

Preliminary Results of the Archaeological Reconnaissance carried out in Atsibi -Wemberta, Eastern Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Archaeological reconnaissance sponsored by the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) was conducted under the direction of the author in February 2004 in Atsibi-Wemberta district (Wereda) in eastern Tigray Administrative Zone. The objective of the archaeological ground reconnaissance was to assess the archaeological and tourism potential of the same place and to prepare the ground for future research. The preliminary assessment survey resulted with the discoveries of several settlements, cemeteries and religious sites ascribable to the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite cultures dating to about the middle of the first millennium BC and the first seven centuries AD, respectively.

Key words: cemetery, settlement, stelae, Tumulus.

Background

Archaeological investigations have never been previously carried out in Atsibi-Wemberta district in eastern Tigray administrative zone to determine the limit of the organized settlements of the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite populations and to assess its archaeological potential for future research and tourism. (See Finneran 2007, D'Andrea et.al. 2008, Phillipson 2012, for details of the pre-Aksumite, Aksumite and post Aksumite cultures).

Only very few foreign scholars have previously surveyed eastern Tigray in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the objective of exploring rock-hewn churches by leaving aside the evidence of pre-Aksumite and Aksumite cultures. Accordingly, many rock-hewn churches probably dating to the medieval times perhaps earlier, such as Mikael Emba, Michael Barka, Debre Selam and Gudufra Sellassie were reported by Buxton (1970), Plant

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(1985) and by Phillipson (2010). Furthermore, the Institute of Ethiopian Archaeology under the direction of the French scholars conducted archaeological surveys near the main road between Mekele and Addigrat. As a result many Aksumite and very few Pre-Aksumite sites were documented near the towns of Edaga - Hamous and Housein (Godet 1977, Tekle 1997, Phillipson 2012).

However, no archaeological surveys have been previously carried out in the Eastern Escarpment over 2600 m above sea level to document organized pre-Aksumite and Aksumite settlements. The only pre-Aksumite site documented by an accidental discovery in the 1950s is Addi-Gelamo, located in the Eastern Escarpment, near the village of Edaga-Rob'e in *Tabia* (Peasant Association) Hawile (Kobischanov 1979, Finnneran 2007, Phillipson 2012).

Atsibi-Wemberta is located along the route to the salt trade and salt mining places of the Afar lowlands. It is also found along the route to the Red Sea ports of Deire and Saba near the coast of Babel-Mendeb since pre-Aksumite times (Tekle 1997). This strategic route seems to have been a center of cultural interaction between the populations of the northern highlanders and the Afar lowlanders and between the populations of the Western and Eastern sides of the Red Sea perhaps since the pre-historic times (Porter 2004). For the same reason, the eastern Tigray Escarpment seems to have great potential for archaeological researches to address population distribution, movements, cultural interactions, economic exchanges of the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite populations during the first millennium BC and first millennium AD.

The author conducted archaeological surveys in Atsibi-Wemberta in 2004 for the first time to assess the archaeological potential of the same and published the result of the inventory in *kirs*, a bilingual magazine (Amharic and English) of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (Tekle 2007). The objective of this publication was to serve as a baseline data and to show the archaeological potential of Atsibi-Wemberta to the public, concerned cultural heritage authorities and the local administrators. Following this publication, an MA dissertation was written on the megaliths of Atsibi-Wemberta with additional contribution of documenting a single stela of unknown age at Heruban Feleg near the Church of Afenegew Mariam near Zarema (577098 easting, 1537669

northing, 2716 m asl) to the north west of the town of Atsibi (Yohannes 2008).

This research report presents the archaeological sites discovered in 2004 Atsibi-Wemberta district in eastern Tigray with an updated data to bridge the gap in archaeological knowledge in this part of Ethiopia.

Objective and Methods

The objective of the fieldwork carried out in Atsibi-Wemberta district in eastern Tigray in 2004 was to assess the archaeological potential of the area. The goal of the reconnaissance was to explore and document evidences of organized settlements as well as cemeteries and religious sites of the pre-Aksumite, Aksumite and post Aksumite populations in the Eastern Escarpment of Tigray along the border with the Afar National Regional State.

Archaeological ground reconnaissance surveys were carried out both on foot and by car for two weeks. GPS was used to document the UTM positions or mapping coordinates of sites on the course of the surveys. Sites were documented by slide and color photographs. Moreover, sites were designated as ET followed by Arabic numbers. ET refers to eastern Tigray while the Arabic numbers refer to the sequences of numbers of sites discovered on the course of the surveys. Furthermore, the team members used observation, interviews, local guides and measurements in the course of the survey.

No surface collection was undertaken in the field as the objective of the reconnaissance was preliminary assessment to determine the archaeological potential of the study areas. Chronology of sites was determined on the basis of surface observations of pre-Aksumite, Aksumite pottery typology and imported pottery and on comparison of Aksumite stelae typology and documentary sources. Thus, the chronologies and interpretations of the discovered sites should be considered as tentative until further investigations are carried out in the study area.

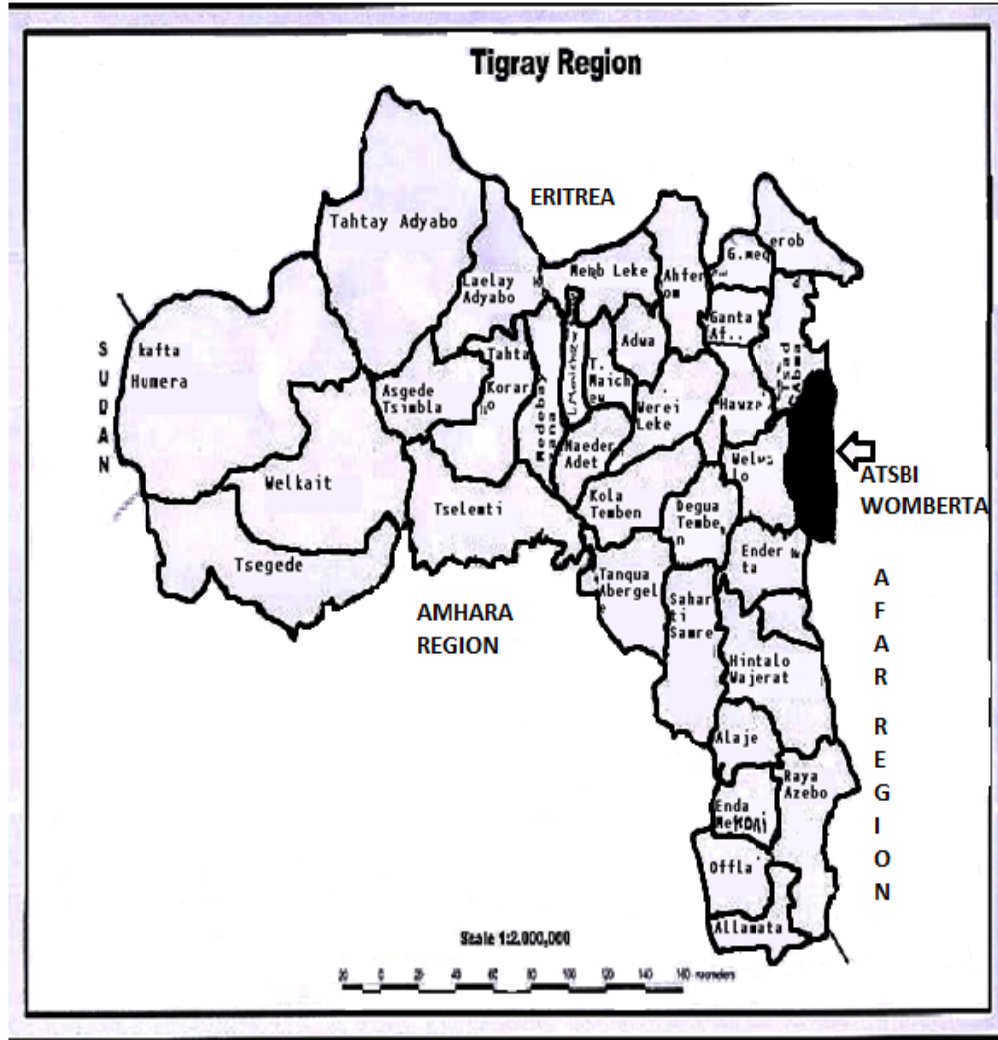


Fig.1: Map of the study areas in its regional context

Sites of the Archaeological Reconnaissance

Thirty archaeological sites were documented in Atsibi-Wemberta district dating probably from the pre-Aksumite and the pre-Christian Aksumite times (prior to about the 6th century AD) to the medieval times on the course of the surveys as discussed below.

Atsibi: This is the first site discovered in Atsibi-Wemberta. It is found in the town of Atsibi near the administrative office of Atsibi-Wemberta, adjacent to the road leading to the town of Wukiro, at 0579441 easting, 1532882 northing and at an elevation of 2682 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-1 by the Inventory Team.

It preserves a single standing stela carved from ignimbrite rock and is oriented to an east-west direction. It is rectangular with smooth surface. It is 1.70m high, 0.70m thick with a width of 0.50 m, 0.54 m and 0.49 m at its top, middle and bottom, respectively. No archaeological features and pottery were found in association or around it. For the same reason, it appears difficult to determine its chronology as it seems to have been in a secondary context. Its morphology seems to be similar to the Aksumite stelae. However, archaeological excavation is required to determine its context, function and chronology.

Kanchabet: Kanchabet is the second megalithic site discovered in 2004 in Atsibi-Wemberta district at the locality of Golgel Naebi (battle plain). It is found at 0579074 easting, 1534837 northing and at an elevation of 2732 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-2.

It preserves three stelae, erected in a semi- circular pattern, on the side of the road that leads from the town of Atsibi to the village of Zarema and to the south of the Church of Enda-Eyesus (Fig.2).



Fig.2: Stelae at Kanchabet

The first stela is found to the south of the road while the others are located to the north of the same road. The space between the first stela and the second one measures 10 m while the one between the first and the third stela measures 2.6 m. It is dressed one with pointed end, 1.80 m high and 0.70 thick with width of 0.12 m and 0.28 m at its top and bottom, respectively.

The second stela is rectangular and undressed on its eastern side. It is 1.90 m high with varying width of 0.30 m and 0.37 m at its top and bottom, respectively. The third one, with a pointed end, is 1.37 m high with a varying width of 0.12 m and 0.30 m at its top and bottom, respectively.

These stelae are found in uncultivated land and seem to have been quarried from the nearby ignimbrites where there are remains of quarrying evidence. No associated feature and pottery were documented. The purpose and chronology of these steale is unknown, which begs for further archaeological investigations.

Zarema: The Zarema site is located to the east of the Church of Debrebirhan Giorgis at 0573078 easting, 154075 northing and at elevation of 2831 m above sea level. The site was designated as ET-3.

It preserves what appears to be an Aksumite dressed round topped stela, erected on a natural stone mound, inclined to the north. It is 1.40 m high with a varying width of 0.20 m and 0.15 m at its top and bottom, respectively. It is made of ignimbrite rocks. Beside this stela, a flat stone, which is 0.75 m long, was lying on the surface. Another rectangular stela stood 2.50 m away north of the first one. A dressed stone is buried on the ground to the south of the second stela. These stelae are 1.15 m apart from each other and seem to mark an underground pre-Christian Aksumite tomb. A small opening located 3.40 m to the north of the stelae, which leads to underground stone built structure of refined workmanship suggests of such a purpose. Below the opening the wall leads eastward. The depth of the visible underground structure is 0.75 m below modern ground surface. Further investigation is required to understand the nature and chronology of the site.

Zarema Debre-Birhan Giorgis: The church of Zarema Debre Birhan Giorgis is located to the west of the town of Atsibi, on the edge of the Eastern Escarpment facing to the town of Edaga-Hamus at GPS coordinates of 0572821 easting, 1540784 northing and at an altitude of 2836 m above sea level. The team designated this site as ET-4.

This site preserves a ruin that indicates an organized settlement and a cemetery. On the northern side of the church, there is a boulder measuring 3.50 m by 5.90 m. It consists of 41 carved conical cisterns and 3 shallow carved cisterns at the bottom side. They are similar to those cisterns found on the basalt base plate of Stela 3, in Aksum. These cisterns seem to suggest of pre-Christian Aksumite customary burial ritual practices. A large ruin found to the east of this boulder also suggests a cemetery of Pre-Christian Aksumites.

In addition to the boulder described above, there is a single undressed stela at the entrance of the church. It faces to the north and is 1.20 m high and 0.30 m, 0.28 m and 0.20 m wide at its bottom, middle and top, respectively.

Gebriel Zelebay: This site that contains a cave church is located to the north of the town of Atsibi, on the way leading to the town of Edga- Hamus at

0577545 easting, 154968 northing and at an elevation of 3012 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-5.

It is situated on a sedimentary cliff on top of the Eastern Escarpment. The site was accessed from the southern side where there are many sedimentary caves, fenced by abandoned stone walls marking the original location of the church. The church of Gebriel Zelebay is located about 100 m away to the western side of these caves. Its entrance is fenced by stonewalls. Human skulls and skeletons were observed on the eastern side of the church, which suggests the significance of the site for future archaeological research.

Wurkro-Mariam: The Church of Wukro Mariam is located to the eastern side of the Eastern Escarpment and to the east of the Church of Gebriel Zelebay at 0577628 easting, 1549915 northing and at 3011 m above sea level. The Inventory Team designated this site as ET-6.

This rock-hewn church was accessed through the gate on its eastern side. The church is fenced by stonewalls that seem to depict Aksumite wooden beams and doors similar to those of the largest Aksumite stelae. The construction styles observed suggest that this church dates to medieval times.

Addi Kesho: This site is situated to the east of the town of Atsibi across the Ayadim River in a hill slope at Hitsa Gebela, Kal Amin (*Tabia*) Peasant Association. Its GPS coordinates and altitude are 0580820 easting, 1532064 northing and 2659 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-7.

The settlement site measures about 100 m by 30m and is found in uncultivated land. It preserves Aksumite and post Aksumite pottery of medium density scattered on the surface, which are also common in the town of Atsibi. Four types of pottery were identified: (1) red pottery (2.50y⁶/6) with a thin layer covering the black clay with chalk inclusion; (2) smooth and polished light brown pottery (7.50YR⁷/1); (3) smooth and polished reddish brown (5YR⁵/4) and, (4) light gray (75YR⁷/1) pottery.

Tsaba-Aiyana: Tsaba-Aiyana is a small locality located to the northeast of the town of Atsibi-Wemberta in Felegeweini *Tabia* Administration center, along the salt trade route at 058210873 easting, 1538824 northing and at an

elevation of 2857 m above sea level. It is found on a sedimentary slope facing south towards the plain of Felegeweini. This site which was designated as ET-8 contains two sedimentary caves that are sealed by the walls made of stones of small size and mud. The caves preserve human skeletons. The clothes that covered the body of the deceased are still well preserved. There are no churches around the site. It requires further investigation to determine the chronology of the site and to understand as to why people were buried in this particular site.

Holla: This site is located on the top of the Plateau at Tsaba-Ayina in Felegeweini, at 0582281 easting, 153961 northing and at an elevation of 2937 m above sea level. It is found on the edge of the plateau in uncultivated land. It takes 30 minutes to climb. It was designated as ET-9 by the Survey Team.

It preserves a circular tumulus with a diameter of 20 m. Its edges are found in an excellent condition while its interior is disturbed by cultural activities. It seems to represent possible pre-Christian funerary practices of the indigenous population who inhabited the area prior to the 6th century AD. It requires further investigation to determine the chronology and to ascertain of the function of the site.

Anaf: This site is situated to the east of ET-9 about half an hour walk, at 0582392 easting, 1539612 northing and at an altitude of 2924 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-10. It preserves a tumulus which is 11m in diameter. It is disturbed by terracing. It seems to have similar function and date with ET-9.

Holla 2: This site is located to the southeast of ET-9 on the edge of the Church of Medihanealem at 0582392 easting, 153939 northing and at an elevation of 2927 m above sea level. It is located on uncultivated land facing the cliff of Tsaba-Ayina. It was designated as ET-11. It preserves a tumulus, which is 20 m in diameter. Its base is well preserved. It is covered by grasses and bushes. It seems to have similar antiquity and function with ET-10 and ET-9.

Ziban Kalsiyen: The site of Ziban Kalsiyen is located at 0582016 easting, 1538946 northing and at an elevation of 2922 m. It is found on the edge of a cliff facing southward to the town of Atsibi. The Survey Team designated this site as ET-12. It preserves a conical tumulus, which is a meter high, with a diameter of 20 m. Its center is disturbed while its edges are well preserved. It appears that it has similar function and chronology with ET-9, ET-10 and ET-11.

Ziban Dibo-a: This site is found on top of Tsaba-Ayina Plateau, which is half an hour walk to climb. It is situated opposite to ET-12 near the salt trade route facing the plain of Daber to the south of Endacherqos plain. Its GPS location is 0582805 easting, 1538686 northing and 2901 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-13a. A circular tumulus, 5.40 m in diameter, is found on the western side of the edge of the hill. It was built with slates and is partially covered by bushes.

Ziban Dibo-b: It is found about 100 m far away to the east of ET-13A on the eastern side of Ziban Dibo facing the plain of Endacherqos. It was designated as ET-13b. It preserves an evidence of ancient settlement. There is an ancient shelter that is built with four sedimentary boulders and stonewalls. Its western side is fenced by four boulders, 4.80 m long. There are caves underneath the boulders, stretching from north to south. One of the caves measures 1.60 m by 1.30 m. A semi-circular stonewall 6.90 m by 6 m; 0.70 m thick was built against this shelter on its northern, southern and eastern sides.

A tumulus, 12.50 m in diameter, was documented about 10 m far away to the north of this settlement. It is disturbed by humans. Only its base survives. Five ruined houses were located about 50 m far away to the north of this tumulus. The largest one is rectangular and measures 7.40 m in length and 4.80 m wide. Its surviving height is 2.50 m. A single blade and four obsidian flakes were found on the same site. The discovery of obsidian flakes on this site indicates the potential of the site for future archaeological investigation.

Gira Huga: The site at Gira Huga is located on the eastern edge of the Tsaba-Ayina Plateau in Felegeweini Peasant Association, to the east of ET-

10, facing the plain of Endacherqos at 0583451 easting, 1539373 northing and at an elevation of 2926 m above sea level along the salt trade route. This site was designated as ET-14. It preserves a conical tumulus with a diameter of 12.80 and a height of 0.50. Furthermore, two small tumuli were also documented to the east of the same structure.

The tumuli described so far are located on top of the Tsaba-Ayina Plateau in uncultivated land in strategically commanding points and very close to the ancient salt trade route and salt mining places.

There are two different opinions by the local population regarding the function of these tumuli. Some argue that the tumuli were built as territorial markers while others say such structures were built to hoard grains. However, available archeological evidences show that the tumuli had funerary function. Thus, the tumuli in Atsibi-Wemberta could have been Pre-Christian mortuaries of the indigenous populations who inhabited what is now eastern Tigray. Anyways, further archaeological excavation is required to determine the chronology and to confirm their function.

Tsirtsi'eti: A site that seems to be Aksumite, was documented at Tsirtsi'eti to the west of the town of Astibi, on the southern side of the road leading from the town of Atsibi to Wukro town, and to the south of the Habes Elementary School. Its GPS readings are 0573933 easting and 1526751 northing at an elevation of 2600 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-16.

It preserves a slab shaped or rectangular dressed stela, inclined to the north and with a pointed end similar to those of Aksum. Its visible height is 4.50 m. It could have been over 5 m high originally before it is partially covered by the wall of a modern house of Ato Gebre Medihin Gebre Egziabher. Its thickness measures 0.20 m with 0.30 m, 0.69 m and 0.77 m width at its top, middle and base, respectively.

The stela was carved from granite stones similar to those of Aksum. Such granite stones are not found around the site and it seems to have been brought from a distant place. The Inventory Team also located a structure with a visible wall on a hilltop to the east of this stela. It appears that this stela might have served as a tomb mark of a chief in rural Aksumite area before the introduction of Christianity to eastern Tigray at about 6th century

AD. However, further archaeological investigation is compulsory to determine the function and chronology of the site.

Enda Freyo: Two important sites that appear to be Aksumite, were documented near the rock-hewn church of Michael Barka, to the west of the town of Atsibi, near Atsibi-Wukro road in *Tabia* Habes. The sites called Enda Freyo and Kokah Wado are located near the source of Mai Ayini stream, to the south west of the Church. The site of Eda Freyo was designated as Et-17.

The first site discovered by our team, Enda Freyo, is located to the north of Mai Ayini stream and to the west of the rock-hewn church of Michael Barka. It is found on a hill top to the north of the main road leading from the town of Atsibi and to the town of Wukro and the Church of Medihanealem at 0575720 easting, 1528388 northing and at an attitude of 2648 m above sea level.

It preserves a single undressed pointed end stela, inclined to the south, found in uncultivated land on a hill slope. It seems to be in its original location. It has a varying width of 0.20 m and 0.35 m at its top and base, respectively. Its height is 1.80 m and it is carved from the surrounding raw materials.

The site also contains a ruined settlement that appears to be Aksumite, which is about 800 m by 300 m. It is located to the northwest of the stela mentioned previously. It is found on a hilltop. It consists of many circular and rectangular houses. The surviving wall measures 1.20 m high. Four rough blocks of rocks to its western side demarcate the settlement.

Moreover, smoothed and polished light red (2.50YR^{6/6}) potteries are also found in this site. Informants from the surrounding site say that beads were collected from this site. Thus, it has a great potential for future research in architecture, chronology of Aksumite archaeology.

Kokah Wado –a: This site is found in Habes Peasant Association to the east of Mai Ayini and to the South west of the rock- hewn church of Michael Barka. It is located about 100 m far away to the south of the road leading from the town of Atsibi to the town of Wukro. Its UTM position is 0576128 easting, 1527541 northing and at an altitude of 2638 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-18.

It preserves what appear to be an Aksumite settlement and a cemetery. The cemetery area is represented by four dressed Aksumite rectangular stelae, found on the uncultivated terraced land owned by Ato Gebremedhin Giday.

The 1st stela is located to the east of the site, in a terraced land almost buried in the ground. Its visible length is 2.95 m. There is also another standing Aksumite stela inclined to the east, 13.10 m far away to the west of the 1st stela. It is rectangular and dressed, found in a terraced land. It has a varying width of 0.60 m, 0.70 m and 0.60 m at its top, middle and bottom, respectively. It is 2.40 m high with a groove on its eastern side and the groove measures 0.22 m by 0.24 m. This groove is found 1.60 m below its top and 0.59 m above its bottom. It seems that there was an attempt to dress it on its western side.

A third rectangular dressed stela which is inclined to the west is located 19.20 m far away to the west of the second stela, in the terraced land, near the road leading from the town of Atsibi to the town of Wukro. The stela is 2.40 m high with a varying width of 0.55 m and 0.60 m at its top and bottom, respectively.

There is also a fourth stela that fell on the ground towards northwest, almost buried in the ground. Its visible length is 4.30 m with a varying width of 0.40 m and 0.80 m at its top and bottom, respectively. All of the stelae seem to have been carved from the surrounding boulders and are found in their original context in a land owned by Ato Gebremidhin Giday.

A ruined settlement that measures about 800 m by 200 m, which appears to date to the Aksumite period, was also located on a hilltop to the north east of these stelae, at UTM position of 0576201 easting 1527524 northing and at an altitude of 2650 m above sea level. It preserves several round houses where the house of Ato Gebremedhin Giday is located.

Imported fragments of pottery (amphorae) and fragments of Red Aksumite pottery (2.50YR ⁷/6) are also preserved in this site. Some of the rims are smooth and polished, very thin and decorated with multiple lines. It appears that this site dates between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD according to pottery typology and imported potteries.

Kokah Wado-b: This site is located on a hilltop to the west of ET-18 about 200 m far away to the south of the road leading from the town of Atsibi to

the town of Wukro near Mai Ayini at 0.575049 easting 1527394 northing and at an elevation of 2628 m above sea level, in a land owned by Ato Atsbeha Teka. It was designated as ET-19. It preserves a ruined structure and a round polished pottery. The pottery is very large and completely buried in the ground.

Mishlack Oromo: The term ‘Mishlack’ in a Tigray language means a narrow passage. The local people call this site as Mishlack Oromo. Its literary translation into English is a narrow passage of the Oromos.

The site of Mishlack Oromo is found at 0574934 easting, 0158434 northing and at an altitude of 2687 m above sea level in Habes *Tabia*, around the rock-hewn church of Michael Barka, to the north of the road leading from the town of Atsibi to the town of Wukro. It is located on a hilltop formed by sedimentary rock (limestone) in a strategically commanding point to control the surrounding areas. It was designated as ET-20.

A stonewall, which is 86.60 m long and 2.10 m thick, is preserved on the western side of this hill (fig.3). It may have been longer than the surviving one and seems to have encircled the hill. It is built with black volcanic rocks, which are large and crude with no evidence of dressing. The enclosure seems to have a gate on its western side. The wall is built against small limestone caves. There is a circular house on the center of the hill top, with its entrance to the east. It is 1.50 m thick, with a diameter of 7.30 m from south to north and 7.70 m from east to west. There are two rectangular ruins on its northern and southern sides that may have been possible guarding posts.

There are also smoothed and polished, light-red (2.50YR ⁷/6) potteries with chalk inclusion. Some of them have multiple linear decorations (multiple horizontal line decorations).

This site seems to have been in use during medieval times when there was no relative peace in eastern Tigray in particular and in Ethiopia in general. It is, thus, the first defensive wall to be documented so far in Tigray Regional State.



Fig.3: Mishlack Oromo

Abiy Addi: This site is located near the Habes Elementary School to the north of Mai Ayini and to the north of the road leading from the town of Atsibi to the town of Wukro, on a hilltop at 0574704 easting, 1527826 northing and at an elevation of 2635 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-21.

It preserves a settlement site, which measures about 100 m by 500 m. Multi-period settlement ruins with at least three construction phases were identified from the disturbed and exposed section of the site. The earliest evidence of construction is buried 0.80 m deep below modern ground surface level. On top of this wall, the second phase of construction is visible to its north. The third phase is marked by the surviving surface wall ruins. The site preserves light red, smooth and polished potteries that appear to be Aksumite.

Modern houses are built on top of these archaeological ruins obscuring the archaeological evidence. It is also disturbed by modern terracing. This site is very important as it preserves an evidence of settlement possibly dating from the beginning of the Aksumite times up to the present. It, thus, has a great potential for future research.

Teka'ele (Mai Ra'a): It is found on top of a plateau in uncultivated land facing the town of Haiq Mesehal to the south of the road leading from the

town of Atsibi to the town of Wukro in Addi Sibha at 0575846 easting, 1526659 northing and at an elevation of 2656 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-22.

It preserves a single tumulus, which is disturbed by terracing. There is also a rectangular structure to the east of this tumulus and to the north of the house of Kegnazmach Alemayehu Berhe. It measures about 10.80 m by 8 m. It appears to have been part of a large tumulus. The stones of the tumulus seem to have been moved for the construction of the residence of Kegnazmach Alemayehu Berhe and for terracing.

Mikael Mistwa'e (Mebrahtom): This church is located 5 km far away to the east of the town of Atsibi in Felegeweini Peasant Association at 0582078 easting, 1534680 northing and at an elevation of 2786 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-24. It preserves a rock-hewn church, located on a sedimentary cliff facing towards west, to the town of Atsibi, the plain and the Ayadim River. It takes 15 minutes' walk to climb.

The stonewall gate of this church is found to the west. Its interior has one large room carved from limestone. Two unfinished carved windows are found to the south of the main church facing west. Human skeletons and skulls are found on the edges of the limestone caves to the north of this rock-hewn church. They are kept on rectangular wooden coffins (fig.4).



Fig. 4: Coffins at Mikael Mistwa'e

Sekera (Tekuley): Sekera is located to the north of the town of Atsibi in Hadnet Peasant Association at Kelkelit, in a cultivated land owned by Weizero Alemash Lema at 0572966 easting, 1548983 northing and at an elevation of 2702 m above sea level. It is found in a lowland plain surrounded by a chain of hills. The church of Mariam Oho Bahallit is found to its south. It was designated as ET-25. Seven stelae that appear to be from the Aksumite period are preserved in this site. They are erected in an east-west direction in semi-circular pattern (Fig.5).

The first stela, which is found on the eastern direction of the site, is rectangular and inclined to the north. Its eastern side is dressed while its western side is not completely dressed. It measures 4.30 m high and 0.60 m wide. The local people believe that this stela was a bride. They say that the bride refused to pray at the Church of Mariam Oho Bahallit and was cursed and ultimately turned to stone. The second stela is located 5.65 m far away to the west of the first one. It fell towards south. It is undressed and rectangular with a pointed top. It measures 1.50 m long and 0.40 m wide. It is believed that this small stela was a child who carried food for the bride and bridegroom.

The third stela is found 21 m far away to the west of the second one. This rectangular stela is still standing in its original location and is oriented towards east-west. It is 2.90 m high and 0.50 m wide. It is believed by the local people that originally this stela was a bridegroom. The fourth stela is located 8.95 m far away to the west of the third stela. It is standing in its original position and is inclined towards west. It is rectangular and measures 3.35 m high. The local people believe that originally this stela was the best man of the bride. The fifth stela is situated 2.25 m far away to the southwest of the 4th one. This rectangular stela is inclined to the north. It is 0.75 m long and 0.30 m wide. It is believed by the local people that this stela originally represented a boy who carried food for a wedding party in antiquity.

Another rectangular stela is found 5.45 m far away to the northwest of the 5th stela. It is with a pointed end and inclined towards northeast. It measures 1.10 m high and 0.33 m wide. The local people say that this stela originally represented a boy who carried food for a wedding party. The seventh stela is located 14.40 m far away to the north of stela 6. It fell on the ground, towards northeast. Its visible length is 6.40 m. It is believed by

the local residents that this stela was a mule that carried the bride and the bridegroom.

It is believed by the local people that there was a rod near the site in antiquity. A wedding group who were traveling along the same route refused to pray at the church of Mariam Oho Bahalit. The same church cursed them and consequently, the bride, bridegroom, the best man; other members of the wedding party and the mule were turned to the stelae mentioned above. However, those who prayed were told by the Church of Mariam Oho Bahallit to walk directly eastward to a place called Keteba without looking backward to their friends who turned to stones. At Keteba, they stopped and looked backward to see what had happened to their friends. Like their friends, they were cursed by the church of Mariam Oho Bahallit and turned into stones (stelae).

The stelae at Sekera are the largest to be found outside the town of Aksum. This makes the same site the second largest Aksumite site in terms of numbers and size of stelae concentration.



Fig.5: Stelae at Sekera.

In spite of the interesting tradition mentioned above, these stelae were probably erected and dressed by the Aksumites to mark cemetery before the

introduction of Christianity to Atsibi Wemberta prior to or about the 6th century AD. This site seems to have been a cemetery area of Aksumite elites in Aksumite countryside. It also preserves smooth and polished light red Aksumite pottery. This makes the site very rich in archaeological evidence to shed new light on the economic, political and social aspects of the eastern Aksumite populations at about the middle of the first millennium AD.

Keteba (Mesaw'eti): This site is found to the east of ET-25 on the slope of the Eastern Escarpment in Hadnet Peasant Association. It is situated to the southeast of the rock-hewn church of Meskel Mesaw'eti and to the north west of the Church of Mariam Medhaneyti at 0576783 easting, 1547424 northing and at an elevation of 2869 m above sea level. It was designated as ET-26. It preserves a ruin that appears to be a tumulus or a burial structure, disturbed by terracing and quarrying.



Fig.6: Broken stela at Keteba

This site exhibits a broken stela that fell towards west to the plain. It is rectangular and dressed (fig. 6). It measures 6.70 m in length and its broken

base measures 0.42m, which makes its total length to be 7.12 m. It has a varying width of 0.80 m and 0.75 m at its bottom and top, respectively. It is 0.45 m thick. Its top seems to have been chiseled by hard stones by school children.



Fig. 7: Stela at Keteba

Another stela (fig.7), which inclines towards the west, is found standing on its original position, 8.25 m far away to the south of the previously mentioned stela. It is rectangular with a pointed end, 3.88 m high with a varying width of 1.05 and 0.80 m at its bottom and top, respectively. Its thickness is 0.40 m. Some stelae were removed from this site to the church of Mariam Medhaneyti, 400 m far away to the south of the same site. One stela, which is 4.25 m long and 0.50 m wide, is found lying from east to the west on the same church compound. Another stela, which is broken in two pieces, was brought to this place from its original position. The 1st one is found on the outer gate of the church compound and is integrated to the gate of the church as a step. It is 1.65 m long. The 2nd one, which is also found in the same church compound measures 1.50 m long. This makes the overall length of the stela to be 3.20 m. There is also a broken stela lying on the ground inside church compound. Another broken stela is also found lying on the ground in the same compound. It is 1.45 m long. Furthermore,

there is a third broken stela in the same church compound, which is 1.40 m long. A stone chair (fig.8) is also found near these broken stelae inside the church compound. All of them seem to have been brought from ET-26.

Estifanos Tsihe (Kelkelbet): This site is found to the northwest of the church of Estifanos in Hadnet Peasant Association on a cultivated land owned by Alem Hadera at 0574413 easting, 1548147 northing and at an elevation of 2811m above sea level. It was designated as ET-27.



Fig. 8: Stone chair at Church of Mariam Medhaneyti

Undressed rectangular pointed end stela oriented from east to west (fig.9.) is found insitu in this site. It measures 1.90 m high with a varying width of 0.60 m and 0.80 m at its top and bottom, respectively.

Red Aksumite pottery that have been dated from the 2nd to 5th centuries AD and imported African slipware that are dated to the 6th century AD were found around this stela indicating that chronology of the site tentatively falls between the 2nd and 6th centuries AD.



Fig.9: Stela at Estifanos Tsihe

Discussion and Conclusion

The archaeological reconnaissance conducted in Atsibi-Wemberta in 2004 show that the settlement patterns discovered on the course of the survey in the study area appear to be similar with those of the pre-Aksumite and Aksumite settlements in the Yeha-Aksum areas in general and to the recently reported sites of Goulo-Makada in north eastern Tigray in particular (D'Andrea et.al. 2008). The discovered sites in Atsibi-Wemberta are located along the salt trade routes to the Afar lowlands and along the Red Sea ports of Deire and Saba near the coast of Babel-Mendeb (Tekle, 1997). The settlement sites in Atsibi-Wemberta appear to be located along the foot of plateaus/hills in fertile soil areas and to the proximity of water (rivers, wells etc.) while the majority of the tumuli seem to have been situated on top of plateaus where there are no fertile soils, rivers and wells.

Furthermore, religious sites are also located in the steep slopes of the Eastern Escarpments.

The archaeological reconnaissance carried out in Atsibi-Wemberta showed that Anfray's (1973) characterization of eastern Aksumite sites is incorrect. He reported that stelae are absent in eastern Aksumite sites. However, during the 2004 survey a large numbers of Aksumite stelae were documented in Atsibi-Wemberta in the Eastern Escarpment.

The archaeological reconnaissance undertaken in Atsibi-Wemberta resulted with the discoveries of multiple cultural entities tentatively ascribable to pre-Aksumite, Aksumite, post Aksumite and medieval populations. In general, these discoveries include tumuli, stelae, pottery, rock-hewn and cave churches: representing settlements, cemeteries and religious sites.

The tumuli documented in Atsibi-Wemberta are located over 3000 m altitude high asl on top of the Eastern Escarpment in strategically commanding points to control trade and trade routes and other resources in the Afar lowlands in the east and in the Tigray highlands in the west. Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite remains were not documented in the highest altitudes where the majorities of the tumuli are located in the Tsaba-Ayna Plateau. This seems to indicate that such structures may have been possible burials of the earliest indigenous population in what is today Atsibi-Wemberta prior or contemporary to pre-Aksumite and Aksumite times.

The stelae, underground structures and pottery documented in Atsibi-Wemberta below 3000 m up to 2300 m altitudes in the edges of the Eastern Escarpment seem to represent an evidence of organized settlements of the Aksumite populations of the first seven centuries AD. Imported fragmented potteries such as amphorae, African slipware (ASW) were documented in Atsibi-Wemberta confirming that the populations had contacts with the outside world such as North Africa and Yemen. The discoveries of imported potteries in many sites of Atsibi-Wemberta also indicate the presence of luxurious classes in the same place in the first seven centuries AD. Moreover, the large numbers of stelae that are found distributed throughout the district of Atsibi-Wemberta also seem to suggest that there were wealthy Aksumite classes who controlled huge resources (trade, agriculture, minerals, forest) and an organized state machinery to mobilize a large number of population to carve and transport stelae such as those of

Sekera and Keteba. Furthermore, the distribution of many Aksumite sites in Atsibi-Wemberta seems to suggest that a large number of population inhabited these places in the first seven centuries AD. Furthermore, the rock-hewn and cave churches; and the settlement sites documented in many sites in Atsibi-Wemberta show that this place was continuously inhabited in medieval times.

The same fieldwork confirmed that the district of Atsibi-Wemberta has a great potential for future archaeological, historical and social anthropological researches. Furthermore, it became clear that the same district has very attractive cultural landscape. It is, therefore, recommended that more work is required to study and utilize these resources.

The sites reported in this article were threatened to obliteration by quarrying, terracing, construction activities and settlements at the time of the survey. Therefore, an urgent united action is required by the local administrative authorities and by the cultural heritage authorities of both federal and regional governments to safeguard and exploit these fragile unique resources.

Summary of the findings

The following table summarizes the result of the inventory of the archaeological sites in Atsibi-Wemberta administrative district.

No.	name of site	site code	Location	Discovery	Chronology
1	Atsibi	ET-1	0579441E, 1532882N and 2682m	a stela	Unknown
2	Kanchabet	ET-2	0582016E, 1538946N and 2732m	Stelae	Unknown
3	Zarema	ET-3	0573078E, 154075N and 2831m	stelae, settlement, and tomb	pre- Aksumite and Aksumite
4	Zarema Debre- Birhan Giorgis	ET- 4	0572821E 1540784N and 2836 m	stela, settlement, cemetery, carved cistern and a church	Aksumite
5	Gebriel Zelebay	ET-5	0577545E 154968 N and 3012 m	a church and human bones	Medieval
6	Wurkro-Mariam	ET-6	0577628E, 1549915N and 3011 m	rock-hewn church	Medieval
7	Addi Kesho	ET-7	0580820E, 1532064N and 2659 m	Settlement	post- Aksumite
8	Tsaba-Aiyana	ET-8	058210873 E, 1538824N and 2857m	human skeleton in caves	Medieval

9	Holla	Et-9	0582281E, 153961N and 2937 m	tumulus	pre-Aksumite?
10	Anaf	ET-10	0582392E, 1539612 N and 2924 m	tumulus	pre-Aksumite?
11	Holla 2	ET-11	0582392E, 153939N and 2927 m	tumulus	Pre-Aksumite
12	Ziban Kalsiyen	ET-12	0582016E, 1538946N and 2922 m.	tumulus	pre-Aksumite?
13	Ziban Dibo-a	ET-13A	0582805E, 1538686N and 2901m	tumulus	pre-Aksumite?
14	Ziban Dibo-A	ET-13B	100 m to the east of ET-13A	settlement, tumulus, obsidian flakes	pre-Aksumite to 19 th century?
15	Gira Huga	ET-14	0583451E, 1539373N and 2926 m	tumuli	pre-Aksumite
16	Tsirts'i'eti	ET-16	0573933E, 1526751 N and 2600 m	stela and settlement	Aksumite
17	Enda Freyo	ET-17	0575720E 1528388N and 2648 m	stela and settlement	Aksumite
18	Kokah Wado-A	ET-18	0576128E, 1527541N and 2638 m	stelae, imported and local pottery and settlement	Aksumite

19	Kokah Wado-B	ET-19	0575049E 1527394N and 2628 m	pottery and a settlement	medieval ?
20	Mishlack Oromo	ET-20	0574934E, 0158434N 2687m	stonewall, houses and pottery	Medieval
21	Abiy Addi	ET-21	0574704E 1527826N and 2635 m	wall ruins, pottery	Aksumite to present
22	Teka'ele (Mai Ra'a)	ET-22	0575846E, 1526659N and 2656 m	tumulus and settlement	pre- Aksumite and modern
23	Mikael Mistwa'e (Mebrahtom)	ET-24	0582078E, 1534680N and 2786 m	rock-hewn church with human skeletons	medieval
24	Sekera (Tekuley)	ET-25	0572966E, 1548983N and 2702 m	stelae	Aksumite
25	Keteba (Mesaw'eti)	ET-26	0576783E, 1547424N and 2869 m	stelae and pottery	Aksumite
26	Estifanos Tsihe (Kelkelbet)	ET-27	0574413E, 1548147N and 2811m	stelae, local and imported pottery	Aksumite

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