

New Readings: A Centenary After The Publication Of The “Deutsche Aksum Expedition”*

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It is generally agreed, that the “Deutsche Aksum Expedition” (DAE) is not only the beginning of scientific research on the Aksumite culture, but its culmination as well, despite major works undertaken since then, especially by British archaeologists. Phillipson's commented translation of the DAE publication demonstrates this very clearly. However, some critical remarks may be allowed on several statements made by the DAE, for they bear one danger beyond the responsibility of Littmann and his fellow members of the expedition: there is a tendency to take for granted opinions of undoubtedly eminent scholars such as Littmann without any further critical examination. An extreme example of similar kind occurred in Cuneiform Studies, where the leading expert on Sumerian, Professor Adam Falkenstein, once stated in class, that the sun rised in the West, which caused severe confusion in the Weltbild of a whole generation of Assyriologists!¹ To make one thing clear: I do not intend to indulge in fault-finding – such idle cavilling could do no harm to the remarkable achievements of the DAE anyway – but rather to demonstrate how dangerous it can be, when one publication is as dominant as the DAE. The publication of the Second Littmann Conference, which saw the well-deserved tribute paid to Enno Littmann in form of a newly named street in Aksum, seems to be the appropriate place for these remarks, especially as they are the result of personal on-site experience on this occasion. I should like to begin with the

* As it took time until this article went to print, there are aspects which are outdated by now: Recently the Sana'a' branch of the German Archaeological Institute has started working at Yeha under the direction of Iris Gerlach and provided a completely new basis for the reconstruction of the long known temple, see S. Japp et al., Yeha and Hawelti – Cultural Contacts between Saba and Daamat. New Research of the German Archaeological Institute in Ethiopia, in: PSAS 41. However, I shall not refrain from presenting my observations of that time. In addition, I wish to refer to C. Robin – A. de Maigret, Le grand temple de Yéha (Tigray, Éthiopie), in: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, Comptes Rendus 1998, 737-98, which I had overlooked previously.

¹ Personal communication by Prof. W. Schenkel, my own respected teacher, who witnessed Falkenstein's statement and the reaction of his students.

correction of some minor mistakes made by the DAE and consequently handed down in scientific literature. Some of them cannot even be called mistakes but rather assumptions that have by now acquired the status of facts. The second part of this essay is a report on work in progress, closely related to the DAE and in a way the result of the conference.

1. On the Reconstruction of Aksumite Buildings and Monuments

Every reconstruction is a hazardous business, it is to a certain degree subjective and thus presents an easy target for critique. A nice example is Phillipson's sweeping remark on the way in which Krencker reconstructed *Ta'aka Maryam*² although, his drawing seems to be quite appropriate. In my opinion, reconstruction drawings are very important, because they get to the heart of archaeological excavation and they make them understandable for non-specialists. It has, however, to be kept in mind, that they in a way restrict the possible views. One possibility to counteract this phenomenon would be to present several different reconstructions.

There is for example the famous and often reprinted drawing of the Aksumite monumental thrones as reconstructed by Krencker. As far as the thrones themselves and the pillars are concerned, there can be no complaint, but the roof deserves closer examination. Krencker was an architect. Therefore he looks at the thrones and their pillars as a builder. For him, massive stone pillars were necessary to carry a heavy roof, in this case one of those thatched roofs so common in Tigray (1906). I for my part do not believe Krencker's reconstruction is correct, because we always have to consider the purpose and function of the monument. Why should there be a massive, i.e., permanent, roof on these thrones? From the inscriptions we know that they were erected as monuments commemorating victorious military achievements. There is no indication of statues or other installations put up on them. The traces of footstools rather suggest, that they were actually used as thrones, probably by the reigning king during his victory ceremony. The existence of permanent roofs therefore seems rather unlikely. The function of a permanent roof can hardly have been to protect the granite thrones from heavy rain or even the sun. There must be another explanation for the pillars. Of course, pillars always carry something, but this must not necessarily be a roof. It could just as well be some sort of baldachin. Even today, huge embroidered parasols are an obligatory requisite in every religious procession in Ethiopia – not as much as to protect the participants against the sun but rather to ensure the sacred aura of the persons, objects and actions involved. In many cultures of antiquity, rulers were protected against evil spirits or the looks of commoners by means of parasols or baldachins and even today in many societies, especially in Africa and Asia, kings disappear behind curtains and other textiles. We know very little about the status of the

2 D.W. Phillipson, *The Monuments of Aksum*, Addis Ababa 1997, s.v. *Ta'aka Maryam*.

Aksumite king as far as this aspect is concerned, but some details suggest a certain degree of sacredness attributed to him, for example his gold-plated nimbus on the coins.

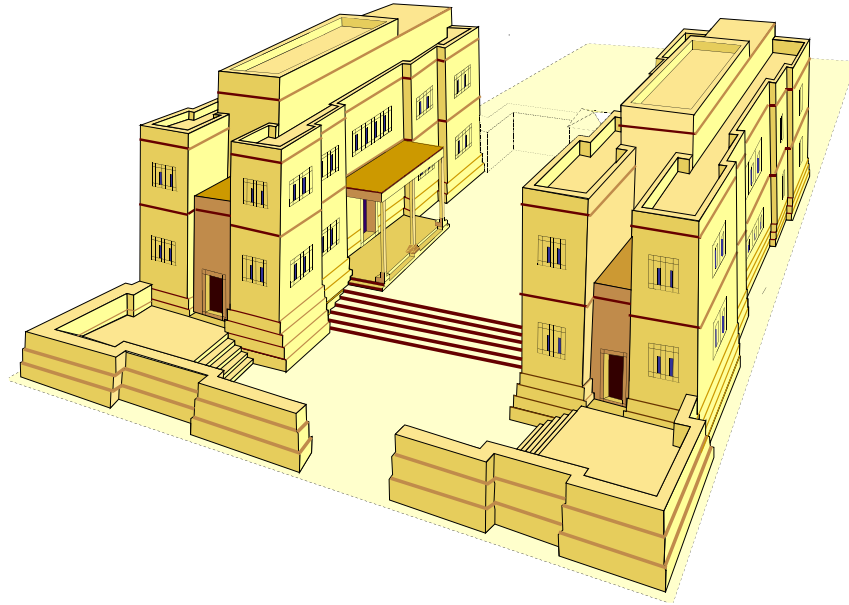


Fig. 1: Krencker's reconstruction of Ta'aka Maryam (cp. Phillipson 1997)

One fact has always puzzled me: Krencker gives drawings of several smaller and badly preserved (today vanished) buildings, but not one of the “Tomb of Kaleb”. This is particularly striking, for here we are in a comparatively good position for reconstruction. The tombs were most likely part of a double church and for Aksumite sacral architecture we have numerous still existing parallels in contrary to profane architecture. I have therefore tried to make my own reconstruction based on the DAE drawings of church buildings like *Däbrä Dammo* (DAE II:171) and *Asmära* (DAE II:195).

When visiting the “Tomb of Kaleb” during the conference, I noticed one detail missing on the DAE-plan of the buildings. On the two stairs leading from the court between the two platforms, you can clearly see a hole in the large stone slab forming the doorstep. This inconspicuous hole is in fact of great importance, because it gives evidence about the entrance situation. The block is what archaeologists call a “Türangelstein”, the hole serves as a hinge for the door.³

In *’Aṣḥafi* / *’Addi Ṣāḥafi* on the other hand, a big stoneslab has been labeled as a “doorstep” (DAE II: 76, Abb. 160d “Türschwelle (?)”) where there is another,

3 See D. Arnold, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Baukunst*, Zürich 1994, 268, where the above drawing is taken from.

more plausible explanation for it. In referring to the monuments of 'Addi Şāḥafi, Krencker speaks of "*Fruchtpressen*" und he described how this type of fruit press works:

"Allem Anschein nach haben wir es mit alten Keltern zu tun, denen nicht unähnlich, die noch heute in Syrien als Weitraubenpressen im Gebrauch sind, und auch dort möglichst aus gewachsenem Felsen herausgehauen zu werden pflegen. Eine solche syrische Presse besteht aus zwei Behältern, einem weiten, flachen, in dessen Rückwand starke Balken so eingestemmt werden, daß durch Hinunterdrücken des anderen freien Endes die in der Mitte untergelegten, zu dicken Ballen zusammenschnürten und mit großer Steinplatte bedeckten Trauben ausgepreßt werden." (DAE II:74)



Fig. 2 (Left): Reconstruction of an Aksumite door with the "Türangelstein", the hole serving as a hinge for the door (by the author).

Fig. 3 (Right): Detail of the "Tomb of Kaleb", hole in the large stone slab forming the doorstep (photo by the author).

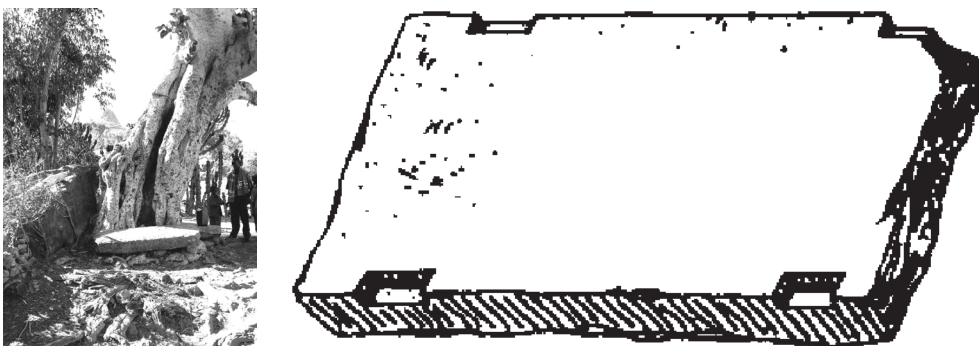


Fig. 4 (Left): Large stoneslab at 'Aṣḥafi (photo by the author).

Fig. 5 (Right): Large stoneslab (drawing from DAE II: 76, Abb. 160d).

Now, if we know that large stoneslabs were used and we find one right at the spot, are we not forced to connect the two pieces of evidence, especially if this slab shows traces of fastening.

Even at the famous temple of *Yäḥa*⁴, interesting new discoveries can be made just by looking carefully. The DAE assumed that the upper level of the front stairs was on the same as the upper step of the podium, but this is not the case.



Fig. 6 (Left): The Great Temple of Yäḥa and front stairs (photo by the author).

Fig. 7 (Right): The front stairs of the Great Temple of Yäḥa (photo by the author).

The stairs rather end in alignment of the third podium step from above, which means, that the stairs were far less monumental. Another inaccuracy concerns the inner part of the building, especially the Adyton. According to the Krencker, the Adyton was separated by means of massive walls, of which nothing has remained. The question arises why anyone would build an inner wall in stonework not directly as part of the whole construction, but dovetailed. This would lead to considerable instability. One reason could be, that the Adyton was built in a secondary phase, but this cannot be the case, as the very regular and intended gaps in the masonry show. In my opinion, there can be no doubt on the nature of the construction, which must have been of wood. The beams were let into the outer wall with metal clamps (DAE II, Abb. 173). Now the floor of the temple has been cleared, one can easily detect the alignment of this wooden partition and the podium in line with it. It is wall e) on the DAE-plan, supposed to be of later date (DAE II:82), which remains to be proved. At least the slabs of the podium give a very regular expression – at least, they can hardly be secondarily used blocks. Be it, as it may, there are more features, the DAE could not have noticed, since they did not have time enough for excavation: immediately at the inner side of the outer wall, we find massive stone benches. They are a very characteristic feature of Old South Arabian

⁴ No further work has been done on the temple but J. Doresse, *Les Premiers Monuments Chrétiens de L'Éthiopie et l'Église Archaique de Yeha*, *Novum Testamentum* 1, 1956, 209ff.

temples and remind us of the ceremonial feasts often mentioned in Epigraphic South Arabic inscriptions. The most important point in my observations apart from the different form of the stairs is another doorstep with one and only one borehole. This hinge is placed not far inside the “doorframe”, but right at the outer edge. In this respect, Krencker's reconstruction of the *Yāḥa* temple and the others based on the DAE⁵ has to be changed considerably. With closed door, the outer façade of the temple was one even surface. Here my own reconstruction:

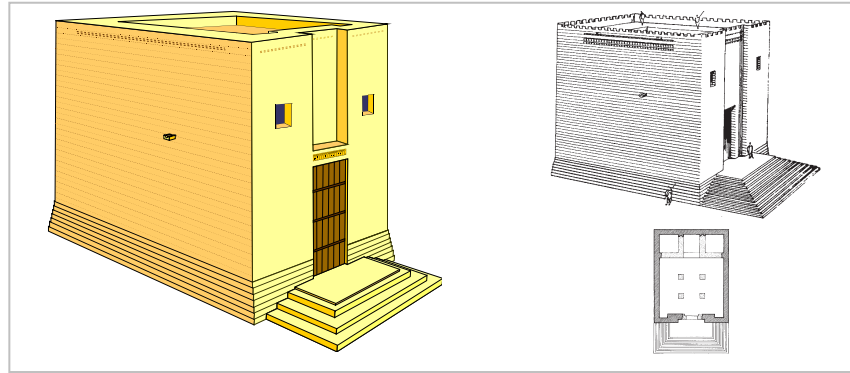


Fig. 8: Reconstruction of the *Yāḥa* temple (by the author).

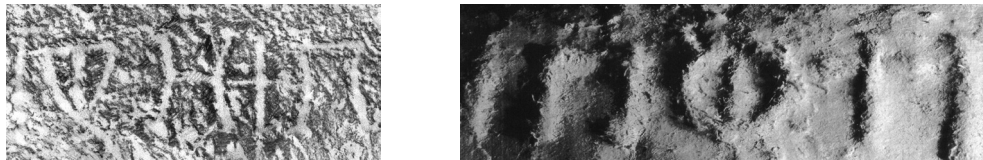


Fig. 9: The “trilingual” ‘Ezana inscription, ‘Ezana Park (Photos by the author).



Fig. 10: Plaque erected for Littmann nearby May Shum, Aksum, at the Littmann Street inaugurated during the Enno Littmann Conference (Photo by the author).

5 J. Schmidt, Zur altsüdarabischen Tempelarchitektur, in: Archäologische Berichte aus dem Jemen 1, 1982 (161-169) 162f.

2. New Copies of the Aksumite Royal Inscriptions

During the Littmann Conference in Aksum, S. Wenig asked me to prepare a new translation of the royal inscriptions for the announced two volumes on Aksum. In this connection, the idea came up, that a new copy (in some cases the first copy) of the inscription in the Museum, the ‘Ezana Park and the Cathedral should be made. Fisseha Zibelo of the Tigray Tourism Commission and the Nəburä’id of Aksum were so kind as to give me permission for doing so. I owe them both a debt of gratitude for their help. I also happened to be very fortunate that all the necessary equipment was at hand in local shops (!), i.e., large size sheets of paper (A1 blotting paper for the squeezes and satin-finished paper for the rubs), water-proof felt-tip pens and transparent and soft plastic film of 3 x 1,5 m size adhesive tape and more.

In consideration of the fact, that texts carved in stone are not very common in Ethiopia, some short remarks may be allowed on the different methods for copying such inscriptions. In general, it has to be distinguished between hand copy and facsimile copy. Both should be supplemented with photographs, which can also be the basis of facsimile copies drawn at the computer. For this purpose it is advisable to prepare the stela beforehand to increase the contrast. This can for example be achieved through dusting with talcum powder (there was no talcum in Aksum, so I had to use baby powder instead, which gave the stelae a nice smell). In any case the inscription should carefully be cleaned before copying, if possible. Before you start, you have to be sure what you want the copy for. A lot depends on the nature of the object and its preservation. There are three main methods:

1. The squeeze (cliché)
2. The rub
3. The facsimile copy on plastic film



Squeezes are made of soaking-wet paper (preferable adhesive-free like blotting paper), which is brushed on or rather in the inscription. After having dried, the paper can be taken off and the result is an accurate copy. The advantage of a squeeze is, that you can have a three-dimensional impression, disadvantages are the restriction on inscriptions without paint and the fact, that you not only have every trace of a letter on your paper but the irregularities and cracks of the stone as well. The same holds true for the rub, where very thin paper is used. Like tourists with tombstones in graveyards and Abbeys, the Epigraphist then rubs over the paper with thick lead pencils or graphite.

Fig. 11: The process of squeezing of the ‘Ezana inscription, ‘Ezana Park (by the author).

Rubs can only be made of inscriptions not too deeply carved on a very smooth surface. The third method is much more demanding. A transparent plastic film is clamped tightly over the stela and the inscription is copied by hand and sign by sign. This is not only very tiring, but requires a profound knowledge on the inscription beforehand, because you only copy what you see and you only see what you know! Besides, the plaque erected for Littmann (fig. 10) is a very nice example of how badly inscriptions are copied when the copyist does not know the language written. The light plays a crucial part in copying on plastic film. Missing illumination is not a disadvantage – on the contrary. The reason is, that with hand mirrors or torches the source of the light can be determined punctually and changed if needed, which means that you can look at the signs from different angles and under lighting conditions by changing the direction of the shadows. Impressions like the squeezes can also be obtained by means of latex, and these moulds can also serve as matrices for further plaster casts. Unfortunately, the necessary source materials were not available in Aksum.

I did squeezes of the famous ‘Ezāna stela now housed in the so-called ‘Ezāna-Garden/Park. Its verso is badly damaged and extremely difficult to read. The last line of the Gə‘əz version has an *hapax legomenon* (*swt*) and as Littmann made no special remark, this passage has remained questionable. It could just as well have been a mistake made during the copying process, but the squeeze once again proves Littmann's accuracy.



Fig. 12: Photo and squeeze of the last line of the Gə‘əz version, ‘Ezana inscription, ‘Ezana Park (by the author).