

## ETHIOPIA

### Community Relations in an Archaeological Context

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One of the most important aspects of any archaeological project is developing and maintaining good local community relations and a local understanding of what you are trying to achieve. With it, an incredible amount of useful extra information and expansion of the project's rationale and scope can be realized. Without it, you might as well pack up and leave, but it is an aspect of fieldwork in Africa that is rarely discussed or emphasized. During the first two seasons (2001 and 2003/4) of the Shire District Archaeological Survey in north-western Ethiopia (see Finneran *et al.* 2002; Finneran and Phillips 2003), we added a few 'extra' activities over and above the usual to further develop and maintain 'positive community relations' and local understanding of our work. This little additional effort yielded not only a great deal of goodwill, but also left behind something so that the local population, not just other archaeologists, benefited from our work.

The situation at Shire, in north-western Ethiopia, is in some respects unusual, but in others typical. It is most obviously unusual in that the local community is generally unaware of the historic importance of their region, because an hour's drive away eastwards is Aksum – nationally and internationally recognized as of major importance in both Ethiopia's history and culture, and for its role in the historic development of east-west relations. In its heyday, Aksum was the capital of what was described as one of the four great civilizations of classical antiquity. Indasellassie, the district capital of Shire, on the other hand, has only been of any importance at all over the past 30 years and Semama, the historic capital of the

area, is now only a small village an hour's drive away northwards on a gravel road barely passable even in the dry season. The people themselves also generally view their region as of no historic importance because no one had ever bothered to come there to investigate it – whilst Aksum is and has been for over a century overrun with archaeologists, historians, ecclesiastics and (now, again) tourists. Even the latest guidebooks to Ethiopia encompass the entire Shire district in just one small paragraph, whilst a full chapter is devoted to Aksum town. Although Indasellassie has a town library, very heavily used, the town itself is hardly mentioned in cultural or historical terms even here. Indeed, although Indasellassie is now quickly becoming the business centre for its western district, Aksum is the 'culture capital' of the province of Tigray where both are located. So, we were in a very unusual position, reminiscent of the early explorers a century or two ago, in that most of the people we encountered had little or no knowledge of the importance or value that we attached to the archaeological remains around them.

It is typical in that there is – and has been for over a decade – a small antiquities office as befits the administrative capital of the district. This consists of a small rented courtyard and a couple of rooms for its few staff. Its most pressing problem is that the office has no means of transport, except to borrow a vehicle from the town's administrative office when one is available which, in this area, means it is incredibly difficult even to investigate any reports of archaeological remains beyond walking distance of the town, much less conduct any serious excavation work. Our project began as a suggestion made to us in 1995 by the then Shire district antiquities officer, Ato Gebre Kidan Wolde Hawariat, a trained historian who had for many years sought to promote the archaeological importance of his district, but with little success – the only controlled excavation made there was his own, of a small hillside cemetery near Semama, in 1994, that was never published.

We of course have followed the usual questioning of inhabitants as the survey continues, explaining what we are doing and what we are looking for. Do they know any places where there are potsherds on the ground? Or old walls? Abandoned buildings? Etc. Our obvious excitement when we 'found' a 'technological' site, apparently iron-smelting, completely baffled the farmer who guided us

there. And we had trouble convincing some farmers' wives that, whilst we were looking for artifacts like pots, we didn't want them to dig anything up to give us: we recorded the site they found for us, the still *in situ* pots were reburied there and those we could not replace were collected together with information of their original findspot. And we explained why they should not excavate such places themselves but rather report them to the antiquities authorities at the Tigray Bureau of Information and Culture (TBIC) office in Indasellassie.

### Direct education of the local inhabitants

A meeting with the history teacher at the district high school led to a much more direct method of education. This high school serves the entire surrounding area for many miles, and its student population numbers over 2000. With the permission of the school principal and the education authorities, the teacher arranged for us to give a talk to the students. Posters announced our impending arrival at the high school at the end of one teaching day, and invited all students and teachers to attend – and nearly everyone did.

We arrived with numerous artifacts, including Gebre Kidan's pots, which we laid out on tables, and put up photographs of these and others. The crowd was so large; we had to use the school's bullhorn. Tekle Hagos gave a lecture in Tigrigna on what we were doing, what we were looking for, a short history of the region as we understood it, and emphasized how important the Shire area is, both historically and prehistorically, for both Ethiopia and the world. And then he described what everyone should do if they find anything on their land like what we had brought, and invited them to look at the artifacts and photographs we had brought (Figure 1).

We each manned a table, some of us with interpreters, and talked and answered questions about the artifacts there. Two tables contained artifacts that could be handled by the students, mainly lithic tools, some iron-smelting slag and the more durable pottery, and they were invited to handle as many as they liked. Artifacts on the other tables they could only see, not touch, and we explained why. We asked them to pass on what they had learned to their parents and other relatives, and to bring anything they find to the TBIC office. The event was a great success and lasted well over two hours before the last questions were asked and answered.

**Figure 1.** Tekle Hagos lecturing to high school students. Laden tables are in the middle ground.



The success of this single venture has been enormous. Although of course the team members who returned to the United Kingdom could no longer participate, the local TBIC authorities have since arranged further similar lectures not only to the leaders and administrators of each village, but also to the younger children in primary schools. To this end, we have sent them some of our project slides, as back-up illustrations in case so they would not risk taking artifacts to the villages farther away – transportation is quite difficult, and many villages are nowhere near the few roads in the area. Even the fact that an effort has been made to go to these villages has been appreciated, and both information and further accidental finds have been brought to the TBIC office by villagers and students since our departure, all of which was recorded by the authorities.

### **Creating the genesis of a museum in the town**

But what to do with these finds? The town has no museum, no place to display the artifacts recovered by ourselves and our TBIC colleagues, or that people have brought in. All these, even those Gebre Kidan had excavated a decade ago, were stored in a locked wooden cabinet in the TBIC office. We therefore conceived the idea of creating a means of public display. We discussed some designs for display cabinets and, with the approval of the provincial authorities, ordered their construction by a local firm of metal and wooden furniture-makers. The cabinet-makers were heavily involved in the discussions on what would be the best woods, metal and glass to use for the cabinets, how they would be secured, what kind of artifacts should go in them, and what designs would be best for their display, adding their practical knowledge of cabinetry and available materials to our idealized plans of the furniture (Figure 2).

Possible locking mechanisms were investigated by the builders and approved by the provincial TBIC office. Importance was placed, not only by us but also by the firm, on local products rather than expensive imports. Three different cabinets were made, and many of the best artifacts have been arranged in them by the Indasellassie TBIC officers. Labels in Tigrigna, and later in English, have been produced indicating in general terms the origins and dates of the artifacts. Eventually also a series of introductory panels, again in both languages, will be

displayed with the cabinets. Many of these artifacts were found by members of the public. Only a few have been excavated, but the findspots and circumstances of many finds were provided by their donors, and recorded by the authorities.

We initially had thought the best location for our new display would be at the entrance to the town library, but this was deemed impossible for both space and security reasons. Few other options remained open to us, but eventually we settled on what everyone agreed was the most suitable location, from all perspectives: inside the entrance to the town's new administrative office, then beginning construction. When it is completed, the cabinets will be prominently displayed in the building, where the TBIC office also will be located. Anyone dealing with local administration will have to go past the cabinets to get to their required office, and will see the antiquities on display. It is but a small step, but an important one for achieving our aim of local public awareness of the archaeology that surrounds them. Eventually, we hope, a dedicated museum building can be constructed by the authorities.

### **Contributing to site protection measures, both temporary and permanent**

In 2001, the question of site protection was first raised, especially for the large Mai Adrasha site near Indasellassie town that already had been systematically overrun for over a decade by the local inhabitants in search of gold – not the usual archaeological 'gold' but instead natural gold in the soil that they then panned in the nearby river. To extract the soil, they had dismantled stone after stone of walls of entire buildings, leaving large 'potholes' over the entire site (see Asamerew *et al.* 2002).

They also found a great many archaeological artifacts *in situ* and virtually all of it was removed and dumped although, in some cases, finds were contentiously turned over to the local TBIC office. In conjunction with our Ethiopian colleagues at the Indasellassie office, the local town council (*woreda*) was notified and, using no more than word of mouth initially, the site was immediately put off limits. Occasionally some of the more obviously interesting archaeological material continues make its way to the local TBIC office, where the usual practice has been to offer a token reward for the material being

**Figure 2.** Indasellasié furniture-makers and their display cabinet.



**Figure 3.** Figurines from Mai Adrasha, after cleaning.



handed in. On the last day of the 2001 survey, for example, a large amount of pottery, glass, metal work, beads, coinage and clay human figurines arrived at the Bureau, where they were rapidly catalogued and photographed before we left. In 2004, the pottery was cleaned and re-photographed, and interviews with the finders ascertained exactly where on the site the material had been found, in what circumstances, and what this area had looked like before removal of the soil.

One such area at Mai Adrasha seems to have been a circular shrine, with several figurines in a line on a platform before their destruction and removal in 2000, before our arrival. Whilst obviously not ideal, we have at least been able to gain some further measure of the original appearance of the site and its parts through these interviews. Both the architecture (as described) and the figurines (Figure 3) are so far unique to Mai Adrasha. The site clearly needed greater protection, and the town council initially hired a security guard for the site, but recognized this as a temporary measure.

The local, provincial and federal authorities all allocated funding towards construction of a fence around the site between 2001 and 2003, when we returned for our second season, but this still was insufficient to construct the fence, which needed to be over a kilometer in length. Therefore, part of our second season budget completed the funds needed, and the fence was constructed in spring 2004, after our departure (Figure 4). The gold-panning, which had still continued sporadically in 2002-3, has now ceased (Phillips *et al.* 2005).

Some of our efforts are ‘do-able’ only because of the immediate situation and circumstances of where we are. In some areas of Africa and elsewhere, we would not have been able to obtain information from similar ‘pot-holers,’ or indeed even have been able to interview them. We might not have been given permission to address the high school students, and there may already be a museum or display, or a public display of artifacts may not have been considered feasible by the authorities. Fencing land involves those who already own or work it:

**Figure 4.** Permanent fencing at Mai Adrasha.



we were fortunate in that those who farmed it could be accommodated, and the authorities were both willing and able to contribute to the cost that neither they nor we could afford alone. But other possibilities can be developed by projects elsewhere in Africa suitable for the area they are investigating. And, as I said at the beginning, they leave behind something so that the local population, not just other archaeologists, directly benefit from their work after their departure.

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