

Unveiling the past: newly discovered archaeological sites of Dongolo and Endameqabr in central Tigray, Ethiopia



Abstract: The preliminary study described in this paper has aimed to conduct an archaeological survey and document the potentially rich but little-investigated archaeological sites of Dongolo and Endameqabr in central Tigray, Ethiopia. To achieve this, pre-field preparations, field surveys, and interviews with local residents were employed as data collection methods and analyzed qualitatively. Intact vessels of diverse forms and sizes, pottery sherds, grinding and polishing stones, well-carved circular and rectangular stone slabs, exposed wall structures, bracelets, and finger rings are among the main finds documented during this survey. Based on a comparative analysis of the material recovered from these newly identified sites and previously documented assemblages from different archaeological sites in northern Ethiopia, it is suggested that these locations may have served as settlement areas and cemeteries during the Proto-Aksumite and early, middle, and possibly late Aksumite periods. This preliminary study indicates that these sites could significantly enhance our understanding of the ancient Aksumite kingdom. Furthermore, it provides baseline data for future, more detailed archaeological investigations of these sites and their immediate surroundings.

Keywords: Proto-Aksumite period, archaeological survey, material culture, settlement patterns, cemeteries, comparative analysis, cultural chronology

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INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Horn of Africa, particularly northern Ethiopia and present-day Eritrea, is rich in diverse archaeological evidence that attests to the cultural development of ancient societies in the region (Fattovich 2001; Curtis 2005). Researchers (see e.g. Munro-Hay 1989; Curtis 2005; D'Andrea et al. 2008; Fattovich 2010) have noted that this region contains some of the most significant traces of early civilizations. Evidence indicating the beginning of socio-economic diversification becomes discernable in the region from the early to mid-1st millennium BC (Curtis 2005; Finneran 2007; Bard et al. 2014; Harrower et al. 2023). Archaeological and historical studies also demonstrate that politically and economically powerful kingdoms, such as the Aksumite and Pre-Aksumite states, flourished in the region from at least this period (Fattovich 1999; Fattovich et al. 2000; Phillipson 2000/II; Phillips 2004; D'Andrea et al. 2008; 2023; Gerlach 2013; Bard et al. 2014; Sernicola 2017; Harrower et al. 2023). Archaeological research has shown that favorable environmental conditions and the region's strategic location were key factors contributing to the emergence of complex societies characterized by social stratification (Fattovich 1999; Michels 2005; Phillipson 2005; D'Andrea et al. 2008). Enquiries into the archaeology of northern Ethiopia, particularly regarding the Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite periods, have a long history dating back over a century, when various foreign explorers, visitors, missionaries, and scholars began their early observations and preliminary studies (Fattovich

et al. 2000; Curtis 2005). Travelers and scholars began to visit and record these ancient sites and their associated remains as early as the 1st century AD, although their accounts were largely limited to descriptive narratives of monuments and impressive architectural features (Munro-Hay 1991; Fattovich 2001; Curtis 2005). However, it was only after the early 20th century AD that modern, scientific archaeological investigations began in these areas, aiming to document and analyze ancient monuments, architecture, sites, and associated artifacts. This laid the foundation for the discipline of Aksumite archaeology (Phillipson 1998; Fattovich 2001). Between 1952 and the early 1970s, extensive archaeological studies were conducted at Aksum and its surroundings (including the sites of Hawelti, Melazo, Seglamen, Yeha, Gobo-Dura, and Bete Giorgis), providing decisive evidence for the historical and cultural stratification of the region over time (Kobishchanov 1979; Fattovich 2001; Curtis 2005; Sernicola 2017).

However, although the archaeological investigations conducted in the ancient city of Aksum and its surroundings are relatively more advanced than in other parts of the country, they remain limited, incomplete, and fragmentary. As a result, the cultural history of the area and its vicinity has not yet been fully addressed. Many sites in and around Aksum remain unexplored, which further contributes to the incomplete understanding of the region's cultural development. The archaeological sites of Dongolo and Endameqabr, where the present study was

conducted, have not yet been systematically investigated despite their proximity to the ancient city of Aksum. These sites are rich in archaeological material that could help fill enduring knowledge gaps and deepen our understanding of the ancient Aksumite state.

Therefore, this preliminary study aims to document the previously unknown sites of Dongolo and Endameqabr in order to gain insights into their archaeological potential and history and to contribute to a broader understanding of the region's cultural past.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODS

The main objective of this study is to document the newly identified archaeological sites of Dongolo and Endameqabr in central Tigray, Ethiopia. These sites and their associated cultural materials were discovered during a two-week archaeological field survey conducted in the vicinity of Tahtay Debreqal. The survey aimed to identify previously undocu-

mented sites and settlement patterns, locate surface artifacts and architectural features, assess their density and distribution, define site boundaries, and understand the environmental context of the area. The survey was useful not only for identifying potential archaeological sites but also for assessing their state of preservation. In addition to the

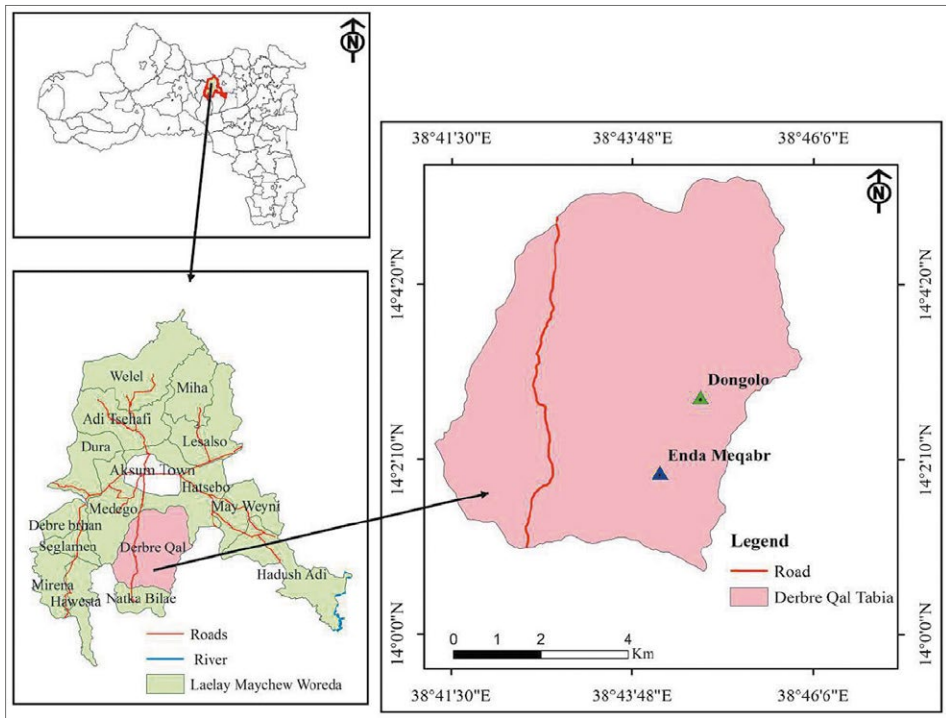


Fig. 1. Geographical location of Dongolo and Endameqabr archaeological sites (Map A. Kiros)

field survey, interviews were conducted with local residents to collect information about place names, the locations of known archaeological finds, the presence of artifacts in households, and to identify where these artifacts had been collected, as well as to gather oral histories, legends, and traditions related to the identified sites. During the field-

work, the researchers used various tools, including a GPS device to record the precise locations of the sites; notebooks and pens to document archaeological contexts and observations; a scaled ruler and meter to record artifact sizes and feature dimensions; and a digital camera to photograph the sites and associated finds.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The archaeological sites of Dongolo and Endameqabr are located in the La'elay Maichew district of central Tigray, approximately 10–15 km south of Aksum, the capital of the ancient Aksumite kingdom [Fig. 1]. Culturally, these newly identified sites share boundaries with various Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite sites in all directions. For example, the Pre-Aksumite site of Seglamen (see Sernicola 2017; 2021) is situated to the west, while the Aksumite site of Natka Bila'e (see Brhane 2018) lies to the south. To the east and northeast, the sites border the Pre-Aksumite sites of Hawelti, Melazo, and Adiataro (see Leclant 1959), whereas to the north and northwest they are adjacent to the Pre-Aksumite site of May Sye (see Abrha

2018), the ancient city of Aksum, and the Gobo-Dura archaeological site.

The results of this preliminary archaeological survey indicate that, although these sites were previously unknown, they are among the most promising archaeological localities in the region. The main findings include Aksumite stone-worked objects, bracelets and other metal artifacts, roughly dressed stelae, rectangular and circular well-dressed stone slabs, stone rubble, and indications of possible underground structures, as well as ceramic objects (both complete vessels and concentrations of potsherds). Both newly identified sites are situated near rivers and fertile land, which are among the main characteristics of most ancient settlement sites in the region that



Fig. 2. View of the Dongolo site from the west (Photo A. Amanuel)

relied on such environmental resources (see e.g. Sulas, Madella, and French 2009; Sulas 2014). A brief description of the two newly identified archaeological sites is presented below.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF DONGOLO

The archaeological site of Dongolo is located in Tabia Debreqal and *qushet* Tahtay Debreqal, approximately seven kilometers south of the town of Aksum. It is situated near Tahtay Debreqal’s river, at the base of the Adiwuferti hill. The term “Dongolo” is a Tigrigna word which refers to a rugged and stony locality. The name was given by local residents to describe the landscape, which is indeed characterized by dense concentrations of stone rubble and architectural remains. Identified as one of the potential sites

during the survey, Dongolo contains a rich assemblage of material culture that provides valuable insights concerning the ancient inhabitants of the area [Fig. 2].

The major finds at the site include architectural remains such as well-dressed circular and elongated rectangular stone slabs, concentrations of potsherds, complete ceramic pots and other vessel types, as well as metal objects. The presence of the architectural remains —such as dressed stone masonry and exposed wall structures— together with an abundance of other artifacts suggests the existence of an ancient village settlement in the area. Unfortunately, members of the local community are currently dismantling these structures for new house construction and agricultural purposes.



Fig. 3. Architectural remains (left to right): a rectangular, well-dressed stone slab reused in a modern wall, circular stone slabs, and exposed wall structures (Photo A. Amanuel)

Moreover, much of the archaeological evidence lies within cultivated fields, accelerating the rate of destruction as farmers intentionally remove artifacts from their original context. As shown in the figure below, some of the recovered stone slabs have been reused in walls of private residential houses. Characteristically, the stone slabs exhibit features of the locally available stone type, and many of the dressed slabs resemble those frequently encountered at ancient elite Aksumite sites in the region [Fig. 3].

Furthermore, the archaeological site of Dongolo contains concentrations of potsherds and complete vessels that have been unearthed at different times during plowing activities. Some of these artifacts are currently kept in the homes of local residents. For instance, one of the discovered vessels is a tripod or three-footed pot, and another is a broken amphora, which was most likely used for transporting liquids and/or food or for trade and exchange in antiquity (Zerai 2022); both are currently kept in a local household. According to locals, other ceramic artifacts have been uncovered during plowing and other daily activities. The tripod, a small complete vessel made

of red ware (now darkened to black due to poor preservation conditions), exhibits features characteristic of tripod pottery dated to AD 100–300 (early Aksumite to classic Aksumite period). It also shows strong similarities to red ware Aksumite tripod jars discovered at other Aksumite sites (see Wilding 1989: Fig. 16) and to examples currently on display in the Archaeological Museum of Aksum.

The broken amphora also shows close stylistic similarities to those identified at Aksumite-period sites, as well as to those currently displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Aksum, and to amphora fragments dated to the 5th–7th centuries AD documented by Phillipson (2000/I: Fig. 283). Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest a similar relative chronology (Aksumite period), as the ceramics exhibit comparable color and form attributes [Fig. 4].

Upper and lower grinding stones, as well as polishing stones of various sizes, were also identified at the Dongolo archaeological site. The size, shape, and raw material of these grinding and polishing stones vary. Most of them are carved from granitic-type raw materials and are similar in size and morphology to comparable artifacts still used in rural areas of the



Fig. 4. A tripod vessel and a fragment of an amphora from the Dongolo archaeological site (Photo A. Amanuel)

region today, although few were found intact. The discovery of such worked stones at the site suggests that the ancient inhabitants were processing cereal

crops, although identifying the specific types of grain requires further specialist analysis. The polishing stones from Dongolo also share characteristics with



Fig. 5. Polishing stones of various sizes from the Dongolo archaeological site (Photo A. Amanuel)



Fig. 6. The archaeological site of Endameqabr (Photo A. Amanuel)



Fig. 7. Intact vessels (cups, bowls, and complete pots) discovered at the Endameqabr archaeological site, currently housed in a local residence (Photo A. Amanuel)

those uncovered from the 5th–6th century AD archaeological site of Arbaetu Ensesa (where remains of a church were found) within the ancient city of Aksum (Tekle Hagos 2008) [Fig. 5].

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE OF ENDAMEQABR

The archaeological site of Endameqabr is located on the edge of a river, about five kilometers southwest of the Dongolo site. The site covers an area of approximately four hectares [Fig. 6].

The term “Endameqabr” is a Tigrigna word meaning a place where human remains have been buried in the past. The site is characterized by a concentration of stones, some of which clearly indicate ancient graves or burials. This interpretation is supported by the similarity between these stone arrangements and contemporary grave markers in the region, which likely inspired the site’s name. However, no erected stelae have been identified at this specific location, although a few roughly dressed stelae were found about three kilometers away. These stelae are stylistically similar to those from the Proto-Aksumite site of Bete Giorgis (Fattovich and Bard 2001;

Bard et al. 2014). Moreover, it is locally believed that the Endameqabr site served as a burial place for unknown people who lived in the area in ancient times. Ceramic objects —both potsherds and complete vessels of various types— were abundantly recorded at the site. For example, eight complete vessels of different sizes, shapes, and colors were accidentally unearthed during house construction and agricultural activities. These ceramics are now kept in the home of a local resident [Fig. 7]. Similarly, four other complete vessels discovered at the site are currently housed in another local residence [Fig. 8].

The vessels are primarily made of light red ware and are brown in color, typical of early Aksumite ceramics. Their morphological features resemble those of complete vessels uncovered at the Proto-Aksumite and/or early Aksumite site of Bete Giorgis (Fattovich 1997: Fig. 5). Thus, the Endameqabr vessels can likely be dated to the Proto-Aksumite period, as Fattovich attributed similar finds to this phase. Some vessels are also characteristically similar to the early and classic Aksumite red ware pottery documented at Aksumite sites (Wilding 1989; Manzo 2003; Phillips 2004) [see Figs 7, 8].



Fig. 8. Cups, bowls, and complete pots from the Endameqabr archaeological site, kept in a local household (Photo A. Amanuel)



Fig. 9. Bracelet and finger ring from the Endameqabr archaeological site (Photo A. Amanuel)

In addition, a bracelet, a finger ring, and other metal objects —possibly used as jewelry— were identified alongside the ceramic vessels. The bracelet, probably made from gilt copper (a thin layer of gold applied to copper), appears to have been designed to fit the hand of an adult woman. According to locals,

similar bracelets have frequently been discovered at the site. These associated materials further support the proposed contemporaneity between Endameqabr and the Proto- Aksumite site of Bete-Giorgis, where similar bracelets and complete ceramic collections were also discovered [Fig. 9].

CONCLUSION

Archaeological research in the ancient city of Aksum and its immediate vicinity has a long history. However, compared to its archaeological potential, the investigations conducted so far remain limited. Most previous archaeological studies have focused on specific parts of the eastern, northern, and western peripheries of the ancient city. Although the sites discussed in this study are situated within a 10 km radius south of Aksum, they have never been systematically surveyed or reported before. This preliminary survey has confirmed the significant archaeological potential of these sites. Complete ceramic objects (including vessels of various forms and sizes), concentrations of potsherds, grinding and polishing stones, architectural remains such as circular and rectangular stone slabs and stone rubble, as well as bracelets and other metal artifacts, are among the dominant findings documented during the survey at the Dongolo and Endameqabr sites. Based on typological comparisons with previously identified material culture from other sites in the region, Dongolo and Endameqabr can probably be dated to the Proto-Aksumite, early to middle, and possibly late Aksumite periods.

Both archaeological sites are situated in environmentally favorable areas, which include a permanent river and fertile alluvial soil. The ecological setting was likely a determining factor in their selection as settlement locations. These newly discovered archaeological sites are of crucial importance for reconstructing the cultural history of the region and for advancing our understanding of Aksumite archaeology. Since they represent occupations from the Proto-Aksumite, early, middle, and possibly late Aksumite phases, they can help refine the chronological framework of Aksumite development. Moreover, they contribute valuable data for understanding the territorial expansion, settlement patterns, and distribution of the Aksumite kingdom — particularly toward the south of the ancient city of Aksum (where these newly identified sites are found), an area that remains poorly explored. Further detailed investigations of these sites may provide new insights into Aksumite daily life, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and technological developments. In short, Dongolo and Endameqabr have the potential to fill significant historical and archaeological knowledge gaps in north-

ern Ethiopia and to enhance our broader understanding of Aksumite civilization.

However, these unique archaeological sites are under severe threat from ongoing deterioration caused by the cumulative effects of both natural factors (such as erosion) and human activities (including construction, agricultural expansion, and looting). Immediate conservation

and preservation measures are therefore essential to safeguard the remains for future generations. Furthermore, since oral traditions represent a valuable form of evidence, narratives shared by local inhabitants—especially elders—should be urgently collected and documented by specialists before this knowledge is irretrievably lost.

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