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In: Annales d'Ethiopie. Volume 14, année 1987. pp. 43-69.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Fattovich Rodolfo. Some remarks on the origins of the Aksumite Stelae. In: Annales d'Ethiopie. Volume 14, année 1987. pp. 43-69.

doi : 10.3406/ethio.1987.931

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/ethio_0066-2127_1987_num_14_1_931

SOME REMARKS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE AKSUMITE STELAE.

by

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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the origins of the Aksumite stelae in the light of the Near Eastern and African megalithism.

The funerary stelae are the most famous feature of the ancient Aksumite culture. They represent the survival of a megalithic tradition in Northern Ethiopia in historical times. At present, four main types of monoliths are known (Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 1 — 43; Kammerer 1926: 126 — 135, 1929 a: 225 — 230; Conti Rossini 1928: 239 — 242) : i) unhewn, elongated and flat stones, sometimes with a roughly pointed top, normally 3 — 5 m high; ii) pointed stones with smooth round sides and square section, 1.60 — 9.50 m high; iii) hewn slabs with smooth sides, rectangular section, round top, up to 21 m high; iv) 'storid' stelae, carved with symbolic representations of houses, 15 — 33 m high. Offering tables, often carved with small basins and vegetal ornaments, were placed at the base of some hewn and 'storied' stelae. The monoliths were oriented roughly to the South East. They were obtained from quarries close to the sites where they were erected (see Anfray 1972 a: 70; Ricci 1974: 439). The stelae were cut in the rock with soaked wooden wedges driven into rectangular notches and were probably erected by means of earth steps (see Anfray 1972 a: 70), like the Egyptian obelisks (see Habachi 1977). According to Monneret de Villard. (1983 39) such technique might indicate an Egyptian influence on the Aksumite culture.

The stelae are located mainly in the Tigray (see Anfray 1973, 1974 a). They were found at Addi Dahno, Bieta Giyorgis, Aksum, Henzat, Hausien and 'Anza. At Aksum they form four stelae fields in the areas of Gudit, Mai Hejja, Mai Malahsô and Bazen (Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 1 — 43; Conti Rossini 1928: pl 39, 1942; Puglisi 1941: 100 — 103; Anfray 1972 a, 1973: 16; Chittick 1974;

Ricci 1974: 438 — 441). A few monoliths were recorded also at Matarà, Dera'a, Selhan Nahahà (Addi Caieh) and Rora Laba in Eritrea (Conti Rossini 1896, 1922: 242 — 251, 1947: 20 — 21; Dainelli, Marinelli 1912: 511 — 512; Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 141-142; Anfray 1963: 91). Two stelae, respectively at 'Anza and Matarà, are decorated with the sun disc and moon crescent on the top and bear palaeo-Ethiopian inscriptions on the frontal side (see Conti Rossini 1896, 1942; Littmann *et al.* 1913 IV: 61-62, Littmann 1952; Ullendorff 1951: 26 — 32; Drewes 1962: 65 — 68). A palaeo-Ethiopian inscription is also engraved on a stele at Henzat (Ricci 1974: 440 — 441). The stelae at Rora Laba are carved on the top with the figure of a lion eating a bovine (Conti Rossini 1922: 242—251).

The Aksumite stelae were originally regarded as religious monuments. They were compared either to the Egyptian obelisks (Poncet 1709 (1949); Bruce 1790; Lord Valentia 1809; Salt 1814; Rùppel 1838-1840; Lefebvre n.d.; Heuglin 1868) or to the Semitic bethyls (Bent 1893). Their funerary function was suggested by Krencker (in Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 1 — 2) and confirmed by Chittick (1974).

These monoliths go back mostly to the Early Aksumite Period (ca. AD 100/200 — 400) (see Fattovich 1977. n.d. a) . The inscribed stelae at Matarà and 'Anza are earlier than the kingdom of Ezana, as we can infer from the palaeographical evidence (Drewes, Schneider 1976). The Gudit stelae are most likely datable to the 3rd-4th centuries AD on the basis of some glass vessels of Egyptian type found in a pit grave in this area (Chittick 1974: 191 — 193). Van Beek (1967) and Chittick (1974: 164 — 169) suggested to date the 'storied' stelae at Mai Hejja to the Christian Period, but the evidence supporting this hypothesis is inconclusive. On the contrary, both the local traditions (Salt 1814: 405 — 406, Lord Valentia 1809: 97) and the geoarchaeological investigation of the area (Butzer 1981: 479 — 484) confirm that they were erected in the pre-Christian time as it is normally assumed (see Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 1 — 43; Anfray 1967: 52, 1968: 357). However, some stelae close to the 'catacombs' at Mai Hejja might date to the Middle-Late Aksumite Period (Butzer 1981: 479 — 484).

It is usually supposed that the Aksumite stelae represent a regional megalithic development of the memorial monuments (*nephesh*) widely diffused among the Semitic peoples, from Syria

to Yemen, since the 1st millennium BC (see Littmann *et al.* 1913 II. 1 — 2, 28 — 30; Conti Rossini 1928: 241; Kammerer 1929 a: 226; Anfray 1968: 363 — 364). Krencker (in Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 28 — 30) suggested that the 'storied' stelae at Aksum reproduce buildings like the modern 'sky scrapers' in Northern Yemen or the ancient grave towers at Palmyra. Playne (1965) pointed out that the 'false' doors on these monoliths are comparable to the 'doors' carved on some Punic votive altars from Carthage and reflect an earlier Egyptian tradition. According to Kammerer (1929 a: 226), the use of funerary stelae was introduced into the North of Ethiopia by the South Arabs.

These assumptions are accepted by most scholars because of the undisputable historical and linguistic links between the Ethiopian and the Semitic peoples (see e.g. Kammerer 1926, 1929 a; Conti Rossini 1928; Drewes 1962; Hetzron 1972; Garbini 1984). Yet, they have never been demonstrated in a satisfactory way, as far as I know.

In my opinion, they might be contradicted by the following remarks:

1. The basic conceptual and morphological differences between the *nephesh* and the Aksumite stelae.

The *nephesh* was the symbolic representation of the personality of the deceased, the name itself meaning 'person'. It always indicated the owner of the tomb and was connected with single burials. It was not specifically related to offering rituals. In its simplest form, it was a funerary cippus originating from the standing stones (*massebot*), which commemorated an event in protohistorical times (Starcky 1966: 951 — 956; Gawlikowski 1970; see also Anati 1963: 394). It included small size stelae and mausolea.

The earliest examples were the Syrian figurative stelae of the 10th-8th centuries BC (Gawlikowski 1970: 10 — 12) and the stelae marking since the 7th century BC the burials of the children sacrificed to Ba'al in the Phoenician and Punic *tofet*. In this case, it was a rectangular or tronco-pyramidal slab ornated with religious symbols (see Lilliu 1959; Moscati 1981). Memorial stelae in honour of the deceased were also used in Southern Arabia in the mid-late 1st millennium BC (Doe 1971: 106; Grohmann 1963: 218 — 238). They were usually carved with the portrait of the dead person,

whose name was engraved on their basis. Sometimes the portraits were placed in a recess of the stele like in a naos (see Fakhry 1951: pl XL — XLII). In later times, the South Arabian stelae were ornamented with figures in the Greek-Roman style (see Grohmann 1963: pl XVIII). Stelae decorated with the scene of the banquetting deceased or simple slabs remembering poor burials were placed also near the tombs at Palmyra in the 2nd century BC (Gawlikowski 1970: 33 — 42).

In the late 1st millennium BC the *nephesh* became a true mausoleum. Some monuments, going back to the 4th century BC, were built by the Phoenicians at 'Amrit. They were cylindrical towers on a round base made with four huge stone blocks, covering a domed room and the burial chamber (Gawlikowski 1970: 12 — 18). In the 2nd century BC the typical *nephesh* appeared in Syria. It was a stone cube, more than 2 x 2 m in size, with a pyramid on the top. This monument had mainly a memorial meaning, being not necessarily associated to a grave (Gawlikowski 1970: 22 — 30). The same type of architectural structure was adopted by the Nabateans. It is represented by some rock reliefs at Petra, by the obelisk tomb showing the front of an edifice with four *nephesh* on the top, each one symbolizing a deceased, at Wadi Mûsâ and by the mausoleum with a pyramid on a base with two steps surrounded by twenty columns at Mamrât (Kammerer 1929 b: 393; Starcky 1966: 951 — 956). According to Starcky (1966: 956), this type of *nephesh* derived from Egyptian prototypes. Finally, at Palmyra the *nephesh* indicated the funerary towers built between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD (Gawlikowski 1970: 47, 52 — 106).

The Aksumite stelae seem to indicate generically the cemeterial area, not single graves or burials. Moreover, at least in some cases, they are directly connected with the offering ritual.

The British excavations in the Mai Hejja and Gudît areas at Aksum have made evident that the stelae were not associated to specific tombs or burials. The only exception is the giant stele, which might be associated with the so-called "mausoleum" at its foot (Chittick 1974: 202). In fact, the 'Nefas Mawcha' and the tomb of the False Door have no stele, while the "catacombs" are surrounded by six stelae. In any case the burials largely exceed in number the stelae.

The inscription on the stele at Matarâ suggests that it was connected with the cult of the ancestors, not with the memory of one personage (Drewes 1962: 67 — 68).

They are typical megalithic monuments, mostly undecorated. The earliest ones were the unhewn and/or pointed monoliths, as we can infer from the stratigraphical sequence at Mai Hejja (see Chittick 1974: 166). Therefore they cannot be compared to the Syrian, Phoenician and South Arabian Stelae or to the mausolea and the typical *nephesh* with cubic base and a pyramid on the top in the Syrian-Palestinian region. In turn, the rare decorations on the Aksumite stelae have no sure memorial meaning (see Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 1 — 43).

The idea of the *nephesh* might have affected some early Aksumite monuments. They are the Tomb of the False Door and the so-called Tomb of Menelik (Chittick 1974: 175 — 179; Littmann *et al.* 1913 II; W34 — 136). In both monuments the burial chambers were covered with a symbolic house comparable to the Syrian-Palestinian mausolea. It is also possible that the “storied” stelae were symbolic mausolea. However, this evidence might prove that the Ethiopian monuments underwent some external influence rather than being a direct derivation from the Near East monuments.

2. The absence of pre-Aksumite stelae.

No undisputable evidence of pre-Aksumite stelae has been found, so far.

Two pointed monoliths — one of them with an offering basin at the base — were discovered at Yèhà (Bent 1893: 139). Their age is uncertain, but the occurrence of Aksumite remains in the stratigraphical tests at this site (see Fattovich 1972 a, b) might support a dating to this period. Another roughly pointed stele decorated with schematic engravings was recorded near a tomb at Enzelal on the Rore plateau, where some possible pre-Aksumite remains have been described. It is probably post-Aksumite (Conti Rossini 1922: 251 — 254).

Some monolithic pillars of pre-Aksumite age were found at Kaskasè and Haulti. At Kaskasè, six monoliths, ranging between 4 and 11 m in height, are visible to the north of the site, along the eastern cliffs of the Amba Terica. They have a rectangular section, narrowing slightly at the top. A South Arabic inscription is engraved on one of them (Conti Rossini 1900: 109 — 110, 1928: 111, 240, pl XLV; Dainelli, Marinelli 1912: 508 — 509); Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 143 — 144, IV: 62 — 63; Ryckmans 1927: 179; Pirenne

1956: pl. XVII b). At Haulti, twenty monoliths with rectangular sections up to 6 m high, were discovered around the two small temples of late pre-Aksumite time. They are perfectly carved, sometimes with traces of pecking. South Arabian letters of the type A 3—B 1 are engraved on the top suggesting the existence of monumental inscriptions (De Contenson 1963: 45).

The rise and shape of these monoliths correspond to these of the pillars at the entry of the 'palace' at Yèhà (see also Anfray 1972 b: 53) and of many temples in Southern Arabia (see Doe 1971, 1983), as Pirenne (1970) also pointed out. It is possible therefore that these pillars were reused as stelae in later times, as the occurrence of Aksumite remains in both sites might suggest (see Dainelli, Marinelli 1912: 508; De Contenson 1963: 45 — 47; Pirenne 1970).

3. The absence of sure funerary monoliths in the Pre-Islamic Southern Arabia (see also Littmann *et al.* 1913 II: 2; Conti Rossini 1928: 241; Le Baron Bowen Jr. 1958).

The megalithic monuments are frequent in the Western and Southern Arabian Peninsula. They are mostly funerary structures without monoliths (cairns, tumuli, stone circles, etc.) covering a very long time span (see Dostal 1968; Doe 1971, 1983; de Bayle des Hermens 1976; de Bayle des Hermens, Grebenart 1980; Parr *et al.* 1978; Milburn 1979).

Two large ceremonial structures made of monolithic ortostates were discovered at Rajâjîl in Northern Saudi Arabia and Wadi Hamili in the Yemeni Tihama.

The complex at Rajâjîl consists of clusters of stone pillars, up to 3.50 m high, aligned along a north-south axis, with an oval or rectangular structure behind them. It has provisionally been dated to the 4th millennium BC (Winnet, Reed 1970: 12; Admas *et al.* 1977; Parr *et al.* 1978; Zarins 1979).

The complex at Wadi Hamili consists of two main clusters of pillars, up to 3 m high: a) six alignments of monoliths along a northwest-southeast axis; b) a radial arrangement of standing stones converging towards a stone circle, 18 m in diameter. Some 'protohistorical' potsherds have been collected at this site (Bernardelli, Parinello 1970; Peters 1974; de Bayle des Hermens 1976).

Another megalithic complex has been found at Wadi Sarr in the Hadramaut. It consists of a square enclosure made of vertical slabs, including four dolmen-like chambers at the corners, surrounded on all sides by large horizontal slabs. Two more large stone circles of standing stones occur in the same region (van Beek *et al.* 1964: 535).

Isolated standing stones of *menhir* type are very rare. Up to now, a few specimens have been recorded at Wadi Besh, Wadi Qubhùd, Hureidha, Abtâr, in a site between the Tihama and Nadjran and Wadi Adim. Sometimes, the monoliths are placed near or in the middle of stone circles. This type of monuments was discovered at Raiyân, Djof, La'bel, Qârîf Bà Dalà in the Hadramaut and at Ras Raisût (see Dostal 1968: 55). Their age and meaning is uncertain. The monoliths at Hureidha go back probably to the mid 1st millennium BC. They are comparable to the northern Semitic bethyls (Caton Thompson 1944: 48 — 49, 529. The stone circles with stelae might be tombs (see Grohmann 1963: 180), but it is more probable that they were altars (Doe 1983: 78 — 79).

Stone cairns with a stela on the top, of possible pre-Islamic time, occur in some sites of Northern Yemen and Hadramaut (see Dostal 1968: 57). According to Dostal (1968: 57) they were graves. However, in some cases they might have been ceremonial structures. An example is the monument at Suq en Na'-am in Northern Yemen. It consists of a large rectangular area covered with stones and delimited at the four corners by stone works, A pillar, 4 m high stands near an end (Rathjens 1953: 93 — 95, pl 43).

Finally, stone slabs were used to build the triliths, which are widely diffused from the Southern Yemen to Oman. They were most likely ceremonial monuments going back to the late 1st millennium BC — early 1st millennium AD (see Dostal 1968: 57; Doe 1983: 75 — 78).

It seems therefore that:

- The Aksumite stelae and the *nephesh* belong to two distinct cultural traditions, reflecting different attitudes towards the deceased;
- the funerary stelae were not introduced into Northern Ethiopia by the South Arabs in the pre-Aksumite time;
- the megalithic funerary stelae did not spread into Northern Ethiopia from the Arabian Peninsula.

At this point we must search for other traditions as a possible origin of the Aksumite stelae.

The use of monoliths and stelae for religious and funerary purposes is a recurrent feature in the Near East and Northern Africa. They have been found in the Syrian-Palestinian region, the Nile Valley, Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, Maghreb, Sahara, Central Africa, Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Togo and Nigeria (see Anati 1963; Alimen 1966: 468 — 478; Joussaume 1980: 20 — 21; Anfray 1982: 135 — 136).

The liest evidence of monolithic stelae seems to be a *menhir*, perhaps of the 8th millennium BC, discovered at Dawiya in Jordan. It was found near some *dolmens*, but it was not directly connected to them (Undeland 1973).

The standing stones were quite frequent in the 3rd—2nd millennia BC (see Lilliu 1959; Albright 1960; Anati 1963). They include four main types of monuments: simple circles or alignments of monoliths, going back to the Early Bronze Age (see. 3100 — 200 BC); bethyl temples datable to the Middle-Late Bronze Age (ca. 2000—1100 BC) and Early Iron Age (ca. 1100 — 700 BC); funerary monoliths of the Early Bronze Age; and ancestor sanctuaries of the Early Iron Age.

Circles and alignments of standing stones, up to 3 high, occur in several sites of the 3rd millennium BC in Palestine: Zerka Ma'in Gilboa Mountain, Tell es-Safi; Ader, Lajjun, Babedh-Dhra', Wadi Wala (Conder 1882: 63-74, 1885: 11 ; Macalister 1902: 322; Lankaster Harding 1959: 106; Albright 1951: 63,78; Anati 1963: 393). They are simple arrangements of monoliths without any funerary meaning. Only at Bab edh-Dhra' seven monoliths were erected near an Amorite cemetery with graves covered by flat stones and surrounded by small tumuli (see Albright 1951: 64,78; Anati 1963: 393).

Temples with enclosures of monoliths (bethyls) were recorded at Hazor, Gezer, Byblos, Ugarit and Assur (Lilliu 1959; Albright 1951: 104; Anati 1963: 393). At Gezer, seventeen monoliths with round tops, up to 3.50 m high, formed a rectangular enclosure delimiting the temple area at the entry of a sacral cave, going back to the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000 — 1500 BC) (Macalister 1903: 23 — 31). A similar arrangement of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1500 —

1200 BC) was discovered at Byblos (Dunand 1939: 272). At Ugarit and Assur the monoliths formed stelae fields (see Albright 1951: 104). At Mazor, a circle of small flat stones with round tops, going back to the Early Iron Age (ca. 1100 — 700 BC) was made evident (Yadin *et al.* 1958: 83 — 90). These monuments are regarded as cultic structures (Lilliu :72). However, it is possible that they had originally a mortuary character (see Albright 1951: 104; Garbini *pers. com.*)

Possible funerary stelae of the 3rd millennium BC were found in the Negev. They are associated to cairns of flat stones, 7 — 8 m in diameter, with a burial in the middle (Anati 1963: 393). Tumuli of uncertain age with a stele on the top were also reported at Bab edh-Dhra' in Jordan (McCreey 1977-78). Yet, their occurrence was not confirmed by successive researches (see Clark 1975).

A sanctuary devoted to the ancestor cult, dating between the 4th and the 1st millennia BC, was discovered at Risqeh in Southern Jordan (Kirkbride 1969). It consists of a circle, about 20 m in diameter, of stone slabs carved with schematic male and female portraits. It was not associated with tombs.

2. Nile Valley.

A. Egypt.

No true megalithic monument has ever been discovered in the lower Nile Valley. In fact, the obelisks belong to a completely different conceptual background (see Habachi 1977).

However, inscribed funerary stelae have been used in this region since the protodynastic times (Edwards *et al.* 1964: 161 — 171). The earliest ones, going back to the 1st and 2nd Dynasties, indicated the tombs of some kings and their relatives. In the Old Kingdom the stelae were reserved to the nobles. By the Middle Kingdom their use was extended to the common people (see e.g. Mariette 1880, 1884-85; Petrie 1900, 1901; Kamal 1905; Lacau 1909-1926; Lange, Schafer 1925; Fisher 1964; Tosi, Roccati 1972).

The royal stelae of the Archaic Period (ca. 3000 — 2778 BC) were roughly pointed or carved monoliths, between 1.50 and 2.50 m. in height, fixed at the entrance of the tomb. and bearing the name of the king. The private ones were small flat stones with round

top, 0.20 — 0.30 m high, recording the name and titles of the owner (see Emery 1961: 193).

By the Old Kingdom, they were decorated with the scene of the owner sitting in front of the offering table, surrounded by his relatives, and they bore his name and titles. These stelae symbolized the entry into the netherworld and were directly connected with the offering ritual (see Ermans 1952: 305-306; 1971: 313 — 314).

In any case, some New Kingdom stelae at Deir el Medina were most likely connected with the ancestor cult (Tosi, Roccati 1972).

B. Nubia.

Funerary monoliths and grave stones were recorded occasionally in the late prehistoric and early historical Nubian cemeteries.

Possible stelae were identified in the A-Group cemetery 268 at Tunqila West, dating back to the 4th-early 3rd millennia BC. They were associated with circular stone cairns with an offering place (Smith 1962: 64 — 69, 1966: 124).

A few monolithic stelae were found in the cemeteries of the C Group (ca. 2200-1500 BC) in Lower Nubia. They are sometimes decorated with engraved figures of cattle (see Trigger 1976: 50; Adams 1977: 157).

Twenty-seven spoon shaped monoliths, between 0.87 and 2.20 m in height, formed two clusters in the cemetery N at Aniba. They were connected with the burials, but no evidence suggests that they indicated single graves (Steindorff 1935: 38 — 40).

Four stelae were found in the cemetery 101 near Daka. One of them most likely marked a tomb. The other ones were not associated with any specific burial. Two monoliths were decorated with the engravings of cattle (Firth 1915: 136, pl 35 a,b, map 3).

Three fragmentary stelae were recorded in the cemetery 118 near Qurta West. One of them, decorated with incised figures of cattle, was found at the north-west corner of the funerary chapel of a tumulus. It is uncertain if it was *in situ* or reused to build the wall (Firth 1927: 149, fig 81; see also Steindorff 1935: 38).

Five broken stelae, about 3 m high, were found at Faras. They were not *in situ*. They were probably associated with later C Group tombs (Griffith 1921: 73, 74).

The correct meaning of these monuments is not clear. They are quite rare in number, if compared to the thousands of burials excavated in the C Group sites. Their chronological relationship with the tombs is uncertain and their association with specific burials is not proved. In any case they do not represent a typical feature of the C Group culture.

Funerary grave stones of Egyptian type were discovered in some chapels of the royal pyramids at El Kurru and Nuri, going back to the Napatean period (ca. 900 — 270 BC) (Dunham 1950: 30, 44, 87,; 1955: 44, 57,58, 81, 148, 169,176,197, 208, 219, 231). They are flat stones with round tops, about 0.60 — 1.30 m high, often decorated with the figure of the king or the queen in front of the offering table adoring Osiris. Such stelae were connected with the offering ritual. A few stelae of this type were found also in the private tombs of the same period at Meroe (Dunham 1963: 65, 380, 395, 400).

In the Meroitic times (270 BC — AD 350) the richest private tombs were supplied with commemorative stelae (see Shinnie 1967: 152; Adams 1977: 377). They are small slabs, about 0.40 — 0.50 m with a round top. The stelae from the west cemetery at Meroe are in the Egyptian style (Dunham 1963: 82, 99, 246). The stelae from Karánog bear a rude portrait of the deceased or an inscription (Wooley, Randall Maclver 1910: 9 — 11).

Grave stones with funerary formulae were frequently used to indicate tombs in the Christian Period (see Adams 1977: 480).

3. Ethiopia and adjacent areas.

A. Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland.

Funerary monoliths were found near Kassala in the Gash Delta and at Aqiq on the Red Sea coast.

A cemeterial area with a stratigraphical sequence of stone circles and monolithic stelae was discovered at the site of Maha.

Teglinos near Kassala (Cremaschi *et al.* 1986; Fattovich, Vitagliano n.d.). It was brought to light immediately to the south of the settlement area at this site and belongs to the same cultural horizon.

The area was almost completely covered with two layers of stones forming a flat cairn. A circular structure, about 2.50 m in diameter, was found in the middle of it. Such structure contained the burials of two children and was surrounded by four stone circles, paved with fragmentary upper and lower grinding stones or pebbles. Two small cairns with the skull of a bovine were placed to the north-west and north-east of the main structure. Two stelae were also fixed in the soil at this level.

Another stone circle was discovered to the north of the main one, at a lower stratigraphical level. It contained the very disturbed remains of a child.

Thirty-five monolithic stelae, about 0.90 - 1 m high, were found at five different levels below the stone circles. Three basic types were distinguished: i) flat stones; ii) quadrangular stones; iii) pointed stones. In front of some monoliths there was a small hearth indicating a possible offering place.

Sixteen burials have been found among these monoliths, so far. They were not directly associated with the single stelae, the skeletons being buried without any definite order around them. It seems therefore that the stelae were erected to indicate the general funerary use of the area, not specific tombs.

On the basis of the pottery evidence, they can be ascribed to one cultural unit, the Gash Group (ca. 2500-1000 BC) and can be dated to the late 3rd-early 2nd millennia BC (Cremaschi *et al.* 1986).

Another small stele was discovered in the central sector of the site (Costantini *et al.* 1982). It is a flat stone, 0.40 m high, placed at about 50 cm to the west of an oval stone cairn. A dating to the early 2nd millennium BC may be surmised on the basis of the general archaeological context.

Four stelae were recorded in the sites K. 5, JM 4 and JM 5 at the foot of the Jebel Taka and Jebel Mokram near Kassala (Fattovich n.d. b). At K 5 a small isolated stele is visible. It was originally connected with an enclosure, about 2 - 3 m in diameter, made with stone slabs fixed in the soil.

At JM 4, a pointed stela, 1.15 m high, was erected at the eastern end of a tumulus about 9 m in diameter.

At JM 5 a pillar, 1.45 m high, was placed within a stone ring about 8 m in diameter; another small stele was erected at the opposite end of it.

The age of these monoliths is unknown. Their funerary use may be surmised.

Many megalithic stelae are visible near Aqiq on the Red Sea coast (Crowfoot 1911; Kirwan 1939; Cremaschi *et al.* 1986).

They include: i) a pillar, 2.25 m high, standing in the middle of a plastered floor, 5 — 5 m in size, surrounded by small stelae about 0.30 m high; ii) an oval structure, 7.80 x 8 m in size, with two stelae of Kassala type at the opposite ends; iii) a stone circle, 2.60 m in diameter, with a stele in the middle; iv) a circular structure, about 12 m in diameter and delimited by vertical stone slabs comparable to some Kerma graves; v) some groups of small stelae, about 0.30 m high, fixed in a plastered floor, sometimes in a circular arrangement; vi) a lot of monoliths of Kassala type.

Stelae of Kassala type can be found also along the track from Tokar to Aqiq. According to information obtained from local inhabitants, they are frequent in the area between Aqiq and Karora on the Ethiopian border.

The age of these monoliths is uncertain. They probably go back to the late prehistorical times (2nd-1st millennia BC).

B. Northern Tigrean plateau.

Funerary megalithic stelae, not ascribable to the Aksumite culture, are quite frequent in northern and central Eritrea.

A cemetery with large tumuli and stelae was recorded at Mameruch, to the north of Dabir Baat, in the Marea mountains. It is attributed by the local traditions to the Rom, a mythical people of giants living in Northern Eritrea, down to the Gash lowlands (Piva 1907: 328).

Some stelae, up to 1.50 m high, were found in the onà near Asmara, at Addi Conzî and Hadamù South, in the Hamasien. A cemetery with stelae standing in the middle of graves was discovered at Addikhe (Tringali 1965: 147, 149, 1981: 109).

Funerary stelae were recorded in the Akkelé Guzai, at Tokonda Zighib, Ahau-Atsù, Addi-mbeitô and in a site at the km 101 of the Asmara — Addis Ababa asphalt road. Cemeteries with stone cairns arranged in circles around a stele were found at Zazzega and Mai Haza (Trucca 1980: 73).

A small monolithic stele was discovered also near Addi Galamo in the Eastern Tigray (Doresse 1960: 418).

The age of these standing stones is uncertain. The cemetery at Addikhe might be attributed to the Onà Group A culture, going back likely to the early 1st millennium BC (see Fattovich n.d. a). Some stelae in the Hamasien and Akkelé Guzai might belong to the Onà Group B culture, which was contemporary to the Aksumite and/or post-Aksumite periods (see Fattovich 1977).

In any case, most monoliths are probably recent. In fact, funerary monuments with stelae were built until recent times by the Beni Amer and Mensa. The occurrence of a “step pyramid” with two stelae, surrounded by a stone ring at Wold Ararat in the Beni Amer region was recorded by von Heuglin (1877 1: 73). The Mensa tombs are simple cairns clustered near a stele within a circular stone wall (Littmann 1910: 261, figs 16 — 17).

Funerary stelae are still being erected in the modern Christian cemeteries of Northern Ethiopia (see Trucca 1980).

C. Harrar.

Small stelae are sometimes associated with dolmens in the Harrar region, (see Joussaume 1975: 23). They were found at Rare and Hassan-Abdi.

Three stelae were recorded at Rare. A triangular stele, 1.30 m high, was placed at the entrance of a dolmen. Two other monoliths, respectively 0.50 and 0.90 m high, were erected at the opposite ends of an horizontal slab, possibly an altar (Joussaume 1972: 42-43, 44 — 45, 1980: 31 — 32). The fragments of about 8 stelae with triangular, quadrangular and cylindrical in shape were discovered during a

test excavation in the same area. The triangular ones were approximately 0.50 m high (Joussaume 1972: 48).

Three small cylindrical stelae, 0.20 m high, were found near some dolmens at Hassan-Abdi (Joussaume 1974: 20, 1980: 41 — 42).

The age of these monuments is uncertain. Two C14 datings from Hassan-Abdi suggest that they go back to the 2nd millennium BC (Joussaume 1976: 26 — 27), 1980: 102 — 103).

D. Djibuti.

Some phallic and anthropomorphic stelae have been found in the Horn along the road from Djibuti to Loyada. They are associated with rectangular graves delimited by vertical slabs, like those in Central Ethiopia. In some cases they are decorated with a symbol in the form of T. Their age is unknown (Joussaume 1980: 18).

E. Shoa.

Different types of megalithic stelae in Central Ethiopia have been described and studied by Neuville (Chollet, Neuville 1905; Neuville 1928, 1932). Azaïs (Azaïs, Chambard 1931) and Anfray (1974 b, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1982; Anfray, Godet 1976).

They were recorded in the following districts of the Shoa: Tegulet and Bulga, Debre-Berhan to the north of Addis Ababa; Haykoch and Butajira, regions of Soddo, Dobbi, Meskan and Silte; Hadiya and Kambata (see Anfray 1982: pl I).

A few undecorated monoliths occur in the region of Debre-Berhan. One of them, 1.87 m high, at Gherrem-Gabriel, is rectangular in section and decorated with a bifurcate sign. The age and meaning of these monoliths is uncertain (Anfray 1982: 45, 53-54).

One hundred and fifty-one sites with stelae were discovered in the Soddo, Dobbi, Meskan and Silte. They all belong to the same cultural tradition, with two regional variants in the Northern Soddo and in the Southern Soddo, Dobbi, Meskan and Silte (Azaïs, Chambard 1931: 147 — 187; Anfray, Godet 1976; Anfray 1982: 49 — 53)

The northern group is characterized by four main types of monoliths: i) stelae carved with the representations of swords and other symbols, ranging between 2 and 4 m height; ii) anthro pomor-

phic stelae, up to 2.90 m high, reproducing very schematically the upper part of a human figure; iii) stelae carved with the schematic representation of a "masked" human figures 1 — 2 m high: iv) hemispherical or conical monoliths, 1 m high, often arranged to form a half circle.

Their funerary meaning is undisputable. They are frequently located within cemeterial areas with rectangular or circular tombs delimited by vertical slabs. It is very difficult to state whether they indicated the general funerary area or single tombs. The distribution of the stelae at Gayet-Gareno seems to confirm the second hypothesis. In particular, the anthropomorphic stelae were most likely placed at one end of single tombs (see Anfray 1982: 57 — 96, pl VII — XI, XL).

The southern group is characterized by three main types of monoliths: i) stelae with complex decorations, ranging between 1 and 2.25 m in height, carved on both sides with the representation of the front and back of a schematic human figure, including the elements of the dress and a plait of hair; ii) phallic stelae, 0.60 — 1.80 m high, undecorated or carved with symbolic signs; ii) simple pointed stones, ranging between 0.60 and 1.20 m in height.

The funerary function of these stelae is postulated but it has not yet been proven (Azaïs, Chambard 1931; Anfray 1982: 97 — 115)

The age of both groups of monoliths is uncertain. According to Anfray (1982: 139 — 140) they might go back to the early 2nd millennium AD. Such dating is confirmed by a C14 date to AD 1200 = 110 from the cemetery at Gattira-Demma (northern group) (Anfray 1982: 141).

Twenty-two sites with phallic stelae, 0.50 — 2.12 m high, were recorded in the district of Hadiya and Kambata. They are undecorated, save for a monolith with anthropomorphic shape (Anfray 1982: 117 — 118).

F Sidamo.

Some thousand stelae occur in the districts of Wolayta, Sidama, Gedeo and Jem-Jem (Azaïs, Chambard 1931:213-241; Jensen 1936:448-483 Anfray 1982: 119 — 128). They are isolated or grouped to form large stelae fields. Two basic types of monoliths have been distinguished: phallic stelae and anthropoid stelae.

The phallic stelae, up to 8 m high are sometimes decorated with symbolic signs. Their funerary meaning may be indicated by the evidence of some burials close to them at the sites of Waheno and Buqqisa (Azaïs, Chambard 1931: 226, 236 — 239). In some cases they are not associated with any cemetery (Anfray 1982: 125).

The anthropoid stelae are cylindrical stones, about 2 m high carved with the representation of a human face and perhaps a dress. They are erected over stone mounds, which might be cemeteries.

The age of these monoliths is uncertain (Joussaume 1980: 16 — 17; Anfray 1982: 140).

Simple standing stones have been also recorded in the districts of Arero and Borena and in those of Gardula and Gamo in the Gamo-Gofa region (Azaïs, Chambard 1931: 246). They are undecorated pillars, up to 2 m high, erected over small tumuli, about 1.50 m in diameter. Such monoliths belong to a different cultural tradition than the phallic stelae. Their dating is unknown (see Anfray 1982: 124).

Funerary stelae are still erected the by Oromo People in the Arussi region. They are flat stones with round tops often decorated with geometrical symbols indicating the social status of the deceased (Haberland 1963 a: 495 — 500, 1963 b, 1976).

4. Kenya.

A ceremonial structure with twenty basalt pillars alligned to form a coarse L and two cairns was found near Kolakol on the western side of Lake Turkana. The age of this monument is uncertain (Lynch, Robbins 1978; Soper 1982).

The occurence of monoliths in the western highlands of Kenya was also claimed out, but it is not yet carefully proven (Sutton 1973: 5).

5. Maghreb.

Monoliths are sometimes associated with tumuli and dolmens in Northern Algeria and Morocco.

Dolmens with stelae were found at Sigus and Ras el-Ain Bou Merzoug, to the south of Costantina, in Algeria. They are built on earth platforms with a stone circle at the base and surrounded by some stelae, up to 4 m high (Camps 1961: 130 — 132).

A large tumulus, 54 x 58 m in size, surrounded by 167 monoliths occurs at Mzora in Morocco. The monoliths are 1.50 m high, save for two very big stones, respectively 5 and 4.20 m high, at the western end of the monument (Camps 1961: 76 — 77).

A circle of stelae, 0.50 m high, is visible on the top of another large tumulus at La Guethna in Morocco (Camps 1961: 78 — 79).

Two stelae were fixed on the top of a tumulus at Wadi Werk in Morocco (Camps 1961: 72 — 73).

The age of these monuments is uncertain. According to Camps (1961: 206-207) they might go back to the 2nd — early 1st millennium B.C.

6. Sahara.

Different types of monoliths are scattered in the Sahara, from Libya to Mauritania.

A cemetery with tumuli and stelae was discovered in the oasis of Jerma in Libya. The tumuli were conical, hemispherical, pyramidal and cylindrical stone cairns with a stele and an offering table in front of them. The stelae were simple pointed or quadrangular monoliths, carved sometimes with the schematic representation of horns or human fingers. They can be dated to the 1st century BC (Pace *et al.* 1951: 160).

Circles of small pointed or round topped monoliths were recorded at Mokto in the Chad Republic. Their dating is unknown (Mauny 1962: pl II).

Stelae fields were reported along the Wadi Tafiret and the Adrar Sirret, Niger. At Tafiret seventeen monoliths were associated with six tombs. In the Adrar Sirret, some hundreds of round topped stelae, 2 — 3 m high, covered an area of 300 x 100 m close to pyramidal stone cairns. Their age is unknown (Boccazzi 1974: 59 — 61).

Monoliths were discovered in several sites of the Erg, Hoggar and Tassili in Algeria (Reygasse 1950: 46 — 51). They include small stones associated with ancient tombs at Takankort (see Foureau

1905: 1063 — 1096); stone circles marked by a monolith at Tiratimine in the Mudyf region; stelae, 2.50 m high, with Tifinar inscriptions at Gara Tiltekine in the Hoggar; stone pillars carved with the figure of a human face, up to 1.50 m high, at Tabebala in the Tassili (see also Camps-Faber 1966: 260 — 262, 265 — 266). Their dating is uncertain. Some monuments might go back to the Neolithic age.

Megalithic stelae were also recorded in Mauritania and Western Sahara (Reygasse 1950: 46).

7. Central Africa.

A megalithic culture has been identified in the Bouar region, Central African Republic. It is characterized by a typical kind of monuments called *tazunu* (Vidal 1969; David 1982).

They consist of a low rubble mound, sometimes 45 x 45 m in size, with several monolithic stelae, up to 3.50 m high, on the top and megalithic 'tables' and cists.

They had a sure funerary function. Yet, the complete absence of any human remains in the cists might suggest that they had mainly a memorial meaning (David 1982: 74). Their age is uncertain, ranging between the 6th millennium BC and the 1st millennium AD (see also de Bayle des Hermens 1975: 253 — 263) Van Noten 1982: 29). At present, however, they are considered as going back to the 1st millennium BC (David 1982: 67 — 75).

8. Mali.

Monoliths were discovered in the Old Niger Delta to the southwest of Timboctu (Davies 1967: 259 — 261).

At Tondidaro, three hundred phallic stelae are still visible. They are conical columns, decorated with geometrical patterns (see also Reygasse 1950: 51; Mauny 1961:129-134). Standing stones, associated with tombs, were also recorded at Kouga, Sandiki Uadiobè Moribabougou and Hombori. At Moribabougou, in particular, they were erected over a cairn (Davies 1967: 260 — 261).

These monuments most likely go back to the Iron Age (ca. late 1st early 2nd millennium AD).

Funerary megalithic structures with stone pillars are widely scattered in Southern Senegal and Northern Gambia, between the Salloum and Gambia rivers (Mauny 1962:174-172; Davies 1967: 274 — 276; Ago 1983).

They include: i) circles of pillars, up to 6 m in diameter, with one or two alignments of monoliths approximately to the east; ii) tumuli with two monoliths to the east. The stone pillars are usually 2 m high (see Todd 1903; Durchein 1905; Parker 1923; Thimans, Descamps 1974, 1975).

They go back to the 1st millennium AD (Ago 1983: 539).

10. Togo, Nigeria.

Standing stones were recorded at Farendè and on the Ewolito Mountain near Palimè in Togo. The latter ones seem to be phallic-form (Davies 1967: 293). Their age is uncertain.

Phallic pillars, up to 1.50 m high, were discovered near the Cross River in Nigeria. They are conical stones carved with the schematic representation of human figures. Some of them go back probably to the 16th century AD (Allison 1968; see also Shaw 1978: 191 — 194).

This evidence points out that the megalithic standing stones and the tomb stelae reflect different cultural traditions, which are joined only by a generic megalithic matrix.

In particular, we must distinguish monoliths from tomb stelae. The former were true megalithic monuments. They were used either as cult objects in sanctuaries, sometimes devoted to the cult of the ancestors, or as funerary monuments indicating single tombs or generally the cemeterial area. The latter probably originated from a megalithic tradition, but evolved quickly into a completely different type of monument. They always marked a single burial in order to secure the offering ritual to the deceased (Egypt, Nubia) or to commemorate him (*nepesh*). Less frequently they were connected with the ancestor cult (e.g. Deir el Medina).

Moreover, the use of the funerary monoliths seems to be more frequent in Africa than in the Near East and the Arabian peninsula. At the same time, no common source can be recognized for these types of monuments. Actually, no element supports the hypothesis that they spread into the African continent from the East.

At present, the following basic types of monuments can be identified:

1. cultic monoliths (bethyls), maybe with an original funerary meaning, in the Syrian-Palestinian region and Arabian Peninsula.
2. Ceremonial centers in the Syrian-Palestinian regions, Arabian Peninsula, Kenya, Sahara,.
3. commemorative standing stones (*massəboth*) evolving into the memorial stelae and mausolea (*nephesh*) in the Syrian-Palestinian region and Arabian Peninsula.
4. memorial stelae connected with the offering ritual in Egypt Nubia and Lybia.
5. standing stones and carved monoliths connected with the ancestor cult in Jordan, Sahara, Western Ethiopia (Sidamo), Central Africa and Western Africa.
6. monoliths marking single tombs in Jordan, Southern Arabia, Eastern and Central Ethiopia, Eritrea, Maghreb and Senegal.
7. 'Stelae' fields indicating the general cemeterial area in the northern Ethiopian-Sudanese borderland, (Kasslaa,) Northern Ethiopia (Aksum), Nubia and Sahara.

On the whole, the comparison between the Aksumite monoliths and the ones discovered in the other regions suggests that they belong to an ancient African tradition. In fact the use of monoliths to indicate the general cemeterial area is documented at Aksum, Kassala, Aniba and perhaps in some Sahara sites too. In particular, we can remark a significant parallelism between Aksum and Kassala. In both sites the cemetery is located close to the settlement area, the monoliths are not directly connected with specific burials, and some of them have an offering place. The different size of these monuments can be explained with their socio-economic context. The standing stones at Kassala can be attributed to a tribal segmentary society, maybe similar to the modern Nuer one. The monoliths at Aksum belong to a state society.

To conclude, the Aksumite stelae can be attributed to a regional cultural tradition of Eastern Sudan and Northern Ethiopia going back to the late 3rd millennium BC. Of course, this is still a hypothesis of work to be confirmed by more detailed field work in these regions. In any case, I believe that the archaeological research presently in progress in the Kassala area will enlighten the African background of the ancient Aksumite civilization.

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