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– All correspondence should be addressed to:

Redazione Rassegna di Studi Etiopici
Dipartimento Asia, Africa e Mediterraneo
Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”
Piazza S. Domenico Maggiore 12 – 80134 Napoli, Italy
e-mail: redazionerse@unior.it

Direttore Responsabile: PAOLO MARRASSINI

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With deep sorrow we inform the readers that the Director of the Rassegna di Studi Etiopici, Paolo Marrassini, passed away before the publication of this issue. Despite the increasing health problems, the Director followed the work of preparation of the issue with his usual devotion and steadiness, which we will miss.

The Editorial Board

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New archaeological evidence in the area of ‘Addigrat (Eastern Təgray) and its surroundings

LUISA SERNICOLA

INTRODUCTION

In December 2012 Luisa Sernicola and Marco Barbarino, members of the Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum of the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, Naples, Italy¹, joined the team of the Ethio-SPaRe Project² of the Hamburg University, Hamburg, Germany, to provide the digital map and 3D model of an old church in the vicinity of ‘Addigrat, in Eastern Təgray.

On that occasion, archaeological reconnaissance was conducted at three different localities: Mə’əsar Gwəḥila Mika’el, where the church under our examination is located, Ləqay Däbrä Məḥrat Kidanä Məḥrat, and Məngas.

In this short note, a very preliminary description of the recorded evidence is presented³, as, due to time restriction, it was not possible to provide a systematic documentation of what has been observed. No excavations were conducted and no material collected.

¹ The Italian Archaeological Expedition at Aksum, central Təgray, of the University of Naples “L’Orientale” has conducted archaeological researches in the area of Aksum since the early nineteen-nineties. From 1993 to 2003 it has conducted archaeological investigations on the hilltop and northern slopes of Beta Giyorgis hill in collaboration with the Boston University (co-directors Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn A. Bard). Between 2004 and 2009 it investigated the plain to the north of Aksum and the eastern, western and southern slopes of Beta Giyorgis (director Rodolfo Fattovich). Since 2010 it has conducted research at the pre-Aksumite site of Seglamen, ca. 12 km to the SW of Aksum (director Rodolfo Fattovich).

² For a description of Ethio-SPaRE aims, objectives and activities visit the web site at <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE/index.html>

³ For additional information on the activities conducted by Ethio-SPaRe in November-December 2012, <http://www1.unihamburg.de/ethiostudies/ETHIOSPARE/Report%202012-6.pdf>.

LUISA SERNICOLA

The author is grateful to: Dr Denis Nosnitsin and the whole team of the Ethio-SPaRe Project for sharing information and ideas, Ato Germay Fesseha (Təgray Culture and Tourism Agency), Feṣṣum Gäbru (East Təgray Diocese Office, ‘Addigrat), ‘Ezra Gäbrä Mädhən (Head of the Ganta Afäshum *wäräda* Church Administration) for their support in the field, and the inhabitants of the sites visited for their co-operation and assistance.

MƏ’ƏSAR GWƏḨILA QƏDDUS MIKA’EL

Mə’əsar GwəḨila Qəddus Mika’el (GPS 14,2844 N; 39,315267 E) is a church situated along the western bank of the ’Ənda Şadəqan river, in the area between ‘Addigrat and Däbrä Dammo, about 15 km to the west of ‘Addigrat. The religious complex, located in a natural cavity in the steep rock, is characterized by a north-south orientation and consists of a main gateway with an entrance house after which stand the remains of a circular tower, a recent church with the related structures and dwellings, an old, presently abandoned rock-hewn church, and an old area for collective burials⁴.

The small, semi-hypogean, abandoned church, formerly dedicated to Abrəha and Aşbəha, has a roughly rectangular plan and is divided into two rooms by a couple of pillars directly carved into the rock. Traces of paint are still visible on the pillars and on the external wall of the church⁵.

On the eastern bank of the river, opposite to the church compound, stand the remains of other semi-hypogean structures. The walls have an average thickness of 30 cm, and are made of roughly carved sandstone blocks and layers of small schist slabs joined with a mud mortar. The internal side of the walls is often plastered with soil mixed with organic material. At least six chambers can be recorded, displaced one after the other with a north-south orientation. Small windows, bench and niches cut into

⁴ For a more detailed description of Mə’əsar GwəḨila Mika’el complex s. Nosnitsin, 2013, 209-219.

⁵ The digital map and 3D model of the old church and of the entire compound has been realized by Dr Marco Barbarino, UNO, Naples, using the Structure From Motion Process for documentation and heritage management purposes.

NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE IN THE AREA OF 'ADDIGRAT

the walls are often present in the rooms. According to local priests, these structures are the remains of an ancient church.

Post-Aksumite potsherds (Black and Gray Ware) dating between AD 700/800 and 1200/1300, and modern ceramics, have been recorded on surface around the structures.

This evidence suggests that the area was in some way occupied at least since early Medieval time. Moreover, the occurrence of few, very eroded fragments of Aksumite ceramics (Red and Orange Ware) and knapped lithics (including an obsidian flake) point to an even earlier frequentation of the area.

LÄQAY DÄBRÄ MƏHRAT KIDANÄ MƏHRAT

The church of Ləqay Dəbrä Məhrat Kidanä Məhrat (GPS 14,30405 N; 39,439817 E) is located to the NW of 'Addigrat, along the road to Zäla 'Ambäsä⁶.

A local tradition relates the foundation of the church to the period of king Kaleb. Despite the poor reliability of local tradition, the church appears indeed located in the proximity of an archaeological site, as suggested by the presence of Aksumite potsherds in the exposed profiles of the streams and cultivated terraces surrounding the church and along the narrow paths close to it.

Moreover, one complete ceramic bowl was shown to us as part of the treasure of this church. The bowl is characterized by a red fine ware fabric, with smoothed internal and burnished external surfaces, evenly curved profile and rounded rim. It measures 14 cm in diameter and is 8.5 cm high; wall thickness ranges between 0.7 and 0.8 cm. Typological analysis dates it to the Aksumite period (ca. 50 BC – AD 700/800).

According to the local priest, the bowl was collected while ploughing one of the cultivated terraces surrounding the church, and other similar objects are presently kept in to the church. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to inspect them. The area deserves further investigations.

⁶ For a detailed description of Ləqay Dəbrä Məhrat Kidanä Məhrat s. Nosnitsin, 2013, 155-158.

MENGAŚ

While the archaeological evidence in the areas of Mə’əsar Gwəhila Mika’el and Ləqay Kidanä Məhrat is very scanty, the exploration of Mengaś revealed the existence of a large, previously unknown archaeological site which may be of great interest for future researches.

The area of Mengaś is located in the village of May Shum, district of Baḥəra – Səheta, behind the Sägren mountains, in the valley of the May Saḥsaḥta river, about 10 km to the south of ‘Addigrat, at an altitude of approximately 2,400 m asl.

The village, hardly accessible by an unpaved road, is characterized by a cultivated plain surrounded by sandstone reliefs whose terraced footslopes are presently occupied by traditional *hidmo* or devoted to farmlands. The plain is cut by a seasonal river which drains into the May Saḥsaḥta. The whole area appears to have a rich and relatively high water table, as several water pumps are located within the village and in its surroundings, and small irrigation channels allow integrated crop cultivation with horticulture. Local tradition claims that a sanctuary at Mengaś was established “fifteen years before the birth of Christ” and that eighty-six ancient kings were crowned at Mengaś before they went to Aksum to rule.

Three major churches are scattered along the terraced footslopes of the mountains: Məngaś Qəddəst Maryam⁷, Məngaś Täklä Haymanot⁸, and Däbri Mādḥane ‘Aläm⁹. The church of Məngaś Qəddəst Maryam is clearly erected on the remains of an older structure. Unfortunately, no archaeological evidence has been recorded within the church compound except for the presence of clearly older stone blocks in the masonry of a small dwelling close to the church and of the entrance gate. Another church, Däbri Däbrä Zakaryas Qəddus Giyorgis, which according to a local tradition was founded by king Gäbrä Mäsqäl, stands on the midslope of a steep cliff, overlooking the valley¹⁰. The remains of a semi-hypogean structure are lo-

⁷ Nosnitsin, 2013, 232-236.

⁸ Nosnitsin, 2013, 232-236.

⁹ Nosnitsin, 2013, 236.

¹⁰ Nosnitsin, 2013, 236-240.

cated in the vicinity of the church and interpreted by local people as the former church of St. Cyriacus.

On the same area as the caves but at a lower altitude, is the archaeological site of Məngəś (GPS 14,1757 N; 39,468 E), covering an area of at least 1 hectare¹¹.

It is characterized by the remains of walls protruding from the topsoil and generally preserved for more than 1.30 m in height, as deduced by the structures visible in the exposed profiles of the gullies of two seasonal rivers draining down from the mountains to the northwest of the site. The walls are made of medium- to small-size roughly squared sandstone blocks joined with a soil mortar; slabs of green schist mark the lower part of the *podium* at regular intervals, giving to the walls the stepped profile typical of Aksumite monumental buildings¹². Part of a circular or semi-circular stone feature abutting one of the walls is still visible in the river bed.

Many ceramic sherds are scattered on the surface and visible along the exposed profile. The ceramics are mainly orange fine ware (OW), characterized by very few and small mineral inclusions. Surfaces are generally well smoothed and quite often burnished. Decoration is moulded, incised or painted.

The observed specimens include: a) globular flasks with rounded bases and short cylindrical necks; b) cups with straight profiles, rounded lips and two horizontal lines incised on the external surface, below the rim; c) open bowls or dishes with slightly everted rims and two horizontal lines incised on the external surface, below the rim, or one horizontal line incised along the internal rim; d) open bowls and dishes with everted rim and moulded decoration on the lip; e) open bowls or basins with roughly made internal grooves, possibly as a local imitation of the basins with internal grooves found in the area of Aksum. An unusual fabric is represented by a green fine ware which has been recorded for the fragments of two different open bowls characterized by an incised decoration of two lines running along the two edges of the flattened rim. Fragments with a purple/brown painted

¹¹ The extension of the site, as well as the density and typology of the artifacts have been determined on the basis of what was immediately visible on surface; no systematic mapping or artifacts sampling has been made.

¹² Littmann et al., 1913; Phillipson, 1997.

decoration, widely diffused in the eastern Təgray ceramic tradition, have been also recorded¹³. Preliminary observations point to date the site to the Middle/Late-Aksumite period (ca. AD 350 – 700/800).

The site deserves systematic survey to provide an assessment of the archaeological area, which should include detailed information about its extension, layout and measures of visible structures, distribution, density and typology of surface artifacts. This might represent a preliminary step for the definition of a long-term project aimed at investigating the area of Mengaś and the surrounding territory. The site may, in fact, provide information on outstanding questions about: a) the population history of Tigrean plateau, as emerging from recent observations on regional traditions in material culture; b) the social, political and economic relationships within the complex network of Aksumite centres during the phases of expansion and progressive decline of the Kingdom of Aksum, and d) the ancient dynamics of human-environment interaction in this region. The area is also suitable for paleoenvironmental studies due to the close proximity of river gullies with archaeological materials in the exposed profiles.

The reconstruction of its ancient past through archaeological investigations may be included in a broader project of preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage of the region as the area and its surroundings are characterized by the presence of rock-hewn churches with, in some cases, interesting collections of manuscripts, and are rich of traditional legends used by local people to describe the religious and secular landscape that they inhabit.

¹³ Anfray, 1966, pp. 5-19; D'Andrea et al., 2008, p. 162.

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