This is a preliminary account of the research undertaken in the second year of renewed archaeological investigation of the ancient Ethiopian capital at Aksum. The current programme, begun in 1993 with a planned duration of five years, is sponsored by The British Institute in Eastern Africa, with additional support from The Society of Antiquaries of London, The McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in the University of Cambridge, The British Academy and The British Museum. An account of the first season has appeared in an earlier issue of Nyame Akuma (Phillipson 1994a).

Work was conducted in Ethiopia during the period from October 20 to December 22, 1994. The research programme followed the project’s overall strategy, as outlined in the earlier report. Attention was concentrated on tombs associated with the major stelae, while test excavations were conducted in the outlying “Gudit Stele Field” and in an area of domestic occupation. Survey was also carried out within the precinct of Maryam Tsion Cathedral and (at the request of the Ethiopian authorities) on an intended building site in the immediate vicinity of the main stelae. The project’s work was throughout greatly facilitated by the active encouragement of the Ethiopian authorities, national, regional and ecclesiastical. The maximum number of people employed on the project at any one time was 107.

Highlights of the season were the further elucidation of the monumental complex formed by the largest of the Aksumite stelae and its associated tombs, together with establishment of the original site of the second-largest stela which is currently in Rome. Further evidence was recovered of the importance of ivory in Aksum’s economy and of the skill with which it was worked. An important area of domestic occupation was located and will be a focus of more intensive excavation in 1995. Survey of the cathedral precinct has confirmed that area’s great research potential.

The Mausoleum

This tomb, which had seen intensive work in 1993 (Phillipson 1994b), was further investigated under the supervision of Mr Michael Harlow. It is a large stone structure, associated with the largest of the Aksumite stelae (Stela 1), probably dating to the early fourth century A.D. It covers an area some 17 by 15 metres, comprising a central passage with five sidechambers on either side. In 1994, two sidechambers were totally excavated (Figure 1), as was the greater part of a third. It was found that these, like the central passage, had been largely but not completely cleared in antiquity, before being filled with debris and rubbish; some materials apparently dating to the original deposit were, however, recovered. Clearance of the brick arch located in 1993 at the western end of the central passage revealed that the granite roof-slabs did not continue further. It was therefore necessary to excavate on a large scale down from the modern surface in order to investigate the western side of the arch. This excavation eventually reached a depth of 5.4 metres and revealed the presence of a second, broken, megalithic portal (Figure 2) nearly identical to that preserved at the Mausoleum’s eastern end. The two entrances to the tomb thus appear to have been symmetrical. The area to the west remains imperfectly understood and will require further investigation next year; the new excavation was roofed at a depth of 2.0 metres prior to backfilling in order to facilitate this. It is hoped that work on the Mausoleum will be concluded in 1995. Measures have been taken to secure the preservation of the plaster which still adheres to many of the structure’s internal walls. Part of the monument’s archaeological deposits will be preserved intact for future investigators; those sidechambers not excavated will be walled up for security and also to maintain the humidity of the deposits.

The Tomb of the Brick Arches

This tomb, located some 25 m east of the standing Stela 3 but not apparently associated with any particular stela, was further investigated under the supervision of Mr Jess Tipper, assisted
Figure 1: Sidechamber F of the Mausoleum, viewed from the central passage. Scales: 50 cm.

Figure 2: The west end of the Mausoleum, viewed from the modern surface, with the intact brick arch and broken portal.
by Ato Getu Degefa. It comprises four rock-cut chambers, their floor being approximately 10 metres below the modern ground surface, and is approached by means of a 12-metre-long adit with 18 surviving stone steps. The tomb probably dates to the late third century A.D.

Work was restricted to the second chamber, where a mass of archaeological material had been located and partially excavated in 1993. An account of the discoveries will shortly be published in Antiquaries Journal (Phillipson in press), so only brief details will be given here. The chamber contained substantial quantities of pottery, both intact and broken, with metalwork and glass akin to that recovered during the previous season. Its disorder confirmed the view that the tomb’s contents had been disturbed by robbers. The depth of deposit was significantly greater than had been expected. The lower levels were found to contain substantial quantities of carved ivory, much of it crushed by fallen stones. Over two dozen plaques were apparently represented, each decorated with concentric circles around a central copper-alloy boss (Figure 3). The chamber was completely cleared and the disposition of its contained artifacts recorded in detail. Work in 1995 can thus concentrate initially on the two loculi in the eastern wall of the chamber, whence many of the artifacts recovered on the chamber floor may originally have derived.

The site of Stela 2

Detailed study of plans prepared by the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition in 1906 (Littmann et al. 1913) had permitted the 1993 team to locate within acceptably narrow limits the former situation of Stela 2, which was taken to Rome in 1938 (Monneret de Villard 1938). Trial excavations in 1994, supervised by Ms Jenny Jones, revealed the exact site where this monument had stood. Stone slabs were unearthed which had formed the base and south side of the original stela pit (Figure 4). There were indications that the stela may have been intentionally destabilised many centuries ago. Extensive modern disturbance containing fragments of Italian beer bottles showed the extent of works associated with its eventual removal. It appears, however, that the lower levels in this area are essentially undisturbed. There is thus good likelihood that detailed excavation of the site will prove exceptionally informative. Certainly, it should be thoroughly investigated before any attempt is made to return the stela to its original site.

Areas of domestic occupation

Trial excavations were conducted in the area on the northern edge of the ancient city, beside the track to the Tombs of Kaleb and Gebra Maskal, where surface indications of domestic occupation had been noted in 1993. Dispersed trenches opened under Ms Jones’s supervision indicated that, contrary to initial expectations, archaeological deposits were preserved to greater depth in the higher, more northerly, parts of the area, further from the modern town. Stone walls were located which showed signs of repeated repair and alteration (Figure 5); these were associated with stratified deposits up to 2.0 metres deep, extending back to at least the sixth century A.D. There is thus a strong likelihood that more extensive excavation, which is planned for 1995, will permit recovery of material illustrating the domestic economy, as well as the establishment of an artifact typology for late Aksumite and post-Aksumite times.

Maryam Tsion Cathedral and its environs

Permission was graciously granted by the ecclesiastical authorities to conduct a detailed survey of the Cathedral precinct at Aksum, including the Old Cathedral of Maryam Tsion and the Aksumite podium on which it stands (Figures 6 and 7). Plans and sections were produced by Mr. Alistair Jackson and a photographic record made by of all features of archaeological significance. Mr. Michael Mallinson was able to make a detailed examination of the Old Cathedral structure and to offer advice on its maintenance and conservation. It became apparent in the course of this examination that part of the Old Cathedral, immediately west of the innermost sanctuary, is older than the rest of the building; it appears that the destruction of ca. 1535 was not complete and that, when the Cathedral was rebuilt in the seventeenth century, a surviving part of the older structure was incorporated.

The project was requested to evaluate the archaeological potential of a site lying to the east
Figure 3: Ivory plaque carved with concentric rings around a metal stud: chamber B, Tomb of the Brick Arches. Scale in millimetres.

Figure 4: The site of Stela 2. The stone slab in the centre marks the base of the stela-pit, that beyond it being the pit's displaced southern side. The carved base-plate in the foreground near the modern surface has no connection with Stela 2. Scale in 50-cm units.
Figure 5: Stone walls, showing several stages of modification, at the northern domestic area (trench D6). Scale: 50 cm.

of the main stelae, where building is proposed by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The site was carefully examined and five test trenches excavated. As a result it was possible to report that the proposed building site is of no archaeological significance.

The “Gudit Stelae Field”

Excavations commenced at this site on the western edge of Aksum, under the supervision of Ato Ayele Tarekegn who is now researching Aksumite burial customs as a Ph.D. project at Cambridge University. The site is apparently demarcated by a terrace; and a trench was opened across this, revealing a well preserved retaining wall with, behind it, a stone platform approached by a flight of steps.

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Figure 6: Plan of the Old Cathedral at Aksum, on its ancient podium.
Figure 7: The Old Cathedral of Saint Mary of Zion, set on its ancient podium. The photograph was taken from the top of the modern bell-tower which lies about 100 m northwest of the Old Cathedral. The small domed building is the Cathedral Treasury, built in the 1960s.

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