

■ ETHIOPIA

The IUO and BU Archaeological Expedition at Bieta Giyorgis (Aksum): 1998 Field Season

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The topographical map of the whole area between the two sites was finished in this season.

Ona Nagast

At Ona Nagast excavations were conducted in four areas: ON VII/X, ON IX/XI/XIV/XV, ON XIII, and ON XVI.

ON VII/X. The excavation in this area, supervised by M. DiBlasi, focused on exploring the large residential structure uncovered in 1996 and 1997, and exposed a complex of walls that defined three rooms (Rooms 4, 5 and 6). These rooms show evidence of multiple episodes of construction spanning the Early to Middle Aksumite phases. Room 4 was a later addition to a large structure with stepped walls typical of Aksumite construction. This room included two partially intact floors composed of compacted clay and crushed rock. Artifacts associated with these floors included pottery, animal bones, glass fragments and lithics. A silver coin minted by King Kaleb was found in sediments above the room.

Also found in the sediments of Room 5 was a carnelian intaglio for a ring, carved with the image of a sitting deity (Rome or the young Mars) wearing a helmet and facing right. Above the outstretched left hand of the deity is a winged victory offering a crown of laurel leaves as a symbol of victory and honor. Room 5 is located east of Room 4 and is linked to it via a threshold. No intact floor surface was found in this room, but a stratum containing concentrations of yellowish-brown deteriorated rock may represent the remains of a floor destroyed by wall collapse. Room 6 lies within the corner wall of the main structure and represents the foundation level of this monumental building. Here, a network of interconnected walls formed a pattern of at least 6 open rectangular spaces. This pattern resembles the foundation level described at Enda Mikael (Aksum) by the Deutsche-Aksum Expedition in 1906. The substantial wall and well built foundations associated with this structure suggest that it was constructed to support two floors of living space. The rooms and floors uncovered in 1997 and 1998 probably represent ground floor occupation areas, whereas the very dense deposits of stone building debris covering the surviving walls represent the collapsed walls and floors of the upper level(s) of construction.

Introduction

In May and June, 1998, the Istituto Universitario Orientale (IUO), Naples (Italy) and Boston University (BU), Boston (USA), conducted the sixth field season on the top of Bieta Giyorgis hill, to the northwest of Aksum, under the direction of Rodolfo Fattovich (IUO) and Kathryn A. Bard (BU). The multidisciplinary project included research in archaeology (Rodolfo Fattovich, Kathryn A. Bard, Michael C. DiBlasi, Andrea Manzo, Cinzia Perlingieri), paleoethnobotany (Catherine D'Andrea), archaeozoology (Louis Chaix), geology (Gerald Johnson), cartography (Livio Crescenzi) and conservation (Pasquale Musella). The research was curtailed one week early because of the war with Eritrea.

Archaeology

During the 1998 field season archaeological excavations were conducted at the sites of Ona Nagast (ON) and Ona Enda Aboi Zewgé (OAZ).

The majority of the potsherds associated with the rooms can be ascribed to the Middle Aksumite phase and to the Early/Middle Aksumite transitional phase. Several Late Roman/Byzantine glass fragments dating from the 1st to 6th centuries A.D. were discovered at ON VII/X. Many sherds of late Roman ribbed wine amphorae, a rim sherd of African Red Slip Ware, and two sherds of a Near Eastern Roman micaceous amphora were associated with this structure.

ON IX/XI/XIV/XV. The excavation of this area by A. Manzo continued investigations of a monumental structure uncovered in 1997. On the basis of two stratigraphic tests in Rooms 3 and 4, two phases of use were distinguished from man-made clay floors. The foundation trench of the building cut soil strata directly covering the bedrock that represented earlier phases of occupation of the area. The structure is characterized by long narrow rooms (Rooms 1, 2, 4, 9, 6, 7, and 8, ca. 7 x 1.7 m) that have been interpreted as storerooms, based on a comparison to similar South Arabian and Near Eastern buildings. Larger rooms (Rooms 3, 5, and 10) have been interpreted as courtyards because no evidence of pillars or columns that would have supported a roof has been recorded. The stepped walls of this monumental building were very carefully constructed, demonstrating high skill in stone masonry construction. The floors of decomposed crushed rock were also well made. The pottery found in the room fill and that associated with the floors in this structure was Early Aksumite in the upper levels, and Proto-Aksumite in the lower levels. The pottery evidence substantially enlarged the typological corpus of Aksumite vessels for the earliest phases. In the Early Aksumite levels sherds of Roman glass dating to the 1st-2nd centuries A.D. and sherds of Early Roman plain amphorae were also discovered.

ON XIII. This excavation was supervised by C. Perlingieri. A very well preserved stratigraphic sequence with different phases of occupation was found here. The latest phase identified is represented by a domestic cooking area, including a hearth with a cooking pot in situ, a number of lower and upper grinding stones, storage vessels, and numerous stone slabs that may possibly be interpreted as sitting places. Adjacent to this area was a very well made floor with grinding stones and potsherds. The pottery associated with this phase is

Late Aksumite. The earlier occupation phase consisted of an arrangement of stone walls that delimited five rooms. Only three rooms were excavated; one of them had a very carefully made floor of stone slabs. Most of the pottery associated with these rooms can be ascribed to the Middle Aksumite phase and to the Early/Middle Aksumite transitional phase. Some glass sherds associated with the Middle Aksumite phase are of Islamic production. Glass fragments from the earlier phase are of Late Roman types. In the same earlier strata several sherds of Late Roman ribbed amphorae, African Red Slip sherds and a Sassanian blue-glazed sherd were found. Some Aksumite bronze coins were also found; most of them date to the reign of King Hataz (VI century A.D.).

ON XVI. The excavation of this unit, supervised by K. Bard, revealed a very promising area for further investigations, as it seems to represent a non-elite domestic context. A 4 m² test square was excavated to an average depth of 30/40 cm below the surface. A corner of a structure filled with stone rubble/wall collapse was exposed. Room fill included a great deal of Early Aksumite domestic pottery (but no imported wares), a bronze earring, modern glass and a few lithics. Two sherds of Roman glass vessels were also discovered.

Ona Enda Aboi Zewgé. Two excavation units were opened at Ona Enda Aboi Zewgé: OAZ VII and OAZ VII/IX. Proto-Aksumite pit-tombs were discovered in both units: Tombs 5 and 6 at OAZ VII, and Tombs 4 and 7 at OAZ VIII. All the tombs have the same design, which is a development of the simple Proto-Aksumite graves discovered at OAZ I and OAZ VI in 1993 and 1995, respectively. These tombs consist of two rock-cut shafts. The upper shaft, up to 3 m deep and trapezoidal in profile, was filled with large rocks in a clay matrix. At the bottom of this shaft, a lower shaft, rectangular in profile, was cut in the bedrock. This shaft, up to 3 m deep, apparently contained the burial and the shaft top was covered with stone slabs. The opening of the upper shaft was about 0.80 m². Each tomb yielded a rich collection of mortuary pottery of a homogeneous Proto-Aksumite ware, characterized by round basins with decorated rims, square basins, and small- and medium-sized bowls. Around 236 glass beads were found in Tomb 6. Some of them are mosaic glass beads, most likely produced in Egypt in the 2nd-1st

centuries B.C. Others, e.g. the gilded and "gold in glass" beads, were produced in Hellenistic and early Roman times. A dating to the late 2nd-1st centuries B.C. is likely. A long, conical bronze seal with a loop at the top was also found in Tomb 6, in the lower shaft. Short, conical ceramic stamp seals with geometric and other designs have been found in early and late Meroitic contexts at Meroe. The very corroded base of the seal from Tomb 6 is possibly decorated with a sun disc and moon crescent, but the symbols are very difficult to discern.

Imported Materials

A total of 26 fragments of imported pottery, 233 fragments of glass vessels, and 282 complete or fragmentary beads were collected at Bieta Giyorgis and were examined by A. Manzo. All potsherds were collected in the residential area (ON VII/X, ON IX/XI/XIV/XV, ON XIII, ON XVI). Glass beads were collected in both the residential and cemetery (OAZ VII, OAZ VIII/IX) areas. Sherds of glass vessels were collected only in the residential area. These materials were identified and classified according to their macroscopic features. A more detailed study of the pottery clay was also conducted with a binocular microscope. All imported ceramics were definitely manufactured in Mediterranean regions and could be easily identified. The occurrence of sherds of Early Roman plain amphorae only at ON and the monumental Tomb 2 at OAZ suggests that the ON structures formed an elite residence or functional area. Most likely, some of the excavated rooms were store-rooms. Most of the excavated glass was probably imported from Mediterranean regions, but some artifacts could have come from Mesopotamia or Persia. Some evidence of a locally manufactured glass was found at ON XIII (Room 2 SU 24, and Room 1 SU 27). It consists of blue glass lip plugs, which are typically African in form and use. Chemical analyses will be required to distinguish imported glass from that which was locally made.

Pottery

A total of 364 kg of plain ware body sherds and 1412 diagnostic sherds were collected and

classified by C. Perlingieri. Most of the sherds were collected in the residential area at Ona Nagast. The pottery was described and classified in conformity with the attribute list and typological classes already used in previous field seasons. In particular, the ceramics from the 1997 field season have enriched the typology of Aksumite pottery, and have demonstrated a clear stylistic difference of the ceramics from the residential and funerary areas.

Paleoethnobotany

A total of 56 sediment samples were processed by flotation, amounting to 270.25 liters. Sediment was processed from ON VII (19 samples), ON X (2 samples), ON IX (13 samples), ON XI (8 samples), and ON XIII (14 samples). Of these samples, 39 were analyzed amounting to 133.51 g of flot. Analysis was completed for ON VII (16 samples), ON X (1 sample), ON IX (11 samples), ON XI (6 samples), and ON XIII (5 samples). The following identifications of domesticates were made: emmer wheat, free-threshing wheat, barley, oats, teff, finger millet, lentil, linseed, and noog.

Archaeozoology

A total of 5841 animal bones were studied, of which 43.2% could be identified at the species level. Cattle bones are greater than 80% of the identified bones. Domestic goats and sheep represent 16% of the bones identified and there are also some remains of domesticated fowl. Two bones attributable to a large antelope (probably hartebeest) were also found. Evidence of butchering marks on the animal bones will allow us to describe the animal exploitation pattern in Aksumite times. In general, the cattle remains indicate that these animals were of the short-horned type with short legs, well adapted to the mountainous environment of Aksum. Among the cattle bones identified were the remains of zebu vertebrae. If confirmed, this would be some of the earliest evidence of this animal in Africa.