

# Preliminary Result of a Survey of the Archaeological Site of Sib‘at, ‘Adwa, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

*In 2008 a preliminary archaeological survey around the town of ‘Adwa was carried out by the Addis Ababa University Ecotourism Project Team. This work resulted in the discovery of an Aksumite site at a location called Sib‘at yielding evidence for two occupation phases approximately dating between about the second and the seventh centuries AD. The early Aksumite phase dating between about the second to the fourth centuries AD appears to be represented in the archaeological record by red-ware decorated pottery and handles, along with undressed and dressed stelae. The late Aksumite phase dating from about between the fifth and seventh centuries AD is represented by fragments of amphorae, coins, iron slag, bricks, a podium and a cross. Hence the site has an outstanding cultural and scientific significance as it preserves evidence of an Aksumite settlement, cemetery and a place of religious worship.*

**Keywords:** Archaeological survey – ecotourism – early and late Aksumite phases – stelae – Aksumite church – Tigray

## 1. Introduction

The archaeological site of Sib‘at is found in the northern tip of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in the highlands of the Tigray Regional National State. It is located in the central administrative zone, ‘Adwa district, at the locality of Keren at a place called Debre Sahil St. Michael. Its distance from the town of ‘Adwa is about 14 km north, and it lies about 34 km to the northeast of the historic town of Aksum. This site is situated at 0157645 northing, 0490753 easting and at an elevation of 2147 meters above sea level. It is located at a strategical military commanding point surrounded by a chain of inaccessible steep cliffs on its western and northern sides. The site is well fortified by the Sib‘at Mountain on its eastern side. It is only accessible from the southeastern side.

Fiseha Giyorgis who documented some of the archaeological sites in the northern Horn of Africa mentions the site of Sib‘at for the first time in Tigrinya language (published by the Istituto Orientale in Napoli, 1982). However, Fiseha Giyorgis was not an archaeologist and never visited the site. His narration of this site was based on information that he collected from others. According to him the site of Sib‘at is located to the east of the May

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Gwagwa River and is a two hours walk distance from the same river. Furthermore, Yeha is located to the east of the same site and is a five hours walk distance from Sib'at.

He describes the remains of the site and its history as follows. The site of Sib'at consists of a ruin with a foundation of an ancient church, which still survives. Blocks of dressed stones are found scattered on the surface of the site. During the Gondarian period *Dejjazmach* Kifle Wahid settled in this town and some part of it is named after him. Later on, the area came under control by *Dejjazmach* Wubé who was the ruler of northern Ethiopia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fesseha Giyorgis 1987). In any case, the site has never been documented by professionals until 2008. It was surveyed and documented by the Ecotourism Project Team under the direction of Mulugeta Fesseha from the College of Development Studies on November 18 and 20 following a request made by clergymen of the monastery of Debre Sahil St. Michael (Mulugeta et al. 2010). The team consisted of researchers in archaeology, geology, ecotourism, history and biology from Addis Ababa and Aksum Universities and the *Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage*. The research team was multi-disciplinary, but this article will only discuss the preliminary archaeological results. The objective of the survey was to explore and document archaeological resources that have significant scientific and cultural values for future research.



Fig.1: Photograph showing the location of Sib'at site with Mt. Sib'at to the east.

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The site – designated by the same team as TgAd-02 – covers an area of about 10 hectares. It preserves an Aksumite settlement, cemetery and remnants of a religious site represented by a podium, stelae, pillars, stone bowls, pottery waterspouts, coins, a cross, iron slag, bricks and other building remains.

### 2. Methodology

An intensive survey was undertaken by the ecotourism research team on foot for about three hours in two days to document any visible archaeological evidence on the surface of the Sib'at site, which covers about ten hectares. The survey was conducted by seven members of the team in one metre spacing. No artifacts were collected from the site.

Digital photographic and video documentation of artifacts and *in situ* materials was undertaken by the Ecotourism Project Team and by the Ecotourism Desk Office of the town of 'Adwa in November 2008. Furthermore the GPS location of the site and the *in situ* evidence were documented.

The chronology of the site was tentatively determined on the basis of artifacts collected from the surface including coins and with the typology of the *in situ* evidence. Furthermore, information on the importance, protection and handling of artifacts and *in situ* material remains was given to the clergymen of the monastery.

### 3. Stelae

The most important archaeological evidence found in this site are the ten stelae. Nine of them are located inside the compound of Debre Sahil St. Michael monastery, while the tenth is found to the north of the monastery on top of the Sib'at Plateau.

The majority of the stelae appear to have been moved from their original positions to places near the podium where the modern monastery stands. The disturbed ones are rectangular and smooth with pointed and rectangular tops. The undressed stelae with pointed ends, located to the west of the same monastery appear to remain in their original positions.

Due to time constraints, no detailed measurements could be conducted on the stelae of Sib'at. However, limited sample measurements were undertaken. They are of variable sizes. Several stelae are more than two metres long. One is 2.30 m long and 0.45 m wide. A second stela, which is located to the west of the monastery that tilts to the west is 2 m long and 0.45 m wide. A third stela, which forms part of the outer gate of the monastery measures 2.24 m x 0.42 m.

The stelae of Sib'at are similar in morphology to those found in the town of Aksum, and to those of the Guditi Stelae Field in particular. It appears that the „Guditi” stelae date prior to the fourth century AD. Until further investigation will be carried out at the site of Sib'at, it is possible to date the stelae at Sib'at tentatively between the second and third centuries AD

according to the evolution of their workmanship (being primitive in stone carving technology).

The functions of these steale are unknown. However, until further archaeological excavation is undertaken, it can be suggested that they were tomb markers of Aksumite elites who were possibly local administrators and/or religious leaders, similar to those found in the town of Aksum.



*Fig. 2: Dressed stela with an Aksumite podium at the background*

#### **4. Podium**

Aksumite sites are often characterized by remains of podia. Aksumite churches, palaces and elite buildings are entered through monumental steps of flights. In other words, Aksumite buildings stood on elevated foundations (Tekle 1997; Phillipson 1998, 1997). The site of Sib'at is characterized by an elevated foundation similar to those found on Aksumite sites at Aksum and elsewhere (Phillipson 1998; Tekle 2008). The podium at Sib'at, which was destroyed in antiquity on the southeastern and northern sides, is the second important material evidence that suggests an Aksumite affiliation.

This surviving podium appears to be a foundation of an earlier Aksumite church. Similar podia are found in Aksum at the monasteries of Maryam Tsiyon and at Abba Liqanos at the locations where these two monasteries originally stood. Furthermore, the sixth century AD Aksumite palaces of İnda

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Sīm'on, İdamika'el and Ta'aka Maryam and the seventh century AD Dungur elite building that are located to the west of Aksum in the old Aksum town originally stood on raised foundations or podia (Phillipson 1997).



*Fig. 3: Aksumite podium*

The original size of the podium at Sib'at is unknown because it is disturbed by the construction of the modern monastery. The visible podium is nine meters long with seven monumental steps (flights). The largest stone used for the construction of the podium is 2.40 m long. Such a podium seems to indicate that an earlier Aksumite church was located at this site. The remains of an Aksumite engraved cross visible on the wall of the modern monastery seems to confirm the proposition that an Aksumite church was built on top of the surviving podium.



*Fig. 4: Reused Aksumite cross reintegrated into the wall of the modern monastery*

The Sib'at site also produced – except remains of Aksumite pillars – a waterspout that further demonstrates that an Aksumite building was present before the construction of the present day monastery.



*Fig. 5: Aksumite waterspout discovered at Sib'at*

Furthermore, evidence of a possible Aksumite building with a rebated wall is preserved on the northern side of the site on top of the plateau. Moreover, disturbed walls are visible on top of the plateau, which indicate that there was a settlement. In addition, a ruined mound that is found on top of the same plateau suggests that there was a building in the same site in Aksumite times. It is hoped that future archaeological excavations will reveal significant Aksumite buildings on the northern side of the site on top of the plateau.



*Fig. 6: A rebated wall at Sib'at*

## 5. The artifacts

Coins, pottery, stone bowls, iron slag, brick, bead, a cross and grinding stones are some of the Aksumite artifacts documented at Sib'at in 2008.

There are six Aksumite bronze coins from Sib'at which are kept by the clergymen of the monastery. Four of them date to Christian Aksumite times between the fifth to end of the seventh centuries AD. The coins depict a single cross in the center surrounded by four crosses. As they are covered by thick matrix they were not deciphered by the project team. The other two coins can be attributed to the Aksumite king Armaha of the seventh century AD. The terms 'Armaha became a king' are inscribed in Ge'ez, the *lingua franca* and script used by the Aksumites in the first millennium AD. The seventh century Aksumite King Armaha is also depicted on the coins sitting on a throne, wearing a crown while holding a long thin cross. On the other side of the same coins, a Latin cross is surrounded by a palm leaf.



Fig. 7: A stone bowl

Two Aksumite monumental stone bowls were also recovered at Sib'at. One was found damaged while another one is complete with two handles (Fig. 7). Similar bowls have been documented at Aksumite sites dating between 4<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Munro-Hay 1989). Ethnographic evidence collected by the author from the monastery of Abba Liqanos show that such artifacts have had a baptismal function since Christian Aksumite times.

Iron slag of a medium density was documented to the west of the site at a place called Īnda Senbet where a church of the same name was believed to exist in antiquity. Such artifacts are black in color, which indicate a lack of control of oxygen in the production of metals.

Aksumite bricks that are red in color with irregular and rough surfaces were also documented at the site of Sib'at in 2008. The bricks lack perfection

in comparison to those of the fourth century AD Tomb of the Brick Arches located at the Main Stelae Field in the town of Aksum (Phillipson 2000).

A single bronze cross is one of the artifacts documented in 2008. It appears to be similar to the cross, which is depicted on the seventh century AD coins. On the same coin King Armaha is portrayed holding a long thin cross in one of his hands.

A medium density of sherds can be observed on the surface of the site in a disturbed context. The majority of these pottery fragments are represented by red Aksumite ware. Some of them have decorated rims. Furthermore, Aksumite pottery foot washers are also among the decorated ones.



*Fig. 8: Red Aksumite ware from the site of Sib'at*

Amphora fragments that date from the fifth and seventh centuries AD context are also preserved in a disturbed context at Sib'at (Munro-Hay 1989). Williams (2000) who studied the petrology of imported amphorae fragments collected from the town of Aksum show that such pottery was imported from Mediterranean countries.



*Fig. 9: Amphorae sherds discovered from Sib'at*



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In contrast, Porter (2004) argued that amphorae that have been known to be imported as far as to the African side of the Red Sea, were produced independently on both sides of the sea in the first millennium BC. She also argues that amphorae are found on pre-Aksumite sites of the northern Horn. Moreover, she argues that there was a movement of people instead of trading contacts between the two sides of the Red Sea. However, such an argument needs further refinement.

Besides the pre-Aksumite context of amphorae (Porter 2004), the available evidence also suggests that amphorae are found in late Aksumite contexts dating to the middle of the first millennium AD. Moreover, amphorae also differ in color, size, shape and techniques of production from the majority of the pottery found on the Aksumite sites. They may have been imported to Aksum as gifts containing luxurious goods such as wine (Williams 2000).



*Fig.10: Photograph showing Aksumite pottery and brick*

One round perforated stone bead and two stone seals were also collected and documented at Sib'at. These artifacts together with those mentioned above are currently deposited in the treasury room of the Debre Sahil St. Michael monastery.

Although such artifacts are found in disturbed contexts, there is no doubt that they provide evidence for the Aksumite occupation of Sib'at. Furthermore, it appears that the site was in use in medieval times. Tradition has it that *imam Ahmad* ibn Ibrahim (in Christian tradition called „Mohammed Grañ”), a 16<sup>th</sup> century AD Muslim warlord, destroyed the monastery. A reused medieval cross integrated into the modern monastery of Sib'at seems to

confirm this oral tradition. The cross appears to be similar in morphology to those of the Zagwe period.

## 6. Chronology

As discussed above, the Sib‘at site has yielded a rich array of artifacts and building remains. It is possible to provide a tentative date for the site based on these materials in addition what we know from oral traditions. Legend has it that the monastery of Debre Sahil St. Michael was built in the fourth century AD. This view is in agreement with the archaeological evidence. Two Aksumite periods appear to be represented in the site, based on the material evidence documented from surface collections. The first phase is the early Aksumite period represented by undressed and dressed stelae and by the red decorated Aksumite ware. This phase dates from about the second to the fourth centuries AD. The second phase is the late Aksumite period that dates from about the middle of the fifth to the seventh centuries AD. It appears to be represented by coins, podium, bricks, stone bowls, a cross and by amphora fragments.

## 7. Conclusion and recommendation

The survey carried out around the town of ‘Adwa by the Ecotourism Project Team in 2008 resulted in the discovery of an Aksumite site dating from about the second to the seventh centuries AD. This is the first Aksumite site discovery around the town of ‘Adwa. The same discovery has shed new light on our understanding that the areas that surround the town were inhabited by an Aksumite population in the early and middle first millennium AD.

The site of Sib‘at has rich Aksumite material evidence, which includes a wide range of surface artifacts and *in situ* building remains. These discoveries help to tentatively date the site to two phases of the Aksumite period – from the second or third centuries AD to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. It is unique from other Aksumite sites because it is located in a strategic commanding point surrounded by a chain of inaccessible steep cliffs and by the Sib‘at Mountains. This indicates that it was one of the important Aksumite provincial administrative towns that controlled the Mereb lowlands to the north and the ‘Adwa Mountains to the east and south. The site seems to have been an eastern and northern entry check point to the metropolis of Aksum. Sib‘at provides evidence for an Aksumite settlement, cemetery and a shrine. The settlement is represented by pottery, bricks, ruined walls and iron slag. The dressed and undressed pointed end stelae show that elite residents were buried there. Furthermore, the stone bowls and the podium, which show remains of an Aksumite church, indicate that the site was used as a religious centre. Hence, it can be safely suggested that the site’s function was threefold: as a settlement, a cemetery and, in addition, a religious site.

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The site has been vandalized by the construction of the new monastery, houses and through digging activities by local people. Urgent action, including giving awareness to the local people, is required by the concerned researchers and authorities, both federal and regional, in order to safeguard the site from further cultural destructions. There are no shelves to display and keep the valuable artifacts collected from Sib'at. Therefore, it is highly recommended to donors to purchase and donate these required materials to the monastery, so as to securely preserve and exhibit them. The Aksumite podium, the rebated wall, ruined mound and other discoveries that are visible on the surface of the site are not yet investigated and have great potential for future archaeological researches.

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