

The Ketema Ra'isi site near the Tekkeze river in Tigray (Ethiopia): A possible Aksumite site in the context of Ezana's war against the Nobā



Abstract: The ruins of the Ketema Ra'isi site in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia could prove to be the southernmost site on the westernmost border of the Aksumite empire, at least during the times of king Ezana and his immediate successors. The mound of ruins contains a residential complex enclosed inside a stone wall featuring typical Aksumite architectural building techniques. Three Aksumite coins collected from the site yield a *terminus ante quem* date for the settlement in the Middle Aksumite period (mid-4th century AD). Therefore, the potential of the site for future archaeological exploration by the PolART expedition is substantial.

Keywords: Tigray region, Ethiopia, survey, coins, miniature vessels, Tekkeze river, king Ezana, RIÉ 189 inscription

Ketema Ra'isi was one of the sites visited in 2019 by the PCMA University of Warsaw team while selecting a site for the first Polish archaeological project to excavate in Ethiopia [Fig. 1]. The little studied western and southern Tigray was high on the list, but in the end it was Debre Gergis in the eastern part of the region that was chosen (Gaudiello 2020; forthcoming;

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see Gaudiello and Mackiewicz 2021, in this volume). The dozens of built and rock-hewn churches in this area (Phillipson 2010: 29–50; 2014: 126–132) from the end of the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century attest to a continued population growth in the area even after the collapse of the mighty Aksumite kingdom (Phillipson 2014: 210–212). However, had the choice been different, Ketema Ra'isi could have provided an excellent beginning for a project designed to retrace the military advance of Ezana to the Sudanese land (Gaudiello 2020: 7). Even more, the site and its vicinity could have enhanced our knowledge of the western limits of the Aksumite Empire. As it is, the PolART expedition will return to Ketema Ra'isi sometime in the future, when the circumstances are more favorable. The results will probably provide an archaeological link between the central-western Tigray and the southern lands of Sudan, where the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology, University of Warsaw, has been working since the early 1960s.

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

By the end of the 6th century the powerful Aksumite Empire, which had spread in the 1st century BC from the foot of the Bieta Giyorgis hill to cover all of the northern Horn of Africa (Phillipson 2014: 69; Fattovich 2019: 256), had slipped slowly into decline. After adoption of the Christian faith by king Ezana (about AD 340, see Phillipson 2014: 98), the kingdom developed a strong religious dependence on the Patriarchate of Alexandria and it was in a position to maintain diplomatic, commercial and even military connections with the Oriental Roman Empire in Byzantium. The Aksumites had exercised control over the Red Sea trade network for millennia, especially in the waters off ancient Yemen, which they also occupied twice (Robin 1989; Phillipson 2014: 203–206; Gaudiello 2019: 217–225). In the 6th century, just before the Persian conquest, they had shared with their Byzantine allies as far as dominance over the sea trade is concerned. As Niall Finneran

put it, “with the conversion of the Aksumite kingdom to Christianity in the mid-4th century, Aksum becomes part of the economic and ideological network centred upon the Byzantine eastern Mediterranean” (Finneran 2007: 22). Starting with the first classical accounts describing ancient northern Ethiopia and Eritrea (*Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes), and the first European travellers visiting the region (for references see Fattovich 1992; Wenig 2006), most of the knowledge about the region of northern Abyssinia has been restricted to the Red Sea route taking its course from the Aksumite port of Adulis in Eritrea, and running southward and then into modern eastern Tigray and then westward to the capital city of Aksum. Most of the modern research and current archaeological projects have followed this inland route, for the most part clustering tightly in the central and eastern Tigray [see Fig. 1]. The site

of Debre Gergis, under excavation by the PolART expedition since 2020, was built most probably on the trade route from Adulis to Aksum, as suggested by a piece of marble/alabaster with sole parallels among the decoration of the Adulis churches (Gaudiello and Mackiewicz 2021, in this volume; Gaudiello forthcoming).

Sources like the *Periplus* and the *Christian Topography* talked of ancient African landscapes, different tribes and kingdoms, and goods subject to trade exchange along the entire inner African route. In addition, the so-called 'Monumentum Adulitanum' (Marrassini 2014: 35, 196–203; RIÉ 277 in Bernand, Drewes, and Schneider 1991: 378–382; 2000: 32–45), copied by Cosmas Indicopleustes

from the famous throne standing once in the Aksumite harbour (Bowersock 2013), and the inscription RIÉ 186 (Bernand, Drewes, and Schneider 1991: 250–256; Drewes and Kropp 2019: 207–215), commemorating the exploits of Ezana's predecessors (Hatke 2013: 80–85; Marrassini 2014: 204–211), encapsulated Aksumite expansionist ambitions aimed at the western lands and the subjugation of the northern tribes (Manzo 2020: 676–677). Indeed, the anonymous king from the Adulitana inscription boasted, among others, of "having defeated the Taggaiton who dwell up to the frontiers of Egypt, I had a road constructed going from the lands of my empire to Egypt" (Munro-Hay 1991: 222; see also Bernand, Drewes, and Schneider 2000: 33).



Fig. 1. Archaeological map of the Tigray region and the towns nearest to the archaeological sites; the course of the Tekkeze river traced as a dashed line in blue; inset, Tigray region within Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The place names are transcribed according to the *fidāl* system (Editing M. Gaudiello)

KETEMA RA'ISI SITE

The Ketema Ra'isi site (UTM: 37P, 490827.71 m E, 1523217.93 m N) is located in the Na'der 'Adet administrative sub-district (EAE V: 632, Map 23). It is in the territory of the village of Embuke Jira (Ato Abay, personal communication, 31 May 2019). The ancient remains and the house of the landowner Ato Abay, who kept the archaeological finds, are located at the extreme, southern point of the *amba* of Embuke Jira [Fig. 2].

Initially, the goal was to inspect some stone slabs said to have been moved from allegedly Aksumite ruins and re-used as a threshold and decorative stones in an 'ancient church' near the site (W. Smidt, personal communication, 29 May

2019). There was also information about Aksumite coins and ancient pottery being collected from the site and sold (Mearg Abay, personal communication, 29 May 2019). The possible presence of Aksumite remains (building or church) as well as the coins suggest that Ketema Ra'isi could be the southwesternmost Aksumite site known to date, in present-day central Tigray, really close to the administrative border with the western subregion. In fact, the Shire province in western Tigray is about 50 km northwest from the site. The first survey classified the scattered ruins, based on an examination of the lithics and potsherd assemblages, as prehistoric,

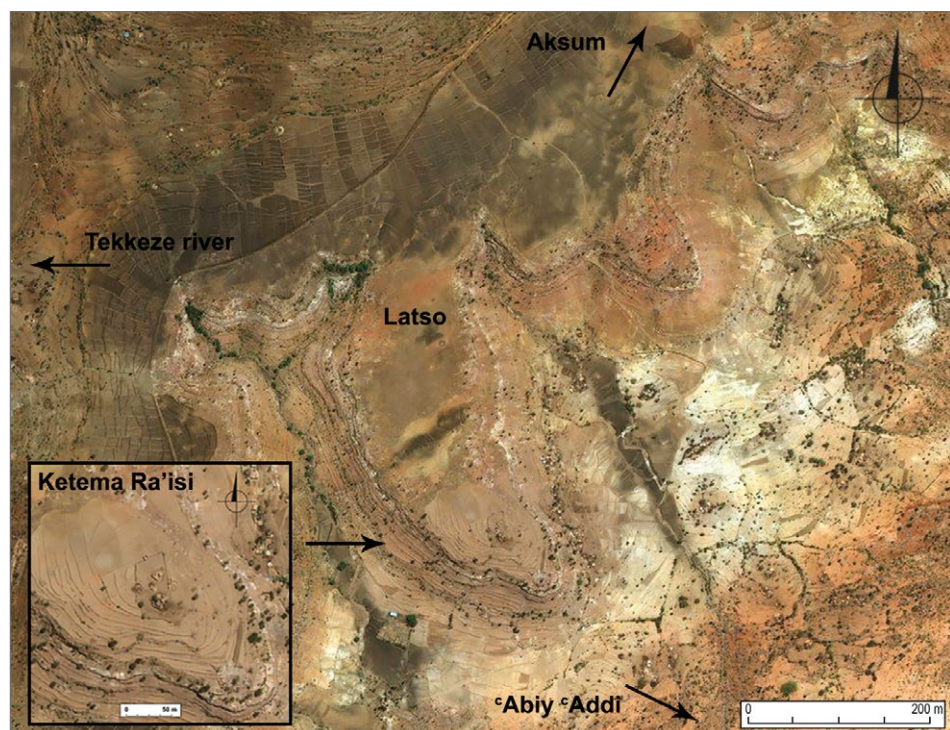


Fig. 2. Embuke Jira village and the Ketema Ra'isi site in the inset (Bing map; editing M. Gaudiello)



Fig. 3. Yellow and red chert, iron ore and slag scattered over the field in Latso (Photo M. Gaudiello)



Fig. 4. Ketema Ra'isi site in satellite images from 2015 and 2019; places discussed in the text marked in the image on the right: 1 – enclosure wall; 2 – inner enclosure; 3 – central building; 4–5 – annexes; 6–7 – Ato Abay's house and the entrance to it; 8–10 – remains of ancient structures (Maps Google Earth | editing M. Gaudiello)

“proto-historic and historic” and “medieval and post-medieval” sites (Finneran et al. 2003; 2005). The ongoing UCLA project at May Adrasha is focused on a pre-Aksumite site (Wendrich 2020). The coins from Ketema Ra’isi would thus be the sole Aksumite coinage discovered to date so far west of Aksum [see *Fig. 1*].

A dirt road turns off the main Aksum–Enda Selassie road and crosses a flat patch of land called Latso before reaching the house of Ato Abay and the ruins of Ketema Ra’isi [see *Figs 1, 2*]. Pieces of red and yellow chert are scattered everywhere in large quantities, along with iron ore and some slag [*Fig. 3*]. Ore and iron slag are not usually encountered in Tigray, or at least it has never been documented so far. In fact, there has been no research on Aksumite archaeometallurgy to date in the Tigray region, except for

Jane Humphris’s pioneering first season in the Wuqro area in 2015 (see <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6963-2143>).

STONE STRUCTURES OF ‘SUB-RECENT’ DATE

The site is a small mound about 180 m² in area, surrounded by a stone fence more than a meter high. Standing in the middle are the remains of an ancient building [*Figs 4, 5*]. Ato Abay built his house in the southeastern corner of the fenced area, using building stones taken from the ruins. Satellite images from 2015 and from 2019 reveal changes in the ancient landscape over this period: parts of the inner enclosure (2) on the southwestern side have disappeared and so has the main building (3) and its annexes (4–5). The 2015 image appears to show a kind of roof over part of the ruins, implying the use



Fig. 5. Mound of ruins at Ketema Ra’isi, enclosed by an enclosure wall, view from the north (Photo M. Gaudiello)

of the structure by the landowner. Ato Abay's house (7) was enlarged, with a new entrance (6).

The stone enclosure is of a polygonal shape (1), extended north–south. The perimeter was measured with a handheld GPS Garmin Montana 650 and the most important architectural features were recorded as waypoints; the measurements were double-checked with the satellite images [see Fig. 4 right]. The site inside the

enclosure wall is roughly 0.21 hectares in area, the fence around it about 122.50 m long. The southern part of this wall, between the entrance to Ato Abay's house (6) and the annexes to the west (4–5), is missing today.

A structure in the center of the northern part of the enclosure wall (1) was most probably the ancient gateway to the enclosed area [Fig. 6]. It is no longer used, the lower part having been blocked with



Fig. 6. Remains of the gateway in the outer enclosure wall: top, general view from the south; bottom, details of the masonry on the inside (Photos M. Gaudiello)

roughly piled up stones. The structure is rectangular, about 1.50 m in height. On the outside, there are pillars and side walls with straight outer faces; on the inside the wall is architecturally a more complex structure with supports or engaged pillars abutting the inner face of the wall, receded by about 0.20 m in relation to the doorway jambs [see *Fig. 6*]. It is built of small rectangular stones in a dry technique not using any mortar.

Passing the gate, one can see an inner enclosure wall (2) around the remains of a central building on a squarish plan (4–5) [*Fig. 7*]. The western side of the main building is straight, while the south wall is constructed in the well-known “Aksumite architectural style” with a series of articulated recesses and projections (Phillipson 2014: 121–125). In the southern part of this inner enclosure, there are some still standing remains of a possible



Fig. 7. Central building: top left, view from the northeast; top right, view of the western side from the northwest; bottom, detail of the southern side viewed from the southeast (Photos M. Gaudiello)

squared annex and a circular structure (4–5) [Fig. 8]. Remains of other ancient structures are observable here and there, even outside the large enclosed area (8–10) [Fig. 9]. The poor preservation of these structures is due, at least partly, to the

activities of the landowner, who has been using the ancient remains as a source of building stone. Ato Abay told the author that the ruins were the palace of one of the heirs of the Emperor Yohannes IV of Ethiopia (1872–1889), Berambaras Hailu,



Fig. 8. Ruins of the annexes inside the enclosure: left, squared annex viewed from the east; right, one of the rounded structures attached to the inner perimeter wall, viewed from the northeast (Photos M. Gaudiello)



Fig. 9. Remains of an ancient structure and a presumed wall outside the enclosed area; view from the south (Photo M. Gaudiello)

a third generation ancestor (Ato Abay, personal communication, 31 May 2019). Excavations in this area, had they started, would have been the first example of contemporary archaeology in Tigray.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS

The building stones reused in Ato Abay's house were professed by the landowner to come from fields away from his residential compound. They include a large slab (about 1.50 m × 0.40 m × 0.10 m) and what seems to be a stone from a pier (about 1.00 m × 0.18 m × 0.18 m) made into benches outside the entrance to his house [Fig. 10]. It remains to be verified whether they could be part of that ancient architectural ensemble with the threshold and structural elements of an ancient church visited by Smidt (see above).

Reddish and white chert and yellowish-red potsherds were observed in

the fields south of Ato Abay's house and near the remains of an ancient structure (8). The color and the type of decoration resembles pottery production from the Middle Aksumite period (AD 360/400–550/610, Fattovich 2019: 256); indeed, some of the sherds were most certainly fragments of a central tripod-support belonging to the so-called “footwasher basin” (see Wilding 1989: 261–265, Figs 16.197–207).

Of particular interest was the landowner's collection of miniature vessels from the fields around his house (Gaudiello 2020: 7, Fig. 4 left). The miniature potstands are about 5–8 cm high when



Fig. 10. Reused ancient building stone: top, stone slab; bottom, stone pier reused as benches outside the entrance to Ato Abay's house (Photos M. Gaudiello)



Fig. 11. Miniature vessels: top, potstands; bottom, oblong cups (Photos M. Gaudiello)

complete, the diameter of the central part being about 2–3 cm and the preserved upper cups about 3–5 cm [Fig. 11 top]. A few of the cups are decorated with simple crossed incised lines or an incision along the rim and two crossed incisions. The more complex patterns consist of crossed incisions and 5–6 small rounded impressions. The other type of miniature vessel are oblong cups, measuring 5–8 cm on the long axis, roughly 4–5 cm on the shorter one, and a couple of centimeters high [Fig. 11 bottom]. They are seldom decorated. The few that are have small oblique strokes incised on the rims. The purpose and dating of these vessels is still a matter of debate among ceramic experts. Miniature vessels are known from pre-Aksumite settlement sites, temples and tombs. They may be

votive objects, but they could have been made equally well by children and used therefore as toys (R. Fattovich, personal communication, 2013). Wilding described two miniature vessels of the potstand type as “... curious pieces defy(ing) labelling ... Their function is unclear. The only comparable form is on a much larger vessel noted by Fattovich ... in the pre-Aksumite material” (Wilding 1989: 286, 288, Figs 16.316–317). Unfortunately, he failed to identify the provenance of these samples in Aksum, where these miniatures were collected, and which could have perhaps helped in understanding their role in the Aksumite period. Similar miniature cups coming from the palatial area and the Gudit stelae park have been described by Wilding as lamps (1989: 287–288, Figs 16.328–329).



Fig. 12. Aksumite coins from Ketema Ra'isi: top, obverse; bottom, reverse (Photos and editing M. Gaudiello)

Much more valuable for the archaeological dating of the Ketema Ra'isi site are the three coins from the landowner's collection (he admitted to the illicit selling of a gold coin and a few other pieces that he had found in his fields), which he found in the same fields as the miniature vessels (Gaudiello 2020: 7, Fig. 4 right). Aksumite coins are fairly numerous in the city of Aksum, frequently offered to tourists as souvenirs to be purchased at gift-shops. A study of the three coins is in progress, but it can be said with certainty that they were issues struck by Christian kings as indicated by the crosses on the reverse and

the processional crosses held by the kings on two of the coins [Fig. 12]. It means that they were minted after Ezana's conversion in the mid-4th century AD (Hahn 2000). This gives a *terminus ante quem* for the Ketema Ra'isi site, which would have been inhabited at some point during the Middle Aksumite period, if not before. The site must have been really important for one of the heirs of Emperor Yohannes to have built his residential house there. Even if this 'noble lineage' is dismissed, it stands to reason that the central building was more of an elite residence than a simple domestic house (Phillipson 2014: 125).

KETEMA RA'ISI, THE TEKKEZE RIVER AND THE INSCRIPTION RIÉ 189

The Christian Aksumite coins and the proximity of the Tekkeze river—with in a four hours walk [see Fig. 1]—make Ketema Ra'isi an interesting object of archaeological research, offering to enlarge westward the territorial limits of the Aksumite kingdom. So far, there has been no archaeological proof of the presence of Aksumites "so close" to the Tekkeze river. In the inscriptions commemorating their military victories (RIÉ 186 and 277), anonymous Aksumite kings claim to control a far-flung empire comprising the lands along the Red Sea coast, as well as west and north of Aksum, as far as the Egyptian frontier. They list the tribes, subjugated and paying tribute to the Aksumite kings, and they boast of clearing a road from the territory of their kingdom: "j'ai rendu praticable la route qui mène des territoires de mon royaume" (RIÉ 277: Bernand, Drewes, and Schnei-

der 2000: 33), "[15] ... Il a aplani la route ... [16] ... sur la route ..." (RIÉ 186: Drewes and Kropp 2019: 208). But where did these northward running routes starting from Aksum lead? The first Aksumite king to mention an actual place is Ezana. The inscription, RIÉ 189 (Bernand, Drewes, and Schneider 1991: 262–267; Drewes and Kropp 2019: 232–241), engraved in a limestone slab in the vocalised Ge'ez language, commemorates Ezana's military campaign against the Noba. Compared to Ezana's other royal inscriptions (RIÉ 185, 187 and 189), recalling military action against the Beja, Agwezat and Sarane, the invocation and dedication in RIÉ 189 are addressed to the Christian God. Ezana first lists his royal titles, mirroring the schemata from other inscriptions, and proceeds to explain the reasons for his actions, mentioning for the first time the name of the Tekkeze river:

7. ... I waged war against the Nobā.
When

8. the tribes of Nobā have rebelled;
when they have boasted saying:

“They will not cross the **Takkazi**”;
9. when they had attacked the
peoples of Mangurto, Ḥasā and
Bāryā ...

...

14. ..., therefore I waged war and
I set out on my way ...

15. ..., I attacked them on the **Tak-**
kazi, beyond Kəmalke, and then
they fled without

16. stopping. ...

...

18. ... I burnt their villages,

19. those in masonry and those in
straw, plundered ... and iron [...]

...

21. threw them in the river Sedā ...

...

28 ... I arrived at the Kāsu, killing
and taking them prisoners, at

29. the confluence of the rivers
Sidā and **Takkazi**. ...

...

31. at the source of Sidā the village
in masonry and those in straw, the
name of their villages

32. in masonry: °Alwā, 1, Daro, 1. ...

...

39. ... I erected a throne at the con-
fluence of the rivers Sidā and

40. **Takkazi**, in the village in ma-
sonry which rises on this peninsula

...

...

(Drewes and Kropp 2019: 233–235,
translation M. Gaudiello)

Some researchers have identified Takkazi with the Atbara river (Marrassini 2014: 232 Note 2 with references). The phrase “beyond the Kəmalke” has been translated as “along the river” (Marrassini 2014: 233 note 7) and as “the ford Kemalke” (Munro-Hay 1991: 228; Drewes and Kropp 2019: 237). The other two inscriptions commemorating Ezana’s war against the Nobā (*RIÉ* 190 in South Arabian script and *RIÉ* 271 in Greek) fail to mention either Takkazi, or Kəmalke, or Sidā.

In light of the text of inscription *RIÉ* 189, the evidence from Ketema Ra’isi could actually imply Aksumites settling along the Tekkeze river, and provide a clue as to whether the river was a natural frontier or already inside the kingdom. Were the latter to be true, then it follows that they could have needed to oversee it and protect the passages/fords. Were these remote lands of the kingdom under the direct control of the central authorities or administered by a governor as was the case for the port of Adulis? To what extent did the Aksumites move to and settle on the Tekkeze river? To connect Tigray to the ancient people of modern Sudan, we need first to understand, from a historical as well as archaeological point of view, the parts of Tigray that have yet to be more fully investigated. Therefore, Ketema Ra’isi can be an informative starting point for the archaeological journey to the western lands.

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