

## Ethiopia

### The ‘Shay Culture’ Revisited: Overview of Recent Archaeological Fieldworks in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia

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#### Background of the project

Megalithic monuments, particularly stelae, are found across Ethiopia displaying a wide range of density and artistic composition. For this reason, the country is regarded as the ‘land of megaliths’ (Joussaume 2017: 23). To date, archaeological studies have mainly focused on the stelae of Aksum and its environs in the north and stelae fields in southern Ethiopia. To this end, megalithic sites in the Central Highlands are recent additions to the corpus of megalithism in Ethiopia.

Francis Anfray was the first archaeologist to visit the Central Highlands, particularly Menz, in 1980 and report the presence of megalithic sites in the region (Anfray 1983: 507-518). Two decades later, a French team led by François-Xavier Fauvelle identified nearly ninety tumuli (Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2007: 329-398). Subsequently, test excavations were conducted at five megalithic monuments including the hypogeum of Ketetiya in South Wollo.

Meanwhile, four charcoal samples were taken from two sites that dated between the tenth and fourteenth centuries AD (Fauvelle-Aymar & Poissonnier 2012). Referring to the river Shay in Menz-Gera along which large numbers of megalithic sites were recorded, the team termed this megalithic culture the ‘Shay Culture’. The study further asserted that the builders were not followers

of monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Islam or Judaism which are known in Ethiopian religious history. Thus, the culture has been regarded as a ‘Pagan culture’ implying that it belonged to traditional or indigenous religious practices. In addition, grave goods were discovered that included imported items, indicating that the medieval trading network of Ethiopia had extended as far as the Middle East (Fauvelle & Poissonnier 2016).

Despite the aforementioned archaeological findings, a number of questions remained unanswered regarding our understanding of the Shay Culture. The present project is thus a continuation of these preceding studies with the intention of mapping megalithic monuments in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia. That being the case, this paper is an interim report communicating recent archaeological prospections conducted on megalithic sites in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia.

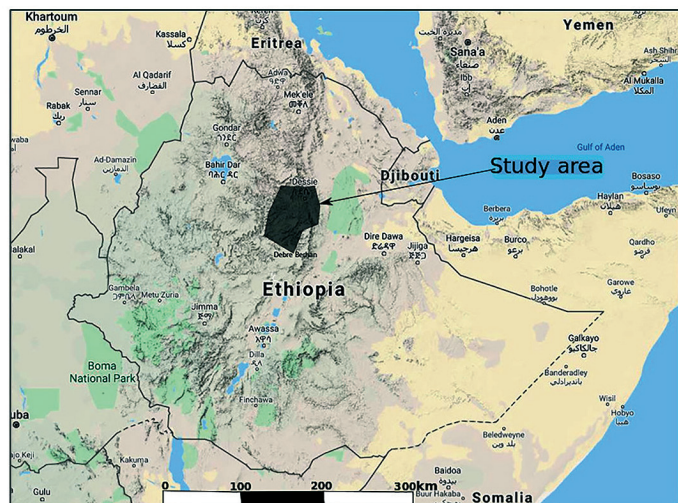
The main goal of this project is to define the Shay Culture. This involves an analysis of the typo-morphological scope of megalithic monuments and location of settlement traces of the megalithic builders. To this end, three comprehensive archaeological exploration missions were conducted, which led to the discovery of hundreds of megalithic monuments and sites. Apart from meeting the aforementioned objectives, the collected data permitted the classification of the study area into sub-regions, the correlation of the position of megalithic sites with the natural landscapes, and the development of hypotheses on the origin and diffusion of megalithic building tradition in the region.

#### Methods

In order to define the geographic extent of megalithic monuments in the region (Figure 1), a pedestrian survey was employed. The survey was carried out over three seasons from 2017-2019 for a total of two months. Accordingly, observation, photography, sketching, GPS reading, measurement (the dimension of monuments), and interviews as well as surface collection were the major data collection tools. These approaches allowed for the accumulation of a considerable volume of data on the various surface features of megalithic monuments and sites. Spatial analysis was completed using QGIS to manage GPS data and map the distribution of megalithic sites and monuments in the study area. This tool also made it possible to plot topographic variations in the landscape where the megalithic monuments were positioned.

**Spatial and contextual frameworks**

Previous studies on the Shay Culture were geographically limited to five districts. This has now been increased to 14 districts in North Shewa, South Wollo and Oromo Special Zones of the Amhara Regional State (A Zone is the 3<sup>rd</sup> level in Ethiopian administrative hierarchy after the Federal government and Regional States, and is composed of Districts) (Figure 1). The megalithic sites identified by the previous Shay Culture Project were also revisited as part of this project. Most of the tumuli were located in rugged landscape traversed by gorges which includes the Highlands of Menz and adjacent Districts to the west compared to the semi-lowland area to the east where there are considerable number of stelae.



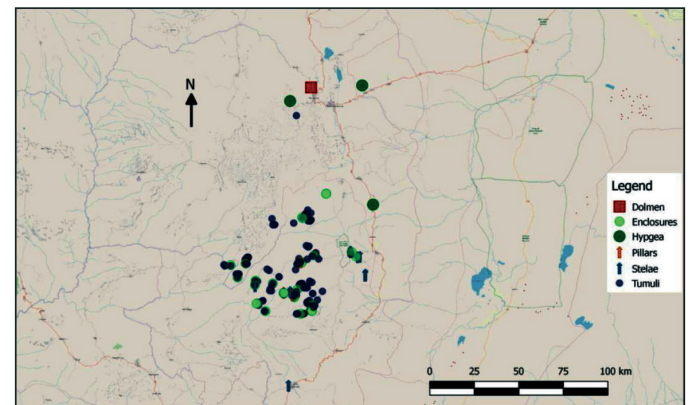
**Figure 1:** Location of the current project area (by author).

A major goal of spatial analysis was to uncover the connection between the megalithic sites and the surrounding natural landscapes. Most of the megalithic monuments in the world are found in proximity to bodies of water, particularly rivers (Shetrone 1936: 31; Pozzi 2013: 19). Similarly, most of the megalithic sites in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia are positioned in relation to the banks of rivers. There are also monuments situated in the uplands and plain fields. However, further investigation is required to better understand the paleo-environment of the region and its implication on the lives of the megalithic builders.

**Typo-morphological features of megalithic monuments**

Developing a typology that is based on the various morphological elements of megalithic monuments is a major

goal of the present project. Based on their structural appearance, megalithic monuments in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia can be grouped into five. These are tumuli, stelae, dolmen, hypogea, and enclosures (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Distribution and types of megalithic monuments in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia (by author).

Tumuli refers to piles of stones, earth or a mix of the two, while stelae comprise monolithic standing stones with and without symbolic imprints. Dolmen is commonly identified as a structure with orthostats and capstone/s. However, in this study they are characterized by an irregular arrangement of giant stone boulders with the form of neither tumulus nor stelae. In general, hypogeum refers to an underground feature while an enclosure is a feature that encircles the site. The last two groups (hypogea and enclosures) are not typically associated with megalithic monuments worldwide, but they share facets with other megalithic structures in the region. For example, the hypogeum at Ketetiya shares elements in function and material composition with tumuli from the Highlands of Menz such as Tatar Gur (Fauvelle & Poissonier 2016). Likewise, enclosures were located in association with some of the megalithic monuments.

In general, 320 megalithic structures were documented under the present study, tumuli comprise 85% of megalithic monuments followed by drystone enclosures and stelae. In addition, there are three hypogea and one dolmen-like structure so far identified. Thus, compared to the northern and southern Ethiopian megalithic sites which are predominated by stelae, the magnitude of tumuli can be taken as a peculiar feature of the Central Highlands. Enclosures are viewed here as settlement markers and discussed independently in the next section.



**Figure 3:** Qum Dengay, Menz Gera (by author).

Analysis of the form of these megalithic monuments provides detailed information on the architectural and symbolic disparities within a particular type of structure. To begin, tumuli are mainly conical in form with dimensions between 10 and 40 m in diameter. Most of these structures are stone piles (cairns) while there are some earthen mounds as well. The stelae are also diverse in their form and artistic composition ranging from crude ones (Figure 3) to those with anthropomorphic, phallic and other symbolic portrayals. In Efrata and Gedem District, apart from the revisit of previously identified stelae in the localities of Mehal Wenz and Gadilo Meda (Hagos 2000: 58; Poissonnier 2012: 119-129); new phallic and anthropomorphic stelae were identified at Ergo Tela in the second fieldwork season.

These new stelae sites indicate an eastward extension of megalithic sites in the region and the gradual refinement in their artistic composition. The presence of stelae in the eastern portion of the region with evidence of genesis in morphology and artistic composition indicates that these belong to the final phase of megalithism in the Central Highlands because there is an observable typo-

logical and morphological alteration from Menz down to Mehal Wenz area and further east through Gadilo Meda to Ergo Tela.

Since 1997, three hypogea were accidentally discovered (at different times and places) while farmers were ploughing agricultural fields and clearing the area. Two of these hypogea are earthen and the third one is a rock-cut. The hypogea of Ketetiya was partially excavated in 2008 (Fauvelle-Aymar & Poissonnier 2012: 129-174; Fauvelle & Poissonnier 2016: 64). An additional rock-cut and an earthen hypogea were recorded as part of this project.

Finally, ceramic objects and human remains are the major archaeological traces collected from these monuments. Ceramics are similar in their form and symbolic composition with those collected from the tumuli.

As indicated above, there is only one dolmen-like structure so far identified in the study area. It is a group of huge stone blocks of different forms positioned over a small earthen tumulus. Informants stated that the stones represent petrified members of a wedding ceremony in-

cluding the bride and bridegroom cursed by an elder in the area for violating social norms. This is a common legend for most of the stelae in Ethiopia mostly called ‘yemushera dengay’ which literally translates to the ‘bride stone’.

As part of the spatial and typo-morphological analysis of megalithic sites, the study area is classified in to three viz. core, periphery-core and periphery. The division is mainly based on differences in quantity, dimension and structural compositions of monuments. Accordingly, the highland of Menz which includes four Districts (Lalo, Mama, Gera and Qeya) is regarded as the ‘core zone’ while the remaining ten Districts fall in the ‘periphery-core’ and ‘periphery’ categories (Figure 4). This is due to the fact that out of the 320 monuments so far documented, over 200 of them are found in Menz. Apart from tumulus, which is the dominant type, there are also stelae and enclosures, which imply the typological multiplicity as well. In addition, there are tumuli from simple stone piles to well-built and enormous ones in the core zone (Figure 5). Likewise, one can see these discrepancies in periphery-core and periphery categories in a reduced scale.

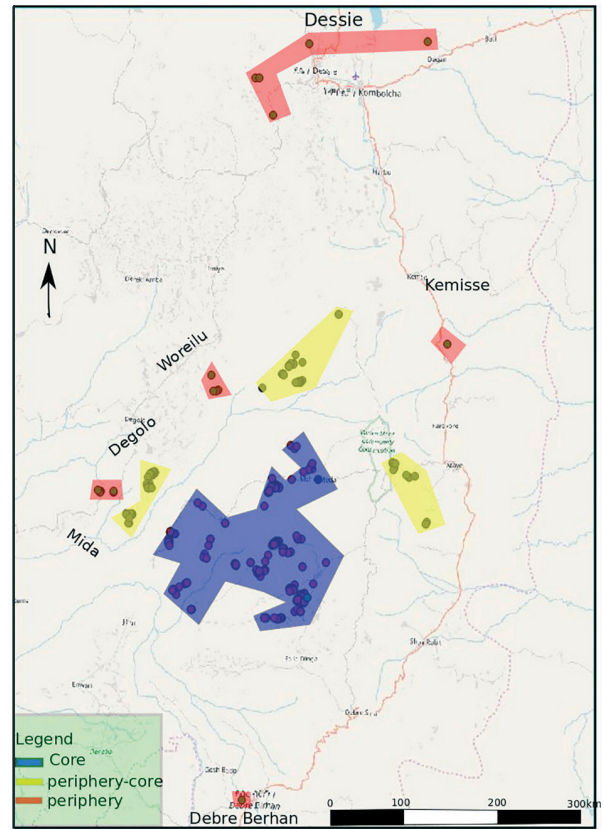


Figure 4: The three spatial categories of the study area (by author).



Figure 5: Seyitan Gur, Menz Mama (by author).

On the basis of the aforementioned propositions, an attempt was also made to develop a timeline for the areas of the initial megalithic activity, its advancement, and finally the cessation of megalithic building traditions in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia. However, considering the scope of this paper and pending the completion of the study, the details are not included here.

### Settlement traces

In the study of megalithic culture, it is essential to consider the search for associated settlement traces of the megalithic builders and users because the socio-economic and political organizations of the society can be discerned from the material and monumental habitation evidence. A focus on habitation sites has received limited attention in the study of Ethiopian megalithic sites. What is noted includes unidentified stone structures found near most of the identified megalithic sites. Roger Joussaume (2014: 175-192), for example, studied three stone walls positioned closer to tumuli in Chercher, Harar. As part of this study, monumental traces (which are collectively called enclosures here) are mostly found attached to or near other megalithic structures, specifically tumuli. These enclosures are usually circular in form while there are also structures with irregular geometry.

Ceramic and stone objects were found associated with enclosures and tumuli. Some of these objects were collected by the locals residing around while clearing the megalithic landscape and building their dwellings decades back. The ceramic objects shared several elements from and decorations with ceramic wares from the previous excavations including those from the hypogeum of Ketetiya (Fauvelle & Poissonnier 2016: 66). Furthermore, there are thousands of sherds, and some grinding stones collected from the surface in and around these structures, which are under study.

Recent excavations in Lalibela uncovered ceramic objects possessing similar features with those from the Central Highlands (personal observation and discussions with members of the French archaeological team working there). This is a very important clue to explore the northward expansion of the ceramic technology of the Shay Culture. However, to better establish the ceramic production and exchange of the period, independent and comparative studies are needed.

### Conclusion

Building upon previous research on the Shay Culture, this project focuses on the spatial distribution of megalithic sites, the typo-morphological features of monuments, and settlement traces of the megalithic builders. This paper, thus, highlights the ongoing archaeological investigation on megalithic sites and the project's provisional findings.

Extensive archaeological fieldwork conducted during the past three years have increased the corpus of archaeological data on the subject. This has permitted the refinement of the spatial as well as typo-morphological aspects of megalithic monuments in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia. The settlement ruins identified were located in association with the megalithic monuments. Artifacts, mainly ceramic and stone tools, found in both megalithic and settlement sites are identified as important material vestiges to boost our understanding of megalithic culture in the region. Thus, the interim results discussed in this paper indicate the diversity and peculiarity of megalithic structures in the region and imply the potential for further archaeological investigations.

### Acknowledgments

I am very much grateful to Dr. Liza Gijanto for her review and invaluable comments. I would like to thank Debre Berhan University for the permission to pursue my study and interim salary considerations. I am grateful to the French Embassy in Ethiopia and CFEE for providing the scholarship and financial support. I am deeply indebted to my supervisor Professor François-Xavier Fauvelle for his relentless support and encouragement throughout my study in general and in the preparation of this paper in particular. I am also thankful to Dr. Deresse Ayenachew and Dr. Vincent Ard, for their follow-up and backing. My gratitude also goes to Professor Marie-Laure Derat for the inclusion of this project as part of her grand "Ethio-Christ" project and sponsoring the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> fieldwork seasons. It could have been hard without the kind support of ARCCH, and Culture and Tourism Departments and Offices in the Zones and Districts respectively. I am very grateful to all who took part in the field missions and contributed their part for their successful completion. I also thank Mr. Daniel Kumah for reading and commenting the draft of this paper.

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