Archaeological Rescue Excavations at the *Dejazmach* Gebreslassie Palace, Aksum, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Archaeological rescue test excavations that were carried out by the Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project Site Planning and Conservation sub-component at the Gebreslassie Bariya Gabir palace enclosure at the back of The Main Stelae Field in Aksum from the 5th of June to the 15th of July 2005 yielded at least four underground rock-cut tombs 4 meters depth below modern ground surface level, dating at least to about the 3rd century AD. In the course of the excavations, a large number of classical Aksumite ware, imported pottery, glass, beads and Aksumite iron tools dating between about the 3rd and 4th centuries AD were also retrieved from the same site.

Keywords: Stelae, rock-cut, mortuary, Aksumite

Introduction

This article is partly of an abridged form of a monograph entitled 'Archaeological Rescue Excavations at Aksum, 2005-2007' written by the same Author and published by the World Bank funded Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project in 2008. The same monograph contains the results of archaeological excavations conducted at Aksum by the author who was employed as a resident archaeologist and consultant by the Italian company known as Hydea. The present article is up dated by additional data after the publication of the earlier monograph. The results of test excavations carried out at four trenches at the Dejazmach Gebreslasie palace in 2005 by the author is presented in what follows.

Location and Previous Investigation

Dejazmach Gebreslassie Bariya Gabir who was the governor and Nebure'd of Aksum in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries built his earliest palace on top of an Aksumite

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archaeological site. Wall remains on the same palace is still visible to the east of the present circular building with one floor and a rectangular building with one storey of the same governor. The earliest palace of Dejazmach Gebreslassie Bariya Gabir is located behind the Main Stelae Field on the foot hill of Betegiorgis at 469580 easting, 1562207, northing and at an altitude of 2166 m above sea level (asl). The site including all the plot of land that was proposed for the construction of the new Aksum Archaeological Museum is 2, 875.7 meters square, separated by a modern wall from the Main Stelae Field in the eastern side. On the northeastern direction, a modern wall separates it from the Church of Enda Eyesus. The site was part of the Main Stelae Field before Ras Mengesha Seyoum laid the Stelae Park and built a wall enclosure that delineated it in the 1960s. Some part of the same site was part of the Church of Enda Eyesus during the reign of Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1890). This plot of land was added to that of Gebreslassie by Prince Welete Israel in the 1940s when she built service quarter houses for her entourage to the west of the present circular and rectangular buildings.

Although many archaeologists have conducted investigation at The Main Stelae Field since the early 20th century, some of the major ones are mentioned just to give brief background information about the previous archaeological researches undertaken in the same place. The Main Stelae Field was systematically investigated for the first time by the German Research Expedition in 1906 under the direction of Enno Littman. This team made an accurate plan of the largest decorated and the non-decorated monolithic stelae including those located at the Church of Enda Eyesus (Littman et.al.1913; Phillipson 1997). The British archaeologist, the late Chittick, on behalf of the British Institute in Eastern Africa (B.I.E.A.) assisted by David Phillipson conducted large scale excavations at The Main Stelae Field in 1973-1974. Chittick and his colleagues revealed built up structures such as the Tomb of False Door, The Brick Vaulted Structure and underground rock-cut shaft tombs in The Main Stelae Field site. The Tomb of the Brick Arches and the Mausoleum were partially excavated and documented in this place by the same team. The results of these researches revealed several built up and rock- cut underground tombs indicating that The Main Stelae Field was a cemetery area and that stelae were erected as grave markers of Aksumite kings and elites (Munro-Hay 1989; Phillipson 1998). In the 1990s the British archaeologist, David Phillipson also conducted large scale excavations in The Main Stelae Field and excavated the built up tombs known as the Mausoleum and the Tomb of the Brick Arches (partially rock-cut) confirming the function of The Main Stelae Field as a cemetery place of Aksumite kings and elites at least dating between third and fourth centuries AD (Phillipson 2000). Furthermore, in 1994 and 1997 David Phillipson also determined the original location of the Second Largest Aksumite Stela that was taken to Italy in 1937 by the order of Mussolini in The Main Steale Field complex before its return and reinstallation in its original location (Phillipson 1998; 2000).

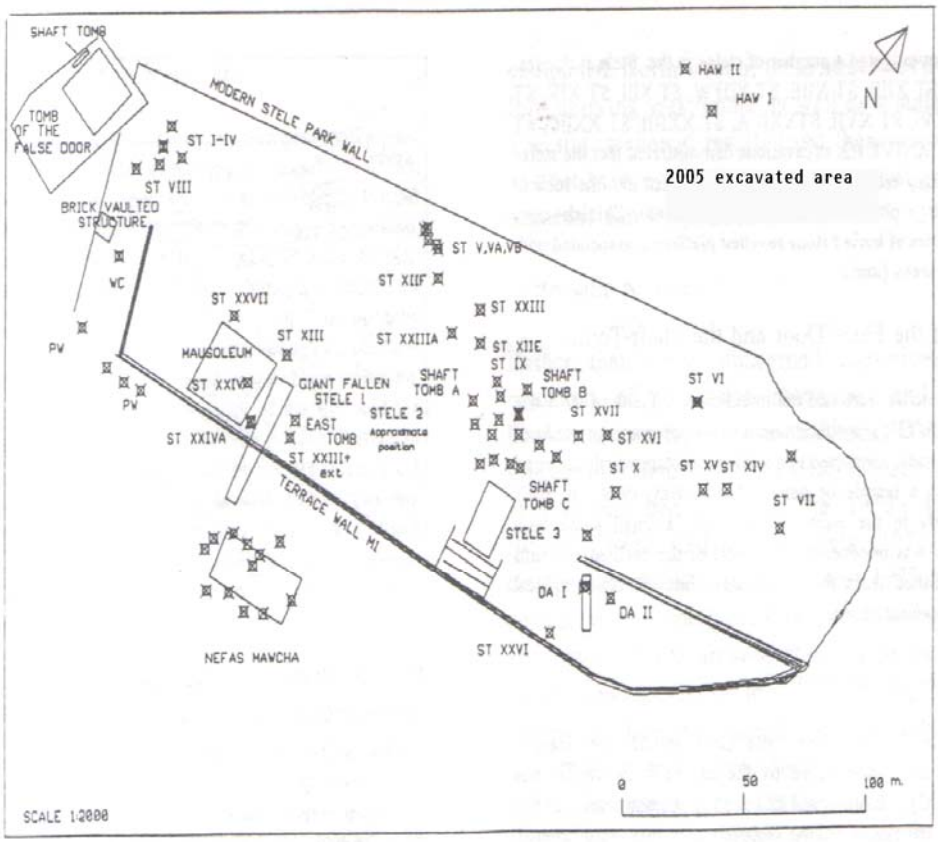

Fig.1: Plan showing the location of the excavated site and structures mentioned in the text
Source: after Munro-Hay 1989

The proposed site for the construction of the Aksum Archaeological Museum in particular was investigated by Chittick in 1973. The objective of Chittick's test excavations at the same place was to study the stratigraphy and Aksumite pottery sequences dating to the first seven centuries AD. For similar reason he excavated two L shaped trenches that measured 5 m by 1.5 m. These trenches were designated as Haw I and II. The word haw is an arbitrated Tigrigna word of hawelti for stelae. Such excavations were carried out up to 5 meters depth below modern ground surface level and revealed a large number of early and

classical Aksumite potteries that are similar in style with those of the Tomb of The Brick Arches dating to the 4th century AD.

Moreover, according to Chittick (1974) a short period of settlement was represented from the pottery excavated in the same site. Furthermore, no significant archaeological burial or residential structures were found in the site by the same researcher (Chittick 1974; Munro-Hay 1989).

Objective and Methodology of Excavations in 2005

The objectives of the test excavations carried out at the Dejazmach Gebresslassie palace in 2005 were to check the presence of significant archaeological structures where the Aksum Archaeological Museum would be built in November 2005. Moreover, such excavations were undertaken on the same site to avoid destructions of any major archaeological structures due to the construction of museum building and to rescue, document and preserve archaeological artifacts and structures from the same site.

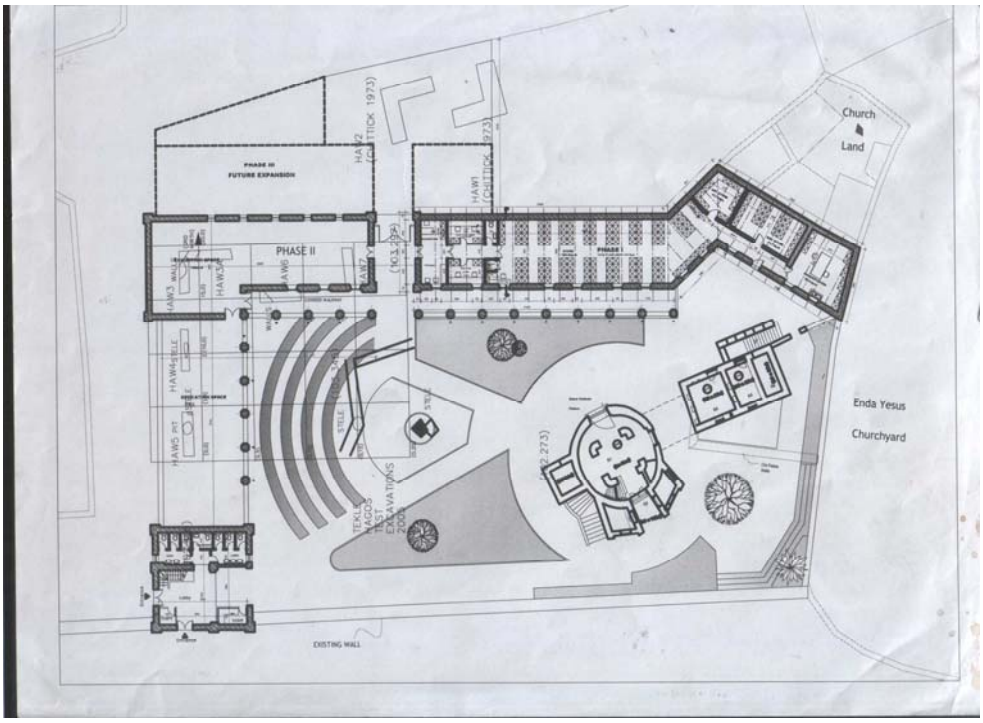

Fig.2: Plan showing the location of the excavated pits and the design of the new museum.

Grids of 5 meters were laid down from north to south and from east to west in a plot of land measuring 30 m long and 20 m wide. Six trenches, which are 4 m by 1 meter each, were opened where the Ethiopian Cultural Heritage project architects proposed to build the Aksum Archaeological Museum. These trenches were given local designation as Haw 3, 3A, 4, 5, 6, and 7. Chittick also used the same designations in 1973 in the same site. Thus, the same designation was used in the 2005 excavations to keep consistency. Twenty daily laborers were employed to clear the huge pile of modern garbage deposits accumulated for several years by the ex-residents and to demolish the modern wall that was 20 m wide and a meter high to facilitate test excavations.

An area of 24 meters square of plot of land was excavated beginning from modern ground surface level up to the maximum 5.5 depth below modern ground surface and into the bedrocks in 6 trenches. Excavations were carried out in every 0.15 m spits. For the same reason, artifacts were collected in separate bags at intervals of 0.15 m up to the natural clay soil or the bedrock. Trowels, picks, shovels, spades and brushes of different sizes were used for the same excavations. Moreover, soils were sieved as appropriate not to miss small findings such as beads. Retrieved artifacts were cleaned in site and packed in plastic bags according to their contexts. Finally, they were labeled by ball parker and stored in the new Aksum Archaeological Museum to be accessible for future research and training. In addition, the retrieved bones and other artifacts were packed and stored in the same museum for future study. Furthermore, features and sections were planned in 1: 20 scale.

Chronology of the excavated structures was established by comparison of the artifacts excavated in 2005 in the same site with those previously dated Aksumite sites such as the tombs of GT II (Gudit Stelae Field), The Tomb of the Brick Arches, Shaft Tomb, STXXIII, STXXIIIA and Brick Vaulted Structure (Main Stelae Field).

Results of the Excavations

The results of the 2005 excavations that were carried out in the most important trenches are summarized as follows.

Haw 4

Haw 4 is located 2 m to the east of the modern stone built enclosure. It measures 4 m long and 1 m wide. It was excavated up to the bedrock, 5.1 meters deep below modern ground surface level. Five layers of different soil deposits were excavated up to the decayed soft sedimentary rock.

A huge layer of modern garbage deposits accumulated over the surface for many years characterizes the top horizon. This garbage is 0.60 meter thick. No objects of archaeological interest were collected from the same deposits. A brown soil that is 0.60 m (0.60-1.20 m) thick was excavated below the garbage deposits. Aksumite pottery with classical decorations, bones and rubble fills were documented in this horizon. The rubble fill appeared at a depth of 1 m below modern ground surface level.

The third soil layer excavated at Haw 4 is light gray in color (1.20 - 2.25 m). It is characterized by stone fill deposits which is 1.05 m thick. A semi circular stone fill that measured a meter by 0.90 m was uncovered at 1.43 m depth below modern ground surface level. Below this fill, another rubble fill covering almost the whole trench was excavated. A light loose brown soil (2. 25 – 3.00 m), 0.75 m thick was excavated below the previous layer. The last and the earliest archaeological layer excavated is the yellow loose soil (3.00 m-5.10 m). A rock-cut tomb, a fallen stela, beads, iron knife, iron dagger, iron spearheads, and human teeth and pottery were excavated and retrieved below the fallen undressed stela in this archaeological horizon.

Fig.3: Photograph showing the excavated trenches of Haw 3, 4 and 5

The most interesting discovery in this trench is the uncovering of undressed or rough and semi rectangular shaped stela. It appeared at 3.70 m depth below modern ground surface level. It is 1.70 m long with a varying width of 0.20 m and 0.30 m at both ends and 0.60 m and 0.70 m in the middle. The stela and the rock-cut tomb are found at $14^{0}07'57''$N $38^{0}43''$ E at an elevation of 2150 asl.

Fig.4. A rock- cut tomb and a fallen stela excavated from Haw 4

It fell from northeast to southwestern directions in antiquity. It seems that it fell by robbers when they dug in the same trench in antiquity. In its eastern profile a robber pit was documented at 3.00 m depth below modern ground surface level.

The bronze bracelets, iron spearheads, iron knife and iron dagger discovered in the mud grave below the fallen stela and above the rock-cut tomb might have been grave goods of the servants for the elite who was probably buried in the rock-cut tomb. It appears that the stela fell on top of the grave discovered under the stela in the black clay soil. Gradually, it was covered by slop deposits that came from the hill of Betegiorgis. The accumulated slope deposit that was documented in the northern section of Haw 4 confirms that it was buried by sedimentation.

A rock-cut tomb was excavated at 4.80 m depth below modern ground surface level and 0.80 m below the fallen stela. Only the entrance of the same tomb was excavated to avoid further disturbance. This rock-cut tomb and its marker, the fallen stela have outstanding universal cultural and scientific values. For the same reasons the construction of an archaeological museum on top of it was avoided. The same tomb and its associated stela were included as part of the new museum exhibition room so that the public would see the same from above. One thousand three hundred and forty seven pottery mostly red

Aksumite wares with classical Aksumite decorations were selected from the four archaeological layers described above. In addition, about twice the same number of pottery shards mentioned above were also collected from the same trench.

Trench 4 also yielded imported potteries from 1.35-1.50 m and from 2.70-2.85 m depth below modern ground surface levels. Three fragments of imported ones, which are blue painted or plastered, were documented at 1.35- 1.50 m depth below modern ground surface level. Such fragments are mostly white in color with multiple line decoration on their exterior surface. They are decorated on their interior surface. The second type of imported pottery is a single amphora body fragment which is 5 cm by 3 cm.

Seven glass fragments that appear to be imported from the outside world possibly from the Romans were retrieved from the same trench between 1.05 and 4.65 m depth below modern ground surface levels. One glass fragment, which is colorless with red coating, was found at 1.05- 1.20 m depth below modern ground surface level. This seems to have been imported from the Romans. Another glass fragment with white coating was also retrieved from Haw 4 at 1.65 m depth below modern ground surface level. Furthermore, additional glass fragment with yellow coating was documented at 1.65- 1.80 m depth below modern ground surface level. Moreover, a glass fragment was also found in a grave context at 4.25 m depth below the fallen stela. In addition, two pieces of glass fragment with white coating and another one was discovered in grave context at 4.20- 4.35 m and 4.50- 4.65 m depth below modern ground surface level.

Four beads were also retrieved from Haw 4 beginning from 1.80 m up to 4.35 m depth below modern ground surface level. Such beads were documented at 1.80 m, 3.90 m, and 4.20 m and from 4.20 m- 4.35 m depth below modern ground surface level. The beads are round in shape with perforations. They are round, gray in color with gold inlay (10YR $^{7}/_{4}$) rectangular and diamond in shape and blue in color (10B $2.^{5}/_{1}$) with 4 perforations, two beads which are blue and gray in color were retrieved in grave context in the lower archaeological horizon at 4.20- 4.35 m depth below modern ground surface level.

Haw 4 also yielded very interesting archaeological discovery that could give us a clue about the Aksumite iron and metal technology. An iron knife broken in one end was discovered in a grave in the black clay soil under the fallen stela at 4.05- 4.20 m depth below modern ground surface level. This knife is 12 cm long and 3 cm wide. An iron dagger broken in 4 pieces was also retrieved in the same grave at 4.20 m depth under the fallen undressed stela. The overall length and width of the same dagger is 38 cm by 4 cm.

Furthermore, four iron spearheads were also found together with the dagger in the same context. Two of the complete iron spearheads measure 6 cm long while the others are 5 cm long. Moreover, four bronze bracelets were also documented in the same grave below the fallen stela together with the iron spearheads, dagger, human bone and pottery. The bracelets have a diameter of 5.50 m each. A human wrist was also found inside the bracelets. In addition, human teeth, pottery and glass were also documented together with the bronze bracelets, iron spearheads and dagger. The bones, bracelets, armaments and glass were found buried by the fallen stela in a black clay soil 0.80 m above the rock-cut tomb. A light blue metal that appears to be a medal was retrieved at 1.35-1.50 m depth below modern ground surface level. It is 2 cm by a centimeter.

Haw 4 yielded large collections of human and cattle bones and teeth. Such collection took place beginning from 1.35 m up to 4.95 m depth below modern ground surface level. Five hundred and twenty three bones and teeth of human and cattle were collected from this trench. Burned cattle bones were explored in grave contexts from 1.95 m- 2.70 m and from 4.20-4.95 m below modern ground surface levels. Furthermore, human bone fragments, tooth, skull, bone, molar, mandible, and tooth were excavated from 4.05-4.20, 4.20-4.35, 4.80-4.95, 426, 3.90 and 4.05 meters depth below modern ground surface levels, respectively.

The preceding section has outlined important discoveries that could shed a new light in Aksumite Archaeology. Consequently, it was recommend that this trench and its immediate surroundings to be protected from any cultural activities including constructions. It was agreed and decided by all to save such structures and to be included as part of the archaeological exhibition of the new museum. At present the excavated structures and some of the retrieved artifacts from Haw 4 have become part of the permanent museum display.

Haw 5

Haw 5 is found 4 m away to the south of trench 4 and is the nearest trench to the gate of the palace of Gebreslassie. It measures 4 m by a meter. It is opened from north to south direction parallel to Haw 4.

Six different soil layers were excavated in this trench up to 5.30 m depth or to the bedrock. The upper soil layer, light brown in color, is modern garbage deposit. No object of archaeological interest was collected from 0-0.90 m depth below modern ground surface level. The second soil layer is a brown loose soil with an average thickness of 0.30 m (0.90-1.20 m). Red Aksumite ware and stone rubble fills were excavated from this archaeological horizon. Furthermore, a yellowish brown soil at an average thickness of a meter (1.20-2.20 m) was excavated below the brown loose soil. Evidence of human activities such as pottery, bones and stone fill were retrieved from this layer. For instance, fragile human teeth and bones were explored in the same layer from 1.46- 1.50 m depth below modern ground surface level. It was not possible to determine the orientation of the deceased due to the decayed nature of the bones. However, it appears that the deceased rested from north to south direction or vice versa. Furthermore, this layer yielded burned animal bones, 2 beads and a single glass. A black pottery was retrieved at 1.95 m depth below modern ground surface level that suggests disturbances dating to the post Aksumite times.

A loose dark brown soil layer mixed with stone fills and bones was excavated below the above layer (2.20-3.30 m). Red Aksumite pottery and bones were documented from the same. Yellowish sediment that indicates slope deposits was also recorded in this layer at 2.70 m depth below modern ground surface level. Part of the undressed or rough and erected stela appeared in this level. The last and the earliest phase excavated in this trench is a black loose fill soil (3.30-3.90 m). This phase is very rich in red Aksumite pottery, burned cattle bones, bones, charcoal and stone fills. Almost half of the erected stela is found in this layer. The pit, which is the entrance of the rock- cut tomb, was also excavated in this layer.

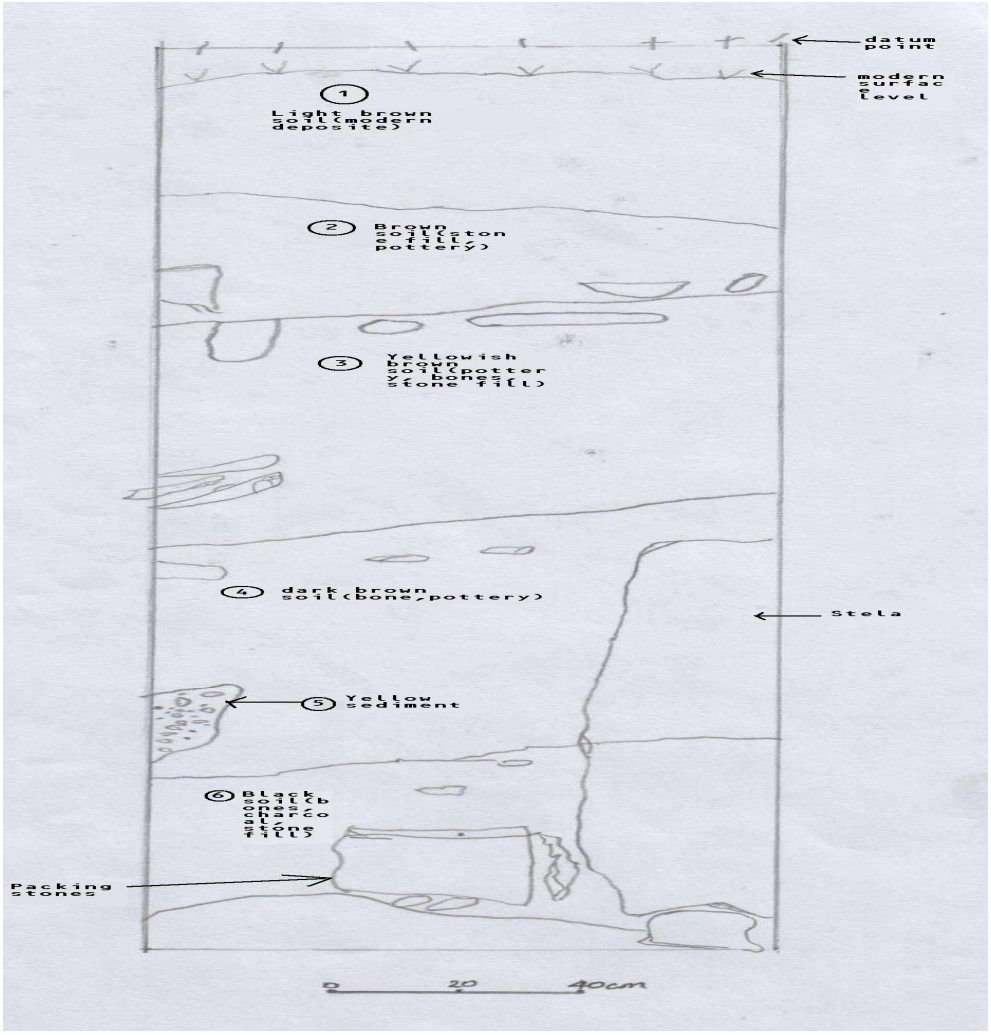

Fig.5: Northern profile of Haw 5

The multiple rock-cut tombs and the erected and fallen stelae are the most important features discovered at Haw 5. A single undressed rough semi-rectangular stela with a narrow top, which is still found insitu and erected, appeared at 2 m depth below modern ground surface level. Such a stela and a rock cut-tomb are found at 14^0 07'57" N and 38^0 43' 08" E at an altitude of 2150 asl. It was erected on top of a natural black clay soil, which

is 3.90 m deep below modern ground surface level. It stood on top of a single rough stone, which is 0.25 m by 0.20 m. Again, this packing stone is also placed on top of a natural black clay soil, which was an Aksumite surface level at the time of the erection of the stela and carving of the rock- cut tomb. Packing stones on the northern section of the trench supported this stela. It is 2 m long with a varying width of 0.45 m at the top, 0.40 m at the bottom and 0.50 m at the center.

Another undressed fallen stela was also discovered at 3.90 m depth below modern ground surface to the south of the entrance of the pit mentioned above. Most of it is found on the eastern section of the trench and therefore it was not completely exposed. Furthermore, no excavations were carried out to determine its associated grave.

Fig. 6: A stela and an associated rock-cut tomb excavated from Haw 5

A circular pit with a diameter of 1.10 m was excavated at 3.90 m depth below modern ground surface level 0.70 m to the south of the erected stela. Stones marked the edge of the same pit. Stone slabs covered it and the largest one measures 0.45 m by 0.55 m. A large number of burned cattle bones were retrieved from the top level of the pit. It was excavated vertically straight from 3.90 m up to 4.80 m depth below modern ground surface level. The diameter of this pit extends to 1.20 m at the 4.80 m depth below modern ground surface. On the same depth, the pit was excavated horizontally towards east. Then it was excavated vertically for a depth of 0.50 m and below this its diameter declines to a meter on the main entrance of the rock-cut grave. From there, the grave is entered through 3 rock-cut steps.

The first step is 0.30 m thick while the 2nd and the 3rd ones are 0.20m thick each. The main chamber of this rock-cut tomb was not excavated to avoid disturbances.

Furthermore, burned cattle bones, a single snail and Red Aksumite ware were retrieved from the upper level of this pit. Moreover, one iron disc and human teeth were also uncovered on the steps that lead to the main rock-cut grave.

On the western section of the upper level of the pit, rock-cut mark that indicates another rock-cut tomb was observed in the same trench. It appears therefore, the erected stela may have been grave marker of these multiple tombs.

The erected and fallen stelae and their associated underground graves with their contents have outstanding universal cultural and scientific values and may tell us about the culture, technology and chronology of the early Aksumite civilization. For the same reason, it was recommended not to carry out any construction on top of this trench and in its immediate surroundings. It was agreed and decided by all to save the rock-cut tombs and the stela to be included as part of archaeological exhibition in the new Aksum Archaeological Museum and became part of the permanent exhibition of the same.

Haw 5 yielded rich pottery collections. From such a large number of collections only 1,515 were selected as culturally and scientifically significant from the four archaeological layers beginning from 0.90 to 3 m deep or up to the decayed sedimentary bedrock. Red Aksumite potteries with classical decorations dominate such collection. Furthermore, nine imported pottery shards were retrieved beginning from 1.50 up to 3.15 m depth below modern ground surface level. Most of them are white in color with blue paintings on their internal surface. Five imported glass fragments were also uncovered from this trench at 1.50 m and 1.71 m meters depth below modern ground surface level. Two fragments have black coating while the other two are yellow in color and decorated. The other fragment is diamond shaped, blue in color with yellow coating. Although this glass has no perforation, it may have been intended for ornamentation on the neck.

Three corroded iron fragments were also explored in grave context from 3.90 up to 5.10 meters depth below modern ground surface level. A single iron nail fragment, which is red in color, 0.20 m by 0.30 m in size was retrieved from a grave from 3.90- 4.05 m depth below modern ground surface level. Another iron nail fragment was also uncovered from a grave from 4.95- 5.10 m depth below modern ground surface level. It is corroded and broken in both ends and measures 2.50 m long. Furthermore, an iron disc was also found from the same grave in the same depth as mentioned above. It is almost complete and with a single broken small fragment. Its diameter is 0.11 m. It appears that such a discovery in Aksumite grave is the first of its kind in an Aksumite context and seems to indicate the beliefs of the pre-Christian early Aksumites.

Four beads were excavated in Haw 5 at 1.50 m, 3.30 m and 3.90 m depth below modern ground surface level. They are round blue gray (10YB $^{6}/_{1}$), round gray glass (10YR$^{7}/_{4}$) were documented on the upper level. A grayish green bead (SG $^{6}/_{6}$) with 4 perforations and a groove in its center was excavated at 3.30 m depth below modern ground surface level. This type of bead appears to be the first so far in Aksumite context. Furthermore, an ellipsoid Carnelian bead (10YR $^{5}/_{8}$) was found on the top level of the pit that leads to the rock-cut grave.

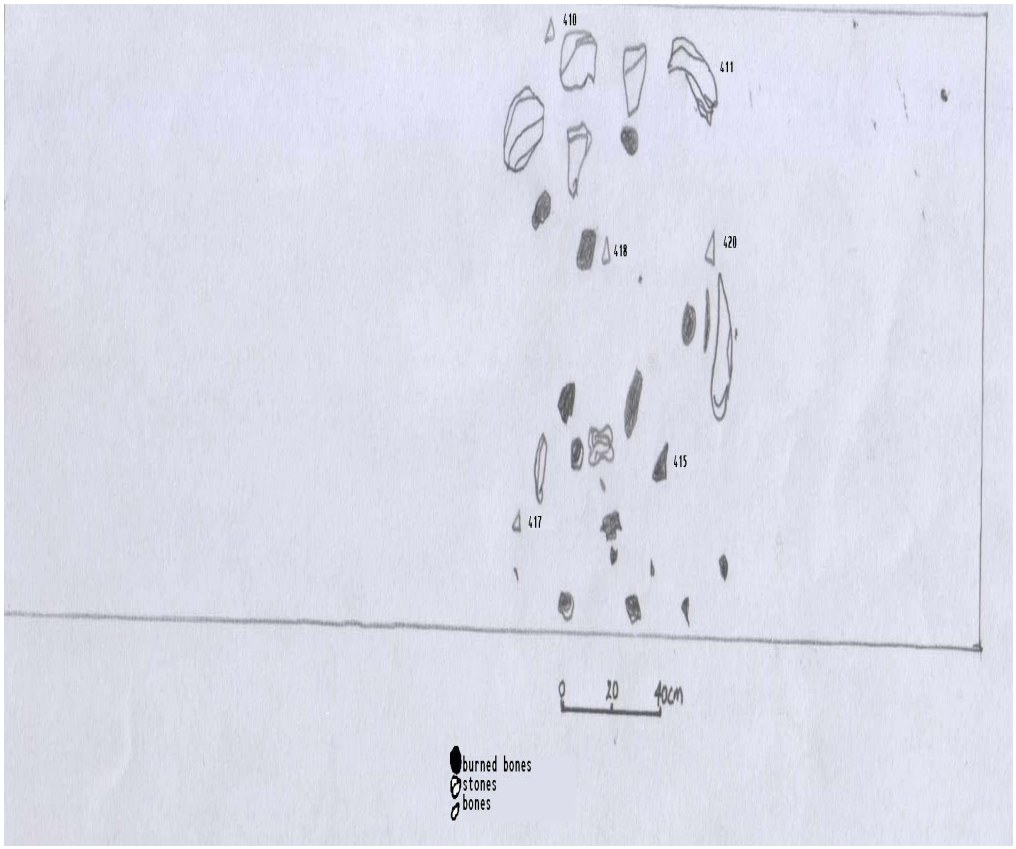

Fig.7: Plan showing burned bones in a tomb at Haw 5 (405-420)

Four hundred and nineteen cattle and human bones and teeth were uncovered beginning from 1.20 m up to 5.25 m depth below modern ground surface level. Moreover, human bones and teeth were uncovered at 1.46 m, 1.50-1.65 m, 2.25-2.40 m, 3.00-3.15 m, 3.60-3.75 m and 4.95-5.10 m depth below modern ground surface level. Human teeth, skull and 10 long bones were found at 1.46 m depth below modern ground surface level. The deceased rested on a black clay soil. This grave appears to date to the post Aksumite times.

Burned cattle bones were also excavated from the different levels in this trench. They were discovered at 1.46 m, 2.55-2.70 m, 3.75-3.90 m, 4.05-4.20 m and 4.20-4.35 m depth below modern ground surface levels. This evidence shows that burning of bones was the customary burial ritual practice of the pre- Christian early Aksumite population.

A single snail was excavated at 3.75- 3.90 m depth below modern ground surface level in the upper level of the pit leading to the rock-cut tomb. Such evidence may give a clue for further investigation about heavy rainfall episode in early Aksumite times.

The foregoing section has outlined significant discoveries from Haw 5 with particular emphasis to the erected stela, the rock-cut tombs and the grave goods. These discoveries will help to broaden our understanding of the early Aksumite civilization. The unexcavated rock-tombs and other features of the trench have outstanding universal scientific and cultural values and need proper protection from further man made destructions. It was agreed that the material evidences discovered through this excavation to be exhibited *in-situ* as live archaeological display in the Aksum Archaeological Museum. Some of the artifacts and the stelae are exhibited at the same museum already.

Haw 6

The other trench opened by the archaeologists, Haw 6 trench, is found to the east of Haw 4. Several layers were excavated in this trench. The top horizon, which is between 0.60 m and 0.80 m thick, is modern garbage deposits. A thin layer of light brown loose soil was excavated below the modern garbage deposits. This layer yielded pottery and stone fills. A thin black soil layer that yielded stone fill was also excavated below the second layer.

A relatively modern wall 0.79 m deep below modern ground surface level was found below the modern garbage deposits at the western edge of the trench. Its visible length is 1.10 m and 0.90 m thick. It extends towards the northern and western sides of the sections of the same trench. It has neither archaeological nor architectural significance.

Human bones were found at different depth from 1.10 m to 2.25 m below modern ground surface level. Such evidence suggests that this site was used continuously as a cemetery for many years up to a relatively recent past. A human grave, marked by stone piles, was excavated at 1.10 m meters depth below modern ground surface level. Under these mortuary stones, human skeletons were retrieved in the loose yellow soil. The skull and bones were decayed due to the acidic nature of the soil. As a result, it was not possible to determine the orientation of the deceased. A human grave, marked by stone fills, was also excavated at 2.70 m depth below modern ground surface level. A loose yellowish soil was excavated below the mortuary stones. Two human teeth, 1 metal fragment, 2 beads, burned bones and red Aksumite pottery were retrieved from this pit grave.

The most interesting discovery in this trench is the excavation of a grave and its associated pottery at the depth of 3 m below modern ground surface level. The human skull was found lying on stone pillow on the black clay soil facing to northwest direction. Two complete potteries were also found together with the human skeletons and skull. The legs, arms and hipbones were found together. The absence of luxurious items and the simplistic nature of its construction seem to indicate an ordinary Aksumite grave.

An Aksumite grave, which was marked by pile of stones, was excavated in the loose brown soil at 4.25 m depth below modern ground surface level. It is found at $14^{0}07'\ 96''$ N, $38^{0}\ 43'\ 13''$ E and at an altitude of 2150 m asl. Such stone fills are not compact and have open spaces. Fragments of human skull and decorated Red Aksumite pottery were uncovered in this grave. A circular stone fill structure that mark a human grave was

excavated on the eastern section of this trench at 4.35 m depth below modern ground surface level. This pit was excavated up to 4.80 m depth below modern ground surface level. Red Aksumite pottery with classical decorations, beads, glasses, iron fragments together with human bones and skull were uncovered from this grave. A structure that marks a rock-cut tomb was discovered at 4.80 m deep below modern ground surface level. This structure is surrounded by yellow sedimentary soft bedrock. Burned cattle bones were explored in this depth, which probably indicates the pre-Christian early Aksumite ritual practice of the deceased.

Excavations continued into the bedrock up to 5.50 meters depth below modern ground surface level and multiple rock- cut tombs were documented in this trench. An arch shaped rock-cut tomb was excavated in the southern section of the trench in the same level. This tomb extends towards the direction of The Main Stelae Field. Beside this tomb, the brown loose soil continued down vertically indicating the presence of another rock-cut tomb in this trench. Furthermore, the loose brown soil was also extending in the eastern section suggesting the presence of an additional rock-cut tomb. Moreover, a pit marked by pile of stones was also explored on the same level on the northern section of the trench, which suggests that the tombs were robbed in the distant past. The human teeth found scattered in different parts of the entrance of the rock-cut tomb suggests its disturbance. Furthermore, beads, obsidian scraper, glass and Red Aksumite pottery were also found on the top level of this rock- cut tomb. Excavation terminated at 5.50 meters deep below modern ground surface level where arch shaped rock-cut tombs were excavated. These tombs were left as they were originally sealed to avoid further destruction.

The rock-cut tombs and their grave goods discovered at Haw 6 have outstanding universal cultural and scientific values. Consequently, it was recommended not to carry out construction on top of this site and its immediate surroundings. Finally, it was agreed to avoid constructions on top of this trench and the new museum was constructed outside of the same.

Haw 6 also yielded very rich collection of Aksumite artifacts and ecofacts such as pottery, bones, beads, glasses and metals. A large number of pottery fragments were retrieved from this trench. However, only 1,152 fragments including decorations, bases, handles, necklaces and rims were selected. Collection of pottery was undertaken from 0.60 m up to 5.50 m depth below modern ground surface level. No imported pottery fragments were uncovered from this trench. Only one light blue glass fragment was discovered in a grave context at 4.50-4.65 m depth below modern ground surface level.

This trench also yielded five fragments of metals in its lower levels. A blue metal fragment (bronze), which is broken, 1.50 cm long, was retrieved in a grave context at 3.00-3.15 m depth below modern ground surface level. Furthermore, two iron and a blue metal fragments were uncovered in a grave context at 4.80-4.95 m depth below modern ground surface level. In addition, a single iron nail fragment, broken at both ends and 1.30 cm long was also found in a grave context at 4.95-5.10 m depth below modern ground surface level.

The second largest beads collection came from trench 6. Nine beads were collected from the different levels of the same trench. A single round stone bead 2 cm long, $10YR^{5}/_{1}$ in color was discovered in the upper level (60-75 cm) depth below modern ground surface level. The rest of the beads came from the lowest levels of the same trench in grave context

from 4.80- 5.95 m depth below modern ground surface level. These beads consist of one large and another small ellipsoid stone bead. The largest one is grayish green in color SG $^{3}/_{2}$ and the smallest one has similar color SG $^{4}/_{2}$. An ellipsoid stone bead which is grayish green in color (SG $^{4}/_{2}$) and two glass beads pale, green in color (N $^{6}/_{2}$), were also retrieved from 4.95-5.10 m depth below modern ground surface level. Furthermore, one round glass bead pale green (N $^{6}/_{2}$), one elongated ellipsoid stone bead grayish green ((SG $^{4}/_{2}$) and a round Carnelian bead (10YR $^{5}/_{6}$) were discovered in a grave context from 5.10-5.25 m depth below modern ground surface level. An obsidian tool flake was also uncovered in a grave context at 4.35-4.50 m depth below modern ground surface level in the same trench.

Haw 6 also yielded rich collections of cattle and human bones and teeth beginning from 0.95 up to 5.25 m depth below modern ground surface level. Two hundred and forty two cattle and human bones were retrieved from different levels of the same trench mentioned above. Only human bones and teeth were documented from the upper levels (0.95 m up to 2.40 m depth below modern ground surface level). This suggests that this site was used as a cemetery continuously up to the recent past. No human bones were retrieved from 2.40-3.00 m depth below modern ground surface level. On the other hand, burned cattle bones were discovered in the earliest levels of the same trench in a grave context from 4.80-4.95 m, 5.10-5.25 m and 5.35 - 5.50 m depth blow modern ground surface levels. This evidence may suggest that burning of cattle or cattle bones was customary burial practices of the pre-Christian early Aksumites. Moreover, the decayed human teeth discovered in a grave context at 5.10 m-5.25 m depth below modern ground surface level may give us a hint for further inquiry about the chronic teeth disease of the Aksumite population.

The findings summarized above show the rich artifacts and features in Haw 6 that have significant scientific and cultural values of the early Aksumite civilization. Construction of a museum on top of this trench was avoided to save the archaeological evidence discussed above.

Haw 7

The last trench excavated in this site is Haw 7. It is located to the east of Haw 6. It was opened in an east west direction and measures 4 m long and a meter wide. Six different layers were excavated beginning from modern surface level up to 4.95 m depth into the soft sedimentary bedrock. No object of archaeological interest was collected in the upper level up to 0.60 m depth below modern ground surface level.

A human grave marked by stone covered pit was excavated in the middle of the trench at 2.10 m depth below modern ground surface level. The mandible was found in the edge of the trench while the skull and the maxilla were retrieved in the center of the same trench. It was not possible to determine the orientation of the body due to the disturbance and decayed nature of the bones. It appears to be a Christian grave. Pottery fragment of modern *mitad* was retrieved from this grave indicating its late antiquity. A light gray loose soil was excavated below the grave. A Christian grave of two individuals was excavated from 2.10-2.25 m depth below modern ground surface level. The bones are placed on a black clay soil from west to east direction.

A hearth was excavated at 2.90 m depth below modern ground surface level in the northern side of the trench. A large sized flat stone is placed on top of two stones similar to traditional hearth. On top of this feature, burned cattle bones and charcoal were documented. It appears that several cattle bones were burned in this spot for the deceased as a common ritual practice of pre-Christian Aksumites.

A yellow loose soil was excavated below this feature. A human mandible was uncovered at 3.30 m depth below modern ground surface level. A mortuary stone slab was discovered on the edge of the trench under the mandible. A large number of different beads, a single human tooth, metals and pottery were retrieved in the loose brown soil in the center of the trench from 4.05- 4.20 m depth below modern ground surface level. This grave is marked by stones. It measures 0.90 m by 0.35 m. It appears that such a grave might have been robbed in the past as a large robber pit was documented in its eastern section.

A rock-cut tomb was discovered at 4.80 m depth below modern ground surface level. It is found $14^0$07' 96" N, 38^0 43' 14" E and at an altitude of 2150 m asl. It is carved from a soft sedimentary rock. It is covered by several stones. Its entrance measures 1.05 m by 0.70 m. The main grave extends towards west to Haw 6. It was left as originally sealed to avoid further destruction. This rock cut-grave and its contents have outstanding universal cultural and scientific values. It was recommended not to carry out museum construction on top of this trench and its immediate surroundings.

Trench 7 has also yielded large number of pottery collection of which only 2,085 were selected as scientifically and culturally significant ones. Collections were undertaken from 0.60-4.95 m depth below modern ground surface levels. Such pottery selections are dominated by Red Aksumite ware with classical decorations. They are similar in type and style with those described by Wilding Munro-Hay (1989) and Phillips (2000).

Four glass fragments were retrieved from grave contexts in Haw 7. Three glass fragments that are white, yellow and yellow coated were uncovered from a grave context at 4.05-4.20 m depth below modern ground surface level. In addition, a light brown glass fragment was also discovered in the rock-cut tomb at 4.80-4.95 m depth below modern ground surface level.

The largest beads' collection in this site came from Haw 7. Seventeen glass and stone beads that are round, ellipsoid, diamond and ring shaped were uncovered from different levels in this trench beginning from 2.70 m to 5.10 m depth below modern ground surface level. They are blue, green and gray (10YR $^4/_6$ 10YR $^7/_4$, 10YR2.$^5/_1$) in color. They were excavated in the yellow soil in disturbed context in a robber pit in the upper level of the rock-cut tomb.

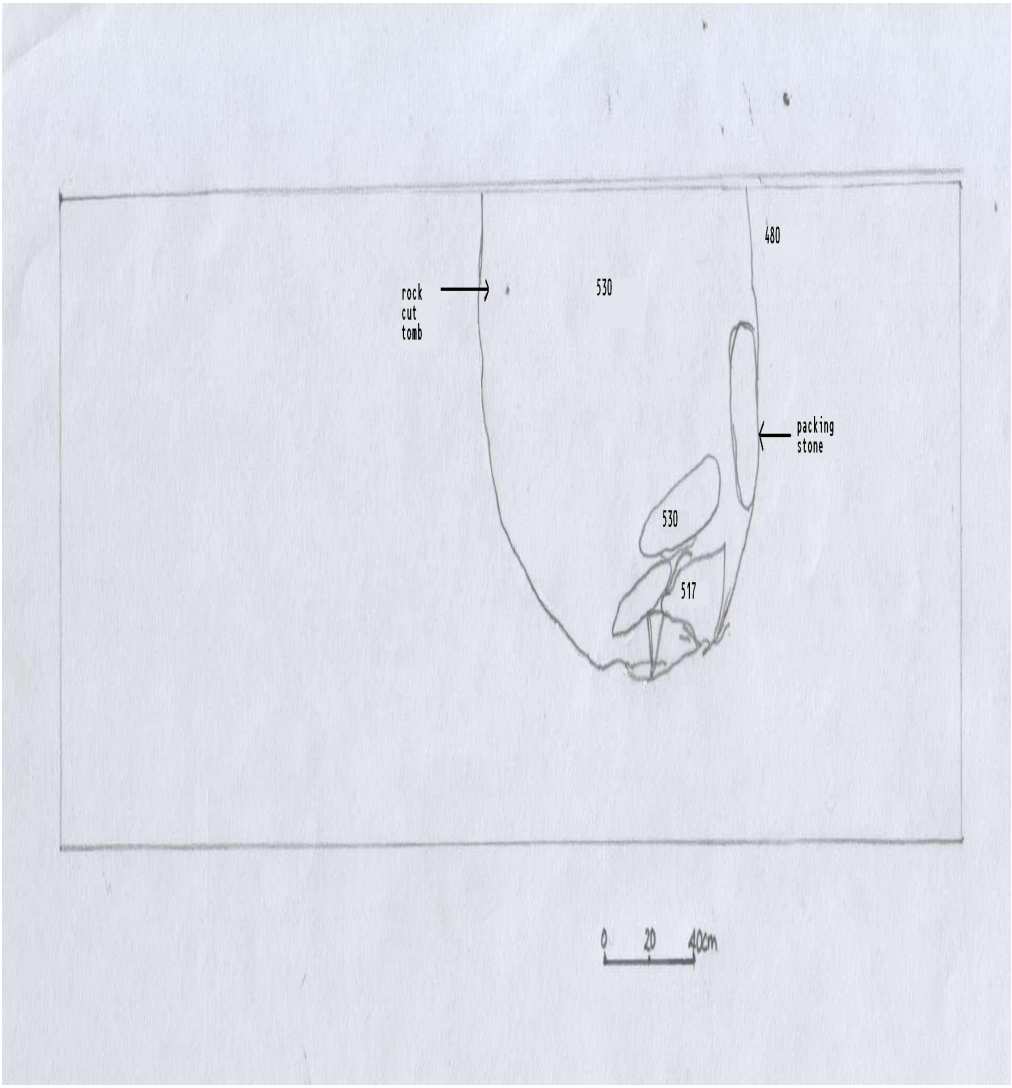

Fig.8. Plan showing an entrance to a rock-cut tomb in Haw 7(480-530)

Haw 7 yielded the richest metal collection from all the haw trenches excavated in 2005. Artifacts were collected beginning from 1.95 m up to 4.20 m depth below modern ground surface level. Nine metal fragments came from this trench and seventeen fragments

were collected from the four trenches. Two blue metal fragments were collected from 1.95-2.10 m depth below modern ground surface level. Moreover, two thin fragments of a single bracelet were also uncovered from 2.55-2.70 m depth below modern ground surface level. The rest five are iron fragments discovered in the lowest levels of Haw 7, 3 m depth below modern ground surface level. These fragments are an iron knife (4x1cm), two flat irons (6x3 cm, 3.5x 2.5 cm), an iron nail fragment (2 cm long) and an iron knife fragment (3 m long). Two small sized quartz scrapers were also found in a disturbed grave at the lowest level of the same trench at 4.05-4.20 m depth below modern ground surface level.

A large number of bone collections came from Haw 7. Six hundred and sixty one cattle and human bones were retrieved from the different levels of the same trench beginning from 0.60 m up to 4.65 m depth below modern ground surface level. Only cattle bones were found from the upper levels from 0.60 m up to 1.80 m depth below modern ground surface level. The same bones were also collected up to the bedrock. On the other hand, human bones were found at the lower levels starting from 1.80 m up to 4.65 m depth below modern ground surface level. The human teeth retrieved from the lowest level of this trench are decayed and suggest the possibility that early Aksumites had suffered from chronic teeth disease. Burned cattle bones were also retrieved at the Aksumite levels below 3 m depth below modern ground surface level. Such bones were discovered at 3.15-3.30, 3.90-4.05, 4.05-4.20 and 4.50- 4.65 m deep below modern ground surface level.

This site is very informative about the early Aksumite civilization particularly the pre-Christian Aksumite customary burial practices. It therefore needs protection from further construction activities.

Stelae Clearance

Archaeological clearances were also conducted at the Gebreslassie Palace enclosure to expose some of the visible buried stelae in middle July 2005. Accordingly, four stelae designated as A, B, C and D were cleared and exposed for future public display. Some of them were erected in the museum compound in 2008 and became part of the exhibition of the same museum.

Stela A

The first stela exposed is named as stela A. It is slab shaped and unfinished and the nearest to the main gate of the museum. It is found 6 m to the south of the proposed future museum location. It is located at 14^0 07' 58" N, 38^0 43' 09" E and at 2151m asl.

Before excavations, its base was only visible on the surface. Small test excavations were carried out to determine its size. It was completely exposed by the same excavator. The largest fragment of the same stela is 5 m long and has a varying width of 0.12 m, 0.60 m and 0.90 m from its top up to the bottom, respectively. Its top is unfinished and not well carved. It was intended as a pointed end. There are two wedge marks at its bottom. It is smooth, dressed, and made from granite boulders similar to those of the largest decorated

Aksumite stelae. It fell from south to north direction. Another broken stela is visible on top of the surface level 3 m to the north east of this stela. It is 1.10 m wide and long at its both ends. This fragment is part of the first fragment discussed earlier. Its overall length is therefore, 6.10 m. Both fragments were re-erected around their original location in 2008.
This smooth, dressed stela seems to represent the second stage in the evolution of the Aksumite stelae. It appears that this stela was erected by the Aksumites as grave marker. For the same reason, it is assumed that there is an associated grave in its immediate surroundings.

Fig.9: Stela A and its fragment erected after clearance

Stela B

The second stela cleared in the same site is designated as stela B. It is located at 14^0 07' 57" N, 38^0 43' 09" E and at 2151 m asl north of the rectangular building of Dejazmach Gebreslassie; house closer to the church of Enda Eyesus and to the north east of the proposed construction of museum store location. It was found buried in the same site in

2005. It was completely exposed by the same excavator. It is round in shape and carved from granite rock similar to those of the majority of the Aksumite stelae. It measures 5.50 m long and 0.90 m wide. It is dressed and smooth. It fell from northeast to southeast. Its bottom is found very close to the proposed store of Aksum Archaeological Museum. It was recommended to avoid store construction in its immediate surroundings. For the same reason, construction of the new Aksum Archaeological Museum store was avoided in and around this stela to protect the possible Aksumite underground tombs associated to the same stela.

Stela C

The third stela cleared in 2005 in the same site by Tekle Hagos, is stela C. It is found at 14^0 07' 57" N, 38^0 43' 09" E and at 2150 m asl and 2 m away to the west of the circular house of Gebreslassie. Before, excavations its top was only visible on the surface. Excavations were undertaken to expose and display it. It was not completely exposed as it went down vertically deep into the archaeological section. Its visible length is 3.10 m and has a varying width of 0.50 m and 0.95 m. It is cylindrical and rough. It seems to represent the earliest Aksumite types of stelae in morphology and is similar to some of those found in the Gudit Stelae Field and Betegiorgis hill at Ona Enda Aboy Zewge. It fell from west to east in antiquity. This stela may have been the earliest grave mark of the early Aksumites. It was strongly recommended that undertaking constructions in the immediate surroundings of the same stela would destroy the earliest Akusmite archaeological evidence. For this reason, this place was left free of construction to save the archaeological evidence. It was re-erected around its original position in 2008 by the local authorities.

Stela D

The last stela cleared in the same year is designated as Stela D and is found at 14^0 07' 57" N, 38^0 43' 08" E and at 2151m asl, 5 m to the north of Stela C and 6 m to the east of the proposed location of the Aksum Archaeological Museum. Before excavations, its top was only visible on the surface. Excavations were undertaken to clear it completely. However, it was not completely exposed as it went down vertically deep into the archaeological section. Its visible length is 1.60 m. It is undressed or rough stone and appears to be the earliest Aksumite stela. It fell from bottom to top in an east west direction. It is also a marker of an early Aksumite grave and should be protected from further cultural activities. It was re-erected around its original position in 2008 by the local authorities.

The outgoing section have shown that the proposed site for the construction of the Aksum Archaeological Museum is an extension of The Main Stelae Field representing the first and second stages in morphological evolution of the Aksumite stelae. This site encompasses the rough or simple and the rectangular smooth or the round smooth Aksumite stelae. Such a material culture shows the earliest local manifestation of an indigenous Aksumite civilization. For similar reasons, such a site should be protected as an extension of The Main Stelae Field.

Chronology

The test excavations carried out at the Gebreslassie palace enclosure in 2005 yielded a large number of artifacts that can be dated by comparison with those previously dated Aksumite sites. A large number of red ware with typical classical Aksumite decorations were retrieved in the earliest or lowest levels of Haw 4, 5, 6 and 7. Such potteries are similar with those excavated at other Aksumite sites such as Haw I and II and the Tomb of The Brick Arches described by Wilding (1989) and Phillips (2000). The classical Aksumite potteries are mainly known from the 4th century AD contexts. The earliest classical Aksumite pottery decorations appeared at the Gudit Stelae Field tomb at GT II (Phillipson 2000). Chittick dated this tomb to the 3rdcentury AD by radiocarbon and typology of glassware (Munro-Hay 1989). This date is also confirmed by a calibrated radio carbon dating of a tomb from the G2 trench of the same stelae field (Phillipson 2000). It follows that the excavated tombs and stelae from the Gebreslassie palace dates at least to about the 3rd century AD.

Moreover, iron tools and weapons that can be dated by comparison with other Aksumite sites were also retrieved in grave contexts in the earliest levels of Haw 4, 5, 6 and 7. An iron knife, iron dagger and iron spearheads were found in a grave context in the lowest level of Haw 4. Similar iron spearheads were retrieved from the Gudit Stelae Field tomb GT II (10) dating to the 3rd century AD by Chittick in the early 1970s (Munro-Hay, 1989). Furthermore, iron knives dating to the same century were documented from the Gudit Stelae Field tomb GT II (10), STXXIII and STXXIIIA (Phillipson 2000; Munro-Hay 1989).

Irons nail and iron knife fragments were retrieved from grave contexts in the lowest levels of Haw 5, 6 and 7. Similar iron nail and other iron fragments dating to the 3rd century AD were found at the Gudit Stelae Field GT II (11) tomb, STXXIII, STXXIIIA and the Shaft Tomb were excavated by Chittick in the early 1970s. It follows that the rock-cut tombs in Haw 5, 6 and 7 can be dated by comparison to the same period (Munro-Hay, 1989). Moreover, ellipsoid and round Carnelian beads 10YR 5/8 in color were discovered from grave context in the lowest levels of Haw 5 and 6. Similar beads dating to the 3rd century AD were uncovered from the GT II (11) tomb of the Gudit Stelae Field (Munro-Hay, 1989). Furthermore, a ring shaped glass bead with large perforation similar to those of the GT II tomb was also found in a grave context in the earliest level of Haw 7. Such evidence indicates that the excavated graves and stelae from the haw site are datable to about the 3rd century AD.

No coins were excavated in all the haw trenches in 2005. This suggests that the rock - cut tombs excavated at Haw 4, 5, 6 and 7 pre-date the mintage of coins in about AD 270. Furthermore, Aksumite bricks that are common in the 4th century AD tombs of The Brick Arches (Phillipson 2000; Munro-Hay 1989)), Mausoleum (Phillipson 2000) and Brick Vaulted Structures (Munro-Hay 1989) were not retrieved in all the trenches at the Dejazmach Gebreslassie palace enclosure suggests that the rock-cut tombs and their contents mentioned above date prior to the 4th century AD.

The stelae excavated from the same site can be dated by the typology of the Aksumite stelae. Scholars such as Bent (1896), Phillipson (2000) and Munro-Hay (1989) suggested

that the Aksumite stelae evolved beginning from simple undressed stones to the sophisticated largest decorated ones. The earliest Aksumite stelae, which are simple and undressed ones are found at the Gudit Stlelae Field and date to at least to the 3rd century AD. Chittick excavated similar three buried rough erected stelae at the back of The Main Stelae Field in early 1970s. For similar reason this scholar suggested that such stelae were the earliest specialized local manifestation of the Aksumites and that there are likely to be many others at the back of The Main Stelae Field. This proposal was confirmed by the test excavations carried-out at the Gebreslassie Palace enclosure in 2005. One erected undressed and many other undressed or rough ones were found in the deeper levels of the haw trenches and on surface levels. It appears that the stelae excavated in 1970s and 2005 at the back of The Main Stelae Field were buried by slop deposits and pre-date the mintage of coins in about 270 AD (Munro-Hay 1989).

Fig.10: The new Archaeology Museum at Axum

The rock-cut tombs and stelae excavated from the haw trenches can also be dated to the 3rd century AD by comparison of the environmental history of Aksum. Various researchers such as Monneret De Vilard (1938), Butzer (1981) and Zigert (2000) documented slope deposits of sedimentation that indicate a heavy rainfall episode at early Aksumite time between 100-350 AD (Tekle Hagos 2005). The undressed erected and fallen stelae excavated from the same site seem to be contemporary to this heavy rainfall episode. Furthermore, a single snail retrieved in grave context and the yellowish sediment deposits in the earliest levels of Haw 5 at 3.9 m depth below modern ground surface level may

support the proposal that the same rock-cut tombs were made at about the third century AD during a heavy rainfall episode (Bard *et.al* 1997).

The above discussions have synthesized the available comparative evidence for the chronology of the excavated structures at the Dejazmach Gebreslassie palace enclosure. The available evidence tends to favor the dating of the rock-cut tombs and rough or undressed stelae of the same site prior to the mintage of coins to about the 3rd century AD.

Conclusion

The excavated haw trenches yielded large number of pottery fragments of which 6,198 fragments were selected as scientifically and culturally significant. The local Aksumite wares are handmade and are very informative particularly about the early Aksumite technology and other social, political and economic aspects of the Aksumite population. Furthermore, the thirteen-imported pottery fragments retrieved in most of the trenches indicates Aksumite commercial and political connections with the outside world especially with Asian and Mediterranean countries in early Aksumite times. Moreover, the fourteen glass fragments discovered from the haw trenches, which are probably imported from the outside world particularly from the Romans, show also the earliest Aksumite foreign connection. Such imports among others indicate the luxurious status of the Aksumite elites in early Aksumite times.

Furthermore, the seventeen metals including iron fragments uncovered in the haw trenches at the Gebreslassie palace enclosure tell us about the sophisticated nature of metal technology of the early Aksumites. Such findings also tell us that the early Aksumites had skilled social groups who specialized in the workings of metals. In addition, such evidence provides more information about the types of ornamentation, weapons and tools used for construction by the early Aksumite population.

Fourteen stone and glass beads retrieved in most of the haw trenches in the same site among others show early Aksumite foreign connection, nature of their ornamentation and their belief after death. The large number of human bones discovered at different levels of the haw trenches show that this site was used as cemetery area since early Aksumite times up to the very recent past. Furthermore, the decayed and blackened human teeth retrieved at the lowest levels in the different how trenches give us a possible clue about the chronic teeth disease of the early Aksumites. For similar reasons, this site has a great potential to study the history of the diseases of the early Aksumite population. The excavations of 2005 in the same site show that burning of cattle bones was the common customary burial practices of the pre-Christian Aksumite population. The lowest levels of all the excavated trenches yielded burned cattle bones indicating that such bones were burned as ritual practice on top of the graves of the deceased. The same site also yielded an ordinary Aksumite grave accompanied only by two ordinary non-decorated potteries with the deceased that rested on stones pillow.

The excavation of the 2005 confirmed that the Aksumite stelae were erected as grave markers. Rock-cut tombs were excavated beside stelae in the deepest levels of Haw 4 and 5. The site under discussion represents the earliest Aksumite rough or simple stelae, which

are the first local manifestation of an indigenous Aksumite civilization followed by the dressed smooth round or slab shaped stelae which represent the second stage of the evolution of the Aksumite stelae. It appears that the earliest Aksumite elite cemetery began at the proposed site for the construction of the Aksum Archaeological Museum and gradually extended to The Main Stelae Field. This proposal is confirmed by the absence of bricks and built up burial structures at the Gebresslassie palace. Bricks and built up burial structures are common features of the excavated structures at The Main Stelae Field which are absent in the Gebreslassie palace. The Gebreslassie site preserves a large number of dressed and undressed stelae and their associated graves that have great potential for future researches particularly those rock-cut tombs explored and left sealed in their original contexts in 2005.

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