Archaeological Survey and Test Excavations, Harlaa, Dire Dawa, and Sofi, Harari Regional State, Ethiopia, August 2015. A Preliminary Fieldwork Report

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Introduction

Islamisation, the origins of ethnic identity, and of the settlements linked with different groups in eastern Ethiopia have been the subject of some historical research (cf. Ahmed 1992: 45; Braukämper 2004; Chekroun et al. 2011), but despite recognition of the potential for archaeological research (e.g., Waldron 1978: 239) have been largely ignored by archaeologists. This reflects the fact that Islamic archaeology in general in Ethiopia has been neglected (Insoll 2003). The absence of Islamic archaeological research in Ethiopia, and in eastern Ethiopia in particular, is an omission of consequence because of the importance of this region for Islamisation and as a focal point of international trade. Beginning in July-August 2014, excavations have been focused on Harar and its wider region (Insoll et al. 2014), and in Harlaa, Dire Dawa, to

1. Establish a settlement chronology through radiometric dating.
2. Establish a ceramics typology.
3. Assess the archaeological evidence for regional and long distance trade.
4. Examine the material evidence for Islamisation.

In August 2015 a second season of archaeological test excavation and survey was completed. Timothy Insoll directed the fieldwork, assisted throughout by Rachel MacLean of the University of Manchester and Blade Engda of the ARCCH, and in Harlaa by Ermias Tadessa, and in Harar by Muhammad Rabih.

Survey at Harlaa

Site Components. Harlaa is situated northwest of Harar and approximately 15km southeast of Dire Dawa (Figure 1). The name of the currently occupied village overlying much of the site is Ganda Biyo. Chekroun et al. (2011: 79-80) have reviewed the previous research completed at Harlaa, which has been limited to survey, some unpublished. Archaeological survey formed an element of the 2015 fieldwork. This indicated that Harlaa is a multi-component site formed of settlement areas, combining residential and manufacturing usage, cemeteries, mosques, and sections of defensive wall (Figure 2). The site is dominated by a ‘citadel’, which has been largely destroyed by quarrying to obtain stone for modern house construction and to build terraces for khat (Catha edulis) cultivation (Figure 2). Only on the northern, relatively inaccessible side of the citadel hill does an area of ‘Harla’ housing survive (Figure 2).

The remainder of the settlement areas are below ground and their presence is only occasionally indicated on the surface by wall outlines or features such as wells or pits. Test excavation further suggested that the bulk of the settlement is buried approximately south of the citadel. This is also the area in which local farmers are continually finding archaeological material such as beads, coins, imported glazed pottery, locally produced pottery, moulds, and glassware while digging in their fields.
Figure 1: The locations of Harlaa and Sofi in eastern Ethiopia.
Two stone built structures apparently unconnected with the modern village survive. The first, described as a mosque by local inhabitants and near to the Dire Dawa road, is possibly more recent than the other, as indicated by the use of what appears to be modern mortar for its construction or repair. Doubts as to the age of this structure and its function as a mosque were voiced by Chekroun et al. (2011: 80), though local informants deny this and state that the building is a mosque and its ruinous condition was due to it being blown up by the Italians during their control of the region (presumably, ca. 1936-1941), and that it substantially predates this event. The date and function of this structure cannot yet be confirmed, as it has not been investigated as part of the current research.

The second building, which is a mosque, differs in having been built using lime based mortar. This was the focus of excavation, discussed below. Sections of a substantial stone built defensive wall also survive (e.g., N09.28090’ E041.544579’), particularly on the southern side of the site. This is constructed from large blocks of stone, some in excess of 100cm in length by about 50cm width. North and east of the settlement area and outside the perimeter of the defensive wall are cemeteries (Figure 2). Many of the graves have been damaged by cultivation and although cemeteries and burial have not yet been the focus of detailed survey preliminary indications are that they vary in size with individual inhumations common. A larger mausoleum built of stone and containing multiple graves was also recorded (N09.27305’ E041.55085’).

Inscriptions. Two new Arabic inscriptions were also recorded during the survey. These possibly had been originally associated with burials, but were not seen in situ, for both inscriptions had been removed from their original contexts by local villagers during farming activities. These inscriptions add to the corpus of epigraphy from Harlaa previously published by Schneider (1969) and Bauden (2011). One of the new inscriptions (ca. 41cm width x 44cm height) is from the hamlet of Ganda Oda, northwest of the main Harlaa site, the other is from Harlaa (ca. 40cm width x 46cm height) and is a fragment of a larger stela. Both are sandstone and are undated. The Ganda Oda stela has carved on it part of an inscription
from the Quran 48: 3-1. Frédéric Bauden who identified this (personal communication 23/9/15) has also indicated that the text on this stone is identical to another (no.10) from Tchélenko southwest of Harar published initially by Littmann in 1924 (Littmann 1924: 238), and subsequently by Ravaisse (1931: 296). He notes that “only a very small part of line 1 is still visible and a slightly longer one on 2. The remainder of the text must be restored on the basis of the inscription in Littmann” (F. Bauden personal communication 23/9/15). The complete Arabic inscription would read, line 1, “In the Name of the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”, line 2, “We have given you a glorious victory”. The partial Harlaa stela only has the words “On God” engraved on it (S. Almahari personal communication 23/9/15).

Excavations at Harlaa

Two test excavations were completed at Harlaa in areas identified by the survey and given the codes HAR 15 (A) and HAR 15 (B).

Mosque Excavation. The first site excavated was the stone built mosque (HAR 15 [A]; approximately N09.28096˚ E041.54457˚). Chekroun et al. (2011: 81) give the dimensions as 9.3x7.4x8.9x6.9m, with a maximum standing wall height of 3.25m, which generally accords with the building survey completed in 2015 (Figure 3). The walls could be accessed on three sides, with the fourth northern wall almost totally obscured on its external face with material that had been washed down from the slope behind. Excavation was concentrated in the mosque interior with a unit excavated matching the dimensions of the eastern half of the internal ground plan (Figure 3).

The first layer removed was of loose stone rubble from the partially collapsed walls. The rubble layer and the mosque walls themselves indicated that different types of stone, basalt and granite, and in both shaped and unshaped blocks had been used in its construction. The mihrab, a small niche within the mihrab, and a larger adjacent niche were all identified. To concentrate on these features and the surrounding northern part of the mosque interior the excavation unit boundaries was initially reduced to an area of 400x200cm, and then again to an area

Figure 3: Plan of the mosque excavated at Harlaa (HAR 15 [A]).
of 300x200cm (Figure 3). Large plaster fragments likely to have come down from the roof, as there were no traces of internal plaster on the walls, were also found. Beneath these was a layer of white lime and stone filled matrix, which in turn yielded to a white lime mortar and gravel (plaster) floor of ca. 5-10mm depth encountered everywhere except in the mihrab, which had a bedrock floor. A posthole (ca. 14x17cm diameter x 32cm depth) was also recorded in the floor, which might have held a pillar to support the roof.

It was suggested by local informants that the mosque roof had been built of timber and plaster/mortar supported by wooden columns. Consensus was also that the larger niche was used by the Imam to sit whilst delivering sermons, and the smaller niche in the mihrab for storing a copy of the Qur’an. The use of coralline limestone in the mihrab might further represent an architectural style indicative of Red Sea coastal influences (cf. Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2011: 46). The Harlaa building also bears comparison with other mosques in the interior of Somaliland described by Curle (1937), as in the use of stone blocks and lime mortar as construction materials. However, the interior Somaliland mosques also differ in the extensive use of stone pillars lacking in Harlaa (cf. Curle 1937: Plate 3; Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2011: Fig. 2.8).

Only small quantities of archaeological material were recovered from this excavation. This is to be expected inside a mosque, a building likely to be kept clean (cf. Insoll 1999: 41). Besides locally made ceramics discussed below, a single sherd of ‘biscuit’ ware was the only imported ware found. The AMS dating of the site is in progress.

Settlement Area Excavation. A second test excavation of 200x280cm was completed in the buried settlement area (HAR 15 [B]; N09.28101˚ E041.54453˚). This uncovered structural remains comprising a section of stone wall and 2 areas of flooring formed of flat basalt, and flat sandstone slabs (Figure 4). A concentration of charcoal, an iron furnace base and a significant density of faunal remains in the unit suggest kitchen and/or industrial activity either inside or outside the structure represented by the wall and floor areas. This building will be investigated through further excavation in 2016.

In contrast to HAR 15 (A) large quantities of archaeological material were recovered from this excavation: locally made pottery, glazed imported ceramics, beads, metal fragments, glass vessel and bracelet frag-

Figure 4: Plan of the structural remains recorded in the settlement area at Harlaa (HAR 15 [B]).
ments, cowry and other shells. This material is in the process of being analysed. However, extensive trade connections are attested. The imported pottery is composed of both Chinese (Celadon, white ware, possibly Qingbai), and Islamic ceramics (black on yellow or ‘mustard’ wares, unidentified green, black, and brown glazed wares). The glass fragments are predominantly from vessels and include clear, brown, blue, and green glass. Three glass bracelet fragments were also recovered. The bead assemblage is particularly diverse both in the materials and forms represented. Besides glass trade beads in medium and short cylinder shapes, it includes carnelian, rock crystal, coral, and banded agate beads. The origins of these materials are as yet unknown, but could include: Egypt and the Near East for the glass vessels, and some of the glass beads and glass bracelets; the Red Sea for the coral and some of the shell; elsewhere in East Africa for the rock crystal; western India for some of the carnelian beads; Yemen for some of the glazed pottery, e.g. ‘mustard wares’ (cf. Bridgman 2009: 136-137) and some of the glass bracelets; and the Maldives for cowry shells.

It is also possible that manufacturing of some of these artifacts took place at Harlaa. An undrilled rough out of a biconical rock crystal/quartz bead was recovered and another rock crystal bead had drill holes that did not meet in the middle suggesting it was made on site. Finished coral beads were found, as were undrilled pieces of coral that could be used for making identical beads. Cut conus shells and back ground and chipped cowries were recorded along with pieces of shell cut from conus and cowry, and other unidentified species, as well as an elliptical shell bead blank with flattened ends and a short undrilled shell bicone, either a bead or a weight. Other manufacturing is likely represented. The spindle whorls imply weaving, and the numerous crucible fragments that metals or vitreous materials were being melted for casting. The presence of what have been classified as gemstones, small cut or uncut pieces of carnelian, other agates and rock crystal suggest lapidary work. Iron smelting or working is attested by iron slag and furnace base fragments, and possibly by a piece of ore, awaiting identification.

AMS dating is in progress, but the imported ceramics suggest a date of between the 12th to 14th centuries AD. This date range is supported by unstratified finds collected by local villagers during farming activities at Harlaa. These were regularly brought to the excavations where they were recorded and returned to the villagers. Chronologically significant artefacts included imported trade artifacts, for example, a nearly complete Chinese white ware bowl, possibly Qingbai porcelain, and sizeable base sherds from three Celadon vessels. A bronze Chinese coin was also recorded with the inscription “Kai yuan tonbao” on it, meaning, “circulating treasure of the new beginning” (Wilson and Flecker 2010: 38). These coins were issued from 621 AD (Tang dynasty) but remained in circulation for a considerable time afterwards (H. Wang personal communication 15/9/15; cf. Cribb and Potts 1996: 109, 112). Islamic coins were represented by three silver coins, 10 clipped silver coins and two bronze coins. Preliminary reading indicates these seem to be mostly Ayyubid issues of the 12th to 13th centuries AD (V.S. Curtis personal communication 15/9/15).

Local Pottery. Initial classification of the locally made pottery from HAR 15 (A) and HAR 15 (B) identified three dominant categories of pottery.

1. Red burnished or unburnished wares made in a spectrum of red fabric types from fine to coarse, but predominantly fine.
2. Black burnished wares in fine black fabric, either undecorated or decorated with appliqué, painting, impression or incision.
3. Brown burnished wares that are probably a sub-category of black burnished wares.

A range of rim forms were recorded with diameters of between 9 to 39cm and vessel forms include jars with rounded rims, and bowls with slightly everted in-turned or out-turned rims (Figure 5). Overall, the black burnished wares seem to have been serving vessels, and the coarser unburnished wares cooking or storage/fermenting vessels. Some of the black burnished base sherds appear to be copies of Islamic or Chinese glazed ware foot rings. Two brown burnished sherds also had a glaze residue on their interiors suggestive of either an experiment in glazing or the result of another industrial process at the Harlaa settlement (HAR 15 [B]).

A further insight into vessel forms was also gained from four complete pots found by local villagers and brought to the excavations for recording. These comprised an undecorated flat-bottomed vessel with a round body and narrow collar neck and straight rim, a round bodied vessel with a slightly in-turned rim decorated with areas of impressed or incised angled oval patterns, a double handled round bodied vessel with rolled out-turned rim decorated with incised or impressed lines meeting at an appliqué lump as if representing scarification patterns.
centred on a navel, and an urn type vessel with a simple open rim and lid and with two pairs of lump type handles on opposite sides of the body.

**Sofi Burial Mound**

The second site excavated was a burial mound in the village of Sofi, approximately 12.5km southeast of Harar (N09.26004° E042.14605°) (Figure 1). This site was initially excavated in 2014 (Insoll et al. 2014), when it was given the code TUM 14 (A). The excavation was unfinished in 2014 and was resumed in 2015 and coded TUM 15 (A). Measuring 13m southeast to northwest by 14.2m northeast to southwest and about 150cm in height, the mound was excavated with a trench of 2mx5m placed in its northern quadrant.

The renewed excavations indicated that the tumulus was built, contrary to initial observations in 2014 (Insoll et al. 2014: 105) of progressively larger layers of stones, with the most massive at the base and getting smaller as the surface of the mound was reached. Thus the tumulus was composed of an outer layer of smaller stone pebbles and cobbles with beneath a second layer of larger boulders. These larger boulders and the basal stone foundation layer were white in colour, which the local farmers said was non-local. Whether this stone, which is possibly limestone, is exotic has not yet been identified, but it differs from the pink granite outcropping directly south of the tumulus. All the stones were unworked.

At the base of the mound a single fragmentary human burial was recorded towards the northern edge of the tumulus next to an upright stone slab that had been placed on its edge in the ground. This appeared to be oriented north to south and was 4m out from the centre of the mound. The burial had been destroyed by stone collapse from above fragmenting the human remains and any pots that had been originally placed as grave goods, as perhaps were represented by the few potsherds found with the burial. The poor state of the burial was further exacerbated by the bad bone preservation resulting from the soil conditions. The local workmen said that in their experience of removing or digging tumuli during farming, there tended to be two or three burials on the outside.

![Figure 5: Rim profiles recorded in HAR 15 (A) and HAR 15 (B), top row, 1, thickened everted, 2, thickened open, 3, thickened closed, 4, flattened closed, 5, flattened slightly everted in-turned, bottom row, 1, rolled open, 2, slightly everted out-turned, 8, jar with rounded rim, 9, rolled out-turned closed, 10, ‘nose’ handle.](image-url)
edge of a mound rather than being placed in the centre. No definite trace of a central chamber was found but some potsherds and corroded scraps of iron were recorded at the centre of the mound just above ground level. This possibly represented the remains of a further central burial but the poor conditions for bone preservation allied with the likelihood that the burial had also been crushed by stone collapse precluded a definite burial identification. Excavation was terminated at ground level and the unit backfilled over plastic sheeting.

An AMS date was obtained from charcoal from the interface between the outer stone layer and the larger stone slabs (TUM 15 [A] 1) of Cal AD 1275 to 1385 (2 Sigma calibration; Beta-421104). A TL date of AD 1224+/−80 (W4824) was also obtained from a potsherd retrieved from the second larger boulder layer during the 2014 excavations (TUM 14 [A] 2). This suggests an overall chronology for this burial tumulus of the 13th to 14th centuries AD.

Only a small quantity of archaeological material was recovered from TUM 15 (A). The pottery from TUM 15 (A) was unglazed and is of similar types to those recovered in the 2014 excavations (cf. Insoll et al. 2014). This includes wares decorated with impressed finger marks on a medium black fabric, as well as black fabric wares burnished on the interior. Other wares recorded were undecorated and had black, brown, or pale pink brown medium fabric. The rims represented were simple open, simple closed, slightly everted open, and everted open forms (Figure 6).

Conclusions

As yet, the relationship between Harar and Harlaa is unclear. This will be better established once the AMS dates from Harlaa are received and considered. Currently, the earliest AMS date from Harar is from the Emir’s Palace excavation, PAL 14 (A) (cf. Insoll et al. 2014). This is of Cal AD 1431-1476 (2 Sigma calibration; GX-33812; PAL 14 [A] 7), and indicates that Harar was certainly established by this date. Currently, the imported glazed ceramics of the 12th to 14th centuries AD from Harlaa suggest that this site predates Harar, though earlier material may be recovered in future excavations in Harar.

Figure 6: Rim profiles recorded in TUM 15 (A), top left, simple open (TUM 15 [A] 2.1), top right, simple closed (TUM 15 [A] 2.3), bottom left, slightly everted open (TUM 15 [A] 2.6), bottom right, everted open (TUM 15 [A] 3.2).
There are also significant differences between Harar and Harlaa evident in the archaeological material recovered. The extensive quantities of imported artefacts from Harlaa are so far lacking in Harar. However, preliminary indications are that there are possibly generic similarities in some aspects of the local pottery assemblages from Harar and Harlaa, in the presence of shallow bowl rim forms and the black burnished wares from both sites. The Harlaa wares however are of finer fabric and manufacture, and the Harar black burnished wares lack base foot rings, and incised decoration. Potential ceramic parallels can also be noted between regional sites test excavated outside Harar in 2014 (Insoll et al. 2014), and Harlaa, as in the red slipped/red fabric wares from Harlaa and those from the site of Tulu-Korefta, 17km southeast of Harar. The fine quality of some rims from Tulu-Korefta, and those from Ganda Harla, 1km north of the burial tumulus at Sofi, are also suggestive of potential similarities with the Harlaa assemblages. Future ceramic analysis will help identify the extent to which ceramic affinities can be reconstructed.

It is also apparent that Harlaa was a very important, at least partially Islamised trade centre. The presence of artefacts from Arabia, the Red Sea, and China, alongside those from the local context and probably also from western India and elsewhere in East Africa reflects at the least participation in heterogeneous and cosmopolitan economic and likely social systems as well. Based on the imported glazed ceramics obtained so far, this seems to have been for a relatively brief period between the 12th and 14th centuries AD when it was potentially connected with the Sultanate of Ifat (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011: 24; cf. Insoll 2003: 73). Yet the heterogeneity of belief in the region must also be recognised, for the chronology of the Sofi burial mound also indicates that in the 12th to 14th centuries AD Islam was not universally accepted and non-Muslim burial practices continued.

In summary, complex patterns of trade, urbanism, religious belief and ritual practice are beginning to be indicated archaeologically. These will be further explored through extended excavations at Harlaa in 2016.

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