The First Joint Archaeological Field School of the University of Axum and the University of Naples “L’Orientale”, November 2009

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Introduction

The first annual Joint Field School of the University of Axum and the University of Naples, “L’Orientale” was conducted from the 2nd to the 12th of November 2009 for undergraduate students of the University of Axum, led by L. Phillipson, assisted by faculty of the University of Axum: Hiluf Berhe, Ahab Afifi and Tekie Fisseha. The course consisted of classes in survey techniques, lithic technology and artefact measurement and recording, plus one day of fieldwork at the newly recorded site of Mirina, located about 18km southwest of Axum in a fertile valley near the head of the Mirina river and about 5 km south of the Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite site of Seglemin near the road which leads from Axum to Adet (map ref.: Eth 4 sheet 1438D3-Axum; 49.5N, 61.7E)

For the day of survey and surface collecting, the 32 students worked in five teams: to interview local residents about localities with material of archaeological interest; to define the boundaries of this very large site and to locate the densest surface exposures of ceramic, lithic and any other artefacts within it; and to make total surface collections of all artefactual materials within several circumscribed areas. All knapped lithics and diagnostic sherds collected plus a sample of body sherds were brought to Axum University to form the basis of a teaching collection; no other artefacts and no remains of monuments or architectural features were found. Each group of students reported separately on their findings; what follows are verbatim extracts from their reports.

Situation

(Students: Solomon Zewdie, Mulualem Medhanie, Tewelde Yemane, Chalachew Derso, Eermias Werie, Gebriela H/Maryam)

“The general topography of the site is at a base of a hill full of eroded stones and some cultivated land … houses of the farmers around it. The people also have a water dam for irrigation, also Mirina Primary School …. also cattle of the farmer and grazing on the site. The people nearby are very sociable and respectful. Moreover they helped us during our survey by giving the oral tradition about the site plus other area with archaeological data (artefact) nearby … like Balinena a site near a church and Abune Gerima a site with ceramics and lithics have been found. Person from the site [the land owner] Ato Aregay W/Giorgis.”

“A concentration of lithic materials with a little big grinding stone which is broken: N 14°00 928, E 038°38 627, elevation 6813 feet, located in cultivated area.”

“A ceramic fragment: N 14°01 037, E 038°38 617 elevation 6801 feet, in cultivated area.”

“Concentration of lithic material, a single chert flake [and knapped fragments]: N 14°01 131, E 038°38 394, elevation 6782 feet, in cultivated land.”

“Lithic material; N 14°01 114’, E 038°38 906, elevation 6798 feet, cultivated land”.

“Ceramic fragments: N 14°01 155’, E 038°38 915, elevation 6800 located in cultivated area.”

“A kind of lithic with yellow colour, a single chert flake and it is patinated, located at the middle of a hill: N 14°01 151, E 038°38 947, elevation 6834.”

“A concentration of lithics found at the base of a hillside which means that they are transported or are not in their original context: N 14°01 144’, E 038°38 954, elevation 6832 feet.”
Site Location and Dimensions

(Students: Kifle Zens, Gezae G/tense, Hagos Abadie, Haftom Berhane, Weldekared Haile, Yemane Gebne)

“This survey group concentrated its effort in the southern portion of the site …. the UTM coordinates are N1549469, S1548848, E462319, W461863; according to this the site’s extreme area ca. 620 x 450 m. Although our sketch map reflected the site to be ca. 1200 x 500 meter.”

“The site’s shape is elongated running northwest-southeast …. There is a gentle slope which runs southerly…. In the northwest area of the northwestern quadrant of the site is sloped to Mirina creek …. It is west of Dembeba Mikael Church and northeast of Adis Go-at Amanuel Church.”

“The southeastern quadrant of the site exhibited a massive lithic concentration (GPS E1548958 N462267) estimated to be 200 sq. …. most all the material is brown chert …. some areas have extreme density …. ceramic deposits are quite sparse when compared to the lithic deposit ….”

Artefact Collections

(Students: Yemane Gebru, Mulugeta G/meskele, Tesfay G/kristos, Derbe Gelase, Gidey G/her, Getachew Almeneh, Tigst Negash)

“The total collection area of the first site is 8m by 6 m, GPS reading 04 61992/ 1549 357 and its altitude 2078 m. Its topography is a flat plane surrounded by hills to the east, Mirina Primary School to the SE, the stream to the west and settlement to the north and NW. Its soil colour seems like black and silty …. The rectangle surveyed was scarcely covered by cultivated teff [harvested stubble] …. It contains high diversity of lithics, scattered quartz and very small number of ceramics.”

“The collections from rectangle no. 1 are brought to the lab to be sorted and described. We have sorted 162 cherts, of which 47 of them are flakes, 109 fragments, 2 multi-platform cores, 1 casual core, 1 steep convex scraper, and 1 steep concave scraper. We have sorted 10 quartz of which 8 of them are fragments, 1 irregular core, 1 radial core and no flakes. The total number of chalcedony is 12, of which 8 of them are fragments and 3 of them are flakes.”

“The second site, with GPS 04 61901/ 1549 338 and altitude 2078 m, has the total area 4 by 6 m. It has the same topography, color and [soil] texture with the first site, but with high diversity of ceramics. The material collected from this site was not sorted [owing to lack of time].”

(Students: Abrahaley Tesfay, Abraha Tesfay, Goyteom Admasu, Gebremariam Tafere, Haile Tekele, Haagu Zeru)

“The soil texture of the site is blue-brown and its topography is flat agricultural land surrounded by hills in most part except in the eastern direction and in the west direct the site is bounded by a river with beautiful appearance of green grassland. The current land use of the site was agricultural field but the cereals were already harvested.”

“Collection area one measured 6x8=48 m² and area two measured 4x6=24 m² From these areas the concentrations of lithics and ceramics were good surface indicators. Most of the collected artifacts were in their original context, but some are transported from surroundings by different agencies like by plowing, erosion, etc.”

“Most of the lithic materials are flaked from cherts, quartz, obsidian and chalcedony…. among the collected lithics are 75 flakes, 93 fragments, 5 casual cores, 3 radial cores, 3 irregular cores and 3 irregular cores, all are chert. [We also collected] 1 fragment and 2 flakes of chalcedony; 1 radial triangular core [Levallois-style for the production of triangular flakes] and 1 fragment of quartz; 1 fragment of slate; 4 fragments and 2 flakes of obsidian.”

“The collected ceramics differ in terms of colour, design, raw material, thickness, etc., and some of them are decorated, well polished and the others are rough shaped or grooved.”

(Students: Girmaw Gedamu, Tadesse Boja, Ebisa Dechassa, Semane Meressa, Tikubet Debessu, Tesfaye Niguse)

“The site of Mirina is located in the Central Zone of Tigrai. It is surrounded by mountain hills…. The topography of the site is almost flat in nature and vegetation cover is cleared by the land used for agriculture. GPS 0461884/1548337, altitude 2075 m.”
"In our survey activity first of all we select areas where abundance of artifacts and ecofacts are found. Our area size 6x8 m. We collected every trace of past human activities within the choiced area; we have collected lithics, obsidians, ceramic and quartz."

"Because of time and budget scarcity we take samples. In our laboratory room we try to count and measure each artifact by using sample from the biggest to smallest. The counted number of artifacts quantity, materials and their descriptions is listed above by table."

Discussion

The site of Mirina, extending for almost half a kilometre along the left, north-east, bank of Mirina River, is marked by surface occurrences of lithic materials and ceramic sherds exposed in traditionally-ploughed fields, with soil disturbance to an estimated depth of about 100 mm. Despite this disturbance, the remarkably dense concentrations of archaeological materials do not appear to have been greatly displaced. Owing to time constraints, no assessment was made of the ceramic sherds; the lithics are of...
generally Aksumite appearance (cf L. Phillipson 2009),
though the inclusion of a few heavily weathered and
patinated pieces may indicate some prehistoric or
Pre-Aksumite occupation of the area, and the con-
tinuation of lithic knapping into the Post-
Aksumite period is not precluded. Most of the lithics
are of chert, probably derived from a single source.
Much more detailed assessment will be required be-
fore their affinities can be discussed. However, the
absence of backed microliths and of the refined, stand-
ardised lithic tools which are characteristic of many
Aksumite collections made near Aksum is a notewor-
thy feature. Perhaps we have at Mirina a rural, non-
commoditised lithic industry which may pre-date the
Aksumite in its origins and may have continued into
the Post-Aksumite period. This very tentative hy-
pothesis remains to be tested by much more detailed
studies.

The Mirina River valley is a north-westward
tributary extension of a well-watered tract, at about
2200 metres altitude, which extends southwards from
the foot of Dura Hill, close to Axum’s western bound-
ary, to the town of Adet and thence down a steep
escarpment to the Tekeze River. This land, which forms
a remarkably straight and level corridor in an other-
wise very hilly landscape, averages 3 km wide and is
about 35 km long; until recently it was the principal
route southwards from Axum and must have been so
in ancient times. It is bounded on the west by the
convoluted hills of the Sidebey Ridge, rising to about
2500 meters, and on the east by the Aneseti River.
Several archaeological sites in addition to Mirina and
Seglemin have been reported or observed along this
corridor, but are not yet recorded, and it is antici-
pated that other sites have yet to be located. It is
hypothesized that villages in this corridor area, which
is better watered than the plains immediately to the
west and east of Axum, may have prospered both
from their position on a major ancient trade route and
from their provision of food stuffs to the Aksum
conurbation.

Conclusions

Owing to time constraints, only a brief exami-
nation could be made of a small sample of the very
abundant lithic artefacts exposed at this site and no
examination of the ceramics. The primary purpose of
the Field School was to give the students an initial
experience of hands-on archaeology and to assess
the area’s potential for future research. Both of these
aims were successfully met and this important and
extremely interesting corridor area from the site of
Seglemin southwards to the town of Adet has been
designated as the focus for future, longer, Joint Field
Schools of the University of Axum, Department of
Archaeology and the University of Naples,
“l’Orientale”. These will be conducted under the aus-
pices of the agreement signed in 2008 between the
University of Axum and the University of Naples,
“l’Orientale”. The agreement includes the exchange
of students and professors between the institutions
involved as well as the establishment of joint research
projects. The next Joint Field School is scheduled for
October-November 2010.

Bibliography

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