

End of an Era: Diversity in Former Feudal Landscapes

**An ethnoarchaeological study of
powerful places in Tigray, Ethiopia**

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Introduction

- This is an ethnoarchaeological study of how different levels of feudal authority were materialized in the built landscape of rural Tigray.
- The contemporary rural landscape includes a large number of domestic compounds that were built during the last century of the Abyssinian Empire which ended in 1974.

Study Area

- The study was conducted in Gulo-Makeda Woreda in the Eastern Zone of Tigray Region in the northern highlands of Ethiopia.



This study was part of a larger archaeological project directed by A.C. D'Andrea (Simon Fraser University)

Remnant feudal landscapes

- Many late feudal period houses are occupied by original owners or their direct descendents
- Original owners were:
 - Regional Aristocrats
 - Local Nobles
 - Peasants



Integrated political landscapes

- Archaeologists tend to focus on elite architecture as the places where power and authority are generated.
- But power is not the sole prerogative of the elite.
- Argued here is that different levels of authority are similarly legitimated through a common vernacular architectural practice by peasants, nobles, and aristocrats.
- These social categories of people contributed to Tigray's political landscape; few of these buildings are monumental in scale.
- Common vernacular building practices were scaled up to lay claim to increasingly greater levels of authority over land and peasant labour.

Late Feudal Period: Dynamic Social Order

- Local nobles held non-hereditary military titles.
- Any peasant could achieve a title through distinguished military service and loyalty to a powerful lord.
- Aristocrats constantly fought each other for land, power and titles.
- Consequently, access to power and authority was highly dynamic.

Land: basis of power

- Land tenure in Gulo-Makeda late feudal times:
 - Village land (*shehana*) shared by all village residents
 - Heritable family land (*resti*) only held by some village residents
 - Land grant (*gult*) from overlord held by local nobles/aristocrats
 - Consequently there were significant differences in land holdings and levels of wealth *within* as well as *between* social strata.



Legitimate claim to land

- Built rural landscape made up of domestic compounds of different social categories. No public buildings (except churches).
- Men activated personal rights in family and village land, and the right to represent themselves in court and village council *when they married and after they built and occupied their own house.*
- Construction of every house was a political claim to land and authority at some level.



Former nobleman's house, now occupied by his son

Feasting and status

- Peasant households were obliged to host feasts in order to maintain status in the community and to maintain membership in local and regional mutual aid societies that provided members with reciprocal pools of labour.
- Nobles and aristocrats had similar feasting networks with their peers.
- Feasts are important venues for manifesting household power, and they occur in the host's compound.
- Compounds of all groups are locales where power and authority are negotiated.



Farming household preparing for a memorial feast.

Building powerful places

- Farm compounds include a house (*hidmo*), kitchen and courtyard enclosed by a high wall.
- This study focuses on *hidmo*.
- *Hidmo* characterize Tigrayan rural architecture
 - rectilinear mud-mortared masonry building
 - flat mud roof (or more recently corrugated zinc)
 - interiors finished with mud-plastered and painted walls, benches, beds
 - quality and size of *hidmo* represents the integrity of its builder
 - building usually torn down on death of its builders (except grand houses of titled men although few houses last more than a century)
 - Multi-functional building: sleeping, storage, food preparation, consumption, entertaining guests, mutual aid association meetings, feasts



Peasant compounds

- *Hidmo* interiors have plastered and painted walls and furnishings.
- Built by husband and wife.
- Only assisted by others if they could afford to provide food and beer.
- Often cost of assistants was prohibitive.



Scaling up: Local noblemen's *hidmo*

- Lowest level of state administrative authority is *chika shum* (sometimes held military title)
- Usually locally born man
- Collected taxes, redistributed land, local judge
- Built his own house to claim village and family land
- Extracted local peasant labour to build his *hidmo* by right or by coercion
- *Hidmo* are larger and more elaborated forms of vernacular architecture
- *Hidmo* greater height is achieved with second story loft and interior roof posts
- *Hidmo* also had decorative wood ceilings



Scaling up: the currency of peasant labour

- Building noblemen's houses required that peasants cut and carry juniper logs for roofs and ceilings from a distant place
- Ceiling pieces were cut and shaped requiring more time to build than peasant *hidmo* ceilings (consumed more labour and wasted wood)
- Use of wood in a highly deforested environment was act of conspicuous consumption
- Some rich farmers built decorated ceilings, but had to pay workers
- Only noblemen's ceilings had political capital of free peasant labour
- Commanding peasant labour to build noblemen's houses reproduces nobleman's power and authority at local level



Decorated ceiling in former nobleman's *hidmo*

Scaling to the top: regional aristocracy

- In late feudal period Gulo-Makeda was part of province of Agame
- Local aristocracy descended from Dejazmach Woldu Sebagades
- Aristocratic homes investigated were in poor condition but 3 of 5 were still occupied by descendants of original builders
- Compounds are monumental in scale, but these buildings continue to manipulate the vernacular architectural aesthetic.



5 aristocratic residences investigated

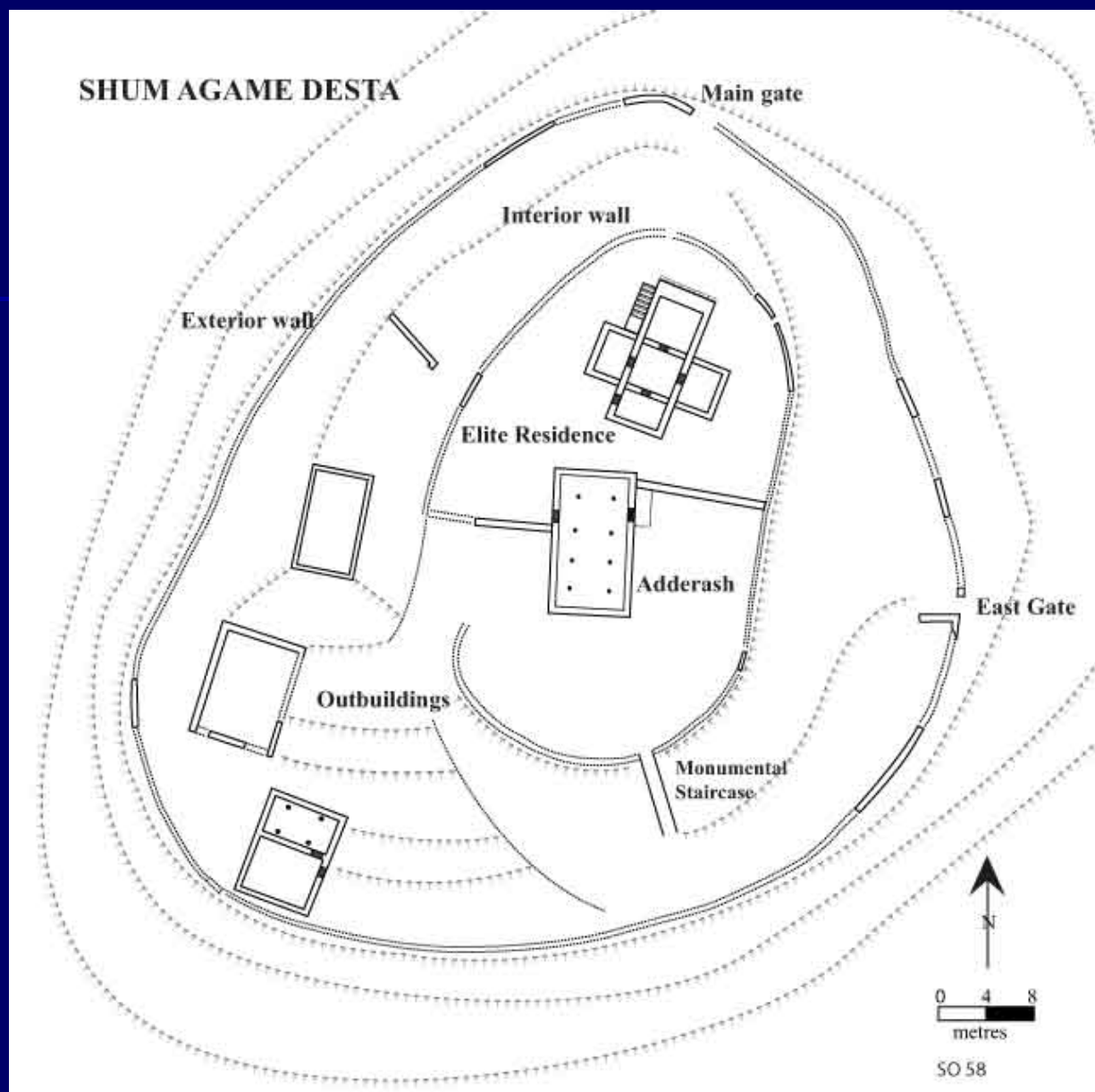
- Common features :
 - Monumental compound wall
 - Uninhabited zone outside outer walls
 - Commanding topographic location
 - Elite house and feasting hall enclosed by inner wall (compound within a compound)
 - Elite house is multistoried and often cruxiform in plan
 - Feasting hall is taller than other *hidmo*

Example: Shum Agame Desta (Governor of Agame)

Residence
constructed in
late 19th
century



SHUM AGAME DESTA



Shum Agame's compound

- Elite family house and feasting hall (*addersh*) at spatial core of compound, physically separated from rest of compound by inner wall
- Residence and *addersh* split domestic and public functions of vernacular *hidmo* to meet demands of larger scale feasting and food storage.
- Both are constructed using same vernacular aesthetic as *hidmo* but taller and more elaborate.



Addersh exterior and remains of decorated wood ceiling

Elite family house

- Elite houses are 2 to 4 stories tall
- Shum Agame Desta's house was 3 stories
- 2nd floor had 2 circular wood ceilings with painted beam



Wood

- Wood braced walls for structural demands of multi-storied buildings (unnecessary in smaller *hidmo*)
- Aristocratic houses consume much more wood than those of local noblemen
- Aristocrats also consume more peasant labour drawn from larger territories under their control



Wood beams in wall of elite residence

Building power in political landscapes

- Shum Agame Desta's house was built over a century ago, but construction is well remembered
- Every man and woman in Agame was commanded to come and build his house (deeply resented by peasantry)
- Stone quarry located a kilometer below the house
- Stones passed by hand in a continuous human chain from quarry to building site
- Exercise was powerful act of Shum Agame's authority over the people and land of Agame, and of the people's submission to this authority.

Political landscapes

- Political landscapes are not constituted solely in elite and monumental places of power
- Peasants, nobles and aristocrats in Gulo-Makeda all built houses to claim rights in land and authority at different but integrated levels of power in the late feudal period
- All domestic houses were places where power was generated
- All of these built places manipulated a common architectural aesthetic that was scaled up incrementally to construct the greater levels of power held by the builder's owner
- Scaling up of the vernacular always involved the use of peasant labour and scarce resources: the process that materialized differential levels of authority on the landscape

Archaeological importance

- Aksumite polity dominated the study region in 1st millennium AD
- Aksum's elite selected houses as political symbols including the multi-storied houses carved into its famed stone stelae
- Clay models of houses found in pre-Aksumite and Aksumite contexts strongly resemble historic *hidmo*
- Aksum's monumental buildings are elite domestic residences



Multi-storied house carved in stone stela at Aksum

Symbols of power

- Caution is required in using the present to interpret the past.
- But it is worth considering that Aksum's elite may have claimed land and authority through domestic buildings and that their subjects did the same.
- Archaeological investigations need to integrate all social players into our interpretations of past (and present) political landscapes.
- Political symbols are only powerful if the people that they are intended to manipulate understand (and accept) their intended meaning.

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