

Ethiopia

The first short visit of PCMA in Tigray (Northern Ethiopia). An overview of the activities and an attempt to date the archaeological sites.

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Introduction

After 60 years of successful research by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (PCMA) in Egypt and Sudan, finally the Polish archaeologists look to the south, in Ethiopia, to launch therein a new project and archaeologically discover this southern part of the ancient Nile Valley System. After signing the Memorandum of Understanding with Mekelle University, we were invited by the local authorities² to visit selected sites in Tigray. This northern region of Ethiopia was the place of the powerful kingdom of Aksum that had documented relations with the Mediterranean and Red Sea countries, and with the closer African powers. Although our first goal was searching a new archaeological site in the southern and western sub-region of Tigray, because the area was quite completely untouched by archaeologists (Figure 1), we had to temporarily downsize our ambition. In fact, time allowed us to visit only Central Tigray, where the king-

dom of Aksum originated and developed, and the Eastern part, where the Aksumite civilisation is alleged to have continued during the Late Aksumite, after the collapse of Aksum city as political centre (Phillipson 2014: 209-211). Aware of plenty of new sites in the Eastern Tigray that spread from the Pre-Aksumite to the Post-Aksumite periods (Phillipson 2014: 72, Fig. 20) we opted for a possible Late Aksumite site.

The sites

From 29 May to 05 June 2019 we mapped eight sites using the handheld GPS Garmin Montana 650 (see Figure 1). By observing the potsherds scattered on the site surfaces, we attempted to date them and in the end it is our opinion that as a whole, the sites represent a wide timeframe of the Aksumite period: from the Pre-Aksumite site to the Post-Aksumite. After careful evaluation, Däbrä Gərgis was deemed of particular significance to our study because of its possible representation of the internal Aksumite trade system and the possible hierarchical and territorial organization of the Aksumite Kingdom. Below we provide an overview of each site we surveyed.

Ḥanzät

This site is located two hours north of Abi Adi, the main city in the Tembien region, and is reachable by car through the new asphalt road from Mekelle to Adwa-Aksum. At the core of the village is the church of St. Gabriel, in front of which are two stelae that were relocated there in an undefined ancient time. Those monoliths show rectangular sections, roughly hewn surfaces, and rounded tops (Figure 2). Many of those types of stelae are found throughout the stelae fields in Aksum (Phillipson 1997: 47-65), as well as on top of the hill of Bieta Giyorgis (Bard *et al.* 1997: 388-393). An inscription in proto-Ge'ez language is engraved on one of the two *Ḥanzät* stelae. Additionally, assemblages of white and yellowish chert as well as obsidian and potsherds were observed. Most of the sherds were pieces of yellowish-red cooking pots which, based on the decoration, shape, and fabric, can be dated to the first phases of the Aksumite polity's development (ca. 400 BC-AD 400, Fattovich 2019: 256). Moving to the north, other pieces of large stelae were discovered in the sub-recent houses reused as threshold and roof beam, while another stele lying down on the field was broken into two pieces, likely due to impact with the ground. One of the farmers collected several complete and fragmentary pots, bronze bracelets, and a clay human figurine near the

² The interested local authorities that manage permits and supervision of all archaeological, paleontological, and ethnological research in Ethiopia are the national Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) in Addis Ababa and in our case the regional Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB) in Mekelle.

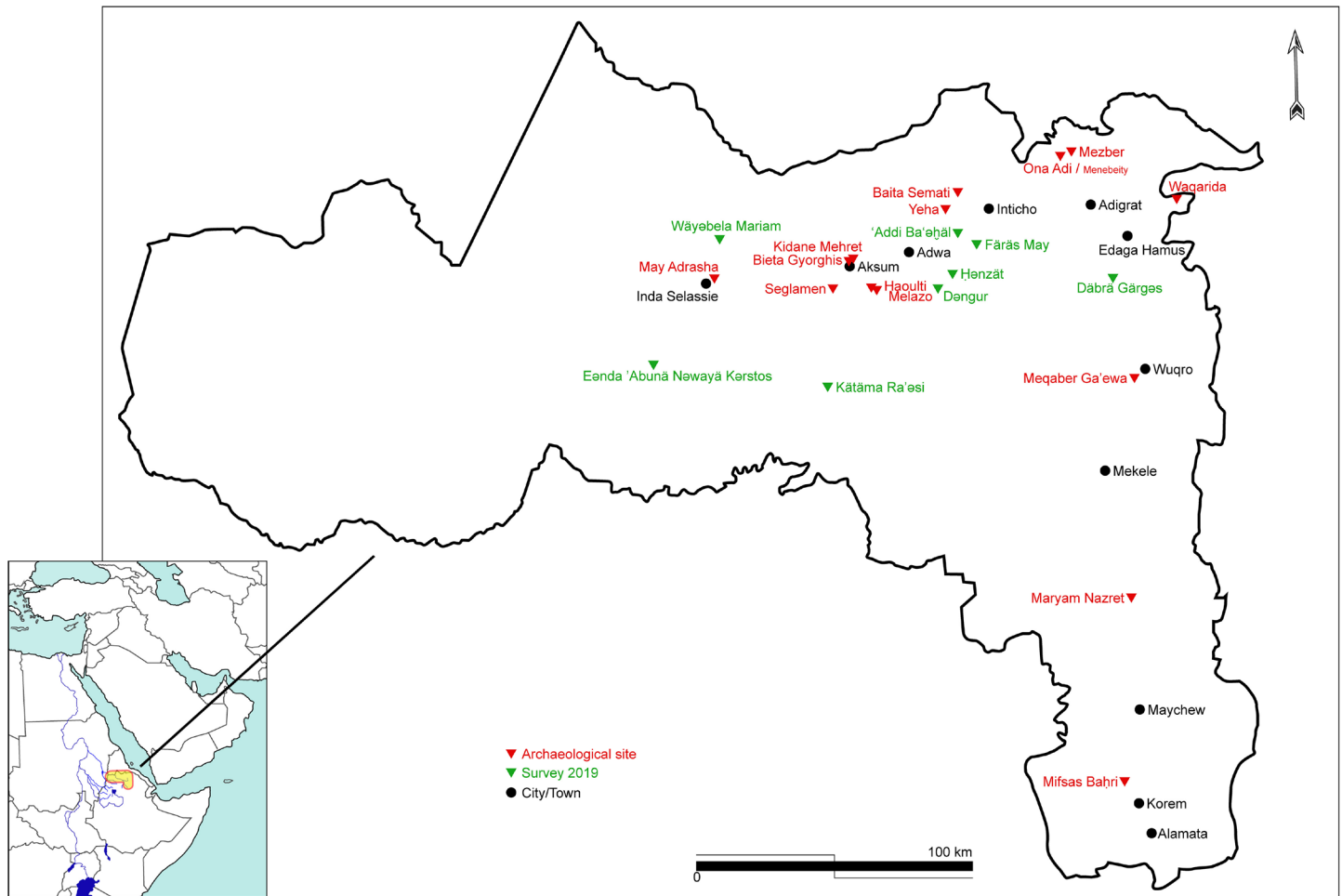


Figure 1. The Tigray region with archaeological sites, the main towns and the PCMA’ surveyed sites. (Adobe Illustrator drawing by author.)

fallen stele (see Figure 2). A comparison of these pots with the materials analysed in Bieta Giyorgis (Bard *et al.* 2014: 292-294, Figure 3) and by Wilding, for Aksum pottery (1989: 235-316), allows us roughly date the Hənzät hoard between the Proto-Aksumite and the Middle Aksumite period. The pots in the foreground of Figure 2 are similar to the Aksum ceramics described by Wilding: the globular jar (1989: 274, Figure 16.256), the cauldrons (1989: 268, Figure 16.226), the large undecorated pot-stand, the plain bowls with simple strap arc handle (Wilding 1989: 249, Figure 16.102), as well as the plain beaker and several pieces of the supposed foot-washer basins (Wilding 1989: 261-265).

Däbrä Gärgəs

The archaeological site of Däbrä Gärgəs is located about 8 km north-east of Sinq’ata city, a few kilometres of dirt road east from the Mekelle-Adigrat main road. The first mention of the Däbrä Gärgis ruins was provided by Mordini during the 1940s, who briefly reported that the site

was characterised by remains of columns, pillars, stelae and Aksumite graveyards (1944-45: 151). The landscape is quite rocky, with scattered prickly pear cacti and few trees. It dominates two lower green valleys. Built on the top of an isolated hill south of the church of Çerqos is a mound of ruins which measures ca. 29x20 metres in width and ca. 3 metres in height. The lower perimeter of the mound as measured by the GPS is about 85 metres. On the top of the mound on its northern side is a monolith and pieces of five other pillars that are standing or partially collapsed (Figure 3). The pillars appear to have been originally arranged in two rows of three pillars each. Only one pillar in the central northern row stands completely intact with its rectangular undecorated capital. This pillar was constructed from a single stone block, while the others are characterized by two stones joined by rounded mortices and tenons. No archaeological materials have been observed on the top of the mounds or in its immediate environs. About 150 metres to the west from the ruins, near



Figure 2: Hənzät: stelae replaced in front of St. Gabriel church and pottery hoard. (photos by author.)



Figure 3: Däbrä Gärgəs: detail of ruins, viewed from the south-west and view of the stele from the east. (photos by author.)



Figure 4: Kätäma Ra'əsi: miniature vessels and coins. (photos by author.)

the hill slope, stands a monolith about 6 metres high (see Figure 4). The stele has a sub-rectangular section and its top was likely pointed. Wolbert Smidt, during his ethno-historical research in the area, suggested that an inscription was incised on the top of the stele and was removed and moved elsewhere (2007: 109). However, there is no archaeological proof to support his assertions, because it is unusual that an inscription would be engraved on the top of the stele where nobody could read it. The site most probably belonged to the Late Aksumite period.

Dəngur

The Dengur site is located about one hour north from the main road leading from Abi Adi to Adwa-Aksum. The study surveyed a flat terrace with a sub-oval shape and a perimeter of ca. 107 metres in the compound of a modern household, as well as the fields just west and south-west of the mound. Despite the local belief that Dəngur was the site of an ancient palace, no corresponding structures have been observed, and the few lithics and several yellowish-red sherds are not sufficient to prove this local speculation. Specific rims, shapes and decorations of the diagnostic sherds found do suggest a Late Pre-Aksumite – Proto- Aksumite period, dating roughly from 400-300 BC.

Kätäma Ra'əsi

The site, located in proximity to the administrative border between Central and Western Tigray, is reachable about 43 kilometres from Abi Adi in north-north-west direction as the crow flies, or from Aksum driving south-south-west for about two hours. The site lies in the village of Embuke Jira, just before the hill slopes overlooking the mountains that protect the course of the Tekeze river. The site is located on private land in the household of Ato Abay who claimed to be a descendant of Emperor Yohannes IV (1837-1889). Before approaching his house, the ruins of a large building greet the people from the top of a fairly high mound. The building is of dry-stacked masonry construction using small irregular flattish stones. The whole complex occupies an area of 1,573 square metres and is arranged around a wide courtyard with the main building in the central-eastern portion, a northern gate, and rounded annexes at the south-west and southern side of the enclosing wall. The external wall is preserved for about 1-1.10 metres in height and 167 metres in perimeter. The façade, the central building and the perimeter wall are characterized by common elements of Aksumite architecture such as recesses and projections (Phillipson

2014:123-125). The plan of the central building is difficult to understand as it is almost completely demolished and collapsed. It should also be noted that parts of Ato Abay's modern home were built with stones robbed from the ancient building.

Across the entire surface of the building the lack of archaeological finds has inhibited any efforts at dating the site. Nevertheless Ato Abay collected a considerable amount of miniature pottery from his land (see Figure 4). These objects are fragments from miniature incense burners and bowls, identified as lamps by Wilding (1989: 287, Figure 16.329). Although the abraded surfaces are difficult to read, the three Aksumite coins, two in copper and one in silver, are of great value (see Figure 4). The portraits and the legends are impossible to distinguish but the presence of crosses on the reverses and the precious descriptions of about four centuries of Aksumite coinage made by Hahn (2000) and Munro-Hay (1991: 180-185) permits the identification of the coins to the Christian period, between the first half of the fourth century and the beginning of the sixth century. In fact, the type of crosses and portraits on the copper coins are quite similar to copper coins attributed by Hahn to the anonymous king coeval to Ebana and to Kaleb (Hahn 2000: 309).

Eənda 'Abunä Nəwayä Kərstos

Given our scientific interest in examining Western Tigray, the TCTB brought two specific areas to our attention. Apart from the UCLA team of Willeke Wendrick, who are working in Mai Adrasha, since 2014, no archaeologist has pursued an examination of this sub-region of Tigray. Along a flat area near a seasonal stream, we identified rounded Muslim graves characterized by small accumulations of irregular stones in an area called Meqaber Islam, or 'Burial place of Islam'. In addition to the Islamic tombs, we identified iron slags, cherts and flints of different colours, and obsidian pieces on the surface. In a vast wooded area enclosed by a modern fence, several alignments of stones comprising ancient fence walls and houses likely connected to the ancient church were also recorded. A modern church, still under construction, houses the remains of an ancient building that locals recognize as the church of Eənda 'Abunä Nəwayä Kərstos. Two pilasters of the portal of the ancient church are still visible, built from square stones of different sizes and thickness with a semi-circular base, as well as a few corner stones of the façade. Other stones from the basement of the church are preserved on various sides of the building. Local priests have reconstructed what must have been the original

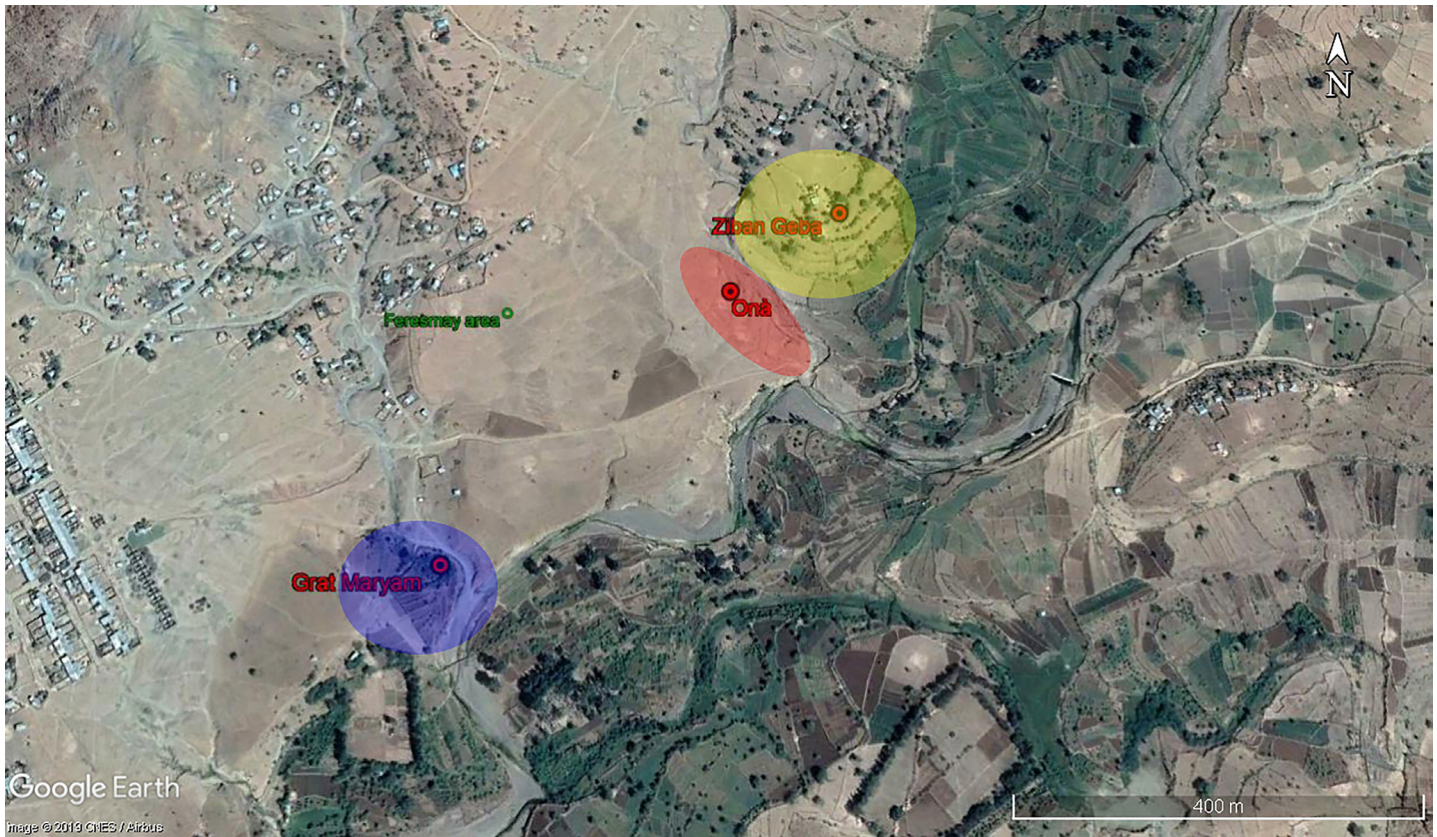


Figure 5: Färäs May archaeological areas: Gərat Maryam (blue circle), Zəban Gäba (yellow circle) and ‘Onà (red oval).

elevation of the church and covered everything with a wooden roof and aluminium. Unfortunately, there is no known manuscript or archaeological material to advance any hypothesis about the dating and use of the church.

Wäyabəla Mariam

A second church was briefly visited in Western Tigray: the church of Wäyabəla Mariam, located about 12.70 kilometres north-east from Enda Sellasie as the crow flies. Outside the church enclosure, monoliths and carved stones of a previous church dedicated to St. Mikael, St. Gabriel, and St. Mary have been rearranged to form a sort of altar with two lateral seats. Other remains of the ancient church were found scattered within the compound of the church, such as the stone gargoyles and worked stones incorporated in the access steps of the modern churches and the priest’s house or reused as a base of the *tabot*. According to reports from the priests, the ancient church was destroyed by Queen Gudit in the tenth century and they are in possession of the ancient manuscript on its foundation and destruction.

Färäs May and ‘Addi Ba‘əḥäl

The Färäs May area is located about 16 kilometres as the crow flies south of the pre-Aksumite site of Yeha, and it contains three distinct archaeological sites as well as the

present-day village of ‘Addi Ba‘əḥäl. Kifle Zerue has previously investigated the site on several occasions and analysed several potsherds under my supervision as well as that of the late Professor Fattovich for his master’s thesis of 2014. As noted by Zerue and Beldados (2019: 1) the ceramic material from the Aḥfärom Wärädä site ‘reflects evidence of Pre-Aksumite, Proto-Aksumite and Early Aksumite occupation.’ In the Färäs May area, we visited the Gərat Maryam graveyard (Figure 5, blue circle) and the possible settlement areas of ‘Onà and Zəban Gäba (Figure 5, red and yellow circles respectively). Unfortunately, the ceramic and bronze objects described by Zerue & Beldados (2017: 20-22) that were kept by several farmers have not been viewed. The burials of Gərat Maryam have been almost completely destroyed by intense agricultural activity and the construction of terraces, making it just possible see ceramic fragments scattered all around the area. Moving along the slope of one of the tributaries of the Bäräkīt river, we crossed both sides of this tributary that divides the two archaeological areas of ‘Onà and Zəban Gäba. The area of ‘Onà is characterized by three mounds of raised stone alignments and yellowish-red potsherds with abundant whitish inclusions, a typical ware of the Early Aksumite period.

On the opposite bank of the tributary, the site of Zəban Gäba lies on about 4 metres of overlapping archaeological strata. Among the archaeological material inserted into these strata or those that have eroded into the riverbed include several stone implements, obsidian and flint tools, and yellowish-red ceramic. One sherd with a large ledge rim and deep grooves on the external surface and rim, has decorations similar to Early Aksumite basins found in Bieta Giyorgis and Aksum. Two ceramic fragments with a ledge rim and a thickened, rounded inward lip with a snake-shaped application on the rim could represent a local decoration. The core of Zəban Gäba is characterised, instead, by several fragments of stele, worked stones, obsidian, flint and ceramic of the Proto-Early Aksumite periods, and stone alignments that the locals attribute to an ancient church.

The last site visited in Färäs May area is the village of ‘Addi Ba’əḥäl, well known for the discovery of a Sabaic inscription, translated by Lusini as an *Addendum* to the Zerue & Belbados contribution (2019: 39-40). The land where the inscription was found does not offer any other archaeological material. However, moving north-east, we visited the area called the ‘beads site’. The site hosts a copious number of small stelae, fragments of obsidian, black topped potsherds, and beads, which allows us to speculate about a possible Pre-Aksumite/Proto-Aksumite cemetery.

Period	Fattovich 2019
Proto-Aksumite	360? – 120/40 BC
Early Aksumite	120/40 BC – AD 130/190
Classic Aksumite	AD 130/190 – 360/400
Middle Aksumite	AD 360/400 – 550/610
Late Aksumite	AD 550/610 – 800/850

Table 1. Aksumite periods and date range based on Fattovich 2019. The Early to Late Aksumite periods correspond to Aksumite 1 to Aksumite 4 in Bard *et al.* 2014.

Conclusions

After eight days of survey, a careful evaluation of the potential of the sites described above was made, along with a feasibility study of conducting archaeological excavations in areas of the Tigray that do not fall within the concession areas of other archaeological missions. It was determined that the site of Däbrä Gärgəs offers the best potential for additional investigations for the first PCMA project in Tigray. The first Polish archaeological season in Däbrä Gärgis was conducted last March 2020 for a short time because the Covid-19 pandemic which forced us to evacuate Ethiopia.

Acknowledgements

These activities were entirely supported by the PCMA, therefore I would like to express my special thanks to the director, Dr. Artur Obłuski. I am also grateful to Prof. Kindeya Gebrehiwot, President of Mekelle University, W/ro Brikti Gebremehdin and W/ro Zenebu Halefom, Head and V/head of TCTB in Mekelle, who suggested several sites to visit. I am also immensely grateful to Ato Demerew Dagne, Cultural Heritage Research Directorate Director of ARCCCH in Addis Ababa, who always provides his great assistance and support to my projects. Last but not least, I express my friendly thanks to Hagos Abrha Abay, coordinator of St. Yared Centre for Ethiopian Philology and Manuscript Studies in Mekelle, for the correct transliteration of Tigrigna sites’ names.

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