

## ■ ETHIOPIA

### The I.U.O./B.U. Excavation at Bieta Giyorgis (Aksum): An Interim Report

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The third season of archaeological fieldwork was conducted at Bieta Giyorgis (Aksum) by the Istituto Universitario Orientale/Boston University expedition from 19 May to 16 June 1995, under the direction of Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathryn A. Bard. Excavations were undertaken at the sites of Ona Enda Aboi Zewgè and Ona Nagast on the top of the Bieta Giyorgis Hill to the northwest of Aksum. Members of the expedition were: Livio Crescenzi (Ministry of Culture, Rome), surface surveyor; Michael C. Di Blasi (Boston University), archaeologist; Julie Hansen (Boston University), palaeoethnobotanist; Andrea Manzo (I.U.O.), archaeologist; Caroline Negussiè (Uppsala University), archaeologist and osteologist; Cinzia Perlingieri (I.U.O.), ceramic analyst and illustrator; Donatella Usai (I.U.O.), archaeologist and lithic analyst. The Center for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage, Addis Ababa, was represented by Ato Tafesse G/Egziabher. The Regional Office of Culture, Makalle, Tigray, was represented by Ato Afworki Tiumay and Ato G/Kidan W/Hawariat. The Aksum Office of Culture was represented by Ato Girmay Elias. Five students from Makalle and four students from Aksum participated in the fieldwork for elementary training in excavation procedure. Mr. Akinwuoni Ogundiran of Boston University conducted a preliminary reconnaissance survey of Bieta Giyorgis Hill in conjunction with this project.

### Ona Enda Aboi Zewgè

Archaeological investigation of this site began in 1993 and continued in 1994. In 1995 three excavation units (OAZ IV, OAZ V, OAZ VI), 10 x 10 m in area, were opened in the northern, central and southwestern sectors of the site.

OAZ IV. Excavation unit OAZ IV was opened around an isolated fallen stele in the northern sector of the site. The stele was roughly hewn, and 2.3 m in length, but missing its top. Excavation revealed a rough stone structure in a pit associated with the stele, but no other features were found. Very few eroded sherds were recovered from this structure, and therefore it is of uncertain date. The evidence of this stele raises the problem of different purpose than funerary.

OAZ V. Excavation Unit OAZ V was opened in the southwest sector of the site in the area of four large fallen stelae. Three of these stelae were carefully hewn, round-topped stele (5.40, 5 and 8 m in length). A fourth unfinished stele (6.9 m in length) was located immediately to the north of the excavation unit. Most likely this fourth stele was never erected. Excavations revealed that the three other large stele were erected in a well constructed stone platform. Ceramics excavated on the surface of this platform demonstrated that this area was reused as a settlement in Late Aksumite and/or Post-Aksumite times (ca. 8th/9th to 13th/14th centuries A.D.). A great quantity of animal bones were associated with this late occupation phase; they were mainly bones of cattle along with sheep/goat. In front of the OAZ V platform an L-shaped corridor was cut in the bedrock ca. 5 m deep from the surface of the platform. Ceramics from the filling of this corridor are Early Aksumite (ca. 1st to 4th centuries A.D.). These included many sherds of imported wares of Mediterranean and possibly Syrian origins, and possibly some sherds of Late Meroitic wares. Sherds of imported glass vessels were also found in this corridor. These included one fragment of 'millefiori' glass dating to the 1st to 4th centuries A.D., and a fragment of a molded beaker of Egyptian or Palestinian origin dating to the 3rd to 5th centuries A.D. The L-shaped corridor consisted of 11 (excavated) steps in the east-west vertical cut and a north-south vertical cut with chambers opening to the southwest, northwest and northeast. This evidence suggests that the corridor was

the entrance to three separate tombs. The southwest and northwest tombs were almost completely filled with mud and may have been disturbed, but the northeast tomb was still sealed with a carefully constructed stone wall. Because of lack of time, these three tombs were not excavated, but they will be investigated in the next field season.

OAZ VI. This excavation unit was an extension to the South of OAZ I, excavated in 1993. In both units a coarse platform construction with stones in a marl mortar was excavated. The whole platform was covered with a layer of prepared marl. Three different types of roughly hewn stele were erected in this platform: pointed monoliths, flat stone slabs, and monoliths which are roughly rectangular in cross-section. Two possible deposits of ceramic bowls and basins (Features 2 and 5) were excavated in OAZ VI, and 2-3 possible hearths were located at the southern edge of this unit. A square shaft of carefully constructed rectangular stones (Feature 4), 0.50 x 0.65 m at the top, was excavated in one 2 m<sup>2</sup> square in the northwest quadrant of the unit. This feature was excavated to a depth of ca. 1 m, but could not be excavated any further without being disassembled. The purpose of this square shaft remains unknown. Another oval shaped feature (Feature 1) was recognized at the surface of the platform immediately to the north of the rectangular feature (Feature 4). This feature was filled with soft clayey soil and some stones and contained only a few sherds. Finally, to the east of Feature 4 a possible pit grave cut in the bedrock (Feature 3) was discovered. This feature consisted of a circular stone arrangement on the platform surface marking a constructed shaft with the platform. This shaft was filled with large stones thrown in as fill mixed with deposits of different soils. At the base of the platform a circular pit ca. 1 m in diameter was cut in the bedrock about 2 m deep. At the bottom of the circular pit a smaller rectangular pit 1.0 x 0.50 m was located covered with three large, flat stone slabs and a hard marl mortar. The rectangular pit was about 1 m deep. Altogether Feature 3 was about 4 m deep from the surface of the stone platform. The circular pit cut in the bedrock was filled with many stones mixed with a hard clayey soil, and contained many sherds of basins. At the bottom the rectangular pit was filled with a layer of pure dark grey clay above the bedrock containing two crescent-shaped microliths. Over this clay layer many fragments of ceramic bowls were

cemented in a very hard grey marl together with one stone pestle and one iron arrowhead. A few fragments of a poorly preserved human cranium and three teeth were found at the bottom of the circular pit, and a few fragments of possibly human bones were found in the hard grey marl filling within the lower rectangular pit. These bones might confirm that Feature 3 was originally a human burial. All the ceramics from OAZ VI were stylistically 'Proto-Aksumite' (ca. 1st century B.C.) and consisted mainly of bowls and basins. Few animal bones were found scattered on the platform surface; they were mainly fragments of bovine teeth.

### Ona Nagast

Evidence of a dense urban settlement of 7-10 ha at Ona Nagast were reported in J.W. Michel's archaeological survey of the region. In 1995 three test excavations were conducted here (ON I, ON II, ON III).

ON I. ON I was a 2 x 4 m test trench located on a ridge above land sloping down to Mai Lahlah. Approximately 0.60 m of deposits of domestic refuse were excavated here above the bedrock. The upper two strata of ON I appeared to be disturbed by plowing, but the third (lowest) stratum was excavated with little evidence of disturbance. The sherds from this site were greatly eroded and thus difficult to date, but the presence of fragments of footrests suggests an Early Aksumite context. Lithics, animal bones and teeth (mostly bovine fragments), and fragments of glass sherds and beads were also found in this stratigraphic unit (S.U. 3), including 'millefiori'. Flotation of soil samples from S.U. 3 was conducted by Prof. Julie Hansen, who identified grains of wheat (*Triticum aestivum* and barley (*Hordeum vulgare*). This is the first evidence of wheat and barley from an Aksumite context.

ON II. ON II was a 4 m<sup>2</sup> test trench located ca. 30 m to the south of ON I. The excavation of this unit revealed a stone tool workshop in the upper levels, and a possible arrangement of small stones in a hard clay matrix mixed with a few sherds in the lower levels. The meaning of this arrangement is uncertain, as the size of the stones is too small to be a wall foundation, and it is too regular to be accidentally deposited. Some animal remains, consisting mainly of bovine teeth, were

found as well, and the ceramics were Proto- to Early Aksumite. The lithic evidence at ON I and ON II points to the occurrence of a lithic workshop widely scattered on the whole area. This is suggested by the abundance of debitage and cores, and the low frequency of tools here. At ON I agate was the most frequently used raw material, while at ON II a yellow chert and brown flint were used. Less than 1% of the collection was in obsidian. The stone tool industry is mainly one of flakes. Finished tools were mainly end scrapers along with some perforators and burins. This evidence confirms that a lithic technology survived at Aksum up to the early 1st millennium A.D.

ON III. ON III was a 2 x 4 m test trench located on a slope which extends to Mai Lahlah. Excavations were conducted here because the site was heavily covered with stones from an earlier construction, and the local landowner had reported evidence of an exposed wall at the base of a mound. Excavated evidence of structures here consisted of a series of walls and corner wall segments superimposed upon one another. The stratigraphy demonstrates multiple phases of construction, separated by periods of sediment deposition resulting from human occupation, wall collapse, and down-slope erosion. The ceramics associated with these phases of construction were Middle Aksumite (ca. A.D. 400-700). A great quantity of animal bones were recovered from this site, the majority of which were from cattle. Sheep and/or goat bones were also common, and a few fragments of dog bones were also identified. Flotation samples were processed from this site, and the remains of wheat and barley were identified by Prof. Hansen. In addition, teff (*Eragrostis teff*), lentils (*Lens culinaris*) and grape (*Vitis vinifera*) were recovered. Thus, the macrobotanical evidence suggests the cultivation of teff by Middle Aksumite times. Artifacts included three sherds of imported amphorae from Upper Egypt, dating to the 3rd to 7th centuries A.D., and a sherd of "terra sigillata africana", dating to the 2nd to 6th centuries A.D.

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