

Research and Expedition Reports

A Journey to Central and Western Tigray: An Assessment of Mostly Unknown Archaeological Sites

by Dietrich RAUE¹

The following report documents the main stations of a short archaeological survey expedition to central and western Tigray. The aim was a first assessment of archaeological sites known only through local oral tradition and never documented in surveys so far, therefore not known to scholarship and consequently under potential threat of destruction, for example due to new infrastructural measures. Reporting these sites may help in setting up research projects, to be initiated by Mekelle University in accordance with the responsible authorities of the Ethiopian government and in national and international collaboration, that can help to set new standards of preservation in a situation of rapid change of the traditional landscape. During the same journey known sites, such as Yeha, were also visited, with a special focus on possible links of finds with ancient Sudan.

A leading question during the research journey was: Do the regions visited fit into ancient Egyptian reports about Punt? This was the reason why both lowland and highland areas were visited, and especially areas marked by incense, the main export product of Punt. A proper assessment of such connections will be the subject of future research, but this journey delivers some initial material which will serve as a basis for future inquiries. All objects documented during the journey remained at the original sites and await proper documentation by teams in the future. Mekelle University showed interest in the idea of documentation of such sites and supported the voyage. After a meeting with Vice-President Dr Kindeya Gebrehiwot, assistant professor in forestry and specialist in incense, on the afternoon of 21 September 2011, the group left the next day at noon.

22 September, Megele – Hagere Selam – °Abiy °Addi.

SITE 1 (Fig. 1): On the way to Hagere Selam, still about 3 km away from it, a stela is seen standing intact and upright about 10 m to the left of the road. Measurements 200 x 70 x 20; it is uninscribed but according to neighbours it

¹ This report has been submitted to the Vice-President of Academics of Mekelle University, Dr Kindeya Gebrehiwot. The observations documented in this report were made during the tour that was generously supported by Mekelle University with a car and a driver in September 2011. The participants were: Dr Dietrich Raue, Curator of the Egyptian Museum of the University of Leipzig/Germany; Dr Wolbert Smidt, Associate Professor in the Department of History and Cultural Studies at Mekelle University; Mr Habtom Gebremedhin, geologist, Dilla University.

belongs to the grave of a local king of the past. Name of the stela area: Hala, special place of stela: Kohi.



SITE 2 (Fig. 2): A bit further down the road, 2 km from Hagere Selam, a small group of pottery can be observed on the slope next to terraces with fields: The pottery is dark with anorganic temper, with a few thinner (4 mm) pieces of light brown colour; the date is not certain but it could be medieval or even later. The area is called by locals farmers Deggu^{ca} ('high spot'), the region is called ^cAddi Qola Qol; beneath the site is a spring that gives perennial water.



After the crossroad close to Agabe/Agawe, we reach the incense areas indicated by Dr. Kindeya, but we are not allowed to proceed to the Tekkeze dam lake by police at checkpoint. We reach the incense region of Hidmo that was recommended by Dr Kindeya.

23 September, °Abiy °Addi – Werq Amba – °Adwa. Departure in °Abiy °Addi with the car of the university that arrived in the morning. Arrival in Werq Amba. According to the geologist Habtom there is a large sherd accumulation in the lower land next to the village, but because of the crops (*t'ef*) it is not visible now in September. The farmers know another place with sherds.



Fig. 3a

SITE 3 (Fig. 3a,b): The area belongs to Mr Atakilti Girmay. A remarkable number of potsherds is found halfway up the mountain on a terrace; small ditches of 80 cm with a lot of pottery, in the trenches, full



Fig. 3b

profiles of jars of about 30 cm diameter are visible, pottery can be seen up to 50cm depth; the site measures about 20 x 10m. The sherds are clearly connected to the Aksumite Era. Many fragments are part of a foot-washing set like those exhibited in Aksum Museum.

The owner of the farm mentions in addition an inscription far up the hill at the cliff of the mountain itself. On the way up the hill we find recent Christian inscriptions and gaming boards in the rock, probably in context with the pilgrimage to the rock-church at the very top of Werq Amba; the inscriptions themselves turn out to be Italian, dated 27 February 1936.

After a break in Werq Amba we reach the Wer^ci River with incense trees on the surrounding hills. According to the local farmers and gold-washers, no settlements are to be expected here because of the malaria danger. People live further up, and only during the day is the river bed approached for cattle and for gold prospecting; women and small children should never go down into the malaria area. Nobody here has ever seen potsherds or other settlement remains close to the river.

On the way to ^cAdwa, we reach the end of the incense region. Close to Adwa there are find spots of potsherds in the valley that leads to the mountain Imba-Semayat, but it is too late in the evening to start searching. Nevertheless all farmers confirm the presence of these fields. Overnight in ^cAdwa.

24 September, ^cAdwa – Rama – Yeha – Aksum. The car of the university is changed because the driver states that the car is not suitable for the lowlands of H^umera. We reach the plain before Rama; the name of the plain is Hamedo.

SITE 4 (Fig. 4a,b,c): Landmark called Wit'ah: a 15m-high single tripartite granite formation of about 10 x 6m length/width; it is situated at main road to Eritrea just about 6 km distant from the border River Mereb (later becoming the River Gash).



The site seems to extend around the rock at a radius of about 20 m; just to the west, where the site encompasses a small hill, it extends to 40 m. North of the rock there is a considerable amount of pottery of small size on the surface, some of the pieces incised. They are definitely to be dated to the pre-Aksumite period and may point to relations with the Gash region; many small obsidian flakes are scattered on the surface, some of them definitely tools. In addition, round ball-like stones of granite, according to Wolbert Smidt possibly Borkuta-stones, are present: they were heated and then covered with dough to make bread.

Fig. 4b

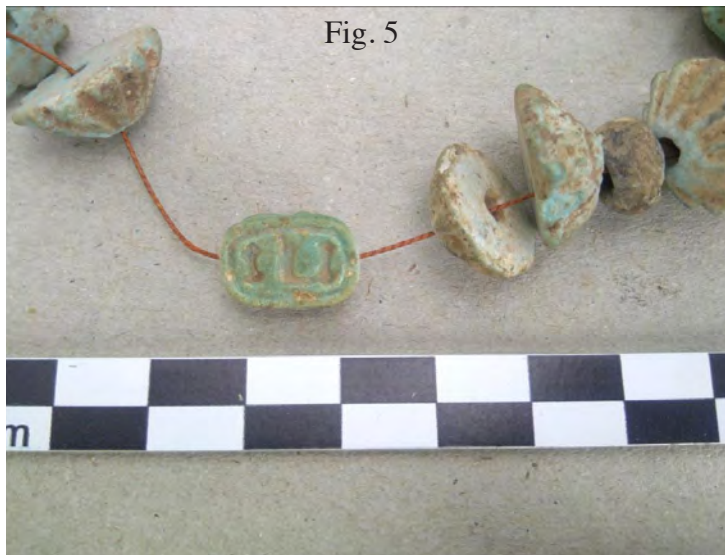


Fig. 4c



Break in the town of Rama. It is not possible to reach the river because of border regulations

Arrival at the plain of Yeha; visit with Dr Iris Gerlach (German Archaeological Institute) to the church precinct and the temple of Yeha, as well as the current excavation; visit to the small museum of the church: priests show a necklace (Fig. 5) with fayence beads (Dm: 1,82 cm, H: 0,84 cm), glass beads (Dm: 0,83 – 1 cm) and two scarabs: Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions can be read as “given life (like) Re” (1,74 max x 1,24 x 0,71 cm) and “*nfr-st-nfr*” (1,45 x 0,97 x 0,71 cm) of Late Period date (8th – 4th century BC). Later on the ancient necropolis of Yeha is visited. In the evening arrival in Aksum.



25 September, Aksum – Ch’illa – Shire: Visit to quarries, stela and museum of Aksum. Departure at noon in direction of Shire; turning north in village Wugro Maray.

SITE 5 (Fig. 6): °Addi Deqqi Haftu, with a large hilltop castle of 19th century. Local farmers still know the history of the place: it belonged to an aristocrat of the time of Emperor



Yohannes; the son of Haftu, Gebrekidan Haftu left the area after the victory of °Adwa, returning later to settle as a hermit on the hill south of the castle. Very

well preserved, up to 1,5 m; pottery here is similar to SITE 2, a large amount of quartz (sand temper, dark reduced firing); east-west: ca 30 m with well-made stone door, north-south: ca. 40 m, with round structure in the middle of an open area, rooms attached to enclosure wall. Iron (?) slag is found all around.

Fig. 7



SITE 6 (Fig. 7): In the fields at the foot of this structure (name: Mi^cam At'al), a strange feature is encountered in the middle of the fields. Down the slope there is a place with six short stelae in a row. According to the farmer a seventh once existed but is now gone; the stelae measure 42 x 37 x 100 cm, distance to each other: 62 cm; they are very well oriented to the north, east-west-running, the easternmost stela deviates slightly from the orientation. The stelae are still embedded in the soil; according to farmers the crops cover a stone building and pottery sherds, red fired bricks are visible. The date and purpose of the structure remain obscure.

Break in Ch'illa. According to a record of the 1950s, a pre-Aksumite site was found and some pieces of Sabaeen pottery were published. Today the only ruins at Goboch'illa ("height of Ch'illa") we find are houses of the 20th century in decay.

SITE 7 (Fig. 8): On the way to the church a plain with large amount of pottery on the soil, probably medieval or later, is found (very thick walls, much anorganic temper,

Fig. 8



in/out orange, core black).

An elderly lady remarks that in the fields to the south of Goboch'illa coins, pottery, and dressed stones were found, now invisible because of the crops; the area is called Mezabir.



Fig. 9a



SITE 8 (Fig. 9a,b): Two kilometers before reaching Shire, there is a quarry on the right called 'Addi Gedad; material for road construction is quarried here. According to Wolbert Smidt, there was much more of a pre-Aksumite site preserved the last time he passed by; there is still an area of about 20 m x max 10 m; the layers are 60-110 cm thick, a pottery layer is visible at about 1m depth in the profile. On the other side of the modern trench, there is the same

layer with sherds, stretching up the hill; there is a stone stela fragment of 155 x 46 x 17 cm made of Ryolithe (volcanic rock). Another fragment, damaged by lorries, is still sticking in a profile.

26 September, Shire – *Humera*: Departure without Wolbert Smidt who has to return to Meqele.

SITE 9 (Fig. 10): North of Shire close by the road, a stela is found. Measurements: 270 x 70 x 30 cm, made of Ryolithe. Scattered around are some pieces of thin-walled pottery with small amount of anorganic temper; it is exactly parallel to the stela of the Shire Quarry of ^cAddi Gedad! The stela is fixed by a couple of smaller stones on the back side with chiseled grooves for transport ropes. It is erected at the border of the mountainous area and a flat part of the area.



SITE 10 (Fig. 11): In the flat land just north of Shire city the next stela can be seen from the road: Measurements 250 x 65 x 25 cm; only remains of grooves for transport. There is no pottery around the stela on the surface; object was used by soldiers for shooting practice.

According to the geologist Habtom, the area is very rich in gold resources. Incense trees can be seen again at a height of about 1550 m, and now also while descending to the lowlands, at a height of sometimes 1250 m, sometimes 1050 m; on all hilltops now again incense trees, while the road is at 970 m, descending to Tekkeze River valley.

Reaching the bridge over River Tekkeze. Extremely dense incense area overlooking Tekkeze River and its western hinterland; after this the incense is less dense, but regularly present in ^cAddi Goshu Region in *Humera* District. Arrival in *Humera* in the afternoon.



Fig. 11

27 September, *Humera – Gondar*. According to Habtom there were potsherds found ten years ago on small hills close to the border River Tekkeze. These mounds cannot be visited today because of border regulations; those we can examine have only modern potsherds. Break in Densha, passing ‘Angareb River.



Fig. 12

SITE 11 (Fig. 12): According to local farmers this area is considered to be an old settlement, potsherds are found while ploughing. People are much afraid of bandits. We are advised to leave soon. Also an “Italian settlement” is

mentioned. The site would be ideal for a settlement: space for fields, close to large river, and a little creek nearby.

Further up the ^cAngareb River, more and more people urge us to stop and search off-road. In the village Sandja is an old man who is sure that about 3 hours walk northeast of the road there has been found lots of pottery; no incense anymore on the heights.

Entering the Falasha area, an old man is sure that behind a row of hills a large sherd field can be found after about 2-3 hours walk; there are many fewer sites close to the road than expected. The road was built anew at a new site by the Italians, most settlements were founded *after* the road was built and renewed some years ago; according to older people, sites with sherds are 2-4 hours walk north of the road.

SITE 12 (Fig. 13): Below a large fig tree, shortly before reaching the village Tikl-Dingay, stone walls are visible at height of about 1950m; one sherd (rough smoothed in/out, anorganic temper, light-brown in/out, black core) and two pieces that might have served as lithic tools are found.

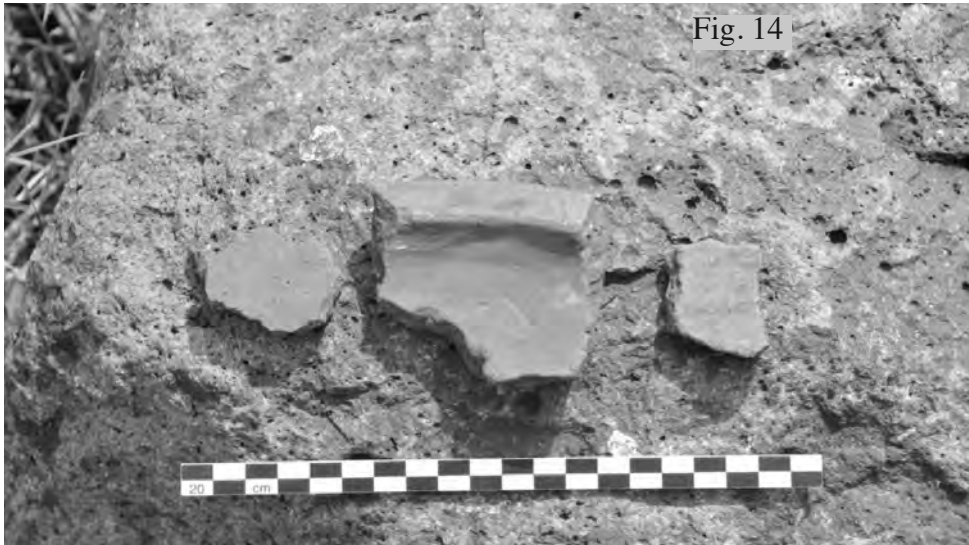
Fig. 13



28 September, Gonder – Addis Ababa:

SITE 13 (Fig. 14): Gonder – Hill of the Monastery Debre Birhan Sillasé: according to local inhabitants sherds are found in the valley. Indeed, there are sherds found on the eastern slope of this hill; the sherds are fired with low temperature and have a reddish-brown burnished slip.

In a valley at 2050 m, which is the uppermost valley of the River ^cAngareb, there is no pottery found – though this is uncertain because we cannot examine many spots due to the crops. Local farmers say that further to the east, up the hill, old men have told about potsherds and older settlements.



The driver and the car of the university leave at 10.30 am to Meqele, while Dietrich Raue and Habtom Gebremedhin take the plane to Addis Ababa.

	Pre-aksumite	Aksumite	Medieval-later	Unknown
Urgent need of excavation	-site 8 (Quarry Addi Gedad)			
Excavation work recommended	-site 4 (Wit'ah in Rama-Plain)	-Site 3 (Weriq-Amba)	Goboch'illa Gutba	-Site 6: Stelae in fields
Survey in dry season recommended		-Survey in lower fields of Weriq-Amba (see site 3)		-Surroundings of Site 1&2 -Rama Plain around site 4 -Fields south of Goboch'illa (see site 7) -Stela area of site 9 - Angareb-Valley: settlements at bridge (site 11) - Area parallel to road close to River Angareb (see site 11) -Tikl-Dingay: Fig tree site (site 12) -Gonder site 13, at slope and in fields in valley

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