



Before Aksum

EXCAVATING ETHIOPIA'S EARLIEST CIVILISATION

In the 1st millennium AD, Ethiopia was home to the great civilisation of Aksum, one of the world's first Christian kingdoms. But what came before Aksum? A joint Ethiopian-German project near Wugro in the Tigræan highlands is revealing a fascinating and unprecedented picture, as **Steven Matthews** and **Saskia Büchner** explain.

The mighty civilisation of Aksum, centred on the verdant Ethiopian highlands of Tigray, thrived for much of the 1st millennium AD.

Once described as one of the four greatest kingdoms on earth, along with Rome, China and Persia, it was an important trading empire ruled by a wealthy elite.

Its connections stretched from Europe to China, bolstered by a lucrative trade in indigenous frankincense, myrrh and gold. Yet with the passage of time, the kingdom fell from wider memory. Despite over a century of excavations, the archaeology of Aksum, with its wealthy settlements and iconic field of towering stone carved stelæ, remains little known when

compared to the sites of Rome or Persia.

Yet what of the period before Aksum? In this so-called 'pre-Aksumite' era, we enter even less well-known territory, but one that is equally fascinating. Here we witness a world of elegantly austere monumental temples, and a mysterious merging of cultures across the Red Sea with ancient Yemen and the kingdom of Saba,

IMAGE Dreamstime



commonly thought to be the Biblical land of 'Sheba'. Stretching back to the early 1st millennium BC and beyond, this is Ethiopia's earliest known civilisation.

While previous research has revealed something of the religious aspects of pre-Aksumite Ethiopia, we are now beginning to shed light on their intriguing residential life. Indeed, since 2007, our team from the German Archaeological Institute, in cooperation with the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, has been investigating a series of pre-Aksumite sites dating to the 1st millennium BC in the hinterlands of Wugro, a rapidly growing town in eastern Tigray, and the results have been spectacular.

Pre-Aksumite finds

It all began a rocky plateau southwest of Wugro, near the village of Meqaber Ga'ewa, when an unusual stone structure appeared during local quarrying. Thanks to the regional heritage authorities, all activity on

the site was stopped, allowing Ethiopian archaeologists to investigate. Carved limestone blocks began to appear bearing unusual inscriptions. Such spectacular discoveries were largely unheard of in this part of Tigray, tending only to occur much further north near Aksum and in Southern Eritrea. The local archaeologists quickly contacted Professor Steffen Wenig, an eminent specialist in northeast African archaeology, who encouraged the formation of a joint Ethiopian-German project under the direction of Prof. Ricardo Eichmann, Prof. Norbert Nebes and Dr. Pawel Wolf.

Careful excavation revealed a structure some 13m by 9m in size, built mostly of undressed flat limestone blocks, and set within a large enclosure. The main building consisted of a broad, stepped entrance, with portico, and a large central room with three smaller rooms toward the rear, flanked by a further series of rooms inside the enclosure wall. In the centre of the main

LEFT Excavation on the mound of Ziban Adi during 2015, revealing large pre-Aksumite building.

ABOVE View across the great carved stelea field from Aksum dated to the 1st millennium AD. The project sought to discover more about the Ethiopian civilisation that came before.

BELOW Beneath sultry skies: the landscape of Wugro in southern Tigray.

building, we then made an extraordinary discovery, a completely preserved carved stone altar of immense beauty, which site director Dr Wolf has described as "truly a piece of world heritage"

Constructed from several slabs of carefully worked limestone, the altar is intricately decorated, incorporating narrow steps around its base, false 'windows' on each face, and around the top an inscription. On its upper surface, a shallow square carved basin would have caught libations, perhaps the blood of sacrificial animals. From there, the offerings would have flowed over a carved bull's head into ➤



RIGHT The stone altar and associated 'cult inventory' (ABOVE) including miniature altars, statue and inscribed blocks, discovered inside the temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa.



another basin down inside the altar, and then exited from the southern face of the altar, again over a carved bull's head, onto a monolithic limestone drain and into a final circular stone basin situated in the southern part of the building.

To the rear of the shrine, behind the altar, a sanctuary contained further limestone objects, including a block with an inscription, two miniature altars, and a beautiful statue of a seated women, set upon an inscribed pedestal. Behind these were six large enigmatic naturally polished stone cobbles, arranged in a line. The quality and

range of finds were not only unprecedented for the area, but they also represented some of the finest examples of such objects ever found in Ethiopia. The distinctive layout of the building and range of religious objects suggested we had found a temple belonging to the pre-Aksumite era.

Reading the past

The altar's inscription provided vital clues to the history of the temple. It was written in Sabaic, the language of the ancient Sabaeans, who lived on the other side of the Red Sea in Southwest Arabia, in the

region of modern day Yemen. There, similar inscriptions have revealed that the Sabaeans ruled over a kingdom known as Saba during the 1st millennium BC, and that they grew wealthy from their control of the incense route out of Arabia.

Prof. Nebes translated the inscription from Meqaber Ga'ewa as follows.

Wa'ran, the king, who downthrows (the enemies), son of Radi'um and Shakkatum, the companion, rebuilt (the altar) for Almaqah, when he was appointed the Lord of the temple of Almaqah in Yaha', on instruction of Attar and Almaqah and Dat Hamyim and Dat Ba'dan.

Given that Sabaic inscriptions are rare in Ethiopia, this short text provides vital insights into the religious life of the ruling elite and their attendant gods. The inscription speaks of a king called *Wa'ran*, who was the son of *Radi'um* (father) and *Shakkatum* (mother) and his ascension to the lord of the Almaqah temple at *Yaha*, referring to Yeha, an important pre-Aksumite temple just east of Aksum (see box). The inscription also confirmed that both the temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa and at Yeha were dedicated to Almaqah, the chief god of the Arabian Sabaeans.

Further evidence of this Arabian influence was apparent at the back of the temple, in the form of the six large enigmatic polished cobblestones, which



LEFT The pre-Aksumite temple dedicated to the Sabaeen god Almaqah on the site of Meqaber Ga'ewa, near Wugro.

BELOW Plan of Meqaber Ga'ewa, showing the temple within its enclosure.

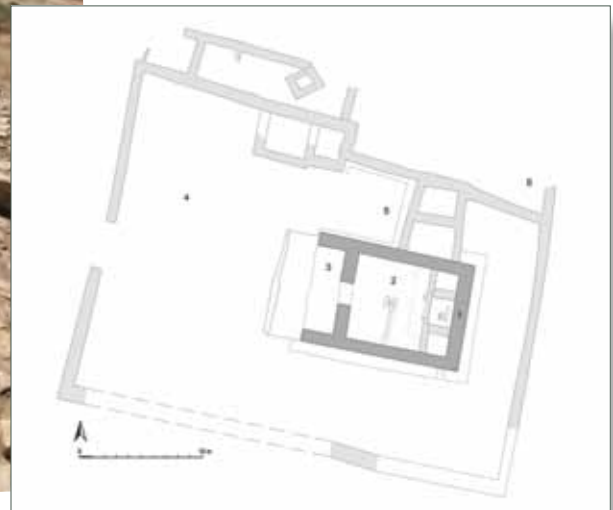


IMAGE: DAI

Di'amat rises

How to explain what was going on? There was already trade and contact between Northeast Africa and Southwest Arabia during the 2nd millennium BC, but with the rise of the kingdom of Saba in the first half of the 1st millennium BC there developed ever-closer cultural ties between the two regions, especially with Tigray. At this time, we see the Sabaeen influence in Ethiopia: in the form of a range of religious iconography, such as the altars and

monumental temples, in the adoption of their principle deity Almaqah, and of course in their written language.

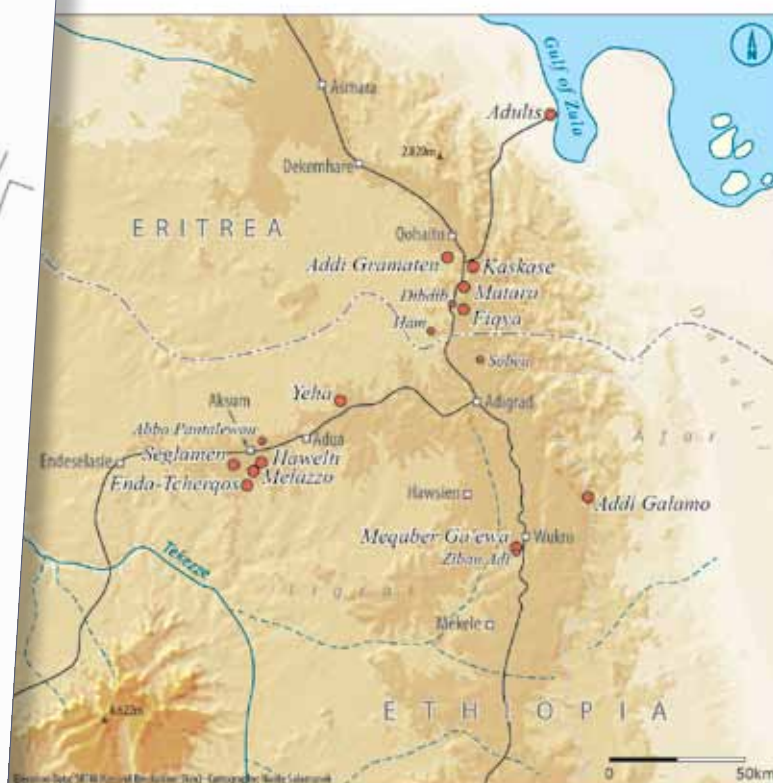
Earlier archaeologists saw this as the result of migration or invasion by the Sabaeans. However, there is now significant evidence that Sabaeen religious traditions were adapted to suit local African tastes, and that they were adopted by the elites of Tigray to serve their own local political ends and to maintain close trading alliances across the Red Sea. Indeed, it is this process that seems to have given rise to Ethiopia's first civilisation which, according to a number of Sabaic inscriptions, seems to have been called the kingdom of Di'amat. ▶

formed a 'batyl', a traditional pre-Islamic shrine. As important as these connections to the kingdom of Saba are, the mention of the king's mother is especially significant. None of the Southwest Arabian inscriptions ever mention a prominent woman, and certainly not in the role of consort or queen. In northeast Africa, however, women were recognised as playing an important political role, as seen in the neighbouring Kushite Empire on the Middle Nile, in modern day Sudan. Here, kings based their rule on matrilineal claims and queens and the kings' mothers were often prominently depicted on religious buildings.

ABOVE The team was able to discern a number of different phases of remodelling that the Almaqah temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa underwent during the 1st millennium BC. Note also that the temple stood above an earlier 'predecessor building', as explored later in this feature.

ABOVE LEFT Map of the Tigray, showing sites of the pre-Aksumite period Aksum.

BELOW The Sabaic inscription that surrounds the top of the stone altar from the temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa. Its translation would provide many clues to the history and meaning of the temple.



IMAGES: DAI





Centred on the Tigray highlands of what is today northern Ethiopia and southern Eritrea, Di'amat appears to have comprised several independent regional polities, with a religious capital situated at Yeha, located some 50km east of Aksum, far to the north of our site (see box below). The inscription on our altar from Meqaber Ga'ewa mentions Yeha, and describes how the king *Wa'ran* rebuilt Yeha's temple in honour of the Sabaeen god, Almaqah. We also found it highly significant that the limestone used in the temple at Yeha appears to come from a source in our Wuqro area. All this would feed into our analysis of the site, and interpretation of what was going on, as we will soon explain.

Our investigations at Meqaber Ga'ewa concluded with its partial reconstruction and the erection of a large, permanent roof over the site, creating an open-air museum. Conservators also worked hard to create accurate stone replicas of the altar and other Sabaeen-influenced artefacts, which we installed in the exact position in the temple in which they were found. We then transported the originals to a new museum

in Wuqro, where the altar is now the central display in the main gallery, surrounded by other objects from the temple, including clay figurines, ceramic incense burners and bronze artefacts.

Beyond the temple

But this was far from the end of the story, for Wuqro still had much more to reveal about Ethiopia's earliest civilisation. When excavations began at Meqaber Ga'ewa they were accompanied by a survey of the surrounding area, which helped to identify a number of other possible pre-Aksumite sites. Of these, we were particularly interested in an oval shaped mound, set within a group of small fields about 1km south of the temple. Known locally as Ziban Adi, the large mound rose some 3m above ground level, and through the parched beige soil and wild brush, we were already able to discern lines of roughly hewn limestone blocks. We began tentatively exploring it in 2010, carefully brushing and trowelling away just a few centimetres of soil atop the mound, soon revealing another large rectangular building some

ABOVE LEFT The restored temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa after erection of the new roof to protect the site.

ABOVE RIGHT The altar and other finds from Meqaber Ga'ewa now on display in the new Wukro Museum.

20m by 16m with broad walls of limestone.

The building was formed of three large rooms, with the back room further subdivided into two smaller rooms. Its overall design, method of construction, and pottery were all clearly pre-Aksumite. Moreover, it lay just a few hundred metres south of the church of Abuna Garima, which houses three large stone incense burners bearing the symbol of the Sabaeen god Almaqah, identical to examples found at Yeha, while fragments from a stone altar, similar to that found at our temple of Meqaber Ga'ewa, were lent against the church entrance and incorporated into its walls. The local priests confirmed that they came from nearby fields immediately adjacent to the mound. It seemed that the building at Ziban Adi was yet another pre-Aksumite temple.

The following year we undertook a

THE GREAT TEMPLE AT YEHA

Yeha, c.50km east of Aksum, appears to have been a major religious capital during pre-Aksumite times of the 1st millennium BC. Today its magnificent temple stands within the grounds of a Christian church. Measuring 19m by 15m and built of carefully squared limestone blocks, the temple walls still survive to a height of 14m. Not much remains of the building's original layout, since it was continuously reused

and modified over two and half thousand years. However, it once had two floors and a partially covered roof, and that six monumental square stone pillars marked its façade, echoing the temples built by the Sabaeans in South Arabia. The main chamber would also have housed a stone altar similar to that from Meqaber Ga'ewa, fragments of which survive in the nearby church. It was probably built during the 7th century BC. Significant

to the project outlined in these pages, it appears that the limestone used in the temple at Yeha was brought from the Wuqro area, further underscoring the special connection between the two areas. Dr. Iris Gerlach and her team from the German Archaeological Institute are currently working at Yeha, the nearby Grat Be'al Gebri palace, and the surrounding area, so adding greatly to this overall picture.

BELOW The remains of the Almaqah temple at Yeha, near Aksum, in northwest Tigray.



magnetometry survey of the fields around the mound, which revealed evidence of other structures, suggesting a settlement once surrounded the mound. We dug eight large test trenches to investigate but to our dismay agricultural activities appeared to have destroyed the buildings, leaving only rubble and their foundations.

Upstairs, downstairs

Our plan for the 2015 season was to finally undertake excavations inside the building. We laid out two trenches, the first to investigate the central room of the building, and the second to explore one of the smaller rear rooms. Given the results of the test excavations, and the considerable number of finds from the earlier surface clearance of the walls -- including obsidian, animal bones and pottery, plus a beautifully preserved bronze beaker, now displayed in the new museum -- we expected there to perhaps be as little as 20cm of building surviving.

To everyone's surprise, it was to be almost two weeks later, and some 3m below the highest point of the mound, that we finally reached the lowest occupation levels inside the building. Both trenches were filled with several metres of limestone rubble, formed from collapsed parts of the walls, and full

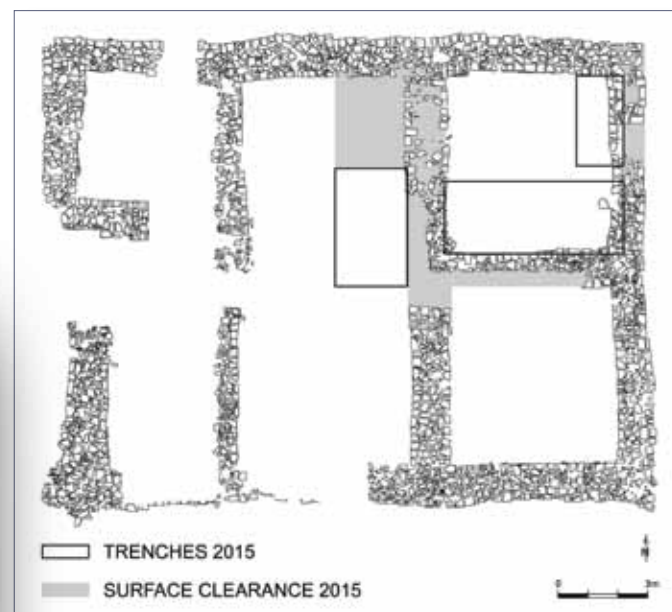
of patches of burnt red clay. Lower down in the trenches, this clay still clung to the walls, as a covering for the rough stone, and apparently decorated with orange pigment. It was clear that there had been a catastrophic fire inside the building, turning the clay plaster red. Beneath the limestone rubble we found two bands of thick, compact yellow clay, with burnt timbers beneath each, and large amounts of pottery, bone and other finds above and below these clay bands. These were almost certainly the collapsed roof and upper floor of the building, with the finds above and below them representing the contents of the rooms from different floors. The archaeology was entirely undisturbed, and sealed beneath several metres of limestone rubble, indicating that when the building collapsed it was not disturbed by later activity, providing an incredibly rare opportunity to study the organisation of space inside a building over two floors.

The evidence from the first trench, representing the middle room of the building, suggests that the ground floor may have been dominated by a large central fire-pit or hearth, and that it originally had only a partial first floor, formed by a walkway or internal terrace, held up by large timbers

running down the middle of the room.

Evidence from the second trench, in the rear room, indicates that it would have had a complete first floor. The latter seems to have been used for preparing food, and was well furnished with two large grindstones over half a metre in length, and lots of storage jars, pots and dishes. Raised kitchens for food preparation are not unusual in Northeast Africa, as they protect food from animals, insects and seasonal damp.

Beneath it, on the ground floor, we recovered a wealth of personal ornamentation, including seven matching perforated shell beads and seven matching bronze 'buttons', along with an ivory pendant, and several other beads and larger shells, all of which seem to have been stored together in a small pot. Other ornaments were also scattered around the room, and we found a small well-used whetstone, and pottery comprising mainly flat dishes. In one corner of the room, embedded in the floor, we found a large, flat round stone, which likely served as base for a timber beam supporting the upper floor, and its position suggesting that there had been four such beams, one in each corner. ▶



ABOVE Plan of the building discovered within the mound of Ziban Adi, showing location of trenches during the 2015 excavations.

LEFT (above) The intriguing mound of Ziban Adi, located just south of Meqaber Ga'ewa, near Wuqro, under excavation in 2015.

LEFT (below) The remains of a pre-Aksumite stone altar incorporated into the walls of the nearby church of Abuna Garima, near Ziban Adi, and one of several stone incense burners

INSET kept at the museum, reputed to have been found in the fields around the mound.



Small finds made inside the building of Ziban Adi during the 2015 excavations, including **ABOVE** an ivory pendant incorporating the crescent moon symbol of the god Almaqah, being sketched here, **FAR RIGHT** seven matching bronze buttons and perforated shell beads form the ornament cache, and **INSET** one of the large grindstones discovered. **RIGHT** Hard at work: finds director, Saskia Büchner, in the finds magazine built by the project next to the site of Meqaber Ga'ewa.



Peopling the past

It was immediately clear that this was no temple but rather a residential building. Such buildings of the pre-Aksumite period are rare but those that are known, such as at Seglamen and Kidane Mehret, near Aksum, have similar sized rooms and construction to that of Ziban Adi.

However, the incredible preservation of our site meant that we were able to identify, for the first time, the use of multiple storeys in these buildings. Previously, the only evidence for the existence of upper floors was at the temple of Yeha, as well as a large building located some 45m to its south: the Grāt Be'al Gebri. The latter is truly monumental, being some 46m by 46m, with a raised, stepped podium and a façade again in the Sabaean style, with six monumental stone pillars, some of which still survive. Its lower levels were built of stone and incorporated a timber structure, allowing it to hold several upper storeys – though they, or any evidence of their use, have long perished. Despite the fact that a few fragmentary Sabaic inscriptions have been discovered in the Grāt Be'al Gebri it seems not to have been a temple, and is usually referred to as a 'palace'.

It is thanks to the surviving height of the walls of our house that we were able to draw a number of architectural similarities with the Grāt Be'al Gebri palace. Thus, within one of the walls of the central room, we found two horizontal gaps in the limestone

walls, positioned one above the other, which probably held the timber beams that were burnt in the fire. The exact same architectural feature occurs in the walls of the Grāt Be'al Gebri. Moreover, the fragments of decorated clay found on the walls at Ziban Adi also seem similar.

Meanwhile, we also observed links with the great temple site of Yeha: among our small-finds, the seven bronze buttons resemble the larger bronze seals found at Yeha, while the decorated stem of the ivory pendant is matched by similar stem fragments from a series of contemporary graves located near the temple of Yeha. Though these are only fragments, the pendant from Ziban Adi was complete and discovered in situ in its original shape, revealing that the stem terminated in the shape of a crescent moon – the symbol of the god Almaqah.

As for the pottery from Ziban Adi, in addition to revealing much about what people were doing inside the building, it also provided vital glimpses of contacts



between regional settlements, and of wider pre-Aksumite economic organisation. Pottery during this period was primarily non wheel-made and decorated in various styles, including incised wavy lines and chevrons. These same decorative styles can be found on the pottery from other regional polities. However, with the application of chemical analyses, we found that the clays used to produce this pottery all largely came from the local production area. Therefore, while the shapes and decorative styles of the pots were widely shared across the different regional polities, very few actual vessels were traded beyond their area of manufacture.

The house at Ziban Adi is thus unique in that it has a number of important connections with major pre-Aksumite Ethiopian buildings, such as the Grāt Be'al Gebri palace and with the Sabaean-influenced Almaqah temples. However, as with the few other known pre-Aksumite residential buildings, any obvious Sabaean influence, in the form of inscriptions or architecture is largely absent.

RIGHT Women from the nearby village employed to assist with the excavation of the deep, rubble filled trenches at Ziban Adi during the 2015 excavations. This house, and indeed the other material uncovered during the course of the current project, has shone new light on the great pre-Aksumite culture, Ethiopia's earliest civilisation.

Secrets of the site

Since this is the first pre-Aksumite house to be revealed in the Wuqro area, it is hard to be sure of its exact social status. Perhaps it was the residence of a rich merchant who took advantage of Wuqro's peripheral position to the religious capital to exploit trade between Yeha and neighbouring cultural areas, or perhaps it was the home of an administrative official for this region. While considerably smaller than the Grati Be'al Gebri, the latter view might suggest that our building functioned as the 'provincial palace' for this regional polity, in keeping with the more humble character of the Almaqah temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa when compared with the high status temple at Yeha.

But since Ziban Adi is clearly a residential building, and since altars and stone incense burners are usually temple-related paraphernalia, we were faced with a conundrum: how to explain the pre-Aksumite altar and stone incense burners in the nearby church? Could they have eroded out of our house? To test this, we positioned a third trench in the northeast corner of the building, at the lowest corner of the mound. It was still covered by limestone rubble, sealing the lower archaeological deposits. This means that the religious items must have come from somewhere else, indicating that a further temple is still to be discovered in the area!

Another significant benefit of our site was that it provided a rich source of organic remains for radio-carbon analysis, such as the burnt timbers from the roof and upper floor. The earliest activity on the site seems to date from the 10th to 8th centuries BC, which predates the construction and use of the Almaqah temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa. Instead, this period is contemporary with a 'predecessor' building that we discovered immediately beneath our temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa and also contemporary with the earliest construction of the palace of Grati Be'al Gebri at Yeha. A second, later group of dates falls between the 8th and 6th centuries BC, which is the same time as the



construction of Ethiopia's Almaqah temples and the adoption of Sabaeen cultural influences into Tigray. This is incredibly significant, as it suggests that a tradition of monumental architecture already existed in Tigray prior to the adoption of Sabaeen religious influences by the local elite.

This puts the origin of Ziban Adi among the very earliest known pre-Aksumite sites in Ethiopia. Previously, the oldest pre-Aksumite activity was known only from Northeast Tigray. Here there is clear evidence for interaction across the Red Sea but no direct Sabaeen religious influence. Even though our sites at Ziban Adi and Meqaber Ga'ewa are located much further south, they have closer links to the sites in the western part of the highlands, such as at Yeha, where this Sabaeen religious influence was strongest. How to explain all this? It is perhaps the case that our early 'palace' at Ziban Adi, as well as that of the Grati Be'al Gebri at Yeha, represent part of the initial spread westwards of these Sabaeen cultural features and their adoption by the local elites of Tigray. Our understanding of Ethiopia's

pre-Aksumite past is still expanding and changing. The number of sites that can be related to this early civilisation is still relatively small, and its earliest origins and interactions in the 2nd and 1st millennia BC is only just beginning to be explored, despite a century of work in the region. Our sites of Meqaber Ga'ewa and Ziban Adi, situated at the southern limits of these developments, have much to tell us about the early history of Ethiopia and of the great and complex civilisation that came before Aksum. ■

SOURCE Steven Matthews and Saskia

Büchner were the field and finds directors for the Ziban Adi excavation. Both are specialists in the archaeology of Northeast Africa, with Saskia also being the finds director for a number of projects in Sudan with the *German Archaeological Institute and University College London Qatar*, while Steven is just completing his PhD at the University of Groningen (NL). You can contact them at: stevenmatthews99@gmail.com and saskia.buechner@yahoo.de.

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