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David W. Phillipson

Aksum, Maryam Tsion

In the northern part of Aksum's Old Town, a roughly circular area, now largely enclosed by a stone wall, comprises the Cathedral Precinct. For two thousand years this has been an exceptionally prominent location, immediately in front of the royal burial area, use of which began in pre-Christian times (Phillipson 2012: 139–149; Canavas, this volume). The precinct was accorded considerable attention by the 1906 Deutsche Aksum-Expedition (Fig. 1; DAE 2: 136–140; DAE 3: 75–85; Phillipson 1997: 169–178), although the investigations of both Daniel Krencker and Theodor v. Lüpke were hindered by their poor relations with the priests (Phillipson 2011: 136, 143–145). Since the mid-twentieth century, as discussed below, the precinct has contained two churches of Maryam, here designated the Old and the New Cathedrals; but for the greater part of its history there was only one. In the far western extremity of the precinct was the former round church of *Arba'etu Ensesa* (= the Four Animals) set in its own walled compound entered – as it is today – from outside the main precinct (Fig. 2; DAE 3: Abb. 175, 210; Phillipson 2011: 144–145). Until the New Cathedral was built, this was sometimes referred to as 'the women's church'.

THE OLD CATHEDRAL AND ADJACENT BUILDINGS

The Old Cathedral of Aksum enjoys unparalleled prestige and sanctity, and is widely regarded – at least informally – as the mother-church of Ethiopia, being popularly accepted as the direct successor to Ethiopia's first Christian church whose actual site it probably occupies; it is also deemed the repository of the Ark of the Covenant. Both these beliefs are evaluated in later sections of this chapter. Most of the

present structure dates from the mid-seventeenth century, although hints that it incorporates part of an older building have recently been confirmed (Phillipson 1995: 35). The structure seen today is often popularly attributed to the Portuguese, whose architectural influence is indeed apparent, but it seems that it was in fact erected more than a decade after they had been expelled (Caraman 1985: 154–158). By tradition, women are not admitted to the Old Cathedral or its surrounding compound.

The Old Cathedral has been – and still is – known by a variety of names: those most commonly applied today are Maryam Tsion (sometimes anglicised as St Mary of Zion) or Aksum Tsion. These names are encountered in numerous variant forms: for example, Tsion may be spelled as Tseyon or Seyon, and Maryam as Mariam; Enda Tsion also occurs, while the DAE generally opted for *Zionskirche*. There is further controversy over the applicability of the term 'cathedral', for the use of which in this context no incidence seems to have been recognised prior to the twentieth century (Monneret de Villard 1938): the term has no Ethiopian equivalent other than *gabaza* which is more appropriately translated 'guardian' or 'sanctuary' (Habtemichael 2005), and may have been adopted by foreigners merely to indicate the buildings' superior status.

It is convenient to begin this discussion with the detailed – but by no means infallible – account and illustrations of the DAE (DAE 2: 136–140; DAE 3: 75–85), produced during the months January–April 1906, since they represent the oldest comprehensive record extant. As noted in an earlier volume of this series (Phillipson 2011: 145), the DAE personnel were not admitted to the eastern parts of the Old Cathedral's interior, and their hypothetical plan of this area has since been shown to be erroneous. v. Lüpke's plans of the precinct gen-

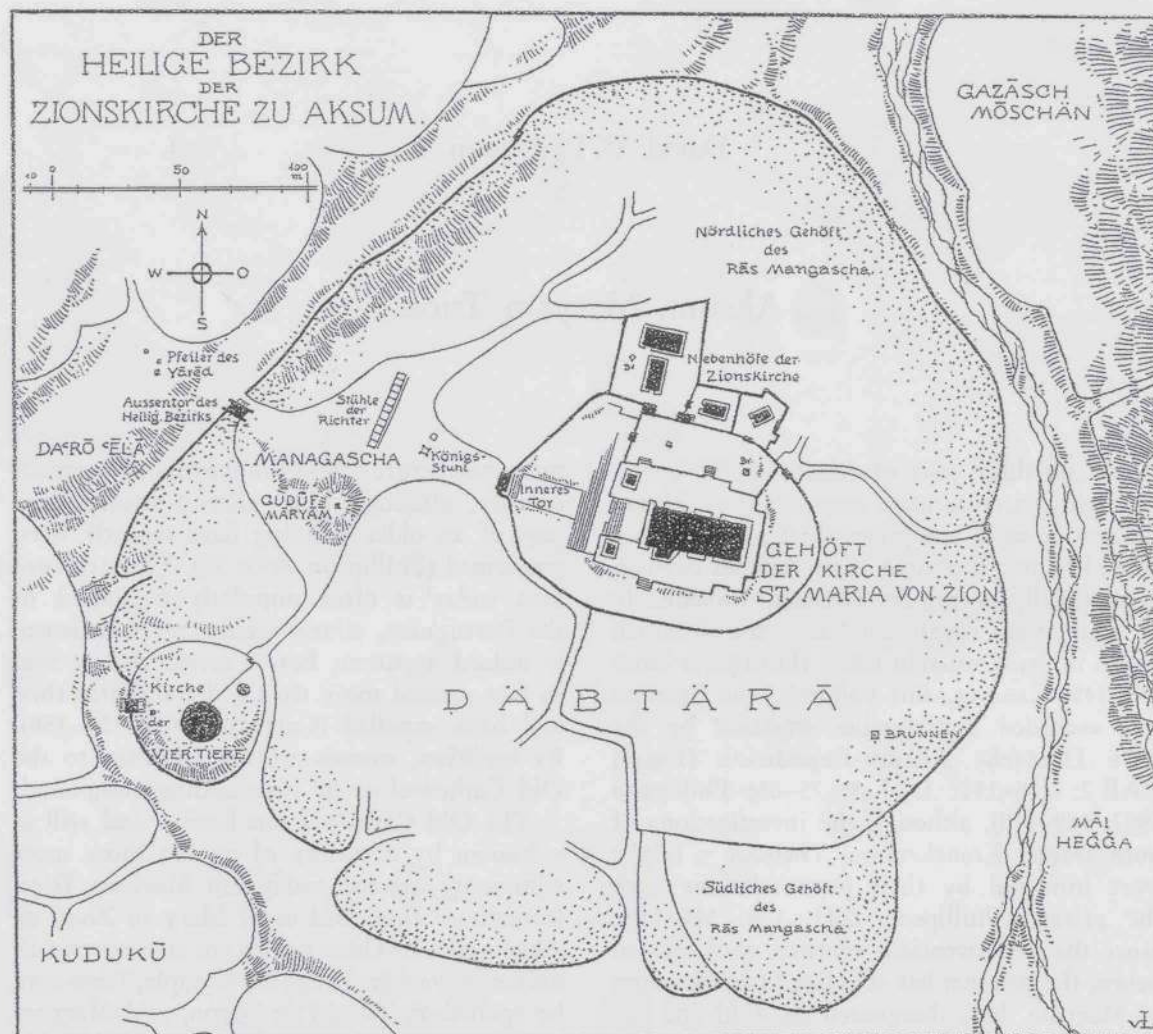


Fig. 1 v. Lüpke's sketch-plan of the Cathedral Precinct (DAE 2: Abb. 87).

erally and of the Old Cathedral surroundings in greater detail (respectively Fig. 1 and Figs. 3, 4), on the other hand, are of particular value, not only because of their apparent precision and accuracy, but since they recorded features that were subsequently destroyed with little if any additional record. This applies particularly to the buildings shown on the DAE plans in the area north of the Old Cathedral, as discussed below.

The Old Cathedral stood – and still stands – on a massive 3.4-m-high podium measuring 66 m from east to west by at least 41 m, the original position of its northern edge being now hard to distinguish. On the south and east, the podium's near-vertical walls are of massive ashlar masonry, recessed and rebated in the typical Aksumite style, with large dressed blocks at the corners, somewhat obscured by subsequent repairs and additions

(e.g. Phillipson 2009: fig. 45). As Figures 5 and 6 indicate, very little change has taken place here since the DAE record was made. On the other hand, the northern face of the podium, exceptionally well preserved at the time of the DAE visit (Fig. 7), has since been largely obliterated. On the western side, a flight of stone steps giving access to the church's west front extends across the full width of the podium and beyond, suggesting that the width of the podium itself may at some time have been reduced. The proposal by the DAE (DAE 2: 140) that, since the steps were not mentioned by Alvares (see below), they must post-date his sixteenth-century visit, has not found favour from subsequent commentators; the steps were clearly recorded by Manoel de Almeida c. 1624–1633 (Beckingham/Huntingford 1954: 90). The flat top of the podium is only partly occupied by the present Old Cathedral, which

measures 42 by 19 m. Centrally in front of the church, at the top of the steps, was the carved stone object known today as *Manbara Dawit* (= throne of David; there seems to be confusion in some sources between this and the more westerly 'King's Throne' noted below), comprising an ancient capital set into a massive stone disc (Figs. 8–10). On the northwest and southwest corners of the podium stood square towers that the DAE termed *Glockenhäuser* (= bellfries); they are effectively unchanged today.

To the north, the DAE (Figs. 1, 3 above, also DAE 3: Abb. 231, 232) recorded a series of buildings beyond the perimeter wall surrounding the Cathedral podium itself. These comprised the *Kleine Zionskirche* (= Little Church of Zion) with its own *Torhaus* (= gate-house) and, in the same compound, a *Schatzhaus des Johannes* (= Treasury of Yohannes). In smaller compounds

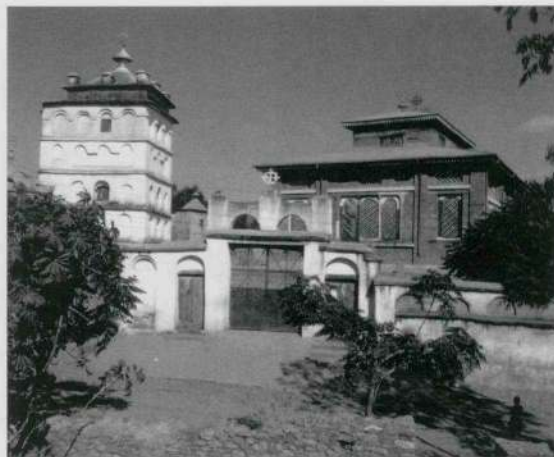
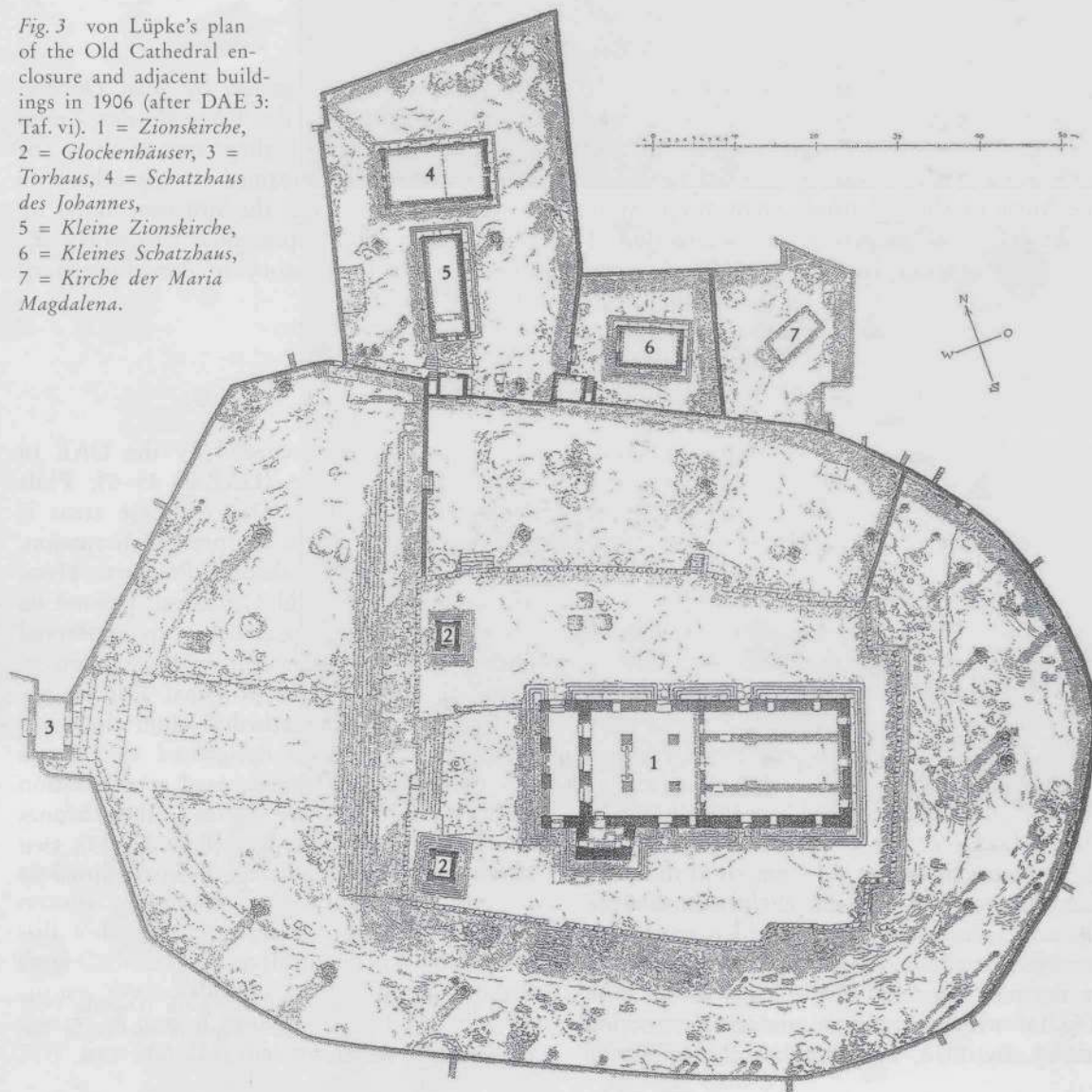


Fig. 2 The Church of the Four Animals [*Arba'etu Ensesa*], 1994. The rectangular church seen here was erected c. 1962 (Phillipson 211: 144). The gatehouse and tower also post-date the DAE visit.

Fig. 3 von Lüpke's plan of the Old Cathedral enclosure and adjacent buildings in 1906 (after DAE 3: Taf. vi). 1 = Zionskirche, 2 = Glockenhäuser, 3 = Torhaus, 4 = Schatzhaus des Johannes, 5 = Kleine Zionskirche, 6 = Kleines Schatzhaus, 7 = Kirche der Maria Magdalena.



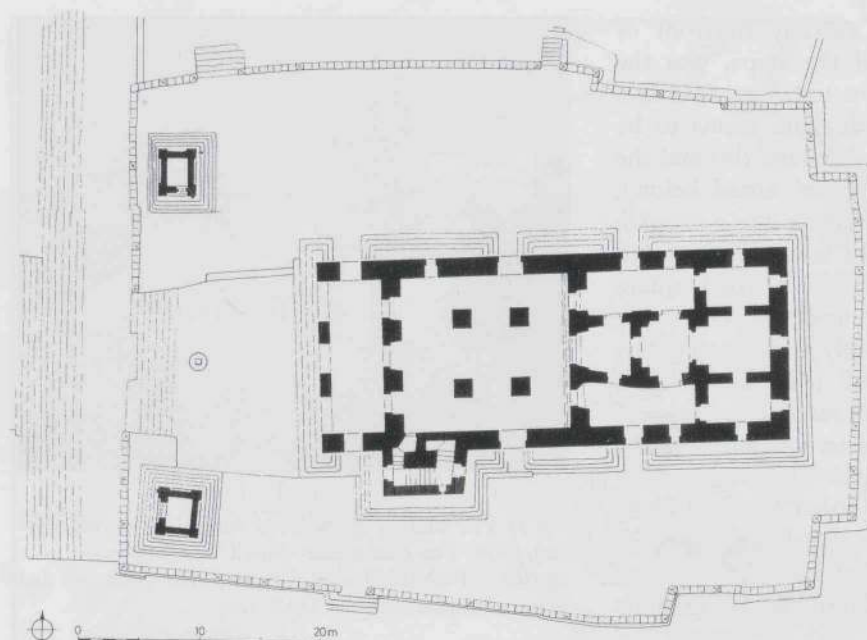


Fig. 4 Detail of Fig. 3, with corrected plan of the Old Cathedral by M. Mallinson and A. Jackson substituted (after Phillipson 2009: fig. 44).

to the east were a *Kleines Schatzhaus* (= Little Treasury) and the *Kirche der Maria Magdalena* (= Church of Mary Magdalene) which the DAE personnel were not permitted to examine. Most of these features were swept away in the course of preparing for the erection of the New Cathedral in the late 1950s; the only survivor is the Treasury of Yohannes, albeit now a much smaller structure than that seen by the DAE. Some of these buildings are apparent in photographs published with only minimal commentary by Jean Doresse (1956: 13, 85). Stuart Munro-Hay (2005: 46–47) considered this lamentably incomplete documentation, drawing attention to the unusual north-south alignment of the *Kleine Zionskirche*. He argued that this was the building to which the DAE team was denied access, and also that seen in photographs taken by Henri de Contenson (1963: pls iib, vib, xd) in 1958. On both counts, Munro-Hay appears to have been mistaken: restricted access was mentioned twice in the DAE publication (DAE 2: 140, DAE 3: 84), both passages being attributed to v. Lüpke and clearly indicating that the building concerned was the Church of Mary Magdalene. Re-examination of the photographs published by de Contenson indicates that they depict, not the *Kleine Zionskirche* but a more easterly building which must have been either the Church of Mary Magdalene or the new Treasury and Chapel of the Ark (Fig. 11) which was then under construction nearby. By 1954, however, the DAE's *Kleine*

Zionskirche was designated by Jean Doresse (1956: 13, 19, 47) as the *Chapelle des Tables de la Loi de Moïse*¹. Perhaps one of these authors had been misinformed or was otherwise mistaken; alternatively, the situation noted by Doresse may have represented temporary accommodation preparatory to construction of the new Treasury.

THRONES

Throne-bases were recorded by the DAE in two areas of Aksum (DAE 2: 45–69; Phillipson 1997: 123–154). One of these areas is particularly relevant to the present discussion, being within the Cathedral Precinct. Here, to the west of the Old Cathedral, beyond its perimeter wall and gate-house, are preserved a total of fifteen stone throne-bases. Two of these are sited on the principal axis of approach to the Old Cathedral from the west: they are traditionally designated the King's and the Bishop's Thrones, used at coronation ceremonies. Nearby are thirteen other thrones recalled as those of judges (Figs. 12, 13), two of which had at some stage been modified to

¹ In the English edition of this work (Doresse 1959: 33) the name is given as 'Chapel of the Tablet (*sic*, singular) of Moses'.

Fig. 5 The south side of the Cathedral podium (DAE 2: Abb. 292).



Fig. 6 The south side of the Cathedral podium in 1994.



accommodate double seats. The DAE's proposed reconstructions by Krencker (Fig. 14) that are still today widely accepted as valid: most of these Cathedral-group thrones had pillars at each corner, presumably to support some kind of canopy. A carved stone (DAE 2: 62; Phillipson 1997: figs. 219, 220) that was, at the time of the

DAE visit, set into the west exterior wall of the Old Cathedral vestibule was interpreted as having formed part of a throne-back. Although it is now no longer visible, its former placement below the bottom right-hand corner of the central aperture is discernible on the DAE photograph reproduced below as Figure 8. The



Fig. 7 The north wall of the podium (DAE 2: Abb. 290).

throne-bases in the so-called Cathedral group are today in a condition remarkably similar – save in one important respect – to that in which they were seen more than one hundred years ago: the ground-surface in the area of the so-called King's and Bishop's Thrones is now approximately 50–60 cm higher than it was in 1906. Photographs reproduced here (Figs. 15, 16, 17) demonstrate that most – if not all – of this build-up has taken place since the 1940s.

The second group of thrones extends along the road from the southeast entrance to Aksum as far as the principal stela; these thrones appear to have had neither pillars nor canopies; they were rather smaller overall than those in the Cathedral Precinct. There is both textual and archaeological evidence that they originally supported seated statues, and that their backs and sides were formed by stone slabs bearing commemorative inscriptions. Francis Breyer (2011) has provided a reconsideration of some of these inscriptions' texts; for further detail, including the thrones themselves, see Phillipson 2012: 57–63, 132–136. The inscriptions indicate that most of the thrones in the second group were erected in the mid-fourth century, but that the practice continued for some two hundred years thereafter. It would be reasonable

to suppose, but cannot be proven, that the Cathedral group of thrones also dates from within this time-span, although their uniform style and workmanship may indicate that they were created within the space of a few decades.

ERECTION OF THE NEW CATHEDRAL, AND ASSOCIATED WORKS

Most changes that have taken place in the area of the Cathedral Precinct since the DAE visit have been associated with the creation of the New Cathedral during the years 1954–1961. Unlike the Old Cathedral, this is a church to which women are freely admitted. Construction was undertaken by the Ethiopia-based but largely Italian-owned Navigatana company, working to the designs of a Greek architect. The cost of the Cathedral building is said to have been met by Emperor Haile Sellassie, that of the accompanying Treasury and repository for the Ark (*Enda Selat*) by Empress Menen. As noted above, preparatory work by the contractor resulted in much destruction, virtually unrecorded, notably in the area immediately north of the Old Cathedral which was itself carefully protected. The area further to the

Fig. 8 The Old Cathedral from the west, showing *Manbara Dawit* (DAE 3: Abb. 222).



Fig. 9 The Old Cathedral, west front and *Manbara Dawit*, 1994.



north, previously covered with round houses (cf. DAE photographs, notably DAE 3: Taf. ii; Phillipson 1997: fig. 6), had been largely cleared by 1954 (Doresse 1956: 44–45) and is now occupied by the New Cathedral. The area between the two cathedrals saw considerable change (Fig. 11, below). Paving was laid over the area surrounding the New Cathedral, with a range of offices partly underground on its

south side. Further south again, between these offices and the northern edge of the Old Cathedral's podium, an area of some 770 square metres was investigated archaeologically under the direction of Henri de Contenson on behalf of the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology during the first three months of 1958.

A preliminary account of this important work (de Contenson 1963; 2005) has not been



Fig. 10 *Manbara Dawit* in 1994.

superseded by a more comprehensive report, and subsequent investigations nearby by Francis Anfray remain effectively unpublished. The excavation was never backfilled and may still be seen, albeit in a ruinous and overgrown state (Fig. 11). De Contenson's investigation (see Munro-Hay 2002: 309–310) revealed three principal phases of activity, the first of which was associated with pre-Christian Aksumite coins and therefore presumably dated to the late third or early fourth centuries AD, while the second and third phases were numismatically attributed to the late-fourth or fifth centuries and to the sixth or seventh centuries respectively. The first-period building shared architectural features with the so-called 'palaces' or elite buildings of later Aksumite times (cf. Phillipson 2011: 142–143), and its alignment differed from that of the later Cathedral podium. Buildings attributed to de Contenson's second and third phases, however, shared the orientation of the Cathedral. It is reasonable to conclude either that the podium dates from the period between de Contenson's first and second phases or that it was contemporary with his second phase.

EARLY HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

This is an appropriate place to consider the age of the podium and its relation to the earliest manifestations of Christianity at Aksum (Phillipson 2012: 91–106 provides a detailed evaluation). There is good evidence that Christianity was first adopted by the Aksumite king in the mid-fourth century: this ruler is named as Ezana both on stone inscriptions (Breyer 2011; Phillipson 2012: 57–63) and on coins (ibid.: 97,

181–193). While compatible with the dating, local tradition makes no mention of Ezana but indicates that the conversion took place under two kings, Abreha and Atsbeha, who apparently ruled jointly (for possible explanations of this contradiction, see Munro-Hay 2002: 308; Phillipson 2012: 103). For as much as a hundred years after the initial royal conversion, it seems that Christianity was largely restricted to the capital and to the elite, not becoming widely adopted through the Aksumite realm and its population until the reign of Kaleb early in the sixth century. There is corresponding uncertainty as to whether the first church on the site now occupied by the Old Cathedral was erected in the fourth century or the sixth. The available evidence (contra Heldman 1992: 226) seems to support the earlier attribution: the podium was apparently erected around the time of the first Christian coinage – indisputably struck under Ezana – and was large enough to have accommodated a building significantly larger than the present Old Cathedral. Mutually incompatible traditions (e.g. DAE 2: 136; Phillipson 1997: 169) relate that the first church was built on the site of an earlier, non-Christian, religious building, or that the site was formerly a lake or swamp. Although neither is implausible (re-use of religious sites was a frequent occurrence elsewhere in Ethiopia, and sediments exposed in a stream-bed adjacent to the Cathedral Precinct suggest the former existence of standing water), independent supporting evidence for either tradition is currently lacking.

Archaeological excavation on the podium itself has not been permitted, and clear evidence is not available for the sequence of buildings there. Traditions, most of which were committed to writing long after the periods to which they ostensibly relate, mention several destructions and rebuildings. It is, however, impossible to determine whether these events involved total replacement, or repair and refurbishment of an older church.

2006 and 2007, Tekle Hagos (2008; 2011) excavated the ruins of a stone building located some 700 m to the southeast of the Cathedral Precinct on a site traditionally recalled as that of the first church of *Arba'etu Ensesa* (cf. above). The building had clearly been a church of basilican plan, with a central nave flanked by single aisles on either side and with an inscribed apse at the east end. Its external walls were of typical Aksumite indented style. To the north of the apse and at a lower level

Fig. 11 The Cathedral Treasury and *Enda Selat*, erected c. 1960, photographed from the roof of the Old Cathedral in 1994. Beyond may be seen the site of de Contenson's excavations, the 1960 office buildings, and part of the New Cathedral.

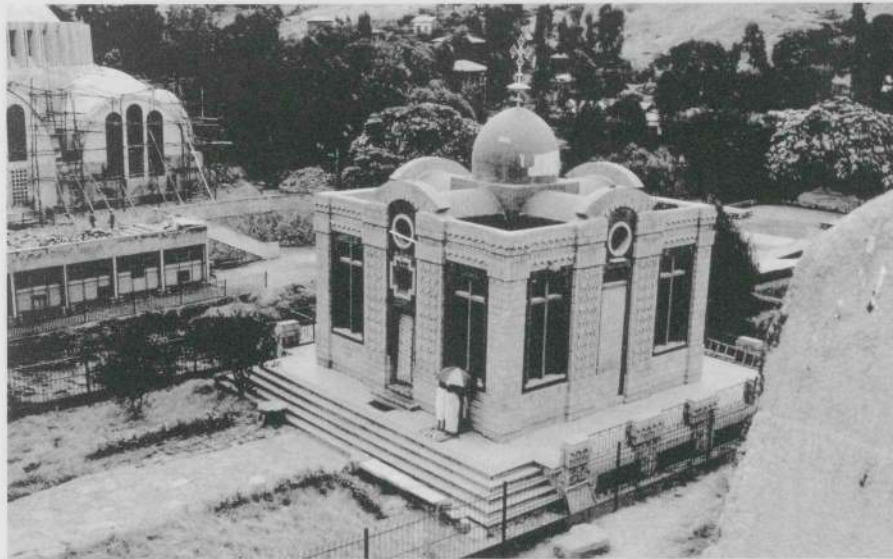


Fig. 12 DAE photographs of 'Judges' Thrones': left = single throne no. 8 (Phillipson 1997: fig. 186); right = double throne no. 3 (DAE 2: Taf. xiv_a).

was a rectangular room, originally entered from outside the building by way of stairs; built into the walls of this underground room were niches, presumably for storage. This church could be dated by associated artefacts to about the sixth century, but it had been modified for re-use at a much later date.

Additional evidence possibly relating to a first-millennium church at Aksum has recently been recognised. Among carved stones collected within the compound of *Arba'etu Ensesa* is a square-sectioned marble pillar (Fig. 18) with vertical grooves on each side; this is clearly a component of a prefabricated screen of a type produced in the vicinity of Constantinople and widely distributed through the eastern Roman Empire in about the sixth century. Examples of such stone screens have been recognised at

Adulis on the coast of Eritrea (Munro-Hay 1989; Heldman 1994; Matthews in Peacock 2007: 122–124); in eastern Tigray, their style and construction were subsequently replicated in wood (Phillipson 2009: 193–194). While it cannot be proved that the stone screen of which this pillar was clearly a component was formerly installed in a church at Aksum, this is certainly an economical and plausible hypothesis.

Although Aksum evidently retained its position as an ecclesiastical centre long after the seventh century when it ceased to be a political capital, traditions seem to recall sackings in the ninth/tenth centuries and, less certainly, on other occasions also. It has often been repeated in the secondary literature that seventh-century Muslim visitors recorded the



Fig. 13 The 'Thrones of the Judges', 1994. The double throne (DAE no. 3) is in the foreground, while the figure with white shirt in the background is sitting on no. 8. Note, by comparison with Fig. 12, that only minimal change has occurred since 1906.

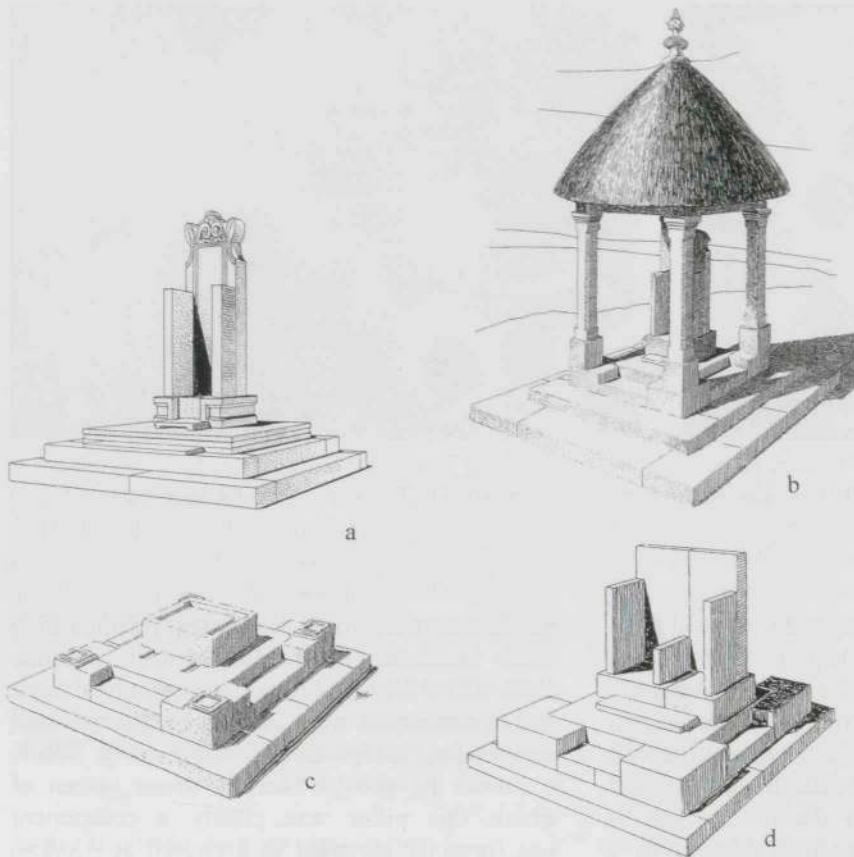


Fig. 14 DAE reconstructions of thrones in the Cathedral Precinct:

a = the 'King's Throne', without canopy (DAE 2: Abb. 86);
 b = throne with canopy (ibid.: Abb. 139);
 c = one of the 'Thrones of the Judges', no. 6, with bases for pillars supporting a canopy (ibid.: Abb. 101);
 d = double throne, no. 3 (cf. Fig. 12; ibid.: Abb. 98).

beauty of an Abyssinian 'church of Mary', which may or may not have been at Aksum (Muir 1912: 480; see also Sergew Hable Sellassie 1972: 186) but, as Munro-Hay (2005: 166–168, 260) has emphasised, these references are based on translations from an Arabic text first written two hundred years after the visit

concerned, and of which the oldest surviving copy was produced several centuries later still. The possibility that the reference cited above was inserted as an explanatory gloss must therefore be considered; the apparent reference in the same passage to mural paintings seems more likely to be original.

Fig. 15 The 'King's and Bishop's Thrones', 1906 (DAE 2: Abb. 89).



Fig. 16 The 'King's and Bishop's Thrones', 1940s (Buxton 1949: pl. 62).



THE CATHEDRAL PRECINCT SINCE THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

It is only for the period beginning around the early sixteenth century that more detailed accounts of the Cathedral Precinct are available, permitting tentative reconstruction of a developmental sequence. These details are preserved both in Ethiopian sources and in the writings of foreign visitors; the latter, despite their prejudices and other shortcomings, can usually be dated fairly precisely. Pride of place

among these accounts is occupied by that of the Portuguese chaplain, Francisco Alvares, who visited Aksum on several occasions during the years 1520–1525 and saw a large church which, although his description (Beckingham/Huntingford 1961: 150–155) is difficult to understand, clearly bore little resemblance to any presently existing structure. Alvares (op. cit.: 151) stated that this church was 'named St Mary of Syon', but did not designate it a cathedral, neither did he make any specific mention of the Ark of the Covenant.



Fig. 17 The 'King's and Bishop's Thrones', 1994 (Phillipson, taken from a position slightly to the northeast of the Fig. 16 viewpoint, showing the rise in ground-level that has occurred since the 1940s).

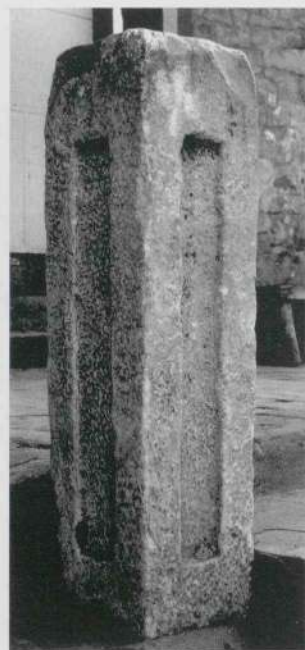


Fig. 18 Marble slotted pillar from a chancel screen (height: 0.9 m), seen outside the Church of the Four Animals [*Arba'etu Ensesa*], Aksum, in 2011.

The most informative Ethiopian source is contained in the text known as *Mashafa Aksum* (often translated *Liber Axumae* or 'Book of Aksum'), which seems to contain material originating at least as early as the sixteenth century; additions continued to accrue for three hundred years after that date and it would thus be wholly erroneous to attribute any precise age to the work as a whole (Hirsch/Fauvelle-Aymar 2001: 66–69; Lusini 2003). In the present context, particular interest attaches to the description of a five-aisled basilica of beams-and-monkey-heads construction (Conti Rossini 1909–1910: 7; Beckingham/Huntingford 1961: 521–525). This is likely to have been the same building as that visited by Alvares. The overall precision implied in the *Mashafa Aksum* by detailed quantifications of the building's components – e.g. 62 columns – may be misleading, but the example quoted has given rise to the supposition that the building had an external colonnade.

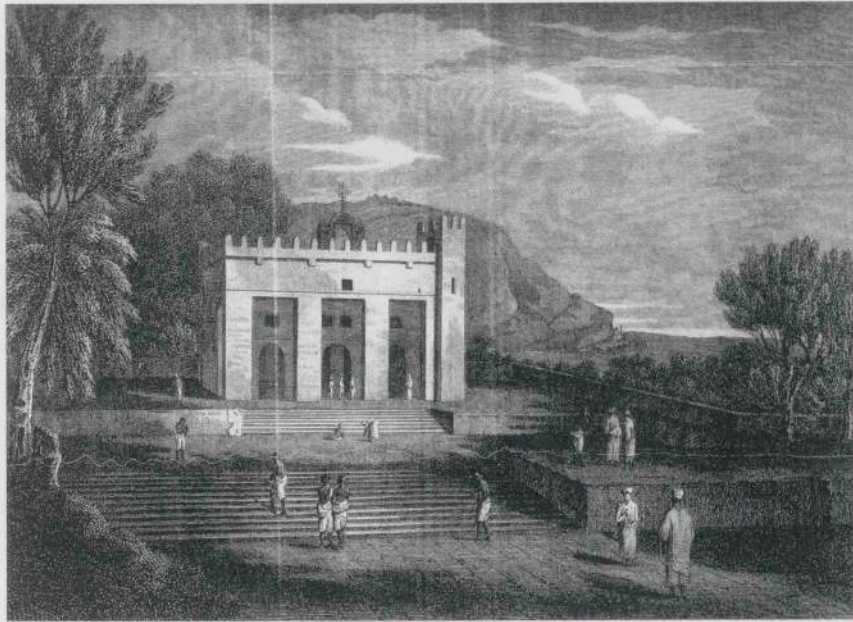
On the basis of these descriptions, both the DAE (DAE 2: Abb. 294; see also Beckingham/Huntingford 1961: 150) and Buxton/Matthews (1974; cf. Phillipson 2012: 129) attempted reconstructions; neither is entirely convincing, although the DAE plan suggests a building-size

appropriate to the podium. The view, proposed independently by Dabbert (1938) and Buxton (1947) and subsequently developed by Buxton/Matthews (1974), that the rock-hewn basilica of Beta Madhane Alem at Lalibela (Phillipson 2009: 153–160, 196–168) was modelled on the principal early church at Aksum has been somewhat uncritically accepted by subsequent writers (see also Mercier/Lepage 2012: 91–92).

Destruction of the church described in the *Mashafa Aksum* and by Alvares is generally attributed to the raid on Aksum led by Imam Ahmad bin Ibrahim ('Gragh') c. 1535. Although many sources indicate that Aksum was burned at the instigation of Imam Ahmad, none provides details concerning destruction of the church, nor do we know when the church that stood at this time might have been built. It certainly cannot be assumed that the church destroyed in the sixteenth century was the first that had been built on the Maryam TSION site, whether that initial construction was of fourth- or sixth-century age.

As noted above, it is not until the early-sixteenth century that the designation 'Maryam TSION' is firmly attested. Incontrovertible mentions of the presence at Aksum of the Ark of the Covenant are likewise surprisingly late

Fig. 19 The Old Cathedral from the west (Salt in Valentia 1809, 3: opp. p. 88).



in date (Munro-Hay 2005). Abu al-Makarim (formerly known as Abu Salih al-Armani), writing in the eleventh century, was aware of claims that the Ark was somewhere in Ethiopia (Evetts 1895: 287) but he did not specifically mention Aksum. Cosmas Indicopleustes, who visited Aksum early in the sixth century, has long been notorious both for his gullibility and for his fascination with all matters purportedly relating to the Ark (Wolska-Conus 1968–1973; Boorstin 1985: 109): the fact that he makes no mention of it in an Aksumite context is a very strong indication that he was completely unaware of its possible presence there. Alvares made no specific mention of the Ark. Use of the term ‘Tsion’ or a variant thereof to signify the Ark, and recognition of Mary as its New-Testament counterpart, indicate that the two elements may be closely interconnected.

Following its destruction, presumably c. 1535, no information appears to be available concerning the church’s condition until the reign of *atse* Sarsa Dengel, who was crowned there c. 1579; a brief description by Fernam Guerreiro contained in Jesuit records for c. 1604/1605 may be taken as reflecting re-building undertaken prior to that ceremony (Monneret de Villard 1938: 65; Munro-Hay 2002: 312). Two or three decades later, following the coronation of Susenyos, Aksum received further Portuguese visitors, Manoel de Almeida (Beckingham / Huntingford 1954: 90–91) and Manoel Barradas (1996: 118–126), both of whom left descriptions of the church, noting that it was thatched over

mud-bonded stone walls and wooden pillars, standing within the ruins of a larger building, de Almeida (*loc. cit.*) adding the important detail that the remains seen by him were those of a building with five aisles. Restoration at the order of *atse* Fasilidas c. 1655 is recalled as the occasion when the Old Cathedral assumed more-or-less its present form and appearance. Recent investigation (Fig. 4, above; Phillipson 1995: 35–36) has revealed that the structure attributed to Fasilidas incorporated walls that had survived from an older building, the age of which could not be determined. It appears that the church escaped serious damage in the fire that destroyed much of Aksum in 1678 and was used for the coronation of Iyasu I some fifteen years later. Further structural work was undertaken at the instigation of Iyasu II around 1750. The records of James Bruce’s (1790, Vol. 3: 131–132) visit in 1771 contain little useful information: he was not impressed by the building’s style, status or condition, and professed disbelief in stories relating to the Ark. One hundred years after Bruce’s visit, two Armenian priests travelled from Jerusalem to Aksum where they requested sight of the Ark and claimed (Dimotheos 1871: 136–143) to have seen a stone object held to be one of the Tablets of the Law. This object was apparently kept upstairs in a building close to, but clearly separate from, the Old Cathedral.

It is only after the beginning in the early nineteenth century that illustrations of the Old Cathedral are available: those by Salt (Fig. 19),

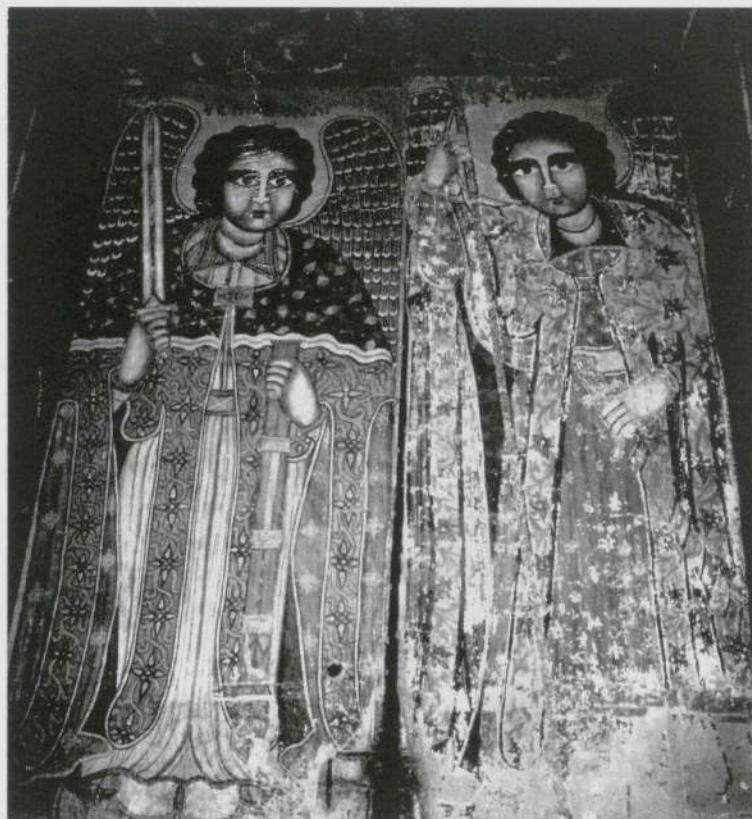


Fig. 20 The doors leading to the sanctuary area of the Old Cathedral, 1994. These doors, bearing paintings of two archangels, were photographed in this position by the DAE (DAE 3: Abb. 226).

Lefebvre et al. (1845–1851, atlas: pl. 1; reproduced in Beckingham/Huntingford 1961: opp. p. 145) and Bent (1893: 162) show that little change took place during the period of one hundred years preceding the DAE research, other than the installation of wooden trelliswork to close the apertures on the west façade. Shortly after 1906, the former flat roof was replaced with a pitched structure and modified turret (Phillipson 2009: fig. 34), and the horizontal lintels on the west façade were replaced with arches (Figs. 19, 9; also Smidt 2011: 43). v. Lüpke's photograph of the interior (DAE 3: Abb. 226) indicates that, although some pillars now linked by arches formerly supported horizontal lintels, other features – including the fine paintings of archangels on the great sanctuary doors (Fig. 20), remain virtually unchanged.

THE CATHEDRAL PRECINCT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Today, the Cathedral Precinct is controlled exclusively by the ecclesiastical authorities. Its traditional function as a major religious centre continues unimpaired. Over one hundred years ago, it was forcibly brought to the attention of the DAE that the interests of visitors were

secondary, and the same is true today. Attempts to integrate tourist-management in the Cathedral Precinct with that in other parts of Aksum have proved unsuccessful. However, a major new building is under construction on a church-owned site to the east of the Old Cathedral, at least part of which is intended to house a new museum. Meanwhile, a temporary display of church-owned treasures and other antiquities is maintained in a converted office building elsewhere in the precinct. Perhaps a way is being found whereby visitors can be welcomed while maintaining the traditional use and ethos that the place has long enjoyed.

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