethiopian region lies very much at a cultural cross-roads. Bertram Mapunda suggests that we might place more emphasis on trans-Red Sea contact and technological exchange; certainly any explanations for the origins of ironworking in north-eastern Africa tend towards very Meroë- or Egypto-centric models. In other areas of sub-Saharan Africa the emergence of ironworking technology is a phenomenon associated with what archaeologists and historians have termed the 'Bantu expansion' from western Africa (where the earliest dates for ironworking are found) south-eastwards over a period of some 3,000 years (Childs and Herbert 2005). This major cultural manifestation appears to have by-passed the plateau and its neighbouring regions to the east, and perhaps if we cannot recognise an independent origin for iron working in the Horn, we might reasonably look towards Meroë as a potential progenitor for ironworking at least in the north-western highlands where ironworking is known to have been present since at least 2,300 years ago (Tylecote 1982).

Overview

The material presented in this chapter spans a vast timescale and it is clear that there are major gaps in our archaeological knowledge. National boundaries are meaningless within the context of these data; perhaps we should consider the material along the following lines: highland and lowland. It is clear that environmental factors, especially during the Pleistocene and during periods of the Holocene, would have governed the possibility of human settlement in the highland zone (much above 2,000 metres a.s.l). The broken nature of the highland zone would have shaped the possibility of cultural contact across the region, yet may also have contributed to a culture of difference across very short distances. Differentiation in lithic technology is surely geared to raw material availability and preference; the idea that the Ethiopian Blade Tool Tradition, for instance, should encompass all highland archaeological material is clearly problematic. One could, however, argue for more social, economic and cultural homogeneity along the Rift Valley, where the Omo-Afar section would have been relatively easy to traverse, and whose relatively stable lacustrine ecology would have afforded more possibilities for longer-term settlement than the higher plateaux regions.

During the Holocene we see the emergence of some degree of interregional contact. The presence of Red Sea gastropod shells at Lake Besaka suggests contact with the coastal zones, and the presence of a stone bowl fragment in later contexts may suggest links with the pastoralists of the eastern African savannas. There is also the possibility that a similar form of advanced hunter-fisher economy – as is noted on the Middle Nile and adjacent regions during the Khartoum Mesolithic phase – could have penetrated the southern region of the Rift; a number of pieces of the highly distinctive wavy line pottery (in some cases associated with bone points, but which might not necessarily have been used for fishing) have been collected around Lake Turkana, and also at Kibish in the Lower Omo valley (Brown 1975; Chavaillon and Boisaubert 1977).

Yet another element of medium-long-distance exchange centres upon the use of that distinctive and obviously aesthetically desirable volcanic rock: obsidian. The main source of obsidian used for stone tool fabrication in northern Ethiopia (and possibly in the Gash region associated with contexts dating to *c.*7 kya; Fattovich 1990a) is widely held to be the Dahlac archipelago in the Red Sea (Blanc 1952; Fattovich 1996). It is also suggested that Dahlac obsidian has been used in contemporary contexts in South Arabia (e.g. Zarins 1990), but in fact scientific analysis has not been able to distinguish its actual area of origin (Durrani 2005: 107). The geology of the Ethiopian plateau is in any case conducive to the formation of obsidian, so it is clear that on the African side of the Red Sea at least there were many sources of obsidian available in the highlands. This is not to

deny the possibility of contact across the Bab el-Mandab straits from the mid-Holocene, as Rodolfo Fattovich posits in his model of the Tihamah cultural exchange sphere which embraced the Gash Delta (below), highlands and littoral of the Horn of Africa and the Tihamah plain and hinterland of south-western Arabia, and which forms an essential precursor to the developments discussed in Chapter 4 (Fattovich 1996; 1997b). Claims for similarity in pottery forms between fragmentary prehistoric wares found at Adulis (Paribeni 1907), possibly also Matara (Anfray 1965) and the South Arabian sites of Sihi (Zarins and Zahrani 1986) and Sabir (Vogt and Sedov 1998) have been advanced as a central feature of the Tihamah cultural tradition, but they remain to be investigated in detail.

Another variable to consider, and one which is geographically more pertinent to the north-eastern highlands, is the nature of socio-economic developments during the mid-late Holocene in the area centred upon the Atbara River, eastern Sudan. Rodolfo Fattovich (1990a) describes fragmentary finds of bone harpoons and wavy line pottery from the Gash Delta site of ES 2, which he suggests dates to the Saroba phase (*c.*7 kya). Edwards (2004: 64) points out that the material culture of this region in later prehistory was markedly distinct from those cultures of the middle Nile riverine margins, and it is probable that strong Ethiopian highland influences may have formed a major role in forging this identity. This is an area to which we shall return when we consider how social developments here may have impacted upon the trajectory towards socio-economic complexity in the northern highland zone. In the next chapter we shall move beyond technological development during the mid-late Holocene and consider two interlinked phenomena: economic and ideological change during that period.

3

FROM HUNTING TO HERDING AND PLANT CULTIVATION

Beyond ecological determinism and neo-evolutionary trajectories

Contexts

Having looked at the nature of regional technological development over a 2-million-year period we now turn to a consideration of the archaeological evidence for economic change, specifically during the early-mid Holocene and focusing upon the emergence of the distinctive specialist and generalist food-producing economies in the region. The lack of hard archaeological evidence demands that the orientation of our investigations has to be largely theoretical, using ethnographic and comparative approaches. Traditional perspectives on the archaeology of early food production have emphasised an evolutionary, teleological continuum or trajectory; in fact the African picture as a whole is far more complex, dynamic and cyclic. It is also important to stress that the development of new food-acquisition strategies, replacing long-lived hunter-gatherer adaptations, was also accompanied by a profound shift in symbolic behaviour. As such, a consideration of *indirect* evidence for food production in the region needs to take into account the area's rich wealth of rock art which provides dual evidence for economic and ideological change. In the first instance we need to situate the archaeological data in context; this demands a consideration of the modern food-producing economies.

The highland farming systems: an ethnoarchaeological framework

This section focuses upon the culturally distinctive highland farming economies of the region (although this is not to deny the importance of the lowland specialists); within the context of African – and indeed global – palaeoethnobotanical studies these economies have attracted much academic attention. The late Jack Harlan encapsulated this fascination: 'we have in the Ethiopian centre a survival of an entire agricultural system little changed from prehistoric times . . . . it is as if a vanished world had been rediscovered by use of a time machine' (Harlan 1969: 313). Whilst perhaps

unfairly suggesting that these systems (plural) are in some way quaint anachronisms, Harlan's words have great resonance, and were articulating a long-held botanical perspective. Harlan was influenced by the work of the Soviet botanist Nikolai Vavilov, who considered these highlands to have been one of eight global 'centres of origin' for cultivated plants. His theory was based upon the observation that the wide diversity of highland Ethiopian cultivated cereal resources should be equated with a long-time scale of domestication (Vavilov 1951). This hypothesis would influence a generation of botanists (Harris 1990), and while Harlan recognised that the real picture was invariably far more complex, botanists have always considered the cereal-cultivation systems of highland Ethiopia to be some of the most ancient in the world.

These highland farming systems are, within the African context, highly distinctive (although they share a basic core of cereal resources); in contrast the specialist lowland food-procurement economies (such as pastoralism or hunting-fishing) are much more familiar in the African context. Particular attention attaches to the wide genetic diversity of plant resources used in the generalist economic complexes, and this fact, allied to a perceived notion of cultural conservatism (although not stasis), has made the study of these economies the focus for extensive ethnobotanical research (Engels

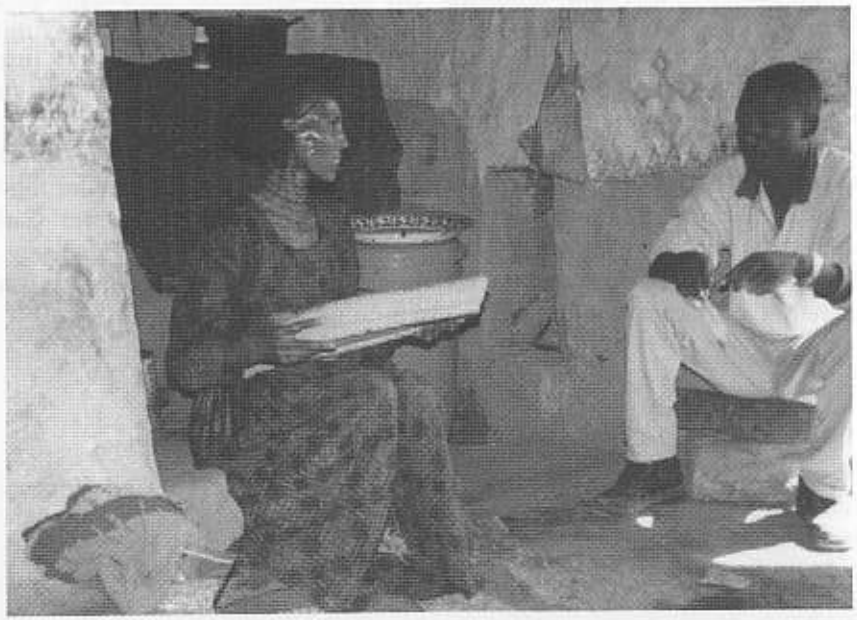

Figure 3.1 Ethnographic interview in traditional Ethiopian domestic environment, near Mekelle, Tigray 1997.

Table 3.1 Major plant cultigens of Ethiopia/Eritrea

Crop origin; Name	*Notes*
Ethiopian: Tef (*Eragrostis tef*)	Highland crop of the love grass family, cultivated as human food crop unique to Ethiopia. Very small grain used for bread-making. *Eragrostis pilosa* was probably the progenitor of the modern domesticates (Ingram and Doyle 2003). High genetic diversity.
Ethiopian: Enset (*Ensete edule*)	'False banana' mainly grown in the south-western highland zone today, formerly widespread cultigen (BOSTID 1996; Brandt *et al.* 1997).
Ethiopian: Abyssinian oat (*Avena abyssinica*)	Tolerated weed, intercropped with barley (Edwards 1991).
Ethiopian: Noog (*Guizotia abyssinica*)	Oil plant cultivated in highland areas (BOSTID 1996).
African: Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor* (L.) Moench)	Major African cereal; five key landraces are recognised in Africa; in Ethiopia and Eritrea the major preferred landrace-type is *durra* (Engels and Hawkes 1991). The *bicolor* type is regarded as being closest to the ancestral cultigen (Doggett 1991). Highland crop up to 3,000 metres asl; used for bread making. Present in India (Doggett and Prasada-Rao 1995).
African: Finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) or *dagussa*	Highly diverse highland crop but also work intensive; also present in India (Mehra 1991). Used for beer and porridge.
Asian: Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*)	No wild progenitors in Africa, yet has a high genetic diversity in the Ethiopian highlands (Harlan 1995).
Asian: Wheat (*Triticum sp.*)	Highland crop; high genetic diversity. Emmer wheat (*Triticum dicoccum*) or *Ares* is occasionally used for bread-making (Engels and Hawkes 1991).
New World: Maize (*Zea mays*)	Popular highland crop. Introduced after the sixteenth century, possibly through Portuguese contact. Other New World crops include ground nut, pumpkin, chilli, tomato and potato (Tewoldeberhan 1984).

and Hawkes 1991). These approaches seek to understand through the use of analogy how this flexibility of resource choice and response to environmental pressures may translate into the archaeological record, focusing in particular upon storage facilities, evolved 'coping strategies' during times of famine (Butler 1998; Holt and Lawrence 1993) and also the potential

for archaeological recovery of crop remains at every stage of the food preparation process (D'Andrea *et al.* 1997; 1999). One important theme which arises from these studies – and which has important archaeological implications – is the notion of flexibility.

Crop cultivation

The suite of crop resources used by the highland farmer is diverse. We may conveniently divide these crops into: (1) crops that are unique to the Ethiopian agricultural system; (2) 'African'-origin crops; (3) generic Old World crops and (4) New World crops (Table 3.1).

A few observations need to be made about these data. Many of these crops exhibit a wide range of genetic diversity; which would suggest a long timescale of cultivation, but this is clearly a problematic issue. In the Bale highlands the local barley populations (barley is a western Asian origin crop) are exceptionally genetically diverse, which under conventional criteria would imply that the region was a 'centre of origin' for barley, yet wild progenitors of these crops have not been identified there and it has been posited that exposure to intensive levels of ultraviolet light at high altitudes *inter alia* contributed towards this diversity (Fekadu and Parleviet 1997). The tabulated data emphasises cereals, but there are other non-cereal plants commonly which are heavily cultivated, especially as back up crops. Pulses, notably faba (horse) bean (*Vicia faba*),

Figure 3.2a Common Ethiopian food crops: harvesting *Eragrostis tef.*

Figure 3.2b Enset.

field pea (*Pisum sativum*), chick pea (*Cicer arietinum*), lentil (*Lens culinaris*) and grass pea (*Lathyrus sativus*) are all grown, often as an extra protein source (useful given the predominance of fasting days in the Ethiopian Church) and are also cultivated to improve nitrogen contents of depleted soils. Again, some of these crops betray a considerable genetic diversity, perhaps suggesting a significant history of local cultivation (Butler 2003).

Enset cultivation has been historically attested in the northern and central highlands (where only the leaves are used for making flour for bread) but is today commonly associated with the south-western highlands where it has become known as the 'tree against hunger', a valued and dependable resource of great utility (Brandt *et al.* 1997). Again there is a large regional

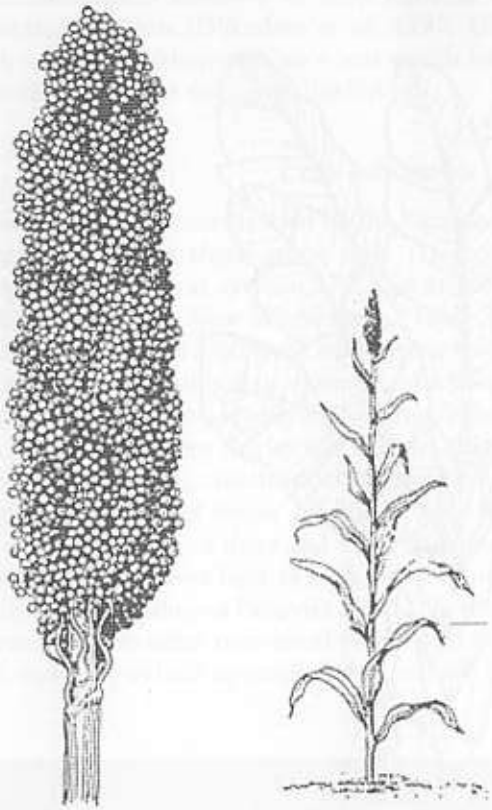

Figure 3.2c Sorghum bicolor (after BOSTID 1996).

variability in Enset cultivation systems, but its value for producing food and non-food resources has long been recognised even if its study has been neglected in comparison to Ethiopian cereal crops. It is clear that in common with other members of the banana family, the actual preservation (taphonomy) of Enset may be problematic, although linguistic studies (Ehret 1979) suggest that it was the first indigenous plant to be domesticated in Ethiopia.

Within these systems flexibility and innovation are a necessity. To offset the large economic outlay for livestock, a wide crop range is grown, especially in kitchen gardens (locally this is known as the *gwaro* complex), often involving the cultivation of traditional herbal drugs, or even gathering wild plant foods to augment the cultivated varieties (Tesfaye *et al.* 1997). The survival of an important plant gathering component in modern mixed farming economies may have important implications for modelling past plant domestications events (Harlan 1992; Smith 2001;

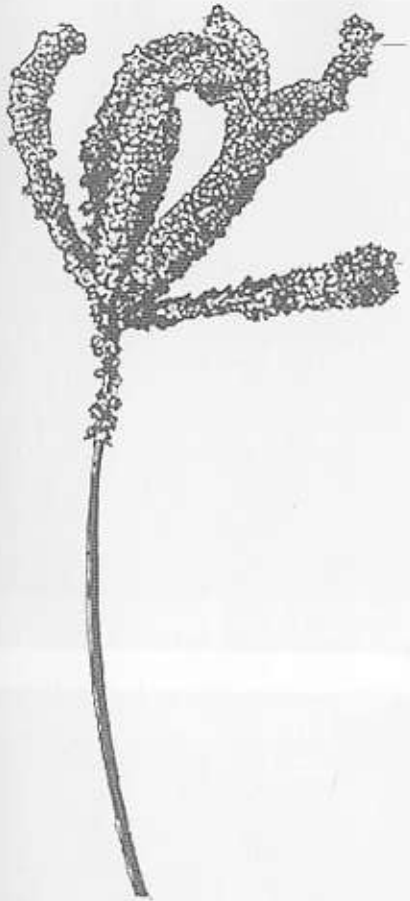

Figure 3.2d Eleusine coracana (after BOSTID 1996).

Hildebrand 2003). Mixed cropping provides another opportunity for experimentation and a 'coping strategy', if one crop fails, then the farmer can fall back on another resource (Butler 1998; Holt and Lawrence 1993: 6). Around Mekelle (Tigray) a number of farmers have taken to planting European and American bread wheat (*Triticum aestivum*) varieties, all leftovers of aid programmes in the mid-1980s (Catherine D'Andrea pers. comm.), and this has supplanted traditional crop varieties. *Ares* (emmer wheat: *Triticum dicoccum*) is rarely seen growing in the fields of Tigray; some farmers have implied that this may be due to the time-consuming process of de-hulling the harvested seed heads (C. D'Andrea *et al.* 1997).

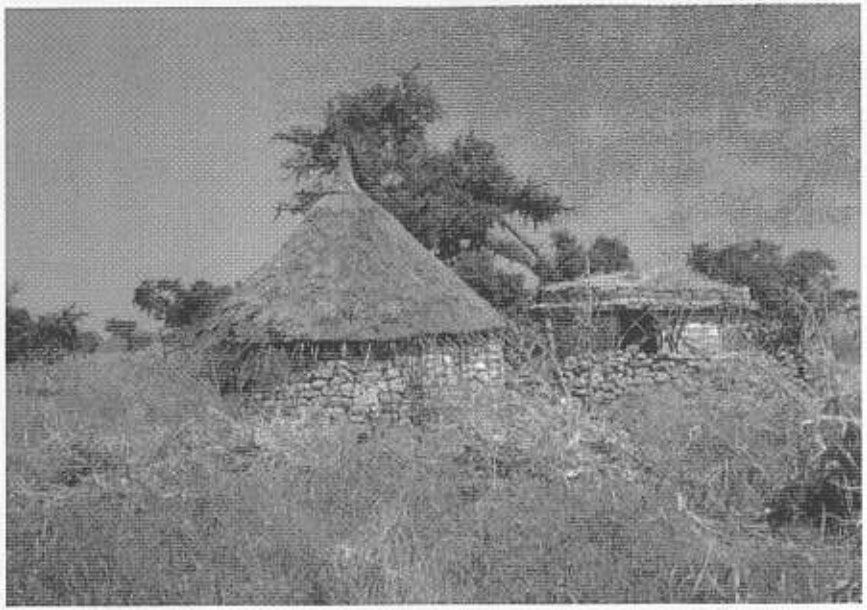

Figure 3.3 Traditional farmstead complex with round *tukul* (Shire 2001).

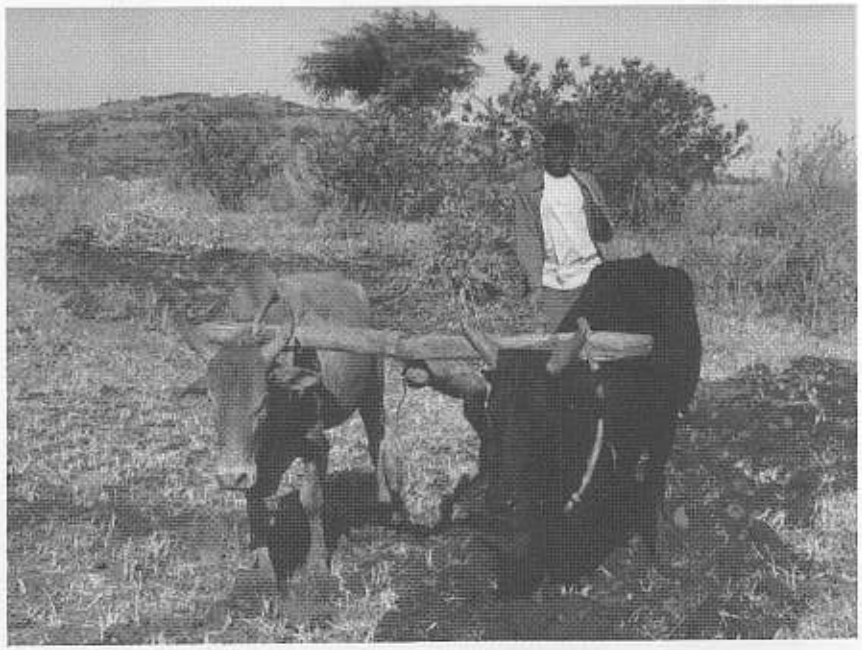

Figure 3.4a Traditional agricultural technology: ploughing with zebu cattle, Shire 2001 (M. Harlow).

Figure 3.4b Threshing floor (Aksum 1996).

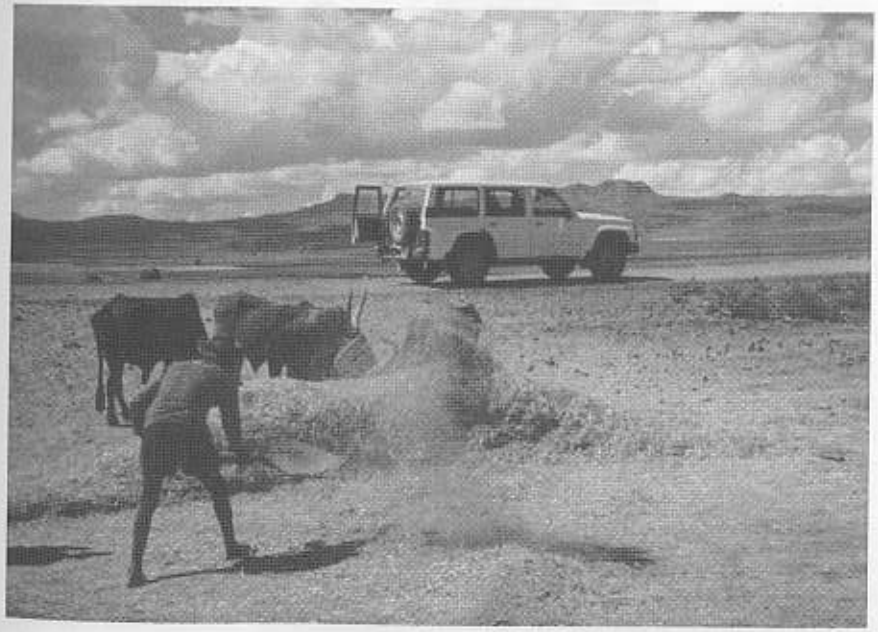

Figure 3.4c Winnowing using traditional paddle (Mekelle 1997).

Figure 3.4d Milling (Mekelle 1997).

Animal husbandry

Livestock exploitation is a vital component of highland (generalist) and lowland, (specialist) economic systems alike, and it is important to emphasise that we should be clear about the recognition and definition of the terms 'herding' and pastoralism. The former implies a more generalist label, associated with mixed farming, whilst the latter has very distinctive socio-cultural, economic and archaeological implications. The most widespread types of cattle used today are the small, chest-humped zebu (Figures 3.4a and 3.4b)

and the neck/chest-humped *sanga*. Humpless cattle in the highlands are nowadays rare, but may have existed in recent historic times in much greater numbers, although historically they would have been the earliest forms of cattle in the region (Albero and Hailemariam 1982a; 1982b). Ovicaprines (goat/sheep) are generally utilised for meat, hide and milk-based products. Of the sheep the most distinctive types are the desert forms, found around the arid western steppes, the Ogaden (mainly thin-tailed), and the plateau variants which are commonly fat-tailed and possess small degree of wooliness in the coat. There are three common goat types used (Workneh *et al.* 2000). Most farmsteads will keep small sheep/goat herds for a ready meat supply; cattle are more expensive and are mainly used for traction.

Guinea fowl and chickens are also kept for general meat consumption. Christians maintain the general Semitic prohibition of consumption of pig and shellfish, and Cushitic-speaking peoples occasionally adhere to a taboo against the eating of fish (Levine 1974: 36). Unsurprisingly, in the highlands at least (except around Lake Tana), fish are not a major food source. Although strong socio-economic cachet is attached to the ownership of cattle, other livestock components are also indicators of social status. Wealthier farmsteads often contain at least one beehive; honey is a marketable commodity in highland areas and is mainly used in the manufacture of mead (Amharic, *tej*) which from medieval times onwards was regarded as a drink for royalty and aristocracy (Simoons 1960:156). Camels are widely used as beasts of burden among pastoralist groups of the western lowlands and they occasionally appear in the highlands. Having considered the general ethnographic picture, let us now turn to the problematics of the archaeological reconstruction of food-producing economies of the region in antiquity.

Archaeological problems and paradigms

In global terms the emergence of food-producing systems (plant cultivation and stock-keeping) remains an important yet poorly understood phenomenon. In Europe and Asia, it is bound up with that problematic term 'Neolithic' (itself a technological label) which has actually moved beyond describing cultural and economic criteria (Thomas 1991: 12). Traditionally the idea of 'being Neolithic' (if we can make such an identification) implied a teleological trajectory of social, cultural and economic evolution: sedentism, domesticated crops and pottery bound up with changes in social structure and cosmology. Contemporary approaches to the problem emphasise differential rates of evolution rather than revolution and a rejection of the teleological or neo-evolutionary paradigm. The notion of economic 'pre-adaptation' is now emphasised; the idea that one can live a 'Neolithic life' without necessarily possessing domesticated crops (Hayden 1990). Monocausal models for the 'origins' of food production

have given way to more nuanced approaches (Uepermann 1996), moving away from rigid environmental or demographic determinism, to a consideration of the social, ritual and psychological implications for the 'acculturation of nature'.

In general terms the theoretical archaeological debate surrounding early African food production reflects broader global trends, seeing a shift away from migrationist and diffusionist thinking (e.g. Clark 1962) towards an emphasis upon local innovation and development (Shaw *et al.* 1993: 9–13; Bower 1995). As Neumann (2005) points out we can no longer define an artificial dichotomy between hunter-gatherers and farmers; we must instead recognise a continuum (or perhaps spectrum) of differing economic strategies, although in basic analytical terms we may distinguish between economic generalists and specialists. The archaeological visibility of both groups, along with their social structures and organisation of material culture will differ.

Archaeological research into the emergence of food production in Africa has framed the following general model: the appearance of domesticated cattle and ovicaprines in the northern Nile Valley margins by 6 kya and their gradual diffusion southwards and westwards over thousands of years. Specialised animal pastoralism clearly predates crop cultivation in early northern and eastern African food-producing systems (Marshall and Hildebrand 2002). The appearance in the archaeological record of domesticated indigenous African cultigens (most particularly finger millet and sorghum) seems to be much later than the appearance of imported, western Asian crop plants such as barley, wheat and pulses (Neumann 2005). Many explanations have been advanced to explain this scenario: the harvesting techniques used in Africa militated against cross-pollination, taphonomic problems especially in rock-shelter environments, biases in archaeobotanical recovery methods, or even the problem of recognition of domestic forms from wild (Young and Thompson 1999).

Where direct archaeobotanical evidence is lacking, there are other methods of indirect dietary reconstruction which may be of relevance. The recognition of cultivated pearl millet (*Pennisetum*) in an impression left in pottery from Oued Chebbi, Mauritania was a particularly important advance (Amblard and Pernès 1989), and recent experiments in the recognition of cultivated finger millet from abrasion patterns in Iron Age pottery from Uganda may also prove to be significant (Reid and Young 2000). Particular interest also attaches to the possibility of chemical analysis of different forms of animal fats from the fabric of archaeological pottery (Copley *et al.* 2003), a technique which has been used to identify the presence of dairy products. Developments in chemical and physical analysis of human remains may provide some clues, either in the realm of dental wear patterns, or more promisingly on measuring the relative amounts of Carbon isotopes in human bones, a technique that claims to be able to distinguish between different

dietary regimes (Pate 1994). Plant remains derived from environmental core data can, in rare cases, be supported by historical sources. In the Lake Tilo area of Abiyata, Ethiopia oral-history records stated that as recently as the 1940s the local economy was based overwhelmingly on cattle pastoralism. At the end of the decade, crop cultivation was introduced, and this is borne out by the sudden appearance in the uppermost sections of the lake core of large quantities of maize, the key cultivar in the region (Lamb 1998). Let us now provide a more detailed regional framework for the study of early food production in the Ethiopian region.

The domestication of livestock: an African context

Archaeological evidence may indicate the presence of domesticated cattle in the eastern Sahara of Egypt at around 9–8 kya at the sites of Bir Kiseiba, Nabta Playa and Kharga, although the very fragmentary nature of the bone assemblages does not allow for confident identification (Gifford-Gonzales 2005). A basic distribution of radiocarbon dates for domesticated cattle show a pattern of more recent dates the further west and south one goes (Algerian sites such as Meniet and Grotte Capaletti, for instance, give dates of *c.*5,500–6,500 years ago; those in Mali generally as far back as 4kya; Hassan 2000). Whether African cattle derive from the ancestral indigenous *Bos primigenius* is open to question; recent advances in the field of mitochondrial DNA (which is carried purely by females) suggest that the *Bos primigenius* is the progenitor of African humpless breeds (Bradley *et al.* 1996; Cunningham 2000). The zebu forms are now thought to be more hybrid in origin than a simple *Bos indicus* introduction, they are the result of a number of complex cross-breeding episodes with humpless forms.

The archaeological history of other major African animal resources may be briefly outlined; domesticated forms of goat (*Capra hircus*) and sheep (*Ovis ares*) are found in northern African contexts from about 7kya. There is a widespread consensus that these animals are direct introductions from Western Asia, probably via the Sinai; they then diffused westwards and southwards along the coasts. This scenario is suggested by the find of domesticated ovicaprine remains at Sodmein Cave on the Red Sea coast of Egypt dating to around 7 kya (Vermeersch *et al.* 1996). Archaeological evidence for early camels in Africa is more problematic; it is believed that the camel was first domesticated by the Midianites in central-south Arabia around 4 kya, and subsequently entered the African continent either through the Sinai, or more likely across the Bab el-Mandab straits into the Horn. A single burnt camel skeleton from Sihi in Saudi Arabia has been dated to around 9 kya, and has been identified with some confidence as *Camelus dromedarius* (the predominant African form) rather than the Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrius*), or the northern African fossil form

Camelus thomasi (Grigson *et al.* 1989). Domestic fowl (*Gallus gallus*) appears to be a more recent introduction into Africa from south-eastern Asia; the earliest evidence comes from Jenne-Jeno, Mali, at around AD 500 (Macdonald 1992). Where the archaeological picture for domesticated livestock is seemingly straightforward, the crop evidence is patchy.

The domestication of crops: an African context

The earliest evidence for the utilisation of domesticated western Asian-origin cereals in Africa is associated with the Pre-dynastic period of Egypt (*c.*8 kya), although it is clear, especially from the evidence from Wadi Kubanniyah, that there is a long-lived tradition of local wild grass and wild plant utilisation in the region. Much later, western Asian origin cereals underpin the farming economies of the middle Nile, and as we shall see are present in 'pre-Aksumite' contexts in the northern Ethiopian/Eritrean highlands by 2,500 years ago. The major problem remains the identification of early African-origin domesticates, which tend to be found in 'late' contexts.

A key case study is the search for early domesticated forms of Sorghum. In its wild form it probably originates in the Sudanic-Chadic belt of northern Africa) and has been found as a wild plant on a number of prehistoric sites in the region (Haaland 1999). Recent work on Kushite agricultural systems at Kawa (Sudan), however, appears to date the earliest recognisably domesticated forms to between *c.*400–780 BC (Fuller 2004). Some of the earliest domesticated forms of the crop are to be found in southern/eastern Arabia (Edens and Wilkinson 1998) and also India (Fuller 2003; as is finger millet see Mehra 1991) in archaeological contexts dating from *c.* AD 100. The Kawa data appears to weaken the recently held view that Sorghum did not emerge as a recognisably domesticated form in its area of origin until around AD 200. A consideration of the archaeological evidence for food production in the immediately adjacent areas to the Ethiopian–Eritrean plateau emphasises the need to move away from evolutionary models and also suggests avenues for reconstructing the situation in that region.

Regional case study: incipient generalist economic systems (Middle Nile; Gash Delta)

In the middle Nile region of modern Sudan, a 'Mesolithic' phase (the terminology is obviously derived form Eurocentric prehistoric constructs) dating from around 8 kya is defined by semi-sedentary riverside and lakeside communities (this period of the early middle Holocene was much wetter than today). This period is characterised culturally by bone harpoon points and distinctive ceramics, and is recognised as a 'pre-adaptive' phase of economic intensification (Edwards 2004: 24–31). There is no evidence at

this stage for plant or animal domestication. Seemingly widespread cultural analogues exist in contemporary contexts across the Sahara into the Sahel, and southwards to the east of the Lake Victoria basin (this horizon was labelled the 'aqualithic' by John Sutton; Sutton 1977). A subsequent 'Neolithic' phase is defined on the basis of the presence of domesticated stock (although a fishing component remains important; Krzyzaniak 1991), and latterly domesticated, imported cereals (Haaland 1995).

A somewhat different picture emerges from the eastern Sudanic steppes, close to the modern Eritrean border, where the Gash River debouches into the arid Atbai plains, a region which as we shall see has played a formative role in the shaping of socio-cultural developments on the northern plateau. Later prehistoric sites in this region show evidence of more rapid economic adaptive change over a very short timescale. The earliest sites – variably dating from 8 kya to 6 kya – demonstrate a reliance upon hunting-fishing and plant gathering (Fattovich 1993; Haaland 1995). Later Saroba-phase settlements (approximately 5–4 kya) are characterised by a lesser reliance on riverine resource exploitation, and a general trend towards increased site aggregation, larger population density and intensive hunting and wild grass collecting, a scenario that could be possibly viewed as a response to a gradual climatic desiccation (Marks 1987; Marks and Fattovich 1989).

It is only during the Jebel Mokram phase (3 kya) that the emergence of a fully fledged agropastoral system is recognised (Sadr 1993), although it appears that this is more of a social phenomenon rather than a response to environmental pressure. Karim Sadr hypothesises that the pastoralist adaptation in this region developed on the margins of large-scale complex polities (Meroë, and latterly Aksum); it afforded a range of mobility and a sense of social independence that settled agropastoralism could not furnish (Sadr 1991: 127). The circle has turned from an intensive hunter-gatherer economy, to a generalised 'pre-adaptive' economic phase, to a settled agropastoral economy and finally a return to mobility and economic specialisation. A consideration of the data from the middle Nile and adjacent regions obviously has implications for our understanding of economic change in the northern and eastern zones of the highland regions during the mid-late Holocene, but for the southern portions of the plateau and adjacent lowland areas we need to look southwards, beyond Lake Turkana.

Regional case study: incipient specialist economic systems (east African highlands)

Another contrast presents itself to the south of the plateau. Archaeological research on the early food-producing economies of the eastern African highland zone (within the modern states of Kenya and Tanzania) has shed light upon the emergence specialised pastoralist economies. In the Lake Turkana region, distinctive barbed harpoon points and 'wavy line' pottery

have been discovered at the site of Lowasera in contexts dating from around 9 kya (Phillipson 1977b; it will be recalled that similar barbed-bone harpoon points, associated with ceramics and a mode 5 lithic industry, have also been noted in the Ethiopian Omo valley). It is clear that these settlements tended towards a discrete aquatic specialisation, rather like contemporary sites on the middle Nile and eastern Sahara, although there is a crucial difference between the two regions. Although intensive exploitation of grasses is attested to (alongside a wider hunting economy) at the northern Kenyan sites of North Horr, Ele Bor and Kulchurdo at around 5 kya (Phillipson 1984), the utilisation of plant resources is not noted elsewhere. In later phases, from *c.*4,500 years ago the emphasis is wholly upon livestock (although fishing appears to remain important), and not just from an economic perspective. The presence of clay cattle figurines at the megalithic site of Jaragole hints at a developing cattle-centred ideological scheme.

Southwards, savanna sites dating from *c.*3 kya (both Elmenteitan and Pastoral Neolithic cultural traditions) contain very high percentages of domestic cattle and although associated with grinding stones actually have yielded no evidence for plant domestication (Marshall 1990). This relatively 'late' development of pastoral economies here may have important implications for our study of the eastern fringes of the Ethiopian plateau as well as the Rift Valley corridor. As Fiona Marshall has suggested (1990), it was only with the onset of the modern rainfall regime *c.*3 kya that these regions became optimum zones and pastoralism began to flourish. The foregoing discussion has illustrated, as Diane Gifford-Gonzales has shown us (2005: 214), that the picture yielded by archaeological research on early African food production does not conform to the traditional framework suggested by a western Asian and also latterly a Eurocentric orientation. An awareness of these factors might help us contextualise the admittedly limited Ethiopian archaeological evidence to which we now turn.

The archaeological evidence for early food-producing economies in the Ethiopian region

Prior to the 1970s very little targeted archaeological fieldwork focused upon the problem of identifying early food production (primarily mixed generalist farming) in the Ethiopian–Eritrean region. This is why so many early models put forward to explain the phenomenon are very speculative and reliant upon migrationist or diffusionist scenarios, seeking 'origins' in either the Nile Valley or southern Arabia (Clark 1962; 1976; Murdock 1959; Simoons 1965). More data generated during the early 1970s – particularly the excavations of Joanne Dombrowski around Lake Tana (Dombrowski 1970) and Steven Brandt at Lake Besaka (Brandt 1980) provided the basis for a number of critiques which predominantly utilised

multi-disciplinary perspectives on the problem (Barnett 1999b; Brandt 1984; Clark 1976; Phillipson 1993; Sutton 1989b) but which all came to the same conclusion: more work was needed. In the 1990s targeted excavations on mid-Holocene sites in the Aksum region (Finneran 1999; see also Agazi 1997a) and also continuing work by Steven Brandt (1997) on Enset cultivation on the south-west plateau have added to the debate, although the work at Aksum has in general emphasised the problematic nature of rock-shelter taphonomy. To these studies we should add recent archaeobotanical work on the food-producing economies of the 'pre-Aksumite' and Aksumite periods.

'Direct evidence': the archaeological context for crop cultivation in the region

Within late-mid Holocene archaeological contexts (i.e. before the 'pre-Aksumite' period) direct evidence for crop exploitation is very thin. At Gobedra rock-shelter, Aksum, a number of finger millet seeds were noted in stratum 2b, associated with a radiocarbon date of *c.*7 kya. The implications for such a date are obvious; domesticated finger millet has been found in roughly contemporary contexts in India and Arabia, but not in this region until at least the Aksumite period, and even then only very sparsely (Phillipson 2000: 469). The fact that the seeds were not carbonised raised doubts about the date and in fact much later direct dating of a single seed by AMS techniques showed the seed to have been intrusive, and it was certainly not older than AD 1000 (Phillipson 1990). A more intensive programme of wet flotation was undertaken on rock-shelter sites at Aksum in the 1990s. Mixed charred botanical material, including barley, wheat, tef and legumes were recovered from Anqqer Baahti but these were contaminated, as were those from Baahti Nebait, which had seemed to the excavator to have possessed more secure archaeological deposits. A direct AMS date on a charred *Hordeum sp.* seed from the latter site, associated with the aceramic mode 5 industry, proved it to have been intrusive (Finneran 2000b).

Beyond the Aksum region, mode 5 material from Porc Epic was associated with cow pea remains but again considerable doubt must attach to its stratigraphic security (Clark and Williamson 1984). From Dombrowski's work east of Lake Tana, archaeobotanical flotation was possible only at the Lalibela site. Here, a mode 5 industry was associated in the lowest stratum with grinding stones and iron pieces, and with a radiocarbon date of 2,500 years ago. Barley, horse bean and chick pea were identified from this phase, making this site one of the earliest in the Ethiopian/Eritrean highlands to yield elements of the Western Asian crop assemblage (comparable with material from the Ona sites of central Eritrea discussed in the next chapter). Tef was only recognised in much later contexts, at around

2 kya. It is also clear – from present archaeological evidence and mirroring the picture with finger millet and sorghum – that some of the earliest archaeological finds of tef are to be found beyond the Ethiopian highlands. A find from Hajar Bin Humeid in south-western Arabia has been suggested to date to *c.*4,600 years ago (Van Beek 1969: 367) and there are also unconfirmed finds of *Eragrostis pilosa* reported from Dassur, Egypt and Ramses, Israel (Portères 1976). *Avena Abyssinica*, the Ethiopian oat, was found alongside sorghum at the prehistoric site of Hili 8, Abu Dhabi (Potts 1994).

In addition to direct evidence for mid-late Holocene plant cultivation, there are a number of other avenues which may reward investigation. Clark and Williams (1978) proposed that blades excavated at the rock shelter of Laga Oda showed evidence of plant silicates on their edges ('sickle sheen'); accretions were also noted on the edges of the mudstone long-blades from Anqqer Baahti, Aksum (Finneran 2000a; see Figure 2.9b), but using microscopic analysis it was inferred that the material was probably a post-depositional phenomenon. Arguably a more valid approach – and one used extensively on later, Aksumite stone scrapers by Laurel Phillipson – is edge wear analysis. The Anqqer Baahti blades did not show the sort of fracturing at microscopic level consistent with butchery or hide preparation, and it is possible (although by no means proven by the absence of associated plant evidence) that they *could* have been used to cut wild grasses. Indeed experimentation with archaeological specimens appeared to suggest that they would have been effective harvesting knives.

The presence of grinding stones has been noted at a number of mid-late Holocene sites; Barnett (1999b: 100–1) draws attention to finds from 'MSA' contexts at Porc Epic and Gorgora, and later from 'LSA' contexts in the Rift at Lake Besaka and in the highlands at Gobedra. A number were also recovered from Anqqer Baahti. Barnett points out that these pieces need not necessarily have been used merely to grind seeds and grains; some show evidence for preparation of ochre, an important symbolic material, whilst others could have been used to detoxify certain plant foods or even grind salt. It is generally true to suggest, as Barnett thinks, that the appearance of this technology does represent an important component in pre-adaptive technology, much like the long-blades of Anqqer Baahti, perhaps, but the numbers and contextual associations of these pieces militate against any truly firm conclusions in this regard. Iconographic representation of crop husbandry as opposed to pastoralist activity is rare; a ploughing scene at the Eritrean rock art site of Amba (Baahti) Focada is well known and unique (Figure 3.5). (David Phillipson (1993) has also drawn attention to the depiction of ears of corn on Aksumite coins; the symbolism of the iconography is clear: state and land were intimately attached).

In conclusion, we must ask ourselves why we have so little direct evidence for plant cultivation in the mid-late Holocene period in Ethiopia (bearing in mind of course that absence of evidence should not betoken

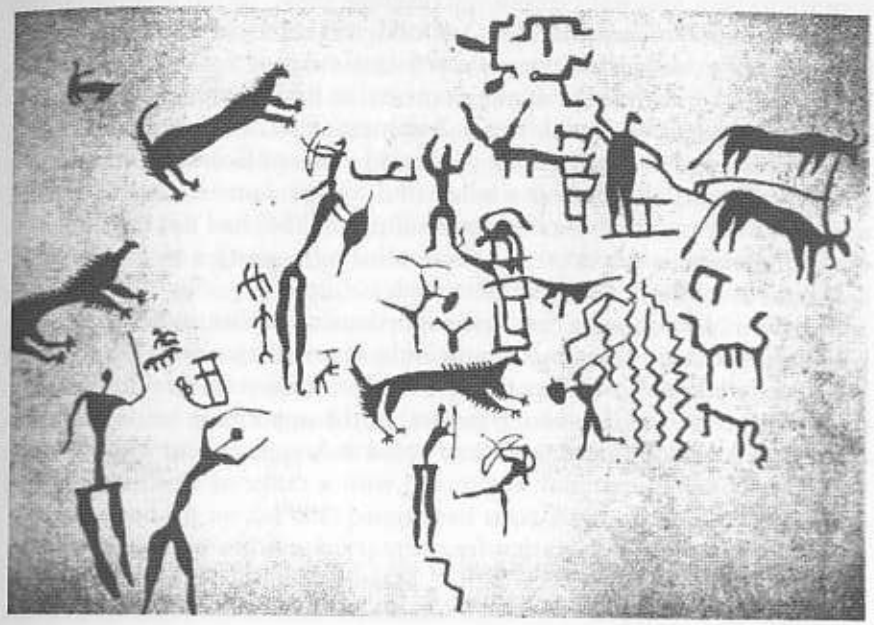

Figure 3.5 Ploughing scene, Baahti Focada, Eritrea (after Graziosi 1941).

evidence of absence). The main arguments concerning the survival and recognition of the African cultivars discussed above obviously apply in this regard. Rock-shelters, whilst seemingly ideal micro-environments for plant preservation are especially problematic, often being the home to burrowing animals whose activities disturb the stratigraphic matrix. The best results have been obtained from farmsteads but these date at the earliest from the pre-Aksumite period. It is also clear that a major shift in excavation methodology is required; hitherto rock-shelter sites have been excavated in arbitrary spits. They should be treated as any open site, excavated in open area and also using single-context recording, essential good practice for secure archaeobotanical recovery. In addition to the botanical data, faunal data for the period in question are also disappointingly sparse.

'Direct evidence': the archaeological context for animal husbandry in the region

Faunal remains from later sites associated with 'LSA' material from the late-mid Holocene are generally highly fragmentary and for the most part unidentifiable at species level. Apparent domesticated bovid remains are suggested from material dating from around 3,500 years ago in the Rift Valley sites of Laga Oda and Lake Besaka. At the latter site a significant shift away from aquatic resource exploitation towards cattle pastoralism is noted at this time, and this material is associated with fragments of what

appears to be a Pastoral Neolithic-style stone bowl. In the highlands, the three excavated rock-shelter sites around Aksum have all yielded very fragmentary evidence for domesticated cattle dating from *c.*3 kya, and later material from pre-Aksumite contexts at Beta Giyorgis is placed at *c.*2,300 years ago (Bard *et al.* 1997). A domesticated camel tooth excavated in archaeological contexts dating to around 4 kya at Gobedra would have been significant (alongside a similar find by the same excavator at the northern Kenyan site of Ele Bor, see Phillipson 1984) had not the integrity of the archaeological context not been called into question by recent AMS dates on the associated finger millet seed.

At Baahti Nebait we see that the proportions of smaller, more gregarious wild animal remains increase significantly in association with the mode 5 lithic material, indicative perhaps that the improvements in hunting technology were yielding better results. In the uppermost levels domesticated bovids predominated, a pattern noted at Anqqer Baahti where unfortunately the faunal material was mixed with a range of small burrowing carnivore remains. Tertia Barnett has argued (1999a), on the basis of first-hand study of the material, that fragmentary domesticated bovid remains from levels 4/3 at Quiha rock-shelter, Mekelle could date, by association, to as early as 4 kya. Fragmentary faunal material was also collected at the Lake Tana sites of Lalibela and Natchabiet caves (Dombrowski 1970); in the lower levels it was noted that there were proportionately more cattle remains than ovicaprines, whilst this pattern was reversed in the upper levels which reflects current stock-keeping practice in the region. Long-term environmental records do not suggest any major climatic upheaval to account for this shift in faunal exploitation which is arguably in historical times a response to economic factors.

Beyond the plateau, useful faunal data have been revealed by excavation in Somalia and along the Red Sea coast of Djibouti. The Eibian industry of Somalia which dates to *c.*9 kya is associated with grinding stones, wild fauna, and (in coastal areas) shell middens, hinting at a very broad-based economic adaptation (Brandt 1988; Brandt and Gresham 1991). Fragmentary undiagnostic bovid fragments have been found at most of these sites, generally dating from around 3,500 years ago. In the northern part of the Afar, (Djibouti) evidence of pastoralist settlements dating to around 4 kya has come to light. The site of Handoga was the home of nomadic pastoralists who possessed domesticated cattle and fabricated a microlithic obsidian lithic industry and very plain ceramics from the middle of the fourth millennium BP (Grau 1981). Coastal midden sites attest to widespread marine resource utilisation, and the large numbers of 'picks' that are found on these sites may have been used for opening larger molluscs.

The plentiful rock art in the Djibouti region hints at hunting and pastoralist economies; on the one hand are scenes with caravans, camels and

cattle herding, on the other are hunting scenes depicting many forms of large game such as giraffe (Ferry 1981). Over 2 kya this coast was the home of the *Icthyophagi*, or fish-eating peoples (Kobishchanov 1979: 125) described by Agatharchides of Cnidus. It appears that these coastal peoples (whom modern scholars closely identify with the Cushitic-speaking Beja who now occupy north-western Eritrea) practised a dual economic strategy based on seasonal mobility with herds of cattle, and (during lean times) trapped fish and shellfish from the coastal zones (Burstein 1989: 69–74). We now need to address other avenues of enquiry which may help elucidate the picture. Two key approaches which look at indirect evidence for food-producing economies in antiquity demand our attention: first the use of linguistics to help reconstruct economic change in the past, and second a consideration of the region's rich wealth of rock art which allows us, to some extent, to move beyond questions of economics and which enables us to reach into the mindset and world view of the earliest cattle keepers of the Horn of Africa.

'Indirect evidence': the palaeolinguistic context

African archaeologists and historians have long recognised the value of using palaeolinguistic approaches to reconstruct economic change in the past (Blench 1997; 2006). In favourable circumstances it should be possible to reconstruct the original 'proto-language' of a given phylum and isolate specific terms associated with subsistence strategies which can then be traced through time, as well as to identify the area of origin of the phylum, and track subsequent linguistic and economic dispersal. It is important to recognise the limitations of these approaches in general terms; one cannot date words. It was once thought possible to estimate relative time depths of convergence or divergence of languages in a family using lexicostatistical approaches (which statistically calibrated the 'decay' or mutation of cognates over time), and then by utilising a technique known as glotto-chronology actually supply an absolute chronology for language change. These methodologies used a universalised approach to language change, but are now discredited. Socio-linguistic studies have shown that language mutation is not a predictable variable to be applied universally, there are many (often unquantifiable) factors which contribute to language change over rapid or long periods (Blench 1997).

Palaeolinguistic reconstruction of the core vocabulary of African proto-languages has highlighted a number of very important issues for the study of economic prehistory. Subsistence-based vocabulary has the benefit of being a universal variable among language groups (Fronzaroli 1975), and also betrays possible areas of origins for language phyla (in general terms the more diverse the languages are in a given area the more likely that area is to be the geographical area of origin for that phylum. This has implications for

the Ethiopian–Eritrean picture). Names of plants are better in this respect because they are obviously more specific to a given 'core' ecological area whereas animals tend to be more easily transported across language groups (Schnirelman 1997). No vocabulary related to cultivation, for instance, is found in the proto-language of the Niger-Congo ('Bantu') phylum (Blench 1997). Within these languages agricultural terminology has been acquired from other non-related languages. In his reconstruction of proto-Berber, Blench (2001) has demonstrated that all major classes of domestic ruminant are present in the vocabulary, but words for camel are not. Speakers of proto-Berber languages were therefore agriculturalists rather than pastoralists. These forms of reconstruction allow us to define a *relative* chronology for economic change to language evolution even if we cannot provide hard dates. The study of loan words is also important; the introduction of maize (a New World crop) into Africa through the agency of Portuguese colonial contact can be traced linguistically rather than archaeologically across the Continent through the transmission of a novel item of vocabulary (Blench 1997). Let us now try to translate some of these concepts to the later prehistory of the Ethiopian/Eritrean region.

We have already encountered the variety and types of languages found in this area of Africa (Chapter 1; Hetzron and Bender 1976). In general terms linguistic diversity equates with antiquity, but as Blench (2006: 54) cautions: 'total numbers of language and diversity often go together but should not be confused'. If we take the modern Afro-Asiatic languages of the Horn of Africa we find a diverse set of languages; the Ethio-Semitic languages of Gurage in south-western Ethiopia, for instance, are exceptionally diverse yet clearly related. Looking at subsistence-based terminology one is able to reconstruct a relative timescale of linguistic divergence. One of the most controversial contentions – but only for those linguists perhaps of a more Asian-orientated, Semitic intellectual background – is that the Afro-Asiatic phylum probably had its area of origin in what is now the south-western corner of the Ethiopian highlands at around 10 kya (Blench 2006: 159).

Around 7,500 years ago the main heartland displaced northwards into the Nile Valley from where the Afro-Asiatic languages moved into western Asia (the progenitors of Arabic and Hebrew *inter alia*). The Omotic languages developed within the original core zone of origin of the Afro-Asiatic languages and are characterised by an extensive hunting-gathering terminology; the proto-Cushitic languages, in contrast, were characterised by a core subsistence-based vocabulary which suggests an intimate knowledge of animal husbandry (pastoralism) (Blench 2006: 151). The modern Ethio-Semitic languages owe their presence to a reintroduction through the agency of migrants from South Arabia around 2,500 years ago.

According to Christopher Ehret (1979) speakers of Semitic languages actually borrowed their agricultural terminology from speakers of Cushitic

languages; this suggests that there was no introduction of agriculture by the migrant Semitic populations from Arabia as traditional models have suggested (e.g. Clark 1976; Hetzron and Bender 1976). The Amharic word for finger millet, for instance, is *Dagussa*, a word derived from the Cushitic Agau languages rather than any Ethio-Semitic derivation. Detailing the development of the original, earlier Cushitic agropastoral tradition, Ehret describes two key economic systems co-existing in north-eastern Africa from 8 kya to 5 kya. The first was the preserve of Nilo-Saharan speakers centred around the Nile Valley and was based upon pastoralism and sorghum cultivation (1998: 5); the second (which he terms the 'Erythraean Neolithic') is suggested to have been the preserve of Cushitic speakers, and was centred around the Red Sea littoral and Ethiopian/Eritrean highland zone, and was based more on the exploitation of wild plant resources (this economic stress is mirrored in surviving vocabulary in many of the region's Cushitic languages, many of whom it will be recalled are today pastoralist peoples). The Western Asian package of crops was introduced, it is argued, at this time into north-eastern Africa from across the Red Sea or via the Sinai (1998: 11). In short, linguistic approaches can offer powerful analytical tools to the archaeologist, and are especially suited to the study of the antiquity of cultivation and animal husbandry in the Horn of Africa. Another 'indirect' evidential approach recommends itself in the study of the region's extensive corpus of parietal art which can begin to add a more psychological dimension to the raw archaeological and linguistic data.

'Indirect evidence': the iconographic context

Whilst recent studies of the European and Asian backgrounds to the emergence of food production have begun to emphasise the symbolic implications of the new lifestyle, this has not, with few exceptions (e.g. Haaland 1997) been attempted for the African material. The study of prehistoric rock art offers such an avenue, particularly in a north-eastern African context. Southern African rock art, perhaps the most well-researched corpus of prehistoric iconography in Africa, is the work of hunter-gatherers and as such it has a different underlying psychological 'grammar' and references different cosmological experiences. Cattle obviously formed the main economic basis of north-eastern African pastoralist societies, and they thus subsequently acquired overt social meanings and also strong symbolic connotations. Cattle burials have been discovered at Nabta Playa and Bir Kiseiba (Wendorf and Schild 1998), and at the site of El Ghaba in the Sudan cattle horns are associated with human burials (Lecointe 1987). Much later, in the eastern cemetery at Kerma in the middle Nile region we also find cattle burials – not simply the disposal of an already butchered carcass, but the interment of a whole beast, often associated with grave goods (Chaix 1988).

The bull soon took on other connotations; in pre-dynastic Egypt it was identified with the king, although we should be cautious about uncritically using the term 'cattle cult' (Wengrow 2001). There is also ample ethnographic evidence for the way in which cattle have transcended purely economic meanings; Similar aesthetic values are also prevalent among the Maasai of Kenya (Galaty 1989). For them cattle are things of beauty as well as indicators of personal wealth; they have acquired, in Marxist parlance, fetishistic status; they have moved beyond pure monetary value and are no longer mere walking larders. It has even been recently suggested, from an Ethiopian perspective that the Ethiopic glyph *Ha* – meaning beginning – is based on a pictograph of the horns of a bull (Ayele Bekerie 1997: 80). Clearly this is a very widespread symbolic reaction to cattle ownership.

The regional ethnoarchaeological and archaeological evidence then, suggests that cattle carried important symbolic connotations, but how can we undertake more nuanced interpretations of the evidence from the Ethiopian and Eritrean rock art? A general consideration of some recent approaches to the interpretation of prehistoric rock art in a wider context may highlight some of the main cosmological (and economic) concerns surrounding the emergence of food production in the region. Prehistorians have long moved away from the notion of 'art for art's sake'; these pictures were designed to be 'read' in a certain way, as grammar in fact, as Christopher Tilley noted in his ground-breaking analysis of northern Scandinavian rock art (Tilley 1991: 53). We may take this concept a step further by attempting to codify the rules of the grammar; each discrete image can be read as a word, its meaning changed through juxtaposition with other images (Hassan 1993); like language, the images are fluid and may be freely combined. Recognising this schema is one thing, making the next step and breathing meaning into the grammar is more difficult.

The British prehistorian Steven Mithen has argued that some Western European Upper Palaeolithic rock art can be seen as a tool of information transfer. These images codified vital environmental information depicting the seasonality of game, habitats and the spoor of certain animals (Mithen 1988). In this sense the images were to be 'read' as a guide for hunting. A visual grammar such as this demands a 'naturalistic', accurate approach to the subject matter, but what happens with abstract imagery? Recent work on southern African rock art (focusing especially on geometrics and abstract forms) has highlighted the possibility of the depiction of altered states of consciousness of the San shaman; they are attempting to depict the entoptic ('behind the eye') visual phenomena associated with the shamanic trance state (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988). This model is based upon a very specific ethnographic analogy which clearly does not translate into other ideological contexts. We cannot simply argue that all abstract phenomena are indicative of cases of altered states of consciousness; other more complex factors may be at work. These are just two approaches

which can be taken to explain the meaning of the rock art of Africa, the naturalistic and abstract. Let us now turn to the pictures themselves.

Prehistoric rock art – both painted and engraved – is widely distributed around the Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands, but major centres may be defined in eastern and southern Eritrea (particularly the Hamasen region), and towards the south-east of the Ethiopian massif around Harar, and in the southern highlands of Sidamo (Agazi 1990). The study of rock art in the highland zone of Ethiopia and Eritrea has had a long history (Agazi 1997b); the French prehistorian Henri Breuil (1934) described a number of rock art sites around the Harar region, and Desmond Clark published a brief description of a few southern sites, particularly Yavello (Clark 1954). More detailed descriptions and cataloguing of these sites continued into the 1970s, when scholars began to turn their attentions to the rock art of adjacent areas, such as Djibouti and Somalia (Brandt and Carder 1987; Joussaume 1981). There are other areas with much sparser distribution of rock art localities; within Tigray, for instance, the 'homeland' of the Aksumite polity, very few sites of rock art have been reported (Gigar 1979; 2000), but of late new sites have been discovered in Aksum, Tembien, Shire and Gulo Maqeda and await full description (Phillipson 2000: 424; Agazi 1997a; Finneran and Phillips 2003b; Catherine D'Andrea pers. comm.). The major sites by zone (with references) are set in Table 3.2.

It is impossible to date these depictions. Occasionally rock art may be associated at the site with a recognisable cultural sequence, yet this can only give a very broad chronological attribution. By and large, archaeologists are compelled to employ relative methods of dating based on the evolution and change of style over time, and this is certainly true of the Ethiopian/Eritrean material. The key concept is stylistic degradation; the earliest forms are held to be naturalistic in style, whereas the latest designs are more abstract, or schematic. This may occasionally be proven by the superimposition of differing styles, and it was largely on this basis that Breuil felt able to distinguish eight phases of rock art evolution in southern Ethiopia, arguably an exercise in exceptional 'splitting' (Willcox 1984: 57) and is not followed here. It is widely accepted that zebu cattle and fat-tailed sheep were a late introduction to Ethiopia (Brandt 1984), and it has been argued that the earliest 'naturalistic' paintings solely depict long-horned and humpless cattle, but this does not give a concrete date for the evolution of the different styles, especially when one considers the conservatism of the artist in their choice of subject material.

Modern academic consensus has settled on two basic 'styles' of rock art in the Horn of Africa. The earliest style, naturalistic in character and mainly depicting humpless cattle, is known as the Sorre-Hanyika style (Anfray 1964); this is followed by a recognisably different, more abstract

and schematic style known as the Dahthami style. Cattle bucrania (i.e. skull with extended, exaggerated horn) representations predominate, abstract geometric symbols, interpreted as tribal motifs or totems (Clark 1954: 304) appear in numbers, and anthropomorphs appear as mere dashes, often in the shape of the letter H. Parallels with neighbouring regions have been suggested; the hypertrophied horns of the schematic cattle motifs and certain geometric motifs are thought to share traits with broadly contemporary South Arabian rock art depictions (Cervicek 1978), but the current evidence from both regions does not point to any close similarities (Durrani 2005: 106). Certain motifs appear to be specifically African in character, especially with the trend towards narrowing of the cattle bodies, the high arching of the horns and the twisted perspective of the body (Graziosi 1964a). It is hard to disagree with this basic chronological stylistic scheme, but it is overly simplistic, and it certainly takes no account of the considerable stylistic differences between the northern and southern rock art regions.

In the north a very noticeable trend towards visual abstraction may be seen. A cattle-herding scene from Baahti Sullum (Figure 3.6) could be described as being the most 'naturalistic' in style. The cattle are rendered in outline, with internal patching and mottling; all are humpless taurines, and no humans are present. The central emphasis is on four heifers, each with a suckling calf, suggesting a stress upon the reproductive aspect. One may detect a subtle stylistic shift in two similar depictions from Zeban

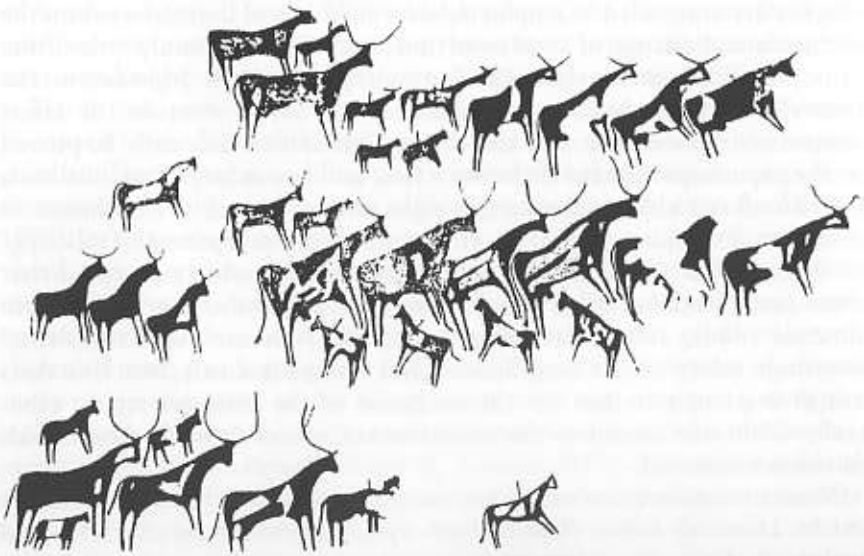

Figure 3.6 Herding scene, Baahti Sullum, Eritrea (after Graziosi 1964a).

Table 3.2 Major pastoralist rock art sites of Ethiopia and Eritrea

Region	*References*
ERITREA	
Baahti Abba Keisi	Graziosi 1964a
Zeban Ona Libanos	Graziosi 1964a
Karora	Vigliardi-Micheli 1956
Sollim Baahti	Graziosi 1964a; Franchini 1951
Baahti Sullum	Graziosi 1964a
Baahti Focada	Graziosi 1964b; Leclant and Miquel 1959
Kortamit	Cervicek 1976
Maji Malehess	Cervicek 1976
Lamdrara	Cervicek 1976
Dembe Wadi Mudui	Cervicek 1976
Edit	Franchini 1963
Da'ro Qawlos	Tringali 1990
(See survey by Calegari 1999)	
HARAR	
Genda-Biftou (Goda Kataba)	Breuil 1934; Anfray 1965
Wayber	Joussaume 1995:49
Ourso	Bailloud 1963
Goda Rorris (Errer Kimiet 1)	Bailloud 1963; Anfray 1965
Saka Sharifa	Bailloud 1963
Goda Ondji	Bailloud 1963
Laga Gafra	Cervicek and Braukamper 1975
Laga Oda	Cervicek 1971
SIDAMO	See overview: Le Quellec and Abegaz 2001
Chabbé (Šappe, or Mancetti)	Anfray 1976
Galma	Anfray 1976
Yavello	Clark 1954
Bur Dahir	Clark 1954
El Goran	Clark 1954
Ka'mbata Azga	Bouakaze-Khan and Poisblaud 2000
Akirsa	Poisblaud 2002.

Ona Libanos and Baahti Focada; at Zeban Ona Libanos (Figure 3.7), there are three hunting/pastoral depictions, the cattle in two depictions have more elongated bodies, and are clearly different in style from the Baahti Sullum herding scene. Here stylised anthropomorphs wield spears and shields, their bodies are elongated, but noticeably flare out at the midriff. The subject material here strongly suggests a pastoralist economy (note the depiction of milking), with an almost equal emphasis between human and animal interaction. The scene from Baahti Focada, however (Figure 3.5), suggests an agropastoral economy with a depiction of a plough yoked to two humpless cattle.

Figure 3.7 Herding scene, Zeban Ona Libanos, Eritrea (after Graziosi 1964a).

The latest forms of northern rock art are, as many scholars agree, the most abstract: the motif of the bucranium. A selection of these depictions from Kortamit, Maji Malehess and Lamdrara is shown in Figure 3.8a–d. These designs are pecked rather than painted, a technique that automatically lessens the degree of detail available to the artist; Cervicek claims to be able to distinguish between ovicaprine and bovine depictions, but it is debateable whether there is any clear difference. The ancestry of this motif is not clear, but it is striking, relegating the body and emphasising the horn. In some cases a small bifurcation or addition to the horn may be noted (Figure 3.8a), and this has been interpreted as being a horn ornament-modern Nilotic pastoralists of eastern Africa still decorate the cattle horns of their herds (Graziosi 1964a). One of the more fascinating motifs is the fused bucranium (Figure 3.8b; c). Here, two or more individual elements

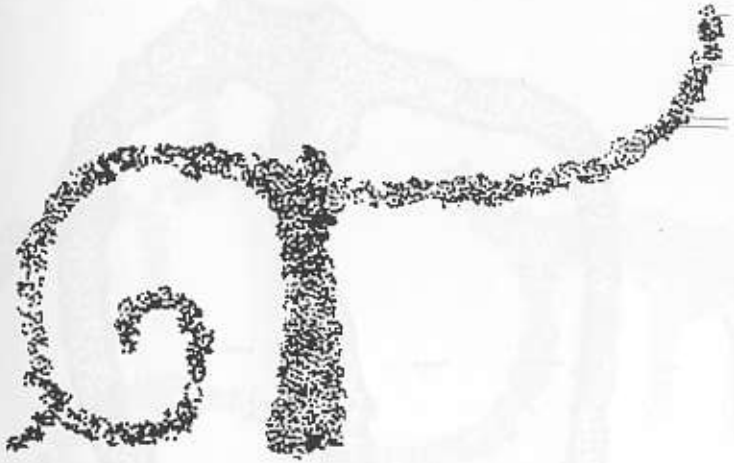

Figure 3.8a Stylised bucrania, Hamasen sites, Eritrea: Lamdrara, note horn decoration.

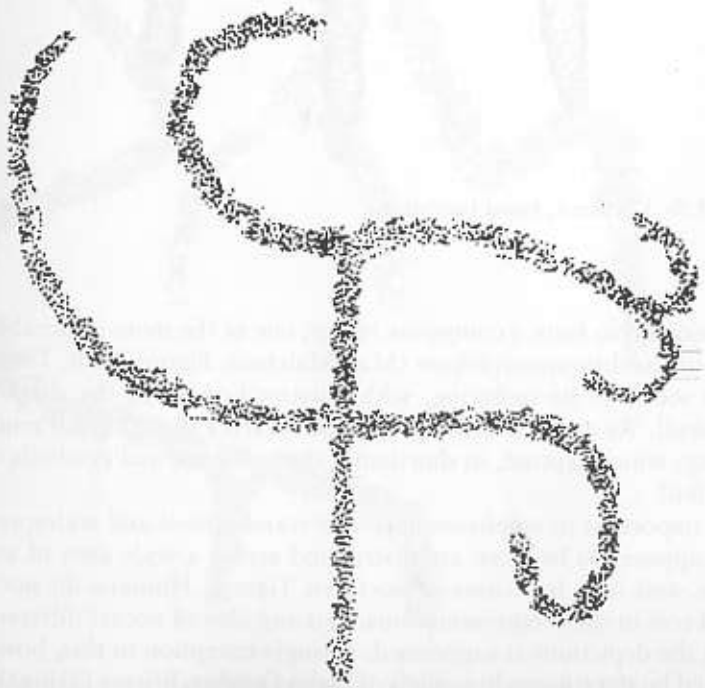

Figure 3.8b Lamdrara, fused bucrania.

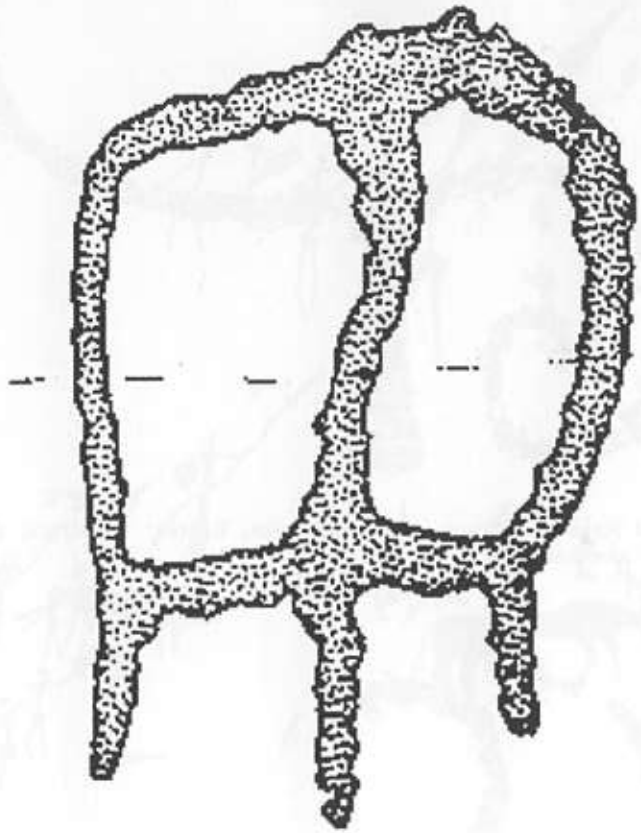

Figure 3.8c Kortamit, fused bucrania.

are conjoined to form a composite image; one of the more noticeable is the composite anthropomorph/cow (Maji Malehess; Figure 3.8d). The human almost seems to be imitating, with outstretched arms, the shape of the bull's skull. We are now dealing with icons rather than faithful renditions, drawings which capture, in shorthand, the economic and symbolic essence of the bull.

It is important to emphasise just how standardised and widespread this image appears to be (they are distributed across a wide area of southern Eritrea, and in a few cases in northern Tigray). Humans do not play a central role in these representations, and any idea of sexual differentiation within the depictions is suppressed. A single exception to this, however, is provided by the strange bas reliefs of Da'ro Qawlos, Eritrea (Tringali 1990) which appear to show carved female figurines, all seemingly naked with

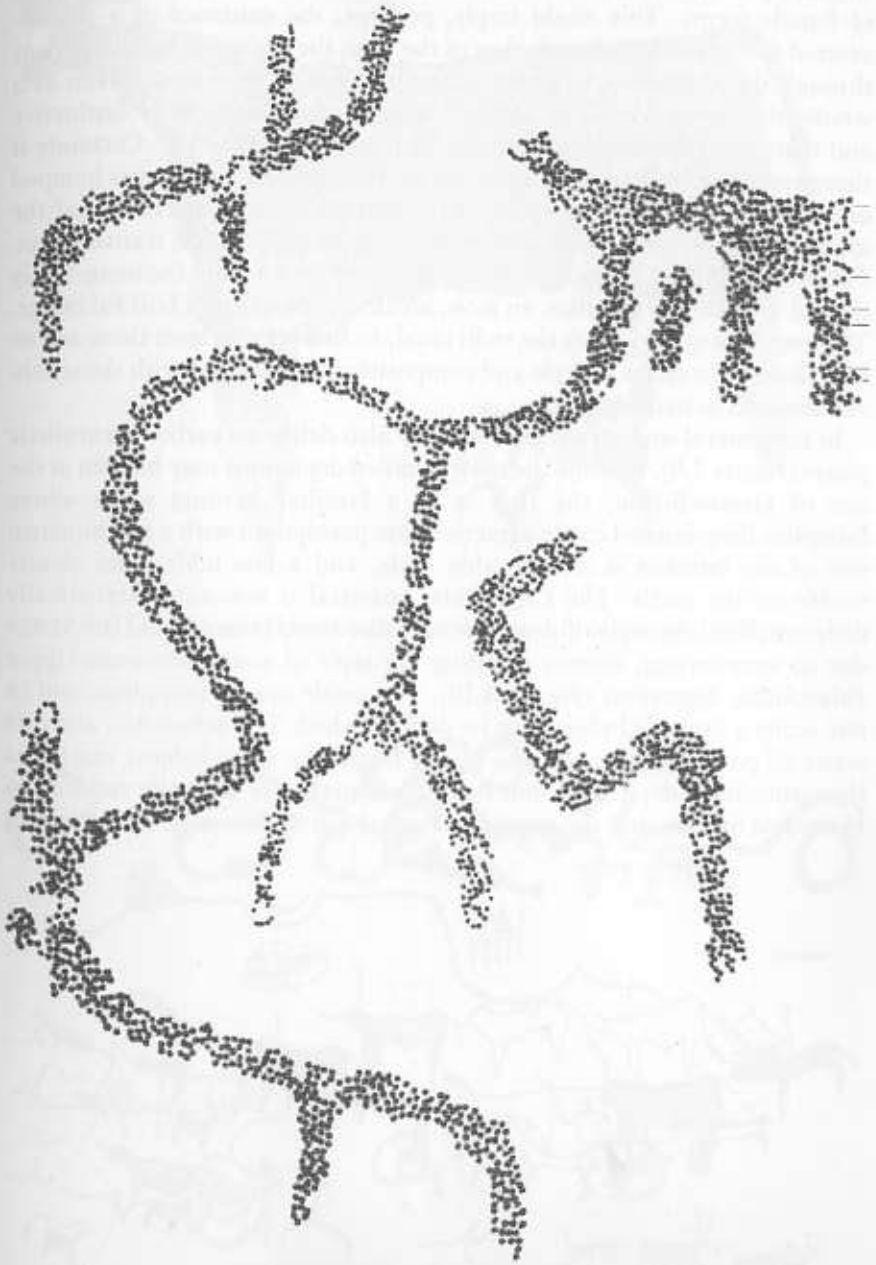

Figure 3.8d Maji Malehess anthropomorph (all after Cervicek 1976).

stylised heads, almost surrounded by what appears to be a halo. There is a single appearance of a cow's head, but the accent is wholly upon a register of female forms. This might imply, perhaps, the existence of a female-centred fertility cult alongside that of the cow; the notion of fecundity runs through the symbolism of much of the rock art of the Horn. Taken as a whole, the cattle depictions of the northern region are highly distinctive and there is a remarkable uniformity of image and execution. Certainly if these are the later images, then it does not matter whether a cow is humped or not. The detailed recognition of the animal is not important, and the images are thus not used as media for accurate information transmission. The artists, limited by their preferred means of pecking out the image, only needed to present a signifier, an icon, an idea, rather than a faithful image. The emphasis is also upon the individual, in this style at least there are no large friezes. In terms of style and composition the contrast with the southern material is striking.

In the general southern region we may also define an earlier naturalistic phase (Figure 3.9). Perhaps the most detailed depictions may be seen at the site of Genda-Biftou; the first is of a familiar herding scene where humpless long-horned cattle depictions are juxtaposed with a few humans; one of the humans is recognisably male, and a few udders are clearly visible on the cattle. The Laga Gafra material is noticeably stylistically different; here the style of depiction is rather more blurred (and this is not due to weathering), almost recalling the style of some European Upper Palaeolithic depictions (Figure 3.10). The cattle are all humpless, and in one scene a fat-tailed sheep can be distinguished. The schematic, abstract series of paintings from Genda-Biftou retain the same subject matter as the naturalistic depictions, but here the humans are virtually reduced to H-shaped figures, and the cattle are rendered in outline with filling within

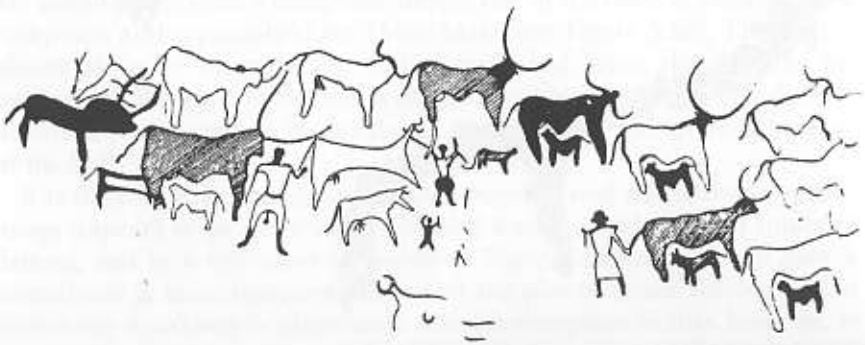

Figure 3.9 Genda Biftou, Harar (after Breuil 1934).

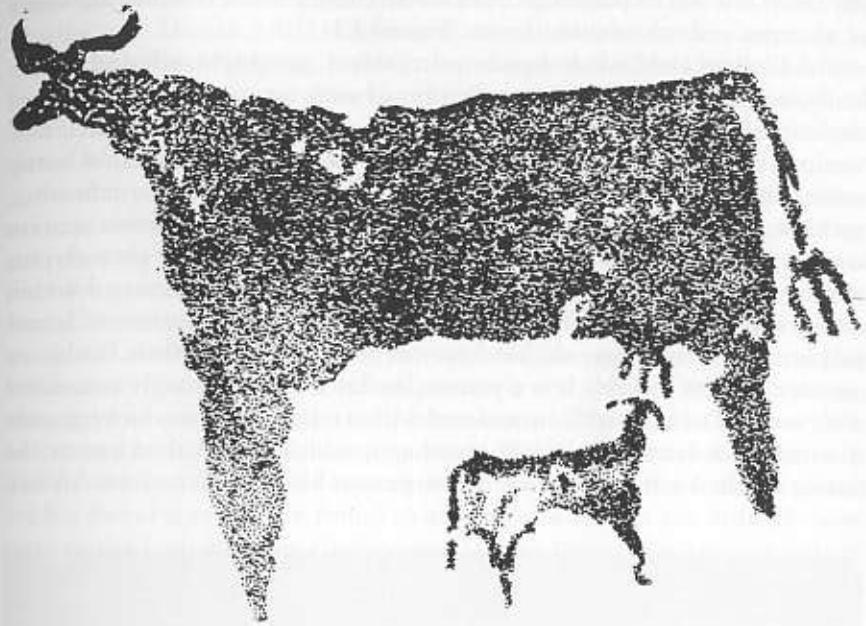

Figure 3.10 Laga Gafra, Harar (after Cervicek and Braukamper 1975).

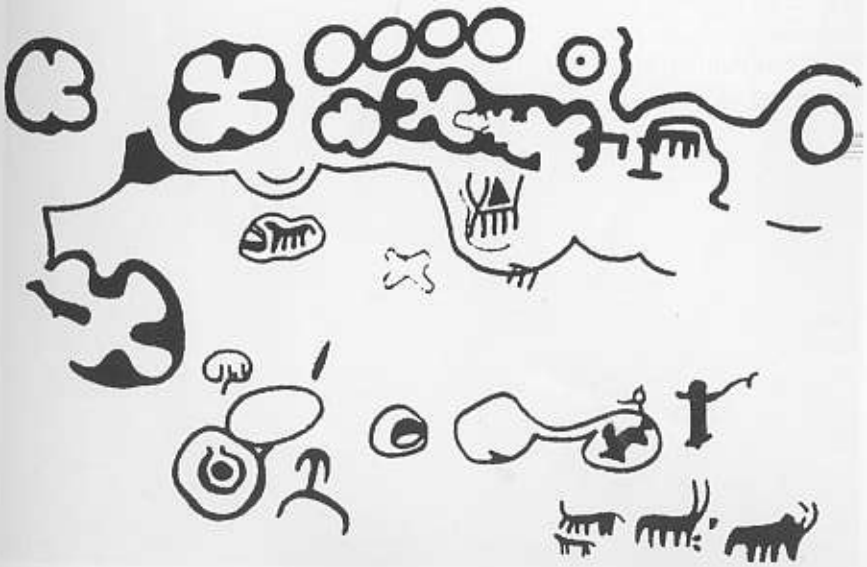

Figure 3.11 Goda Ondji, Harar (after Bailloud 1963).

the body; a series of paintings from Goda Ondji show a bewildering series of abstract and schematised forms (Figure 3.11).

The Chabbé and Galma depictions represent, geographically and stylistically, another distinctive concentration of rock art sites. The method of depiction is to peck out the surface of the rock, almost like bas relief or 'sculpture'; the sites depict humpless cattle alone, but the Chabbé cattle seem to be solely female: note how over-stylised the udders are, indicating, perhaps, an emphasis on the production of milk as well as a preoccupation with motherhood and fecundity (Figure 3.12). The Chabbé petroglyphs, which are represented by four different 'panels', are actually located within a deep ravine, implying that there must have been considerations of access and how the engravings should have been viewed within their landscape context (Anfray 1967b). It is a private, enclosed space, strongly associated with water. The site itself is associated with a relic shoreline which suggests it dates from later than 4,800 years ago, which would conform to the dating of the emergence of specialist pastoralism in the eastern African

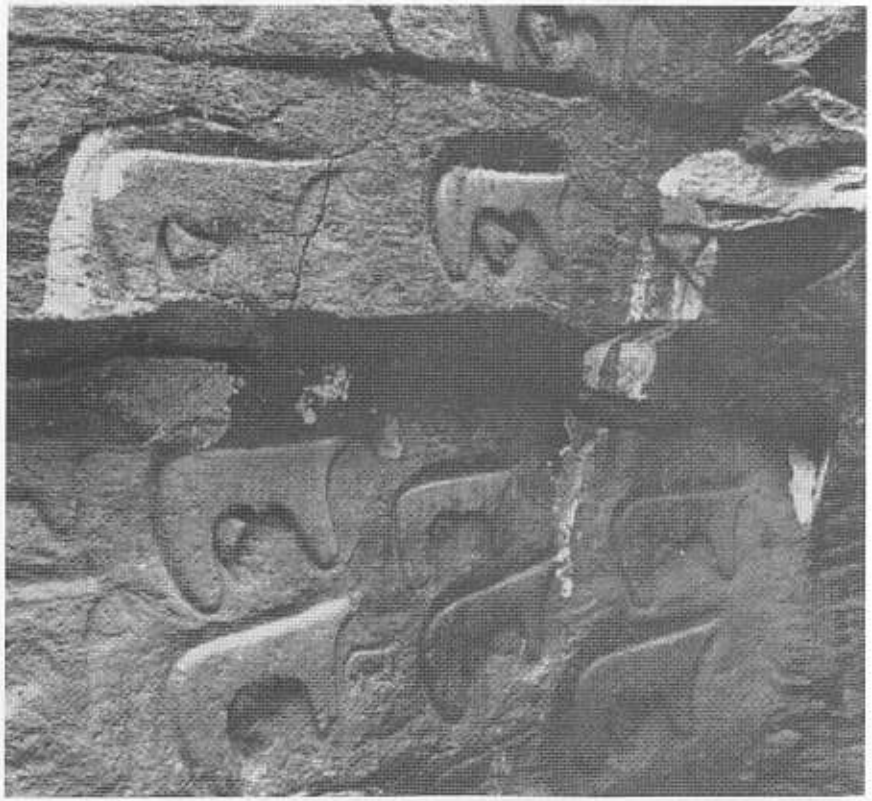

Figure 3.12 Chabbé petroglyphs (Francis Anfray).

savannah region rather than the earlier developments to the west (Le Quellec and Abegaz 2001). Additional interest attaches to the discovery, at the rock-shelter of Akirsa, Soddo, of an unusual, backed clay bovid figurine associated rock engravings in the distinctive Chabbé style (Poisblaud 2002); hitherto, actual models of bovids have only been reported from later 'pre-Aksumite' and Aksumite contexts in the north.

Further to the south-east, the Yavello paintings have a similar subject matter, although here a humped zebu is clearly visible which would suggest that they are relatively later depictions (Figure 3.13). A number of circular geometric designs also predominate (and these are forms also found at the petroglyph sites of Bur Dahir and El Goran further to the east); all are based on circular forms, and are associated with highly schematised humans, zebu, humpless cattle and sheep. Geometric forms also appear in numbers at the Harar site of Laga Oda (Figure 3.14), associated with a highly schematised style of cattle depiction. Occasionally a disc motif – almost like a sunburst – is noted, and when associated with a bovid it is usually found to the bottom rear of the animal, lying near to the hind leg. The Chabbé and Galma depictions are certainly of very similar style, and are reflected at Goda Rorris and Saka Sharifa towards Harar. Cervicek (1971) and Joussaume (1981) place these depictions in the 'Arabo-Ethiopian style'. A very similar naturalistic style may be seen beyond the plateau in southern Somalia at Karin Heegan

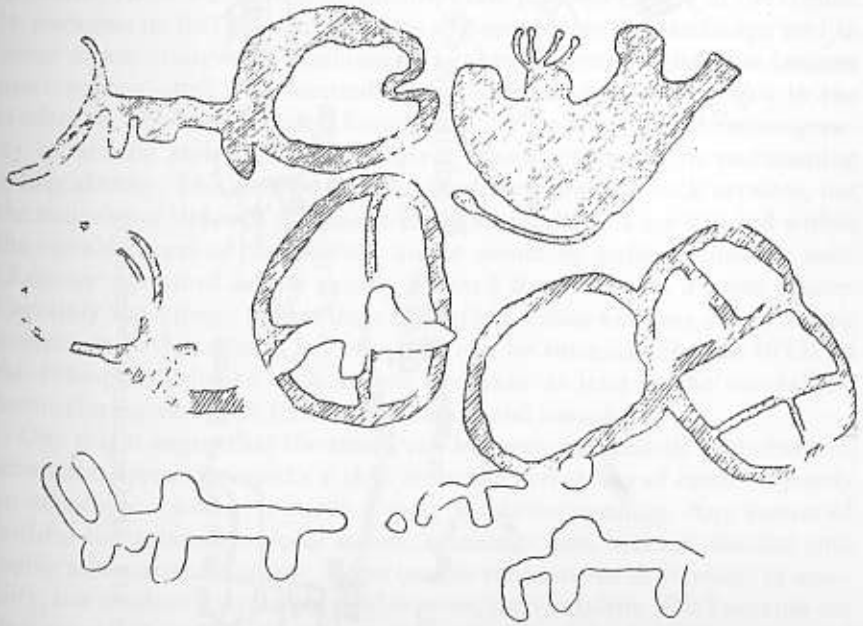

Figure 3.13 Yavello (after Clark 1954).

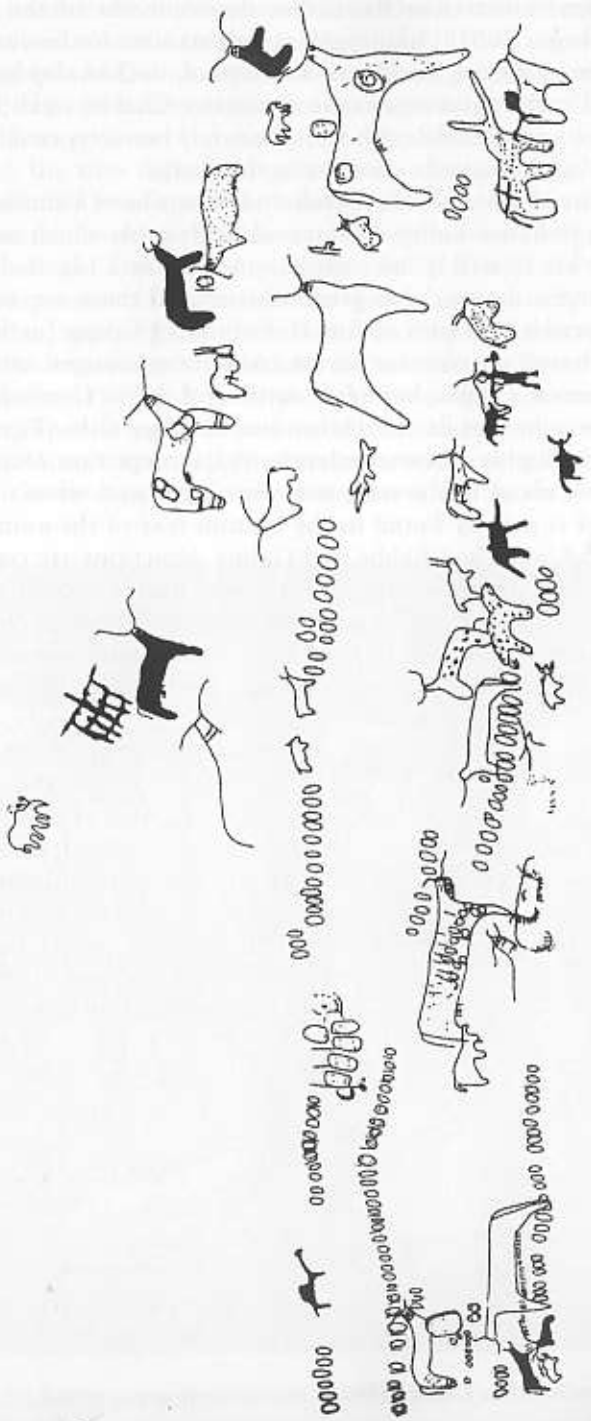

Figure 3.14 Laga Oda (after Cervicek 1971).

(Brandt and Carder 1987), and here an abstract scheme depicting outlined/patched cattle with pronounced horns can also be recognised.

In Djibouti a similar naturalistic style is present. At the site of Oued Baho the cattle have exceptionally pronounced horns, and are juxtaposed with giraffe depictions, subject matter eminently suitable for the lowland landscape context. The schematic styles represented here are vaguely similar to the northern variants; stylised fused bucrania may be recognised (at the sites of Dorra and Yangoulakama) alongside outline-schematised bovids that recall the southern Ethiopian types of stylisation (Dorra). Unsurprisingly, given the ecological conditions of this area, camel depictions also feature, and these may be mounted or shown as a caravan, but even this close to the Ethiopian highlands, a definite individual and localised, stylistic scheme is apparent (Joussaume 1981). Apart from the very obvious point that pastoralists created much of this art (although in the lowland areas wild fauna also feature), what other meanings can be read from what are clearly visual texts?

One of the first attempts to explain the meanings of the region's rock art was put forward by Steven Brandt and Nan Carder (1987). Their hypothesis focused upon environmental change as the main factor in provoking this outburst of artistic expression. It is posited that the earliest rock art forms – the naturalistic style – coincided with the onset of a severe middle-Holocene arid phase (approximately 5 kya), a period during which great economic stress was placed on the disparate pastoral groups of the region. In response to this pressure, groups dispersed over the landscape and in order to maintain some semblance of cohesion, ritual behaviour became more sophisticated and focused upon fixed loci (meeting points) in the landscape, here rock art sites. Brandt and Carder argue that the homogeneity of artistic styles reflects the great efforts expended in maintaining group identity. This may be a useful model for lowland rock art sites, but the majority of the rock art sites in Ethiopia and Eritrea are situated within the equable areas of the plateau, and it would be unlikely that the mid-Holocene period of aridity greatly affected these areas to a great degree. Certainly the subject matter does not reflect stress; one sees a very strong contrast with the tenor of Saharan rock art, for instance (Hassan 1993). In the Ethiopian/Eritrean rock art the emphasis at least in the naturalistic forms throughout is on fertility, fecundity and nature.

One might argue that the transition between naturalistic and abstract, schematic depictions marks a shift from the perception of cattle as purely an economic resource towards a more symbolic meaning. Any notion of faithful information transfer is lost, meanings now become distilled into highly schematised imagery. These images suppress the differences of sexuality, but emphasise other physical aspects, such as horns. The bucrania are thus essentially icons; they convey the concept of the bull, its power and arguably also a sense of masculinity. Explaining the even more abstract

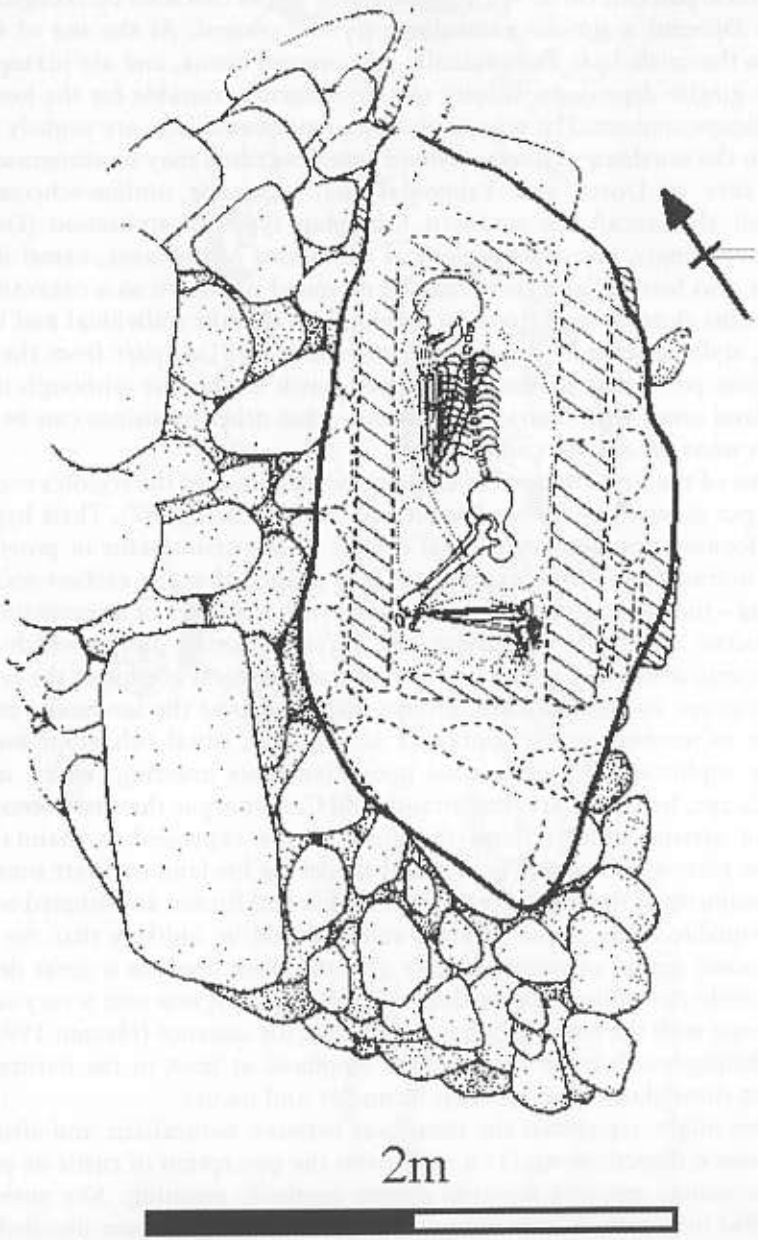

Figure 3.15 Sourre-Kabanawa dolmen, Harar, fourth millennium BP (after Joussaume 1987).

geometric forms is more problematic; they could represent cattle brands – distinctive group markers – but to invoke the 'entoptic' analogy is surely an invalid approach (a recent petroglyphic discovery at Borasa, Wolayta, southern Ethiopia is connected explicitly with the idea of entoptic phenomena; Bouakaze-Khan and Poisblaud 2000). In contrast the naturalistic forms are a celebration of the interaction between nature and culture.

One must emphasise that stylistically there are great variations even within regions; it is important to stress difference rather than unity, and this is hardly surprising given the nature of the highland landscape where mobility may be impaired by natural features, and very localised cultural traditions emerged. It is also important to view the rock art within a wider landscape context, part and parcel of symbolic space which even has resonance today. The Harar rock art sites in particular may be associated with pastoralist people who constructed the distinctive dolmens which are clustered along the westward route from Harar around the villages of Tchelenko and Dobba (Figure 3.15). These monuments appear to date from about 4 kya (Joussaume 1976a), and embody a range of different meanings; apart from being houses for the dead, it is possible that they act as territorial group markers, meshing with the rock art sites to produce a network of symbolic loci within the wider landscape for the local pastoral groups. It is significant that today, even though Islam expressly prohibits the veneration of stones, the local Oromo people leave offerings at these *'daga koffiya'*, or 'hats of stone' (Joussaume 1976a).

Having made a few observations about the possible meanings of the art, are we in a position to frame a basic chronology? The iconographic material suggests only a relative chronology for the introduction of cattle species, a picture which would seem to be borne out by the current genetic and archaeological evidence from the wider region. Whilst the majority of the rock art depictions (especially the earlier naturalistic styles) of cattle show humpless longhorns (indeed cattle models from Hawelti (a pre-Aksumite ritual context) are humpless (De Contenson 1963a)), humped zebu feature in the later abstract rock art of the south and in the north iconographic evidence for zebu include the bronze figurine from Zeban Kutur, which on palaeographic grounds appears to date from the second–third centuries AD (Drewes and Schneider 1976), and those from Matara (Anfray 1967a). It is also significant that the rock art sites in the highlands are found in regions where mixed agricultural economies now predominate. This suggests that pastoralism (in common with other regions of Africa) predated the emergence of fully agricultural societies which subsequently became more successful highland adaptations. In contrast pastoralism continued to flourish in the lowlands.

In summary, it is clear that the importance of cattle – economic, social and symbolic – is emphasised in this art, and this is a factor which continues

to play a strong role in the formation of cultural identity (especially in the northern highlands) over the next two millennia. The continuing depiction of cattle into 'pre-Aksumite' and Aksumite times (as *art mobilier*) emphasises the special place of cattle within the social and ideological realms of everyday life of a *non* pastoral, predominantly agrarian society (Fattovich 1990b); the cattle heads from the 'Ona' sites of the central Eritrean region, which may date from *c.*2,800 years ago (Tringali 1987), are a case in point (this material is covered in more detail in the next chapter). Within the historical Ethiopian context it has been argued that the Kings of Aksum and their successors, by taking control of herds of their defeated enemies, were symbolically neutering their opponents. The vast amounts of grazing lands given over at the expense of prime arable land in early Ethiopian royal urban centres reflects this concern (Pankhurst 1979); even today the ownership of cattle in highland farming societies confers a social standing out of proportion with the actual economic value of cattle. This is a very important socio-symbolic thread that runs through the life of the lowland pastoralist as well as the highland farmer, whose psychology still perhaps fossilises an earlier pastoralist social memory, a social memory associated with the north-eastern African rather than Arabian world.

Overview

Taking the regional data together first, food-producing economies appear earliest on the northern and eastern fringes of the plateau, and only by *c.*3 kya to the south in the savannas of East Africa. As a rule, specialised pastoralism predates generalised agricultural economies based upon stock-keeping and plant cultivation, but pastoralism should not be viewed as an intermediary rung in a teleological 'ladder' towards the 'idealised state' of agriculture. As we have seen in the Gash Delta region, a return to pastoralist strategies is always an option and one not necessarily demanded by ecological conditions. Social factors also play an important role in the choice of food-procurement strategy. Underpinning all these systems there appears to be a much earlier phase of pre-adaptive, perhaps semi-sedentary settlement, redolent of the Eurocentric construct of the 'Mesolithic'. In the Nile Valley and much of the Sahara, as well as lowland and lacustrine areas to the west and south of the plateau, this takes the form of a very distinctive material and economic culture. Let us translate these ideas to the specific context of the Ethiopian highlands and surrounding regions.

Taking together the admittedly limited direct archaeological evidence alongside the linguistic evidence we might begin by formulating a discrete 'highland' model for economic development over the Holocene period when these regions would have enjoyed an equable climate which guaranteed excellent availability of animal and plant resources: a 'pre-adaptive' economy based upon broad-spectrum hunting and gathering in a dependable

environment. It is important to emphasise the plant gathering component of this type of economy; archaeologically this adaptation might be recognised in the presence of grinding stones as well as the use of long-blades (such as identified at the three excavated rock-shelters at Aksum) as harvesting knives. As Barnett suggests this method of harvesting wild grasses does not provide the right conditions which might result in the emergence of a recognisably domesticated form over a relatively short timescale (1999b: 156), and in any case stable 'low-level' farming strategies such as these are difficult to recognise in the archaeological record (Smith 2001). This reliance upon wild plant gathering has, as we have seen, survived in places alongside the highland agrocomplex (Hildebrand 2003), and the faunal data from the excavations at the site of Moche Borago in Wolayta seems to suggest a long-lived hunting-gathering economy. In the lowlands a similar case of the 'survival' of a pre-adaptive economy might also be made for the disparate populations of the Omo river region, thus strengthening the contention that there is no such thing as an evolutionary trajectory of food production. Each economy must be understood within its own ecological terms.

What is clear is that cattle husbandry begins to take on a very clear economic and symbolic significance in a number of different regions in and around the plateau. In the north at least we might envisage the augmentation of the basic plant gathering/hunting economy with cattle pastoralism introduced from the eastern Sudanic region/ Nile Valley at some time after *c.*5 kya. With the emergence of pastoralist economies here (and elsewhere in the highlands at broadly later dates) a new symbolic order becomes apparent in an iconographic system which charts the changing meanings of cattle from an economic to symbolic and socio-cultural force. This strong social memory is also apparent among pastoralist groups along the Nile, and also later in the Great Lakes region, and today survives in Maasai oral tradition. Archaeobotanical data from 'pre-Aksumite' and 'Ona' sites – as we shall see in the next chapter – indicates that western Asian crop domesticates were being cultivated 2,500 years ago, so these resources were probably introduced through the agency of the Tihamah cultural axis some time prior to this (as Ethiopian Barley populations have a high genetic diversity it is probable that it was introduced quite early and spread relatively rapidly through the whole plateau). With an emphasis now upon plant cultivation, large-scale transhumant cattle pastoralism (never a viable strategy on the broken topography of the highlands) became less important, although the pastoralist social memory remained strong. It was only within the framework of more agriculturally intensive regimes underpinning the Aksumite state that the right circumstances existed for the domestication of local cultigens such as tef and finger millet, and the sort of economic picture that we see today in the northern highlands becomes established.

Towards the southern plateau and around the lowlands a different picture emerges. Here at least on the high plateaux, the pre-adaptive economies did not emphasise wild grass gathering, rather they focused upon vegeculture, based upon Enset exploitation (Brandt 1997). Here disparate populations gathered in highland refugia in response to the significant shifts in early Holocene climate that have been attested by wider palaeoenvironmental studies. The need for dependable and plentiful food resources resulted in the 'incidental' domestication of the Enset plant. Only much later did additions to the local complex from outside the highland area (i.e. livestock, Western Asian cereals) arrive. Undated surface collections of ground-stones have been noted in the south of the plateau, roughly corresponding to the modern area of Enset cultivation (Bailloud 1959), and it may be that these implements which resemble digging-stick weights represent archaeologically the traces of a hoe/digging stick agro-complex which is associated with Enset cultivation. In the Omo basin, semi-sedentary hunter-gatherer-fisher economies thrived and survived, whilst in the lowland regions pastoralism became the primary economy. We might tie these developments in with those seen in the eastern African savannahs after *c.*3,500 years ago, and they are broadly archaeologically attested in the Lake Besaka cultural and environmental sequence.

In summary there can be no single model to account for the variety, dynamism and brilliance of the varied food-producing economies of the plateau and adjacent regions. Consideration of extra-regional data allows us to build a basic time frame and historical linguistic analysis strongly suggests a localised origin for plant cultivation in the region at least and the development of food production in this corner of Africa can be seen in broad terms to fit in with the generalised north-eastern African scenario outlined above. Demands of geography, climate as well as social needs have shaped these systems over time, making for a very distinctive set of economic pathways. Although cautioning on the whole against a cause and effect model, it was the very success and stability of the northern highland agropastoral tradition which allowed in some part the emergence of social complexity there at around 2,500 years ago.

4

AFRO-ARABIANS?

Emergent social complexity in the northern highlands in the first millennium BC

> 'The South Arabians introduced a vastly superior civilisation, both material and cultural, into Africa'.
>
> (Ullendorff 1960: 5)

Contexts

The earliest evidence for incipient socio-economic complexity in the Horn of Africa becomes visible during the early-mid-first millennium BC in the northern Ethiopian and Eritrean highlands. Although obviously a problematic term, social complexity is betokened by a number of archaeological indicators. The appearance for the first time of formal inscriptions indicative of a very marked social hierarchy is a prominent motif; other features include the emergence of distinctive monumental architecture; a *seemingly* implanted and *apparently* monolithic cosmology based upon southern Arabian – specifically Sabaean – influences; a more complex system of settlement patterning, and a diverse material culture which although appearing to be shaped through extra-regional contact, references a strong local substratum (Munro-Hay 1993). In short, a very different archaeological footprint becomes visible in the landscape of the northern highland region, yet this trend is not yet archaeologically apparent in the highlands further south, nor in the desertic and coastal zones to the south-east and east, hence the narrow geographic emphasis of this chapter.

At the outset a number of broad observations may be made which frame the context for causes and consequences of social complexity in this region. In the first place – in comparison with other areas of north-eastern Africa along the Nile corridor and also westwards into the Sahel – the emergence of complex societies in this region is a relatively retarded phenomenon. Even using the most liberal estimates from what is an admittedly very narrow archaeological database, it is hard to

argue for any manifestations of social complexity earlier than the period *c.*900–700 BC. This contrasts with the situation in the middle Nile region and the Nile Delta. A second issue – and arguably the most important within the context of the central question of formation of identity – is the influence of extra-regional contacts upon events in the region. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the sense of the 'de-Africanisation' of Ethiopia derives in part from traditional constructs of this period under discussion (as is reflected by the quote at the head of the chapter), and the use of (now archaic) terminology to describe the 'pre-Aksumite period' (which itself is clearly an illogical and unsatisfactory term) as an 'Ethio-Sabaean' or 'South Arabian' phase (the terminology was defined by Francis Anfray 1968).

Uncritical culture-historical assessments of migrationist-diffusionist influences from across the Red Sea during this period have played a key role in the externalisation of Ethiopian identity (e.g. Isaac and Felder 1988: 71), yet this is also part of a wider African debate. In many regions, cultural or social innovation has been ascribed to foreign influences; the study of the causes and consequences of early urban societies in the west African Sahel is a key example (McIntosh and McIntosh 1993), and we might also invoke equally well known examples from the historical literature on the Middle Nile worlds and also the Swahili coast. In emphasising the indigenous phenomenon, we must be wary of falling into the sort of evolutionary, teleological trap which has clouded the picture of the development of food-producing economies in Africa. This approach demands a critique of the social trajectory, a model which envisages the evolutionary progression from hunter-gatherer, via more complex levels of social organisation, to the level of the state, or extended to include the supra-regional state: the empire. What concerns us here explicitly is the problem of the 'chiefdom', an intermediate-level society which would appear to be the 'best fit' for the material discussed in this chapter (Schneider 1976a uses this term in connection with this period). The 'pre-Aksumite' 'chiefdom'-level society would be traditionally viewed as a 'necessary' intermediate stage between the farming societies discussed in the last chapter, and the more complex state-level organisation of the Aksumite state and empire which we will encounter in the next chapter.

Broadly, the definition of a classic chiefdom emphasises a quantitative scalar difference between tribal and state regions, a population ruled over by a single king or chief, with an economy based upon surplus production and redistribution of wealth. As such there is a level of social differentiation which is theoretically mirrored in material culture organisation (Earle 1987). As usual these neat criteria for the archaeological recognition of these phenomena cannot often be made to fit the data, and the African picture, as recently critiqued by Susan McIntosh (McIntosh 1999) is more

variable, complex and nuanced than previously thought. Three key points need to be made in this regard.

In the first place the label 'chiefdom' carries certain preconceptions and primitivist implications; the use of the term middle-ranking (or segmentary) society is more appropriate. Second ethnographic studies have shown that whilst many African societies do possess very fine-grained systems of social organisation (based upon combinations of age grades, gender, lineage and so on) these networks are often *not* reflected in material culture organisation. In many cases socially complex societies are culturally invisible as there is a strong emphasis upon the acquisition and maintenance of *social* rather than *economic* power. It is also noticeable that where economics do enter the equation, the emphasis – especially in pastoralist societies – is upon the accumulation of a given resource (in this case cattle): quantity as opposed to quality. Third we should disabuse ourselves of the notion of some form of teleological social continuum; as Norman Yoffee (1993) emphasises, in many cases the African 'chiefdom' does not inevitably develop into a fully formed state. The mechanism for the origins of state-level polities cannot be reduced to a simple neo-evolutionary developmental scheme, the emphasis should perhaps be placed more upon the cyclic nature of society, a theme with which we shall become very well acquainted (Schmidt 1996). Without placing the accent wholly upon a diffusionist-migrationist scenario, the complex nature of the developments and debates outlined in this chapter demands a consideration of the regional picture, with special emphasis upon south-western Arabia and the Gash Delta of the eastern Sudanic steppes.

Social complexity in the Horn of Africa: an extra-regional context

Southern Arabia

Rodolfo Fattovich (1996) draws our attention to the long-lived nature of contacts between Arabia and Africa across the Red Sea; its earliest phase appears to be represented by the Tihamah cultural complex, an entity whose archaeological visibility is apparent in the transfer of plant resources, obsidian and also ceramic material culture across an axis through the Gash region, via the highlands and sea, and into the coastal plain (and mountainous hinterland) of what is now modern Yemen. The latter region has, as we have seen, played an important role in the creation of a shared Ethiopian–Arabian identity, especially in the person of the Queen of Sheba, claimed by the Arabians as *Bilqis* and the Ethiopians as *Maqeda*. There is a close physical similarity between the regions too, and their proximity (20 kilometres at the narrowest part of the Bab el-Mandab

straits) has allowed for considerable cultural interchange in antiquity. For reasons outlined in the previous chapter, cultural influence from Arabia does not impinge upon the development of a variety of distinctive traditions of pastoral rock art in the plateau as a whole and Arabian influence is thus felt most in the northern mountains and coastal strip.

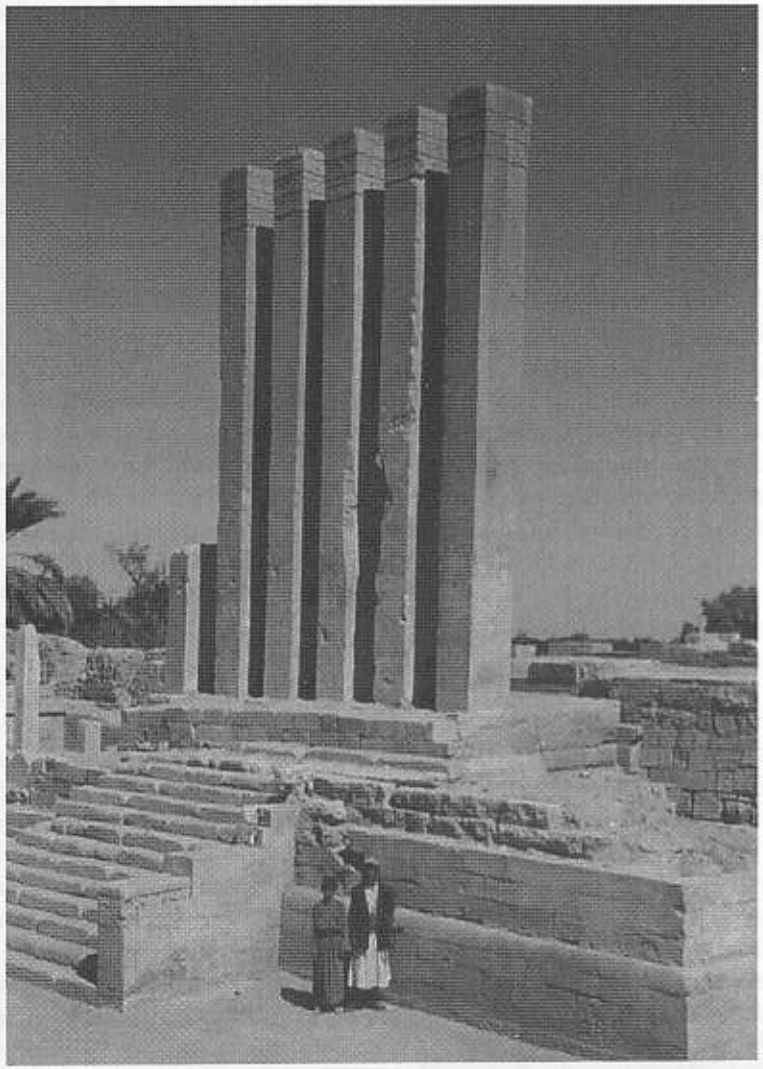

Figure 4.1 The Ba'ran temple, Marib, Yemen (Nadia Durrani).

The emergence of the Sabaean polity can now, with the excavations at the site of Wadi Yala, be dated as far back as *c.*1,200 BC (if not earlier), and is clearly related to longer-term trends of developing irrigation systems and mixed agriculture over the mid-late Holocene period (Edens and Wilkinson 1998). The capital of Saba was at Marib, located some 130 kilometres to the east of San'aa, the modern Yemeni capital. Particular attention attaches to the complex known as Mahram Bilqis, or Awwâm temple. This structure, which contains eight free-standing pillars on a podium, is surrounded by an extensive oval (temenos) wall measuring 75 by 112 metres. The installation dates from *c.*600 BC, and was only abandoned in the fourth century AD, and was dedicated to the moon deity LMQ, who also occupied a special place within the secular life of the state. The complex is associated with another temple building, the Ba'ran temple of broadly similar design (Figure 4.1) as well as a necropolis (Hitgen 1998); decorative embellishments within the temple buildings include distinctive ibex friezes (Figure 4.6) which are also to be found, as we shall see, in cultic installations of the Ethiopian–Eritrean pre-Aksumite period, and which through an extremely schematised iconography – like the very stylised Ethiopian–Eritrean cattle art discussed in the last chapter – place a very strong symbolic emphasis upon the horns (Avanzini 2005).

The economy of the Sabaean state was underpinned by a highly developed agricultural complex which utilised extensive irrigation systems; the massive dam at Marib, which dates from *c.*1000 BC and measures 700 metres in length, bears witness to the complexity of these works. The dam irrigated a vast region of farmland, and when it finally collapsed the regional agricultural system never recovered. The existence of developed long-distance trading and exchange networks is witnessed by the development of the Qatabanian coinage at around 400 BC (which predated the Sabaean coinage system), based upon the Athenian tetradrachm standard (Davidde 2003), and which may have had implications for the development of Aksumite coinage in the third century AD. To the east of the highlands of the northern Horn, then, a highly developed and complex set of states, dominated initially at least by Saba, was flourishing, and it is inconceivable, given their very internationalist outlook, that they did not maintain the age-old and established cultural and economic links with Africa.

The Gash Delta

To the west of the northern highlands, at the other end of the Tihamah cultural axis, other developments were taking place. Recent archaeological work in the area around the town of Kassala in the Gash Delta region of eastern Sudan has defined a long sequence of cultural development spanning at least 5,000 years. From the perspective of the northern

Ethiopian highlands, special interest attaches to the long antiquity of a developed pastoralist economy in the region which must have served as a bridge between the middle Nile zone, the plateau and the Red Sea coasts. This very distinctive Gash Group culture, which dates from around 2500 BC, is centred upon the large urban site of Mahal Teglinos (Fattovich 1989a; Fattovich 1993). Here, finds of what appear to be clay seals would suggest the existence of a developed system of social control or administration (Fattovich 1991), whilst the use of small stelae as grave markers may, as we shall see, have influenced later Aksumite period commemorative practices (Fattovich 1987; 1989b). During the mid-second millennium BC the emergence of a new culture, the Mokram group, may reflect wider population movements in the region; Edwards (2004: 100) draws our attention to the strong similarities between Pan Grave and Mokram ceramics, the former being a culture centred upon the area to the north of the second Nile cataract, and associated with the Medjay people. At around 1500 BC the Pan Grave culture disappeared and it may be that the population displaced south-eastwards into the southern Atbai (Sadr 1991: 106).

The emergence of the Napatan polity in the Middle Nile region in the mid-first millennium BC appears to have extensive ramifications; the so-called pre-Aksumite culture emerges in the northern highlands of the Horn at this time (Sadr 1991: 68), and a nomadic pastoralist culture, the Taka phase of the Hagiz group (they may be identified *Megabaroi* described by Agatharchides of Cnidus; Fattovich 1990a) replaced the agropastoralist Mokram group in the Gash region, where isolated finds of 'pre-Aksumite'-style pottery suggests some form of connection between the steppes and high plateaux. According to a hypothesis developed by Karim Sadr, this return to nomadism was not a reaction to ecological conditions, but was a response to the development of complex societies to the west – and tantalisingly perhaps, in the highlands to the east. Pastoralists essentially acted as the 'ranching economy' that underpinned the complex polities whose economic basis was now predominantly agricultural (Sadr 1991: 1). It must be emphasised that this geographical axis through the northern highlands was, during the early first millennium BC, the home of a variety of peoples engaged in a range of economic pursuits. At each end of this region were complex polities represented by Napatan Kush and Saba, in between pastoralist and highland farmers, all part of a wider exchange dynamic. We shall now consider the highland picture in more detail (Figure 4.2). In the following section I will argue that nascent social complexity within this region cannot be reduced to the monolithic term 'pre-Aksumite'. The picture is more nuanced and demands a consideration of two spatially and (slightly) chronologically differentiated cultural traditions, as will become clear.

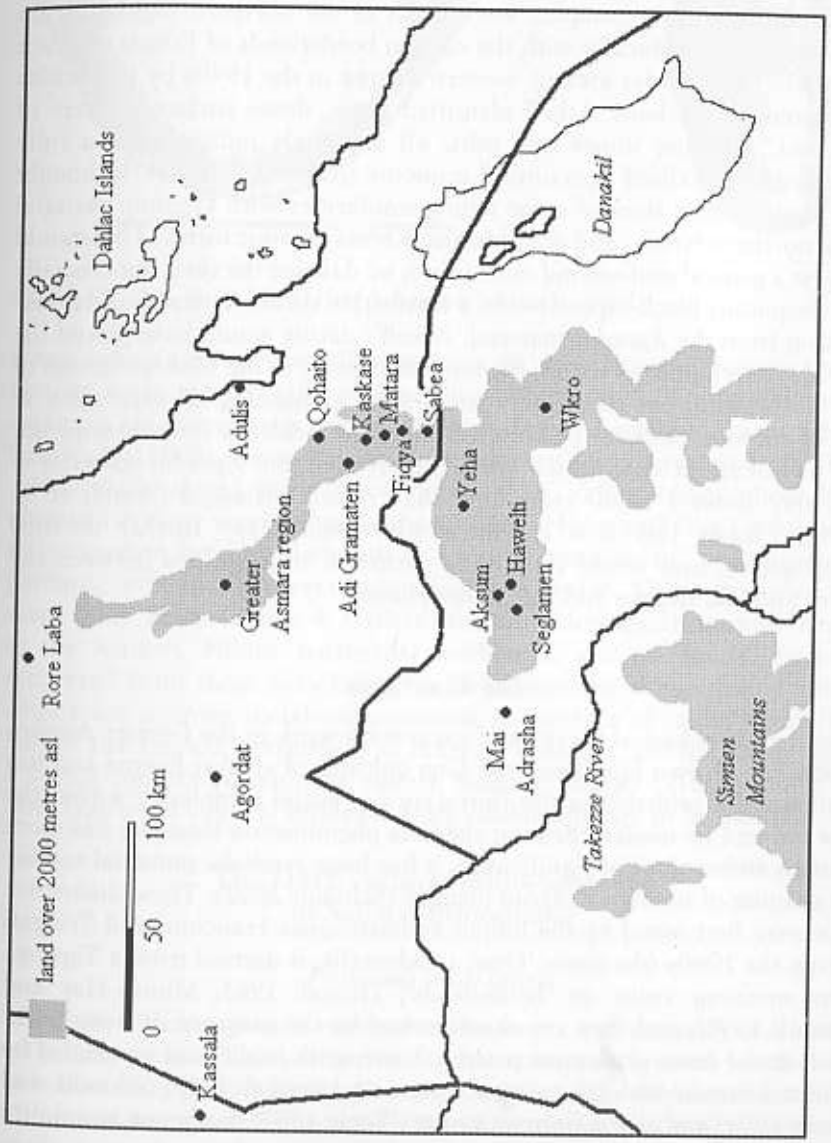

Figure 4.2 Location of major sites discussed in Chapter 4.

The northern highlands in the mid-first millennium BC: the northern-eastern region

The Agordat sites

Some of the earliest complex settlements in the northern highlands are associated geographically with the eastern borderlands of Eritrea. Surface survey in the Agordat area of western Eritrea in the 1940s by the British archaeologist Anthony Arkell identified large, dense surface scatters of ceramics, grinding stones and celts, all seemingly indicative of a fully developed generalised agricultural economy (Arkell 1954). Arkell thought that the ceramics showed some strong similarities with C-group material from northern Nubia, and possibly also Kerma ceramic forms. This should suggest a general mid-second millennium BC date for the sites, but crucially the ubiquitous black-topped ware, a distinctive chronological marker, was missing from the Agordat material. Arkell's dating would have placed the Agordat developments within the broader context of the Mokram group of the Gash Delta, but recent very small-scale archaeological excavation at one of the sites (Kokan) by Steven Brandt has yielded a ceramic sequence and radiocarbon date which would imply that the Agordat material is probably about a 1,000 years later than Arkell envisaged (Brandt *et al.* 1998). Clearly this is a region which would repay further detailed investigation, and would clarify the nature of relationships between the lower Sudanic steppes and the higher plateau.

The 'Ona' sites

Recent archaeological survey and excavation work in the Greater Asmara region has thrown light upon the Ona cultures of central Eritrea and has emphasised a probable earlier florescence of social complexity within the area covered by modern Eritrea; the Ona phenomenon therefore has more than an archaeological significance, it has huge symbolic potential too for the shaping of modern Eritrean identity (Schmidt 2002). These distinctive sites were first noted by the Italian archaeologists Franchini and Tringali during the 1960s (the name 'Ona', incidentally, is derived from a Tigrinya noun meaning 'ruins' or 'homesteads'; Tringali 1965; Munro-Hay and Tringali 1991), and they are characterised by the presence of stone bulls' heads and a dense settlement pattern. Later work in the area conducted by a joint Eritrean and US team (Curtis and Libsekal 1999; Schmidt and Curtis 2001) and also a German group (Wenig 1997) has begun to amplify the picture considerably.

Test-pitting has uncovered stone structures associated with the ubiquitous bulls' heads, and has furnished a useful sequence of radiocarbon dates. Excavation at the site of Sembel recovered very distinctive cups and

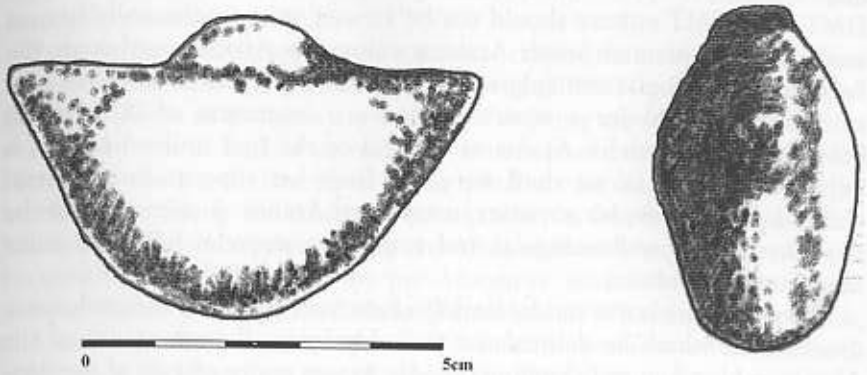

Figure 4.3 Ona bull's head (after Schmidt and Curtis 2001).

bowls, which although broadly diagnostic of 'pre-Aksumite' ceramic forms further south, are actually smaller than those vessels. The predominant ceramics are coarse brown wares and red-slipped burnished wares; whilst Fattovich (1990b) sees some similarity between these forms and the ubiquitous black-topped ware of the central Nile Valley, radiocarbon dates obtained at these sites (including those of Mai Hutsa and Ona Gudo) point to occupation between the ninth and fourth centuries BC, contemporary, perhaps, with the primary occupation at Agordat. The presence of the stone bulls' heads (Figure 4.3) places the Ona ideological tradition firmly in the African, Nilotic pastoralist worldview, and the faunal evidence recovered from these sites (which is dominated by domesticated cattle) emphasises a strong social and economic importance of cattle. Rough stelae are also erected, presumably in funerary contexts, and indicating again a strong connection with the eastern Sudanic steppes (Trucca 1980). At this stage overt cultural influence from Arabia appears to be minimal.

The *DMT* culture: Ethio-Sabaeans or Sabaeo-Ethiopians?

Problems with labels

A slightly different picture emerges to the south, and arguably at a somewhat later period. This cultural entity has traditionally been labelled the 'pre-Aksumite' period, although here I use the term *DMT* culture. This I do in an attempt to bring some internal consistency to the organisation of the cultural period anterior to the Aksumite state. In their chronological overview, Fattovich *et al.* (2000: 23) imply that the 'pre-Aksumite' culture represents archaeologically the 'Ethio-Sabaean state of Damaat' (their vocalised version of *DMT*). I see no reason why we should not therefore

dispense with the problematic 'pre-Aksumite' label and instead substitute *DMT*. The *DMT* culture should not be viewed, as it traditionally has, as merely a transplanted South Arabian colony in Africa – although the Belgian archaeologist and epigrapher Jacqueline Pirenne (1989a) has controversially argued for a reverse scenario, a migration of 'Africanised Sabaeans' into southern Arabia at the end of the first millennium BC, a hypothesis which as we shall see grew from her support for a 'short' chronology for complex societies in southern Arabia. A re-reading of the most significant archaeological and epigraphic material points to a far more complex picture.

This is broadly borne out by Rodolfo Fattovich's (1990b) comprehensive overview in which he defined the period prior to the emergence of the Aksumite kingdom as belonging broadly to two major phases of development: an early manifestation of a strongly South Arabian inspired complex polity – which we know from unvocalised Epigraphic South Arabian inscriptions as *DMT* and was defined by Anfray (1968) as the Ethio-Sabaean period – followed by a period of political fragmentation, which saw a much stronger indigenous cultural development. This picture reflected a gradual process of Africanisation, a shift away from the Arabian roots of the culture towards the foundations of the Aksumite empire. Recent excavations by Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn Bard at Aksum, however, have changed this picture, indicating perhaps that the Aksumite state did not develop directly from a culturally monolithic 'pre-Aksumite' phase.

The DMT *culture: spatial and chronological context*

The *DMT* polity, whose political and ideological centre was probably to be found at Yeha, Tigray, appears to be a relatively localised phenomenon. An initial manifest of sites (Godet 1977; 1980–2) combined with recently published survey work (Michels 2005) places the number of sites at about 100, all sited in a core zone of the central-southern Eritrean highlands, and somewhat to the east of Aksum in the northern Ethiopian highlands (corresponding to the Eritrean Rore region and the Enderta region of Tigray). Sergew comments on the presence of Epigraphic South Arabian inscriptions in the church of Abuna Garima in the vicinity of Adi Kewih, near Wkro in eastern Tigray (1972: 29, note 32). If his observation was correct, then here would be evidence of the *DMT* culture in a region beyond its conventionally recognised south-eastern borders. His identification appears to be confused, however, as he latterly places Adi Kewih to the east of Adwa (ibid.: 118). The Church of Abuna Garima at this location *is* noted as a site in Godet's schedule and

Fattovich's synthesis, but Plant (1985:76) makes no mention of an inscription in the church.

Even further south, reports of contemporary remains at the Lake Tana monastery of Tana Qirqos cited by Fattovich (1990b) are more problematic. The pieces in question are described as being superficially similar to the usual form of brazier or incense burners found on *DMT* sites much further to the north (described below), but are in fact described by the monks there, using the Amharic term *gomer*, as bowls with Epigraphic South Arabian inscriptions. They are thus eminently portable artefacts. Fattovich's identification of two 'pre-Aksumite' sites 50 kilometres north-west of Keren in northern Eritrea (Fattovich 1979) remains unproven, and as such the extent of the *DMT* culture remains circumscribed, although it is clear that later phases of the Ona culture overlapped with the southern *DMT* culture and there was extensive contact between the two regions.

The chronological limits of the *DMT* culture are generally agreed upon. An intercomparison between the Yeha and Matara ceramic material by Rodolfo Fattovich (1990b) has yielded a summary chronology of this period which to all intents stands to this day, albeit with important modifications in the light of recent research at Aksum. The phasing of the Yeha ceramics from the Grat Be'al Guebri (Yeha) excavations (see below and Fattovich 1978a) points to the presence of red-orange ware preceding the main architectural phases (phase II); the main architectural development is associated with phase 1b, represented mainly by black-topped ceramics. The latest, phase 1a material from Yeha is characterised by what Fattovich describes as 'brick-like' red ware. The earliest architectural phase at Matara, however, is characterised by the presence of black-topped ware and burnished ware (phases V–VIII). Using these data, Fattovich suggests a broad relative chronology defined thus

1 An early phase – which in general terms sees a predominance of red polished and red-orange wares, although the difference in composition between the Matara phase V–VIII and Yeha phase II material leads Fattovich to hypothesise (1990b: 10) that even at this period there exists a marked 'cultural diversity between Tigray and Eritrea' (in the light of the discussion in Chapter 1, it might be more apt to suggest a difference between the Tigrean and Eritrean pre-Aksumite *sites*). The beginning of this phase is unclear, but terminates at *c.*700 BC.
2 A middle phase (700 BC–400/300 BC) characterised by an increasing frequency of black-topped ware and painted ware.
3 A late phase (300 BC–AD 100), characterised by the predominance of brick-red ware and rough black/red wares, sees the final development of formal temple structures at Yeha, Hawelti and Melazzo.

Recent excavations on Beta Giyorgis, Aksum, have led to a re-evaluation of this chronology. The latest evidence for the *DMT* culture, at least at Aksum, has been replaced by the 'proto-Aksumite' period dating from *c.*400 BC–150 BC (Fattovich and Bard 2001). The material from this phase is evaluated elsewhere in the chapter, but in broad terms, as noted by Michael DiBlasi (in Michels 2005: x), the proto-Aksumite period is a phenomenon *possibly* only visible at Beta Giyorgis and may not be relevant for a wider, regional chronology. Apart from stratified ceramic material yielded by excavations at Yeha and the lower levels of Matara (and also recently at Aksum itself), a fine-grained dating resolution of *DMT* cultural material remains problematic. An attempt to make sense of a regional picture was attempted in the 1970s by the American archaeologist Joseph Michels.

The recently published results of his extensive survey work (Michels 2005) cast new light on changing settlement patterns in the Aksum-Yeha region over a period of almost 1,000 years; there are, however, some methodological issues which need to be addressed. Although undoubtedly the survey was thorough in coverage, Michels assumed the integrity of surface deposits; in addition the use of a ceramic seriation methodology (based upon fabric change rather than surface decorative attributes), dated by problematic obsidian hydration on associated lithics cannot possibly allow for the relatively detailed changes in settlement patterning that Michels envisages. These concerns aside, Michels' chronological framework generally integrates well with the accepted scheme formulated by Fattovich: Michels' periodisation (2005: 21) defines the following phases: early period 700–400 BC; middle period 400–150 BC; late period 150 BC–AD 150 (he uses the term 'pre-Aksumite').

Epigraphic sources also afford another relative method of defining cultural change over this period, especially when considered against the better-known South Arabian picture, and they also demonstrate this trend noted by Fattovich of a gradual 'Africanisation' of what appears to be a small-scale although undoubtedly high-impact South Arabian cultural increment. The syntheses of the South Arabian epigraphic material by Pirenne (1956), and the Ethiopian–Eritrean material by Drewes (1962) and Bernand, Drewes and Schneider (1991; 2000) allow for a useful although somewhat limited reconstruction of the political and ideological context of the region in the late first millennium BC. The inscriptions represent the clearest evidence for close contact between the Horn of Africa and southern Arabia. Theodore Bent was the first to recognise the relationship of early Ethiopian inscriptions to those of South Arabia: an inscription he observed at Yeha in the late nineteenth century bore the unvocalised name *MRYB*, in which he saw a parallel with the Sabaean site of Marib (Bent 1893: 140). A further connection was in the use of the name *AWM* which may refer to the name by which the temple of Mahram Bilqis at Marib was referred to in antiquity (Awwâm; Anfray 1972b); these toponyms undoubtedly

point to some relationship between the two regions. These inscriptions also shed light upon the political structure of the *DMT* polity.

The political structure of the DMT *polity: colony or independent state?*

The titles of the rulers of *DMT* are given as *MLK* and *MKRB*. *MLK* is clearly derived from the Semitic root for 'king', as seen in the Arabic noun: *malik*. This implies a single powerful figure, and it is used in the earlier inscriptions to refer solely to a king known as *WR'N HYWT* (Schneider 1976b). *MKRB* is a much more explicit South Arabian term, which as Alfred Beeston has shown is used in contemporary southern Arabian contexts to denote a unifying figure (1984). This is a theme which, as we shall see in the next chapter, is also implied in Aksumite-period inscriptions with the use of the term *Negusa Negast* 'King of Kings', suggesting that both the *DMT* polity and the Aksumite kingdom were politically structured as confederations albeit with varying degrees of centralisation of power. *MKRB* is used by the kings known as *RD'M*, *RBH* and *LMN* alone (Drewes and Schneider 1967; Schneider 1961; 1965; 1978). The king himself is also either referred to as the king of *DMT* or the king of *SBH* (Sabah) and *DMT*, which may be suggestive of two parallel ruling dynasties (Bernand *et al.* 1991: 68). What does the change in kingship terminology tell us about relations, political and cultural, between southern Arabia and the Horn?

In her recent monograph Nadia Durrani (2005: 123) has suggested four main scenarios to account for this new emphasis: (1) a single (African) king evolving greater and wider political power; (2) 'a provocative Ethiopian assertion of power' at local level; (3) the adoption of *MKRB* status as a political tool for local legitimisation or finally (4) a simple change in local semantics. Each situation (1–3) reflects a change in the balance of relations between the two regions. In the first case the king, copying South Arabian practice, has absorbed wider political responsibilities probably through military conquest or political treaty; in the second case the adoption of *MKRB* is a proverbial statement of intent, a move to break from what may be direct Sabaean rule from across the Red Sea; in the third case the use of the term may reflect a desire for the local king to be viewed as at least an equal of the Sabaean king. There is actually evidence in the African Epigraphic South Arabian inscriptions to imply that there was a very strong local flavour of kingship, suggesting that there was very little real direct political control from across the Bab el-Mandab straits. This was not a colony in the commonly accepted sense of the word. An inscription from Seglamen, for instance, uses a form of royal title quite unrecognisable from the perspective of south-western Arabia (Schneider 1976b), and over time

the inscriptions take on a stronger, idiosyncratic local flavour in terms of structure and content (Schneider 1973).

Epigraphic evidence, whilst suggesting a degree of local political control, innovation and a general lack of southern Arabian 'imperialistic' extension, does also point in places to a strong South Arabian cultural imprint in very localised domains. An inscription from Gobochela, one of the many dedicated to the deity *LMQ*, the South Arabian moon god, follows very strictly the Sabaean format, resisting the wider trend of what appears to be the acculturation of Epigraphic South Arabian inscriptions in Africa. The Gobochela inscriptions also mention specifically the title of an individual, described as *GRBY*. This translates as sculptor, or mason, and given the conservative nature of the Gobochela religious dedications may indicate the presence of a small cadre of South Arabian artisans of craft specialists at what we shall see is a significant ideological site (Bernand *et al.* 1991: 88), and one whose temple architecture significantly remains very faithful to South Arabian archetypes.

A cautious and critical chronological assessment of the northern Ethiopian/Eritrean corpus of pre-Aksumite inscriptions rests on understanding how they fit into the wider South Arabian culture-historical picture, something upon which scholars have had difficulty agreeing. A number of individuals – including Jacqueline Pirenne (1987) – see the emergence of Sabaean inscriptions in South Arabia at around the fifth century BC. This is the chronological scheme which, as Rodolfo Fattovich points out, has informed the majority of Ethiopianist scholars, and on the whole tends to place the African Epigraphic South Arabian material slightly later. Drewes, for instance, in his analysis of the Melazzo inscriptions (1959), notes that they refer to the conquests of a South Arabian king named *KRBL WTR*. This individual can be dated with some confidence to the mid-fifth–late fourth centuries BC, and belongs to a period during which Sabaean power was declining, and the Ma'in and Qataban kingdoms were developing. This would imply an emergence of a complex, literal society in the Ethiopian highlands during the mid-first millennium BC (cf. Anfray 1994). If, however, we use the 'long' chronology proposed by Fattovich which is based upon the emergence of the Sabaean, Qataban and Ma'in kingdoms at around 1200 BC (this is borne out, as noted above by the earliest archaeological phases at Wadi Yala, Marib, Yemen) we could push the Ethiopian/Eritrean material back even further. Certainly Michels makes some claims for earlier settlements in the Aksum-Yeha region than the conventional chronology would posit (Michels 2005: 55).

Centres of political and ideological power

Rodolfo Fattovich's typology of settlements during this period (1990b) defines four main forms of site: towns, ceremonial centres, villages, and hamlets/compounds. This is also broadly the model from which Joseph

Michels has worked, although one should caution the application of such labels; different sites may embrace a range of roles, and biases in archaeological coverage mean that only the ceremonial, or high-status portions of sites are actually investigated. Special attention attaches to the pre-eminent site of the period: Yeha, in central Tigray (figure 4.4). Now a small town and ecclesiastical centre located about 20 kilometres to the east of Aksum, Yeha was first visited by Alvares in the 1520s and subsequently by James Bruce in the eighteenth century and Henry Salt in the nineteenth century. The site has been the subject of antiquarian investigation starting with Theodore Bent and subsequently Littmann's DAE survey in the early part of the twentieth century, and then in the latter half of the twentieth century by a French-led team from the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology (Anfray 1972b), and more recently by another French team who focused primarily upon architectural recording in the main temple (Robin and De Maigret 1998). The most noteworthy feature of the site is, of course, the standing remains of the temple dedicated, it appears, to LMQ. An associated structure – Grat Beal Guebri – and a series of rock-cut graves clearly suggests an important ceremonial centre rather than a place of secular power.

Fattovich's suggestion (1977) that the whole site actually covered 75 square kilometres cannot be supported by the available evidence. Michels argues (2005: 60–1) that the actual habitation zone is to be found at the site of Enda Gully, 1 kilometre to the east of the main temple; his criteria for estimating population and site size on the basis of ceramic density would suggest to him the presence in the early Aksumite period of a population of about 3,500 people. The general layout of the whole complex, especially in

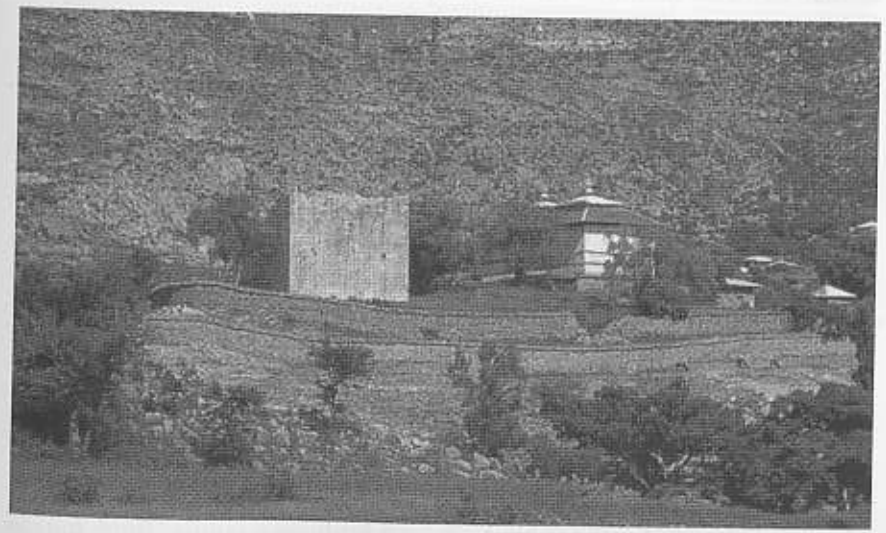

Figure 4.4 The Yeha temple and medieval monastery complex.

relation to the placement of temple, irrigated farming complex and town is suggestive, according to Michels, of the plan of Marib in south-western Arabia itself. From the perspective of agricultural technology, irrigation farming would appear to be an import from south-western Arabia and its use would have had significant connotations for the growth of the *DMT* kingdom. The dam described by the DAE at Safra, near Qohaito (Eritrea) replicates the sort of hydraulic technology employed at Marib, Yemen, although on a much smaller scale (Manzo 1995). It is important to note that modern farmers in the region have no need to use elaborate irrigation systems, and terracing, where observed, is often used as a means of combating soil erosion.

First surveyed by the DAE architect Daniel Krenker in 1906 (figure 4.5), the temple measures 18.5 metres by 15 metres and has standing walls to a height of 13 metres. Krenker's reconstruction shows some South Arabian influence, especially when compared to the temples of Mahram Bilqis and at Ba'ran at Marib, although a better analogue is in the smaller temple recently discovered at al-Hamid on the Tihamah plain (Durrani 2005: 122). The structure is entered at the west end, and would have been divided internally by four pillars. The denticulated friezes on the temple walls are clearly inspired by South Arabian archetypes Anfray (1972a; also figure 4.6). The complex of Grat Be'al Guebri is located some 200 metres to the north-west of the Temple; this is represented by three standing megalithic pillars somewhat similar to the structures at Hawelti (below). Excavations here revealed a long wall running north-south across the site and a flight of 10 monumental stairs. Fragments of denticulated frieze, similar to those mounted on the temple itself would indicate that some form of monumental building stood here. Equally striking, as we shall see, is the similarity between these shaped friezes and later Aksumite architectural styles as depicted upon the decorated stelae at Aksum. The complex was remodelled during the period 400 BC–150 BC, incorporating an original portico structure. The overall layout is now suggestive, according to Anfray, of the later Aksumite palace-type structure rather than a shrine, using stone and wooden beams in the construction (Anfray 1997).

The tomb complex at Yeha, located to the south of the temple, was excavated in the 1960s and may represent some of the most important evidence for (presumably elite) mortuary practice in the *DMT* polity (Anfray 1963a; figure 4.7); indeed only at Matara have broadly similar structures been recorded, although the exact dating of the structures is difficult. The Yeha tombs take the form of catacombs built into the rock beneath square access shafts. Within the excavations in sector one, to the south-west of the temple, 12 tombs were cleared; the number of loculi vary between one and three, and some contain a variety of grave goods. These tombs would presumably have been built for a family. Tomb four is particularly rich; this tomb possesses a single loculus to the south-west of

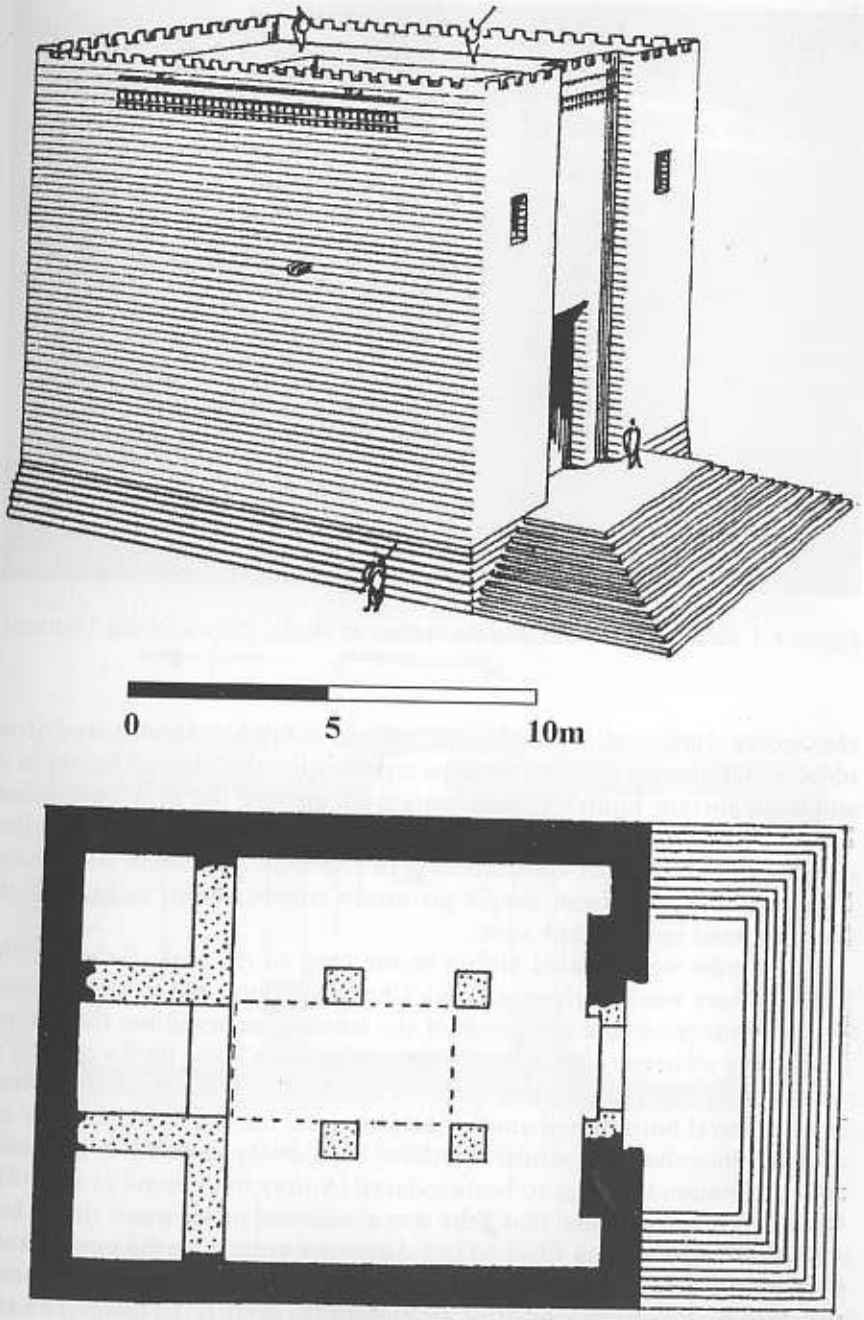

Figure 4.5 Reconstruction of the Yeha temple by Krenker of the DAE (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

Figure 4.6 Sabaean altar with ibex decoration at Marib, Yemen (Nadia Durrani).

the access shaft and is filled with various ceramics, bronze and iron objects and incense burners, perhaps representing the place of burial of a single, important figure. The decoration of some of the pots show what appear to be rutting ibex as well as dedications to *LMQ*. The only other comparable tomb in terms of richness of grave goods is tomb six, whilst the remainder vary from simple pit tombs (tombs seven, eight, ten) to three-roomed tombs (tomb nine).

Two tombs were located within sector two, to the east of the temple (tomb 13 here was latterly reused as a Christian tomb), and in sector three, about 50 metres to the south-east of the *temenos* surrounding the temple three other relatively simple tombs were excavated. These tombs contain a wealth of grave goods, leading Rodolfo Fattovich (1990b) to identify them as being royal burials, and another very unusual feature is the presence of channels into the tomb which may have been designed to allow for post-mortem libation offerings to be introduced (Anfray in Bernand *et al.* 1991: 40). It has been suggested that Yeha was abandoned in Aksumite times, but Anfray (1972b) reports finds of late-Aksumite pottery in the environs of Grat Be'al Guebri, and we know that the Temple itself was converted into a church at some point soon after the mid-fourth century AD complete with baptistery installation. The place must have retained a strong symbolic significance.

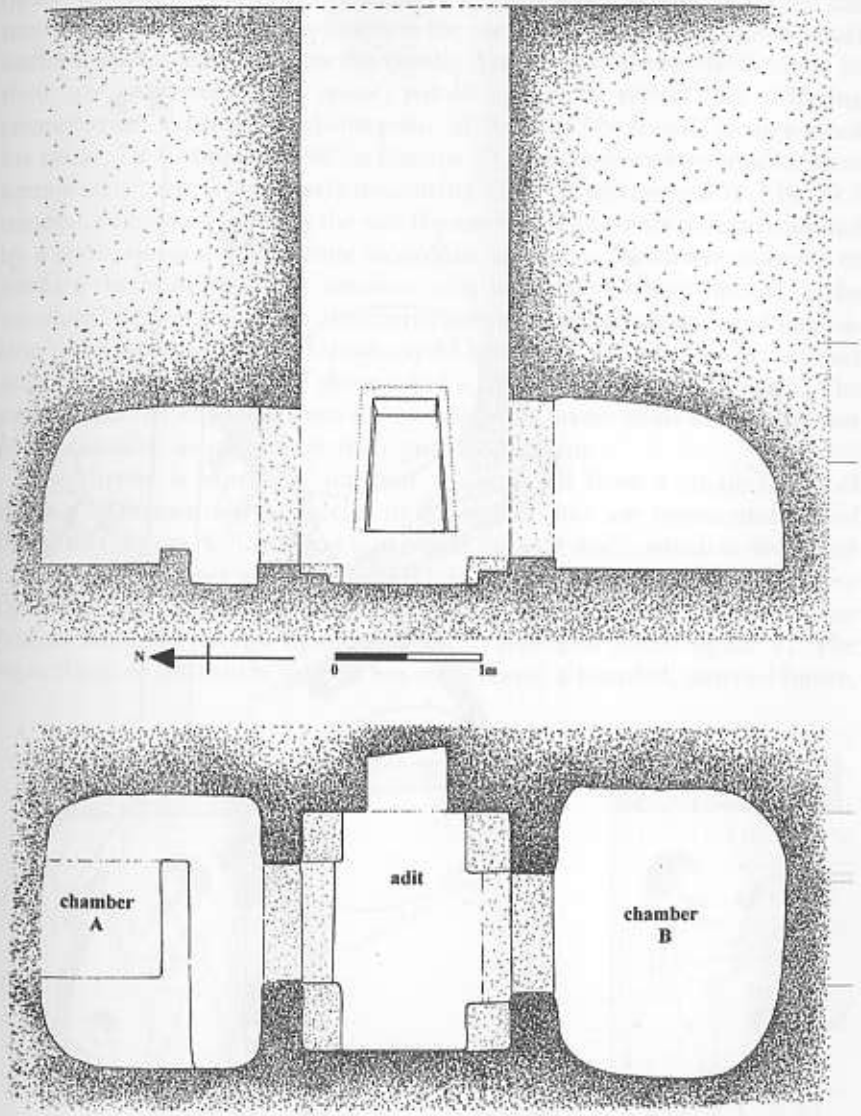

Figure 4.7 Tomb no. 5, Yeha (after Anfray 1963a).

Another major regional cultic centre for the *DMT* culture is to be found at the twin sites of Hawelti-Melazzo, which are located on a basalt hill overlooking a flat plain some 10 kilometres to the south-east of Aksum. The sites were actually discovered when the presence of spolia (friezes and inscriptions) within the fabric of the local church at Enda Cherqos was

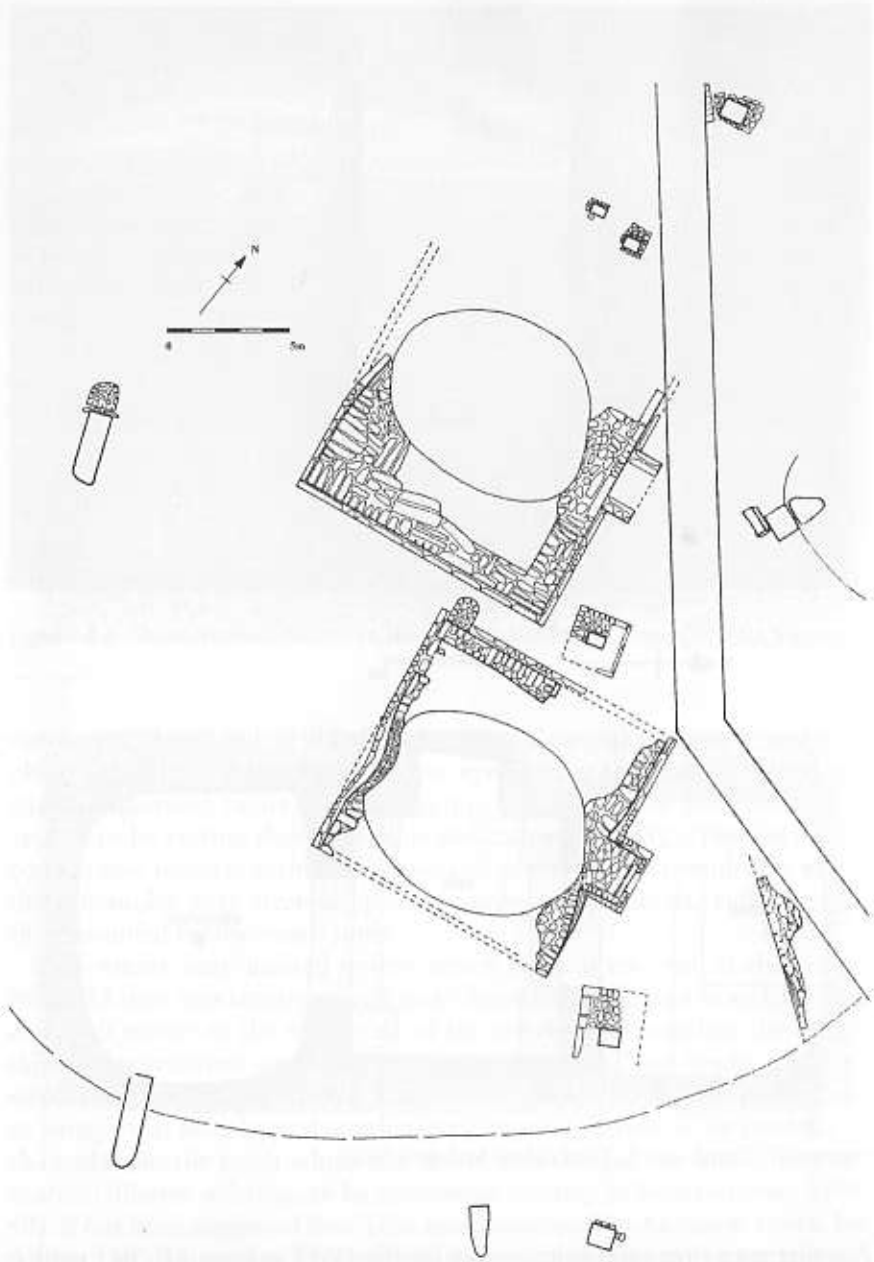

Figure 4.8 Plan of twin Hawelti temples (after De Contenson 1963a).

observed in the 1950s (De Contenson 1961a), and excavation here over the next few years did much to fracture the idea of a monolithic cosmological outlook based wholly upon the South Arabian pantheon. Both sites, in their use of architectural space, would appear to reflect two differing cosmological threads. The hilltop site of Hawelti (the local Tigrinya word for stelae; De Contenson 1963a; Pirenne 1970) comprises two small square temple structures (respectively measuring 11 by 11 metres and 10.5 by 10.5 metres), orientated towards the east (figure 4.8). The complex is surrounded by a series of square limestone monoliths, or stelae, which are assumed to predate the buildings. The recovery of a number of votive figures in the 'corridor' between the two structures strongly suggests structured deposition (De Contenson 1962; Drewes and Schneider 1970). Particular interest attaches to a large covered throne and a statuette of a seated female. The association – if any – between the two pieces is, as we shall see, the subject of speculation, as indeed are their potential origins.

The throne is especially unusual; constructed from a single block of stone and measuring 1.4 metres in height, the feet are representations of bulls' feet (figure 4.9). A cover surrounds the seat itself, which is decorated on the facing edges and on the slightly bowed top with schematic ibex figurines (their execution is virtually identical to those on a large alabaster plaque from the Ba'ran temple at Marib; Avanzini 2005: figure 7). The right flank of the throne bears a bas relief scene: a bearded, gowned figure,

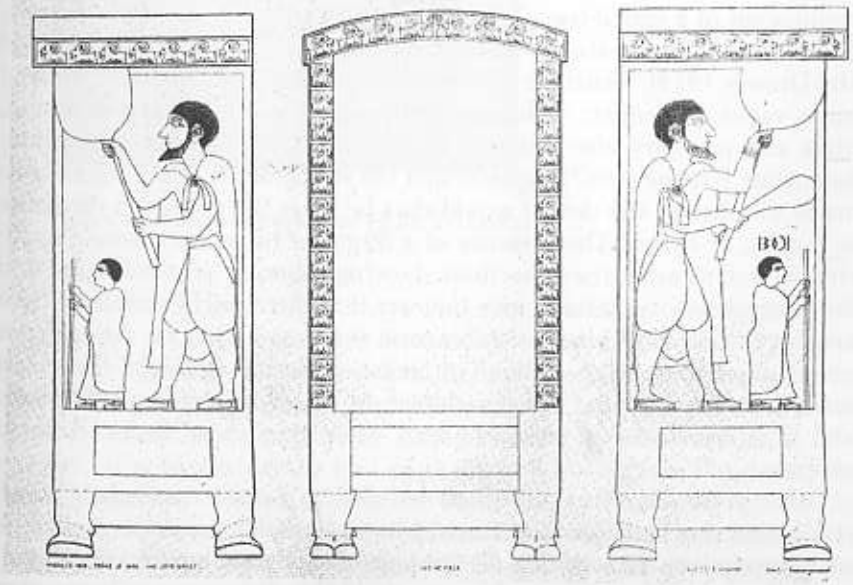

Figure 4.9 Hawelti throne (photograph Henri de Contenson; copyright CFEE).

shown in two-dimensional relief in a style akin to ancient Egyptian sculpture. He holds in his outstretched hands two objects which appear to be fans. Beneath him is a much smaller figure, cloaked and evidently a child, who holds a staff. An unvocalised inscription above him may refer to a personal name: *RFSH*. Of particular note is the physical representation of the facial features and the hair in both figures; the eyes are very 'Egyptian' in style, but lack any detailed features. The hair appears to be rendered as very tight, small 'peppercorn row' hairstyles, something which has been suggested to have parallels in roughly contemporaneous figurative sculpture from Persepolis, Iran (Leroy 1963) whilst De Contenson (1962) argues for a more general north Syrian, Greek or Achamenid influence. A similar, albeit fragmentary, portion of head showing distinctive tight curls was also found at Matara (Anfray and Annequin 1965 pl. LXIII figure 1). In fact these tightly curled hairstyles are noted on South Arabian coins, suggesting that this piece very faithfully represents contemporary South Arabian sculptural practice. Inscribed thrones become a distinctive feature of Aksumite material culture, best represented, of course, in the now-lost throne at Adulis noted by Cosmas Indicopleustes in the sixth century (figure 1.8).

The seated female figurine (figure 4.10; 80 centimetres high) displays the same facial characteristics as those figures on the throne, but is obviously rendered in three dimensions; she sits with her hands on her knees and wears what appears to be a lined robe and a large triple necklace. A fragment of a similar statue was found nearby, and this piece is also strongly reminiscent of a seated female statue found at Addi Galmo, near Mekelle, south-eastern Tigray also in association with small votive altars (Caquot and Drewes 1955). Henri De Contenson suggested that the piece betrayed some vague Hellenistic influence, although the facial characterisation, dress and jewellery also pointed, he argued, to a Meroitic connection. Jacqueline Pirenne (1967) suggests that the statuette may have been borne inside the throne; the throne would thus be what Egyptologists recognise as a naos, or shrine. The presence of a fragment of another female statuette, as well as other frieze portions showing a similar bearded figure and thus suggestive of a throne, may indicate that there might well have been another throne and statuette combination at this site. Thus far the evidence points to a strong South Arabian influence at the site, although this is not really borne out by the cultic architecture which emphasises squareness and thus has little in common with more rectilinear South Arabian temples.

Other votive figurines deposited within the same area include much cruder and simpler versions of seated females as well as depictions of cattle with inscriptions (figure 4.11), diverse animals and even models of a rectangular (figure 4.12) and conical house; could this dichotomy in house plan reflect differences in Arabian and African approaches to domestic space?

Figure 4.10 Hawelti statuette (Jean Leclant).

The female figurines, much more basic in execution, display signs of steatopygia, a theme paralleled as a whole in portable female figurative depictions in prehistoric north-eastern Africa, especially those in pastoralist 'A' and 'C' group contexts in Nubia. Clearly the redundancy of the cattle motif also indicates a continuing strong Nilotic, African ideological substratum, as witnessed by the find of a very well-made cattle figurine at the site of Mahabere Dyagove, Aksum (De Contenson 1959b; 1961b; figure 4.13). De Contenson raises the possibility that this dichotomy in belief systems may be reflected in the history of the site of Hawelti and its development; the stelae structures, being thought to be older than the twin 'temple' buildings, may be associated with the deposition of the cattle figurines, and the

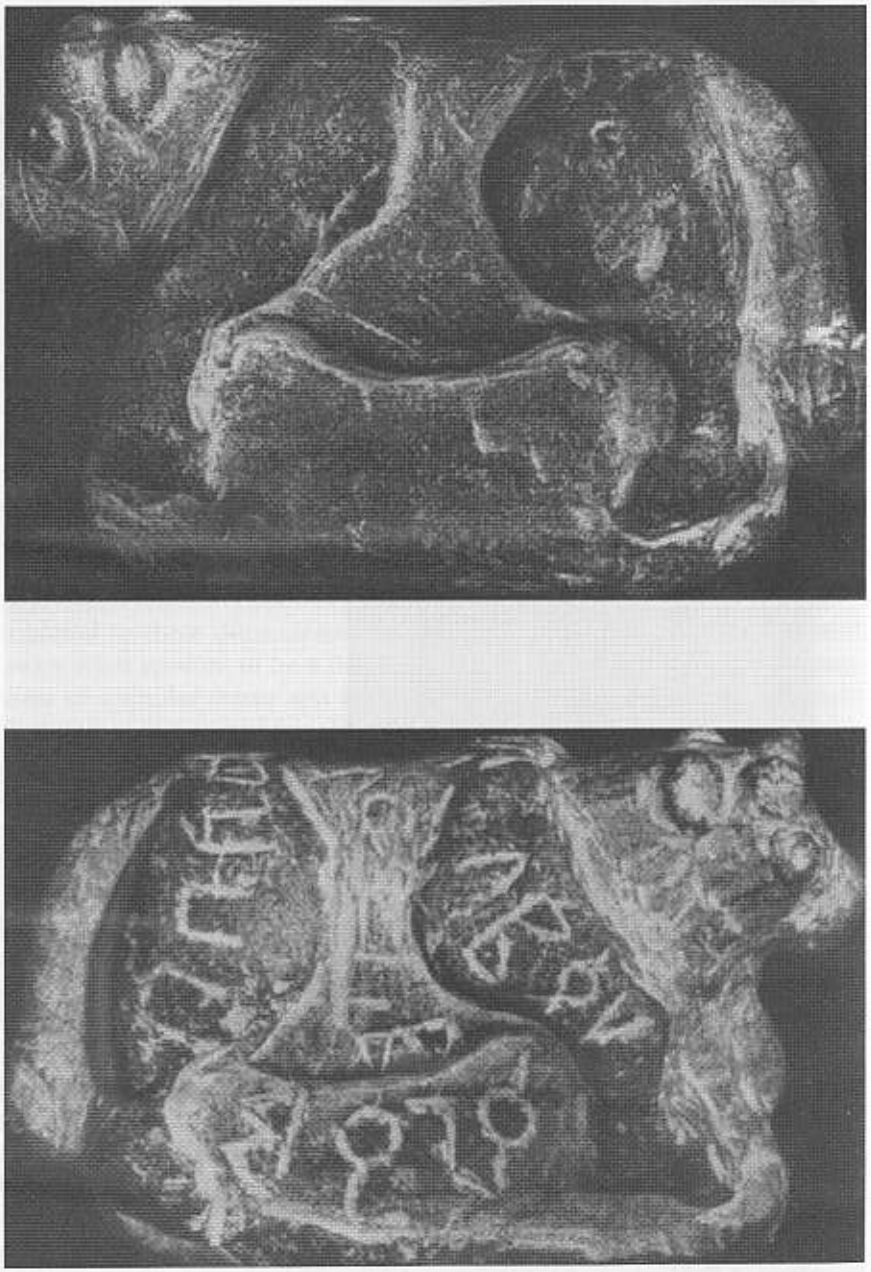

Figure 4.11 Hawelti bull figurine with dedication (Jean Leclant).

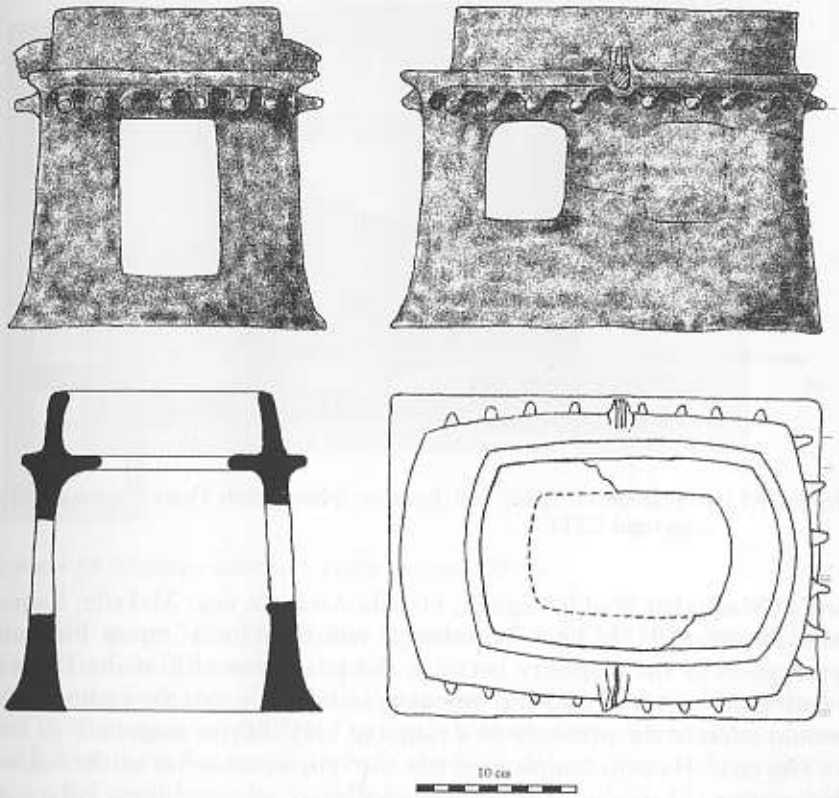

Figure 4.12 Model of house from Hawelti (after De Contenson 1963a).

buildings themselves belong contextually to a second, later phase of ideological activity associated with the throne and statuettes.

It is also clear that there must be some form of continuity with Aksumite material culture; distinctive terracotta heads (actually jars in the shape of faces) are clearly comparable to similar forms excavated at Aksum in the Tomb of the Brick Arches, in contexts dating to the late-fourth century AD (Phillipson 2000: 504), although Munro-Hay (1989a: 20) suggests that the Hawelti versions are much cruder and hence ancestral to the jars from the Tomb of the Brick Arches. Another perspective is offered by Jacqueline Pirenne. In her first survey of the Hawelti material (1967) she suggested that the difference in the types of depositions here may have reflected some form of class disparity; the 'lower' classes would have deposited the more cruder figurines, whilst the female deity might have been the preserve of the elite. In a later paper (1970), she posits that the site represents an Aksumite period reuse of an earlier votive hoard (a similar hoard was discovered at the

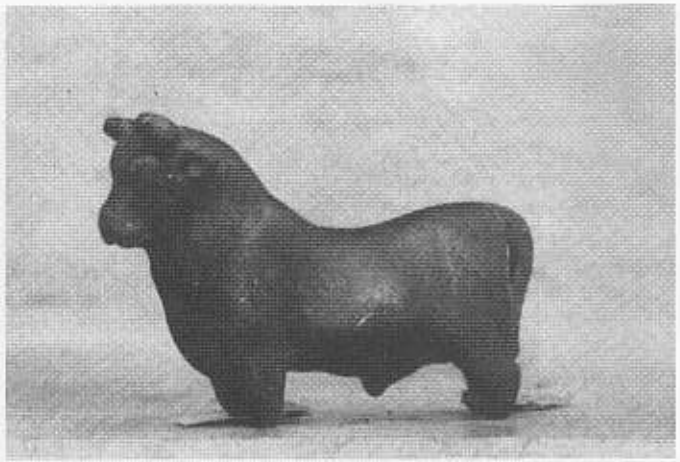

Figure 4.13 Mahabere Dyagove bull figurine (photograph Henri de Contenson; copyright CFEE).

site of Maqqaber Waddi Negussi, Hawila Assaraw, near Mekelle; Caquot and Drewes 1955). This hypothesis, which is based upon Pirenne's perception of the disparity between the relative wealth of the Hawelti ideological material and the baseness of the twin temple architecture, would explain the presence of a range of very diverse material.

The twin Hawelti temples are not the only sanctuaries in the region. Excavation at the nearby site of Melazzo (the modern village of Gobochela, located upon the east bank of the May Agazen river south of the site of Hawelti), uncovered a small temple, measuring 9 by 7 metres, which is entered via the west wall (Leclant 1959a; figure 4.14). This installation is sub-divided into two rooms, the inner of which contains a votive altar on a raised platform at the east, near to where a human skull was found imbedded in the wall. There is an annex in the south-western corner, and the whole structure is enclosed by boundary wall extending 18 metres west-east and 12 metres north-south. The layout is thus more strongly reminiscent of an Arabian temple than the twin Hawelti structures. This complex is associated with dedicatory plaques and alabaster and stone models of bulls; familiar forms of square incense burners found here bear dedications to *LMQ*, an identification further strengthened by the presence of a disc-crescent motif. Another dedication mentions an unknown divinity, *HWBS*, leading Drewes (1959) to suggest that the inscriptions here are a mix between authentic Epigraphic South Arabian forms and peculiar, localised corruptions. Geometric frieze fragments recall those found at Yeha, and display traits that mark them out as the predecessors of the later, Aksumite decorative tradition.

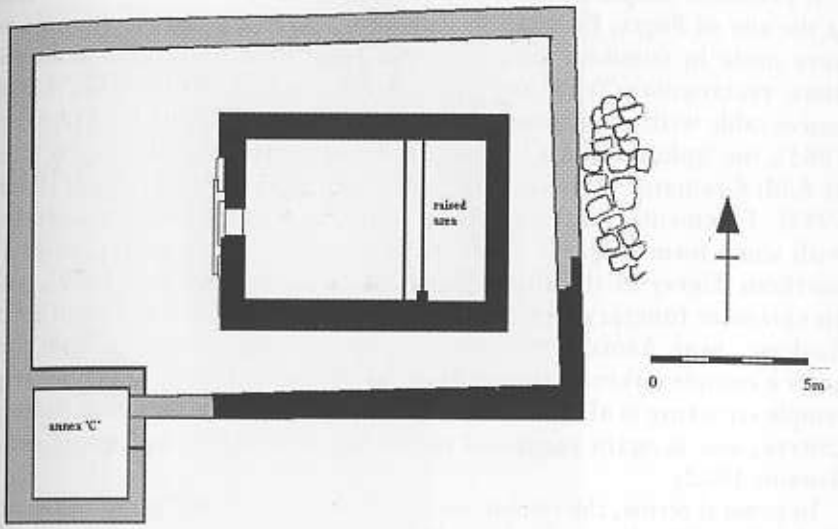

Figure 4.14 Melazzo sanctuary (after Leclant 1959a).

As noted above, the epigraphic evidence also points to a very strong South Arabian influence at the site.

Other supposed temple buildings or cultic installations have been discovered in the region of the *DMT* polity, although they all betray less overt South Arabian influence (apart from elements of portable ritual equipment associated with the sites). Michels (in Kobishchanov 1979: 13) argues that the site of Seglamen, 10 kilometres south-west of Aksum, was a very important cultic centre. Excavations here in 1974 recovered a number of distinctive libation platters or offering dishes, ancient inscriptions and the foundations of two rather fragmentary buildings suggested to be temple installations. (Ricci and Fattovich 1984–1986) There is also plentiful evidence for cultic activity elsewhere beyond the Aksum-Yeha region. The major Aksumite site of Matara in southern Eritrea (136 kilometres south of Asmara) does have evidence in its earliest phases of *DMT* settlement in the form of buildings fabricated from rough schist slabs (Anfray 1963b; Anfray and Annequin 1965). The ceramics from the phases period 1 and period 2 are broadly in concordance with those from Yeha (see also below), and the presence of the distinctive geometric frieze forms as well as a piece of statuary remarkably similar to the seated female of Hawelti may suggest the presence of an ideological installation, but then again the material may be residual and have no contextual association. The nearby site of Zala Kesadmai yielded a suite of material with *DMT* cultural affinities and it is possible that this may be the source of the pre-Aksumite material excavated on the main site.

A probable temple structure built from schist blocks was discovered at the site of Fiqya, Eritrea; measuring 11 metres square it appears to have more in common with the twin Hawelti installations than the more rectangular Yeha and Melazzo/Gobochela structures. A flat votive table with projecting sphinx forms was also found here (Anfray 1965); the 'sphinx' motif is also present at finds from the nearby sites of Addi Gramaten (Davico 1946; Duncanson 1947) and Dibdib (Ricci 1954). Fragmentary bronze pieces and ceramics, perhaps associated with some form of grave context, were noted during survey work in northern Tigray at the site of Sabea (Leclant and Miquel 1959), and an extensive funerary complex has been described from the vicinity of Kaskase, near Asmara; the presence here of monolithic pillars suggests a complex akin to that at Hawelti (Tringali 1979). Another large temple structure is also located at Enzelal in the Rore region of eastern Eritrea, and is again suggested to belong to the *DMT* culture (Conti-Rossini 1922).

In general terms, the temple architecture of the *DMT* polity does not faithfully reflect South Arabian designs. Of those outlined above, only the buildings at Yeha and Melazzo (to some extent) really conform to the Sayhadian Sabaean practice of rectangular temple architecture (Durrani 2005: 122). Other elements of *portable* religious material culture do, however, betoken a very overt Sabaean influence, such as

Figure 4.15a Incense burners from Hawelti: square form with crescent moon motif and ESA inscription (Jean Leclant).

Figure 4.15b Circular form or portable altar (Jean Leclant).

small fired clay incense burners or votive altars. These artefacts have been found at the sites of Melazzo (see figure 4.15 a; b), Yeha, Addi Galmo, Matara, Der'a and Addi Gramaten. These come in a variety of forms: tripods, rectangular tabular forms, square and rectangular forms which seem to represent skeuomorphically architectural features and often carry sacred inscriptions as well as raised representations of the sun and crescent moon. Unusually, some incense burners from Melazzo are circular in form, which might reflect the main theme of moon-god worship at that site. These burners have also been found in contemporary contexts in south-western Arabia where they appear to be associated with funerary ritual (Hassell 2002).

The economic context of the DMT *culture*

Until recently, little was known about the rural, agricultural system which underpinned the *DMT* polity much beyond the sort of banal statement that it owed a great deal to South Arabian influences and imported irrigation systems. Both Joseph Michels' survey data and excavations by the BIEA Aksum project have greatly elucidated the picture. Michels located a number of *DMT* culture sites in the valley between Yeha and Aksum; the general pattern indicated a fall-off in small hamlets and villages through the period, implying a rural migration into the urban centre – which must have been Yeha. We may presume that the immediate Aksum region was dominated by small village sites, although there is evidence of larger-scale cultic activity. A shrine structure at the monastery of Abba Pantaleon may represent a central cultic place in the landscape, whilst Fattovich *et al.* suggest (2000: 72) that the foundations of a large, monumental temple building, similar in plan to the temple of Mahram Bilqis, Marib, is visible in aerial photographs on the plain south of the Dungur site. Many of Michels' early and middle phase village sites cluster around Gobedra hill to the west of the town. To the east, *DMT* pottery is present in the upper strata of Anqqer Baahti, replacing the earlier coarse wares decorated with fingernail incision (figures 2.17a; b); these are similar to those described at Yeha (Fattovich 1972). Claims for finds of *DMT* cultural material from a site in the vicinity of the cathedral of Maryam Zion are still unclear (De Contenson 1963b).

Major evidence of *DMT* settlement in the Aksum landscape can be found on the summit of Beta Giyorgis Hill at Ona Negast (ON IX) and Ona Enda Abbay Zawge (OAZ I and OAZ III); at OAZ I black-topped red wares, consistent with a sixth–fourth-century BC dates are associated with a complex of walls which underlie a later stone platform. An analysis of faunal remains from the ON excavations associated with *DMT* cultural material indicated a heavy reliance upon cattle (*Bos taurus*) and a significant utilisation of ovicaprines (Bard *et al.* 2000: 75). A better context for cereal exploitation at this time is provided by the BIEA excavations at 'D' site (Kidane Mehret) to the north of the modern town, which uncovered an earlier period of building construction dating between the eighth and fifth centuries BC. Represented by phases 1–3, the rough, un-mortared walling in units D13 and D23 yielded distinctive black-topped wares and characteristic thin-walled bowls similar to that found at Yeha. Economic evidence from the site pointed towards cattle keeping and mixed cereal cultivation, notably based upon western Asian cultivars such as wheat and barley, with no evidence for local crops (Phillipson 2000: 303). This site is unique within the context of the others discussed in this chapter in so far as it is a specialised farming village rather than a ceremonial or specialist elite centre, and appears to show no evidence for South Arabian cultural influence (Phillips 2004).

Material culture of the DMT *polity: African or Arabian?*

The domestic material culture of the *DMT* polity arguably betrays more accurately the African roots and inspirations of this cultural tradition (Fattovich 1978b). In his survey Fattovich (1990b) suggests that pre-Aksumite ceramic material may be divided into 16 main groups, of which the most common and distinctive are red-orange, black-topped, black-polished and cream wares as well as varied red-slipped wares. In terms of vessel form, mica-tempered, cream amphorae, small thin-walled cups, bowls and jugs are the most recognisable. Decoration is often simple: geometric motifs, incisions and in some cases, reflecting ideological concerns, ibex.

Although metal working was important – as witnessed especially by the varied iron and bronze objects found in burial contexts at Yeha and Matara, and particularly by the bronze filigree 'seals' representing personal monograms and varied animals from Sabea, Hawelti and Yeha (Drewes and Schneider 1967; figure 4.16), no evidence for the industrial aspect of metalworking during this period has been discovered. Fattovich notes that the slag found at Gobedra, Aksum may be associated with pottery reminiscent of the Yeha II phase, a red-orange ware, which has also been noted from the Gash Delta region. This association was not recognised at the site of Anqqer Baahti where plentiful slag only appeared to be contextually linked with the very latest, Aksumite and post-Aksumite material. Fattovich's theory about the Gobedra material would suggest that the technology for metalworking thus originated in the Gash region (and thus ultimately perhaps from the middle Nile region) and diffused eastwards. Iron was not found in *DMT* contexts at the BIEA 'D' site at Kidane Mehret in Aksum, although it should be stressed that this was a 'peasant' rather than elite site. It is important to note, as we have seen in Chapter 2, that the continued use stone-tool technology was still an important factor; the fabrication of obsidian tools was a vital element in the pre-Aksumite domestic economy, much as it would be in later Aksumite times, and the technology has clear local, mid-Holocene-period cultural antecedents.

This last observation, taken with the broader archaeological survey presented above, emphasises the strong local substratum within the *DMT* society, a sense of continuity, yet with some distinctive developments. Two main socio-cultural trends are apparent. In the first place, Michels' settlement archaeology data points to the development of a strong urban culture and a concomitant shrinkage in the numbers of small social units (villages/hamlets). This is described as being a South Arabian settlement pattern, but surely is a universal response to the development of larger economically and socially complex urban centres. Second, archaeological and epigraphic evidence points to a small, although culturally significant, population increment from South Arabia, which becomes gradually more acculturated over time.

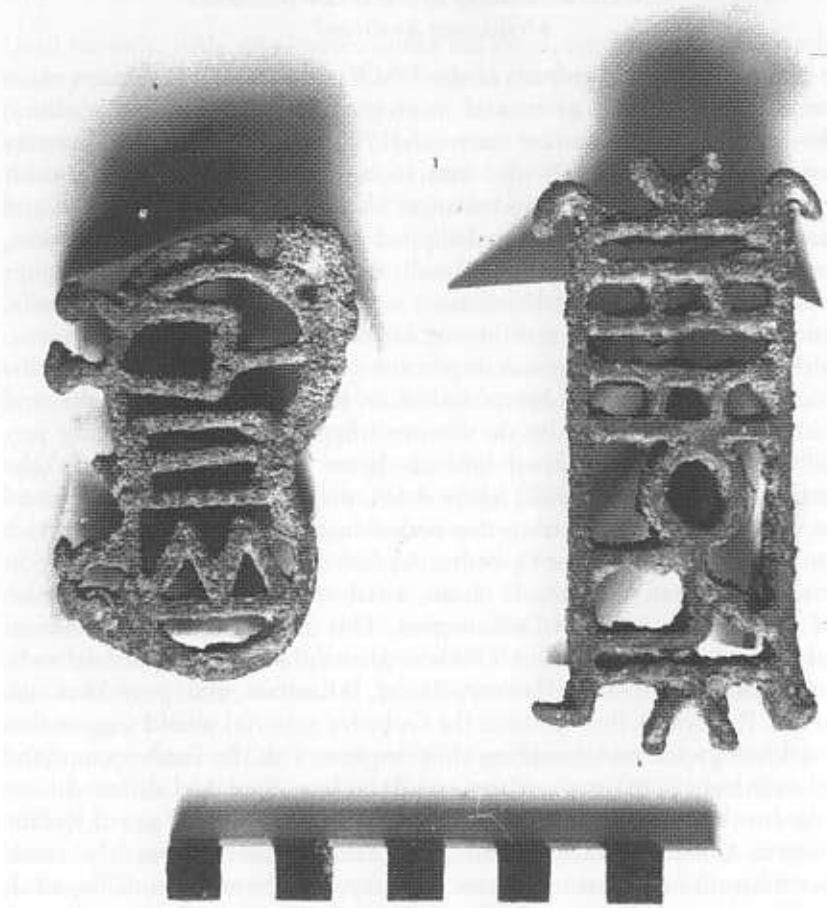

Figure 4.16 Bronze 'monograms' from Yeha; scale in cm (Francis Anfray).

Funerary archaeology may be able to offer some scope for identification of distinct cultural traditions within the *DMT* polity, but this requires much more work. The Yeha tombs, discussed above, whilst structurally similar, may be differentiated on the basis of squared and rounded loculi. This is a theme to which we shall return in the next chapter when it is argued that comparison of approaches to architectural space may betoken cultural differences. But for the *DMT* period funerary data are sparse, and their dating may be problematic. The tombs uncovered at Matara bear broad comparison to those excavated at Yeha (Anfray 1967a), and are grouped in a cemetery at Goual-Saim, to the south of the main settlement. Here, whilst the associated grave goods evidence is rich, the tomb architecture itself is

simple, with only one loculus per tomb, suggesting individual rather than family burial. Apart from the inhumations at Yeha and Matara, little else is known about funerary practice in the *DMT* polity. The strange tumuli burials found in the Ham region, in the vicinity of the monastery at Debre Libanos, Eritrea, may point to a different tradition of funerary ritual, perhaps associated with earlier pastoralist settlement (Anfray 1965), although having been extensively robbed, their chronological attribution is not clear (*contra* Fattovich 1990b). They appear to be associated at this site with a complex of pillars as well as a wine press very like that found at the later (Aksumite) site of Atshafi, Aksum; their closest analogy is with the 'dolmens' of the Harar region.

By the end of the middle part of the first millennium BC the *DMT* polity was declining. In the first case wider regional factors such as the rise of Meroë on the middle Nile, and the emergence of Ptolemaic power in Egypt may have resulted in the reorganisation of existing Red Sea trade systems, which impacted upon the economic base of the polity. Michels' work places the abandonment of Yeha during this period, which saw the dispersal of the population into the countryside, resulting in a new political order at *c.*150 BC which was marked by the emergence of three regional 'chiefdoms' in the Aksum region (this model is informed by the recognition, using Michels' criteria, of three large 'central places' in the area at this time). Importantly it now appears that the orientation of at least one of these polities shifts westwards, away from the long-established Red Sea network towards the eastern Sudanic steppes. This process has important implications for the emergence of the Aksumite state and has forced archaeologists to re-assess traditional views of the possible continuum between the *DMT* and Aksumite culture.

The Proto-Aksumite culture

Recent excavations by Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn Bard at Beta Giyorgis, Aksum, have both shifted the upper chronological boundaries of the *DMT* culture, and also re-orientated elements of the cultural identity of the antecedents of the Aksumite polity (Fattovich and Bard 2001). The proto-Aksumite phase largely replaces Fattovich's 'late-pre-Aksumite phase', and dates from *c.*400–150 BC on the basis of radiocarbon samples obtained from the ON and OAZ sites. Pottery which may also be characterised as being proto-Aksumite in nature has also been noted at the site of Madoge, some 6 kilometres south-west of Aksum (Fattovich *et al.* 2000: 23; De Contenson 1961b) and at Mai Adrasha, Inda Sellassie, Shire, western Tigray (Finneran and Phillips 2003b). Sadly the provenance of the latter material was unrecorded but it is possible that this site, which has suffered the predations of looters,

could form a significant link between the Gash region and the northern highlands of the Horn of Africa. What makes the proto-Aksumite period so distinctive (and we should recall DiBlasi's caution that at this moment it appears to have a very limited distribution) is a closer association with the eastern Sudanic, and ultimately middle Nile regions (Bard *et al.* 2002).

This shift in emphasis is most apparent in changes in funerary behaviour: two forms of shaft tomb (small and large variants), marked by stelae, and containing a range of votive offerings now appear, and the use of temple buildings seems to decline indicating a change in the public commemoration of the powerful individual (Both Pirenne and Fattovich also see probable Meroitic and/or Napatan influence in the layout of the temple complexes of Hawelti; Pirenne 1967; Fattovich 1982). Fattovich has suggested (1987; 1989b) that the use of the stela as a grave marker derives ultimately from Mahal Teglinos, but recent work on the Tihamah plain of

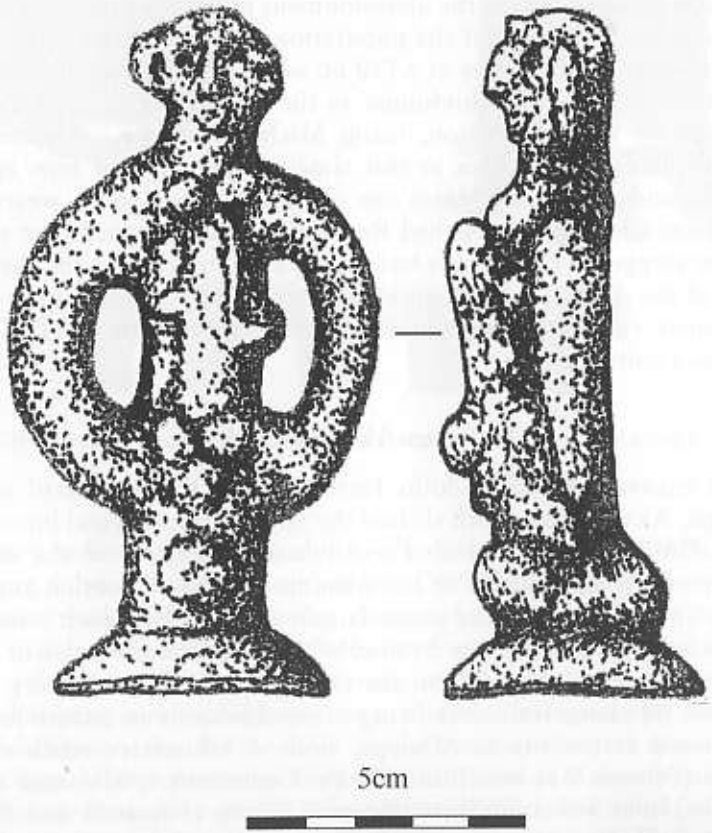

Figure 4.17 'Fertility' figurine, Mai Adrasha (after Finneran and Phillips 2003b).

Yemen by the Canadian archaeologist Edward Keall (2002) has demonstrated that there is an equally vigorous and long-lasting megalithic culture thriving in that region from *c.*2000 BC, and the possibility of another earlier megalithic tradition in the Ona region (Trucca 1980). Ethiopian stelae also differ from Gash Delta types in their size and shape, on the whole being taller and thinner.

More specific examples of contact with the Nile region through funerary evidence may be found in the possibility of a human sacrificial burial at OAZ (which has been attested at Kerma and latterly at Meroë; Edwards 2004: 84; 96), as well the use of model axes as grave goods. Features within the pottery assemblage also betray this shift in perspective; general similarities to Nubian forms may be noted in the S-shaped rims, with ovoid mouldings and the use of incised vertical grooves as decorative schemes (Fattovich *et al.* 1998), and there is very little evidence of continuity from *DMT* ceramics.

From further afield, Bard *et al.* (2002) point to the presence of a large number of Egyptian, Ptolemaic beads in tomb 6 at OAZ (on the eastern side of Beta Giyorgis), as being indicative of more expansive regional contact during the last two centuries BC. Interestingly this tomb also contained a bronze stamp seal broadly similar to those found at Kassala sites as well as in Meroitic contexts. This is not to deny, however, a strong local ideological substratum. Whilst the elite on their hill top site at Beta Giyorgis (and there may have been others elsewhere in the region) looked to the west for cultural exchange, fundamentally the ideological attachment to cattle and female figurines appears to be retained. To the west in Shire, the site of Mai Adrasha has yielded many very distinctive and highly stylised baked clay figurines of elongated females, with evident steatopygia, clasping an infant to their breasts. It is therefore very tempting to ascribe a fertility-ritual function to such pieces (figure 4.17). Such depictions are unknown within later Aksumite period ideological contexts, and suggest the development of a distinctive and very localised urban culture in that region during the last two centuries BC.

Overview

The phenomenon of socio-economic complexity in the northern Horn of Africa during the late first millennium BC was clearly not introduced through the agency of a 'far superior' (in Ullendorff's words) South Arabian culture. In the first place, as Fattovich (1996) has emphasised in his Tihamah Cultural Complex model, it is wrong to view these developments in continent-specific terms, as a rigid dichotomy between Africa and Asia. These northern highlands occupied an economically stable, intermediate zone in a long-lived and dynamic socio-cultural axis that linked the middle Nile at one extreme and the highlands of Arabia at the other. The Red Sea provided a nexus of contact: economic, cultural and

ideological. Possible *DMT* material discovered at Adulis by the Italian archaeologist Paribeni may have its roots in this cultural area, and Fattovich notes (2000: 22) that the general region would have been included in a broad 'exchange circuit' as far back as *c.*1500 BC–900/800 BC, and would have embraced the African sites of Matara and Adulis, and the Arabian settlements at Sihi and Sabir.

This 'exchange circuit', which implies a set of economic rather than formal political linkages, would obviously have had its roots in the much earlier emergence of the Afro-Arabian obsidian exchange system during the seventh millennium BC (Chapter 2). The Tihamah culture area would therefore have had its strongest influences in the east of the region; of the two 'pre-Aksumite culture zones' defined by Fattovich, the northerly/easterly region presumably has its roots in the Ona cultures and also the Tihamah complex. The western region is defined purely upon perceived similarities with the rather sparse material from the upper phases of the Gobedra excavations, and that of the Gash Group, thus implying a stronger African element.

The current archaeological evidence therefore strongly suggests that these developments took place at different times and in different areas in the shape of the Agordat-Ona, *DMT* and proto-Aksumite cultures. There is no African South Arabian empire, the archaeological and epigraphic evidence cannot support a model for colonial domination underwritten by massive military and political investment. This is not a picture which suggests a sense of military or political domination: Munro-Hay (1991: 63) summarises the relationship between the South Arabian incomers and the indigenous Ethiopians in the following terms: (the Sabaeans) 'may have been military or trading colonists, living in some sort of symbiosis with the local Ethiopian population, perhaps under a species of treaty status', but archaeologically speaking a heavy 'colonial' imprint is not visible. What appears to be more likely is that we have here a dispersal of small, elite South Arabian mercantile centres through the highlands, akin to a planter economy. Their presence impacted upon local elites, who might have desired the prestige seemingly afforded by aping South Arabian cultural trends, whilst also still retaining some degree of local cultural and economic infrastructure. By and large they built their temple installations to a local pattern (with few exceptions) but utilised, for reasons of economic and social prestige, portable ritual equipment which had a South Arabian origin.

The best African historical analogy might be found in the development of the Swahili towns, some 1,500 years later, which resulted in a 'creole' culture, a mix of African and Arabian, with the Arabian cultural impact most prominent in the massive impact of Islam. Mark Horton's investigations at Shanga, for instance, chronicle the growth of an Arabian mercantile class from small beginnings, their impact being gauged through the local uptake of Islam, yet fundamentally their presence did not alter, it seems,

traditional Bantu concepts of urban space. In the northern Horn the archaeological evidence for South Arabian cultural input is limited mainly to the elite, ideological context (although this might reflect a historical bias in archaeological sampling, the results of the 'D' site investigations at Aksum would seem to support the notion that South Arabian cultural influence was actually rather narrow), and in all probability a desire by a local king to cement his place as ruler of the *DMT* polity by copying the workings of South Arabian state machinery. In addition, Epigraphic South Arabian Inscriptions carry a disproportionate influence in terms of material culture organisation during this period because, for the first time, they provide the medium for information transfer and exchange, and they change as local writers adapt them to their needs. At lower levels of society South Arabian influence hardly impacted upon the organisation of domestic and ideological culture.

The fragmentation of the *DMT* polity was accompanied by the emergence of smaller-scale societies, and particular attention attaches (in the absence of any other evidence) to the developments on the summit of Beta Giyorgis hill in the late first millennium BC. It is from this background that the Aksumite state emerges, although we should, as suggested earlier, move away from simplistic and evolutionary terms of cause and effect. On this basis one would have to disagree with DiBlasi, for instance, when he states 'the transformation from chiefdom to kingdom is the process that defines the Aksumite period' (DiBlasi in Michels 2005: x). In accepting the monolithic nature of the 'pre-Aksumite' phase we are cementing traditional teleological schemes of social evolution. David Phillipson reasonably states that 'a revision of terminology is now required' (Phillipson 2000: 475); this we have attempted to do, and in doing so we emphasise the cyclic nature of socio-political evolution that is ethnohistorically attested in Africa and largely archaeologically attested by Michels in the Aksum-Yeha region, although in very broad brush strokes. A model of dynamic socio-political expansion and contraction would thus appear to best describe the events in the northern highlands of the Horn from the early first millennium BC onwards, both at the cusp of the first millennium BC and the emergence of the Aksumite state, as well as socio-political frameworks of power over the next two millennia at least.

5

AKSUM

Contexts

The study of Aksum

Arguably the city of Aksum has been the focus of more archaeological investigation then any other urban site within eastern Africa and the Horn. It was the capital of one of Africa's most fascinating manifestations of a complex society – intercontinental empire might even be a suitable term. Aksum was an international phenomenon, enjoying contacts with the eastern Mediterranean world, the Nile Valley, Arabia and even further across the Indian Ocean to India and China. Aksum also forged – at a comparatively early date – its own distinctive Christian identity. These traits have made the study of the Aksumite period one of the most attractive (in terms of research focus) within the broader sweep of the Ethiopian culture history metanarrative, but paradoxically there is also a large gap. The Aksumite Empire is not Aksum alone, there are many more parts to the sum of the whole, other sites and regions which have received comparatively little attention, and as such the balance of this chapter attempts to move away from the Aksum-specific, site-centric perspective towards a more holistic consideration of the wider system (although this obviously has limitations in the light of available archaeological evidence).

The overall bias in research focus does not just exist on a regional level; archaeological research in the town itself has not (with few exceptions) evolved from monumental-focused work. These monuments are, for the most part, major funerary and presumed elite structures. Their investigation – whilst yielding useful information enabling us to reconstruct extra-regional trade networks, elite-level economies and to some extent the nature of Aksumite pre-Christian cosmology – does not furnish a wider perspective. This should not be taken as a criticism. The work of the *Deutsche Aksum Expedition* of 1906 remains an important foundation for all subsequent work on the city and many of its neighbouring sites, yet it is a very

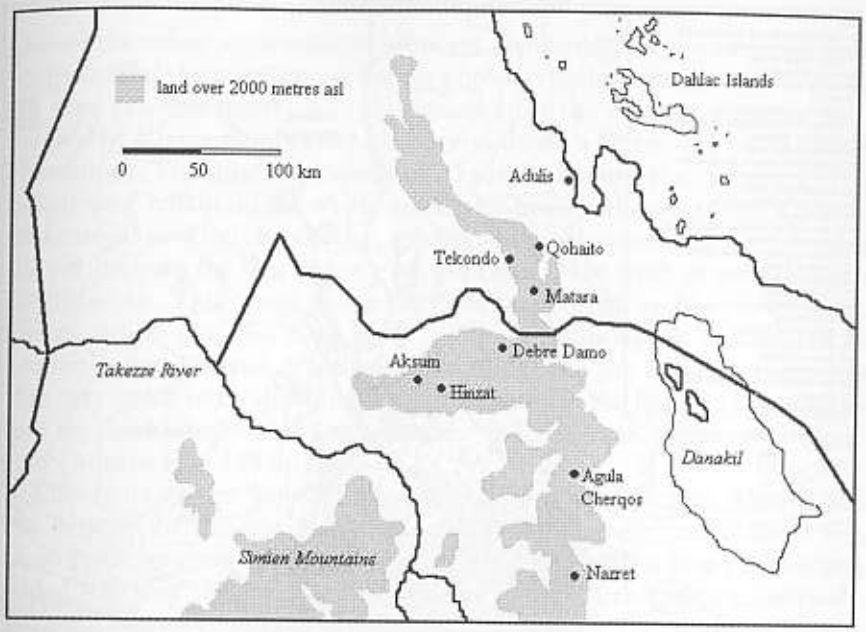

Figure 5.1 Location of major sites of the Aksumite period.

traditional, descriptive work of its time. Subsequent archaeological research focused primarily upon elite structures, and many of the reports of these excavations have yet to be published in adequate form. The first BIEA expedition to Aksum (1972–1974) was curtailed by political circumstances, and as such it never fully realised its goals, although an admittedly interim, although exceptionally useful report was finally produced (Munro-Hay 1989a). A single unpublished instance of rescue excavation – on shaft tombs where the present Yeha Hotel stands – and Joseph Michels' extensive regional survey provided the coda to archaeological work here until the early 1990s.

With the amelioration of the political climate at this time, work here began afresh, with a BIEA expedition under the direction of David Phillipson (1993–1997) and a joint Italian-US project (1993-) under the direction of Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn Bard. The former project investigated 14 sites ranging from large-scale open-area settlement excavation to funerary contexts and rescue excavations (Phillipson 2000: 12); the latter project focused upon funerary and elite residential sites on the summit of Beta Giyorgis hill, overlooking Aksum. In recent years German archaeologists have focused their attentions on the Berit Awde plain to the north of the town. Methodologically and indeed theoretically

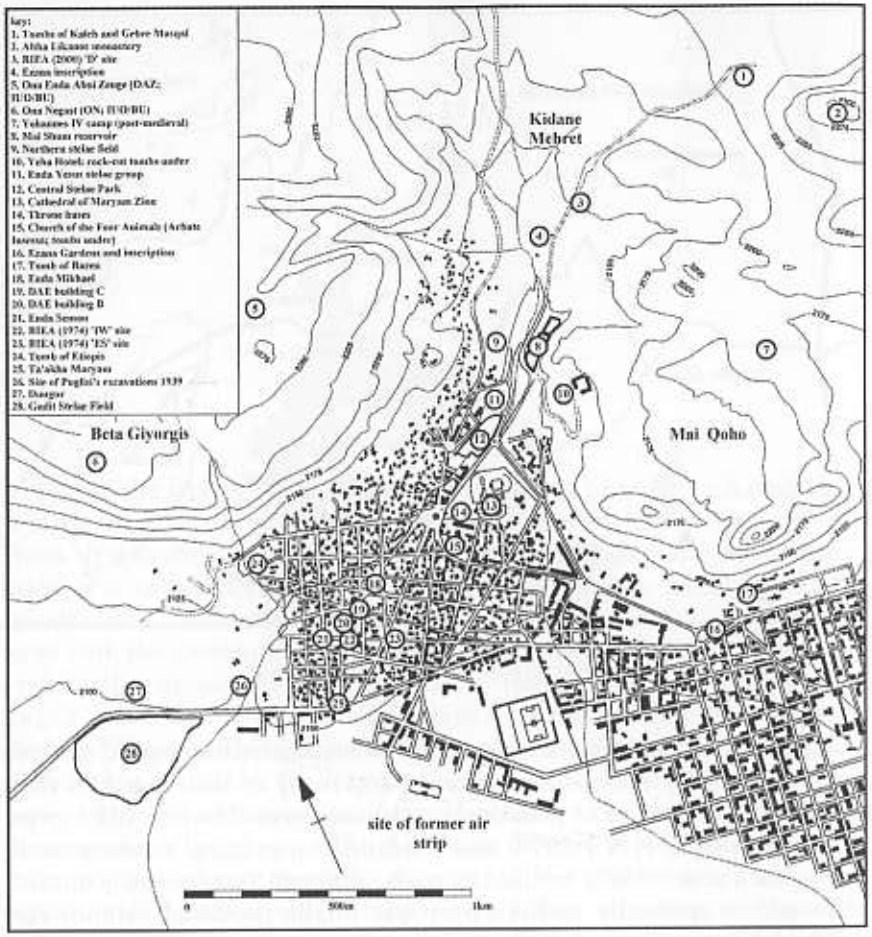

Figure 5.2 Archaeological map of Aksum (after Munro-Hay 1989a; Phillipson 2000).

African archaeology had matured greatly in these intervening years; the focus for the recent projects moved towards greater utilisation of scientific techniques, and changing philosophies especially in the fields of palaeoenvironmental work, object conservation and community archaeology, concomitant with a shift from the pre-occupation upon the site towards the wider landscape context, led to a new approach to the city. A biography of archaeological research at Aksum over the last 100 years encapsulates the wider debates and paradigm changes within African archaeology as a whole.

Chronological context

One of the major achievements of recent archaeological research has been to situate the Aksumite empire within a broader global context. Additionally we now possess, thanks to a reassessment of the coinage sequence augmented by a large number of radiocarbon dates, a better idea of Aksumite chronology. Traditional accounts of Aksumite history (e.g. Sergew 1972), which were reliant on the whole upon later historical sources and a poorly understood coinage chronology, envisaged the Aksumite empire spanning the period from the first century BC to as late as the tenth or even eleventh centuries AD. This 'long' chronology was supported by Neville Chittick, among others (see also Bard *et al.* 2000: 71), although it can be seen in hindsight that Chittick was seeking to bridge the gap between two areas that very much interested him: trading patterns in the Red Sea in antiquity and the rise of the Swahili culture on the Indian Ocean by the twelfth century (Munro-Hay 1989a: 22; 330).

Adherents of the 'long' chronology did not suggest that Aksum was the capital for this entire period, this much is clear, as we shall see, from contemporary Arab sources, but it did allow for a non-problematic transition into the Zagwe period from the twelfth century onwards. Recent archaeological research has demanded that the emphasis be now placed upon a 'shorter' chronology for the Aksumite state, which essentially places its existence between the mention of the 'Basileus Zozkales' in the *Periplus* and the end of the coinage in the sixth century under King Armah (the first issues of the coinage are conventionally dated to those of Endybis in AD 270). This has, however, created a historical and archaeological 'dark age' between the end of Aksum and the emergence of Lalibela. This is a problem to which we shall return in the next chapter.

A broad outline of the contemporary external accounts relevant to the period has already been presented in Chapter 1, but local sources (in the form of monumental inscriptions) tell us much about the way in which the state was organised, its colonial policy as well as charting major ideological shifts. Aksumite inscriptions – which utilise the Sabaean, Greek and Ge'ez (Ethiopic) languages – have been found at a range of major sites in northern Ethiopia, Eritrea as well as in South Arabia and at Meroë (Bernand *et al.* 1991; 2000). Along with numismatic evidence, they constitute the only evidence for the names and deeds of the kings themselves. Some of the kings (*GRDT-ZQRNS*) are *only* mentioned in inscriptions from South Arabia (Robin 1981), indicating that during the third century Aksum was particularly active across the Red Sea.

In the opposite direction, Aksumite inscriptions have also been found at Meroë (Hägg 1984); it is possible that one of these inscriptions may have

formed part of a victory inscription written for King Ezana during the campaigns against the Noba peoples in the mid-fourth century (Bersina 1984). Ezana himself appears in a number of inscriptions in Aksum; two of the most notable were set up on the northern and eastern approaches to the town, and demonstrate his changing ideological affiliations from traditional Aksumite beliefs towards an acceptance of Christianity. Ezana's inscription, incidentally, is noteworthy because it is the first time that we find vocalisation on the inscriptions, showing the beginnings of the Ethiopic syllabary currently in use (Gragg 1997). It should be also noted that the kings go under a variety of different names; Kaleb, for instance, is variously referred to as Ellesbaas, Hellesthaeos or Aidog (Munro-Hay 1991: 88) and Ethiopian

Table 5.1 Aksumite historical chronology (after Munro-Hay 1989: 20; 1991: iii)

Approximate dates AD	*King*	*Remarks*
100 AD	Zoskales	Mentioned in the *Periplus*; Ptolemy
*c.*200–270	*GDRT* *BYGT* (son of the nagashi) *DBH*	Kings' and sons' names mentioned in unvocalised inscriptions in South Arabia.
	GRMT (son of the nagashi) ?Sembrouthes	Only known from DAE inscription 3
	DTWNS *ZQRNS*	
*c.*270–330	Endybis Aphilas Wazeba Ousanas Ezana (pre-Christian)	First coinage issue Ezana inscription
*c.*330–520	Ezana (as Christian) *MHDYS* Ouazebas Eon Ebana Nezool/Nezana Ousas/Tazena Kaleb	
*c.*520–?	Ella Amidas (?Wazena) Ella Gabaz (WZB) Ioel Hataz Israel Gersem Armah	

Table 5.2 Aksumite archaeological chronology

Fattovich et al. (2000: 71–2)		*Phillipson (2000: 474)*		*Michels (2005: 21)*	
Pre-Aksumite	*c.*700–400 BC	Cf. Fattovich			
Proto-Aksumite	*c.*400–150 BC	Cf. Fattovich		Late pre-Aksumite	150 BC–AD 150
Aksumite 1	150 BC–AD 150	Early Aksumite	AD 0–300	Early Aksumite	AD 150–450
Aksumite 2	AD 150-AD 400/450	Classical Aksumite	AD 300–500	Late Aksumite	AD 450–750
Aksumite 3	AD 400/ 450–550	Late Aksumite	AD 500–600	Early post-Aksumite	AD 750–850
Aksumite 4	AD 550–700	Post-Aksumite	AD 700 +	Late post-Aksumite	AD 850–

names differ from Greek versions. Combining the coinage and inscription evidence then, the generally accepted historical chronology for Aksum is shown in Table 5.1; also shown in Table 5.2 are three schemes for the *archaeological* periodisation based mainly upon temporal trends in ceramic development. We will begin the survey of the archaeology of the Aksumite state by starting at its base: the agricultural economy which underpinned the foundations of town, state and empire.

Aksum in its landscape

Concluding his findings of his 1974 archaeological survey, Joseph Michels hypothesised that Yeha became the most important urban centre of the *DMT* polity because of its access to rich farmlands. Whilst clearly there are other factors at work, it is noticeable that both Yeha and Aksum sit on an exceptionally fertile complex of vertisolic soils. Michels' survey and subsequent archaeological excavation has shown that that some degree of small-scale, *DMT* farming settlement existed in the vicinity of Aksum, and by the proto-Aksumite period a significant larger-scale site developed on the summit of the hill at Beta Giyorgis, enjoying trading links westwards to the Sudanic steppes and the Nile Valley. The region was undoubtedly known for its agricultural potential; the soils, as today, could support a range of crop resources, and there are plentiful sources of water in the locality. The Aksumite polity probably developed from the proto-Aksumite settlement on Beta Giyorgis, a settlement which Michels envisages (2005: 113) as being the centre of a 'chiefdom' in the period after the fragmentation of the *DMT* polity.

This much would appear to be clear archaeologically; from a historical perspective the genealogy of Aksum is enshrined in later Ethiopian sources.

The *Liber Axumae* claims that the first city was built here by a certain 'Itiyopis, son of Kush' on a hill to the north-west of Mai Qoho, and this would square with the findings of the recent Beta Giyorgis investigations. The hagiography *Gadl Marqorewos* states that the town was originally known as Atsaba and there is another mention of a capital built at a place known as Mazeber, which was rebuilt by kings Abreha and Atsbeha (i.e. Ezana; Munro-Hay 1991: 9). The etymology of the name 'Aksum' may stress the significance of dependable water supplies near the site; the Cushitic cognate for water is 'ak' and the Semitic term for chief is 'shum' (Sergew 1972: 68). The name may thus be translated as 'water of the chief', implying also a sub-state level organisation which, given the use of two words from different languages to form a toponym might also betoken a union of different linguistic groups of peoples (cf. Taddesse 1988: 8; his preferred meaning is 'chief of the water', i.e. an individual who controlled the water source). However we regard the veracity of the founding legends, it is clear from the evidence of archaeological survey that a large number of earlier settlement sites appear to have existed within the immediate region, suggesting a coalescence of small farming settlements into an intermediate-level society ruled from Beta Giyorgis during the proto-Aksumite-Aksumite 1/early Aksumite period. Up until recently, little was known about the evolution of the local farming complex, and ultimately the economy which underpinned the Aksumite polity, but this picture began to change in the light of some important discoveries in the 1990s.

BIEA 'D' site

The 1993–1997 BIEA Aksum project design sought to shift the focus of work away from monumental architecture towards a more balanced consideration of the whole landscape (Phillipson 1990). A number of sites were selected for excavation to the north of Aksum in the area of Kidane Mehret; 'D site' (domestic) was regarded as a low-status satellite farming settlement, and crucially was excavated using single-context recording allied to a programme of archaeobotanical work on a scale unparalleled on an Ethiopian archaeological site. The 'D site' complex takes the form of a series of stone-walled settlements which in the early phases, as we have seen in the previous chapter, date from the *DMT* period. There is then a hiatus, with significant occupation during late Aksumite times, i.e. the sixth century.

The architectural emphasis is upon the square house form, with one signal example of a rounded building. Square buildings are the traditional vernacular forms of architecture in Tigray today; the circular *tukul* is explained as a fairly recent, historical introduction from the south, yet models of houses found in pre-Aksumite contexts at Hawelti (De Contenson 1963a) consist of rectilinear and circular types (Figure 4.12). An anomaly

was noted with the presence in unit D19, phase 7a of a set of monumental stone steps and dressed masonry akin to that found in the urban 'elite' residences (see below). This structure remains something of a mystery; there are reasons for thinking that it was either much smaller than the palace structures in town or in fact was never completed.

The overwhelming sense from the material culture of the late Aksumite settlement at Kidane Mehret is one of relative wealth rather than poverty. Imported amphorae, African Red Slip and Sassanian wares are found here alongside diverse pieces of metalwork, glass, beads and seals. The artefacts in their own right are important, but particular attention attaches to the environmental evidence. The botanical and faunal data for the Aksumite phase contrasts markedly with the earlier *DMT* material. A noticeable trend towards a widening of the resource base is apparent, this crop diversification which is witnessed by the appearance for the first time of African-origin cereals, such as tef, suggests a greater emphasis upon a market economy. This scenario contrasts with the *DMT* farmstead economy, which emphasised production at family level; we now see a functionally specialised market-orientated complex which was a vital node of production for the wider society (Phillipson 2000: 368). The cultivation of pulses would have provided an extra dietary component as well as refreshing nitrogen levels in the soil given that this fairly intensive farming regime placed a great deal of stress upon the land, demanding either shorter fallowing periods or extended periods between fallowing. The presence of cash crops suggests that cultivation was geared to supply an urban population, whilst the picture of crop diversification is indicative of a market economy and perhaps an awareness of 'coping strategies' for lean periods (Boardman 1999). The faunal remains show a distinctive pattern where whole animal parts predominate; carcasses were therefore processed here on site, and the pieces redistributed, although on the whole the pattern of faunal exploitation in the Aksumite period still appears to show some degree of hunting as well as stock keeping (Melaku 2004).

The 'D' site excavations have yielded significant results. Whilst the *DMT* economy was very much geared towards domestic consumption or as part of a limited redistribution economy, yet with the burgeoning demands of a more complex urban unit the pattern of plant utilisation shifts perceptibly. To all intents, this is a specialised site, not analogous to a village with a few families, more a dedicated agricultural centre inhabited by individuals who are clearly fairly wealthy. We are noticing here a trend in settlement patterning that may be very important: Aksum, the organic urban entity, may, in the words of David Phillipson be more accurately described as a metropolis rather than a city (Phillipson 2000: 476), a coalescence of functionally specific zones in the landscape.

The roots of this spatial zonation may have been found in the organisation of space in the *DMT* polity, for as Michels stresses the pre-Aksumite

settlement at Yeha was structured between habitation, ideological, secular, burial and agricultural zones. One suspects that this patterning is reflected at Aksum, and indeed is a feature of the fragmentation of urban space later on in the post-medieval period at Gondar where different parts of the town are allocated to artisans of Christian, Muslim and *Beta Israel* faiths (in contrast, in the Muslim urban units of Harar and Mogadishu, as we shall see, zonal differentiation within the town is based upon clan affiliation). What is not clear at the moment is whether, as Michels has argued for the *DMT* phase, a developed irrigation system is present in the landscape. There are some basic irrigation works to be observed in the region today, but on the whole the environment allows for rain-fed agriculture, and that is a pattern which probably prevailed during the Aksumite period. The system for storage of agricultural produce is also unclear; Michels (2005: 173) posits that large subterranean silos which may have served this purpose are visible at several localities in the region.

Frameworks of power

The nature of kingship

How then was the entire system controlled and governed? At the top of the pyramid was the king, but how accurate is this label with all its political implications? The *Periplus* is the first external source to explicitly name a king: Zoskales; soon we find the Greek term *Basileus Basileon* in use (Ethiopic: *Negusa Negast*). It means 'king of kings', and would imply an idea of a *primus inter pares*, a paramount ruler controlling a series of perhaps semi-independent or smaller polities (Munro-Hay 1989: 8; 1991: 37; 146), suggestive of a federation rather than a centralised state. This idea, of course, has its roots in the use of the South Arabian term *MKRB*.

Rodolfo Fattovich has argued that 'petty kingdoms existed on the Tigray plateau in the early first – second centuries AD' (Fattovich *et al.* 2000: 24), and he defines three political sub-centres at 'Anza, Henzat and Matara. Michels (2005: 128) also sees a similar picture during at least the early Aksumite period. He makes the intriguing observation that the contemporary pattern of regional markets in the Aksum-Yeha zone does not make much sense in regard to modern settlement location, and that they may actually represent a fossilised pattern of early Aksumite political organisation in the landscape (2005: 35). Michels has also argued that Aksum would have served solely as a ceremonial rather than secular capital (Michels 1988), reflecting the structure of a confederacy or even elective monarchy. It is interesting that the use of the term '*bisi*' after kings' names in monumental inscriptions of the period implies an affiliation of clan, or tribe. As we shall see, it may be possible that changes in mortuary behaviour during the late third century actually reflect a shift away from

the federation towards a commemoration of a more semi-divine and lineage-based kingship (cf. DiBlasi in Michels 2005: xiv), and the emergence of Aksum as a strong, centralising political force.

There are some problems, however, in arguing for too much of a decentralised political entity along the lines of a political confederacy much beyond the early Aksumite period. The distribution of known Aksumite sites (Tekle 1997) gives the impression of a compact polity centred upon Aksum, and in any case as Munro-Hay claims (1991: 42) the achievements of the Aksumite state could only have been advanced through the agency of a strong central figure rather than thorough governance by consensus. The new emphasis upon strong kingship, with its stress upon the dynasty, required new strategies to maintain power. The king thus took on the mantle of a semi-mythical being; the sense of *MKRB* stresses the dual role of earthly king and son of god (Sergew 1972: 30). Inscriptions inform us that the deity Mahrem – who may be identified with the Greek god of war Ares – was the father of the king (Munro-Hay 1991: 144). It is important to emphasise that this dual role of the king would be replicated over the next 1,600 years where the king was at once a secular and religious figure, although now in a Christian context (Caquot 1957).

The king list

The actual identities of kings are known from external sources, coinage issues and inscriptions. Indigenous chronicles, which are of a much later, medieval date, and in many cases designed explicitly to strengthen royal lineages through identification with the Solomonic line, are generally not reliable (Sergew 1972: 3; Munro-Hay 1991: 16). Apart from the mention of Zoskales in the *Periplus* (presumably the Ze-Haqile of traditional Ethiopian accounts; Sergew 1972: 72), the next series of named kings are found in third-century inscriptions from Marib, south Arabia. Frustratingly these individuals named as *GRDT*, *ADBH*, *ZQRNS* and *DTWNS* are not known from any inscription found in Ethiopia or Eritrea, although a sceptre found at Atsbidera is inscribed with the name *GDR*, which could be identified with *GDRT* (Caquot and Drewes 1955).

Sembrouthes (another third-century king) is known from a Greek inscription at the Eritrean site of Daaqi Mahari; he could be identified with the author of both Merotic Aksumite inscriptions and perhaps the inscription of the *Monumentum Adulitanum*. The coupling of the names of *DTWNS* and *ZQRNS* implies that there may have been some form of co-regency in operation (Munro-Hay 1991: 74). The question of a possible regency during the late third-early fourth century might be raised by the use of a single coin die combining Wazeba and Ouzanas (Munro-Hay 1991: 76), and also by a hitherto unpublished manuscript reported by Sergew which claims that God himself established the custom of joint kings (1972: 93). Aksumite inscriptions during the next hundred or so years often give patronyms of the king,

and it is thus entirely possible that by yoking together the names a dual father/son identity is created (Munro-Hay 1991: 158). However we read the use of names, it is clear that there is now a greater emphasis upon the concept of the dynasty, within which is embodied the idea of social continuity.

A cosmopolitan state?

Beneath the king stood a complex bureaucratic machinery that emphasised at once the political unity of the state, as well as its multi-ethnic identity. The *Christian Topography* tells us that the regions of Adulis and Agau were under the control of *Archons*, a Byzantine designation which may be broadly translated as 'governor' (Kirwan 1972). 'Elite' buildings, or palace structures, are also found at Matara and Adulis, and of course at Aksum; the former may be the residence of these functionaries, whilst smaller elite residences at Aksum may be connected with royal family and other bureaucrats. It is probable that control of the polity was based on administrative boundaries which were contiguous with boundaries of ethnic groups. These groups are often mentioned in textual sources; an early third-century South Arabian inscription from Marib refers explicitly to the 'Nagashi of Habashat and Aksuman', implying two distinctive ethnic groups (Jamme 1962).

It will be recalled that Fattovich defined two different 'culture areas' for the pre-Aksumite period based upon western and eastern zones of the highlands of southern Eritrea and Tigray, and this division may have survived into the Aksumite period. Procopius refers to Adulis as the harbour of the 'Adulites'; Epiphanius' fourth-century list of the nine kingdoms of the Indians also explicitly refers to the difference between the Aksumites and the Adulites (Munro-Hay 1991: 37). It may be that from a cultural, economic and political perspective Aksum dominated the western highlands whilst Adulis was the chief centre of the east and the coast. Mention is also made of the Yegaz peoples of the Agyazan 'tribe', from whom it is possible the noun 'Ge'ez' is derived (Munro-Hay 1991: 65); Cosmas Indicopleustes also makes a similar distinction between the Gazen of the Aksum region and the tribes of the Adulis region as the Tigretes (Huntingford 1989: 43). It may be possible that these labels refer to this long-lived phenomenon of cultural differentiation within the northern highland region, fundamentally indicating the difference between the lowland and highland populations. Inscriptions from Aksum refer explicitly to a number of disparate 'peoples' within the polity, 'red' and 'black' peoples, and named groups such as the Noba and Kasu. The latter are pastoralist groups, living across the western and northern borderlands of the Aksumite region. Of the peoples inhabiting the southern regions of the Aksumite polity little is known. Here, in the mountains of Lasta and Wollo, for

instance, archaeological survey appears to have located sites with Aksumite affinities, but these await more detailed investigation; Miquel (1959) sees Aksumite affinities in what are, in fact, Islamic tombs on the slopes of Mount Abuna Yosef, near Lalibela (see also Anfray 1970). Revolts among the subject peoples were also clearly a problem; it appears that Ezana was forced to actually resettle six kings of the pastoralist Beja in the lands beyond his southern borders.

An Aksumite overseas empire?

We may also perhaps talk of an Aksumite overseas empire, a colonial policy directed not only at the consolidation of political power in the northern highlands of the Horn of Africa, but also across the Red Sea in southern Arabia. Relationships with the latter region continued to be important; yet the nature of this contact is ambiguous. Elements of southern Arabian culture survived in the Aksumite ideology of kingship, cosmology and material culture. This indeed was a hangover from the *DMT* period. Even toponyms within the Aksumite landscape were given southern Arabian identities (e.g. the Marib river; Sergew 1972: 29) and the Aksumite king is still called the king of Saba in many inscriptions (Schneider 1961). It is tempting to suggest that even at this time, some 800 years after the initial southern Arabian political penetration of the north that a social memory has been retained in the higher echelons of society, a desire to strengthen difference, the exotic, a foreign lineage on African soil.

Inscriptions found in South Arabia allow us to cast some light upon Aksum's initial phase of colonialism there during the third century (Jamme 1962). Relations between the two areas clearly survived the demise of the *DMT* polity; Rabbi Ben Akiba reports of his visit to the region of Hagga *c.* AD 130 that the ruler was a 'black of Kushi origin' (Sergew 1972: 75). Aksum was undoubtedly taking advantage of the fragmentation of the small kingdoms of Himyar, Saba, Hadramaut and Qataban. This phase of domination was probably short-lived; by AD 295 some degree of independence had been reasserted with the accession of King Shamir Yuhar'ish who took the combined title of 'King of Saba, Dhu-Raydas, Hadramaut and Yamanat' (Munro-Hay 1991: 76). The state of relations between the Horn of Africa and southern Arabia over the next two hundred or so years is not clear, but it remained clearly strategically important (Harmatta 1974). John Sutton has commented (Sutton in Munro-Hay 1989a: 3) that the majority of gold Aksumite coins of the period Ezana-Kaleb are found in Arabia (also Munro-Hay 1989b). The gold issues were often reserved for international trade, and we might hypothesise at this stage that a new relationship between the two areas was now based upon commerce rather than military and political domination.

The period from the accession of Ezana to Kaleb marks the zenith of Aksumite political and military power in Arabia. Ezana, importantly, retains the identity as King of Arabia, and undertakes extensive tribute-gathering expeditions (as would be suggested by his inscriptions at Aksum as well as those from Meroë). The author of the inscription at Adulis noted by Cosmas Indicopleustes is unknown, but was evidently a king with great military capability, for he claimed domains as far as the Nabataean port of Leuke Kome, which we may assume to be somewhere in the region of the Gulf of Aqaba in the northern Red Sea. Munro-Hay (1991: 77) argues that the author of this inscription should be placed between *GRDT* and Ezana, perhaps being the mysterious Sembrouthes of the Daaqi Mahari inscription. This phase of contact sees a more overt Aksumite military involvement in southern Arabia. In AD 520, acting upon the promptings of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, Kaleb moved against the 'Jewish' king Yusuf Asar Yathar (known in Arab accounts as Dhu Nuwas) to protect the region's Christians who were undergoing severe persecution. His victory inscription is to be found at Marib (Kamil 1964).

With the success of the expedition, southern Arabia was now brought under more direct political control of Aksum with the appointment of a 'viceroy', Sumyafa Ashwa, but this did not mean that southern Arabia was a meek vassal colony. Ashwa was soon deposed by a senior Ethiopian figure named Abreha who actively resisted Aksum and essentially set up his own semi-independent state (Smith 1954). In any event, Christianity was momentarily re-established in an Ethiopian model within southern Arabia; in 576 Abreha built a cathedral at his new capital of Sana. This structure became known as al-Qalis, an Arabic corruption of the Greek word *ecclesia*. Its remains are still to be found within the Great Mosque at Sana'a, Jami al-Kabir. Sergew (1972: 150) suggests that Greek architects were employed in its building and was most unlike any Ethiopian church, taking on more of a centralised form in the manner of Haghia Sophia at Constantinople. Another important historical source, the sixth-century Syriac Acts of Gregentius, seem to stress, however, that the local Christian tradition was very much based upon Syriac (eastern Syrian 'Nestorian' and west Syrian 'Orthodox') traditions rather than an implanted Ethiopian model (Christides 1972). It is also possible that the island of Socotra was annexed; a bishop was reported here by Cosmas Indicopleustes, but when Marco Polo arrived in the twelfth century he noted that the Christians there swore allegiance to the See of Seleucia Ctesiphon in Mesopotamia, this indicating membership of the eastern Syriac tradition (Gillman and Klimkeit 1999: 81). Abreha also undertook repair of the dam at Marib, as is recorded in an inscription there (Sergew 1972: 148).

The preceding discussion emphasises the international nature of Aksumite power, a strong centralised monarchy rather than a federation of states, underpinned by a complex bureaucracy ruling over what does

appear to be a multi-ethnic empire. Aksum showed that it could act pro-actively and decisively in its own interests. Moving now away from the historical evidence, let us now turn to a more detailed consideration of the archaeological evidence for the political organisation of the state.

Symbols of power

Monumental buildings

When discussing the creation and maintenance of power in the Aksumite state, two types of site demand particular attention: elite residences and tomb architecture. The elite residences represent a very distinctive form of architecture and are present at a number of key sites, and the scale and sheer monumentality of these buildings makes a number of very overt statements. The usual form of construction (which as we shall see is skeuomorphically reflected in the decoration of the major stelae) is based upon recessed facades, rebated walls, massive dressed stone blocks of granite (basalt at Adulis), tie beams made from wood (which project beyond the façade, and are given the name 'monkey heads') as well as large monumental staircases. Through a series of rebates, walls became progressively thinner towards the roof, thus reducing the overall load of the structure as well as providing for easy rain run-off (Munro-Hay 1989a: 162).

The origins of this style of building may be found to some extent within the monumental architecture of the pre-Aksumite period; the Yeha temple clearly incorporates some forerunners of the features that would become standard elements of the Aksumite architectural canon: emphasis upon horizontal structuring, monumental staircases and geometric friezes, and the dam at Qohaito clearly shows skill in building in large ashlar masonry. The Grat Be'al Guebri structure shows a number of architectural features which may be forerunners of Aksumite building practice, especially in the use of wooden beams (Anfray 1997). Models of Aksumite houses, found during excavation in the area of the Nefas Mawcha tomb in the 1950s show this style of architecture, even down to the very distinctive square window frames (e.g. De Contenson 1959a, fig. 8.). Francis Anfray (1974) sees a Syrian influence in this form of elite architecture, but more obvious Mediterranean links are attested by the presence of Mediterranean marble embellishments found in structures at Adulis. This form of construction was expensive in terms of wood use, both structurally and decoratively, especially in the fabrication of panelled ceilings envisaged in reconstructions of the interiors of elite buildings (Buxton and Matthews 1974), yet it is a durable tradition. As we shall see, this form of architecture survives into the medieval period.

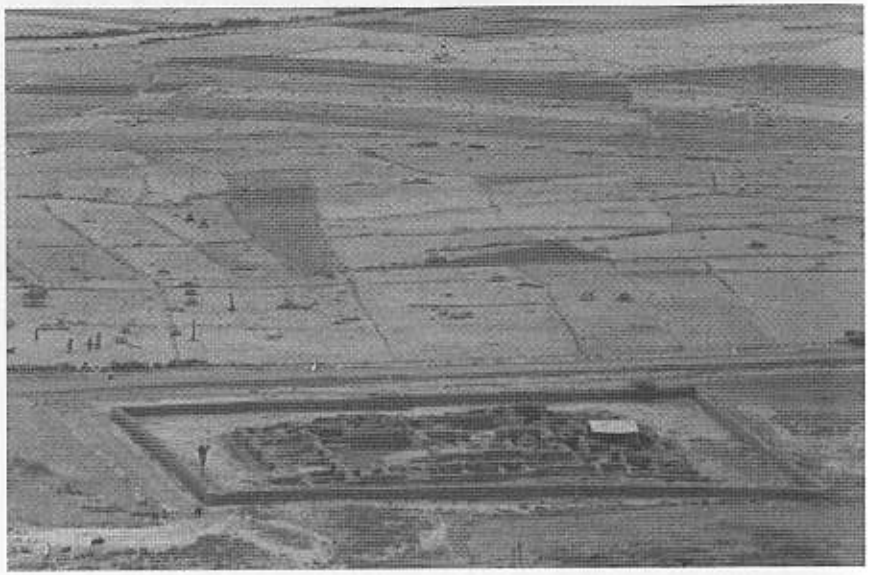

Figure 5.3 View of the Dungur complex from Beta Giyorgis, looking southwards towards the Gudit Stelae Field (Michael Harlow).

An 'elite structure' excavated at Ona Negast on the summit of Beta Giyorgis dates from the second century and clearly pre-dates any other similar structure thus far found at Aksum; Fattovich *et al.* (2000: 26) hypothesise that this was the residence of the early kings, with the focus of royal power and settlement subsequently shifting to the plains below from the beginning of the fourth century. Perhaps the best known and most visible of these 'palaces' on the valley floor is that of Dungur (popularly the Queen of Sheba's palace) to the north of the Gudit Stelae Field on the western side of Aksum. Excavations here uncovered an extensive palatial complex which has in popular memory become associated with the Queen of Sheba (Anfray 1972a); the Dungur 'mansion' represents an example of the standard form of Aksumite elite structure which is now known to have been occupied during the fifth–sixth centuries. Using the recessed form of architecture with well-cut blocks, the structure consists of a central four-towered square 'pavilion' surrounded by courtyards and a range of ancillary rooms.

Closer to the centre of the modern town were found the major palace structures of Ta'akha Maryam, Enda Semon and Enda Mikhael. Ta'akha Maryam was first described by the DAE and subsequently largely destroyed by the construction of the *Strada Imperiale* during the Italian colonial period. The palace takes the form of a central, square 'pavilion' measuring 24 metres by 24 metres, surrounded by an external range, rather like an encircling cloister, measuring 120 by 80 metres. The cloister feature was not uncovered at the

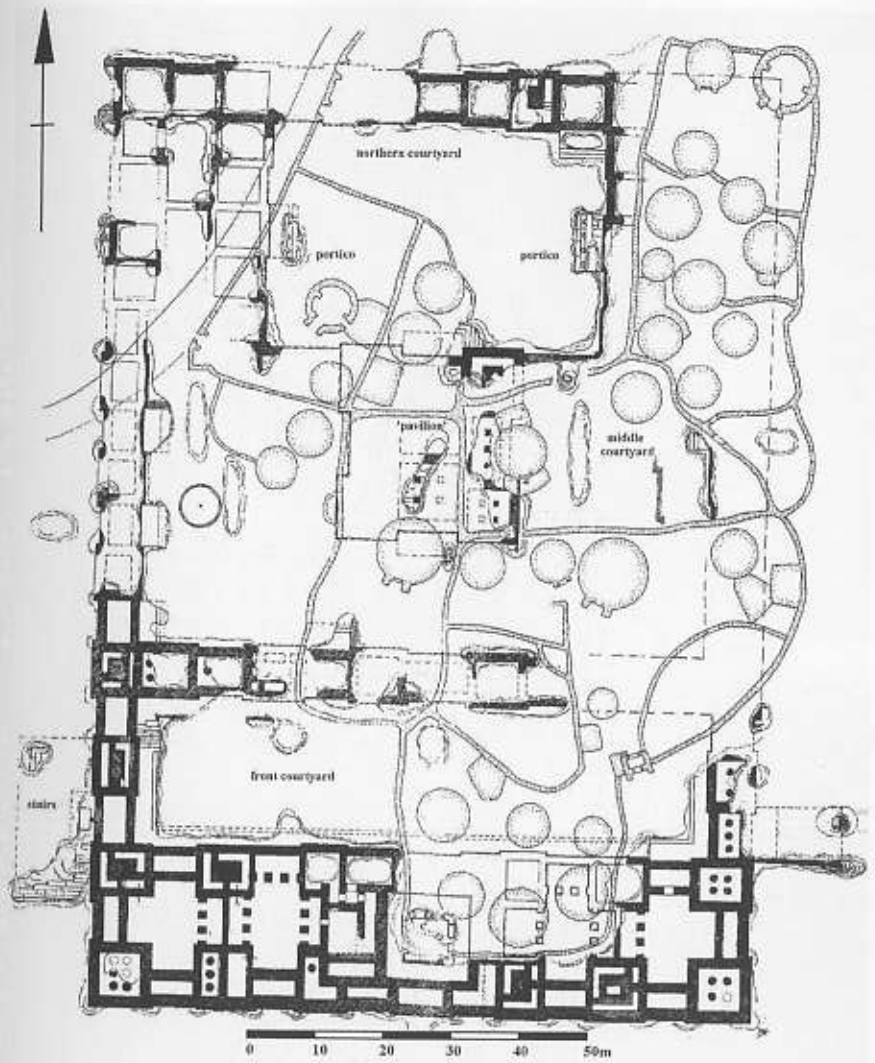

Figure 5.4 Plan of Ta'akha Maryam (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

sites of Enda Semon and Enda Mikhael; these two palaces appear to consist solely of the type of squared, turreted building noted at Ta'akha Maryam, but on a larger scale (the pavilion of Enda Mikhael measured 27 by 27 metres compared with 35 metres by 35 metres for the pavilion of Enda Semon). If the cloister structures *do* exist – and Munro-Hay (1989: 135) suggests that the south-eastern corner of such feature may have been picked up by excavations in Chittick's IW trenches as well as the DAE's '*Ruinenhügel*', south of

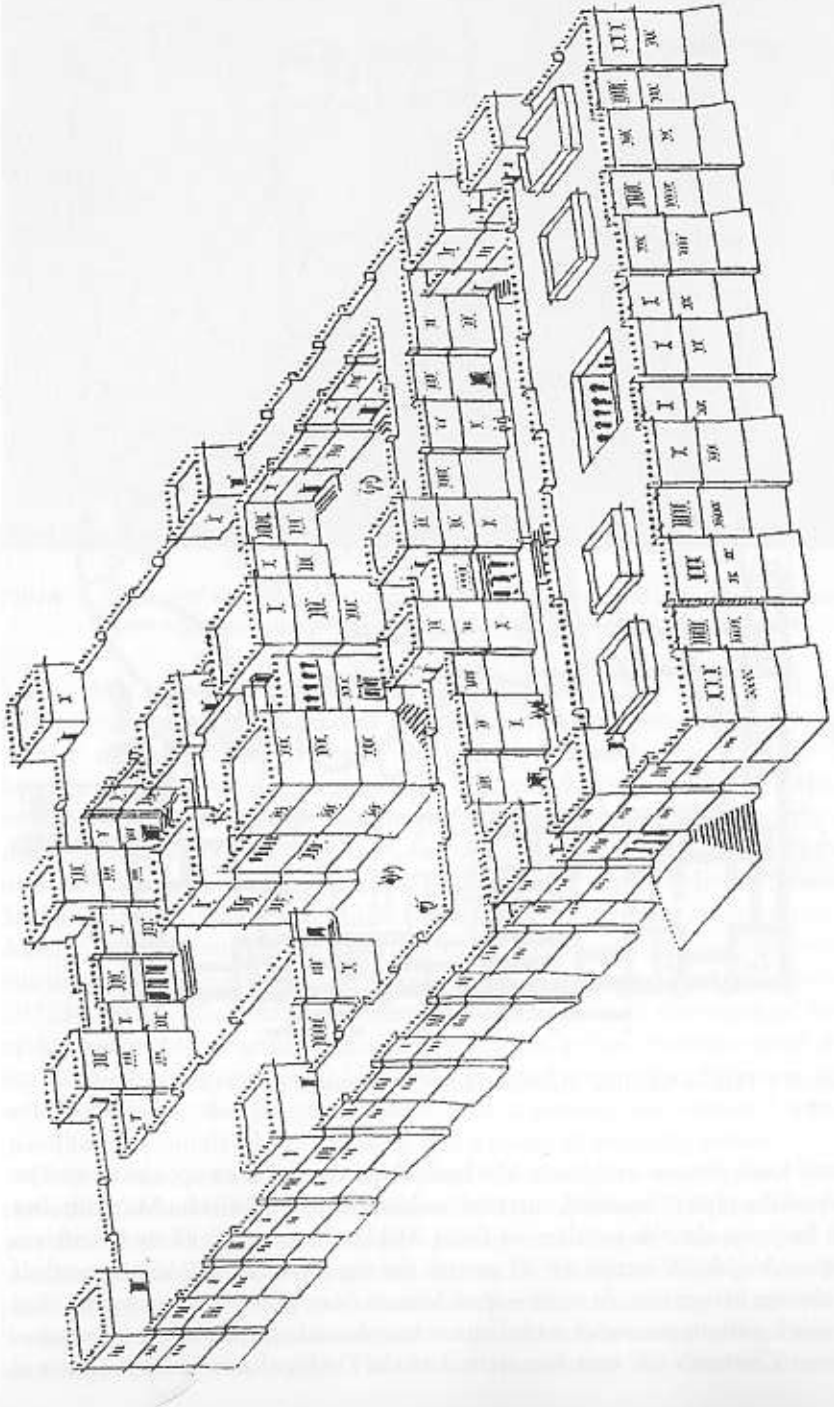

Figure 5.5 Krenker's reconstruction of the Ta'akha Maryam complex (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

Figure 5.6 Aerial view of Matara in the 1960s showing the major structures (Francis Anfray).

Enda Semon – then these two buildings would have been much more extensive than Ta'akha Maryam. The scale of these constructions clearly suggests a royal residence; indeed the *Christian Topography* explicitly states that the king of Aksum lived in a four-towered castle.

These large palace structures cluster in the western part of the town, and are also associated with smaller versions which may have been the

residences of minor royalty, functionaries or similar high-ranking officials. The structure at Addi Kilte (Addi Keletta), cleared during the construction of the *Strada Imperiale*, was 15 metres square and contained only nine rooms, but is clearly a copy of the larger palace structures (Puglisi 1941). Other reported major structures include that at the BIEA 'D' site which may have never been completed, and those reported by Michels – but archaeologically unsubstantiated – in the Abba Liqanos and Mai Qoho areas and the outlying sites of Gobedra and Addi Watot (Fattovich *et al.* 2000: 63). A recently excavated monumental building at Berit Awde, to the north of Aksum, apparently contains a royal grave, and evidence for possible human sacrifice, and was subsequently reused as a monastic church after the fifth century (Ziegert 2001; Wendowski *et al.* 2001; Wendowski and Ziegert 2005).

Beyond Aksum similar structures were also excavated at the southern Eritrean site of Matara (Tertre A, B, C; Anfray 1963b) although in all cases they appear to be considerably smaller than the Aksumite palaces and are surely the residences of local governors or nobility. The pavilion of complex 'C', for example, measures 15 metres square and is conjoined at the north by another structure (D). Complex B is the largest of the Matara elite structures; the whole building measures 60 metres square with a central

Figure 5.7 The Central Stelae Park, Aksum, from the south. The retaining wall at the front respects an Aksumite period alignment. The structure in the centre of the photograph covers the open excavations on the site of stela two.

pavilion of nine rooms measuring 15 metres square. As in Aksum, the palace or elite quarter appears to be separated from the rest of the town; the western zone appears to be the non-elite settlement with the areas E1 and E2 consisting of a densely packed series of small square rooms, although towards the southern end of the complex these structures appear to have been built within the courtyards of at least four square pavilion buildings (Anfray and Annequin 1965).

The 'palace' structure of Adulis as noted by Sundstrom (Littmann 1907) measured 38 metres east-west and 22.5 metres north-south, whilst the Qohaito 'palace' structure (Littmann no. 8) is only represented by the central pavilion; measuring 9 by 11 metres square, this would imply a somewhat smaller overall configuration than the Aksum and Matara structures (Eigner 1999). Although the size of these structures varies, and reflects perhaps the social status of its inhabitants, it is remarkable that they appear to be so standardised in architectural form, a factor which implies a centralised state organisation.

The archaeology of commemoration: stelae

Apart from the monumental buildings, the other most obvious – and visible – manifestations of secular and ideological power are the stelae at Aksum. Particular interest attaches to the multi-storied carved stelae in the Central Stelae Park; of these one still stands (stela three), another, the largest, (stela one) lies recumbent at the western edge of the group and a third (stela two) was toppled in antiquity and was removed to Rome during the Italian occupation in the 1930s from where it has recently been returned. Three other, smaller multi-storied stelae, nos 4, 5 and 6 lie to the east of the main group. Clearly these stelae have at least a basic funerary function. Stela one is associated with the complex of the Mausoleum and East Tomb; although it does not appear that stelae two and three were associated with a single large tomb complex, they do appear to relate to some subterranean structures. In the 1970s the BIEA identified a warren of catacombs beneath the stela park, which may be loosely associated with these stelae (Munro-Hay 1989a: 80–1), a fact which appears to have been borne out by recent geophysical survey.

The stelae are more than mere tomb markers, they embody a great deal of symbolic and social meaning. As Phillipson points out, the fallen stela one – which weighs 517 tonnes and in total is 32.6 metres in length – would have been the largest monolith to have been raised by humans (Phillipson 1998: 86), yet the indications are that it was never successfully erected. This stela is carved, as with stelae one to four, as a skeuomorphic representation of a multi-storied building constructed from wood and stone. The door and window frames rendered here in nephtheline syenite are reflected in the church buildings at the monastery of Debre Damo *inter alia*

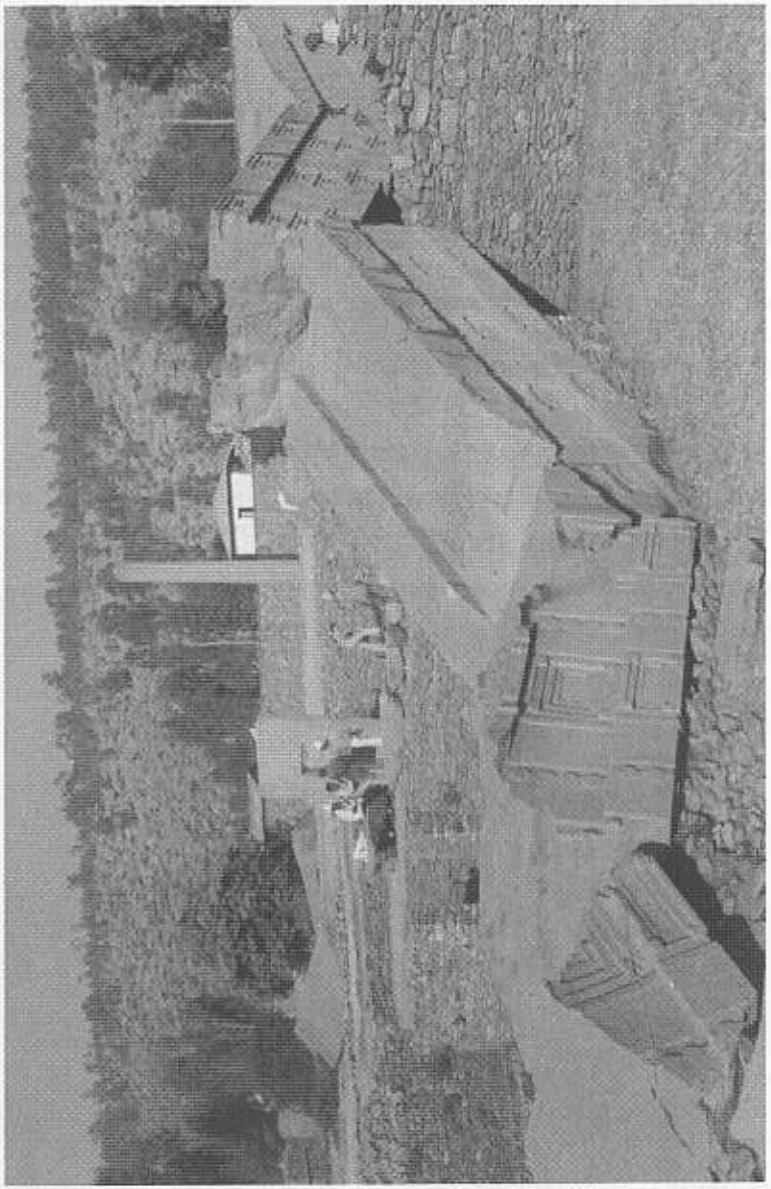

Figure 5.8 Stela one, Aksum. Excavations in the Mausolcum in progress behind (Michael Harlow).

Figure 5.9 Stela one: door feature on the exposed surface (Michael Harlow).

(Figure 5.21d below), and are suggested by architectural reconstructions of Aksumite palace buildings. As Sutton notes (Sutton in Munro-Hay 1989a: 4) the symbolism is clear: the tomb as a palace for the dead king. The sheer monumentality of these structures, as suggested particularly by the scale of stela one, makes a number of overt statements. The play of light on the carved surface (Phillipson 2000: 163) gives a particularly striking visual effect, and the distinctive curved tops of the multi-storied stelae must be symbols of the moon deity. The presence of small holes here may imply that

a metallic plaque had been fixed upon the tops of the megaliths, and a possible analogy may be found in the stelae of Matara and 'Anza upon which sun and moon symbols of the South Arabian deities are carved (Fattovich 1987; Figure 5.11c below).

The stelae face southwards, towards the approach to Aksum across the western flanks of Mai Qoho. The approaching traveller, walking towards the stelae ranged at the foot of Beta Giyorgis, would have passed along a line of throne bases (some of these are still *in situ*, and if the eyewitness descriptions of Alvares and Bruce are to be believed there once existed many more; Munro-Hay 1991: 24–5) which may have been the bases of large statues, perhaps of kings. This area was probably a dedicated royal necropolis and was sited in such a manner as to present a striking projection of royal power beyond life. The decoration of the multi-storied stelae represent something more than a mere copy of the earthly palace residence of the king. The placement of a door may suggest access to the afterlife; the symbolism of this feature has been investigated by Phillipson (1994) who suggests that the door handle may have been deliberately removed when the stela either lost its symbolic power or in some way became ideologically reprehensible. As we shall see later in this chapter, bar the toppling of stela two, the transition to Christianity was marked by a general acceptance of pre-existing sacred spaces and respect for monuments.

Stela two is a smaller version of stela one, being carved upon all four sides. In total the monolith was 24.6 metres long, and weighed 170 tonnes; it was intentionally destabilised during antiquity and broke into five pieces. Excavations on the site in 1997 in advance of its anticipated re-erection gave an indication of the method by which the stela was toppled; the structure was undermined from the front (i.e. the south side) and was pushed forwards from the back (i.e. the north side) with the result that the baseplate was displaced southwards and the stela itself cracked as it impacted upon the ground (Phillipson 2000: 148). The symbolism of this act is not clear; it may be related to the defacement of the door handle on stela one or social breakdown and military conquest in the post-Aksumite period. It seems strange that stela three, however, should be spared. Stela two is not obviously associated with a tomb, and any further excavation in the area would be potentially damaging.

Stela three is arguably the best known ancient monument in Ethiopia and its symbolism is now far removed from that of a pre-Christian grave marker. It is thought that this was the first of the multi-storied decorative stelae to have been erected, stela one being the last; this would suggest a gradual westward extension of the cemetery over time (Phillipson 2000: 480). The stelae are all carved from local rock. A number of quarry sites have been surveyed on the slopes of Gobedra Hill, to the west of Aksum; some are simple stone-working sites whilst two major quarries on the north-eastern edge of Gobedra Hill show evidence of extensive quarrying

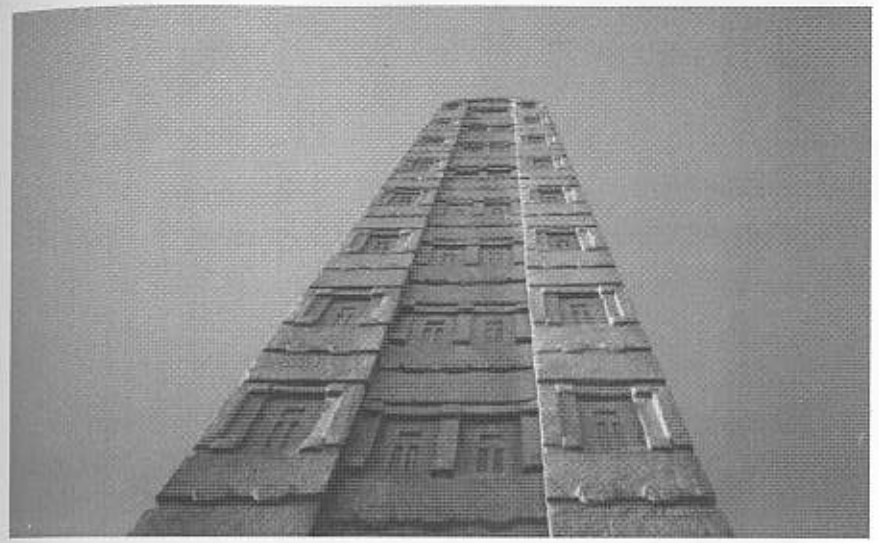

Figure 5.10 South façade of stela three.

of rock as well as slipway features (Phillipson 2000: 230). The stone was then moved across the southern flanks of Beta Giyorgis into the town taking advantage of the topography to assist the movement of what would have been massive pieces of stone (Phillipson 2000: 248). It is hypothesised that the motive power could have been provided by elephants, which although are not to be seen in the region today were clearly important given the status of ivory as a key Aksumite export (Additional interest attaches to the graffiti of an elephant next to an Aksumite inscription from Addi Alawi, Senafe, southern Eritrea; Littmann *et al.* 1913 vol. IV plate 68; although there are no elephants in this region of Tigray, some sightings have recently been reported in south-western Eritrea).

Chronologically it is obvious that the stelae should be associated with the pre-Christian burial rituals of the (clearly) kingly elite, possibly not commemorating an individual, rather a dynasty (Fattovich *et al.* 2000: 51). The development of a royal mausoleum in this area during the third century is evidence of a rupture with the earlier capital zone on the summit of Beta Giyorgis and the creation of a new type of kingship, removed from the scale of the proto-Aksumite intermediate-level society towards a semi-divine kingship and dynastic system consistent with a more extensive and complex society. In any case, their non-Christian ideological context is clear; the earliest stelae belong to the OAZ group on Beta Giyorgis and the practice of erection appears to cease at some point in the fourth century. De Contenson (1959a) noted that fragments of stela one were overlain by

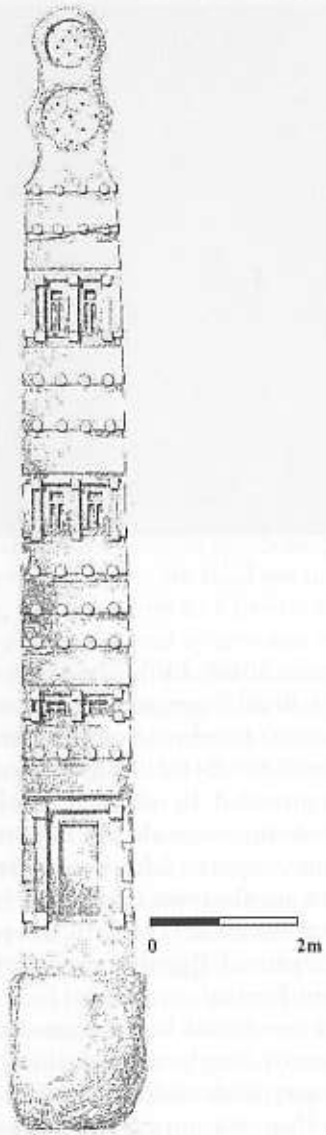

Figure 5.11a Aksumite stelae: stela six, Aksum (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

deposits containing a coin of King Ouzabas, dating to the late fourth century, so the practice of stela erection was not something which the Christian kings of Aksum wished to promulgate. As we have seen, the origins of the Aksumite stelae are probably to be found in a north-eastern African context; as Fattovich points out (1987), although the tradition is widespread

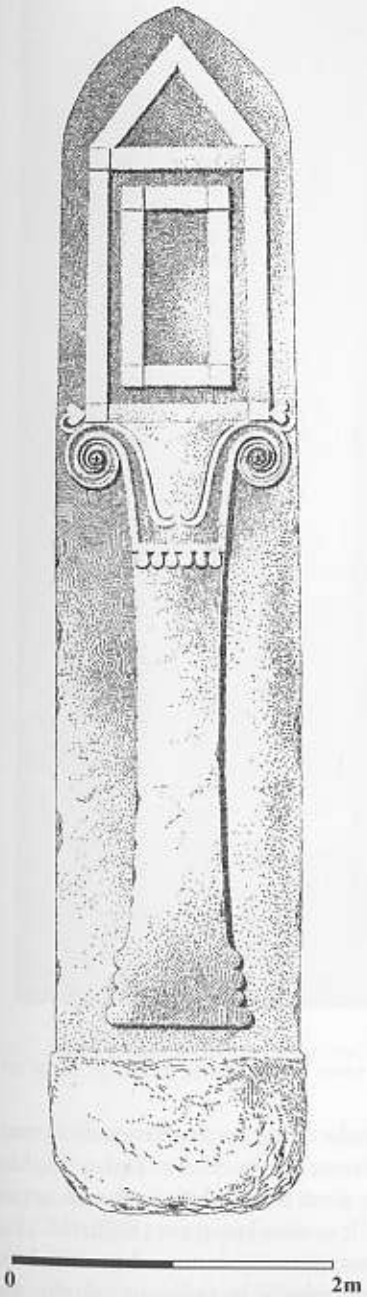

Figure 5.11b Stela seven (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

Figure 5.11c Matara (Francis Anfray).

in the Old World, the Aksumite stelae owe little to the Semitic idea of the *Nephesh*, or memorial stone.

It must be assumed that the use of stela came to prominence as part of the strong process of acculturation between the northern Tigray highlands and the steppic Sudanic lowlands to the west which first becomes apparent here during the proto-Aksumite period. It is also apparent (Figure 5.11 a–d) that these stelae are very diverse, embracing some unusual motifs beyond the underlying crescent-disc symbolism which is redolent of the South Arabian-inspired Aksumite pantheon. One stela (number 75; Munro-Hay 1989a: 344) displays a carved Egyptian ankh symbol at its base; stela seven

Figure 5.11d Hinzat (Michael Harlow).

is a very distinctive monolith with what appears to be a carved pillar supporting a house-like structure. The fragment of stela four, now visible on the staircase of the Old Cathedral, is known as the 'Stela of the Lances' (Figure 7.4). The spear, or lance motif is a feature unusual within the canons of Aksumite iconography, but is well known, as we shall see in the next chapter, from the stelae of Sidamo, in the southern highlands. This diversity of design of what is a funerary monument has obvious implications for understanding cultural diversity at Aksum.

The archaeology of commemoration: tombs, architectural space and identity

The funerary archaeology of Aksum is varied. The Mausoleum, which is associated with the stela one complex, is a tomb which betokens royal affiliation. The plan is symmetrical; access is attained through a portal carved in the manner of a typical Aksumite doorframe and a central passage 16.7 metres long and 1.9 metres wide opens into ten side chambers. The building is of 'unitary design' (Phillipson 2000: 220), implying a single phase of construction into the hillside and then subsequent covering by rubble in order to hide the structure. Although robbed in antiquity (like so many of the tombs hitherto excavated at Aksum), the grave goods indicate that this was a tomb designed for a highly important individual. Large amounts of high-quality pottery, beads and metalwork were found here, which enabled the tomb to be fairly well dated.

It is obviously earlier than stela one with which it is associated and whose fall seriously weakened the roof of the tomb. Radiocarbon age estimates have given a fourth-century date for the complex, and a single Ethiopic glyph carved upon the surface of the tomb may be dated on palaeographic grounds to a similar period (Phillipson 2000: 176). A single coin of the issue of King Armah (late seventh century) found during excavation is obviously intrusive. A counterpart to the Mausoleum is found on the eastern side of the courtyard beneath stela one; this is known as the East tomb, although it has not been investigated in any detail owing to obvious safety concerns. A very preliminary investigation suggested it belongs within the broad chronological range of the construction of the Mausoleum, but the absence of well-dressed floor slabs such as were found in the latter could imply that the edifice may never have actually been completed in full, and was only excavated at the western end (Phillipson 2000: 222).

The Tomb of the Brick Arches – although first located in the 1950s – was initially cleared in the 1970s, but more fully excavated by the BIEA in 1993–1996. The funerary complex is not obviously associated with a standing stela above, and is approached by an adit containing a flight of 20 steps. A horse-shoe arch of bricks frames the entrance. Although some degree of good organic preservation had been noted during initial works in the 1970s, the micro-climate of the tomb had clearly altered in the intervening 19 years and much organic material had been lost. As with the majority of the funerary monuments at Aksum, this tomb was subject to four episodes of robbing; in many cases the disturbance was profound, and concentrated upon the removal of obviously valuable exotic material (much copper alloy and iron was left behind; Phillipson 2000: 57). Exemplary excavation in the 1990s, however, enabled a great deal of valuable data to be recovered.

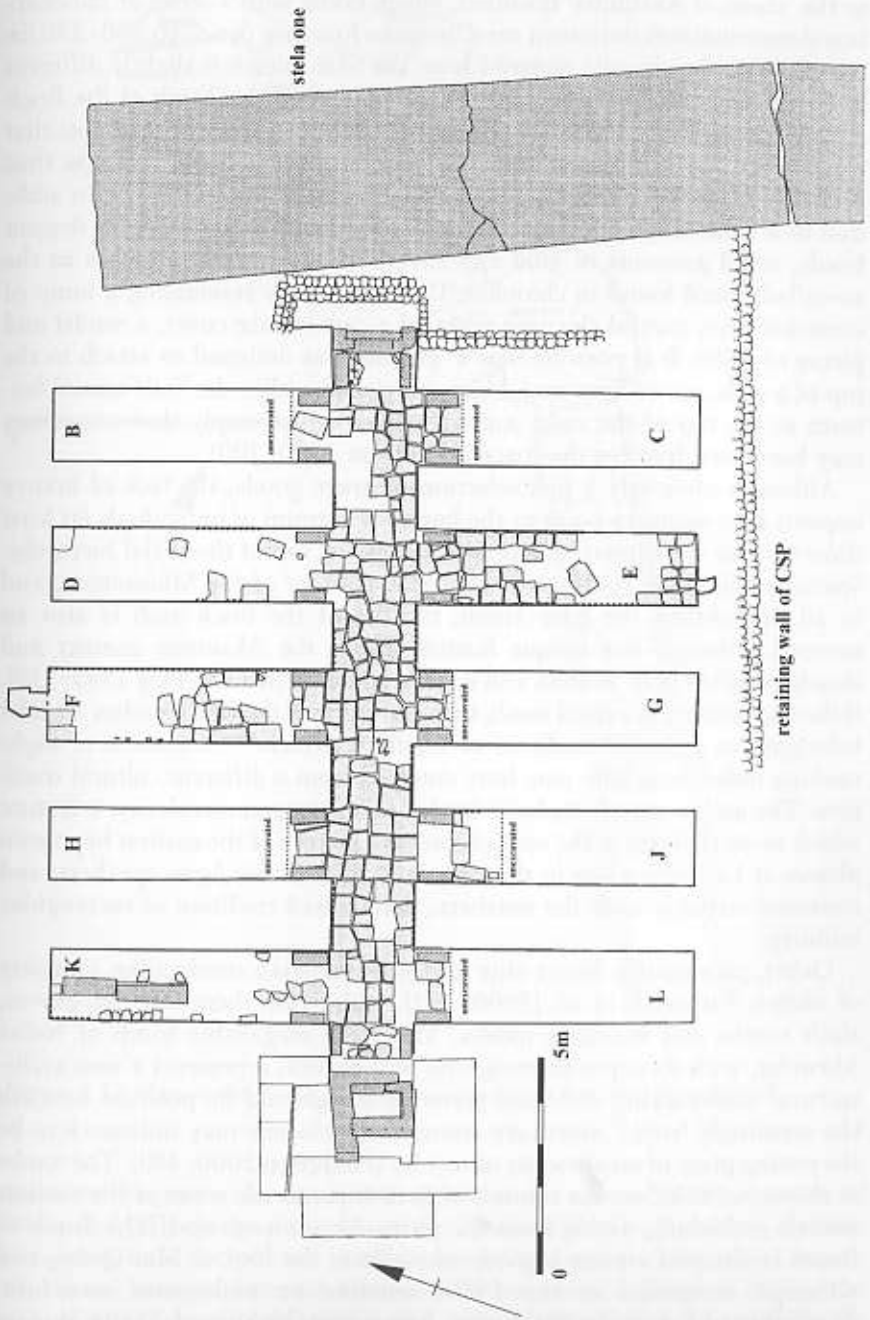

Figure 5.12 Plan of the Mausoleum (after Phillipson 2000).

The range of pottery, which included a variety of vessel forms, belonged to the 'classical Aksumite' tradition, which taken with a series of radiocarbon determinations indicate a pre-Christian funerary use *c.* AD 260–390 (in comparison, the ceramic material from the Mausoleum is slightly different in composition and may be *c.*50 years earlier than the Tomb of the Brick Arches' grave goods; Phillipson 2000: 196). It is also interesting to note that the pottery was not reused domestic material, it was fresh, and was thus probably made for a specific funerary role (Phillipson 2000: 77). In addition to a wide range of ceramics, we also find within the funerary deposit beads, small amounts of gold and silver. Special interest attaches to the so-called hoard found in chamber 'D'; superficially resembling a lump of corroded iron, careful cleaning revealed a cast bronze cover, a rondel and pieces of grille. It is possible that a 'plaque' was designed to attach to the top of a stela; as we have seen holes are visible within the 'half-moon' features at the top of the stela (among others) which imply that something may have been fixed in the space (Phillipson 2000: 100).

Although obviously a rich selection of grave goods, the lack of luxury imports here seems to point to the burial of a group of individuals (at least three or four were interred here) just below the top of the social hierarchy. Spatially this tomb contrasts to the relative order of the Mausoleum, and in all probability, the East Tomb; the use of the brick arch is also an unusual although not unique feature within the Aksumite context and closely parallels both Roman and Persian tradition (Munro-Hay 1989: 159). If the Mausoleum is a royal tomb, then the Tomb of the Brick Arches – whilst belonging to a shared tradition of family interment – is a tomb of high-ranking individuals who may have emerged from a different cultural tradition. The architectural emphasis in this tomb is upon circularity, a feature which as we shall see in the next chapter is a feature of the earliest hypogean phases at Lalibela, a site in the heartland of Cushitic Agau speakers, and contrasts strongly with the northern, Semiticised tradition of rectangular building.

Other, presumably lower-elite and pre-Christian tombs take a variety of forms; Fattovich *et al.* (2000: 52ff.) subdivide them into pit graves, shaft tombs and staircase tombs. The great megalithic tomb of Nefas Mawcha, with its capstone weighing 360 tonnes, represents a vast architectural undertaking although given its design and its position beneath the seemingly 'royal' mortuary context of stela one may indicate it to be the resting place of an associate of royalty (Phillipson 2000: 480). The tombs at the site of OAZ on the summit of Beta Giyorgis are some of the earliest burials at Aksum, dating from the proto-Aksumite period. The Tomb of Bazen is situated among a group of stelae at the foot of Mai Qoho, and although excavated in the 1950s remains an ambiguous structure. According to Ethiopian chronicles, Bazen was the king of Aksum during the time of Christ; an inscription behind the Old Cathedral (Figure 7.4)

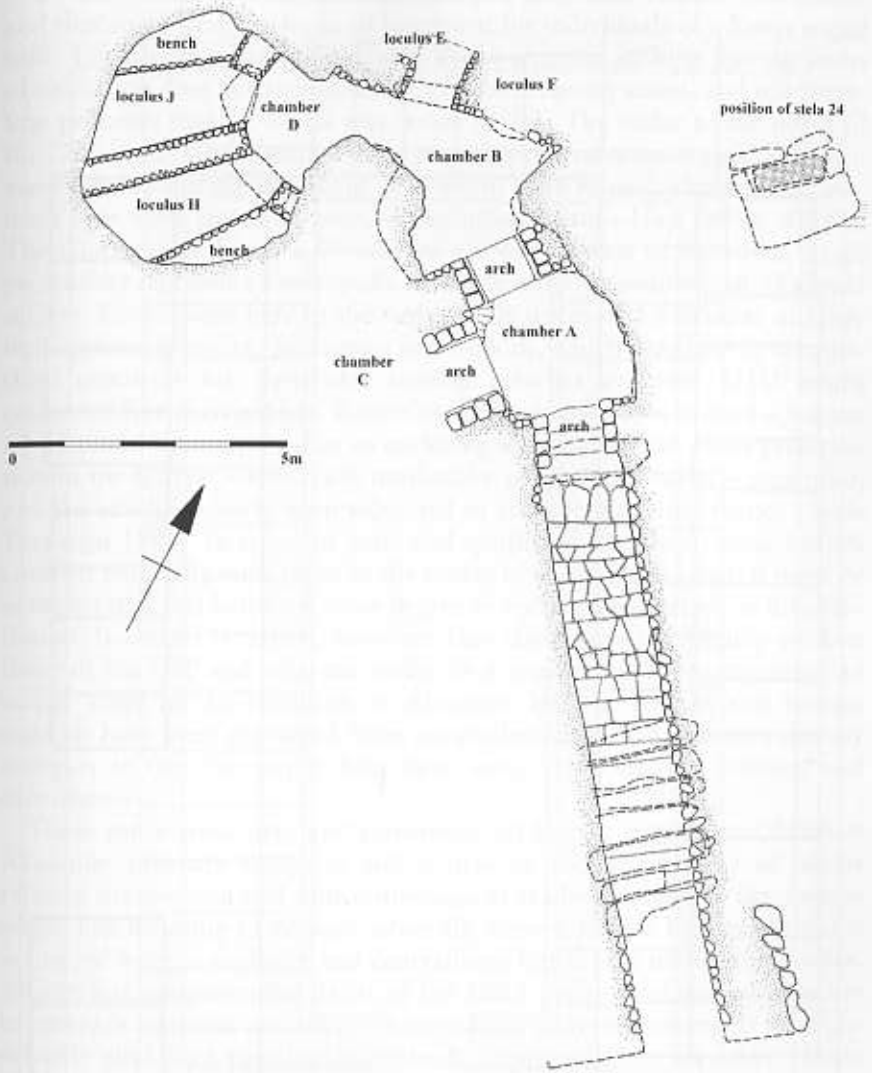

Figure 5.13 Plan of the Tomb of the Brick Arches (after Phillipson 2000).

mentions his name. It would not appear to be a royal tomb in terms of scale, and reflects the structure of the Tomb of the Brick Arches. Similar catacomb-style rock-hewn tombs have been discovered at the Church of Arbate Insessa, beneath the modern bus station (Puglisi 1941), the site of the Yeha hotel and in the area of the Gebra Masqal/Kaleb complex.

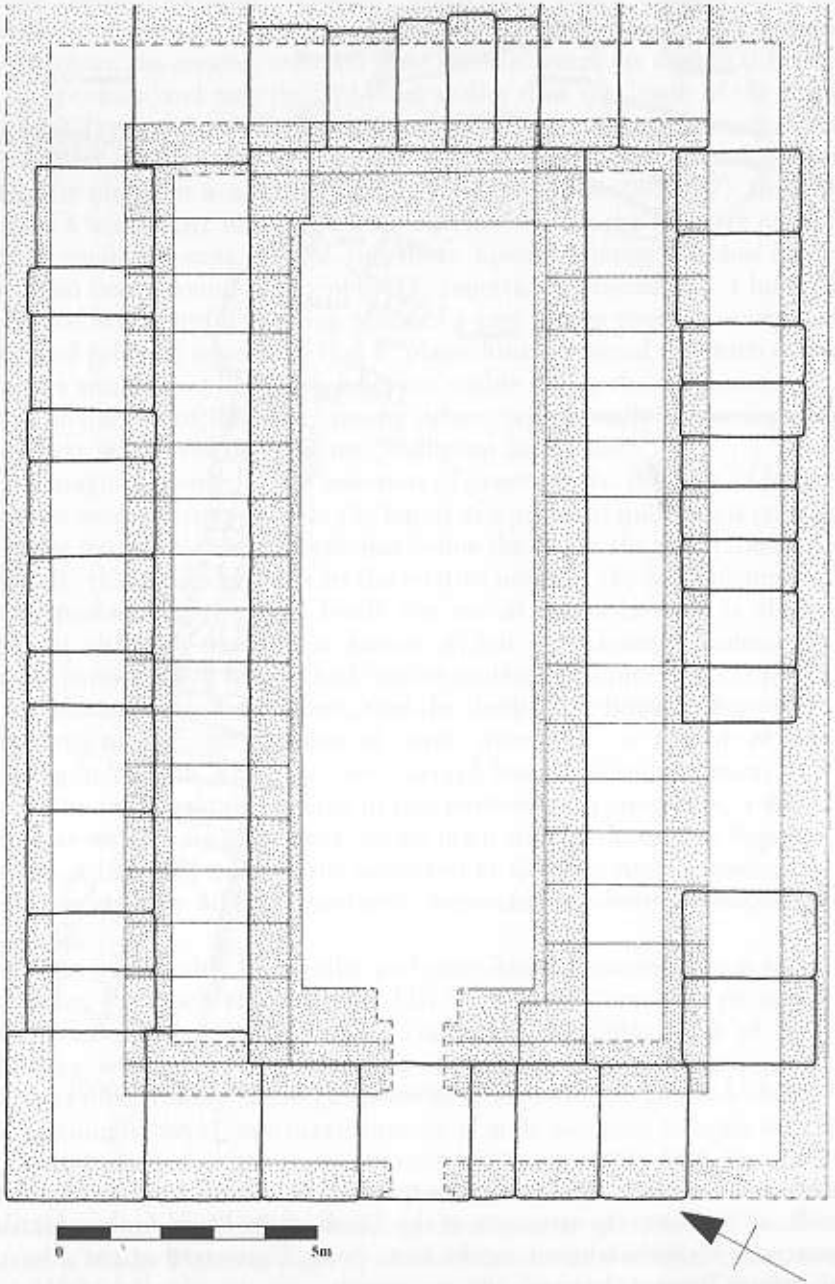

Figure 5.14 Plan of Nefas Mawcha (after Munro-Hay 1989a).

We may assume that tombs were grouped in specific cemetery localities, and that some were the focus of interment for individuals of a lower social rank. Looking at a basic deposit map of the city, it is striking that the focus of habitation does not encompass any of the cemetery zones, and it is therefore probable that all burial was 'extra mural'. The stelae to the north of the CSP, in the Geza Agumai area, probably represent such a specific cemetery locality (necropolis might be a useful term to use), although excavations here have generally been inconclusive (Munro-Hay 1989a: 47–52). The Gudit Stelae Field, a 40 hectare site to the west of the town, in all probability represents a necropolis of middle-ranking members of Aksumite society. Excavations here in the early 1970s uncovered a number of fairly well-appointed tombs, containing grave goods, which dated to the second–third centuries AD. Particular interest attaches to grave GTII which contained fine glass goblets. Recent excavations may have located a feature which could be interpreted as an enclosing wall, but on the whole preservation in the burials – which are marked by rough-hewn stelae – was poor, and the site had clearly been subjected to considerable disturbance (Ayele Tarakegn 1997). In terms of scale and quality of interment, these burials contrast markedly with those in the centre of town, and as such it must be assumed that this betokens some degree of social stratification or differentiation. It should be noted, however, that these burials probably predate those of the CSP and adjacent tombs by a century, and may represent an earlier stage in the evolution of Aksumite burials. Few *in situ* human remains have been recovered from excavations within Aksumite funerary contexts as the elite tombs have been subject to extensive robbing and disturbance.

These tomb structures and cemeteries all belong to the pre-Christian Aksumite funerary tradition and it may be that the variety of tombs reflects diverse cultural and cosmological traditions within the metropolis. The kingship of Aksum, after all, derives from a long tradition, it seems, of being a unifying and centralising figure of a multi-ethnic state. Aksum has outgrown the limits of the *DMT* polity, and as such appears to embrace a greater and more cosmopolitan material culture. Is it inconceivable that high-ranking individuals, representatives of other ethnic groups in the state, were not brought together, in life *and* death at Aksum, even within the royal necropolis at the CSP. This might explain the diversity of tombs and stelae to be found in a very circumscribed space. This form of evidence is our best avenue for understanding how the inhabitants of Aksum prior to the mid-fourth century viewed their place on earth, their place in society and their place in the afterlife. The arrival of Christianity at the Court in *c.*340, however, has implications for the organisation of material culture well beyond the funerary context. Ideological change impacted upon the organisation and perception of space as well, as we shall now see.

Ideology and the landscape

The religion of pre-Christian Aksum

Pre-Christian Aksumite religion retained a very strong South Arabian, Semitic and polytheistic character and the secular and divine worlds met in the person of the king. The identification of the king as a son of the war god Mahrem was a means of maintaining the domination of the royal family over a cosmopolitan and diverse empire, and this is a theme which, as we shall see, survives the Aksumite period, and also has its roots in the *DMT* kingship with a strong association with *LMQ*. The Aksumite gods' names are known from a range of contemporary inscriptions; some are parallels with Greek deities: Astar as Zeus, Mahrem as Ares, and at Adulis, for instance, Beher, who may be identified with Poseidon (Kobishchanov 1979: 228). South Arabian gods include Dhat Himyam and Dhat Ba'adan (the latter two identified with the sun goddess Shams), this represents essentially a continuation of *DMT* cosmology, although *LMQ*, the moon deity with its associated sacred animal the ibex, is not actually mentioned in any Aksumite inscription (Munro-Hay 1991: 198).

Cattle continue to be depicted in a range of media, especially in ceramic forms, attesting to their economic as well as ideological importance (the thread of ancient pastoralist social memory is still strong in what is now a developed and dynamic agricultural economy). Special attention attaches to a model of a horse's head found in Aksumite 2 contexts (i.e. bracketing the second and fifth centuries AD) on Beta Giyorgis (Fattovich and Bard 2003). Beyond funerary archaeology and items which may be regarded as being votive in character, there is actually little archaeological evidence for Aksumite pre-Christian belief. Presumed pre-Christian 'temples', shrines or cultic installations may be recognised perhaps at Ona Negast, Abba Pantaleon and at Wuchate Golo; the Hawelti-Melazzo and Enda Cherqos structures were probably also still in use.

Beyond the central region of the state, it is probable that local belief systems predominated; nature cults, associated with genius loci such as mountains, springs and caves soon became syncretically absorbed into Christian belief (this is reflected much later in reports in medieval *gadlat;* Kaplan 1984: 118). The Cushitic-speaking peoples of the Aksumite state also had a dynamic and distinctive ideological scheme which, as we shall see in the next chapter, might be discerned in the earliest phases of the Lalibela complex. Diversity appears to be the motif most apparent in the pre-Christian Aksumite cosmology, it is not a simple case of a monolithic South Arabian-inspired royal cult. From a material culture perspective, however, it is the introduction of Christianity to Aksum in the fourth century that has a truly profound impact and one which leaves a very distinctive footprint on the physical and spiritual landscape.

The Christianisation of Aksum

Rufinus' account of the introduction of Christianity to the Aksumite court is well known, and is important given that it is virtually contemporary with the events it describes. The traditional account relates that Frumentius, a Syrian of Tyre, was shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast with his brother Aedesius. His Christian piety so affected the Aksumite king, that Frumentius travelled to Alexandria where he was ordained bishop of Ethiopia, and returned to undertake the conversion of the king and his court. It is accepted that the first Christian king of Aksum was Ezana and his conversion was effected during the 330s (Munro-Hay 1990) although it is possible that Ezana himself was not actually baptised and was not therefore truly Christian, a situation analogous perhaps with Constantine the Great (Kaplan 1982).

The process of conversion presented in the traditional account is what we might term a 'top down' model (Finneran 2002: 130), a scenario which is similar to the conversion of the medieval Nubian states in the sixth century (Edwards 2004: 216ff.), and from a wider perspective the conversion of the Caucasian kingdoms in late antiquity, or the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England in the early medieval period (cf. Carver 2003 *passim*). Ethiopia may justifiably claim to be the longest continually Christian state in the world (second only to Armenia). It is even probable that there were earlier Christian communities in the Aksumite empire, among the mercantile community in Adulis, for example. It is inconceivable given the range of trading contacts in the Red Sea, through the Nile region and with Arabia that Christianity was unknown in the Aksumite state prior to the mid-fourth century.

Returning to the archaeological implications of the conversion process, we might draw parallels with what is known from elsewhere. The picture of conversion which is visible in the Roman Empire (where prior to AD 312 Christianity was essentially an underground religion) suggests that the archaeological visibility of its earliest traces are opaque. In contrast, the archaeological implications of the pattern of elite conversion would suggest a fairly immediate impact upon material culture and perception of space. At Aksum monumental inscriptions reveal a striking change in cosmological outlook (Uhlig 2001); DAE inscription 11, for instance, refers to 'Lord of Heaven', clearly a monotheistic label but one which need not necessarily betoken the Christian God. Roger Schneider (1976c) points out that the Greek and South Arabian versions of the Aksumite texts contain more explicit Christian terminology than the Aksumite version; it is possible that the Christian 'message' was being watered down for local consumption, for Christianity had not truly permeated all levels of society and in some places was possibly meeting active resistance in the countryside. As we shall see below when we look at the secondary phase of conversion effected by the

Sadqan and Nine Saints, it is entirely probable that the Aksumite elite alone remained Christian.

The epigraphic formulae reflect a shift away from the sacred kingship (although to a degree this sense does survive the coming of Christianity) emphasised by the link with Mahrem, towards the idea of a 'servant of Christ' (Gebra Krestos). This is also indicated by changes in coinage mottoes; an issue of *MHDYS*, for instance, bears a direct Ge'ez translation of the motto of Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge: 'by this sign (the cross) you will conquer'. As the coinage was intended for use internationally it made sense to stress very heavily a Christian identity for Aksum and its king. Being Christian conferred benefits beyond rewards in the afterlife; it made sense within the wider framework of eastern Mediterranean trading links. Interestingly it is only as late as King Kaleb in the sixth century

Figure 5.15 Ezana's coinage fourth century; pre-Christian (top); Christian (bottom) (after Munro-Hay 1991).

that an Aksumite king actually bears a Biblical (albeit Old Testament) name.

Within the wider landscape, churches were constructed upon sites of undoubted pre-Christian symbolism (below), and it is possible that other places in the landscape containing non-Christian imagery were similarly 'exorcised'. The Gobedra lioness at Aksum is a case in point; this is a very fine representation designed to stand out from the rock face in certain lighting conditions. Its situation on the periphery of the town, almost half way up a rock slope, rather implies that access to it was limited or controlled. Here the Christianisation of the image was achieved through the carving of a cross next to the head. A similar feature may be noted on the 'sphinx' or crouching lion of Tchika Beret, near Kombolcha in Wollo, first noted by the French traveller Lefebvre in 1843 (see figs 5.18a and 5.18b). It too has a cross engraved upon the base (Anfray 1970). The attribution of the lion to an Aksumite date is problematic, it is located in a region which was far to the south of the conventionally recognised southern Aksumite boundary of the state, although this is not impossible if we accept, as we will see in the next chapter, that culturally and politically Aksum did reach into a region which is closely associated with the homeland of the Agau peoples. It may even be that this is a later carving, a translation of a pre-Christian lion motif through the traditions of the medieval *Kebra Negast*, into a more acceptable Christianised symbol: the Lion of Judah.

The Aksumite church building

Another obvious archaeological indicator for conversion is the creation of a new place of worship, a church rather than a temple. As is often noted elsewhere in northern Africa (particularly Egypt), Asia and also late/antique early medieval Europe, these new churches often took over pre-existing sacred spaces. The present 'old' cathedral of Aksum, Maryam Zion, is built upon an earlier podium which extends far beyond the foundations of the existing building; this podium clearly incorporates elements of standard Aksumite monumental architecture, but whether it was the foundations of an earlier temple, or even the older church structure (which was destroyed by Ahmed Gragn in the mid-sixteenth century and was rebuilt in the Gondarene style in the seventeenth) is open to question (cf. Bent 1893: 193) Excavations in this area have merely indicated the presence of some associated wall foundations of indeterminate use (De Contenson 1959b; 1963b).

A reconstruction by David Buxton and Derek Matthews of this earlier church (Buxton and Matthews 1974) is based upon an eye-witness account by Alvares, who describes a five-aisled basilica, and also with reference to the church of the Redeemer (Medhane Alem) at Lalibela which is widely held to have been a copy of the Aksum cathedral, although the reconstruction

would appear to be too large for the present podium. Recent architectural survey (Phillipson 1995 fig. 41) indicates that the present building may actually incorporate elements of the older church in the curved wall to the south-west of the modern sanctuary (*maqdas*); in general terms this part of the church building (the eastern end) is generally the least altered in any church given its strong symbolic value.

Elsewhere we do have evidence of extensive reuse of sacred sites. Paribeni's excavations at Adulis appeared to show that a church was built upon the so-called altar of the sun, which itself was a large podium structure. The church of Enda Cherqos incorporated spolia, including Sabaean inscriptions from the nearby installations of Hawelti (De Contenson 1959b; Schneider 1961). Other associations between Aksumite (or earlier) buildings of presumably pre-Christian cultic importance and later church buildings are suggested at the sites of: Yeha, Menabiet, Seglat and Sabea in the Gulo-Maqeda region (Leclant and Miquel 1959); Bihet (Anfray 1965); Addi Qalebes (Enderta, Mekelle), Nazret (Anfray 1970); Eyerawi Mikhael, Aksum (Tekle 2001); Medogue and Mahabere Dyagove near Aksum (De Contenson 1961b) and Webla Maryam, Semema, Shire (Finneran and Phillips 2003b). In the latter region it is noticeable that a number of rural churches as well as monastic buildings incorporate single stelae in their compounds; these are often used to demarcate the mixed gender and male-only zones (Finneran 2003c). Symbolic meanings of landscapes are thus

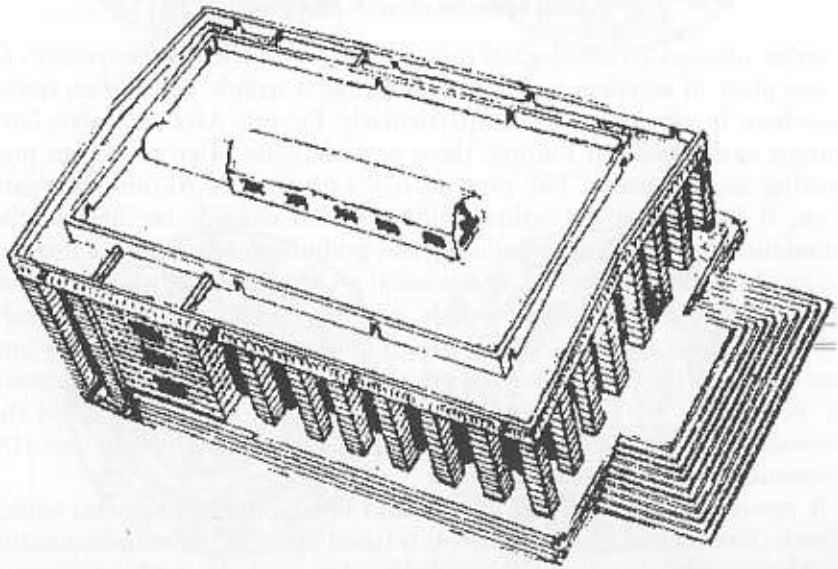

Figure 5.16a Reconstruction of Maryam Zion cathedral, Aksum (after Buxton and Matthews 1974).

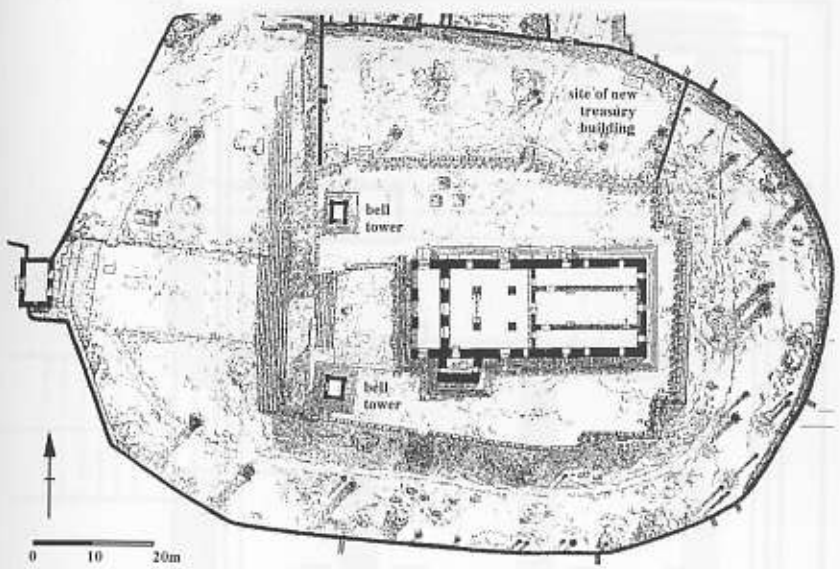

Figure 5.16b Plan of the precinct of Maryam Zion (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

re-written to incorporate a new Christianised sense of place and space; this is a theme which is repeated time and again when we look globally at the phenomenon of landscapes of conversion.

We know little about Aksumite church architecture, but we must assume that it was based upon the standard basilican model prevalent in the Christian world during late antiquity; this much is clear, for instance, in the earliest church structures in Egypt and Nubia. Over a longer period, we see a very distinctive local brand of Christian architecture develop, although fundamentally basilican internal spatial meanings, places for ritual choreography have to remain unaltered. In the Aksumite state a distinctive local variant of the basilica is visible from the start, incorporating elements of local elite architecture, using recessed walls with monumental corner stones with horizontal courses of stone alternating with wooden beams or monkey heads. The only excavated Christian churches within the immediate environs of Aksum are those from Beta Giyorgis and Wuchate Golo. The churches built on the southern flanks of Beta Giyorgis correspond to the areas identified by the DAE as '*Ruinen* E and F' (Ricci and Fattovich 1987). The form is basilican, that is, based upon rectangular space with an internal subdivision into aisles and naves. The basilica at Beta Giyorgis Superiore (*Ruine* F) possesses the sort of recessed architecture that one finds on the large palace buildings; special interest also attaches to the carved column bases as well as the ornate water spouts

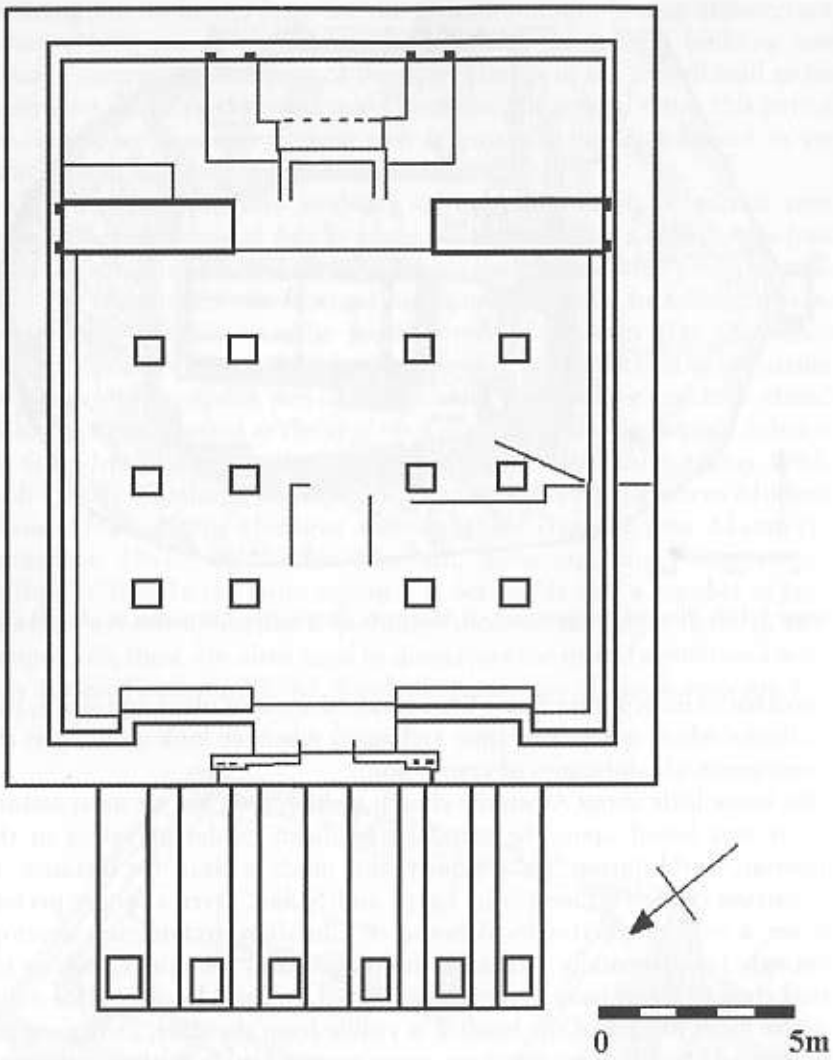

Figure 5.17a Forms of Aksumite church. Christian installation at Yeha/*Beta Christian* (after Robin and De Maigret 1998).

which recall the features on the wine presses found at the site of Adi Tsehafi to the north-west of Aksum.

A structure associated with an enclosure wall excavated at the area of Wuchate Golo north-west of Aksum would appear to be a rectangular basilican church with an associated cistern. This does not have to be a baptistery, although that explanation would make sense in the wider Christian architectural context. Unusually there are no steps to allow

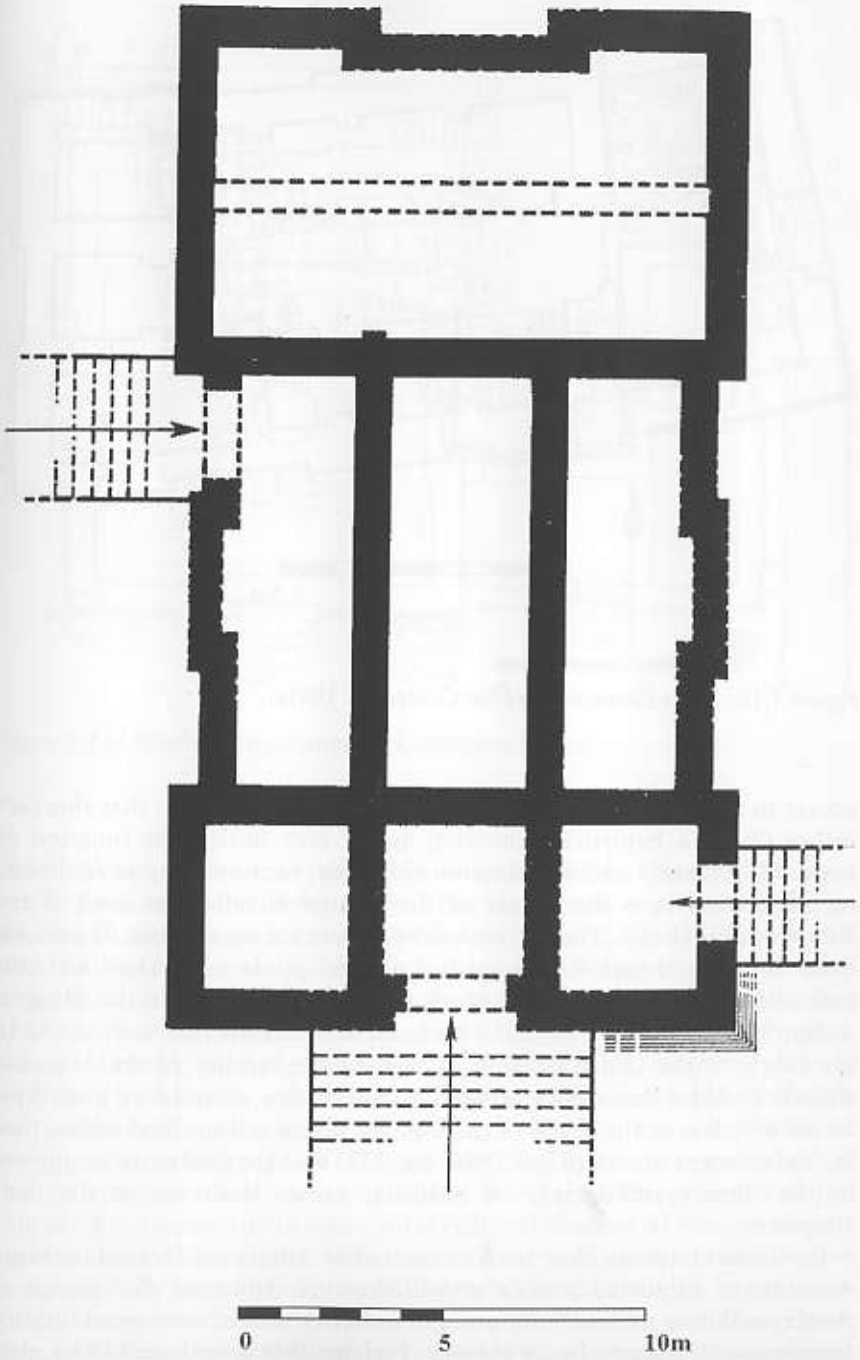

Figure 5.17b Agula Cherqos (after Anfray 1970).

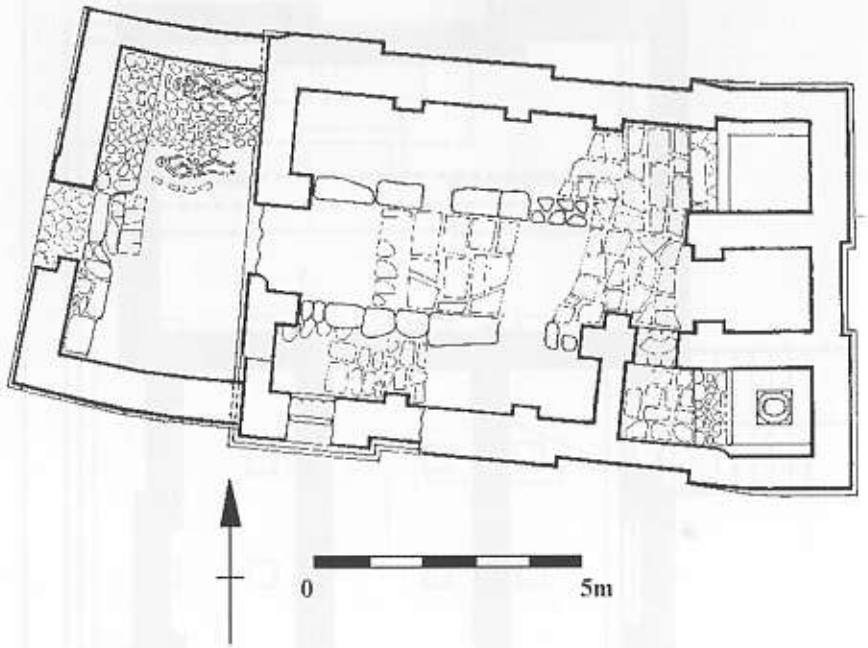

Figure 5.17c Enda Cherqos (after De Contenson 1961a).

access to the tank (De Contenson 1961c); one might argue that this fact rather denies a baptistery function, and it may mirror the function of *laqqan* (Epiphany) and *mandantum* (Maundy) tanks of Coptic tradition, or could even be a forerunner of the sort of installations used in the Ethiopian Epiphany (*Timkat*) ceremony. There are many cases of associations between church buildings and natural pools or springs, but this embodiment of non-Christian symbolism is not confined to the siting of a church. Fragmentary pieces of ecclesiastical architecture were noted in the fabric of the Old Cathedral as well as the vicinity of the monastic church at Abba Pantaleon; of special interest is a piece of arch or door frame which is in the shape of the top of the major decorated stelae, that is, 'the crescent moon' (Ricci 1990; fig. 57). This (pagan) motif reappears in the church architecture of Lalibela, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Basilican churches have been excavated at Adulis which contain large amounts of imported marble embellishments, and also the church at Agula, which is undoubtedly a major construction of very good quality (measuring 25 metres by 14 metres). Perhaps this is indicated in its plan and extension of the royal pavilion-style square building (Anfray 1970).

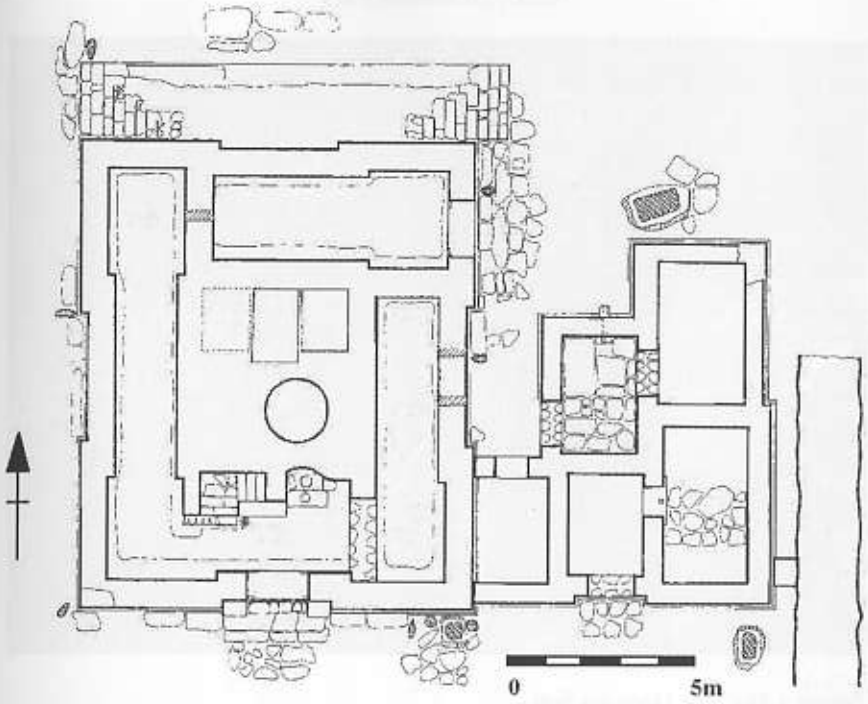

Figure 5.17d Wuchate Golo (after De Contenson 1961c).

Other Aksumite churches are to be found at Enda Cherqos, Matara, possibly Tekondo and Qohaito. At Yeha the temple was converted into the church and a baptistery was added; architecturally this appears to have resulted in the creation of a five-aisled naos with a closed sanctuary with flanking annexes (Robin and De Maigret 1998). The three-aisled Aksumite basilica at Enda Cherqos, which is located near to the cultic site of Hawelti, underlies a more modern circular building; here a baptistery installation, which incorporates a walk-in tank, was found in the southern flanking room of the apse (De Contenson 1961a), a configuration which follows contemporary Syrian practice, and which is also reflected at the churches of Adulis and Yeha. The presence of the baptistery is important as it is a vital cultural element of the conversion process. Large baptisteries with stairs could indicate that adults were being regularly baptised; one would hypothesise that smaller baptisteries would become more widespread as Christianity became established over time, and infants were routinely accepting this very important sacrament rather than adult catechumens.

Figure 5.18a The Gobedra lion.

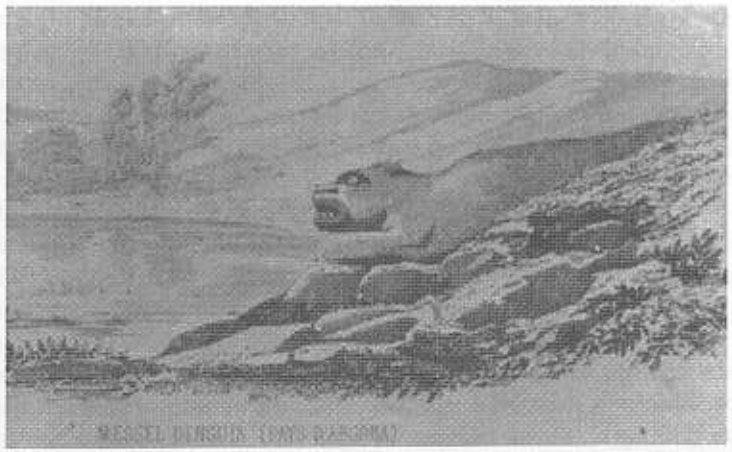

Figure 5.18b Tchika Beret, Wollo (Lefebvre 1845–54).

Christianising death

The impact of Christianity is visible in the archaeology of death. A transitional tomb form may be represented by the Tomb of the False Door at Aksum. In terms of building technology, it is similar to the Mausoleum; a pit was sunk into the hillside and the substructure was then constructed. A flight of steps gains entry into a small chamber and beyond is the actual burial chamber itself; the sarcophagus is aligned north-south, something which does not suggest Christian funerary ritual. Internally there appear to be some similarities with the layout of the Nefas Mawcha, but the general internal alignments and spatial organisation differ. This tomb structure surely represents the final phase of utilisation of the CSP funerary complex (if we accept the idea of an east-west development of the area; Munro-Hay 1989a: 157); it does lack overt Christian architectural symbolism and the usual grave alignment, but perhaps most importantly lacks an associated stela, thus placing it within an ideological context later than that of the rest of the CSP.

The presence of the door on the southern façade recalls those depicted on the main stela in the CSP, as does its symbolism. The stelae themselves do appear to have been largely respected; there was no attempt to destroy them wholesale (this, however, would have been quite a task involving

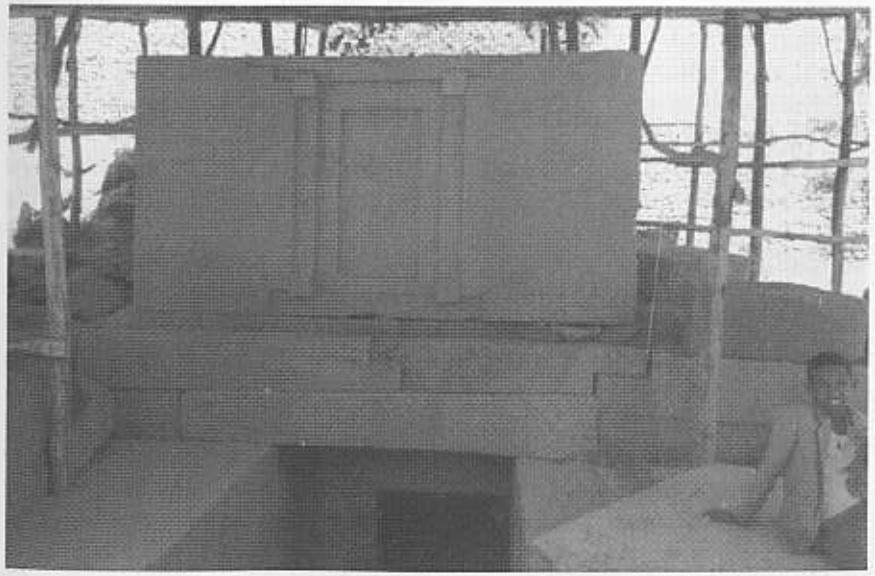

Figure 5.19a Tomb of the False Door, Aksum, south front.

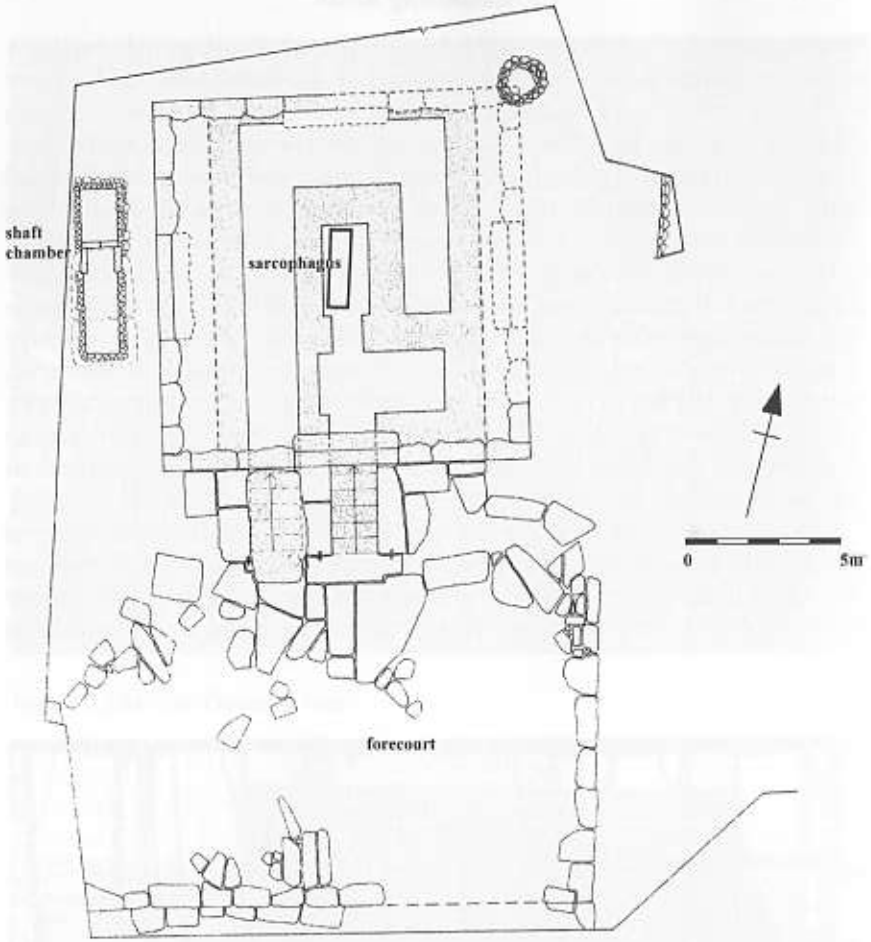

Figure 5.19b Tomb of the False Door, Aksum, plan (after Munro-Hay 1989a).

many individuals) although there is no evidence to support the contention that they were modified to the extent of placing a cross upon them (Van Beek 1967). Although the stelae were not physically altered, their symbolism did undergo a reappraisal, taking part in a rich Christian ritualistic choreography. Every November the Patriarch is enthroned before stela three (Figure 7.3a), not just the leader of all Ethiopian Christians but still, as witnessed by the style of his crown, symbolically still the Christian king of Aksum.

Elsewhere, the tombs of Kaleb and Gebra Masqal clearly embody elements of a more Christianised style of tomb architecture that may in turn

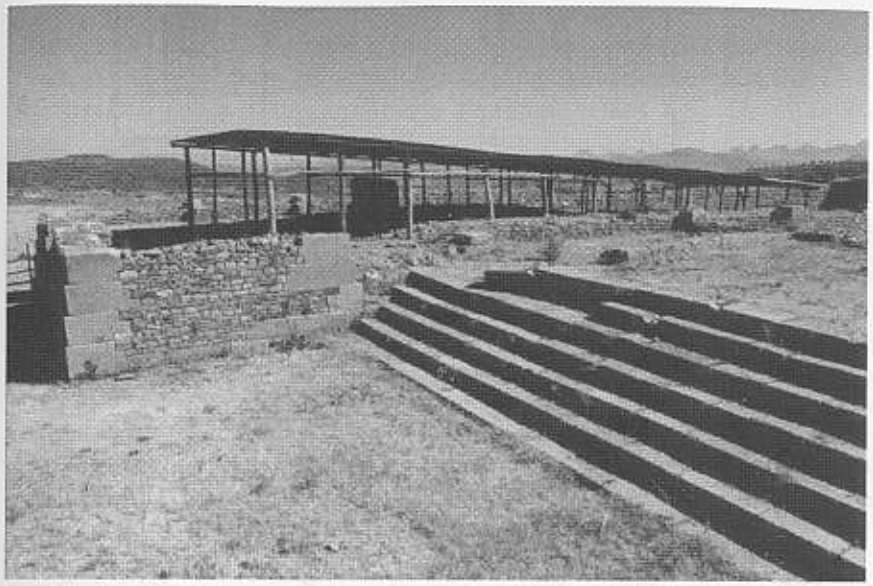

Figure 5.20a Tombs of Kaleb and Gebra Masqal (Michael Harlow).

have influenced post-Aksumite church architecture elsewhere, especially at Degum (see Chapter 6). Aspects of their monumentality emphasise a break with pre-Christian Aksumite funerary tradition. First they are removed from the urban centre, located 2 kilometres up hill from the town, and it may be important that they are sited in close proximity to the monastery of Abba Liqanos, although the presence of earlier shaft tombs in the vicinity might suggest that this area was used as some form of cemetery – probably non-elite – in pre-Christian times (Anfray 1972a; Munro-Hay 1989a: 42–6).

Second their ground plan and structure clearly reflects the organisation of space of a Christian basilica, with a crypt beneath, redolent of a wider Christian, eastern Mediterranean tradition (Manzo 1997). They are fundamentally spatially different from any tomb architecture hitherto seen at Aksum, and their scale suggests royal tomb architecture, although the identity of the individuals who would have been interred here is still open to question; local tradition states that Gebra Masqal was buried at the monastery of Debre Damo (Munro-Hay 1991: 14). These tombs also latterly took on a strong pilgrimage significance, the closest idea in Ethiopia to the martyrium; this is evidenced by the extraordinarily diverse range of Christian graffiti visible on the tomb surfaces (Bernand *et al.* 1991: 304). Tombs found in the Addi Guatiya area, just to the south of the Kaleb and Gebra Masqal complex and again associated with the monastery of Abba

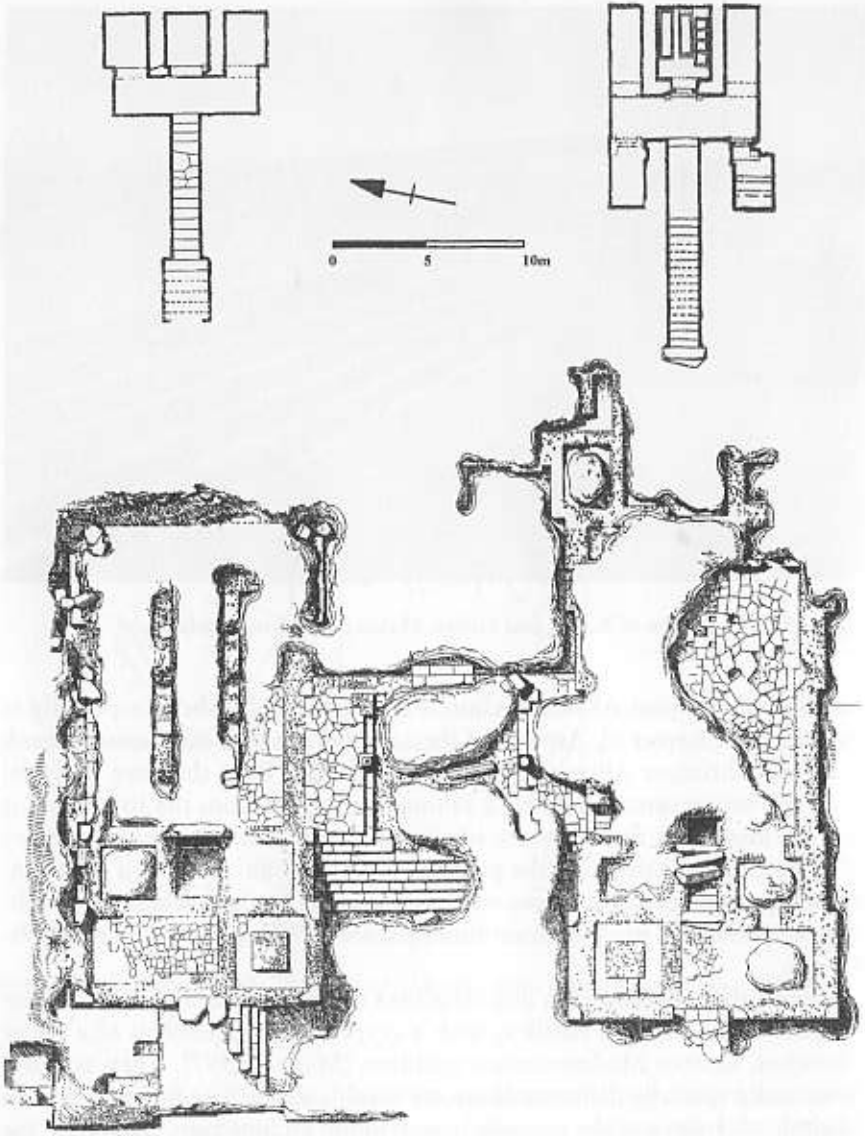

Figure 5.20b Plan of the Kaleb/Gebra Masqal complex (after Littmann *et al.* 1913).

Liqanos, are cross-shaped (De Contenson 1963b) although in general terms evidence for low-status Christian burial elsewhere is lacking; those found during excavation in the CSP in the 1950s would appear to date from as late as the eighteenth century (Leclant 1959b).

The archaeology of Aksumite monasticism

Thus far we have talked about Christianity as an urban Aksumite phenomenon; there does not appear to have been a great penetration into the rural hinterlands, and it is also significant that there is also no evidence in the early Christian phases, of a monastic system which could easily have been copied from either Syria or Egypt. This is surprising. During the fourth and early fifth centuries, monasticism was a vigorous and dynamic social movement in Egypt and Syria, two regions with the closest contacts with the Ethiopian Church, and the movement was taking hold elsewhere in the Eastern Christian world. One of the reasons why this picture is not reflected at Aksum is surely down to the nature of longer-term Christian history in the former regions. In Egypt and Syria there was a strong memory of persecution; martyria formed important and hugely symbolic nodes in the wider Christian landscape; martyrs gave the early church a strong centre of gravity which was re-interpreted in the development of an austere monastic lifestyle. That sort of mindset which might have resulted in a strong impulse for withdrawal from society simply did not exist in Ethiopia.

This picture changed during the fifth century, when in the reign of Ella Amida, or Kaleb's grandfather, we see what appears to be a secondary re-Christianisation of the landscape achieved through the arrival of a number of monks – the Nine Saints – from the eastern Mediterranean. It has long been suggested that these were anti-Chalcedonian monks fleeing persecution; their places of origin given in the Ethiopic *Book of the Saints* and the relevant hagiographies would suggest perhaps more precisely that they came from Anatolia and Antioch (Sergew 1972: 116; Finneran in press b.). As essentially individuals rather than a formal collective, the first form of monasticism to be introduced into Ethiopia would have been the eremitic rather than cenobitic, communal version which was now in vogue in the eastern Christian world.

In order to understand the cultural implications of this novel monastic system, we need to be aware of the broader Syrian Christian cultural context at this time. Frumentius, of course, was a Christian from Tyre, and elements of early Ethiopic Christian material culture reflect this influence: parts of St Yared's chant, for instance, contain strong Syriac influence and there are a number of terms used in the translation of the Ethiopic Bible which have roots in Syriac literary tradition (Marassini 1990). The arrival of the Nine Saints must be seen in this context, part of a longer continuum of ecclesiastical relations with Antioch, rather than a sudden event. Another group of holy men known as the *Sadqan* ('righteous ones') were active in southern Eritrea (Shimazana region) at this period; a number suffered martyrdom at Matara (Taddesse 1972: 23), an event which would strengthen the contention that the spread of Christianity through the

Aksumite state was still very localised and uneven, and by implication that the inhabitants of Matara may have enjoyed a degree of local political and cultural autonomy (Sergew 1972: 128 note 20).

The main contribution of the Nine Saints to the material culture of the Ethiopian church is witnessed in the foundation of a series of monasteries across the rural landscape of the Aksum-Yeha region. As anchorites steeped in the Syriac tradition, their interpretation of distancing from society would emphasise vertical rather than Egyptian-style, desert-orientated horizontal displacement (Finneran 2002: 74ff.). The cult of the Stylites was already popular in the Levant. The monks known as Pantaleon and Liqanos remained close at Aksum, founding monastic cells upon high pinnacles (Pantaleon's cell was located upon an older pre-Aksumite shrine). The proximity of Liqanos and Pantaleon to the centre of political activity was, as Sergew Hable Sellassie points out (1972: 116–17) important owing to their Greek origin and also their support for the accession of Tazena, the successor of Ella Amida. They thus enjoyed a close relationship with the king, and were clearly regarded as trusted advisors.

The use of the rock pinnacle gave a distancing effect from society, yet kept the monastery within view, dominating the social landscape and being symbolically closer to God himself. Their presence on these striking landscape features in other places also resulted in a renegotiation of existing sacred space. The remainder of the Nine Saints dispersed into the rural hinterland of Aksum. Abba Afse went to Yeha and founded a monastery in proximity to the old pagan sanctuary there. Abba Garima (Isaac) settled at Medera, near Adwa; a monastic church dedication to the saint is found at Adi Kewih; Abba Guba also settled in this region. Abuna Alef founded a monastery to the northeast of Aksum named Debre Halle Luya (location unknown), and Abuna Yemata constructed a sanctuary within a dramatic and virtually inaccessible pinnacle at Guh (the modern monastic church of Abuna Yemata at Guh dates from the fifteenth century; Lepage and Mercier 2005: 170); the location of Abba Sehma's mission is unknown, but may be centred upon the region today known as Enda Abba Sehma to the south-east of Adwa.

Abuna Aregawi founded arguably the most famous monastery in Ethiopia; Debre Damo, which is held to have been built upon a pagan sacred site (Krenker in Littmann *et al.* 1913: 90–4). The mythology relating to the site being the abode of a serpent is interesting; this myth has been recast into Christian mythology, and serpents still allegedly guard monasteries today, losing an 'evil' identity (Levine 1974: 49). The monastic churches here were restored in the late 1940s by the British architect Derek Matthews, whose work provided new insight into Aksumite building techniques (Matthews 1949). The façade is clearly Aksumite in style, yet internally retains the strong basilican form which ultimately develops, as we shall see in the next chapter, into a very distinctive local variant of church

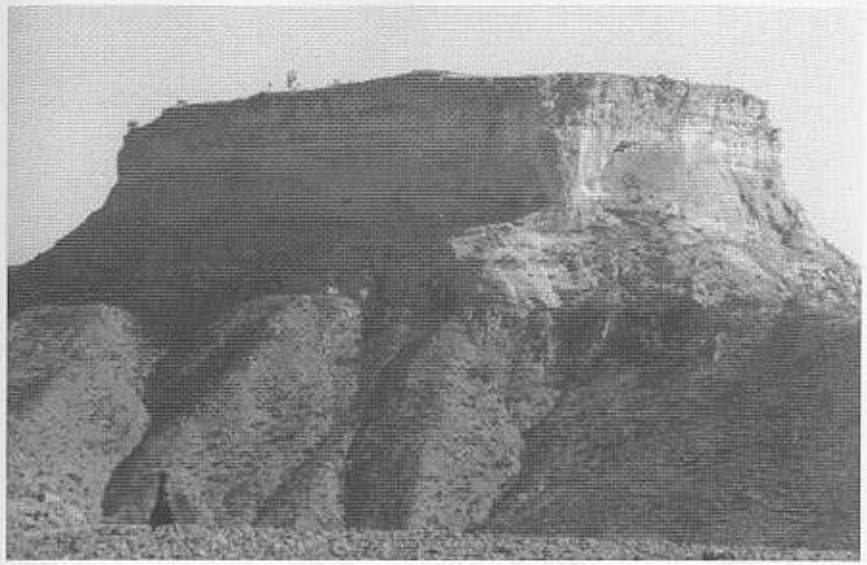

Figure 5.21a Debre Damo *amba* (Michael Harlow).

architecture. Internally the use of wood for decorative panelling schemes is important; many of the features embody a range of Christianised motifs which have their origins in the Coptic, Byzantine and even Sassanid artistic canons (Matthews and Mordini 1959).

Debre Damo is still the most important monastery in Ethiopia and its influence upon the shaping of medieval Ethiopia was profound. It represents, perhaps, the closest to what may be regarded as the cenobitic (communal) monastic archetype found elsewhere (particularly Egypt). Like Mount Athos, the establishment is a male-only preserve (as indeed are most of the high monasteries), and not even female livestock may enter its precincts which are delineated by the cliffs of the *amba* rather than the wall of the Egyptian monastery, or the sea of an early Irish medieval hermitage on an island. The notion of distancing the community and individual is important, yet after the decline of Aksum, as we shall see, the monastery becomes the most significant political and social centre in the landscapes of medieval Ethiopia, reflecting a deep shift in the psychology of fixed political space. These early monasteries are thus based upon the Syrian rather than Egyptian monastic paradigm; the willingness for the hermits to involve themselves actively in the conversion of space as well as the political world of Aksum also is strongly reminiscent of the behaviour of the open Syrian rather than reclusive Egyptian holy man (Brown 1971).

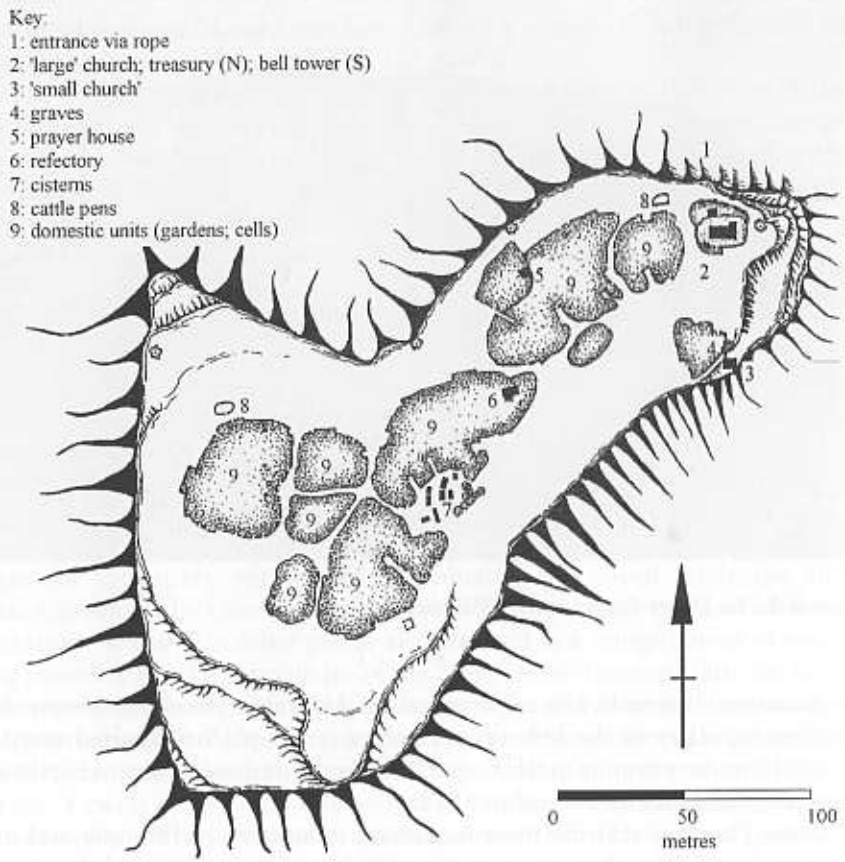

Figure 5.21b Plan of Debre Damo (after Matthews and Mordini 1959).

Aksumite Christian material culture was not isolated; it drew upon a range of external influences, and one late-Aksumite artefact in particular represents this cosmopolitan outlook. The Abba Garima gospel book, from the monastery of Garima at Adwa, shows very strong Byzantine and Syriac influences in its layout and decoration (Leroy 1960); stylistically these schemes would suggest that the book is roughly contemporary with or later than the Syriac Rabbula gospels which date from the sixth century. This palaeographic dating would appear to be broadly confirmed by the presence, in AG II, of a colophon mentioning the repair of a certain church by King Armah (Davies 1987: 293). AMS dating on the actual parchment has confirmed the stylistic chronology; the age estimates bracket the period AD 430–650 (a portion containing a letter from Eusebius) and 330–540 (depiction of an evangelist) making this one of the oldest demonstrably

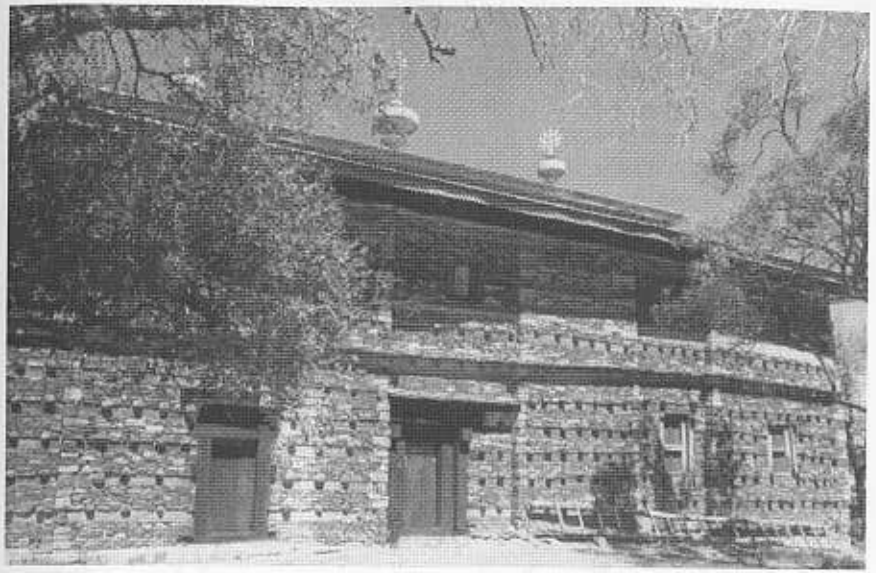

Figure 5.21c Debre Damo main church (Michael Harlow).

Figure 5.21d Close up of 'monkey heads' on the main church (Michael Harlow).

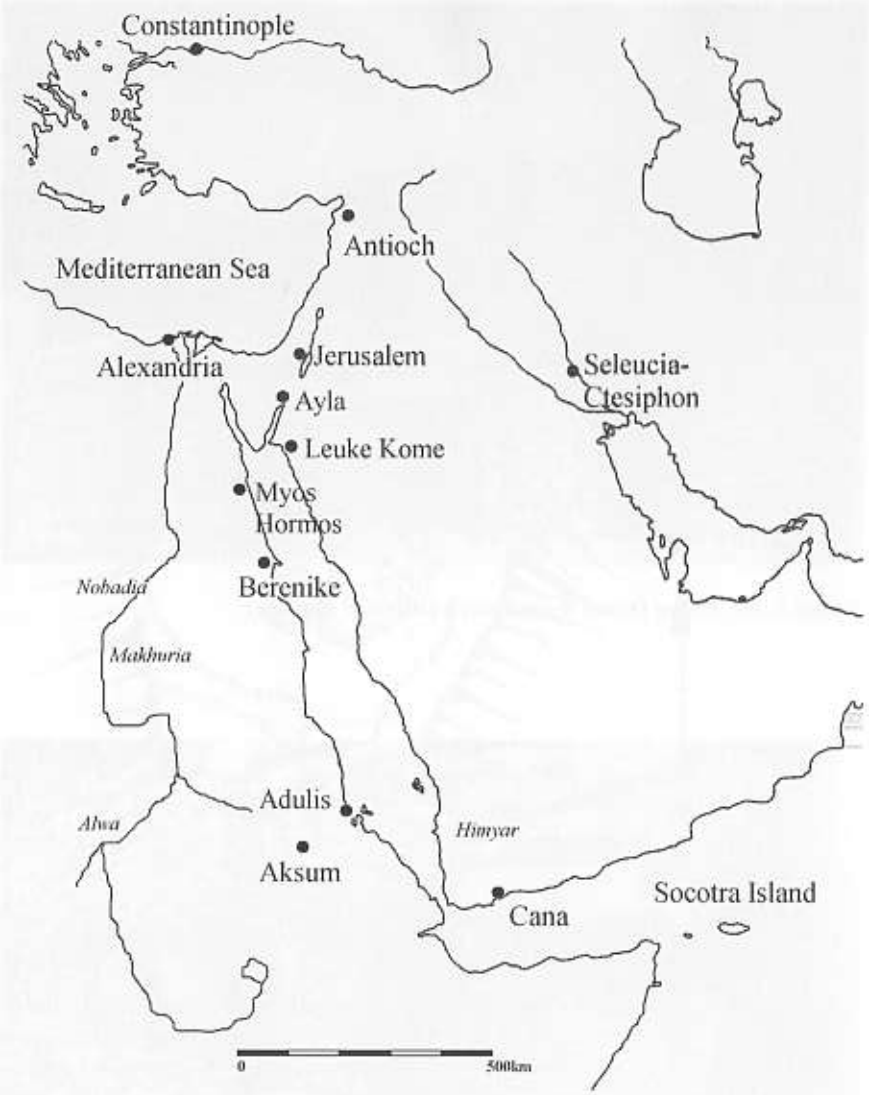

Figure 5.22 Aksum, the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

Christian artefacts in Ethiopia, and one of the earliest Christian manuscripts anywhere in the world (Mercier 2000).

The Abba Garima manuscript indicates how international links with other eastern churches developed (Finneran in press a.); Aksum had already become embroiled in wider theological controversy (as witnessed by Athanasius' *Apologia ad Constantium* which outlines the causes and

consequences of the Arian heresy) in the fourth century, and the rupture between the Byzantine and eastern Churches at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 had profound implications for Aksum's economic, political and ideological relationships with Byzantium, the dominant power in the Mediterranean in late antiquity. To be anti-Chalcedonian *theoretically* meant political rupture with Constantinople – it is actually questionable whether the Aksumite church's views were represented at the Council but in general terms where Alexandria and Antioch led, Aksum was bound to follow – although in any case political expediency would soon overrule theological matters. This brings us finally to a consideration of the economic system which allowed Aksum, through its Christian identity, to assume such a significant role in the east Mediterranean and western Asian world of late antiquity.

Aksum: the international dimension

Aksum, Adulis and the Red Sea

Aksum, at its apogee, was locked into the trading systems of the eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and also, to some extent, the Indian Ocean. As Munro-Hay notes (1991: 3) it seems strange that Aksum rather appears to turn its back on Africa; unlike the picture we see from the proto-Aksumite period, which emphasises a heavy Nilotic component, Aksum chooses the 'arduous' trade routes across the seas. The nexus of Aksum's international trading system was the port of Adulis, and its customs point at Gabaza, on the Eritrean coast just to the south of the modern port of Massawa. Adulis is mentioned in the *Periplus* with a manifest of items imported and exported by the Aksumite kingdom (Munro-Hay 1982). Sergew (1972: 71) highlights the seeming quantitative imbalance in the trade figures given in this account; more goods are leaving than are coming in, and the exports are intrinsically more valuable. The region has, as we saw in Chapter 1, always been known as a source for luxury goods for consumption in Egypt, but how Adulis fits into the context of the earlier Ptolemaic and Egyptian Red Sea trade with Punt is not known. The tantalising Greek inscription of Ptolemy III (246–241 BC) on the throne noted here by Cosmas Indicopleustes has not survived, although recent archaeological survey here has indicated that if not quite extending back as far as this period, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that Adulis was a thriving port during the early first century AD, with the possibility of even earlier settlement on the site.

The *Periplus* describes Adulis as being the main entrepôt for Aksum, which lay, according to contemporary estimates, eight-days' journey away up on the high escarpment via the staging post of Koloë, which had its own large ivory market (in all probability this town should be identified with

Qohaito (Voigt 1999) although Matara also could be a candidate). The whole route along the Aksum-Adulis axis was, in any case, densely populated with significant urban centres such as Tekondo, Ham, Gulo-Maqeda and Hinzat, and it is clear that the economic focus of the kingdom lay along this line. Adulis was then a key economic and also strategic centre; in 525 King Kaleb used Adulis as the launch pad for his successful invasion of south-western Arabia, but in the late seventh or early eighth century the town was attacked by an Arab naval force from Jeddah, and the erosion of the power of Aksum in the highlands and neighbouring areas is reflected in the subsequent decline of Adulis, when early Islamic trading centres on the coast shifted emphasis to Massawa, some 30 miles to the north, and the Dahlac Islands. Archaeological excavation has cast some light upon the character of the Aksumite town; a major Christian basilica was excavated in 1867 by members of Napier's British military expedition (Munro-Hay 1989c); further work by Sundstrom (Littmann 1907) Paribeni (1907), and Anfray in the early 1960s (Anfray 1974) has begun to yield a picture of a typical Aksumite town, its major components being church and elite residential structures.

Recently an Eritrean-British team has begun an intensive land-based and maritime archaeological survey of the site. An initial survey, designed to

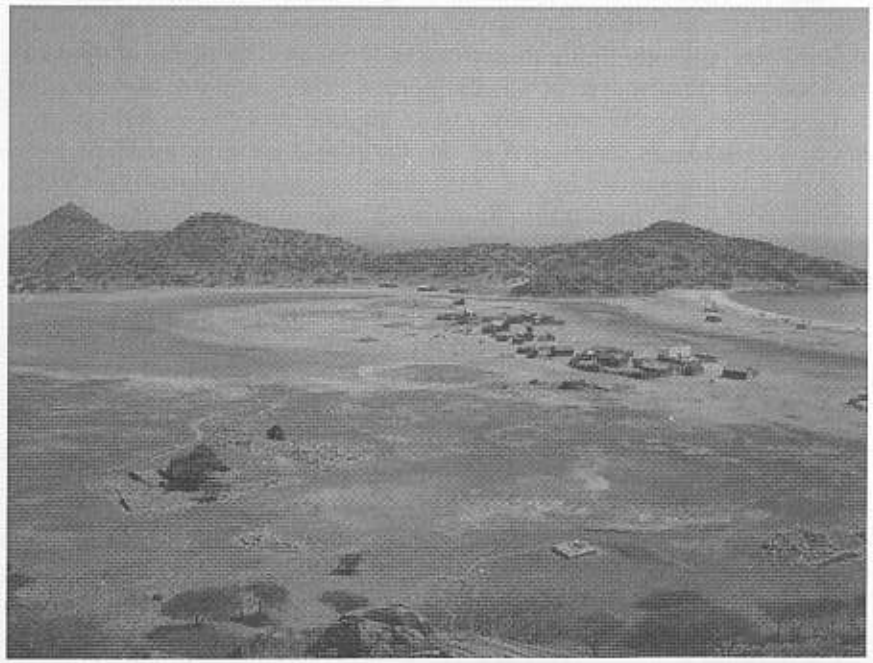

Figure 5.23 The site of Adulis in 2005 (Lucy Blue).

pick up earlier excavated features, managed to re-locate some of the earlier church buildings excavated by Paribeni; the marble used in the buildings was shown to contain fragments of Proconessian marble from the Sea of Marmara region, Turkey, as well as 'grand antique' sourced from the French Pyrenees (Daniel *et al.* 2004). Subsequent survey was able to confirm the identity of the ancient anchorages of Diodorus Island – which yielded surface evidence of first-century BC eastern sigillata A wares – and the later anchorage of Oreinê Island, which is identified as modern Dese (Yohannes Geresus *et al.* 2005). On the whole, surface collections of pottery confirm both the long-lived occupation of the town and its very international outlook: pre-Aksumite wares from the south-west of the site to late Aksumite ceramics (fourth–seventh centuries); pieces sourced from the region of Aqaba (Jordan), eastern Mediterranean Late Roman 1, 2 and 3 wares as well as north African cylindrical amphorae. It is also expected that a thorough maritime archaeological reconnaissance of a recently discovered shipwreck (the Black Assarca wreck) off Dahlac Kebir will shed extensive light on the nuances of international Aksumite maritime trade (Pedersen 2000), a system which also had great implications for economic development upon the east African coast (Juma 1996).

Within Aksum itself, archaeological evidence for long-distance exchange relationships has come to light from many excavated sites (Tomber 2005a). Local Aksumite pottery, whilst drawing upon pre-and proto-Aksumite vessel forms and decoration, soon accumulated influences from abroad: this may be discerned in the trend towards everted and ledge rims from the early Aksumite period onwards (Phillipson 2000: 456). It is important to note that in many cases consumers (especially at D site) recognised the inherent luxury value of the container as opposed to their contents (Phillipson 2000: 484); in some cases the value of the container took on extra symbolism: children were buried in amphorae at Matara and Adulis. These amphorae are very distinctive markers for trade between Aksum and the Mediterranean worlds; Syrian-origin amphorae have been excavated from the fourth–fifth-century AD contexts from ON, Beta Giyorgis (Fattovich and Bard 1997), and other amphorae suggest a Gaulish origin (Fattovich and Bard 1995).

One Aksumite export into the Mediterranean system above others was very highly prized. Concerted efforts by the Romans to source new markets for raw ivory were triggered by the fall off in north African ivory supply during the first century (Phillips 1997b). Many finely finished ivory artefacts have been revealed by recent excavation which bear witness to the quality of the material and its workmanship. It is possible that the ivory chair back found in the excavations of the Tomb of the Brick Arches may have indirectly influenced, for instance, the design of the sixth-century Maximian's chair at Ravenna, Italy (Phillipson 2000: 119). Beyond the Mediterranean Aksumite ivory was also widely used in early medieval Europe (Phillipson 2003: 14).

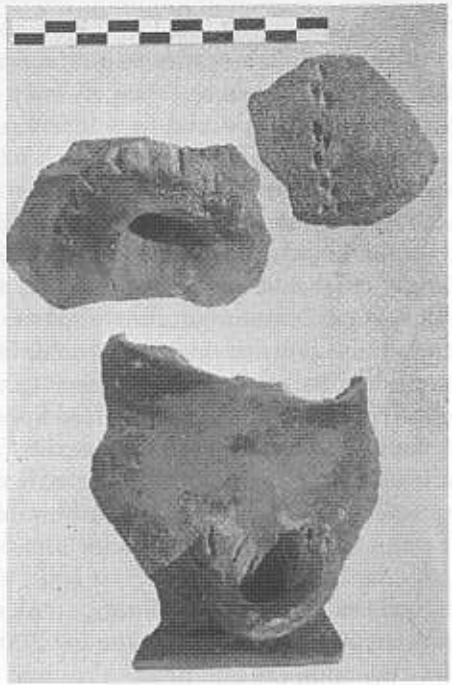

Figure 5.24 Aksumite pottery from the Egyptian Red Sea port of Berenike; scale in cm (Roberta Tomber).

Aksum and the Indian Ocean

There is also evidence of a more eastward trading orientation as witnessed by the discovery of a hoard of Indian coins of the Kushana kings (who controlled northern India) dating from *c.* AD 220 at the monastery of Debre Damo (Mordini 1960); as the monastery itself was not founded until the sixth century it is not clear how they came to be there, but Aksumite coins have also been found in India, and Aksumite pottery has also been found at Kamrej, Gujarat (Gupta *et al.* 2004; Tomber 2005b). Some beads excavated in funerary contexts at Aksum (e.g. Tomb of the Brick Arches) may have ultimately had an Indian origin (Phillipson 2000: 86). Evidence for direct links with China is less clear cut. Sergew (1972: 71) suggests that the region of 'Huang-Chi' noted by chroniclers of the Han dynasty (220–589) as an important trading centre lying '12 months' journey, or 30,000 li' westwards could be identified with Aksum (also Fiaccadori 1984). Chinese material at Aksum may possibly be represented by a small forged iron and silver piece from Chamber D in the Tomb of the Brick Arches (Phillipson 2000: 114).

Figure 5.25 Ivory plaque from the Tomb of the Brick Arches, Aksum (Michael Harlow).

Aksumite coinage

Aksum's internationalist outlook was enshrined in its tri-metallic coinage of gold, silver and bronze, a system unique in sub-Saharan Africa. It may have been initially based upon south Arabian coinage system (silver tended to be used in issues from Saba and Himyar, bronze in Hadramaut), but its value was subsequently tied to the Roman currency. Aksumite gold coins were based upon the Roman *tremissis* standard prior to the coinage reforms of Constantine the Great in 324, making them freely convertible, although over time, a trend towards gold debasement is apparent and many of the later issues only contain about 50 per cent gold (Munro-Hay 1991: 187). Gold coins were designed for use abroad, and bore Greek mottoes.

Aksumite coins have been found not only in South Arabia but also in Aylah (Aqaba, Jordan), Berenike (Egypt) and also Israel (Hahn 2000; Meshorer and Spaer 1966), as well as in the Indian sub-continent alongside Roman coins (Karnataka hoard; Gupta *et al.* 2004). It is even possible that Aksumite numismatic influence may be found in the Anglo-Saxon Mercian issues of Offa in the eighth century (Juel-Jensen and Munro-Hay 1994). Aksumite coinage was first issued by Endybis around 270, and it is a useful chronological tool. The earliest issues contain mottos or invocations to the pre-Christian gods, and the emperor is shown in profile with a distinctive

crown and carrying a fly whisk. The iconography changes with the adoption of Christianity, both in terms of the inscription, as we have seen, but also with the replacement of the disc/crescent motif with a cross; the king also often carries a hand cross. Aksumite coinage not only charts ideological and economic change, it also bears witness to more profound socio-political shifts; as we shall see in the next chapter, the end of the coinage issues during the reign of Armah in the eighth century is indicative of a wider phenomenon of societal collapse.

Overview

In this chapter we have looked at the varied manifestations of Aksumite power and prestige across the northern highlands of Ethiopia and Eritrea and beyond on the international stage. The Aksumite achievement was one which was rooted very much in the north-eastern African world, and was not merely a continuum of the pre-Aksumite heritage of the *DMT* polity. It was a vibrant and dynamic society which embraced Christianity earlier than most areas of the Roman world; it was a society which recognised from an early stage the benefits of an internationalist outlook, bringing with its membership of effectively an eastern Mediterranean Christianised trading bloc. The archaeology of the machinery of the Aksumite state is visible across a highland landscape which is one of the most agriculturally rich in all of Africa; it is also visible too in south-western Arabia, a region which was one of Aksum's progenitors and latterly its colony.

The reach of Aksum beyond these highlands into the deserts to the east, the coast and seascapes and beyond into southern Arabia is also clear; the diversity of material culture, particularly in the realms of funerary archaeology, gives some insight into the multi-ethnic composition of the polity. Aksum was not an isolated entity; beyond the worlds of the Nile and the northern coasts of the Maghreb it was one of the most internationalised parts of Africa. It is important to stress, in the light of the discussion presented in the next chapter, that although Aksum the city collapsed, its material culture, social memory and economic base largely survived, albeit with significant modification, underpinning the early medieval Ethiopian state, a period for which we have little historical evidence and for which archaeology alone has the best potential for clarifying what is a very nebulous picture.

6

AFTER AKSUM

Medieval and post-medieval archaeology

Contexts

After the collapse of the Aksumite polity, it is popularly believed that Ethiopia entered a 'dark age'. Historically, this may be true, for as Sergew states 'there is a complete lack of internal source material about events in Ethiopia between the end of the ninth and twelfth centuries' (1972: 209), but I will argue that this 'dark age' is actually more real than imagined. It is true that the historical emphasis is upon external accounts (mainly Arab) to help us reconstruct events during this period, but there is also a wealth of internal cultural evidence to work with, and herein lies an ingrained methodological problem. From the perspective of material culture, the emergence and development of medieval Ethiopian culture is a phenomenon which has been approached mainly from an art-historical rather than archaeological perspective (Phillipson 2004a).

Using a more multi-disciplinary approach in this chapter, we will chart the emergence and development of medieval and post-medieval Ethiopia, a process which embraces the evolution of a feudally organised, multi-ethnic empire, with its ideological and bureaucratic machinery, and witnessing the florescence of vibrant and multi-facetted material culture. Yet the social memory of the past remains vital, for during this period we see the creation of a distinctive Ethiopian identity which demanded a reinterpretation of its Aksumite roots. Medieval Ethiopia was a culture in flux; in general terms its horizons are re-orientated, seeing a gradual socio-political shift from the 'Semitic' north, southwards to the 'Cushitic' highlands, reflecting a shift in psychology of the state away from the sea and the Mediterranean world (Sutton in Munro-Hay 1989a: 5). Yet this is not to deny a rupture with the past; the maintenance of Aksumite forms of material culture as a means of legitimising political control is a central theme. Other important socio-cultural trends are apparent at the time, the most distinctive being the emergence of the Christian monastery as a

powerful centralising economic and ideological force in the landscape, and in contrast an apparently centralised monarchy which existed without any fixed focus of political control.

In attempting to define an archaeology of medieval Ethiopia, we should try to place these ideas in a more global perspective. It is instructive, for instance, to consider the points of similarity between Ethiopia during this period and the major themes that have been emphasised in European-orientated medieval archaeology. The chronological limits are similar, bracketing the end of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance in Europe, that is, *c.* AD 600–1500. Nuanced approaches to the problem of conversion (and indeed *reconversion*) to Christianity demand our attention; the archaeology of standing buildings (especially the church) becomes an essential methodological tool of analysis, as does another cognate specialisation: monastic archaeology. The emergence of a feudal system (although one might critique the validity of the term in an Ethiopian context; Ellis 1976) in both regions at a broadly similar period of time – we might term this an archaeology of inequality – becomes an increasingly important topic, focusing upon the development of royal estates, manors and castles – although the labels in an

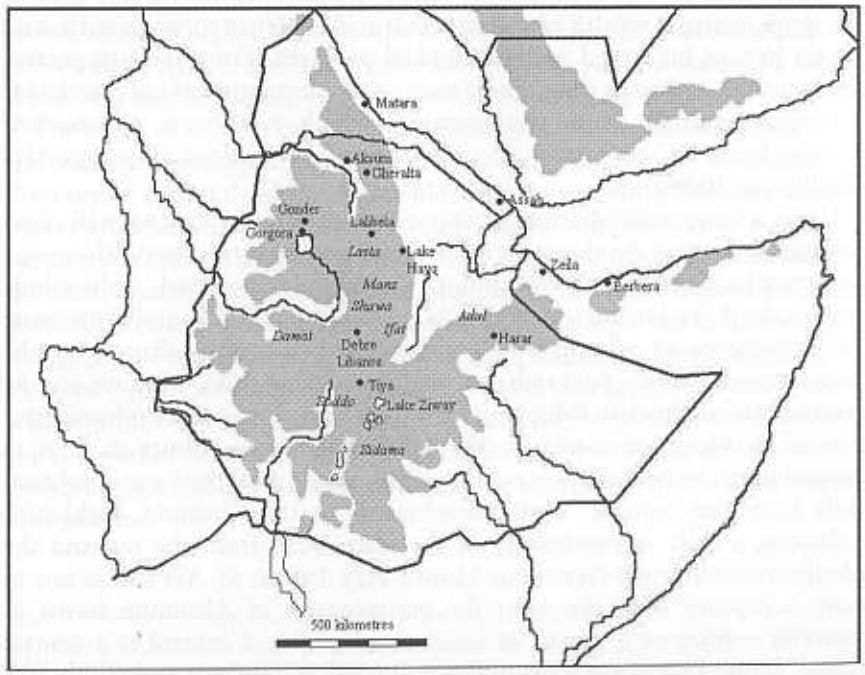

Figure 6.1 Map of key regions and sites mentioned in Chapter 6.

Ethiopian context, of course, are slightly different. A more global approach to medieval archaeology has to consider the archaeology of shifting identities, historical migrations of peoples and here (and in nearby areas) the archaeological visibility of nascent Islamic communities. As we shall see in this chapter, all of the above themes, which broadly form the core of a thematic approach to medieval archaeology in Europe, are wholly relevant to the study of medieval Ethiopia, but this is to anticipate matters. To grasp the cultural and economic roots of medieval Ethiopia, we need to revisit the Aksumite state during the seventh century and try to understand its decline.

The end of Aksum

The 'Gudit wars'

Internal historical sources which underpin the framework for the 'long' chronology of the Aksumite state, provide an explicit and dramatic reason for the decline of Aksum. Ethiopian chronicles relate that the last king of Aksum Dil Na'od, was attacked by a 'pagan' (or Jewish) queen named Gudit (or Judith, Yodit or Esato). She is also known from external sources; Ibn Hawqal mentions her as the Queen of the Hadani, in the southern part of the country of Habasha (Taddesse 1972: 39), an identification consistent with traditional views of her southern, Agau (or Sidama) origins. An unnamed Ethiopian king writing to King Giorgios II of Makuria (*c.*969–1000), reported in the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, tells of being attacked by the 'Queen of the Bani al-Hamwiya' (Munro-Hay 1991: 15). Whilst it has been suggested that this is a corruption of 'Hagwiyya' meaning Agau (Henze 2000: 49), it might also be a corruption of Beni Amer, a Beja agropastoralist group of the western margins of Eritrea. Beni Amer seasonal mobility patterns impinge upon the fringes of the former Aksumite empire (Nadel 1945), and it is possible to hypothesise that they were forced into raiding the highland zones in response to ecological pressures in their homelands of the Kassala region. The letter to the Makurian king may actually be a veiled plea for military assistance (the issue of Gudit's origins is dealt with in useful detail by Taddesse 1972: 38–9; he makes the interesting observation (p. 38 note 5), that the military organisation of the peoples of the Damot kingdom, from where Gudit is said to have originated, was historically dominated by powerful female figures).

Archaeologically speaking, however, there are problems with the account of Gudit. Although the progress of Gudit's armies is said to have been marked through Begemdir by piles of stones or cairns – which are today known as Gudit stones – we find a similar mythology is attached

to the stone cairns which allegedly marked the progress of Gragn's troops in the sixteenth century (Sergew 1972: 231). The original meanings of these monuments have thus acquired a new symbolism in the light of what appears to have been periods of major social upheaval. In addition, there is actually no archaeological evidence at any major site (except for Adulis, below) for any large-scale episodes of destruction as are recognised almost 500 years later during the campaign of Gragn. This is particularly true of Aksum, but, as we shall see below, it is actually unlikely that Aksum would have been the political centre of the kingdom during the tenth century. It had, in all probability, already been abandoned (it might be possible to link the toppling of stela 2 with these events; also of relevance here is the Hatsani Daniel inscription, below). Using historical and archaeological evidence rather than an uncritical reliance upon indigenous sources (both written and oral) we can begin to formulate a reasonable (and multivariate) explanation for the end of the Aksumite polity, a phenomenon which was not quite so apocalyptic as that suggested by the Gudit myth.

A collapsing landscape?

It is argued that traditional accounts of the Gudit wars actually enshrine a folk memory of attacks by a variety of pastoralist peoples from the east, the general scenario that we should envisage has to be more gradual than abrupt, multivariate rather than monocausal, reflecting events at a local and regional level. On the broader canvas, a number of major upheavals had a far-reaching impact upon the international economy of the region: the rise of Islam allied to Persian pressure in the east destabilised long-established Red Sea trading patterns (Sutton in Munro-Hay 1989a: 1–3). On a more local level it is possible to envisage a major ecological deterioration impacting upon the agricultural economy upon which Aksum depended.

The American geoarchaeologist Karl Butzer (1981) put forward a scenario which envisaged that increased soil erosion from the hillsides (mainly as a consequence of deforestation brought about by demand for timber for construction purposes) resulted in the build up of poorer-quality lithosols upon the rich vertisols of the plains and valley floors where the major agricultural complexes of Aksum were located. This pattern of soil erosion ultimately led to a decrease in soil fertility and a degradation of the local agricultural economy. The first victim, so to speak, would have been the cash crop component of the economy as people struggled to feed themselves. Fallowing periods shortened in response, perhaps more pulses were grown, yet undoubtedly some form of 'coping strategy' based upon diverse crop exploitation, married to a return to limited mobile pastoralism and gathering of wild plant foods would have ameliorated matters in the short

term. Whilst these emergency measures can feed extended families, they cannot sustain a complex state.

Whilst this model appears to emphasise a very localised problem, geoarchaeological research in the wider region of Tigray appears to support in some part Butzer's contention; two major soil aggradations upon the lower plains of the region have been identified, the latter coinciding with the period AD 650–800 (Machado *et al.* 1998; Fattovich *et al.* 2000: 16–17), a period which does indeed bracket the time of the last coinage issues of Armah. Palynological profiles indicate that there was a local recovery of vegetation in the Adigrat area at around 1032, implying a return to some degree of ecological stability (Bard *et al.* 2000). With the combined degradation of the local resource base, allied to a shift in emphasis away from the Red Sea trade system to a more southerly focus upon the Swahili coast, the Aksumite economy was beginning to erode. From a socio-political aspect, other factors were at play, the emergence of Islam across the Red Sea being perhaps the most profound event of the period. It would be wrong to imply that this had a detrimental effect upon the Christian state. On the contrary, relations were initially cordial.

Islam, Aksum and 'Kubar'

Arab accounts tell us that the king of Aksum welcomed Muslim refugees from Mecca, and that Umm Habibah, a wife of Muhammad, actually visited Aksum and spoke in glowing terms about the cathedral there (Sergew 1972: 186). Muhammad himself had a number of Ethiopian soldiers in his army, and an Aksumite architect named Baqum was said to have remodelled the Ka'aba at Maqqa (Creswell 1969: 1–5); it does indeed have a striking Aksumite architectural flavour. Geostrategic concerns soon overrode these considerations; an Ethiopian army invaded Jeddah in AD 702, whilst in retaliation Umayyad forces occupied the Dahlac islands, as is confirmed by the find of a hoard of coins at the monastery of Debre Damo belonging to an Umayyad Caliph dating to AD 703. Arab sources even suggest that the *Najashi*, known as Ashama Ibn Abjar (who might be identified with King Armah) may have converted to Islam. In any case, it appears that this king did not reign from Aksum. A successor capital is identified in the early ninth century by Abu Ja'far al-Khwarizmi as Jarmi, or Jarma. Munro-Hay (1991: 98) suggests that Jarma is a corruption of *girma*, meaning revered, and it should be identified with the Libyan metropolis of the Garamantes rather than Aksum.

Another capital is named as Kubar, first mentioned by al-Yaqubi in the late ninth century, which some sources have suggested to be the Shawan town of Ankober, but which is clearly too far south to support this idea. Munro-Hay (1991: 97) highlights the possibility of an identification with Adulis, or the word as a corruption of the Arabic 'Kabur' meaning

'noble'; a better translation is 'big', or 'great' but this adjective could equally apply to Aksum. According to Ethiopian tradition (Taddesse 1972: 34–5), King Ashama's tomb is to be found at a village with the revealing toponym 'Negash' near Wkro, a township some 30 kilometres to the north of Mekelle, well to the south-east of Aksum (Plant 1985: 202). An account of Ahmed Gragn's military campaigns of the sixteenth century given in the *Futuh al-Habasha* (Basset 1897: 319) relates that his soldiers paused here to pray at the tomb. Evidently the memory of an (alleged) Muslim Aksumite king remained well known into the medieval period and may in part have provided an ideological reference point for Gragn himself.

Other internal and later historical sources reflect this further political shift south-eastwards; according to the *Gadl* (hagiography) of Iyasu Mo'a, King Anbassa Wedem, the first king after the Gudit war, established a twin monastic and palace establishment at Lake Hayq in Lasta, the Agau heartland in the late ninth century (Taddesse 1970). King Dil Na'od was allegedly responsible for the construction of the church of Mikhael Amba, Dera, Atsbidera (Plant 1985: 117); the church itself is clearly much later than these accounts should suggest, but it contains Aksumite-style columns which may have been reused from a nearby, older structure as spolia. This is all suggestive of a south-eastward shift of a centre of gravity of the Aksumite kingdom, withdrawing away from the coasts and southwards along the ancient eastern axis between highlands and coast.

Returning to the 'short' chronology and the archaeological evidence for the collapse of Aksum, very little is known about Armah/Ashama himself. A rather decayed portrait of an unidentified Ethiopian king – *najashi* – was found on the walls of Qusayr Amra, an Arab villa in Jordan dating to around the eighth century AD (Fowden 2004), but he is explicitly described – amongst other kingly depictions – as being an *enemy* of Islam, so it may not be Armah. The final Aksumite coinage issues of Armah/Ashama appear to reflect a growing sense of unease. Some depict the tomb of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem; this shift in iconography perhaps stressing very overtly a strong international Christian identity, or a paean to one of the holiest sites of Christendom now lost to Islam. Mottoes on some of the later coin issues ask for 'mercy and peace to the people' (Munro-Hay 1989a: 24). The contrast with the bombastic content of the Kaleb-era inscriptions is profound. The coinage sequence from BIEA 'D site' has interesting implications for understanding the wider picture of the collapse of the Aksumite system. Coins from kings Kaleb to Gersem are all represented, but there are none from the reign of Armah (Phillipson 2000: 486). This would suggest that the site was either abandoned before the reign of Armah – perhaps reflecting a wider and general agricultural collapse in the

Aksumite region, or the probability that Armah had moved his capital and minting operation, and that 'D site' was now very much a liminal settlement in a politically peripheral landscape.

Other archaeological evidence supports the contention that Aksum as an urban centre was waning rapidly at this time. The OAZ elite structure on Beta Giyorgis was abandoned in *c.* AD 650, whilst Michels points to squatting residue in other elite palace structures dating from the mid-eighth century (2005: 201). Michels sees his 'early post-Aksumite' phase as being a period when all centralised political control is ceded to local segmentary-level groups; this contention is supported with reference to medieval toponyms given in the *Liber Axumae* which use the term *walda*, meaning 'son of' (Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2001: 78). This terminology probably fossilises an earlier form of feudal organisation of the landscape in post-Aksumite times. Michels' data implies that there was a 'profound evacuation of the region by both urban and rural non-elite populations' (2005: 217), and secular settlement, such as it existed, was focused upon the Guadguad Agazien site on the northern edge of Beta Giyorgis, and in the centre a small religious community existed on the site of Enda Maryam. A rough inscription on a throne at Aksum, known as the Hatsani Daniel inscription (DAE 12–14) bears little resemblance to the well-carved royal inscriptions of earlier times, and it explicitly asks for divine protection for the people. The use of the term *Hatsani* for king may, according to Sergew (1972: 208) imply a corruption of an Agau word *Asena* (king). This would strengthen the idea of a shift of power within the kingdom away from the Semitic north towards the Cushitic south. This pattern of abandonment is also clear elsewhere; the settlement at Matara appears to have been abandoned at this time, and the termination of occupation at Adulis is marked archaeologically by a distinctive destruction episode (Anfray 1974: 753). Being a coastal settlement, Adulis was equally vulnerable to attack from land and sea.

Aksum did survive, but it became a holy city; an unusual entity as we shall see in the wider context of Ethiopian medieval and post-medieval urbanism. Its economic and secular power was bound up with the presence of the mother church of Maryam Zion, but its symbolic importance as a secular centre was not forgotten. King Zar'a Ya'qob (r. 1434–1468) oversaw the creation of an idealised heritage and legitimacy for his dynasty, which is framed in the *Liber Axumae* (Book of Aksum) and gave the city new life and meaning at the heart of a renascent Christian Empire with a strong ideological rather than political significance. Zar'a Ya'qob revisited the idealised Aksumite past; through his revitalised coronation ceremony at Aksum he became symbolically linked to Aksumite (and also Old Testament) kingship. The *Liber Axumae* itself can also be read as a multi-facetted medieval inventory of Aksum after

Aksum; as Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar (2001: 69) suggest 'l'idée dominante de ces documents d'époques probablement différentes est celle d'un inventaire, inventaire des lieux, des objects et des practiques, des traditions'. The ghost of Aksum lived on in social memory, yet its political importance, beyond the aspects of the symbolic, clearly waned. We may be sure that it took a long time for the region's agricultural potential to recover, and now a new level of political organisation becomes apparent in the landscape.

A neo-Aksumite state?

Claims for Aksumite continuity within the material culture and architecture of the northern regions of Ethiopia have mainly been advanced from an architectural-historical perspective; Munro-Hay (1989a: 160) makes the observation, looking from the other direction, that 'the tendency is to look at Aksumite buildings from a 'medieval' viewpoint based on assumptions of 'conservatism' may well have obscured aspects due to quite different influences'. This statement is equally true if it is reversed, looking at medieval buildings from an Aksumite viewpoint. One major source of evidence demands our attention. The rock-hewn church is the leitmotiv for post-Aksumite architectural continuity and is surely one of the best known features of the cultural heritage of northern Ethiopia. Their distribution is most concentrated within central Tigray (Tembien, Hawzien, Atsbidera regions), although there are others to be found, most notably at Lalibela, Lasta and in northern Shawa. The most northerly rock-hewn church is to be found at Maryam Debre-Tsina, near Keren, Eritrea and the most southerly are the churches of Goba, in the south-eastern Bale highlands and the church of Washa-Mikhael south-west of Djimma (Sauter 1963; Anfray 1985).

An exhaustive survey of the Tigray material has yet to be written; we owe a great debt to the Ethiopian scholars Yosef Tewoldemedhin – who first attempted to create an extensive schedule of these churches (Yosef 1971) – and the late Girma Elias. Other surveys by Buxton (1947; 1971), Gerster (1970), Plant (1985) and more recently by Lepage and Mercier (2005) have attempted to bring some order to a wide variety of structures. The rock-hewn churches of Tigray are generally held to be the predecessors (and hence architecturally inferior to) of the rock-cut monolithic churches of Lalibela. They are not. They are a vital and local cultural tradition in their own right, and the only tangible material evidence to hand, perhaps, of the political organisation of an amorphous post-Aksumite polity in the *eastern* highlands of Tigray. The continued use of Aksumite-style architectural motifs in these structures suggests a 'neo-Aksumite-style' of architecture; not passive pastiche but an attempt, in relatively socially and

culturally fragmented times, to recreate a strong centralising social memory.

Rock-cut churches of Tigray: typology and chronology

We may basically subdivide the corpus of rock-cut churches (*sensu lato*) across Ethiopia on the basis of their degree of separation from the rock and physical construction/excavation involved (after Sauter 1963): churches in caves, semi-monolithic (half-built and half-excavated) churches and wholly monolithic churches, which in terms of engineering and architectural skill represent the apogee of this building tradition. Many of the Lalibela churches fall into the latter category. This typology was extended by Anfray (1985) in his consideration of the later, rock-cut church tradition of the southern highland regions (Shawa, Sidamo and Bale); his six forms differentiate between varying degrees of incorporation within the rock, from free-standing monolithic churches to those half-built, half-carved. He also differentiates churches sited within caves and those which incorporate caves in their structures. Within Tigray and Eritrea stylistic, architectural criteria emphasise a strong Aksumite legacy, as well as indicating the possibility of influence from other eastern Christian churches. David Buxton (1971), for instance, presented an arrow-filled table which linked a series of the major structures to a converging set of Egyptian and Syrian influences. Buxton's 1971 paper actually represents a useful attempt to bring some chronological structure to a bewildering array of material from Tigray, although his conclusions at best can only frame a relative chronology, if at all (his typology is based upon only 20 or so structures).

Buxton places the early examples of the rock-hewn churches in the tenth–eleventh centuries. He envisages an evolution through a series of basilican forms which sees, by the fifteenth century, the emergence of a distinctive local variant whose internal space emphasises a lack of division between nave and sanctuary, the loss of Aksumite-style mouldings and friezes (Figure 6.2) and the increased use of domes. The latter trend would appear to be suggestive of a growing Egyptian, Coptic influence, specifically via monastic rather than parochial architecture. A consideration of a wider range of Tigray churches (some of which in fairness were unknown to Buxton) paints a less coherent and much more varied picture. Any attempt to construct a typology for these buildings cannot ignore factors such as individual agency, or monastic community choices and needs, available materials, the nature and shape of the original cave as well as evolution and alteration of the structure over time. As these are churches, they are more prone perhaps to reflect social upheaval than domestic buildings. It is also difficult to date their constructions; foundation legends

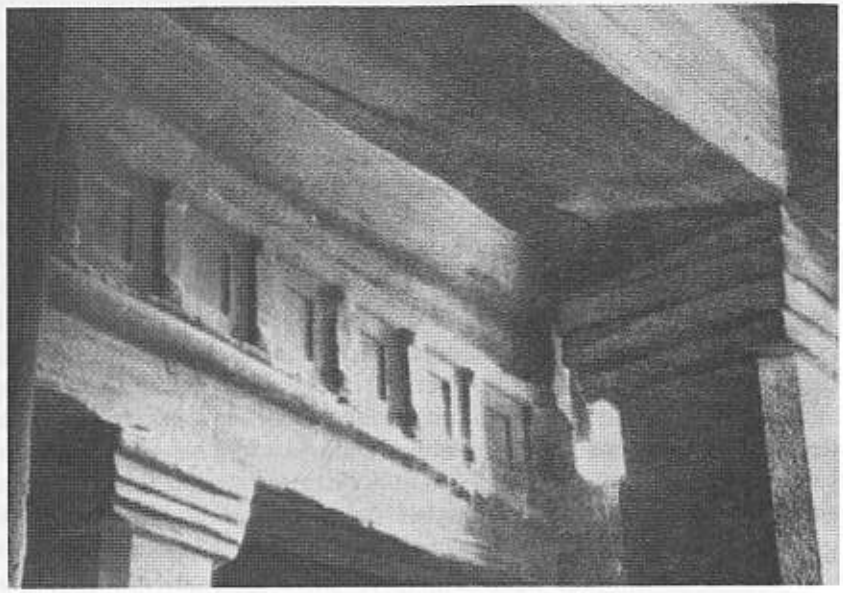

Figure 6.2 Feature in Amba Mikhael Church: Aksumite-style frieze and column heads (photograph by David Buxton; copyright Society of Antiquaries of London).

transmitted via later royal chronicles, *gadlat* or *gult* awards are explicitly designed to create an idealised, semi-mythical past. It is also probable that some of these structures were *not* initially designed with a parochial function in mind.

In a recent reassessment of the Tigray material, Claude Lepage and Jacques Mercier (2005) have attempted to simplify the picture. Most intriguingly, Lepage and Mercier's scheme would appear to shift Buxton's earliest dates for these constructions back as far as 300 or so years, arguing that the progenitor of the tradition of carving churches in rock may be found in a hybrid church-elite funerary monument, dating from the seventh century and suggesting a continuum, effectively, from the tombs of Kaleb and Gebra Masqal at Aksum. If we describe these structures as royal or elite tombs, then this would imply the presence of a post-Aksumite political centre in the Gheralta region of Tigray (Figure 6.3), a region of dramatic mountain landscape which formed the backdrop to an earlier phase of missionary activity in the sixth century (Finneran 2005). The combined tomb-church function is best represented, according to the authors, by the three structures of Sellassie, Degum, located just to the west of the main easterly route through the northern highlands and not far from Wkro, a place which as we have seen was associated with the burial of Armah/Ashama.

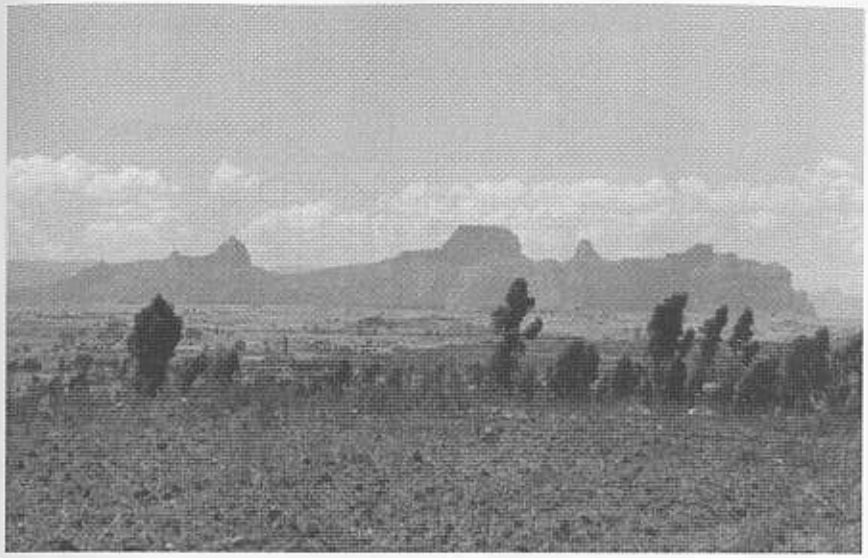

Figure 6.3 Gheralta landscape, central Tigray (Michael Harlow).

Gheralta: a new political centre?

The complex of subterranean structures at Degum appears to belong to a tradition of funerary church architecture which has broad affinities with the Aksumite Kaleb-Gebra Masqal complex, and which were subsequently transformed into parochial churches (Lepage 1972a). There are three subterranean crypt structures which are now used for worship; formerly tombs, presumably of elite individuals, they are orientated on an east-west axis. The addition of access trenches to the north of the Sellassie 1 complex would also indicate the possibility that the site was a pilgrimage destination; the ambulatory allowed a procession to access the tomb (see plan; Figure 6.4). This hypothesis is strengthened by the presence of what is described as a baptistery pool is carved into the rock directly above structure 'C' (Sellassie III); this contains two flights of steps enabling the catechumen to enter and leave the pool (the addition of stairs here would suggest that this is not an Epiphany (*Timkat*) or Maundy tank).

The size of the tank is also significant; this would imply, as suggested in Chapter 5, that adults were being baptised and that the site could also be regarded as at once a memorial, pilgrimage, mission and perhaps political centre. There are problems with dating this complex (in fact Lepage and Mercier do not make their rationale clear). There are two scenarios to consider here: first that the complex was built explicitly to house the bodies of a political elite whose political centre was located nearby and who were in

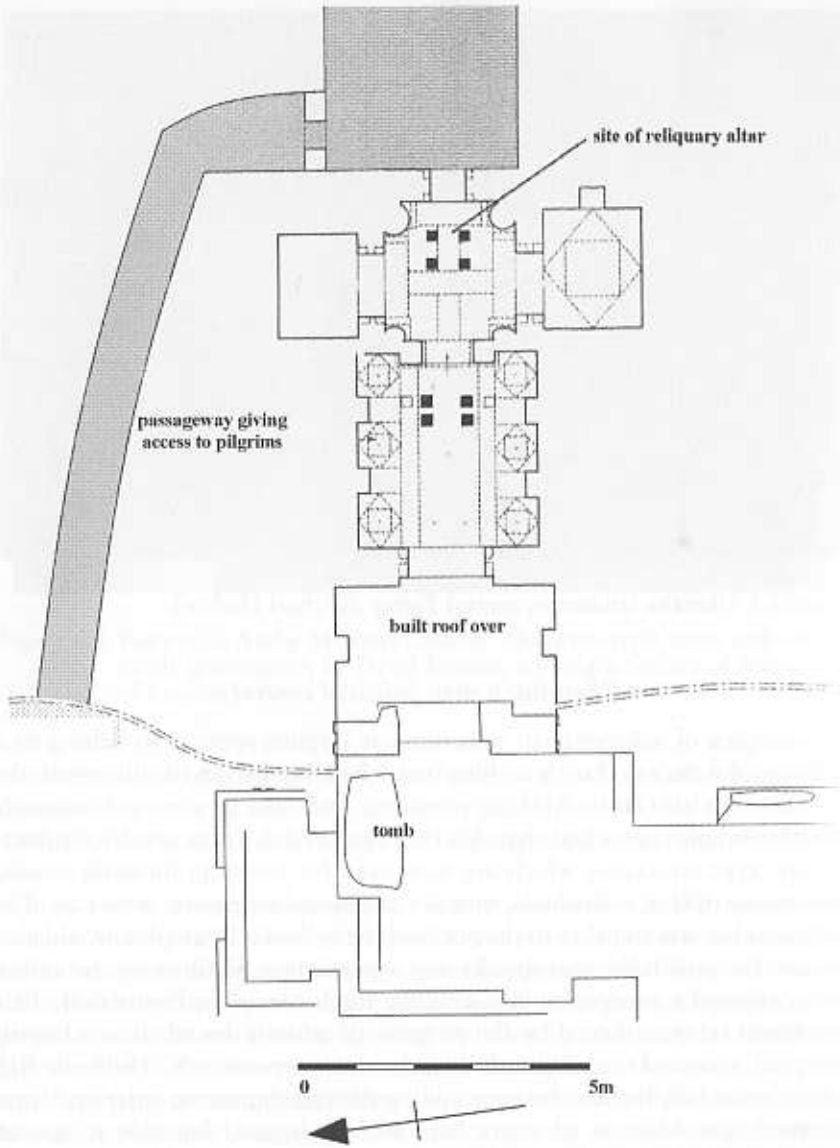

Figure 6.4 Degum: Sellassie 1 (structure A) plan (after Lepage and Mercier 2005).

a sense preserving Aksumite tradition. The intentional copying and use of Aksumite architectural motifs in a form of 'neo-Aksumite' architecture sought to tap into a very recent social memory in order to recreate some of the trappings of Aksumite royalty. On the other hand one might equally argue that existing Aksumite tombs were used for worship, and the

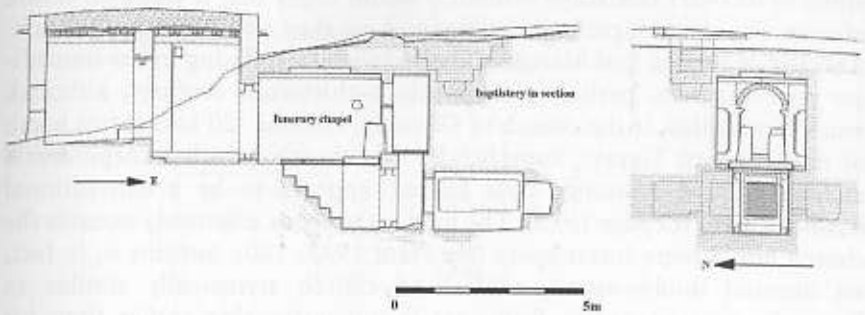

Figure 6.5 Degum: cross-section of Sellassie III (structure C) (after Lepage and Mercier 2005).

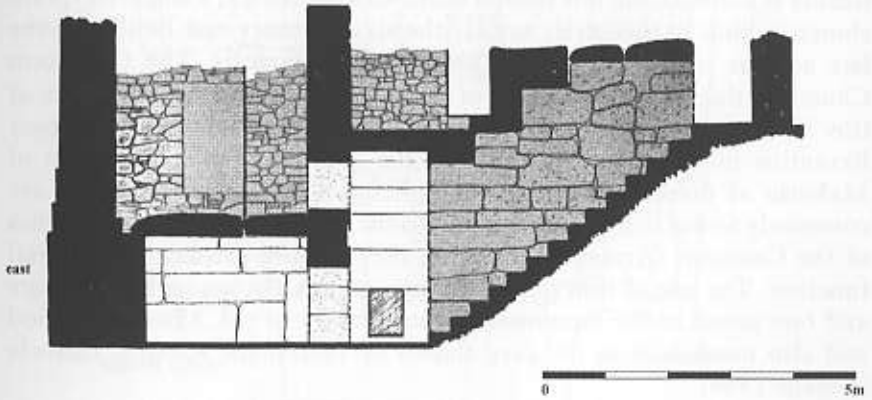

Figure 6.6 Tomb at Matara (after Anfray 1965).

complexes evolved over time into their present configuration. Figures 6.5 and 6.6 compare cross sections respectively of Sellassie III (showing its relationship to the baptistery) and of an Aksumite period Christian tomb at Matara; both are strikingly similar.

Particular interest attaches to two other churches which *may* also be contemporary with the Degum complex. The church of Maryam, Berakit (Lepage 1972b) is located 10 kilometres to the north-west of Degum and is an example of what is defined as a valley church, whose function is more parochial in nature – the higher 'mountain' churches were utilised, as now, for isolated groups of eremitic monks. It is possible, as Lepage notes (1972b: 151) that the church occupies a site of pre-Christian significance, maybe an Aksumite temple, and undoubtedly the structure embodies a number of strong Aksumite architectural motifs, and the quality of its building (which emphasises a Mediterranean basilican tradition),

allied to its overt landscape visibility, would imply that it was a structure of some importance, perhaps embracing a royal or elite funerary function. Another of Lepage and Mercier's 'early' structures, dating to the immediate post-Aksumite period (perhaps ninth–thirteenth century), although much remodelled, is the church of Giyorgis, Zarema (20 kilometres north of Asbi, eastern Tigray). Superficially this church, which incorporates a number of fine Aksumite-style friezes, appears to be a conventional basilican form (Lepage 1973). The modern pronaos effectively extends the church into a more linear space (see Plant 1985: 120), but this is, in fact, an unusual double-apsed, centralised church stylistically similar to Buxton's cross in square form, yet is unquestionably earlier than his twelfth-century attribution.

Another 'cross in square' form of church, that of Abreha Atsbeha, Wkro, is shown below (Figure 6.7). The centralised form of church architecture is known from few sites in north-eastern Africa; a single Egyptian church is built in this style, namely the sixth-century east basilica at the late antique pilgrimage site of Abu Menas, Mareotis. The Cruciform Church at the Makurian capital of Old Dongola is also representative of this form (Godlewski 1988), and its presence may indicate a stronger Byzantine influence as suggested by the account of the conversion of Makuria as presented by John of Ephesus. Cross-in-square forms are commonly found in Byzantium and also the distinctive medieval churches of the Caucasus (Armenia, Georgia); they usually betoken a memorial function. The use of iron ties in the structure is also an unusual feature and one noted in the monumental architecture of the Aksumite period and also much later at the cave church of Yemrehane Krestos, Lalibela (Lepage 1989).

It is possible to build an admittedly speculative model for the structure of the post-Aksumite political landscape on the basis of a study of these churches. Girma Elias noted that these 'early' rock-hewn churches appeared to cluster along the main salt routes from the Danakil (Lepage and Mercier 2005: 35), a conduit for movement in and out of the highlands. We may be sure that whatever filled the cultural and political vacuum after Aksum, it certainly was not an isolated entity, and that trading in salt was probably a primary economic activity. It should be noted that until recent times salt bars were used as currency in northern Ethiopia (Pankhurst 1998: 61), and without access to extra-regional markets there was no need to mint the sort of coinage that had been used in Aksumite times. This factor affects the archaeological visibility of the economy of the post-Aksumite polity; another associated problem is the lack of a recognisable political centre, although it is possible that this period sees the emergence of the peripatetic royal camp, a motif of medieval Ethiopia (below) and one which effectively taps in to a much earlier pastoralist, Cushitic social memory rather than the 'Semitic' concept of fixed urban space. If our palaeoenvironmental

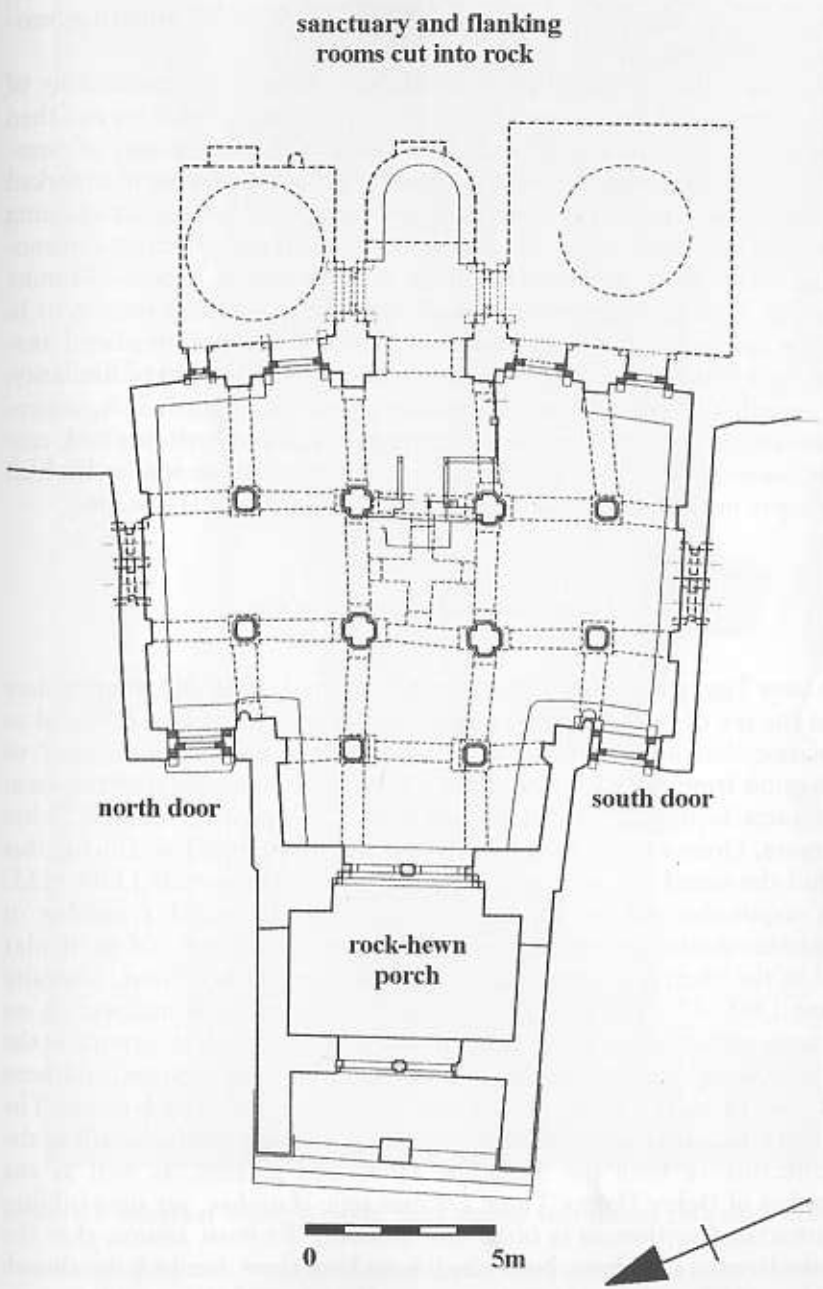

Figure 6.7 Abreha Atsbeha cruciform church, Wkro (after Lepage and Mercier 2005).

models for this period stand up to scrutiny, then it is possible that post-Aksumite elite mobility patterns were also influenced by prevailing ecological conditions.

We might also envisage that these funerary sanctuaries, presumably of 'royal' personages, became transformed into pilgrimage structures and then parochial churches over time, and are evidence of the archaeology of memory in a post-Aksumite context. It is interesting that the sites are of a marked individual character, not grouped in large cemeteries or localities, suggesting they mark the resting places of powerful *individuals* rather than commemorating a dynasty or lineage. This might imply a return, in post-Aksumite times, to a political organisation based upon the segmentary society, or in fact the emergence of a feudal social structure. A European medieval analogue (specifically from Anglo-Saxon England) provides points of similarity; the 'growth and consolidation of magnate power' (Blair 2005: 369), accompanied by the development of local strongholds, military retinues and, crucially, parochial churches in the landscape. This might be an approach which may repay further investigation in the medieval Ethiopian landscape.

Later medieval churches of the post-Aksumite landscape

The later Tigray rock-hewn churches defined by Lepage and Mercier date from the era of the Solomonic restoration, that is, after AD 1270, and as monastic churches essentially bear witness to a 're-Christianisation' of the region from the east, or at least a political reintegration of the area. Structures belonging to this period include the great church of Debre Maryam, Qorqor, with its fine frescoes, and Maryam, Qiat. During this period the noted engineer and architect Abuna Abreham (*c.*1350–1425) was responsible for the construction and remodelling of a number of monastic establishments (Lepage and Mercier 2005: 146). Of particular note is the church of Maryam (Kidane Mehret), Debre-Tsion, Gheralta (Plant 1985: 47). This church demonstrates exceptional engineering on the scale of that found at Lalibela; an ambulatory, which incorporates the cell of Abuna Abraham himself, is carved behind the western, southern and eastern sides of the church making it completely rock-hewn. The northern façade is decorated by a series of 'monkey heads' recalling the architecture of both the Aksumite stelae and palaces, as well as the churches of Debre Damo. These are monastic churches, yet the visibility of associated settlement is often non-existent. We must assume that the monks lived in very basic huts which have long since decayed; the church of Abuna Yohanni, Tembien, however is the focus of an eremitic monastic landscape that is well visible, with a number of rock-hewn hermitages and small cells clustering in the vicinity (Lepage and Mercier 2005: 164–8). The

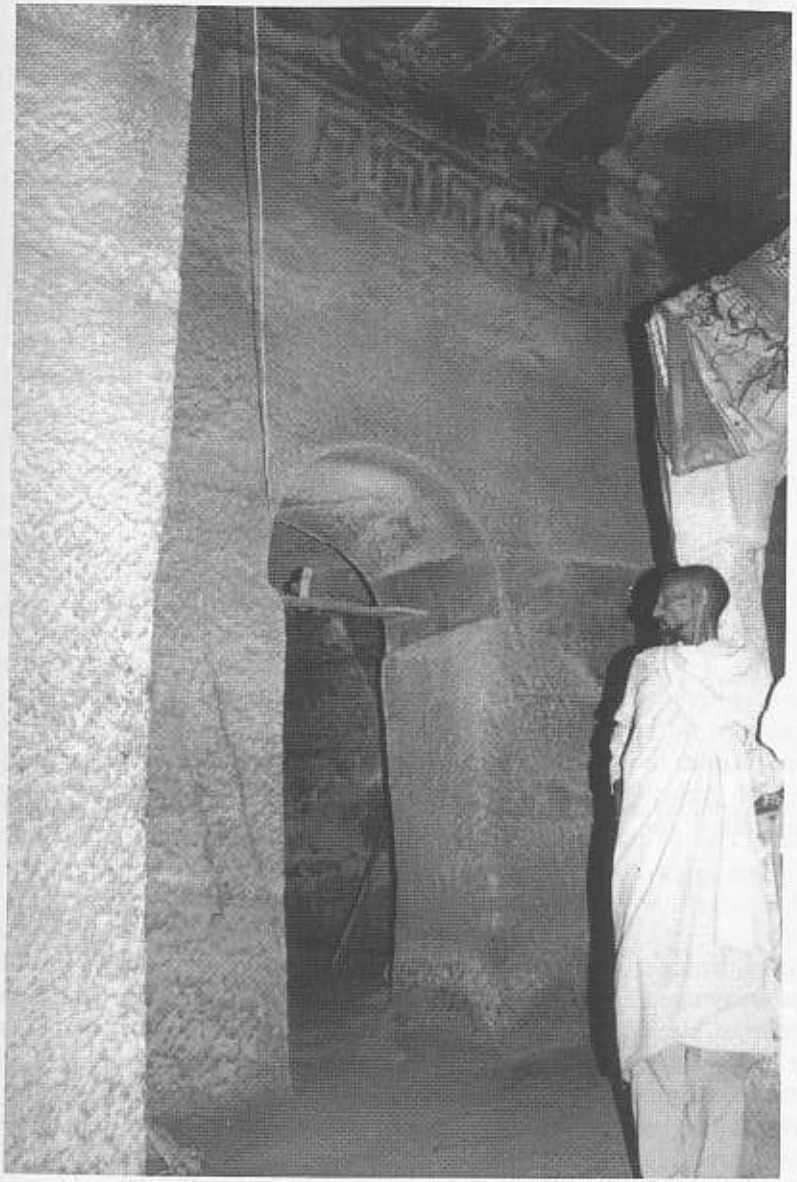

Figure 6.8 Maryam Wkro, Nebolet. Stela-shaped arch feature (Michael Harlow).

monastery of Abuna Aregawi, Zegi occupies the frontage of a very extensive cave system, itself an exceptional natural landscape feature and one which may have very strong symbolic connotations (Plant 1985: 149–50).

The rock-hewn churches of Tigray span the period from the end of the Aksumite polity, to the re-Christianisation of the Tigray landscape under the auspices of the monastic movements from the Lake Hayq region after the thirteenth century. The earlier forms still embody the basic basilican church plan that is well known in Aksumite contexts and which has been borrowed from the standard plans of the Mediterranean Christian world yet often incorporate elements which are redolent of pre-Christian Aksumite sacred architecture making for a strong syncretic mix. In some churches, such as Gabriel, Wokein, Tembien, blind arcading and door arches recall the half-moon, crescent motif of the top of stelae 1–3 at Aksum (also Figure 6.8). This is a motif that reappears at Lalibela. Many embody the repertoire of Aksumite decorative motifs; geometric friezes (especially at Maryam Wkro) and, externally, monkey heads, sometimes skeuomorphically rendered. In some cases pieces of Aksumite architecture have been reused, such as basins, column bases and columns (e.g. Maryam Tehot, Edage Hamus; Maryam Nazret) and the strong association with caves and springs (e.g. Mikhael, Tensoke; Abuna Garima, Adwa; Debre Salem, Atsbidera), natural features which may have been the focus for pre-Christian nature cults, indicate the sort of reuse of sacred space that is suggested by the siting of the earliest churches and monastic sites in and around Aksum. The medieval rock-hewn churches of Tigray, in all their forms, thus embrace a range of meanings: the memory of Aksum is embodied in architectural elements. Important as they are, from an architectural and engineering perspective they are (unjustly) overshadowed by the group of monolithic churches to the south in the Lasta mountains at Lalibela, to which we now turn.

Continuity or rupture: the Zagwe dynasty

One of the most important cultural subtexts in this overview is the latent tension between the established, northern, Semitic, and internationalist Christian kingdom, whose worldview looked east and northwards, and the Cushitic peoples of the central highlands. Historical sources indicate that the relationship between the Semitic Aksumite heartland and the Cushitic fringes was based upon a client relationship; Agau speakers may have served as mercenaries in the Aksumite army (Sergew 1972: 237), and their presence is also mentioned in accounts of King Kaleb's gold expeditions. The Hatsani Daniel inscription at Aksum refers, it will be recalled, to a king using a Cushitic title. The successor polities of the Aksumite kingdom increasingly shifted southwards, from the Gheralta region into Cushitic-speaking lands. According to the Ethiopian chronicles, one of the last Aksumite kings, Anbassa Wedem had already relocated his centre of

secular power to the Lake Hayq region of eastern Lasta, a region peopled by Agau peoples.

The Zagwe: a regional context

As the perspective of Ethiopian Christian culture moved away from the Red Sea and ultimately the eastern Mediterranean worlds, its rulers would still have needed to maintain contact with the Coptic Patriarch in Egypt who was, after all, responsible for appointing the *Abuna*. Contact with Egypt during this period is attested in many historical sources and is also reflected archaeologically. Egyptian textiles and coins have been found in the treasury of the monastery of Debre Damo (Matthews and Mordini 1959: plate 15); the fabrics belong to the Tulunid and Abbasid periods, that is, ninth century AD, and there is also a fragment of Egyptian textile at the monastery of Abba Pantaleon, Aksum (Sergew 1972: 207). Coptic textiles are highly distinctive, and survive well in the dry deserts; monastic habits are well represented and it is possible that these textiles may represent pieces of monastic robes. The purported remains of Coptic monks are to be found at the rear of the cave containing the monastery of Yemrehane Krestos, Lalibela (Finneran and Tribe 2004); Ethiopian historical tradition even suggests that Copts built the Lalibela churches; in fact some centralised forms of early medieval Tigray churches may show a very strong eastern Mediterranean influence, this is especially true in the growing use of the dome over the sanctuary, a specifically Coptic *monastic* architectural feature.

Relations between Ethiopia and Egypt in the early medieval period were mediated through the monastic system. In Egypt, Ethiopian monks lived in the international community of the Wadi Natrun monasteries south of Alexandria; there was a dedicated Ethiopian monastic settlement at the monastery of St Elias and St John the Short. In Cairo are the alleged relics of the important medieval Ethiopian saint Tekla Haymanot in Sitt Barbara church and there is a sanctuary dedicated to Tekla Haymanot at the Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary (al Moallaqah). In fact, Tekla Haymanot, that important missionary monk of medieval Ethiopia, is the only Ethiopian to be canonised by the Coptic Church (Meinardus 1965).

Historical sources also indicate that Ethiopia during the tenth–twelfth centuries was not an isolated entity. Both *The History of the Patriarchs* and accounts attributed to Abu Salih the Armenian make observations about the country at this time; the source quoted in Abu Salih reports that Zagwe Ethiopia was divided into four provinces. The north-western province maintained its capital at Aksum and was governed directly by a priest king (who must be the *Nebura'ed*) who was crowned at the church of 'George' or the 'Archangel Michael' (Evetts 1895: fol. 105 b). The identity

of these churches is unclear and there is no reference to the main church of Mary of Zion at Aksum. Across the Red Sea a dynasty of Ethiopian origin ruled from Zabid in the Tihamah; founded by a freed slave named Najah. The Najahids became important figures in the regional trading system before their final conquest in *c.*1156 by Ali Ibn Mahdy, thus ending the long history of Aksumite involvement in that region (Sergew 1972: 264). It is within this regional context that the 'usurper' Cushitic Zagwe dynasty emerges in the twelfth century.

From internal sources we can construct an outline history of the Zagwe kings; these include: lives (*gadlat*) of Yemrehane Krestos (Marassini 1995); Lalibela (Perruchon 1892) and Na'akweto La'ab (Conti-Rossini 1943). According to the account set out in the *Gadl Yemrehane Krestos*, the Zagwe dynasty was founded by Mera Tekla Haymanot. From the outset it became important to create a legitimate lineage for the dynasty, and as such Old Testament lineage myths were woven into the dynastic history (Sergew 1972: 241). Mera Tekla Haymanot was succeeded by his son Tetewudem, and then by his grandson of his second son, Girma Seyoum, Yemrehane Krestos, during whose reign it appears that there was an influx of Egyptians into his realm. Yemrehane Krestos was replaced by his cousin Harbe, son of Mera Tekla Haymanot's third son, Jan Seyoum. Harbe strengthened ecclesiastical links with Alexandria, yet the period was an

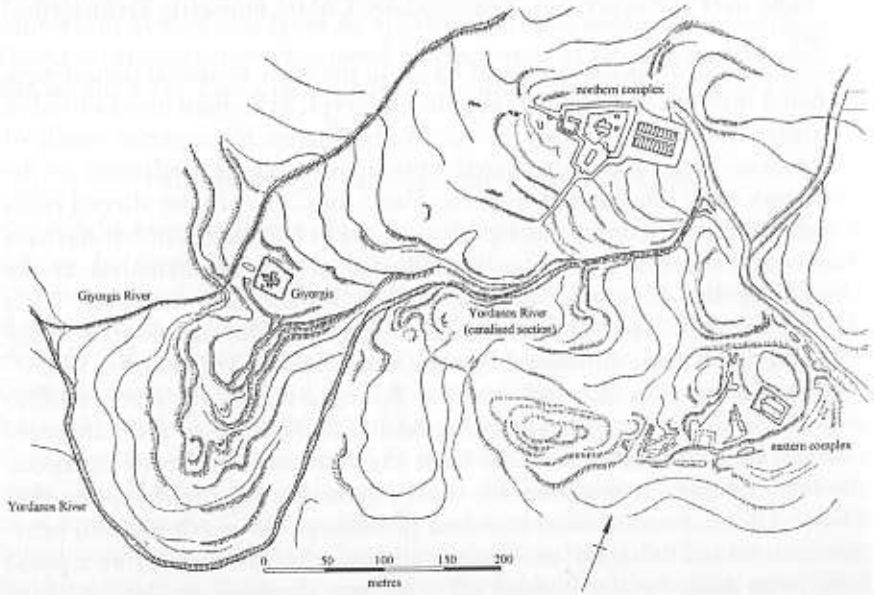

Figure 6.9 Plan of the Lalibela complex (after Monti della Corte 1940).

unhappy one. The countryside was ravaged by plague and famine, and soon the Ethiopian church hierarchy fell into conflict with the Coptic Patriarchate (Sergew 1972: 251ff.).

Such was the nature of the impasse, that Harbe asked the Syrian Patriarch of Jerusalem to consecrate a new *Abuna* for the Ethiopian church (Kaplan 1984: 31; this might have implications for some of the designs of the Lalibela churches). Harbe was deposed (or in some accounts, killed) by his brother Lalibela who reigned from *c.*1160–1211. These accounts suggest a compact dynastic lineage, but it is possible that the political situation was actually more anarchic; Huntingford (1965c: 9) points out that the 'Solomonic' formula '*waldo*', meaning begot is not used. In the Zagwe lineages the verb '*nagsha*' (reigned) is preferred, implying perhaps that Zagwe kingship was not based on father-son succession and as such this was a time of great political upheaval, which is reflected in terms of material culture in an overt referencing to the Aksumite past and a concerted investment in the one fixed, constant in Ethiopian society at this time: the Church.

The development of Lalibela

It is King Lalibela who is traditionally associated with the remodelling of the Zagwe 'capital', which is located 340 kilometres due north of Addis Ababa, and is situated upon the flanks of the 4,190-metre-high mountain Abuna Yosef. The site was, according to the sort of founding legend which permeates medieval Ethiopian culture, dictated by God himself. The site itself is referred to historically by a number of names; Abu Salih calls it 'Arafah', or 'Adefa' in the later Ethiopian sources. It was also known as 'Roha', which is taken as paying homage to the ancient Christian Anatolian centre of Edessa (Al Ruha), which had both very strong Old Testament connotations as well as being an important theological centre for the east Syrian church. Lalibela, in its varied toponyms, thus embodies a great deal of biblical and Christian historical symbolism (Heldman 1992). It was designed, according to tradition, as a copy of Jerusalem (as reflected in a number of toponyms for instance, there is a Jordan river, a Mount of Olives and a Golgotha). It is possible that apart from actually replicating the symbolic topography of the holy city (which during this time, the period of the Crusades, would have been out of bounds to the pious Ethiopian pilgrim; cf. Van Donzel 1998), it also makes an attempt to present a copy of the urban layout of that other holy city: Aksum (Heldman 1995). Pirenne sees the structure of the complex as symbolically representing a commentary of the *Apocalypse of John* (Pirenne 1989b), whilst Irmgard Bidder's popular 1959 book *Lalibela: the Monolithic Churches of Ethiopia* sees the site in terms of an oppositionally structured, allegorical

reflection of human life and a Christianised place of nature worship. However we seek to explain the layout, it is clear that it is laden with symbolism.

Particular interest attaches to the 11 rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, to be found in two major clusters, at the north and east, with a single outlier by the Giyorgis river to the west. According to indigenous accounts the construction of these churches was miraculous (according to the chronicle of Lalibela 10 churches were built over a 23-year period; Perruchon 1892: 121ff.) but even allowing for angelic assistance the excavation of these extensive subterranean complexes was a massive undertaking and one obviously not attributable alone to the deeds of Lalibela himself. It is also impossible to accept that if this was also a centre of secular power that all of these structures were designed as churches from the outset. Again, moving away from the art-historical approach cautioned by Phillipson (2004a) a number of other problems confront the archaeologist. Where is the evidence for the technology used to excavate the structures, where are the remains of ancillary buildings, is there evidence for alteration and evolution of the structures, and what happened to the vast quantities of tufa spoil excavated?

That the whole complex must surely span many years of development rather than a sustained burst of building during the reign of Lalibela – let alone the Zagwe – is clearly the most likely explanation. Many scholars, however, disagree about fixing actual dates of construction. David Phillipson (2004b) essentially takes an 'archaeological' view of the complexes themselves, understanding how the whole relates to its subcomponents rather than isolating each church as a subject of architectural or art-historical merit and being made to fit into the bigger picture. He sees the development of Lalibela as taking place within an immediate post-Aksumite context, drawing our attention to architectural features, forms and *engineering* which have clear Aksumite antecedents (see also Lepage 1998). Marilyn Heldman (1995) generally agrees with the traditional dating of the complex; this too might be supported on palaeographic grounds if carved letters in some of the wooden door-frames at Lalibela can be proven to date from the eleventh–twelfth centuries, as is suggested by Strelycn (1979).

On the other hand, Michael Gervers (1988) draws our attention to the wider, eastern Mediterranean and European context of the 'cave church'; to those structures at Lalibela which do not appear to have any Aksumite influences (in particular the mysterious, closed off Debre-Sina-Sellassie 'crypt' complex) he attributes a later fifteenth-century date (Gervers 2003). Again, the concept of social memory plays a part in his reasoning; the three distinctive monolithic altars in the Sellassie 'crypt' are a feature of some churches in Tigray at this period. During the fifteenth century the Zagwe kings were 'rehabilitated' in the Ethiopic Synaxarium

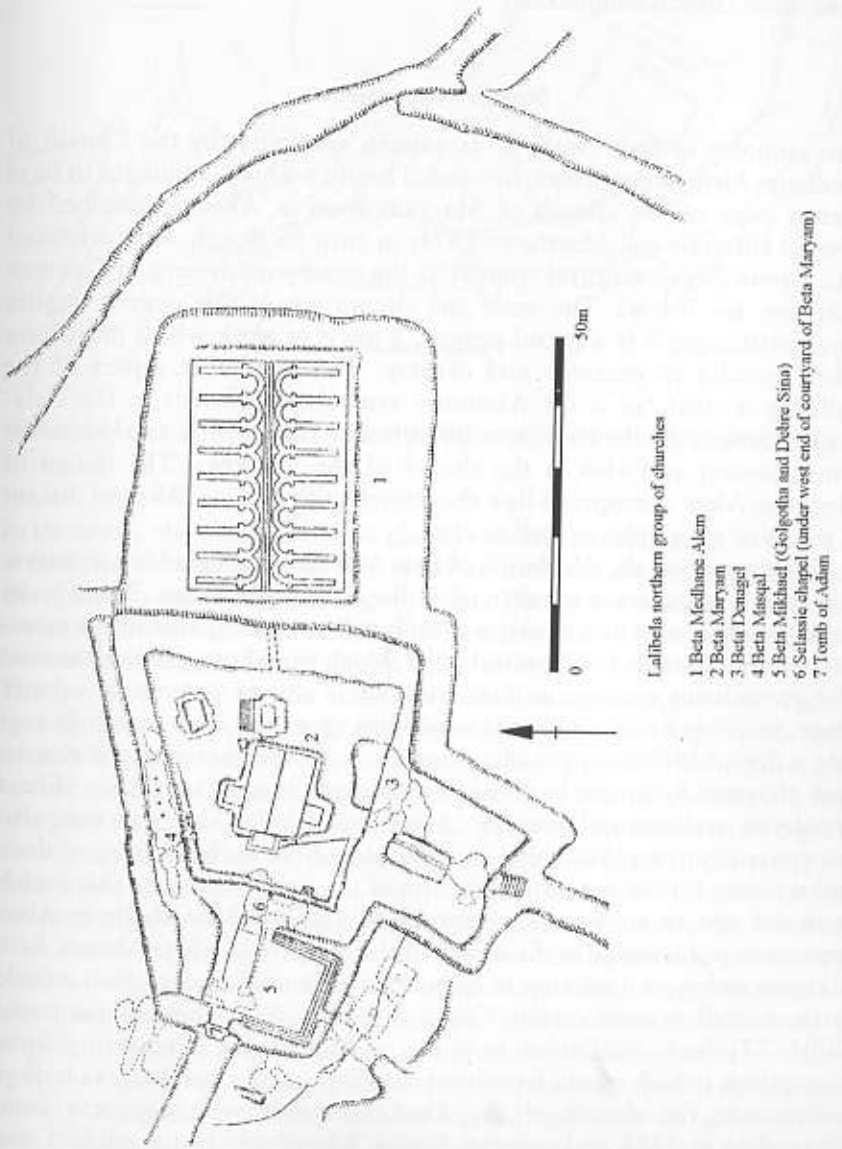

Figure 6.10 Lalibela northern group of churches (after Monti della Corte 1940).

by political and ecclesiastical authorities, who, through reference to the past, were seeking to curb internal heretical movements. This complex at least was designed, according to Gervers, as a memorial to the 'Orthodox' Zagwe kings. Let us now look in a little more detail at the three main church complexes.

Northern complex

This complex is dominated, at its eastern extremity, by the Church of Medhane Alem, a porticoed, five-aisled basilica which is thought to have been a copy of the church of Maryam Zion at Aksum described by Alvares (Buxton and Matthews 1974; in turn its design was translated into a post-Zagwe cultural context at the nearby monastery of Ganneta Maryam; see below). The scale and decoration of this church implies royal patronage; it is a grand project, a piece of work which must have taken decades to excavate and develop. The rectilinear aspect of the building is clear, as is the Aksumite symbolism inherent in the stela-shaped designs on the roof (now obscured by tin sheeting as a conservation measure) and also in the shapes of the windows. The design of Medhane Alem attempts to link the church with a place (Aksum) distant in terms of geography as well as time.

Moving westwards, the church of Beta Maryam is situated in an excavation which truncates a number of earlier, circular features. There is no doubt that this structure clearly was built to be a church, although it incorporates an unusually thick central pillar which would suggest modification of a pre-existing excavation. Beta Maryam is also of an unusual squarer shape; its pitched roof and linear mouldings upon the façades strongly suggest a Syrian influence, yet the structure lacks the characteristic eastern apse of Syrian Byzantine basilicas. If anything it is more suggestive of East Syriac-rite architectural practice (Atiya 1968: 297). This structure also incorporates strong 'Aksumite' symbolism, mainly in the shaping of door and window frames yet also in the use of the half-moon stela shape such as in the eastern entrance to Golgotha-Mikhael. Whilst Medhane Alem appears to pay homage to the design of the mother church at Aksum, Beta Maryam embraces a melange of eastern Christian influences which include Syriac as well as some certain Coptic influence. Eva Balicka-Witakowska (2004: 27) draws our attention to the crude attempts at rendering Ge'ez inscriptions (which would have been easy for a native speaker), as well as portraits in the church of the Abuna Giyorgis who was sent from Alexandria in 1224 and suggests that a 'school' of Coptic artisans was present in Lasta at this period.

The rectilinear architecture of the two main churches contrasts with the circular spaces cut into the rock to the south and north of Beta Maryam.

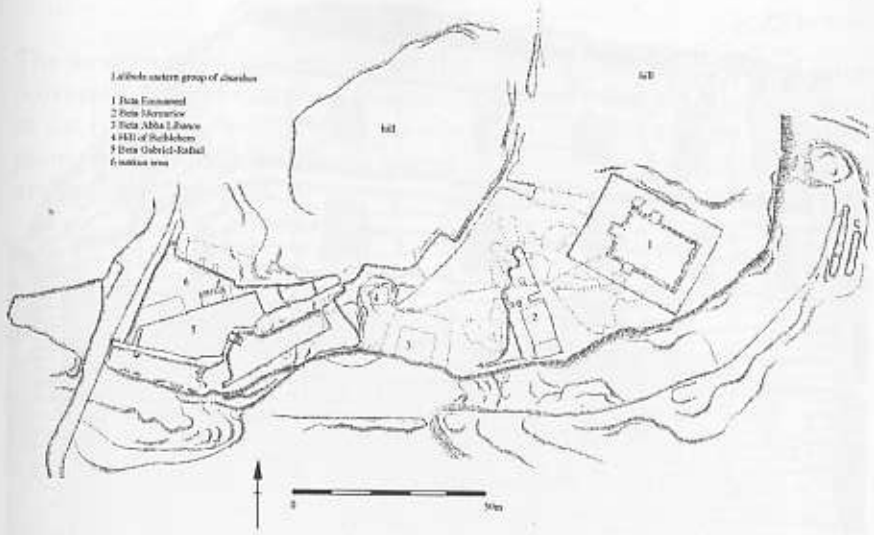

Figure 6.11 Lalibela eastern group of churches (after Monti della Corte 1940).

In the north, the sinuous Masqal chapel – clearly not originally designed as a church – is truncated by the excavation of the pit surrounding Beta Maryam. To the south, the chapel of Beta Denagel extends into the pit. It is clearly earlier than the church of Beta Maryam, and its largely featureless external façade is marked by a single doorway in very Aksumite-style. The western end of the complex contains the complex of Debre-Sion-Golgotha and the dark and mysterious Sellassie chapel with three monolithic altars ascribed by Gervers to a later period. This feature, also known as Beta Golgotha Mikael, extends beneath the cutting of Beta Maryam, hence its usual designation as a 'crypt'. At the western edge of the complex, standing by the access passage to the river to the west, is a monolithic structure known as the 'Tomb of Adam', whilst surrounding the excavations on the north and south are a number of circular features.

In summary, the northern cluster does not architecturally represent a coherent whole; it is clear that the complex has evolved over time, with the two main church buildings cutting into earlier features which tend to emphasise circular space. Gervers' dating of the Sellassie complex is based upon the type of altar present; whilst these features may date to the fifteenth century, it is possible that the complex was enlarged from an earlier excavation. Whilst it makes practical engineering sense to select a location for building a church structure where pre-existing excavations exist, symbolic concerns might also demand the obliteration, with uncompromising rectangular 'Christian' forms, of an earlier sacred space.

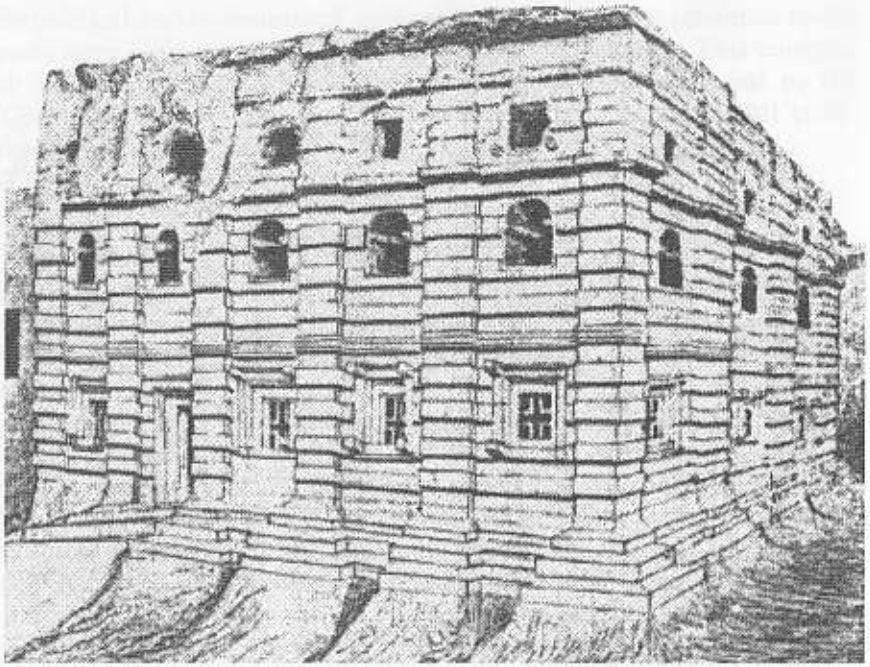

Figure 6.12 Lalibela: engraving of Beta Emmanuel (after Raffray 1876).

Eastern complex

Here again we see the transposition of basilican forms into a set of pre-existing circular spaces. At the eastern end of the complex, the church of Beta Emmanuel embodies strong Aksumite architectural characteristics with horizontal lines and the familiar door/window features. Its excavation trench truncates the excavation of the Beta Mercurios structure (now partially collapsed); note that the alignment of Beta Mercurios does not fit the usual ecclesiastical east-west alignment, which strongly suggests that Beta Mercurios is both earlier than Emmanuel and was also originally a secular construction. The church of Abba Libanos, like Emmanuel, is a basilican space transplanted into an earlier set of excavations. Unusually in comparison to its neighbours, Abba Libanos is actually carved from a cliff face, an ambulatory surrounds the monolithic construction which has not been 'freed' at roof level. The façade again shows a strong Aksumite influence in the shape of the doors and window frames; the blind arcading is shaped like individual crescent-headed stelae, and may be an attempt to replicate the portico of Medhane Alem. The Church of Beta Gabriel-Rafael incorporates arcading shaped like an Aksumite stela, albeit with more pointed ogival heads. The structure is built over a cistern, and in general terms of layout would, like Mercurios, suggest an original secular function.

Giyorgis

The western-most outlier is the famous cross-shaped church of St. George (Giyorgis). This structure is, in terms of ground plan, not wholly unusual in the Ethiopian context; there are few other examples of these centralised plans, but this form is strongly suggestive of the type of centralised church architecture prevalent in the Caucasus in the medieval period. David

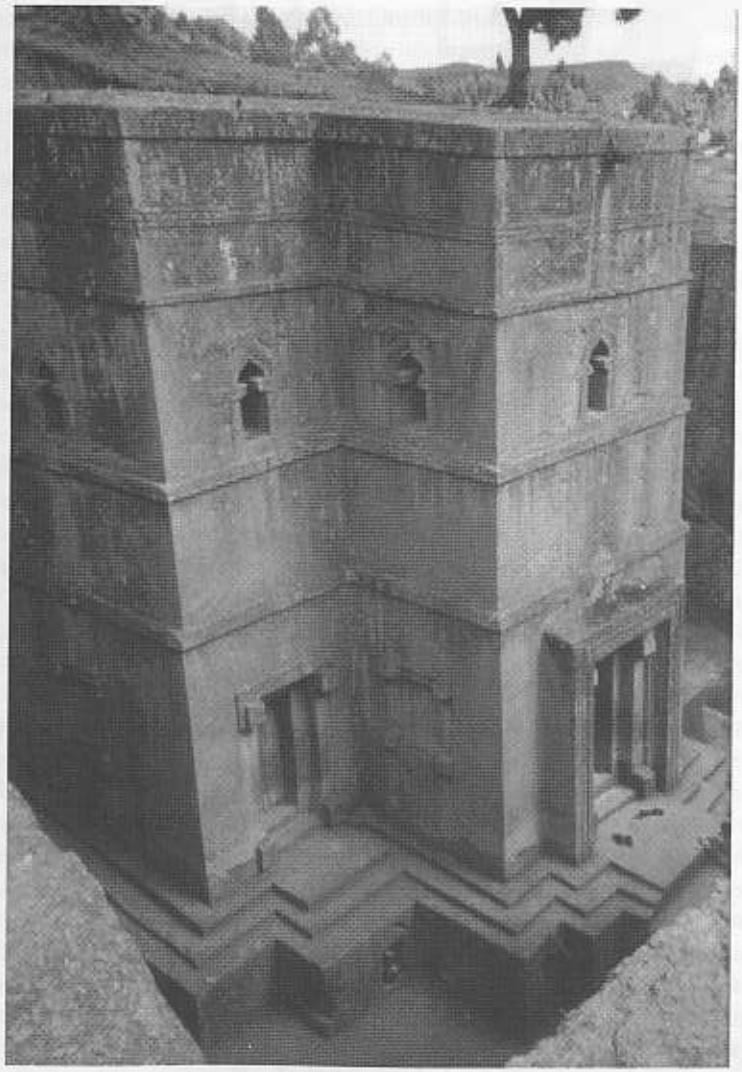

Figure 6.13a Lalibela, Giyorgis (Michael Harlow).

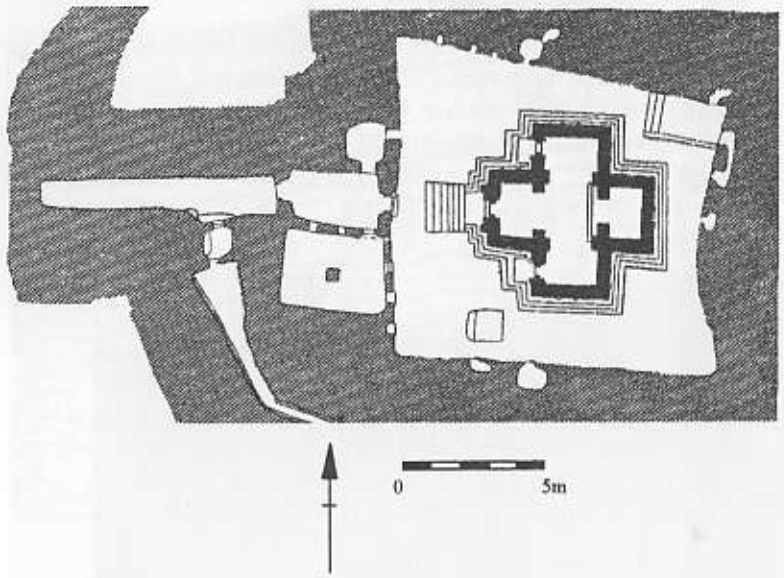

Figure 6.13b Plan of Giyorgis complex (after Monti della Corte 1940).

Buxton noted that to him the church represented a built-up version of the standard altar, or *manbar* (Buxton 1964). Again, the construction pit truncates a number of clearly earlier circular structures (Figure 6.13b). This structure probably represents one of the later of the excavations at Lalibela.

Lalibela: an evolving complex

In summary we may make the following observations. In the first place an elementary 'stratigraphic' reading of the sequence of construction indicates a series of inter-cuttings and truncations; around Medhane Alem, for instance, the rock floors have been deepened on a number of occasions. The whole site is not a unitary phenomenon. The obviously basilican structures, rectangular and aligned very definitely upon an east-west axis, can be shown to have originally been excavated as churches, and are relatively later constructions. Their dating, however, is a controversial issue. Many of these 'late' structures do embody obvious Aksumite characteristics although we might argue about the validity of using stylistic criteria as a basis for chronological assessment.

One cannot discount the possibility that the Zagwe builders, a 'renegade' ruling house, regarded as outsiders, sought to reconnect to an

Aksumite identity through reference to 'neo-Aksumite' architectural schemes. This would certainly explain the desire to build Medhane Alem in the same way as the mother church at Aksum. There is a strong reference to Aksum in Zagwe royal culture. Lalibela, for instance, used the term '*Hasani*' to mean king (thus strengthening the contention that the Hatsani Daniel inscription may belong to an Agau king) and Sergew (1972: 267) notes a strong similarity between the content and nature of Lalibela's inscriptions and those of the Aksumite king Ezana. Beta Maryam and Giyorgis, however, do embrace a number of features which suggest at least influence from the Coptic and Syriac Churches, suggesting that the Zagwe state (if indeed we can ascribe these buildings to this period) enjoyed close relationships with their co-religionists elsewhere in the eastern Christian world.

Other structures at Lalibela (Mercurios, Gabriel-Rafael, Mikhael-Golgotha, Denagel, Beta Masqal) would not appear to have been designed as churches. Mercurios and Gabriel Rufael may be secular structures loosely associated with the churches, whilst the other constructions appear to be modified circular spaces, perhaps originally cultic in nature (such as the tomb of Adam and the Crypt-chapel of Debre Sion-Golgotha-Sellassie). In their new forms as Christian monuments they represent a Christianisation of an earlier sacred space. It is possible that the subterranean template upon which these churches were built may represent archaeological evidence for a centre of Agau cultic or secular power *before* the arrival of Christianity here. This is suggested by the schematics of space, the transformation of circular structures into more regular buildings. The phenomenon of building within caves in an Ethiopian context, or creating subterranean structures is thought to be an Agau phenomenon (Sergew 1972: 274), although there are obvious Aksumite (funerary) analogues. Roger Sauter (1963) does suggest that the Lalibela churches were originally pagan cultic installations, and that there is a strong theme associated with the veneration of caves and water; the church at Ghish Abbai Mikhael, on the headwaters of the Blue Nile, represents a reuse of an Agau site dedicated to the worship of a water deity.

What we lack, of course, is any archaeological landscape context for the site. It may be that the creation of a core group of churches mirrors both an attempt to Christianise the site as well as creating, much along the lines of Aksum, a metropolis, a set of functionally specific zones in the landscape. Future archaeological research, for instance, might locate the varied domestic, housing and industrial units which must have underpinned the economy of the place, although it is important to note in the context of the landscape archaeology of medieval Ethiopia that Ethiopian villages or settlements often tend to get rebuilt on the same location, as such it is very rare to define what in British archaeological terms is known as the DMV (deserted medieval village). An intensive archaeological

survey of the Shire landscape in north-western Ethiopia (Finneran *et al.* 2005) did locate, for the first time, one such type of site, a village and church destroyed by Gragn in the sixteenth century but not rebuilt. The church (and its dedication) was transplanted across the river gorge, but this is a very rare occurrence.

In addition, archaeological evidence for the extent of the Zagwe polity is restricted to churches bearing traditional dedications or tenuous links from oral history sources. There are claims for other churches built by Lalibela, such as Zoz Amba in Lasta, Adadi Maryam on the Awash, and at the pilgrim centre at Lake Zequalla (Lepage and Mercier 2002). Lalibela's widow Masqal Kibra is said to have built a monastery in Shire at Medebay Tabir, whilst the later Zagwe king Na'akweto La'ab was a governor in Shawa and based at a place called Fentale on the Awash River; claims for remains of building there belonging to him cannot be substantiated (Sergew 1972: 282). All we are left with is a mythic creation, and until regional archaeological survey can give more tangible, material shape to the Zagwe Dynasty, popular imagination in Ethiopia and abroad will continue to ascribe meanings to the rock-hewn churches of Lasta.

Emergent diversity: the archaeology of later medieval Ethiopia

According to the Royal Chronicles the last Zagwe emperor, Yitbarak, was defeated by Yekunno Amlak, a Shawan usurper who proclaimed a restoration of the Solomonic line in 1270. It is often suggested that Yekunno Amlak's uprising had been supported by the influential monks Tekla Haymanot and Iyasu Mo'a – in the words of Sergew (1972: 283) 'the two architects of the Solomonic line' – and their monastery of Hayq Estefanos became a focus of royal patronage by way of reward (Taddesse 1970). The reasons for this dramatic political shift are surely varied; whilst the north (Tigray) was under effective Zagwe control, in the south the Shawan and Amharan Christians felt threatened by the actions of the king of the pagan Damot peoples (Kaplan 1984: 20). Economic considerations may also have played a part with the development of Zeila as an important trade centre; geographically this would have favoured the Amhara peoples.

The 'Solomonic restoration' is the term conventionally used to describe an event which effectively saw the renewal of a Semitic lineage over a Cushitic dynasty rather than a reassertion of the rulers of Aksum; the label 'Solomonic' was merely a creation of later chroniclers. The stabilisation of the country was a slow process and it is during this period that colourful accounts of the past, as represented by the *Kebra Negast,* give a new Aksumite and Judaic Old Testament identity to the new dynasty, a created

past to help cement its position within the wider sweep of Ethiopian history, an attempt at historical legitimisation. As Steven Kaplan points out, the reconquest of lands in Enderta (Tigray) enabled Amda Seyon (1314–1344) 'to assert clearly his claim to be heir of that ancient kingdom' (Aksum) (1984: 24). It is from this period that the strong Judaic cultural substratum becomes apparent (Pawlinkowski 1974) and as the state takes a more multi-ethnic character, its need for a centralising force is met with the creation of a semi-divine king not unlike the *MKRB* of *DMT* and Aksum.

The social and political landscapes of this period lack centres of gravity; the royal court is mobile and the monastery fulfils the role of the fixed socio-economic force in the landscape (Derat 2003). It is this dichotomy which underpins the medieval and post-medieval landscape of Ethiopia, and creates a whole new psychology of space. In addition, this is a period when we begin to see archaeologically the presence of a number of different 'ethnic' groups, a time when the kingdom was acquiring a new cosmopolitan identity. The most obvious starting point is with the rapidly expanding Islamic settlement to the east and north of the Christian kingdom.

The impact of Islam

The beginning of this chapter focused upon the nascent and initially cordial relationship between a declining Aksum and the emergent Islamic faith across the Red Sea. Naturally the area with the greatest Islamic socio-cultural imprint within the Horn is the seaboard, although over time Arab culture became integrated with the indigenous Cushitic, Somali-speaking pastoralist peoples who were expanding across the Horn from an area presumably in southern Ethiopia, and soon opportunities for trade with the interior resulted in the opening up of caravan routes through the deserts and up into the highlands. An initial phase of penetration from the littoral is witnessed by a number of settlements with stone mosques built on defensive sites in a cluster to the west and south-west of the Muslim walled city of Harar and this region would soon become the centre of two important Muslim states – the sultanates of Ifat and Adal – which would form a base to challenge Christian hegemony in the highlands.

The impact of Islam upon Ethiopia has been a subject that has, until recently (Insoll 2003: 36ff.), received little archaeological attention and it is important within the context of this study that we look at the issue of Islamic identity formation in more detail. Historical sources are now augmented by archaeological material; a distinctive Islamic funerary culture allied to different approaches to urban (which still emphasises functionally discrete zones) and domestic space. The Islamic

Figure 6.14 Muslim tombstone, Quiha, Tigray (photograph by M. Schneider; copyright CFEE).

archaeological imprint is strongest along the coasts of Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia. The area of the coast north of Mogadishu was known to Arab geographers as 'Barbar' (reflected in the name of the most important settlement there, Berbera), and southwards of Mogadishu, was the 'land of Zanj'.

The Islamic coastal regions

Archaeological remains on the Dahlac Islands include large cemeteries with distinctive tombs, and cisterns, vital for maintaining life on these barren coral islands. The home of an independent sultanate, economically we see here a continuation of Aksumite trade to the east, attested by the presence of ninth–twelfth-century Chinese wares (Insoll 1997). The earliest settlement at Massawa developed on two islands off the northern shore of Hirgigha Bay, Massawa and Tawlud, and may thus be identified with the Beja port of Badi mentioned by the Arab geographer al-Yaqubi in the ninth century (Pankhurst 1982: 80). This identification is supported by the presence of a Muslim grave of a certain 'Aksum bin Ya'lum' nearby at Khor Nubt dated to 815–825 AD, that is, *c.* AH 200–210 (Hasan 1967: 61–2). Along with the port of Assab, Massawa provided an outlet for trade from the northern highland zone.

Further southwards, the port of Zeila (mentioned in a late ninth-century account by al-Yaqubi in the *Kitab al-Buldan*) provided an outlet for the Shawan highlands. Early exports consisted of salt, gold, ivory, slaves and animal skins, whilst key imports are represented archaeologically by glazed ceramics (particularly luxury Chinese celadon between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries), glass and cloth. Interestingly, Ibn Battuta described the inhabitants as 'black' – thus indicating in all probability a large indigenous rather than Arabian population and its political importance was underlined when it became the centre of the Adal Sultanate in the fifteenth century. Further westwards, the port of Berbera owed its wealth to the caravan routes linking the seats of power of the Imperial court and Harar, and its position afforded easy links with the Arabian peninsular (Pankhurst 1965).

Moving along the coast southwards is Mogadishu, which according to some local sources may have been founded as early as the tenth century as a federation of tribes encompassing 13 'villages' which subsequently organised themselves into autonomous quarters. Some scholars suggest that the site may also be identified with the site of 'Serapion' mentioned in the *Periplus*. Neville Chittick (1982) argued against evidence for any pre-twelfth-century settlement here, but this may not be the case. The site is notable as being the first good natural anchorage south of the most extreme eastern tip of the Horn of Africa (Cape Guardafui), and given this useful

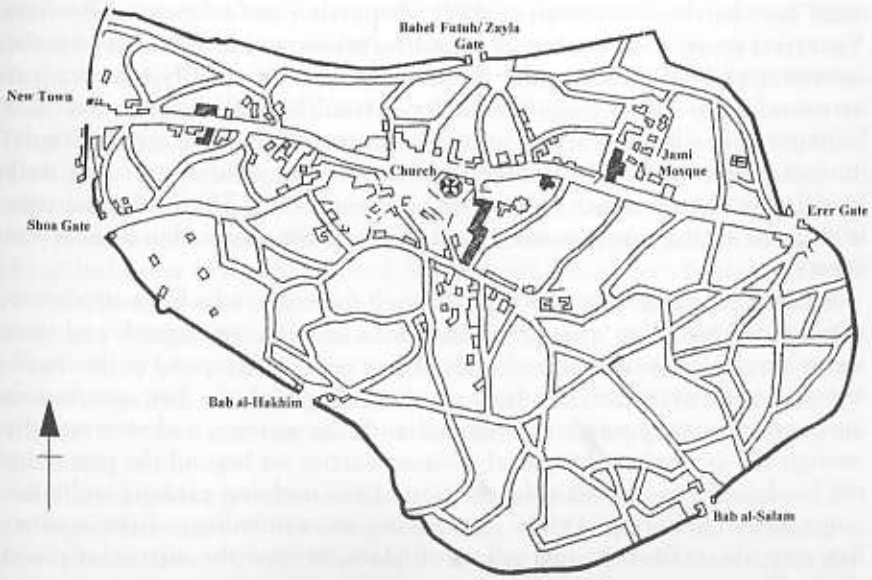

Figure 6.15 Plan of Harar (after *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* 1938).

position Mogadishu soon took on an important role in cross-Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade.

The city was held by the Fakhr-ad-Din dynasty from the thirteenth century – a period during which we find archaeological evidence of extensive links with China and the growth of a strong indigenous textile industry. From this time it also appears that the Jama' mosque was established. Medieval Mogadishu was divided into two separate settlements: Hamar Weyne on a promontory to the west of the town and Shangani on the southern side of the harbour. Both areas were walled and were the homes of two different tribal 'families' and a large market lay between the two. The Arab geographer Ibn Battuta's account of the city in 1331 describes a well-appointed mosque and a prosperous mercantile community whose wealth was mainly based upon the export of cloth; these descriptions are augmented by a fifteenth-century Chinese description, and although this account is almost certainly second hand, it does attest to the widespread fame of the city in the middle ages.

Islamic penetration of the hinterland

Moving inland, the major social, economic, cultural and spiritual centre for Islam in the Horn of Africa developed at Harar, a town with a more Arabian than African flavour (Pankhurst 1982: 49ff.). A former city state in its own right and thus having its own Sultan, the walled city was built by Amir Nur in the 1550s, although mention is made of a settlement here in the fourteenth-century chronicle *Amda Seyon's Glorious Victories*, in an area known as Dawaro, which would later become the sultanate of Adal. Structurally the city is characteristically Islamic; it is surrounded by a wall (*jugal*) with six gates. The wall extends over 3.3 kilometres in circumference, and is constructed from relatively fragile juniper planking, local calcareous tuff and mud render, and was only fortified in the sixteenth century (Abdullahi 1990). The Friday mosque is situated in the north-eastern part of the town and a church is at the centre.

A key axial route runs east-west through the town, which was traditionally divided into five 'quarters', subdivided in turn into *toyach* and then again into *lasims* or neighbourhoods. These zones correspond to the dwelling places of extended families, or clans. Each of the five quarters is accessed by a gate, which is identified with the quarter, and interestingly enough the symbolism of spatial division carries on beyond the gates into the landscape beyond with the division of the outlying gardens and landscape units (Abdullahi 1990). Insoll notes the symbolism of the number five may also reflect the five pillars of Islam, or even the internal division of the Harari house (2003: 78). Its symbolic geography is reflected in the presence of a large number of tombs of holy men in and around the

landscape; politically the city was the power base of the famed sixteenth-century Muslim warlord Ahmed Gragn, and its position on the caravan routes from the highlands to the coast afforded a great deal of opportunity for trade. In fact the sultanate minted its own coinage from the early thirteenth century.

Archaeological surveys conducted in the Harar region by Azaïs and Chambard identified a number of stone-walled settlements, as well as a large number of distinctive stone tumuli (Oromo: *Daga Touli* = piles of stones). The region around Tchelenko, to the west of Harar is particularly rich in archaeological material, including rock art and the distinctive dolmens, discussed in Chapter 3. The tumuli are clearly funerary installations containing flexed inhumations and grave goods (mainly pottery; Joussaume 1976b), and are not associated with the older 'dolmens' which had been initially described as being tumuli denuded of earth covering; they are clearly not Islamic in character. Stone-walled towns were surveyed at the localities of Kourfa Komona, Harar, Tchenassan, Derbiya and Amareyti and Hedjersa (Anfray 1970); a house excavated at the latter site by the Austrian traveller Paulitschka yielded bronze, copper and iron objects.

The 'towns' are usually located on high points, in easily defended locations, and the walls are impressive defensive works in their own right (those at the site of Koubi are up to 10 metres in height). The probability remains that they are settlements constructed by Muslim peoples in the region during the early-mid-second millennium AD (Wilding 1980) although Joussaume and Joussaume (1972) hypothesise that they may have formed part of a defensive system constructed by the fifteenth-century Christian king Zar'a Ya'qob (1434–1468). Ceramics found at the site of Mole bear considerable similarity to those excavated in the tumulus site of Tchaffé which are associated with a radiocarbon date of AD 1450, thus placing the sites during the period before the Gragn *Jihad*. A number of other stone-built abandoned towns – obviously Islamic in character given the presence of recognisable mosque structures – were located in the 1930s along the border of the then British Somaliland and eastern Ethiopia (Curle 1937). Clustered mid-way between Hargeisa and Dire Dawa, these towns show no evidence of fortification, and do not appear, in the words of Curle to have been 'planned'. Dating is difficult owing to the fact that the cemeteries contained no inscriptions, but surface finds of beads and pottery indicate a broad continuum of settlement between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.

Archaeological remains of Islamic settlement in the central and northern highlands are not as widespread, and would appear to represent a slow penetration through the trade routes from the lowlands. In the north, archaeological evidence for the penetration of Islam along the trade routes into the highlands is limited. Muslim graves at Quiha,

Mekelle date from between the tenth and eleventh centuries AD (Anfray 1965; M. Schneider 1967), but more evidence, historical and archaeological, is available from the central highlands. The Makzumite sultanate of Shawa was established in AD 896 and its presence is confirmed archaeologically by the appearance of monumental inscriptions and latterly by grave stones dating from the thirteenth century (Huntingford 1955; M. Schneider 1970) at which point it was usurped by the Walashma dynasty of neighbouring Ifat.

A number of stone towns cluster on the very eastern edges of the escarpment in north-eastern Shawa; the architectural organisation of their villages not only speaks of defensive capability but also the idea of social isolation within the landscape. The ruined towns themselves are well adapted for defence and their situation implies a strong strategic purpose, clustering as they do along the crossings of the Awash River. Particular attention attaches to the site of Rasa, with a large ruined mosque structure based upon local domestic architecture (29.5 metres by 27.5 metres, suggesting a large congregation) and an associated cemetery (Chernet 1990) where are found over 3,000 skilfully carved Muslim headstones which are known to the Argobba as '*tulul*'. In all probability these ruined towns should be associated with a gradual Islamicisation of the north-eastern escarpment region via the trade routes from the Red Sea coasts to the interior; and would appear thus to date from the beginning of the Sultanate of Shawa.

The contemporary Argobba peoples still venerate these sites, a phenomenon which raises many issues about construction and maintenance of identity. Here, as in common with many other highland regions, these peoples are Muslim and itinerant blacksmiths, they are feared and distrusted by the highland Christian farmers (Aklilu 2000) and great importance is thus attached to the memory of a fixed place; prayers are often held at old ruins (Kebede 2000). A similar fixation with a landscape of memory is also apparent in the north-east of Ethiopia, in Shire. The stela of Adi Hahno was originally erected as a pre-Christian tomb marker during Aksumite times; it was moved to its present location in the fifteenth century by the Muslim general Fituari Abdullah to commemorate his victory over the local pagan Kunama peoples on behalf of the Christian king Dawit II (1380–1412). The 'biography' of this object embodies a number of disparate ideological threads; even today the site is venerated by local Muslim peoples who leave incense offerings at the foot of the stone, in spite of the general Islamic prohibition of 'worshipping' monoliths (Finneran *et al.* 2005). The archaeological evidence for the penetration of Islam from the east reflects a growing period of Christian uncertainty during the medieval period which culminated in the *Jihad* of Gragn in the sixteenth century. The expansion of Islam was only halted by the intervention of the Portuguese, which in itself ushered in another period of uncertainty. We now turn to another group of peoples who have, to some extent, been

marginalised in the Christian Ethiopian metanarrative, the pastoralist groups of the southern highlands, who, as we shall see, have their own very diverse and dynamic archaeological heritage.

The Megaliths of Soddo

The lands of the southern highlands of Ethiopia (the modern provinces of southern Arssi and Sidamo) were only finally incorporated into the Christian Empire during the nineteenth century, and they possess a very distinctive cultural heritage of their own. The region of Soddo (which is itself an ill-defined toponym; the etymology may reflect the Oromo noun for 'dressed stone'; Anfray and Godet 1976; Anfray 1982) lies approximately 160 kilometres to the south of Addis Ababa. The archaeology of the region is characterised by the presence of variform dressed stone monoliths, quite unlike the northern stela tradition. Local tradition identifies them as 'stones of Gragn', mementoes of his victorious progress through the region in the sixteenth century. These monuments first came to wider attention with the publication of Azaïs and Chambard's survey in the 1930s and subsequent work here has been driven primarily by Francophone scholars such as Francis Anfray and Roger Joussaume, whose excavations at the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Tiya has thrown some light upon this fascinating cultural tradition (Joussaume 1995; Poissonnier 2000; see also Tournemire 2005).

In broad terms, the region of the megaliths extends south-south-west from Addis Ababa along the west of the line of the Rift Valley lakes, although similar stones have been noted as far north as the site of Gherem Gabriel, near Debre Berhan just to the north-east of Addis Ababa, as well

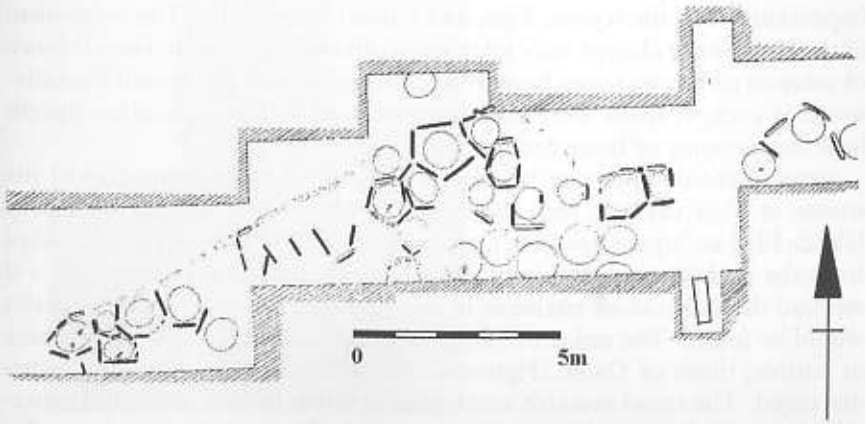

Figure 6.16 Plan of Tiya stelae field (after Joussaume 1985).

as in Efrata and Gidim in northern Shawa (Tekle 2000). The site of Tiya occupies the northern portion of the region, in Soddo proper, and is located 50 kilometres due south of Addis Ababa. The concentration of stelae sites show a marked regional variation from north to south, although we might broadly agree with Anfray's statement that they 'belong to the same culture' (Anfray 1982: 55). The distribution extends still further southwards to the Hadiya and Kambata groups, then further south still through Wolayta into Sidama, an area bounded to the north by Lake Awasa, and to the west by Lake Abaya. It will become apparent that these stelae, of which over 150 sites have been recorded to date (2006), are representative of a very distinctive southern highland cultural phenomenon. The stelae range from simple monoliths to elaborate figurative and phallic stelae; in the northern regions of Soddo they tend to be grouped whilst further south the megaliths often stand alone; this may imply that the northern sites, such as Seden and Tiya, are actually cemeteries. Certainly some order seems to be apparent in the north-east of the site of Gayet-Gareno where the recumbent stelae appear to be grouped into squares. It is striking that the distribution of the known sites tends to group along roads; it may be possible that these stelae are territorial markers as well as grave stones, marking boundaries along long-established routes of communication through the highlands.

The stelae themselves are fashioned from local volcanic rocks (rhyolite). They vary between 2 and 5 metres in height and it is possible, as Anfray has suggested from his knowledge of the traditions of tomb dressing in the Shashemene region, that they may actually have been coloured in organic pigment. In the north of Soddo, decorated stelae predominate (less so in the Sidamo to the south), often utilising the ubiquitous lance (epée) symbol not unlike those seen on the fragments of stela four at Aksum. These forms are best seen at the presumed cemetery site of Seden, and also at the most important site of the region, Tiya, and Lalou (Figure 6.18). The symbolism of the lance is not clear; it may refer, most obviously, to the preferred choice of weapon of the warriors buried beneath the stones. We would hypothesise that such weapons were made of iron, which gives us another insight into the economy of these peoples.

Some of the designs may be related to fertility symbolism; some of the stones at Tiya carry a very distinctive Y-shape (referred to by Anfray (1982: 126) as '*signes ramifiés*'), and are not unlike the bucranial symbol from the prehistoric rock art of the north, yet placed approximately – if we read the stelae as an analogue of the human body – where the genitalia would be found. The stelae of Silte, for instance, are clearly very feminine in nature; those of Osole (Figure 6.19a) still feminine, yet highly schematicised. The trend towards more phallic stelae (which are found generally towards the south) would strengthen the notion that the stelae embodied very strong gendered associations in their own right, indeed

Figure 6.17 Stela at Tite (Francis Anfray).

Figure 6.18 Stela at Lalou (Francis Anfray).

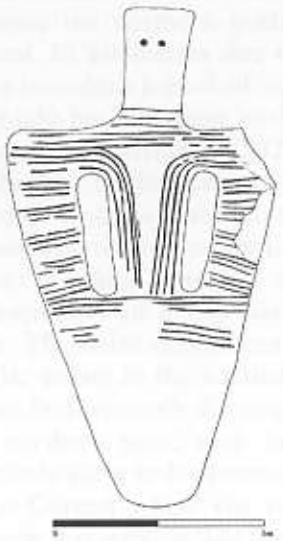

Figure 6.19a Osole stela.

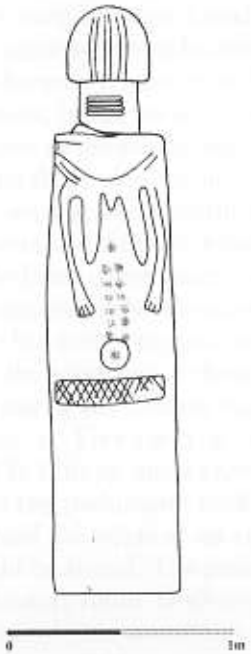

Figure 6.19b Gora Shino stela.

Figure 6.19c Silte stela (all after Anfray 1982).

Figure 6.20 Stela at Soyema (Francis Anfray).

some stelae (such as those of Gora-Shino; Figure 6.19b) are phallic-shaped, yet also have noticeable breasts. The Balemotabi, Mamo and Silte stelae juxtapose overt female symbolism with depictions of pastoralist herding scenes (Figure 6.19c).

In conclusion it is clear that these stelae do not belong to any Christian or Muslim funerary tradition, and as such must pre-date the fifteenth century. It is also clear that these megaliths do not connect with the northern tradition of stela erection (which as we have seen has its roots in the borderlands with the Sudanic worlds) and thus has no link with the megalithic traditions of the Harar and Tchercher mountains, where the 'dolmens' are in any case fairly well radiocarbon dated to the second millennium BC. Excavations on associated graves, which contain flexed skeletons without any grave goods, suggest both a strong association with the stelae, as well as some basis for dating the monuments: a sample of bone from tomb X at Gattira-Demma gave a radiocarbon date of *c.* AD 1200 (Anfray 1982: 129); this broadly matches a similar date yielded by excavations at Tomb 1 at the nearby site of Tiya (Joussaume 1985) as well as dates obtained by recent excavations on the tumulus at Tuto-Fela, to the south-east of Wenago in the north of Gedeo at the southern range of the distribution of the megaliths (Bouville *et al.* 2000).

In all probability these monoliths represent the archaeological evidence for Cushitic or Nilotic-speaking pastoralist groups of the southern highlands whose lives, like many others in highland Ethiopia, were disrupted by the migration of the pastoralist Oromo ('Galla') who emerged from their ancestral lands on what is now the northern Kenyan/southern Ethiopian border and in a series of massive population movements thrust northwards into the highlands during the sixteenth century. The archaeology of the Oromo expansion is a subject which remains full of rich theoretical potential; their imprint upon highland society is evidenced by the distribution of their language, yet they transformed socially in response to their new surrounds in the case of the adaptation of their *Gada* social system. Additional interest attaches to the way in which the Oromo were absorbed, and the possibilities of syncretism in material culture and spatial organisation when the Oromo adopted Christianity or Islam, and how they maintained their distinctive identity. On such avenue as proposed by Paul Henze (2005) might be a close study of Oromo funerary material culture which is hugely distinctive and symbolically expressive, and in the case of the Oromo in the Arssi region may have drawn upon certain elements derived form the earlier megalithic carving traditions.

The archaeology of medieval Ethiopian monasticism

We now return to the Christian highlands, and the 'restored' Solomonic lineage. As in the Aksumite period, a primary agent for Christian mission

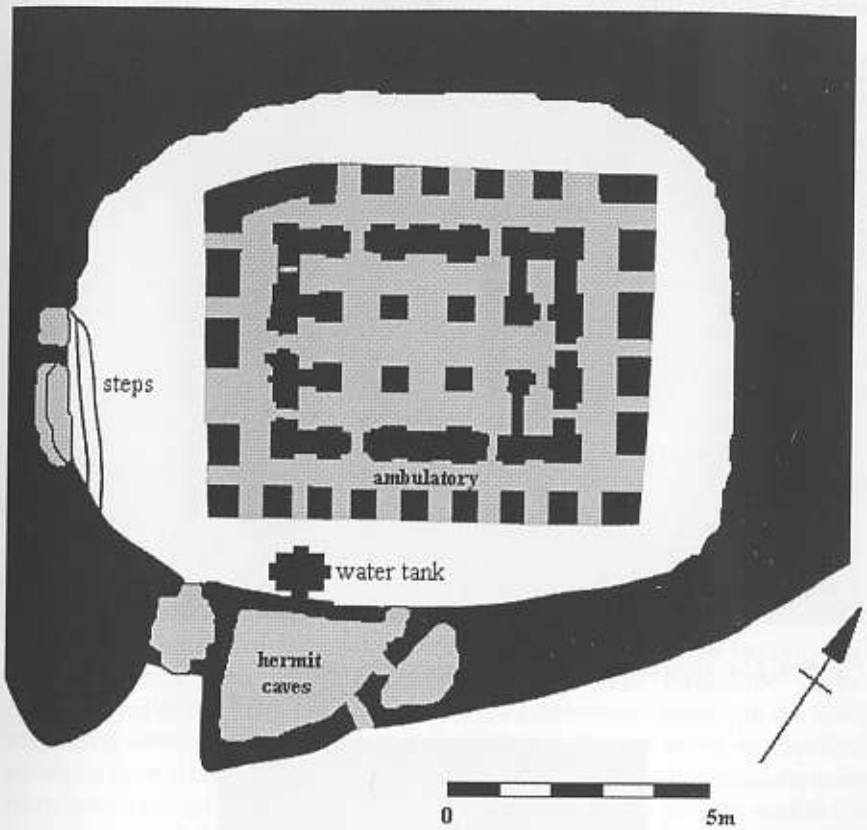

Figure 6.21 Plan of Ganneta Maryam, Lalibela (surveyed by N. Finneran 2001).

was the monastery which in the medieval period became a strong social, economic and ideological force. Perhaps the closest archaeological analogue for the impact of the Ethiopian medieval monastery upon its landscape is that of the early medieval Irish monastery which operated, essentially, in an urban vacuum (Graham 1998). Like the early Irish monastery, the Ethiopian monastery of the Solomonic restoration period was a place founded and inhabited by charismatics, mindful that their role in the mission process was also tied to explicit political and economic demands.

It is significant, for instance, that one of the first acts of Yekunno Amlak was the construction of churches in the vicinity of Lalibela. It is as if he ringed the Zagwe political centre with his own new hermetic cordon; an inscription at the monastery of Ganneta Maryam implies that he was the elect of God; this statement echoes the ideas of the Aksumite kings, the notion of semi-divine kingship which permeates the medieval and

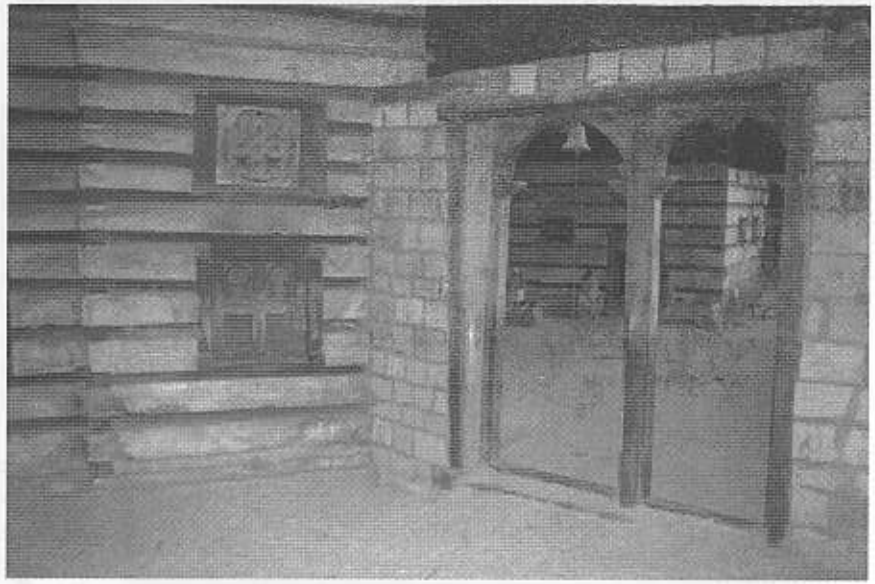

Figure 6.22a Yemrehane Krestos cave churches, Lasta.

Figure 6.22b Aksumite-style window feature, Yemrehane Krestos.

post-medieval periods (Derat and Pennec 1997). The king lavished a great deal of wealth upon the church building and the internal decorative scheme reflects this patronage: biblical figures and secular figures stand together in the wall paintings; every decorative embellishment speaks of immense political power (Finneran and Tribe 2004). The hierarchy of figures shown in the frescoes also reflects the hierarchy of Ethiopian society, organised along feudal lines (Kaplan 1986b). Even the building itself is a copy of the church of Medhane Alem at Lalibela which in turn was based upon the cathedral of Aksum; the wider political and symbolic implications of pastiche are clear (Heldman 1992).

The influence of the king upon the material culture organisation of the monastic establishment was immense; Zar'a Ya'qob, for instance, developed a distinctive Marian theology which found an outlet in a new set of rules for artistic depiction (Kaplan 2002). The monasteries of the Lake Tana region bear witness to the powerful effect of royal patronage; built upon islands and around the lake margins each monastic unit retains a distinctive and independent spirit (Bosc-Tiessé 2000). The monastery of Cheqla Manzo was also effectively a 'royal' island, containing a church and monastery as well as the remains of a royal residence for Iyasu I (1682–1706).

The organisation of monastic space at an intra-mural and extra-mural level indicates how they functioned as discrete landscape units. Architecturally the Ethiopian monastery is a conservative fixture in the landscape and often exists as an informal agglomeration of living spaces sited around a central church. It is difficult to even differentiate some monastic units from actual villages as male and female communities often co-exist within the same spaces (cf. Gilchrist 1999 *passim*). The contrast with the formalised cloister of Egyptian or European monastic tradition is strong, but it is important to emphasise a link with the philosophy of the cenobitic Egyptian monastery, which stressed the idea of work, be it agricultural or craft pursuits. Richard Pankhurst's account (2001) of a *Bala Ejj*, or craftsmens' monastery, in Shawa shows just how the Ethiopian monastery tends to resist categorisation within the usual frameworks of monastic studies. This is a mixed community of monks and nuns dedicated to a life of prayer and craft (textile working, smithing). The sexes live together, yet in church respect the usual gendered space of worship. Of special note is the presence of a *Taketo-bet* where females are kept during their menstruation; this idea of isolation during the menses, which is regarded as a time of infertility and hence danger, is common in many African societies. It is also worth emphasising, in the context of the present study and the idea of creation and maintenance of identity, that these Christian monks and nuns were formerly *Falasha* (*Beta Israel*) who subsequently embraced Christianity (Quirin 1979).

On the broader scale it is important to consider the landscape context of the monastery (Gilchrist and Morris 1993). Within the wider strategic landscape of medieval Ethiopia, the monastery acted as an instrument of colonial expansion (Haberland 1964); from Debre Damo in the north, the seat of monastic-secular power shifted to the monastery of Estefanos, Lake Hayq which produced a number of important missionary saints whose role, rather like that of the Irish *peregrinatio* in early medieval Europe was to bring both the word of God as well as an element of political control to the target converts. The foundation of the monastery of Debre Libanos (formerly Debre Asbo) in Shawa is associated with one such figure: Tekla Haymanot. As Kaplan (1986b) points out, the monks who undertook mission activity were usually apolitical, if not anti-royal. They had grown up in areas of mixed religious inheritance and were thus sensitised to the requirements of mission. This would imply perhaps a strong syncretic thread in social and material culture organisation, in essence a different set of response between the missionary and his target converts (Kaplan 1986a). When missionary monks arrived at new localities in southern Ethiopia, they would involve themselves in local agricultural works. When the trust of the local people had been firmly engaged permanent structures could be built, and the community would grow. In some cases, the founders of the mission monasteries encouraged the development of healing or miracle cults, essentially attaching very strong superstitious forces to their personalities (Taddesse 1972: 111).

The archaeological implications of this medieval mission process clearly mirror that of the Nine Saints in an earlier era; when Tekla Haymanot arrived at Debre Asbo in Shawa, he initially sited his mission in a strategic area of the broader landscape, at the junction of a number of different political areas. In this way he could dominate several different political groups, a situation not unlike the patterning of early medieval Irish monastic units. Tekla Haymanot's chosen site was a cave which he divided into a public church area and a private living quarter for solitary prayer. In some cases the site might have had an important symbolic significance tied to the presence of a spring or a sacred mountain (Kaplan 1984: 118); the dedication of the church at Adadi Maryam in Shawa (itself a hypogean structure, perhaps implying reuse or copying of the 'sacred cave') is referred to as 'tree of Mary' (Anfray 1965). This might reflect a natural association where pre-Christian peoples worshipped groves of trees, as the Qemant did. The site then grew, along the lines of the Egyptian monastic model, from an initial charismatic's hermitage centre into a larger, integrated cenobitic monastery along the line of the Pachomian ideal of Egypt. A similar picture emerges in Shire (Finneran 2003c); monasteries and monoliths cohabit the same space, the monastic community underpinned the military conquest of the Kunama peoples by Dawit II's army. Pastoralist rock art at the site of Baahti Shillom (itself within the precincts of a

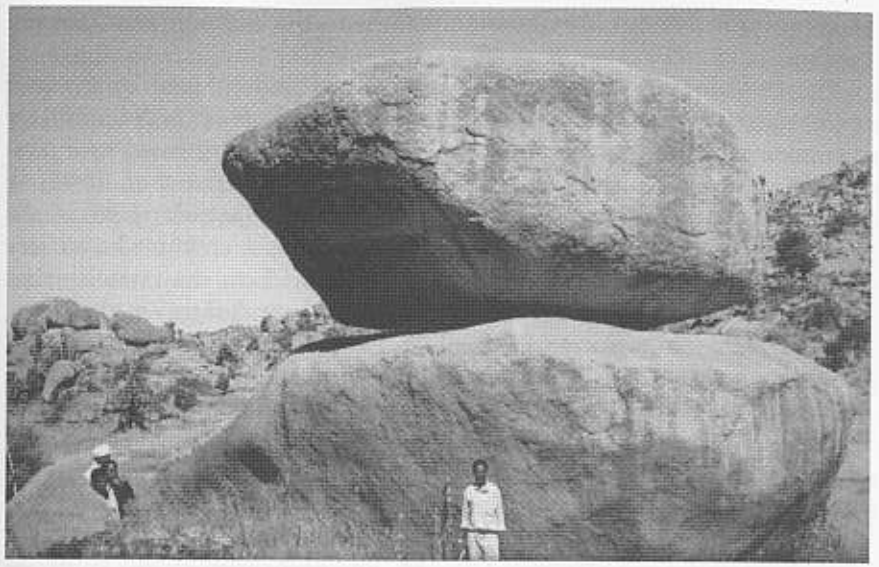

Figure 6.23a Baahti Shillom, Shire

Figure 6.23b Close up of rock art: centre quadruped with rider, below right red cross (images highlighted).

monastery) is defaced (or Christianised?) with the addition of bright red crosses.

The economic impact of the monastery was underpinned by the *gult* system (see Chapter 1). The archaeological implications of these awards for the reconstruction of medieval feudal economies are illustrated by a consideration of a recent survey in the Shire region (Finneran *et al.* 2005). A manuscript entitled the *Woingel Zawerk* (Golden Gospels) held in the treasury of the monastery of Giyorgis, Inda Sellassie, contained a variety of secular documents which detailed the gifts made to the establishment over a 400-year period. The donors fell into three categories: the King, local feudal dignitaries and other churchmen (e.g. the Patriarch) and divided between gifts of chattels (church furniture, vestments, livestock and cereals) as well as named villages with agricultural land. Given that settlement patterns within the highland landscape in particular are conservative, it was possible to identify all the villages named in the charters: a toponym of special significance in one case was Wostah Gult. Having located these villages, it was thus possible to reconstruct the potential output of the *gult* system of Giyorgis, and unsurprisingly the lands, on prime vertisols, were very productive.

This contrasts with the *gult* awards to the smaller monastery of Abuna Aron, whose lands were also sited upon the qualitatively more marginal lithosols to the south of Inda Sellassie. It is thus no surprise that the wealthiest and most socially complex monastery – and the one with evidence for extensive storage facilities – was the monastery of Giyorgis. The Ethiopian monasteries organised themselves in a dependency system which effectively underpinned the political, economic and social landscape of Ethiopia at this time (Derat 2001: 233); the political reach of Estefanos, Lake Hayq, for instance was felt as far south as Lake Ziway (Henze 1989). These fixed points of reference within the landscape contrast with another major theme of medieval Ethiopian political life: the lack of a settled, permanent royal capital.

The archaeology of medieval kingship and governance

Medieval kings ruled from peripatetic camps (*katama*) which traversed the landscape, moving in response to problems in far regions of the empire, or settling on and around favoured monastic locations (Horvath 1969). After 1270, some small-scale forms of permanent, settled capital were established in eastern and northern Shawa. Amda Seyon's (1312–1342) favoured capital was sited at what is now called Tegulat, formerly the capital of the Muslim sultanate in eastern Shawa, in an area known to his Muslim subjects as Marade or Maradi. The settlement rapidly declined in importance after the early medieval period as emperors resumed a mobile life. The

royal camps gradually evolved into a standard structural model; at the centre, in an imperial palace tent lived the king and his family and retinue and other 'areas' were set aside for various aides and functionaries (Taddesse 1972: 270ff.). There was also a provision for worship in the shape of several semi-permanent churches, although on many occasions the emperor would site his camp near to a favoured monastery and worship there during the length of his stay, such as happened at Ganneta Maryam (Pankhurst 1979). Along with the king and the machinery of state and church was provision for the army too; we may thus estimate that the camps contained thousands of men and their families, alongside many more thousand head of cattle and livestock. Given their scale, we may expect that these camps placed an immense strain upon the carrying capacity of the local landscape, and in many cases it would be several decades before a camp could return to the locality.

This imperial mindset of mobility was to last for many years, and each king had a favoured place; apart perhaps from Aksum – which in any case had a special ecclesiastical status – there was really no such thing as a medieval Ethiopian urban settlement. This is reflected by a seventeenth-century account by a Portuguese Jesuit named Manuel de Almeida, which claimed: 'apart from the Emperor's camp there is no settlement in the whole empire that deserves the name city, or even town' (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954: 82). The pattern of moveable camps was established in part to provide a degree of internal security for the Christian empire; the Emperor was able to switch the focus of political and economic control as and when circumstances dictated (Kaplan 1986b). Horvath (1969: 215) refers to these camps as 'guerrilla cities', yet on the whole very little force was actually needed to police the state. This is not to say that the medieval period was necessarily a peaceful one. As we have seen, Muslims were already establishing in numbers on the plateau, and the presence of a Muslim sultanate in Shawa threatened the security of the Christian realm.

Zar'a Ya'qob's capital of choice was Debre Berhane (Pankhurst 1982: 35ff.) – an important town today – which was founded in 1454 in response to a heavenly vision, and a short eye-witness description of it shows how an Ethiopian medieval semi-permanent capital was structured. A *gagwal* – or palisade of olive wood – surrounded the palace structure. In the sixteenth century, Alvares, a reliable source, refers to a square royal tent, surmounted by a cross. Smaller houses were grouped close to the *selemat*, or principal gate. At the foot of the palace were three royal tents (*dabana*) surrounded again by a high palisade; the *nazret bet* was the treasury building and this was surrounded by some 30 other smaller royal tents. Provision was made for a banqueting quarter, and a baptismal pond was constructed near to the church. Richard Pankhurst (1979) notes that as a rule these town-camps had several features in common: a separate palace compound; one or more churches; tents for other nobles and important elements of the

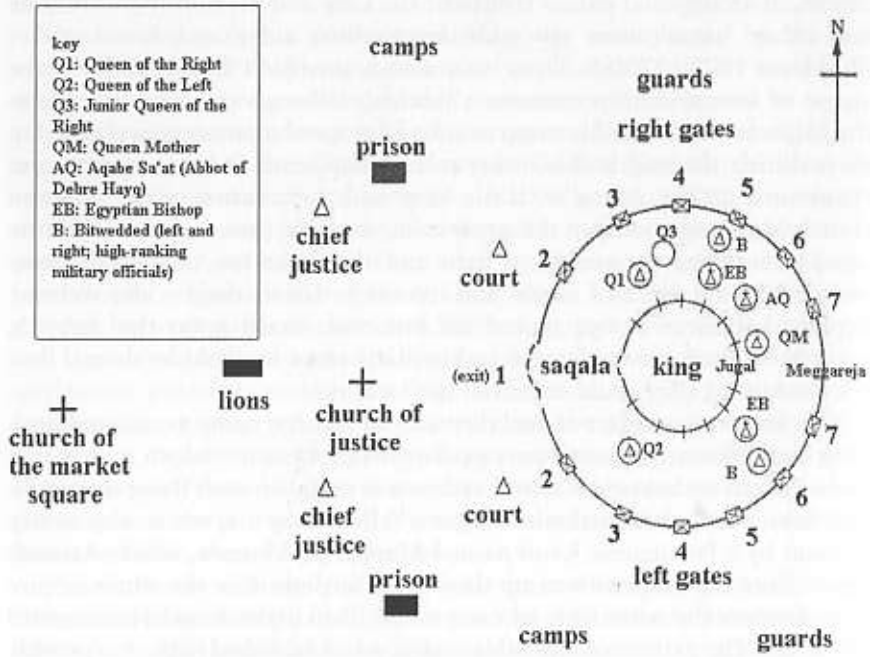

Figure 6.24a Schematic plan of the medieval royal camp (after Taddesse 1972).

Figure 6.24b Manuscript map of northern Ethiopia, Debre Damo (Michael Harlow).

retinue; a market place; separate settlements for Muslims and other artisans, and finally a large expanse of grass for camping, pasture and for enacting the martial/ecclesiastical ceremony the *Jan Meda*.

The archaeological visibility of such camps – in spite of the nature of the construction materials and the relatively short nature of site occupation – should, in theory be strong (Pankhurst 1982: 41ff.). What appears to be a royal camp has been located on the plain at the foot of Ganneta Maryam, Lalibela (Finneran and Tribe 2004); this is the only flat area of pasture and reliable water which could house the royal retinue; dense patches of pottery would appear to betoken areas of intensive settlement and green areas of lush vegetation, easily visible on the plain from the monastery, would suggest high concentrations of soil phosphates, and were thus in all likelihood the sites of former cattle kraals.

The resolution of this amorphous archaeological 'footprint' would surely be confirmed using geophysical equipment to locate and map postholes, ditches and pits features. Recent archaeological survey and excavation in Manz, north-eastern Shawa (Hirsch and Poissonnier 2000), has begun to shed light on the structure of a camp built in the reign of Zar'a Ya'qob's son, Ba-Eda Maryam (1468–1478); the camp is focused upon the church of Meshala Maryam and it incorporates much earlier megalithic structures into its design (Anfray 1983). This kind of multi-disciplinary, landscape archaeology approach is vital for a better understanding of the archaeology of kingship in medieval Ethiopia. It might also be possible to test notions of spatial symbolism and sub-divisions within the encampment too (e.g. Lagopoulos and Lily Stylianoudia 2001); whether, for instance the tripartite, concentric structure of the camp reflected that of the church building, as well as medieval Ethiopian perspectives on the ordering of the cosmos (see also A. Pankhurst 1989). The trend towards circularity in architecture mirrors a more African style of building (Yamagata 1996); it would certainly be useful to assess just how conservative this use of space was, and whether the structure of the peripatetic camp translated into the later, Gondarene semi-permanent and permanent capitals of the north Lake Tana region.

It is clear, however, that more permanent structures, clearly linked to the projection of imperial power in certain problematic regions, may have played a significant role in the archaeology of medieval Ethiopian kingship. Ruins attributed to Zar'a Ya'qob's 'summer palace' have been identified at Djibat, Shawa (Anfray 1965); a major stone-built structure at Enselale (80 kilometres north of Addis Ababa) appears to have basic Aksumite architectural affinities, and its scale and quality of construction would seem to suggest an imperial residence (Figure 6.25a). The edifice measures 11 metres square with four central stone pillars; the geometric decorative friezes which adorn the building would appear to owe more to Byzantine than earlier Aksumite influence (Figure 6.25b). In terms of monumentality and architectural symbolism, the 'palace', if it is such a structure, speaks

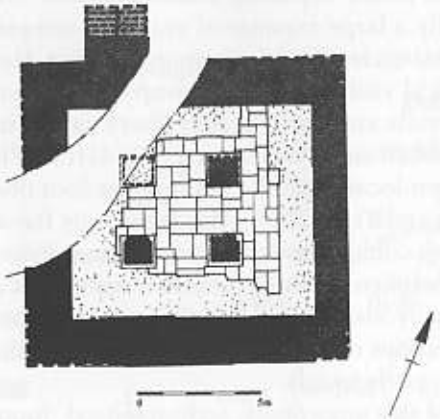

Figure 6.25a Enselale: plan of central building (after Anfray 1978)

Figure 6.25b Decorative embellishments (Francis Anfray).

volumes about the way in which medieval Ethiopian kings sought to project their power in the landscape, tie their lineages explicitly to an Aksumite identity and also to emphasise international credentials.

A similar structure was identified at the Shawan site of Day Giyorgis (near Debre Berhan) with walls of 22 metres in length visible (Chojnacki 1967), whilst Anfray (1978) lists a number of very similar ruined structures

at sites towards the south of Shawa at Tchanghi Mikhael, Qassim Sellassie and Ilala, and even much further to the south-east in Arssi the site of Hadare, which consists of a large square stone-built structure measuring 10 metres square. Possibly linked to this architectural tradition of 'palace' construction is a form of subterranean hypogean building; subterranean circular 'catacombs' have been identified at the sites of Akali Besaka and Toundjit-Gara just to the south of Addis Ababa (Anfray 1978).

In all cases, these are structures of exceptional quality and monumentality, and the corpus of sculpture across the sites appears stylistically coherent. Francis Anfray (pers. comm.) suggests these sites date to the fourteenth/fifteenth centuries; they are thus witness to a programme of pacification of the south Shawan marches, political domination of a landscape and the beginning of a trend towards semi-permanent 'capital' structures in strategic or vulnerable locations. In the north, for instance, the settlement of Debarwa takes on almost fully urban characteristics during the seventeenth century in response to the growing importance of the port at Massawa (Pankhurst 1982: 65). In any case, the psychology of the medieval royal kingship of Ethiopia reflects a very reactive mindset.

A sense of place? The archaeology of post-medieval Ethiopian

It is during the seventeenth century that the Imperial practice of using mobile camps begins to die out, or at least change character (Pankhurst 1982: 94ff.) In response to the Oromo incursions, the focus of Imperial attention moved north-west to the area around Lake Tana in west-central Ethiopia; Emperor Minas (1559–1563) abandoned Shawa, and as a result the focus of the exports and imports of the Christian kingdom switched from the Gulf of Aden ports back to Massawa, as it had during Aksumite times (Pankhurst 1999a). Minas' successor Sarsa Dengel (1563–1597) established a camp at Emfraz (Guzara) in the late sixteenth century, where he had a stone castle or fortress (*makfad*) built, which may have been modelled on the Turkish fort that he would have seen at Debarwa. This building, now roofless, is a two-storied structure measuring 18 metres by 12 metres flanked by two round towers (Berry 1999).

Sarsa Dengel constructed another camp at 'Ayba, north of Emfraz in *c.*1589, and other important centres were founded at Wandege, Qoga and Gorgora – the latter an important settlement on a peninsula in Lake Tana boasting a palace built for Emperor Susneyos (1606–1632) as well as a Portuguese-style stone church dating to 1619. Susneyos also re-developed the settlement of Danqaz, about 30 kilometres south-east of Gondar in 1617, apparently with the help of 'Franks' or *Afrenj* (the word would imply western Europeans); the superb palace structure here was built by an Ethiopian architect by the name of

Gebra Krestos with the help of an Indian named Abdel-Kerim and an Egyptian head mason, and was noted for its scale and grandeur (Pankhurst 1999b). From a technological perspective, the Indian connection resulted in the innovative use of lime mortar and stone, resulting in a wholly new approach to building (incidentally the Cathedral of Maryam Zion at Aksum is the only 'Gondarene' style building beyond Lake Tana).

These settlements in the centre of the Amhara ancestral lands were intensively occupied during the early seventeenth century, and may be regarded as being transitional between the fully mobile camp and the magnificent capital city that would be founded at Gondar by Emperor Fasilidas in 1635–1636, an act that ushered in a new phase of urban development in the Horn of Africa. It should be noted however that the Emperor retained a number of smaller summer capitals nearby at Aringo and Yebara; as yet Gondar was not a wholly permanent capital. A satellite settlement pattern is thus apparent; there is retention of a limited degree of mobility perhaps represented at the sites of Goudera (a residence of Tekla Haymanot 1706–1708) and Sakala (Anfray 1970), all clustered in and around the immediate environs of Gondar.

The elite, secular structures are based upon military architecture, yet in practical terms are hardly useful fortifications. The overriding flavour is of pastiche (Berry 1989); copying Ottoman and Indian fortresses with the aim of making a very overt monumental statement, a statement of power, in fact. Crenellations and domed turrets predominate. Secular buildings tend towards rectangular plans. In this period, the architecture of more overt colonialism is also visible; the Jesuits, now positioning themselves at the centre of secular power, built on the grand scale. The church at Danqaz, for example, represents a magnificent example of transplanted, western European ecclesiastical architecture, here in the shape of a Latin cross. In fact it is possible to view the impact of this Jesuit-led 're-Christianisation' process along the same lines as the original conversion of Ezana. The archaeological and material culture correlates are strikingly similar (Kaplan 2004). The establishment of a Jesuit monastic community called 'Fremona' (the name refers directly to Frumentius) at Adwa meant that the Portuguese had positioned themselves close to the centre of ecclesiastical power (Pankhurst 1982: 192); the remains of the monastery can still be seen today.

Gondar itself marks the culmination of this process of 'semi-permanent' urbanism in the northern fringes of Lake Tana. Emperor Fasilidas (1632–1667), who founded Gondar, had already constructed a number of 'castles' or fortified palaces in the region at Guzara and Gorgora; Gondar recommended itself as a site for a likely settlement as it commanded a number of pre-existing trade routes, had good water supplies and was situated in an area where there was already a great deal of royal building activity.

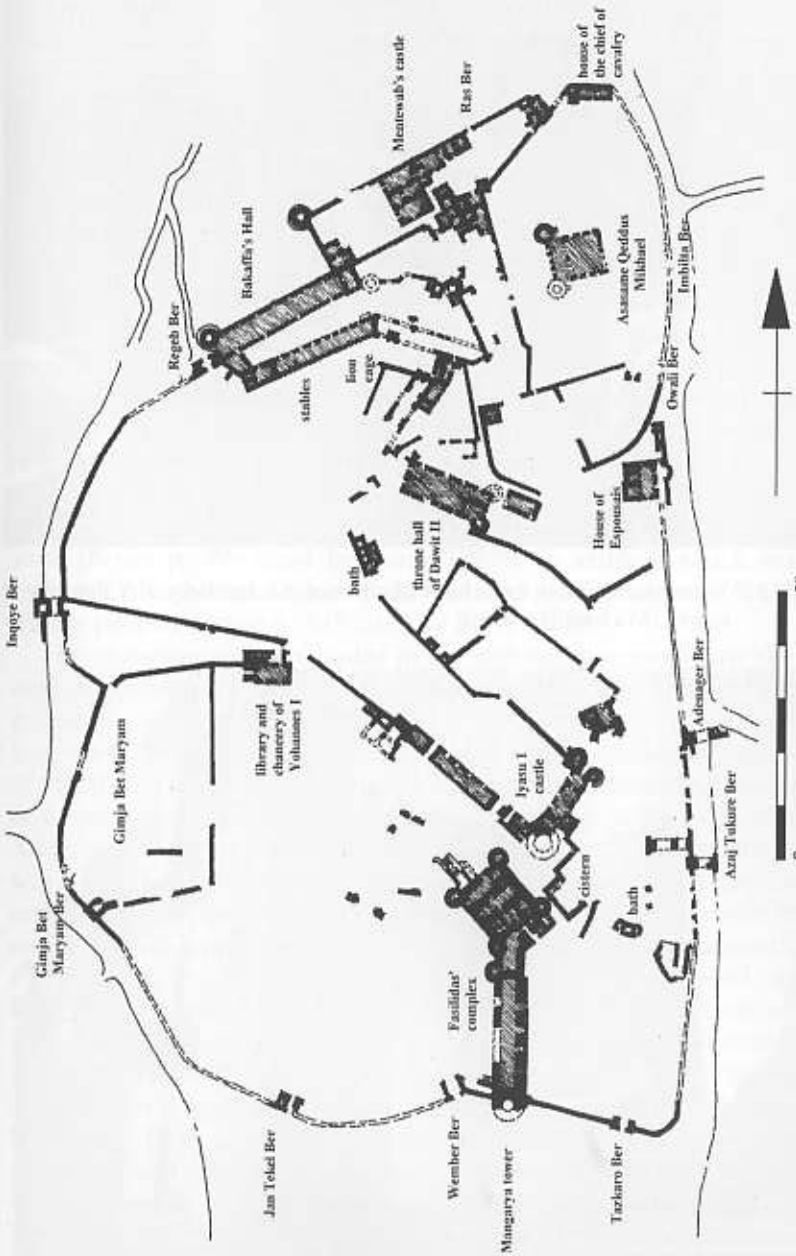

Figure 6.26 Plan of Gondar (after *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* 1938).

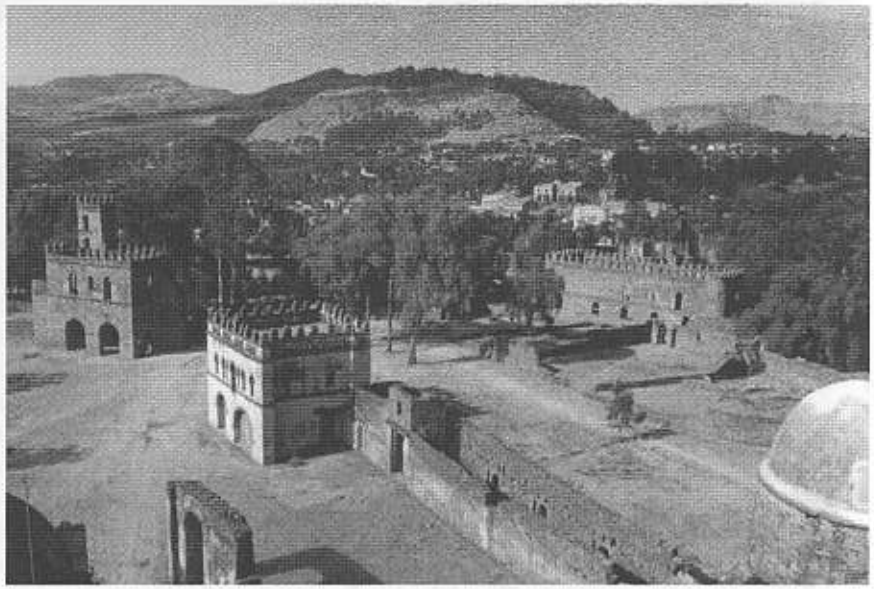

Figure 6.27 View over Gondar from Fasil Gimb roof; Chancellery of Yohannes at centre (Michael Harlow).

Figure 6.28 Gondar: Fasil Gimb (Michael Harlow).

Formally founded in the 1630s, the town grew rapidly to incorporate separate quarters for the royal elite, Christians, Muslims and also *Beta Israel*. The imperial compound itself is, essentially, a peripatetic encampment set in stone in a very distinctive architectural style. The five-turreted castle of Fasil, Fasil Gimb, was constructed between 1635 and 1636 (Figure 6.28); later buildings include the 'library' and chancellery of Yohannes and the castle of his son Iyasu 1 and a throne hall for Dawit III (1716–1721). Also within the compound are seven church buildings and a 'bath' complex which is today used for the *Timkat* ceremony. The whole royal area is surrounded by a wall containing 12 gates and beyond these walls is the royal convent and palace at Quesqwam built in the eighteenth century for the Empress Mentewab.

Although the architecture of the Gondarene period appears to suggest a rupture with the traditional, northern forms of architecture, at least some form of Aksumite survival may be witnessed in the depiction of crowns or headdresses on Gondarene miniatures (Juel-Jensen 1989), although in general the psychology of the period stressed change rather than continuity. Sovereigns such as Iyasu II (r. 1730–1755), for instance had, in the words of James Bruce himself, a 'fixed aversion to houses built by their predecessors' (Bruce p. 499 cited by Berry 1989), an attitude which may have reflected 'an ethos of neglect of the material past' among the Amhara and Tigray peoples (Bruce p. 127 cited by Berry 1989).

The abandonment of Gondar in the eighteenth century saw the beginning of an uneasy political period (*Zemana Mesafint*) and a return to the peripatetic court (Pankhurst 1982: 115ff.). The motif of this period is the fragmentation of the Christian state, and the establishment of a number of small local capitals across the kingdom. The late nineteenth century, however, saw the re-emergence of settled urbanism with the foundation of Addis Ababa, a site which had started life as an encampment founded when the original camp on the mountainside above at Entoto proved too uncomfortable (Pankhurst 1985: 206ff.). Archaeological remains from an earlier period have been noted in the vicinity of Entoto, suggesting that the strategic situation of the place had been long recognised, and that King Menelik II (r. 1865–1913) was aware of the strong historical thread and continuity tied to places in the landscape (Anfray 1987). According to Gebra Sellassie's Chronicle of his reign, it becomes clear that the king had a finely developed sense of his place within the wider sweep of the Ethiopian past. At a time when the Empire was undergoing an unprecedented expansion, the need to form a cohesive national identity was paramount.

Menelik identified himself with the kings of the fifteenth century and their expansion southwards prior to the conquests of Gragn; Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar (2001) note how Menelik engaged actively with the DAE, bringing the Aksumite past into a Christian context by incorporating

elements of pre-Christian material culture into the treasury of the Old Cathedral at Aksum. Through his siting of churches within newly conquered territories in the south (often on pagan sacred places) and the reuse and urbanisation of older, medieval imperial encampments, Menelik created a thread of continuity, a rooted sense of place in the new territories. Soon the camp at the springs of Felweha became Addis Ababa, now a city far removed from the archetype of the Ethiopian camp. In a panoply of recreated Solomonic-era ritual the last Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Sellassie was crowned here in November 1930; the scene is memorably described in Evelyn Waugh's *Black Mischief* (1932) capturing the moment of the transition between the psychology of the old royal encampment and a westernised African city as well as the end of medieval Ethiopia.

7

EPILOGUE

The past in the present

> 'They had nothing to fall back on—no kith or kin, not even a celebrated name in their genealogy. Their native land, where every handful of soil had represented to them the dust of their ancestors and the sweat of their brows, seemed no longer to matter'.
>
> (Danaichew Worku (1973) *The Thirteenth Sun* London: Heinemann p. 16)

In Ethiopia and Eritrea, deep-rooted histories and identities are worked out through the landscape. Daily references are made to ancient churches, miraculous deeds of holy men reported as if only yesterday's news, natural landscape features are empowered and embodied. It is a finely woven tapestry replete with meanings, and one is aware through oral history research just how attuned even the most ordinary people are to the nuances of the past. The landscape thus embodies rhythmed, cyclic, rather than linear time (Schmidt 1996). The recreation and reinterpretation of the past by kings such as Zar'a Ya'qob and Menelik II ('la politique des ruines' in the words of Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar (2001)), as well as the farmer or artisan at Aksum is commonplace. This diverse heritage has seized the western academic imagination, with perhaps undue emphasis upon certain chronological periods and certain geographical zones (this should be apparent from the structure of this book). Many archaeological narratives lie dormant, others ignored. This past has more than a symbolic meaning; it has a very practical role in the present too.

Cultural heritage management

In comparison with many other African nations, the Ethiopian approach to cultural heritage management is well balanced and progressive. Indigenous voices have now become heard; an impressive cohort of Ethiopian scholars

have made their mark, trained as graduate students in universities with strong Ethiopian links (Cambridge UK and Florida State, USA to name but two). These scholars have subsequently returned home to work for the antiquities authority (ARCCH) or within the University system, and have often been trained to a very high standard in modern archaeological methodology, computing, or environmental archaeology. It is also important to emphasise that the award of an excavation permit is conditional on the acceptance of trainees nominated from the national level as well as the regional level; these are often college students and in many cases this scheme has shown to be mutually beneficial to the western scholar and trainees alike. This allows for the creation of an intermediate cadre of heritage specialists at a more local level. Programmes of local lectures are not only informative, but useful means for building trust among people who are apt to regard excavation in the same league as treasure hunting (cf. Phillips 2005).

The post-excavation context is also important, bringing the museum into play. The National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa, for instance, possesses a unique set of material to use as a learning resource, but below this, at regional level, the obvious constraints on funding mean that there are no trained conservation personnel in the rural areas. The rural museum is still a very much hit and miss affair, although a happy exception is the museum at Aksum which, although shaped by successive excavators' ideas, and well-meant attempts at providing storage and signage, resulted in a rather incoherent visiting experience. This museum has recently, through the World Bank, received a large injection of funding and expertise which will result in an impressive resource which will have obvious educational and tourist benefits.

The presentation of the past is hugely important in a country like Ethiopia; whereas many African countries can offer beach or safari holidays, Ethiopia is best placed to play upon its heritage. The method of outreach should be through trained museum guides, based locally, whose expertise (and earnings) can feed back into the community. And there is also a question of image; could different stories, different narratives be stressed perhaps? As we have seen the story of Ethiopia's past is very highland-Christian-Semitic-centric, yet fragmenting the narratives and presenting individual pasts also has very obvious political connotations, as was the case in Zimbabwe (Ucko 1994). In mitigation, it is important to note that the first antiquities legislation framed after the 1974 Revolution explicitly stated that there should be an equal role for all cultures, a recognition of the plurality of the Ethiopian heritage discourse, yet also a trend which reflected the political ideology of the *Dergue* (Seyoum 1989).

Moving beyond the museum, it is clear that a more overt landscape archaeology context needs to be developed making for a more integrated and holistic experience. Aksum for instance would benefit from a more

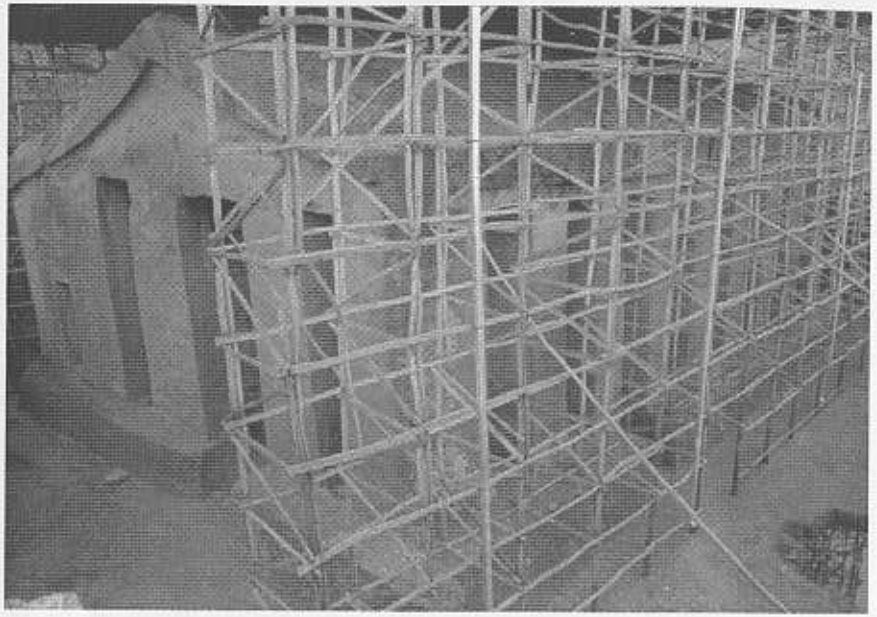

Figure 7.1 Building conservation, Ganneta Maryam, Lalibela, using eucalyptus scaffold and tin roofing.

integrated management, conservation and enhancement approach (Finneran 2006). Archaeological sites in Ethiopia are subject to a range of protection strategies; currently there are seven UNESCO world heritage sites in Ethiopia: Lalibela (1978); Simien National Park (1978); Gondar (1979); Aksum (1980); Tiya (1980); the Lower Awash Valley (1980) and the Lower Omo Valley (1980). These encompass 'archaeological' sites as well as sites of natural significance, although this status does not guarantee the sort of financial assistance so badly needed by the Ethiopian Government to enhance their conservation and presentation. Five Eritrean sites are under consideration for WHS status: Adulis, the Dahlac Islands, Matara, Qohaito and Naqfa. The latter was the site of the headquarters of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front during the war of liberation, a factor which highlights the varied strands of what constitutes heritage 'value'.

Another strategy which is useful for local involvement as well as acting as a self-sustaining research and planning tool is the creation and development of a sites and monuments record; this has recently been put in place in the Shire region where a basic list of all sites and their GPS co-ordinates has been entered upon a map referenced with descriptive survey sheets. This is low maintenance and can be understood by all. It has the added advantage of easy conversion to computerised databases should

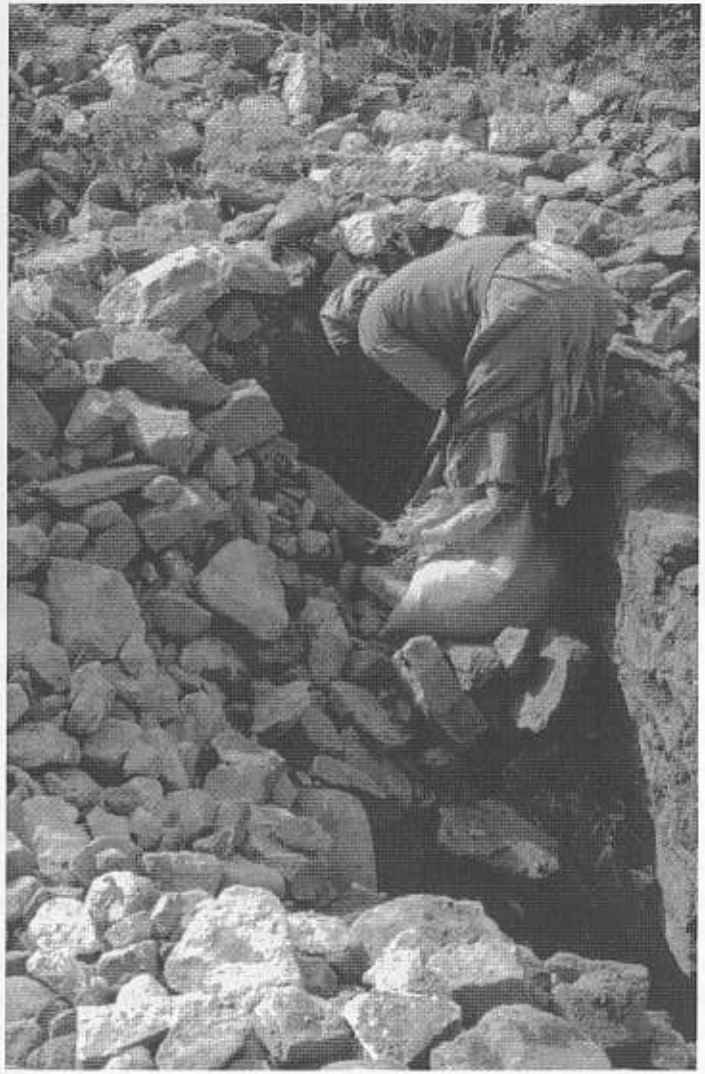

Figure 7.2 Illicit excavation at the Aksumite period town of Mai Adrasha (Shire, 2001).

the opportunity arise (Finneran 2004). These records allow for a swift and accurate threat assessment and in one case has seen the successful 'listing' or scheduling of an at risk site in Shire (Phillips and Tekle 2004). The ARCCH does envisage more emphasis towards landscape survey rather than destructive excavation which results in massive demands upon conservation, museum and storage structures, and as such survey can be conducted in a research-led or rescue context. The latter problem has been

highlighted by the work of Steven Brandt and his international team on the proposed dam site in south-western Ethiopia (Brandt *et al.* 2004). In any case where excavation is required, it has to be undertaken responsibly and accurately, using sound stratigraphic and single-context recording methods.

It is still, however, the issue of the portable antiquity which is the major concern. The situation is not as grave as, for instance Nigeria (although the case of archaeological looting from the site of Mai Adrasha, Shire presents a recent and worrying trend of illicit excavation, see Asamerew et al. 2002) but there are still major issues with both the smuggling of antiquities as well as the problem of repatriation. The saga of the return of Aksum's stela two from Rome (not exactly a portable antiquity) has dragged on for decades and at the time of writing is finally nearing an end (the whole process has been eloquently documented by Richard Pankhurst; Pankhurst 2006a; b). Less well known, however, is the issue of the church tabots removed by the Napier expedition in 1868 and now held in storage at the British Museum (see www.Afromet.org the website of the Association for the Return of the Maqdala treasure). Not even the most ardent art historian of Ethiopian Christian culture would describe them as intrinsically beautiful yet their symbolic value is immense. Similarly medieval and post-medieval manuscripts are eminently portable, and these too find their way into western collections via illegal means. It is not only the theft of these manuscripts which presents a major issue for conservation, but also the circumstances of their storage within monasteries. The fire at the library of Debre Damo in 1996 was devastating, yet who are we, as western scholars, to demand the removal of books which have immense significance for the communities where they are kept? At the time of writing an ambitious cataloguing project focusing upon the treasuries of major Ethiopian monasteries is under way, funded by the European Union and under the direction of the French scholar Jacques Mercier (European Union 2003).

The story of the theft of the Lalibela cross (*Afro Ayigeba*) from the Church of Medhane Alem in 1997 did have a happy ending, in so far as the piece was returned to Ethiopia but the Belgian antiques collector at the centre of the crime was never charged and was even recompensed for buying stolen goods! Easier to export are Aksumite coins, which are prized by numismatists. Even when they have not been illegally obtained, the repatriation of portable antiquities such as coins can be a difficult exercise. The dispersal of the Munro-Hay Aksumite coin collection is a signal example of the problems surrounding reparation of cultural material; a large proportion of the collection was purchased by the Ethiopian Government from the collector – much to the consternation of a number of Ethiopian scholars – but they have yet to be put on

Figure 7.3a The symbolism of stela three in a religious context. The Patriarch and Nebura'ed enthroned in front of stela three, Festival of Maryam Zion, 1995 (Michael Harlow).

Figure 7.3b The symbolism of stela three in a political context. Badge of the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (1997).

Figure 7.4 Past and present at Aksum: multiple pasts juxtaposed; from left the stela-like bell tower of the 1966 'New Cathedral'; centre: fragment of the Aksumite period stela four ('Stela of the Lances'); at right the bell tower of the seventeenth-century Old Cathedral (Michael Harlow).

permanent display (Phillipson 2005b). These are just some of the major practical issues which are bound up with the appreciation of this rich and diverse heritage.

Retrospect and prospect

> 'The peoples of the region (Ethiopia) have a very long experience of living with one another'.
>
> (Clapham 2002: 51)

In this book I have attempted to address a number of wide-ranging and complimentary issues. First, I have attempted to present an overarching and up-to-date synthesis of the archaeology of the greater Ethiopian region. Second, in line with the theme developed in Chapter 1, a geographical rather than political approach to the subject has been taken (as Clapham 2002 emphasises in line with historiography) and I have tried, where such data exists, to provide a balanced account of archaeologies of different communities. I have attempted therefore to break free of what

might be termed the Christian and highland or Semitic-centric approaches of other works. Third, I have attempted to situate these data within current Africanist and world archaeological debate, addressing themes and case studies rather than providing a generalised narrative. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, I have tried to relate these different case studies to the main issue of the creation and maintenance of a cultural identity; what it means, from a material culture perspective, to be 'Ethiopian', 'Eritrean', Christian, Muslim, Oromo, Beja, or Afar (to name but a few). In a country such as Ethiopia, which suffers unfairly from something of an identity crisis within the western consciousness, the diverse pasts which underpin the identities in the region have a very important role to play, psychologically and financially. It is to be hoped that the present work has gone some little way to giving voice to these concerns and hopes.

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Abbreviations used

Journals

AAR: *African Archaeological Review*
AE: *Annales d 'Éthiopie*
JES: *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*
RSE: *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*

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