

■ ETHIOPIA

Newly Discovered Archaeological Sites from Feresmay Area (Tigray, Ethiopia)

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Introduction

Feresmay is located in the Central Zone of Tigray Regional State administration, and is one of the local administrative divisions of Ahferom *Wereda* in northern Ethiopia (Figure 1). Feresmay is approximately 55km east of Aksum, the capital of the ancient Aksumite Empire, and 34km from the town of Adwa, where the most decisive battle between Ethiopia and Italy took place in 1896.

Archaeological sites in Tigray have come to light usually by accident, while others have never been obscured from the public eye because of their location. Previous archaeological research has focused on the well-known centers, which are easily accessible. But sites that may exist far from centers/towns are neglected. Almost no attempt has been made in Tigray to explore remote areas for the existence of archaeological sites (but see D'Andrea et al. 2008; Michels 1974). Joseph Michels carried out the first and the most intensive archaeological survey in 1974. Michels' survey covered the area from Aksum (and a little farther to its west) to Yeha. His survey included areas just north of site III, one of the newly discovered sites discussed in this article.

Survey Objectives

The present survey was conducted over two seasons – the first in December 2008, and the second in March 2009. Our field objects were to:

- Identify the existence of archaeological sites between Yeha and Addi Akaweh, two potential sites from the “pre-Aksumite” period.
- Record site types and current conditions.
- Alert responsible bodies at different administration levels including the Culture and Tourism Office of the administrative region in regards to site protection.
- Document the sites for future full-scale excavation and research.

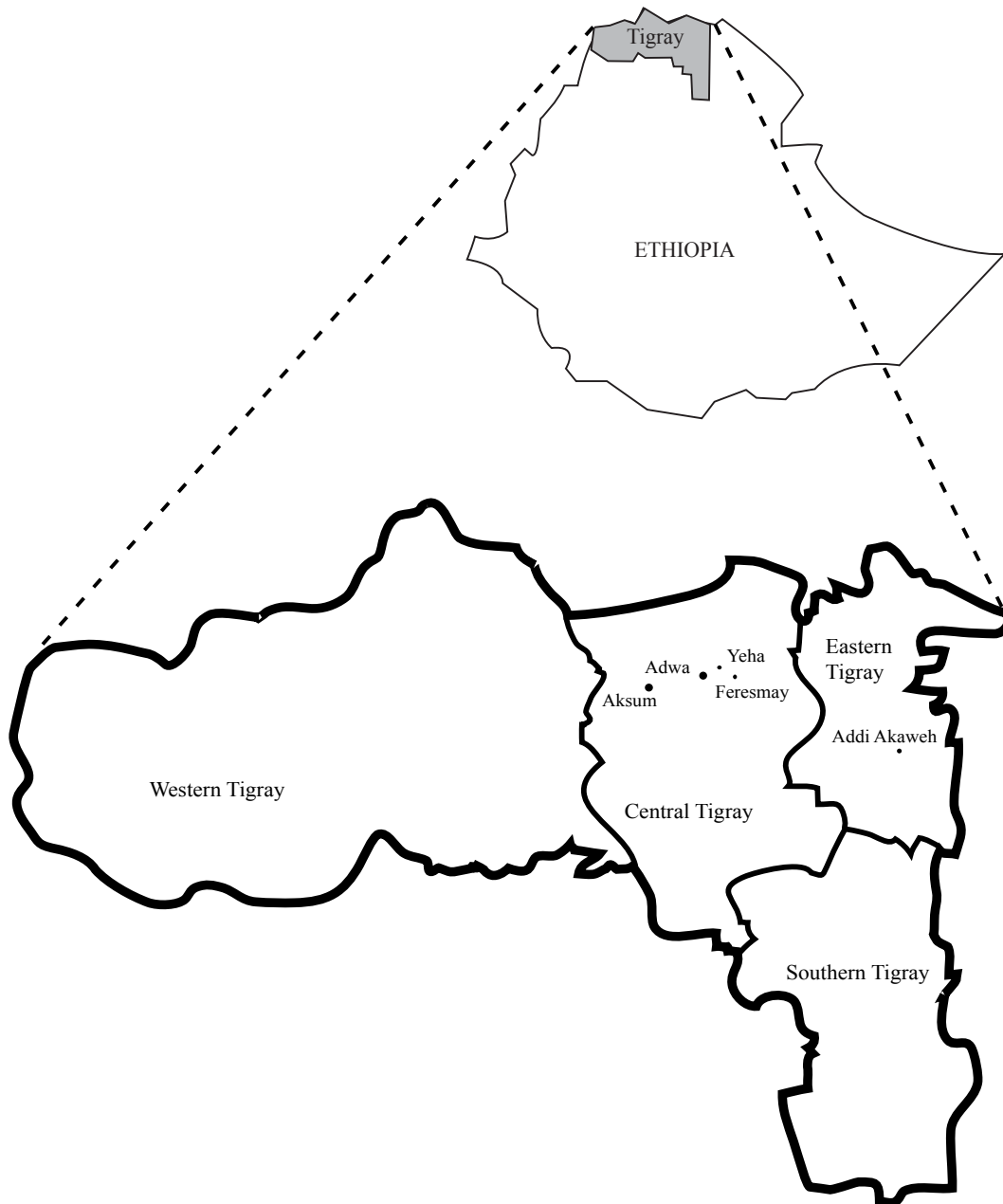
Results of the Survey

Due to limited time and budget the survey was conducted for a few days only, but it provided preliminary information for future intensive, organized and multidisciplinary survey. The survey yielded very important and rich information on the existence of “pre-Aksumite” archaeological sites. Also it indicated the potential existence of additional archaeological sites in the yet unexplored vicinity. Four sites were discovered, the details of which are discussed in this paper.

Site I. Enda Giorgis Rock-cut Temple. Enda Giorgis is named after the local church called St. George (Figure 2), and is the name of a specific place found within the Addi Satra peasant local administration. The site can be reached on foot after a gentle one and half hour walk southeast of the small town of Feresmay. Enda Giorgis is located at the foot of a steep cliff in a small area that is surrounded by large densely grown trees, climbing trees and bushes (E39° 09.105”, N14° 07.992”, at an altitude of 2100m asl). This small forest is well preserved since it belongs to a sacred place.

The site is identified by the presence of a pre-Christian¹ rock-cut temple, pre-Christian buri-

Figure 1: Location of the study area. Note that Feresmay is located between Yeha and Addi Akaweh, which are the two most important known sites from the Pre-Aksumite period in Tigray.



als and stela. The temple is curved with monoliths of reddish sandstone with a visible and unfinished entrance on its west side. The flat temple roof has two holes that are cut down from the exterior surface. The holes are narrow at their opening and wider at the base of the holes. The function of these two holes is unknown. Similar features can be observed in the church of Abune Pantelewon near Aksum. Here the church rests on a small hilltop

built on an ancient site, which was used for worship during the pre-Christian period. When Christianity was introduced to Aksum in the fourth century AD, Abune Pantelewon, one of the nine saints who came to Ethiopia from Syria and Rome, converted the ancient pre-Christian temple into a Christian place of worship. Subsequently a church was constructed at this place in the sixth century AD, where it still stands today.

Figure 2: Christian church (St. George) built on top of the rock-cut pre-Christian temple at Enda Giorgis (view from the west).



The rock-cut temple of Enda Giorgis has four small holes cut into the natural rock on the southern edge of the top surface of the rock-cut temple. They are arranged in rows, two on each line. These may have been used for offerings in the pre-Christian tradition. The presence of such sacrificial holes and the deeply cut holes inside the present small building may indicate the area as the holy of holies in the pre-Christian period. Eight steps built of sand stone are visible west of the rock-cut temple. However, the most ancient ones are not fully functional today, and some lateral steps were added. Nevertheless, all the original steps are still intact. From the eastern side of the temple, a short but upright stela is found standing to an approximate height of 1.5m. There is some evidence that the stela is not of its original size and appearance. It may have experienced deliberate damage after the abandonment of the site as a pre-Christian place of worship.

With the introduction of Christianity, the temple at Enda Giorgis was converted into a Christian place of worship. As a result, a small church was built on top of the ancient rock-cut temple. It was built with a space along the edge of the rock-cut temple so that people could walk around the church

during mass. For example, the space around the church's southern edge is up to 2 meters wide (Figure 2). This Christian church has two entrances: one in the south and another in the north. Inside, it has two sections: 1) the western section for all people, and 2) the holy of holies with an altar inside, (locally made from mud and stone), where only two priests and three deacons are allowed to enter and to lead the mass. People of this village have a service in this church once a year to commemorate the saint. During the rest of the year the church is left empty and open to everyone.

Figure 3: Mouth (opening) of the rock-cut tomb.



At the foot of the temple, (on its south side), some burials were observed that were built of small stones and mortar and located inside the crevice of the natural rock. West of the temple is another important burial site. It is 7m from the temple and is also a rock-cut type of burial (Figure 3). Some old steps, hewn from the natural rock, lead to the top of the rock where the burial is located. The top of the rock slants to the south. The tomb is cut into the northern edge of the rock, first perpendicular to the surface and then at an angle turned to the southeast in order to accommodate a human body. The presence of archaeological traces such as small stones used to cover the burials and fragments of bones also indicate that the whole top surface of the rock was used as a cemetery. The tomb was originally

Figure 4: View of the cultural mound in Feresmay town. Houses totally surround the mound.



closed with flat stone slabs. However, some of the stone slabs were removed by the carelessness of people. Inside the hole, some (human?) bones can be seen clearly. The height of the rock measures 3.5m from the ground to the top of the stone on the northern side and about 2m on the southern side. On the west side of the rock, there is a cave-like artificial hole that possibly was intended as an entrance, burial or shelter.

Site II. Feresmay Cultural Mound. This site is located at the southern edge of the town of Feresmay (39° 06'443"E, 140 09'933"N, at an altitude of 1972m asl), and is surrounded by the plain of Feresmay (Figure 4). Because of its long history of origin, there is a legend about the site. It is said by the local people that this artificial hill was built for the purpose of worship, which means that there could have been a temple on top of the mound that no longer exists. Whatever the purpose of its construction in the remote past, significant human resources must have been mobilized for its construc-

tion based on the size of the mound and the 3km distance to the source of soil and stone.

The top of the mound has a diameter of approximately 200m and it rises to an estimated height of 80m above the plain. The mound is in the shape of a pyramid with steps round the whole mound leading to its top; it is wide at the base and tapers to its flat top. The stone used to construct the mound is black (basalt?) stone and the soil is red. Because this site is found some 25km from the main centre of Yeha, it may have belonged to a community under a local chief based in Feresmay.

At present, the expansion of the town is a major threat to this ancient cultural mound. It is almost surrounded by the construction of new houses, and people were observed using stone from the mound for building purposes. The top and the side of the mound are tilled, and this is done again by removing the stones. People have constructed some terraces to protect the soil from erosion, and so that

they can use the site for cultivation. The top of the mound also is used for dumping garbage. It seems that the local administration has not realized that the site is an ancient cultural mound.

Site III. Adi Ba'ekel. This archaeological site is found also in Ahferom Wereda at Adi Yi'eqoro local administration and at the specific loci called Da'ero. The site is about 29km from Adwa town and is reached by vehicle. Situated on a very flat area, the site is located at the recently founded town of Adi Ba'ekel. The road to Feresmay passes through this small town. Plain agricultural land is located to the east of the road. On the surface, traces of ancient structures can be seen with Sabean inscription and there is a stela field.

Site III-I. The Inscription Site. This site is located close to the Adwa-Feresmay road on a flat area (14°11'724"N, 039°04'328"E, at an altitude of 2033m asl). The main site is used for cultivation, and currently it belongs to the government. It is used as a demonstration site for selected crops. Peasants from the village plough the land as a group on the government's behalf. The land has been used for cultivation for centuries. Recently, however, when peasants were ploughing the land the tip of the plough touched the edge of a stone in the ground and as a result ploughing was stopped. A farmer, named G/Medhin Assefa, excavated the stone because it was decorated with Sabean letters. The farmer always collects stones for construction from this flat field by excavating with his pick. Most of the stones he collects are worked (as observed by the author) and must belong to an ancient structure buried in the ground. In June 2008, the farmer put the inscribed stone in his house for special care. All the other stones collected from the same site were used for fencing, and some were used as a seat. There are many worked stones in his compound that measure up to 60cm x 25cm that originally came from a building structure.

The stone with the Sabean script (Figure 5) measures 46cm x 26cm. The right side of the slab in the figure is partially damaged. The script is carved

in five rows and the space between lines ranges from 1 to 2.5cm and the height of the letters is between 5 to 7.5cm.

Figure 5: Stone with Sabean inscription (note the damage on the edge of the stone on its right side as viewed in the image).



Over the last five years, the site of the inscription has come under the control of the government. But the site has never been protected with a fence or a guard so there is no one to protect the archaeological materials on this property. As a result the archaeological site is exposed to destruction by anyone. Especially now, after the site has yielded a stone with Sabean script, people may go in search of other treasures that may be buried in the ground.

Another immediate threat to the site is the practice of excavating soil from this location to make mortar for house construction. Very soon the land will be allocated to people for house construc-

tion. It was evident during my assessment of the site, that new houses were being built very close to the main site where the inscription and other stone slabs were recovered (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Site of the inscription now being surrounded by house construction.



Site III-II. Stelae Field. This site is located 300m east of the inscription site. The stelae are found scattered in an agricultural field, which belongs to a farmer named Girmay Aregahey. The farmer collected most of the stelae for construction purposes. Some stelae remain partially buried and, because of their size, were not destroyed by the farmer (Figure 7). Sadly, some of the stelae were broken when the farmer tried to take them from the ground for his personal use. By the time the author arrived at the site, most of the stelae were readied for fence and house construction. The farmer even admitted that he would not stop his use of the stelae for construction purposes. An attempt was made to convince him to stop and, finally, the author informed the local administrator to closely watch the farmer's action in regard to the stelae.

Site IV. Filhat Giorgis. This site is located approximately 4km northwest of Feresmay. The area is identified as an ancient site/settlement by the presence of piles of stones from ancient structures and by the presence of a stela. People live on top of the main ancient site of Filhat Giorgis, and have

even built a church. Stones from ancient structures were reused for the construction of houses and masonry wall fences. A large portion of the site is used for cultivation, and every season the plough exposes and damages artifacts and structures. Farmers also collect the exposed artifacts and stones. For example, one farmer had a small intact pot, a nail (?), bracelet, and a piece of molded metal (Figure 8). According to the farmer, the plough exposed each object at different times.

Figure 7: Stela from Site III-II shown partially buried.



Figure 8: Some of the artifacts collected by farmers.



The present residents of the site also have removed the stela from its original place and re-erected it in front of the church. The stela is converted symbolically into Christian material culture with a painted cross (Figure 9). Almost all of the stone used to construct the main church building, its masonry fence wall, and the *dej selam* (a building where priests and deacons are served with holy bread and wine after the mass) are from the ancient structures. Much information about the ancient site has been lost because of this damage. It is even said that some objects have been taken to towns to be sold to collectors, dealers and tourists.

Figure 9: Stela with a painted cross.



Another problem is erosion. The northern side of the site is highly eroded by the creation of a deep gorge. On this section, the site is exposed to ongoing erosion and every year large portions of the archaeological remains are eroded away. The author was able to examine the depth of the eroded

section where archaeological evidence can be observed. Metal and pottery fragments were collected from the eroded section at an approximate depth of 6m below the surface. There is no doubt that many artifacts and other archaeological data were displaced by erosion and re-buried elsewhere.

Recommendations:

The only way to preserve information of these sites is by rescue excavation, documentation and ultimately the display of the objects in a museum and the publication of the information. We suggest the following recommendations:

- Government administrative bodies at different levels (local, Wereda and Zone) should take action to stop farmers from cultivating on the ancient sites, which could be accomplished by allotting alternative land to the farmers.
- Removing stones from the sites, for any purpose, should be stopped.
- The Culture and Tourism Agency of Tigray Regional State should play a greater role in inviting researchers to undertake research of these sites.
- An urgent intervention to the sites for rescue excavation is sought. Academic institutions, in collaboration with the aforementioned agency and local, *Wereda*, Zone and regional administrative offices, should play a leadership role in preserving the history and the tangible heritage from prevailing destructive agents. A community awareness strategy to protect these ancient sites should be implemented.
- The sites can provide an opportunity to train archaeology students from Aksum University (the nearest University to the sites) in rescue archaeology and cultural heritage management.

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Footnotes

¹Christianity was introduced to Aksum in the first half of the fourth century AD; this marks the division between the pre-Christian and Christian periods in Ethiopian history.