



## ERC project HornEast

Connections, Mobility and Exchange between  
the Horn of Africa and the Middle East in the Middle Ages



Preliminary Report  
Archaeological Surveys

## South-Eastern Tigray (Ethiopia)

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To  
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(ARCCH)

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## REPORT SUMMARY

This report presents the preliminary results of a survey campaign carried out by the HornEast team in October 2019 in South Eastern Tigray, near the village of Arra and along the road between Addi Gudem and Hashenge. It also includes some note on the surroundings of Arra after subsequent visit to the site in December 2019, during the excavations in Kwiha.

The first part of the report brings new light on the Islamic past of the region and presents in particular previously undocumented medieval funerary areas used between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. This Islamic cemeteries have been surveyed and dated thanks to Arabic epitaphs carved in stone. The funerary stelae from the region of Arra represent a significant addition to the current corpus of Arabic inscription in Tigray and Ethiopia. They currently constitute the second largest collection after that from Bilet near Kwiha. The report also documents several ancient sites in Arra and its vicinity which have not been dated but would deserve a closer inspection and broader archaeological examination.

The second part of the report is an attempt at reconstructing the itinerary of Francisco Àlvares in Southeastern Tigray during the 1520's. This reconstruction is based on the identification of several sites through survey and a close examination of Àlvares' travel account.

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

### *From Bilet to Arra: recent discoveries of Medieval Muslim cemeteries in south-eastern Tigray*

In March 2018, a team of HornEast Project identified the exact location of the medieval Muslim cemetery of Bilet near Kwiha (Mekelle, Tigray) (Loiseau 2020 ; Loiseau et al. 2021). The existence of a Muslim cemetery in the area was known since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Nathaniel Pearce mentioned the discovery of ancient Arabic inscriptions near Egri Ḥariba (Pearce 1831 : 121-125). Several funerary stelae were later discovered in the same area in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the original location of the graves the steale were originally associated with had remained unknown until 2018 (Conti Rossini 1937 ; Pansera 1945 ; Schneider 1967 ; 2009 ; Smidt 2004). The stelae from Bilet, dated between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, were duly recognised as the earliest material evidence of a Muslim community in the northern highland region which formed the bulk of the medieval Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia.

The Muslim community of Bilet has long been considered as relatively isolated, but the discovery of a unique fragment of monumental Arabic inscription, tentatively dated of the 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> c., in Wəqro (Čärqos Wəqro) led to suggest that another Muslim community possessed a mosque about. 30 km north of Bilet (Smidt 2009 ; 2010a). The presence of at least two Muslim communities in the area support the identification of the region with the historical province of Šəra‘e, where King Ṭāntāwədəm is said to have fought and defeated Muslims around the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century or at the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Smidt 2010b ; Derat 2018 : 261-271 ; 2020a : 42-43). The presence of Muslim communities along the so called “Eastern Tigray Road” which connected Egypt and Yemen via the Dahlak archipelago to the heart of Ethiopia, led scholars to assume they had been engaged in trade, possibly of salt and slaves (Lusini 2001 ; Schneider 2009 ; Chekroun, Hirsch 2020 : 91-92).

The discovery of two previously unreported medieval Muslim cemeteries further south along the same road by the HornEast team in December 2018, during the first excavation campaign of Bilet, shed new light on a possible medieval Muslim network in Eastern Tigray. It provided evidence for more communities along the road, attesting the presence of Muslims at a close distance from the medieval metropolitan seat of Māryām Nāzrēt where an Egyptian community is attested around the same time (Derat 2020a : 55).

First hints of previously unreported funerary sites were provided by Fesseha Abraham during a seminar devoted to the site of Bilet at the CFEE in Addis Ababa (December 2018). F. Abraham referred to several Tigrayan sites with Arabic inscriptions similar to those from Bilet, and also suggested that these sites were interconnected through their šayḥ-s. He notably described the village of Arra, near Addi Gudem as « a big Islamic centre at least 500 years old » comprising a « very important graveyard ». According to him the šayḥ-s of Arra were related to « those of Nebelet near Adwa and those of Adamu (?) in Eritrea ». He also mentioned inscriptions in Chellekot and in the graveyard of šayḥ ‘Abd al-Nūr near Ḥašängä.

Following these indications, visits were paid to Arra where two medieval funerary inscriptions were kept by Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay at his home. According to him, these inscriptions originated from Arra, but other cemeteries with such inscriptions were also known in the vicinity to the east. Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay thus offered to take us to these sites accompanied by the imam of Addi Gudem. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 we surveyed the sites of Mayda Zeilegat and Habera, where a total of 25 inscriptions or fragmentary inscriptions were documented. On our way back to Addi Gudem, our informants mentioned other similar sites confirming the significance of the area and the need for extended surveys.

So far, the funerary stelae discovered east of Arra have yielded dates between the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century covering therefore a close although slightly later and shorter time span as the Bilet corpus.

### *The “Dark Ages” and the significance of Islamic sites in the region*

Little is known of the political context in south-eastern Tigray between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. The so-called Ethiopian “Dark Ages” encompasses the mythical rebellion of the controversial Queen Gudit / Queen of the Banū l-Ham(u)wīyya against the last remnants of the Aksumite power, the foundation of numerous

rock-cut churches and the establishment and fall of the Zagwe dynasty (Hable Selassie 1972 ; Andersen 2000 ; Steyn 2019). As mentioned above, it is during the reign of Tāntāwədām that the most equivocal mentions of Muslim communities in the region can be found. It occurs in an undated royal donation preserved in the church of ‘Ura Qirqos in northern Tigray (Derat 2018 : 261-266). The History of the Patriarchs of the Egyptian Church also refers to an Ethiopian metropolitan being appointed by the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Ġamālī to build mosques in the country in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. According to the chronicle, previous attempts had failed, mosques had been destroyed and Muslim merchants attacked. The new metropolitan was commanded to remedy the situation (Sāwīrus ibn al-Muqaffa 1948 : 347-351 ; Derat 2020b).

It thus seems that around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, tensions and even open conflicts between Christians and Muslims arose in the highland of Ethiopia and that the Fatimid of Egypt used the Coptic Patriarchate to intervene in favour of local Muslim communities and traders. The involvement of a relatively distant power may have been motivated by the broader regional context as the period also witnessed an increase in Gold mining activities in southern Egypt and the development of the Red Sea harbours as economic platforms and instruments for the predication of the Fatimid dawa (Power 2008 ; 2009 ; Bramoullé 2012). Madeleine Schneider suggested that the Yamamī lineage, present in the Dahlak Archipelago and Bilet, may have been linked to the mining activities around the wādī al-‘Allaqī, for which they possibly provided Abyssinian slaves (Schneider 2009).

The latest Arabic inscriptions from Tigray also coincide with the last decades of the Makhzumite dynasty of Shewa, characterized by internal troubles and, after 1272, open conflict with the sultanate of Ifat ruled by the Walasma. In 1279, the deposed Sultan Dul-marrah of Shewa fled toward the Negus (Hatse) and sought refuge in Christian land (Cerulli 2013 : 246-253). This is only one anecdote providing a possible explanation for the presence of Muslims inside Christian territories.

In the current stage of research, these relationships cannot be confirmed. However, the recent findings modify our understanding of the religious geography of the Medieval Tigray and contribute to a re-evaluation of the religious and cultural hegemony of the region during the Zagwe period.

## PART 1 - Survey in the area of Arra (Addi Gudem)

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### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

#### *Landscape, land use and transportation*

The survey focused primarily on the surroundings of Arra. The area under investigation comprised part of two different woredas, namely Enderta in the north and Hintalo Wäjjärat to the south. This region is not densely settled and grouped settlement is the norm. Most villages subsist on agriculture and livestock breeding. A local market also takes place in Addi Gudem on the main road between Mekelle and Maychew (Maych'äw).

The regional landscape can be divided in three contrasted ecosystems: the mountainous highlands to the west and to the south, the longitudinal plain (**fig. 1**) and the hilly depression to the East (**fig. 2**). Due to the specificities of relief and altitude, these regions present different human environment as well as soil occupations and land use. One should stress the virtual absence of permanent settlement east of Arra and in all the eastern depression. This situation seems however quite recent since small villages and hamlets are recorded on the latest Ethiopian maps (1990's) and are still visible on satellite images from the last decade.



*Fig. 1: The plain of Adi Gudem seen from Arra ridge with the mountain of Hintalo in the background.*

The area is currently experiencing important changes due to the construction of the new railway sections connecting Weldiya (Wäldiya) to Mekelle and Dallol. Several bridges and tunnels are being built in the hilly depression east of Arra, and temporary roads and quarries as well as a base camps and storage facilities have been arranged by Chinese companies working there.

The survey focused primarily on the interface area between the plain and the hilly depression (**fig. 3, Map**). It is separated from the plain by a volcanic ridge culminating in Arra at nearly 2200 meter above sea level (**fig. 4 and 5**). Some 200 meters east of this peak, the terrain abruptly falls eastwards, soon reaching an altitude of 2000 meter above sea level (**fig. 6**). The depression is characterized by a dryer landscape traversed by deep ravines and seasonal streams. Several plateaus nevertheless offer possibilities for cultivation and are still laboured by farmers from Arra and its vicinity.



*Fig. 2: Landscape in the hilly depression east of Arra.*

East of Addi Gudem, transportation is limited to trails mostly used by people on foot or by pack animals and beasts of burden (mostly donkeys and camels, sometimes horses). There is no obvious trace of recent or ancient regional roads and most trails follows the relatively narrow valleys presenting a general NW-SE orientation.

While the flat area of Addi Gudem is relatively well irrigated both by natural streams and reservoirs (**fig. 7**), water in the depression seems scarce outside the rainy season. The survey area is traversed by the May Zelefo River, whose bed was almost dry in October. The mapping of perennial springs might therefore help to locate ancient settlements.



*Fig. 4: Arra ridge looking south toward the church. Note the crescent shape of the ridge and the village of As-Segeda in the back. The tree enclosure in the middle right is the school compound of Arra.*



*Fig. 5: The plateau of Arra east of the ridge.*



### *Modern localities*

Arra is the only village currently inhabited inside the survey area, but immediately to the south stands the village of Alem Segeda and to the north the hamlet of Addi Akeyti which possesses a church. The latter seems to have been recently displaced, possibly from its former location two kilometres NE from Mayda Zeylegat.

Not far from Tsomar, a few hundred meters to the NE lies a small group of huts fenced with barbed wire and which seems inhabited.



*Fig. 6: The slope failure east of Arra.*

### *Medieval History and Traditions*

Few medieval sites are recorded in the region. The most prominent one is Māryām Nāzrēt which still preserves monumental Aksumite remains. Pottery and numismatic finds (coins from the 6th-7th centuries) suggest that the site was occupied at least from the Middle or Late Aksumite periods (Anfray 1970 : 36-39 ; Amare, Henze 2016). Historical sources allow to identify the site as a residence for some Ethiopian bishops and metropolitans shortly before the Zagwe period and it is currently studied by another French-Ethiopian project which will hopefully provide more information on its sequence of occupation and its organisation (Derat et al. 2020). Not far from Nazret, 7 km to the north west, the site of Addi Qalebes was visited in 1969 by Francis Anfray who reported the discovery by local inhabitants of a stone coffin believed to contain the remains of 'Amdä Şəyon's body (Anfray 1970 : 36). The site also has an ancient church.

*Fig. 3: View from the top of Arra ridge looking south with the plain (right) and the hilly depression (left).*



It is worth noting that a vivid memory of the Christian kings' involvements is kept alive in at least two nearby sites. Be it a recent reconstruction or not, the traditions linking kings Lalibəlla (1181-1221) and 'Amdä Şəyon (r. 1314-1342) to Māryām Nāzrēt (Amare, Henze 2016 : 129-130), as well as mentions by chronicles presenting the site as the residence and burial place of early Ethiopian patriarchs (Mordini 1945 : 150, n. 2, explaining the local toponym of Addi Abuna) are important as they set a chronological framework for Christian-Muslim relations and provide a general frame for the contemporary connections between the region and neighbouring Islamic lands, especially with Egypt from where the metropolite were sent to Ethiop. This context and the Islamic environment in which the Coptic clergy bathed in has long served as an argument to explain the Islamic influences in Māryām Nāzrēt buildings.



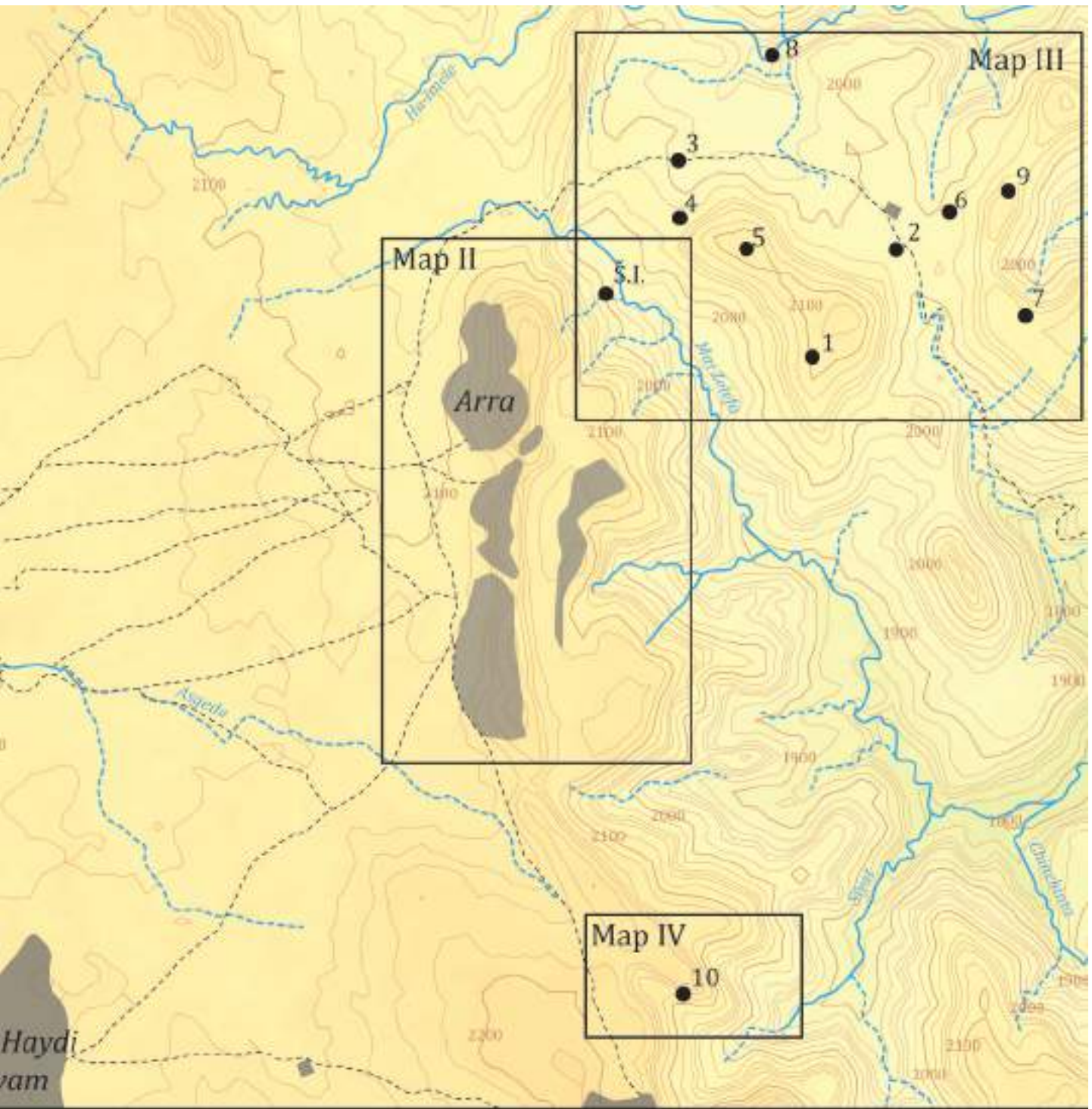
*Fig. 7: The plain between Adi Gudem and Arra in October. Note the streams and reservoirs.*

Map I : General map of the surveyed area and index of the detailed maps in the report.



**Sites**

- |                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| 1. Habera        | 7 |
| 2. Mayda Zelegat | 8 |
| 3. Tsomar        | 9 |
| 4. Habera Golat  | 1 |
| 5. Keren Golat   | 5 |
| 6. Grat Weizero  |   |



- 1. Ziban Arba
- 2. Maetso Wedi Gomo
- 3. Ona Addi / Ksad Merere
- 4. O. Šayḥ Margān cem.
- 5. I. Šayḥ 'Ismā'īl Ambassa cem.



-  Built on Area
-  Highway
-  Secondary road
-  Track
-  Seasonal river
-  Dry river bed



## 1.1 ARRA

The village of Arra (kebele or built area) is located at the eastern end of the plain east of Addi Gudem. It stands on the border between the woredas of Enderata and Hintalo Wäjjärat, belonging to the latter. Arra is the siege of a kebele (Ara-Alem Segeda).

The village covers a relatively large area (about 170 ha) along the volcanic ridge overlooking the sloppy and hilly area leading toward the Danakil depression (**Map II, Pl. 1**). Further south, the locality of Alem Segeda is also located along the same ridge and belongs to the same kebele (see **Map I**).

The village is currently inhabited by Christians and Muslims farmers and herders. It consists of traditional Tigrayan vernacular houses built in stones (*hidmo*), usually composed of one or more housing units and of additional service buildings (separated kitchens, barns) distributed around a central courtyard (**fig. 8**). Many such compounds are surrounded with plots of land enclosed by dry-stone walls and used for cultivation or to gather the cattle. The density of settlement is therefore relatively low with many plots of lands deserted. As customary in the region, family plots and paths are often delimited by cactus trees.

### *Churches*

The two churches of Arra stand on a small hill in the centre of the village nucleus. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century church dedicated to Mikael was built by King Yohannes IV in thanks to the local inhabitants for their help in exile during the reign of Theodros (**fig 9 and 10**). Paintings dated 1874-1875 are preserved in its nave (Lepage, Mercier 2005 : 188-189, 222). In 1992, the building was threatened of destruction when the construction of a new octagonal church was initiated. The latter can be seen from afar and is still under construction. North-east of the church compound lies a relatively large Christian cemetery still in use.



*Fig. 8: A traditional housing unit in Arra with the large house (hidmo), separated kitchen and barn.*



Fig. 9: The two churches of Arra seen through the entrance of the church compound. The 19th century church (left) and the octagonal church under construction (right).



Fig. 10: The eastern outer wall of the 19th century church and the bay-window of the choir.

### Mosques

We were shown four mosques and a *maqam*, two of the mosques being still in function. The largest which is also the most recent one is located on the fringe of the main village nucleus to the East. The two old deserted mosques and the last one still in use are located at the foot of the central ridge near the ancient settlement area.

#### Old Mosque 1

Site coordinates: 13.26108/39.57711 Visited: 11/12/2019 Surface survey

Informants: Kemfe Hagos, Muhammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: Located near ruined buildings and cactus trees, on the edge of a flat area, close to the western limit of the village (fig. 11).

Toponymy: Addi Zaboy.

Description: This is a small one-room rectangular building measuring c. 30 square meters. It stands in a ruinous state. The roof and the upper part of the walls collapsed inside the building, with the exception of the front wall in the south which is preserved for almost its entire height and shows well preserved quoins (fig. 12). Walls are built of small quadrangular blocks linked with earth. The southern wall is 63 cm. width. Entrance (fig. 13), in the middle of the southern wall, is 78 cm. width. The floor inside the building is not visible due to the collapse of the side walls. The northern wall inside includes a mihrāb of irregular square section which is 70 cm (figs. 14, 15) wide and 81 cm. deep. Qibla is 4 degrees north. The mihrāb is 75 cm. height in its present state of preservation. In front of the building to the south, two semi-circular rows of basalt blocks delimit a platform facing the entrance.

Conservation: The building is almost entirely ruined with the roof and walls collapsed, with the exception of the front wall to the south where the entrance stands. There is no door left.

Tradition: The building is supposed to be one of the four mosques built by Faqīh Muḥammad.



Fig. 11: General view of the mosque (right).



Fig. 12: The entrance of the mosque. Note the semi-circular enclosure in front of the building



Fig. 13: The interior of the mosque from the qibla wall.



Fig. 14: The mihrab. Note the large slab used as a side-wall.



Fig. 15: The mihrab seen from above. Note the irregular rectangular section.

*Fig. 16: Dawit Tibebu in front of the mosque.*



*Fig. 17: Inside old mosque 2.*



*Fig. 18: The qibla wall from above. Note the mihrab and the niche in the qibla wall.*



### Old Mosque 2

Site coordinates: 13.25510/39.57905 Visited: 01/12/2019 Surface survey

Toponymy: No name was recorded.

Description: This is a small rectangular building measuring c. 40 square meters (**fig. 16**). It stands in a ruinous state with a partly collapsed roof made of wood and earth and supported by wooden beams (**fig. 17**). The *mihrab* is still visible and presents a rectangular section (**fig. 18**). It is slightly protruding. The mosque is built of dry-stones, and nothing identifies it as such from the outside. We were told that a number of inscriptions discovered after 1930 had been deposited below the cactus trees standing between the mosque and the rock to the east. As requested, during a visit in December 2019, we offered a goat to be sacrificed before the clearance of the cactus, but no inscriptions were found near this spot.

Conservation: The building is still standing but part of the roof and walls have collapsed. There is no door left. According to local informants, the mosque has been abandoned since 1990 (1983 Ethiopian calendar).

Tradition: No specific traditions were recorded.



Fig. 19: A recent mosque seen from the top of Arra ridge. The team is standing in front of the ancient mosque 2.



Fig. 20: The mosque in its enclosure with its protruding semi-circular mihrab.



Fig. 21: The mosque compound. Note the paved platform before the entrance.

### *Recent Mosque 3*

Site coordinates: 13.25490/39.57889 Visited: 01/12/2019 Surface survey

Toponymy: No name was recorded.

20 meters westward from the previous building, a relatively recent mosque stands in the middle of an enclosure recognisable by its four-slopes metallic roof (**fig. 19**). The rectangular building measures c. 75 square meters and presents a protruding mihrab of semi-circular external section (**fig. 20**). It has a window on its eastern side and a unique door on its southern side preceded by a quadrangular stone platform (**fig. 21**). The building was not entered but seems to be less frequented since the erection of the new mosque near Faqih Muḥammad's *maqam*.

Tradition: No specific traditions were recorded.

### *New Mosque*

Site coordinates: 13.25093/39.58220 Visited: 13/10/2019 Surface survey

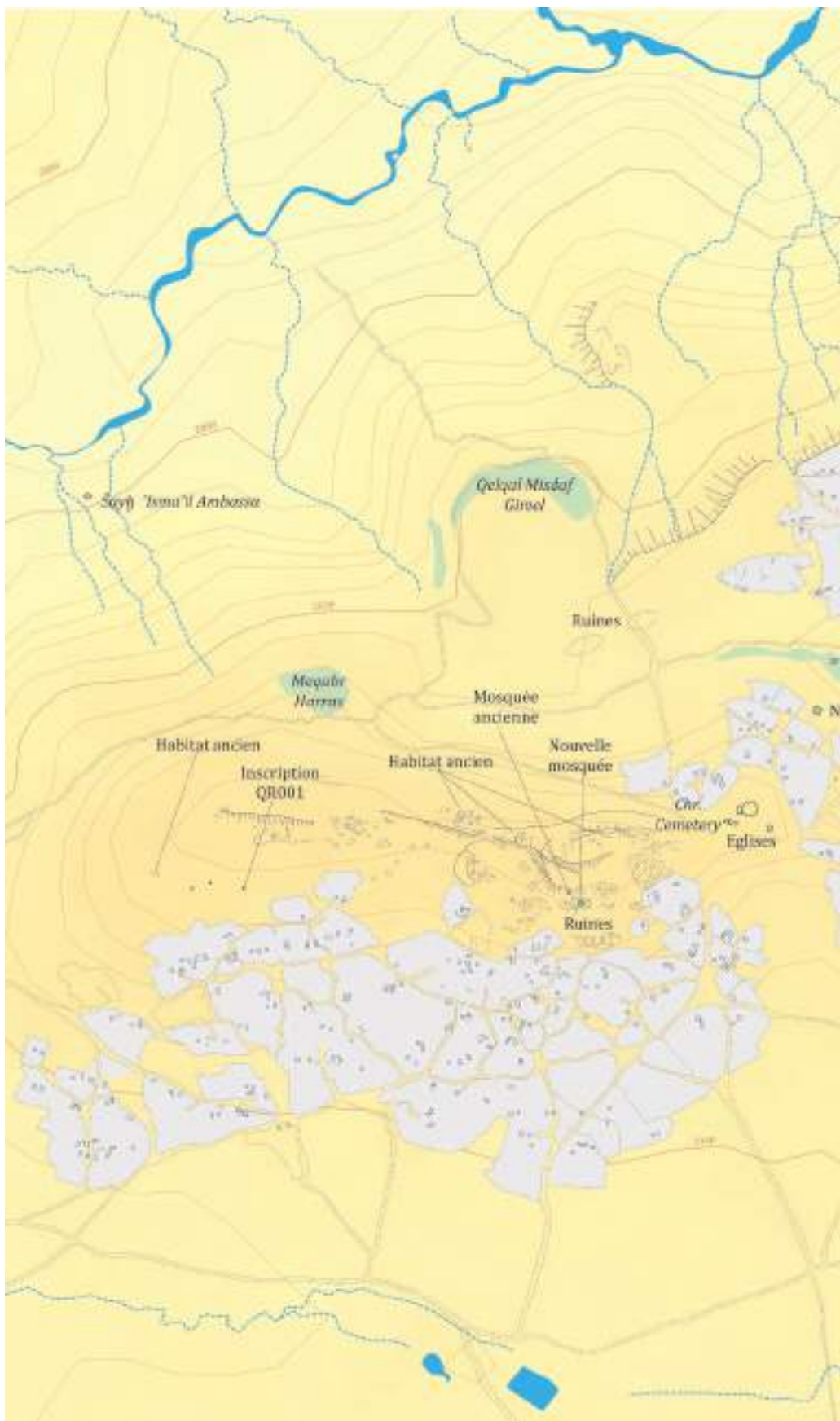
Toponymy: No name was recorded.

The new mosque of Arra is located halfway between the churches and the *maqam* of Faqih Muḥammad Arra, on the edge of the main village nucleus to the south (**fig. 22**). It was built in the late 2000's on a vacant parcel delimited by a low dry-stone wall. It is a rectangular building built of dry roughly squared stones and measures c. 90 square meters (**fig. 23**). The building is orientated NNE-SSW, with a relatively deep *mihrab* of semi-oval section in its northern wall (**fig. 24**). The only entrance to the mosque is through a wooden door in the southern side, facing the qibla wall. On each side of the door,



*Fig. 22: The mosque seen from the North-west with Faqih Muḥammad's maqam among the bushes in the background.*

Map II : General plan of Arra with its mosques, churches and funerary areas.



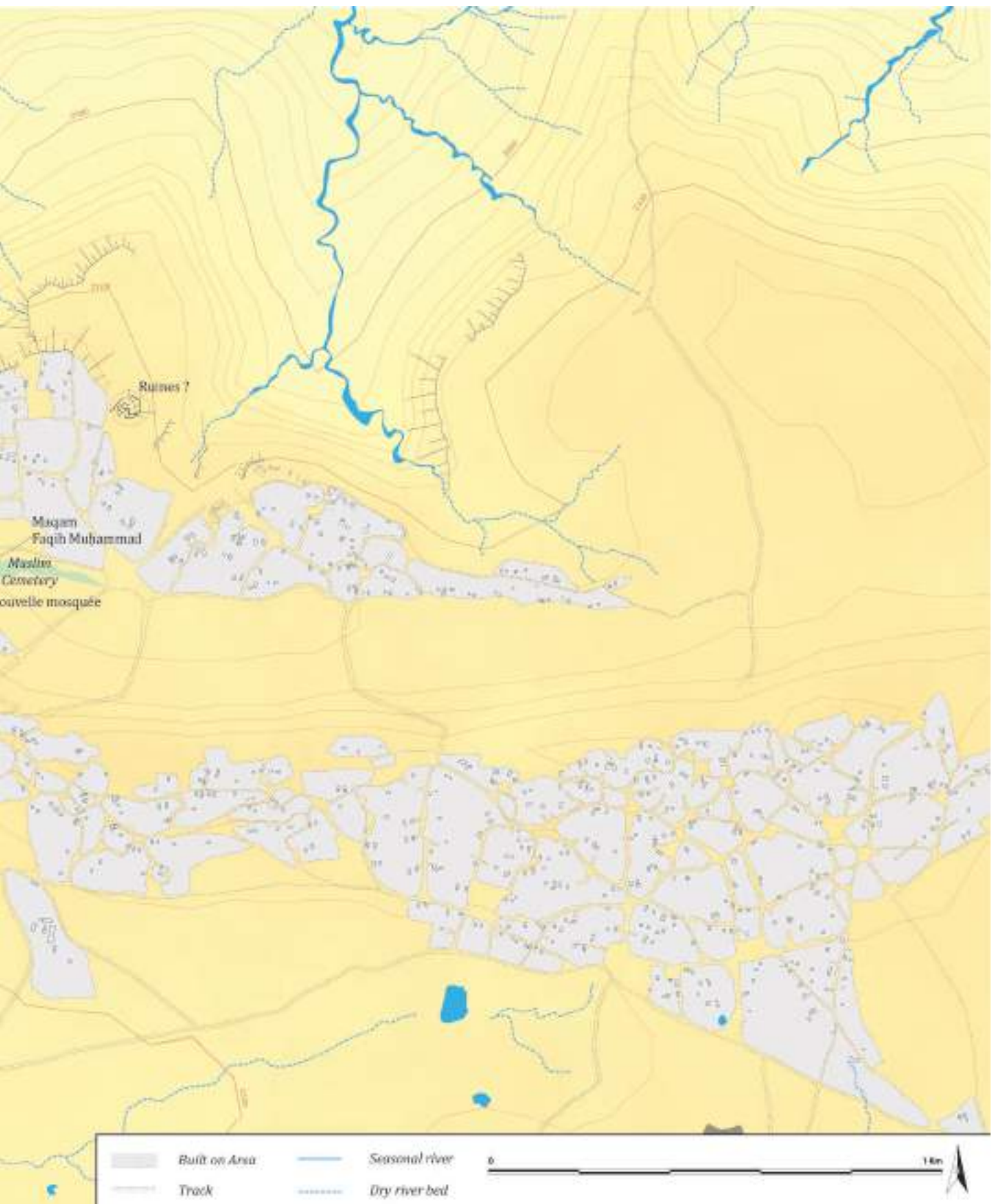




Fig. 23: The mosque entrance. Note the two blocked windows and the potholes in the façade.



Fig. 24: The semi-circular mihrab.



Fig. 25: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay presenting the wooden coffee-table kept in the mosque.

two square windows were blocked as is another window on the western side of the building. Those later arrangements leave the door as the unique source of natural light inside the building. The roof is made of metal sheets supported by wooden beams and the lintels of the door, windows and *mihrab* are also of wooden beams. Regular potholes or boulin holes are still visible both on the inside and outside walls indicating the use of scaffolding during the building work. The general appearance of the building, the material and the technics of construction are thus reminiscent of several recent houses of the village. From the outside, nothing differentiates the mosque from other domestic or farming-purposes buildings.

The building has no internal division. Its floor is of beaten earth covered by some mats and carpets. The mosque possesses hardly any furniture set aside a few stones serving as seats, recent Qurans, plastic buckets, and a wooden coffee table presenting two rows of ten circular cups-holes (fig. 25).

*Maqam Faqih Muḥammad Arra*

Site coordinates: 13.25072/39.58291 Visited: 13/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kabsay

Landscape: The *maqam* stands on the edge of the southern cemetery, among low trees and bushes (fig. 26 and 27).



Fig. 26: General view of the maqam compound. Note the blocked door in the enclosure wall.



Fig. 27: The entrance of the maqam's compound.



Fig. 28: Maqam Faqih Muhammad Arra.

Description: It is a square building measuring c. 50 square meters (**fig. 28**). Inside, a wall divides the room in two following the collapse of the roof. The building is painted in green and surrounded by a dry-stones enclosure with a gate. It has one door and at least two windows painted in blue. We were not allowed to enter the building to check if it possesses a qibla wall.

Conservation: The building itself shows signs of decay. The original roof has collapsed, and cracks are visible on the walls.

Tradition: The *maqam* is believed to host the tomb of Faqih Muḥammad Arra who is recognized as the founder of the local Muslim community. It used to be a regional pilgrimage aim at least until the 1930's. Although visits to the tomb seem to be less frequent, it is still regarded by Muslims from Addi Gudem but also from Godjable and Addi Shela as an important site.

## Muslim Cemeteries

### *The southern cemetery*

Site coordinates: 13.25016/39.58315 Visited: 11/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad 'Alī Kahsay and local inhabitants

Landscape: The cemetery lies along the northern bench of a small waddi dug by a seasonal brook (**fig. 29, 30 and 31**). It is covered by bushes and cactus trees, which sometimes prevent access to the graves or cover it entirely. The cemetery can be seen from the ridge while looking southward, as well as from the church compound. It is easily spotted thanks to the green *maqam*.

Toponymy: No specific name was recorded for the cemetery itself, but it is strongly associated with the figure of Faqih Muḥammad.

Description: The cemetery extends along a strip about 450 m long and roughly orientated north south. The funerary area covers 1 ha but presents an uneven density. Surface markers are scattered among the cactus trees, sometimes grouped although further survey and mapping of the site would certainly help to understand its organisation. At this stage it is impossible to estimate the number of graves, but it is likely to exceed one hundred.

Surface markers are both circular (fig. 32 and 33) and rectangular (fig. 34 and 35), the latter sometimes belonging to the platform type (fig. 36) or being covered by a pile of earth surmounted by a stela (fig. 37). The rectangular surface markers follow a general east-west orientation. Although not systematically, both types present anepigraphic standing stelae, most commonly installed in the central part of the markers (fig. 38), sometimes at its western or eastern end. Several of the stelae are engraved with geometric symbols (fig. 39, 40, 41 and 42). Our local informants explained us that since the deceased families were illiterate, or could not write Arabic, they marked the stelae with the same symbols used to mark their cattle. Being aware of the presence of Arabic engraved funerary stelae in the vicinity, they believe the latter to belong to proper ancient “Arabs”, and the anepigraphic stelae of the southern cemetery to modern local Muslims. They are usually unable to tell who is buried there or if a given grave belongs to a woman or a man, but they refer to the marked stelae as indicator of a male burial. Most of the rectangular “platform-type” markers seem to be concentrated in the



*Fig. 29: View from the wadi looking toward the north and the church counpound.*



*Fig. 30: Terraces and tombs between the maqam and the wadi.*



Fig. 31: The southern cemetery on the edge of the wadi.



Fig. 32: Simple circular surface markers in the southern cemetery.



Fig. 33: Circular surface markers with stelae in the southern cemetery.



Fig. 34: Rectangular surface markers in the southern cemetery.



Fig. 35: Rectangular surface markers in the southern cemetery.



Fig. 36: Platform-type surface marker in the southern cemetery.



Fig. 37: Rectangular surface marker covered by a pile of earth and surmounted by a stele.



Fig. 38: Circular surface marker with a central stele.



Fig. 39: Marked stele.



Fig. 40: Similar mark on another stele.



Fig. 41: Marked stele with a barred cross.



Fig. 42: Marked stone used as a stele. The anthropic origin of the marks is uncertain.



Fig. 43: Terrace walls along the wadi.

northern part of the cemetery, and judging by their state of preservation, they could belong to the most recent graves in the area.

It is interesting to note that animal brand-marks are also found incised in funerary stelae on Muslim Somali graves (Lewis 1961 : 104).

Conservation: The cemetery is relatively well preserved; the vegetation being allowed to grow free. Terrace walls have been built along the waddi to prevent erosion (**fig. 43**).

### *Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel*

Site coordinates: 13.25497/39.58588 Visited: 11/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kəhsay and local inhabitants

Landscape: The cemetery extends from north to south on the edge of the Arra plateau along the cliff towards the Habera ridge (**fig. 44, 45 and 46**). Vegetation is scarce except in its western part which has recently been planted, causing damage to ancient graves according to our informants (**fig. 47**).

Toponymy: The name of the site meaning « the cliff from where the camel fell down » referring either to the incidental fall of a camel into the ravine to the east or a place where dead camels would have been thrown from.

Description: The cemetery can be reached from Faqih Muḥammad’s graveyard by following the waddi toward the north and then the farmers’ paths leading eastward to the cliff. The site covers approximately 0,6 ha although two areas to the north and to the south present a higher density of surface markers. Small stones are scattered in the entire area making the site quite difficult to understand.



*Fig. 44: View of Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel cemetery from Meqabr Harras. The arrows indicate the two areas where graves were observed.*



Fig. 45: The view from Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel cemetery toward the east, embracing the entire Ḥabera ridge.



Fig. 46: Muḥammad 'Alī Kahsay in Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel. Note the rectangular enclosure-type surface marker at the front.



Fig. 47: Flags and stones piled on the edge of the new field in Qelqal Misdef Gimel



Fig. 48: Rectangular enclosure-type surface marker.



Fig. 49: General view of Qelqal Misdef Gimel cemetery.



Fig. 50: Triangular an-epigraphic stele standing in the middle of a rectangular surface marker.

Surface markers are both rectangular (**fig. 48**) and circular (**fig. 49**) and of various sizes. These are usually low structures of the enclosure-type. Some are not more than circular heaps of stones possibly recent rebuilding of ancient markers. No evident stelae have been recorded but bigger stones are sometimes placed at the head and foot of the markers (**fig. 50**). Due to their bad conservation, it is not sure whether the surface markers do follow a specific orientation and it was impossible to estimate their number.

Conservation: Our informants told us that this cemetery was partly destroyed by the recent extension of the cultivated area to the west and that several tombs were dismantled, and their stones reused.

Tradition: No specific tradition about the site have been reported by our informants although they claim this is a Muslim cemetery.

### *Meqabr Harras*

Site coordinates: 13.25968/39.58276 Visited: 11/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kabsay and local inhabitants

Landscape: The site is located on the north-eastern limit of the village, north of Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel cemetery, facing Habera ridge and Şayḥ ‘İsma‘il Ambassa’s tomb toward north-east.

Toponymy: *Meqabr* = cemetery

Description: It is a large cemetery on a small hill covered by trees and bushes and surrounded by cultivated fields on the three other sides (**fig. 51, 52, 53 and 54**). The site extends on approximately 0,8 ha with some discontinuities. Its tombs are relatively well preserved and number a few dozen at least, possibly more than a hundred. The surface markers are both circular (**fig. 55**) and rectangular in shape



*Fig. 51: Meqabr Harras seen from the south-east in october with the northern end of Arra Ridge in the background.*



*Fig. 52: Meqabr Harras seen from the top of Arra ridge in December with Habera ridge in the background. Compare the dry winter landscape with fig. 51.*



*Fig. 53: General view of the eastern edge of Meqabr Harras.*



Fig. 54: View of the western edge of Meqabr Harras.



Fig. 55: Circular surface marker with central stele.



Fig. 56: View of the western edge of Meqabr Harras.



Fig. 57: Surface markers with stelae in Meqabr Harras.



Fig. 58: Platform-type surface markers with central stele in Meqabr Harras.



Fig. 59: Rectangular platform-type surface markers incorporating large basalt boulder.



*Fig. 60: Large circular enclosures incorporating several nave-shaped s and circular surface markers with stelae in Meqabr Harras.*



*Fig. 61: The cairn and funerary enclosure of Šayḥ 'Isma'īl Ambassa on its promontory.*



Fig. 62: The round funerary enclosure of Šayh ‘Isma ‘īl Ambassa seen from the west, facing Habera ridge.

(fig. 56), a vast majority having a standing anepigraphic stele in their centres (fig. 57). Some of the rectangular markers are of the platform types, built of several rows of stones and more than 50 cm high (fig. 58). Some integrates rather large basalt stones (fig. 59). Others take the form of very large circles of stones hosting several standing an-epigraphic stelae, thus suggesting collective burials (fig. 60). The latter are usually very low above ground, a single row of stone delimitating the grave. Judging by their state of conservation, this type might be older than the platform-type markers.

Conservation: Most of the markers are very well preserved, some even suggest a very recent or contemporary use of the cemetery. Vegetation is apparently let untouched, and several markers are covered by cactus trees.

Tradition: According to our informants, the cemetery has developed around the graves of 40 women belonging to Faqih Muḥammad’s family.

*Šayh ‘Isma ‘īl Ambassa*

Site coordinates: 13.26304/39.58586 Visited : 12/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kabsay



Fig. 63: Habera ridge seen from Šayḥ 'Isma'īl Ambassa.



Fig. 64: Šayḥ 'Isma'īl Ambassa funerary enclosure seen from the west.



Fig. 65: The enclosure made of boulders and field stones. Note our guide repairing the wall.



Fig. 66: Detail of the enclosure's wall.



Fig. 67: Several anepigraphic stelae surmounting the funerary cairn.

Landscape: The site is located northeast of Arra. It stands isolated on top of a small promontory overlooking the valley and facing the Ḥabera ridge (fig. 61, 62, and 63). Its access is relatively difficult.

Toponymy: The site is named after a son of Faqih Muḥammad Arra, who is believed to be buried there with other members of its family.

Description: A large cairn covered by trees and cactus and surmounted by several anepigraphic stelae standing in the middle of a circular stone enclosure (fig. 64, 65, 66 and 67). It is without doubt a collective burial.

Conservation: The site is well preserved and during our visit our guide added new stones to the enclosures, evidencing regular repairs to the tomb.

#### *Qalqel Rway*

Site coordinates: 13.26056/39.57911 Visited: 11/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kabsay

Landscape: The tomb is located at the northern edge of the village, at the end of the slope descending from the ridge, among cultivated plots of land (fig. 68).

Toponymy: The « quenched edge » or watered ridge (?)



Fig. 68: The funerary cairn of Qalqel Rway seen from Arra ridge.

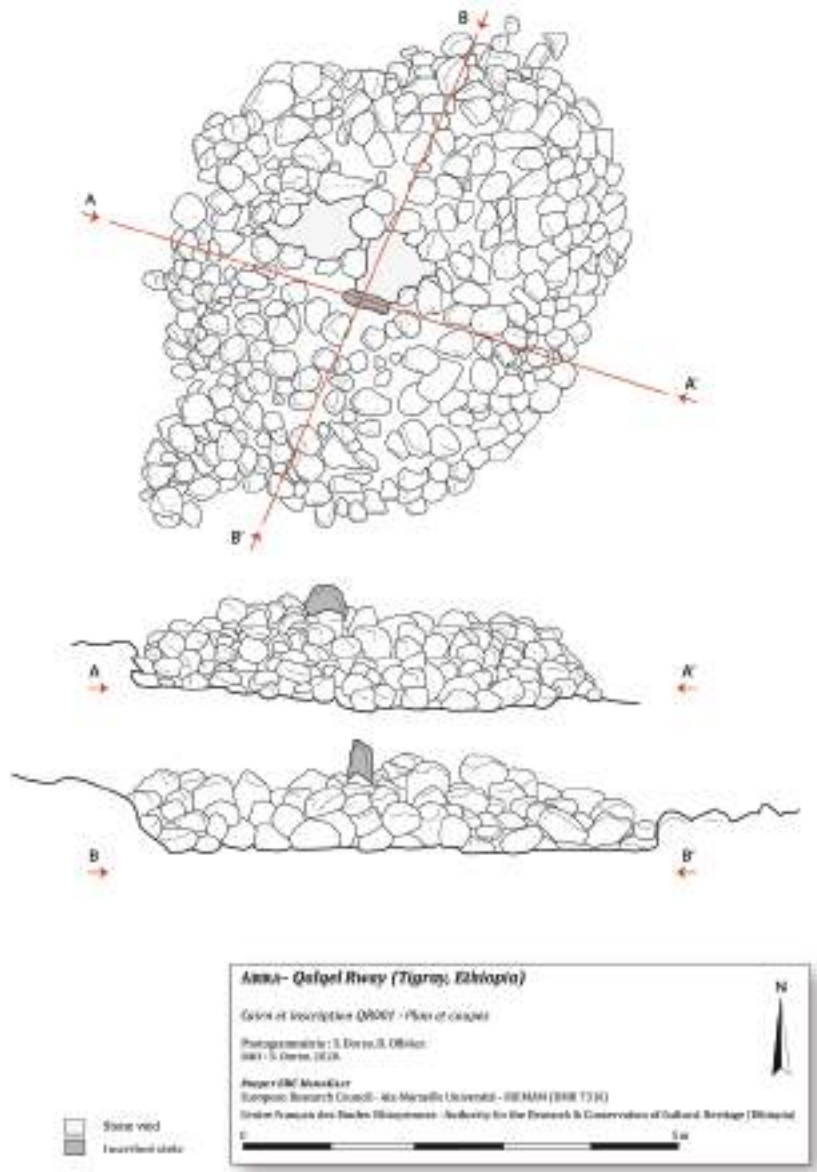


Fig. 69: The funerary cairn of Qalqel Rway seen from the North-West.



Fig. 70: Muḥammad 'Alī Kahsay standing in front of Qalqel Rway funerary Cairn.

Fig. 71: The medieval funerary inscription of Qalqel Rway in situ (QR001)



Pl. 2: Qalqel Rway, plan and section of the funerary cairn.

Description: A roughly circular cairn (**fig. 69, 70**) with a single stele standing the inscribed epitaph (QR001) facing west (**fig. 71, Pl. 2**). Other similar cairn or small mounds are scattered in the vicinity to the north (13.261166/39.57921; 13.26139/39.57919) but without stelae. It is not certain whether all those are burial markers or structures formed by the accumulation of stones removed from the fields or used for cultivation purposes (refuse-heaps or plot boundaries). The remains of a ruined circular house were observed further to the north. If a funerary monument, it would be tempting to link the cairn to the ancient settlement on the ridge.

The inscription of Qalqel Rway provides a 12th century date.

Conservation: The cairn and its inscriptions are well known and have been preserved by local farmers. No imminent action is therefore required, and the inscription was left in situ. An explanation panel with the translation of the text in English, Amharic and Tigrinya could be installed nearby.

#### *Ancient settlement and its organisation in Arra*

The ridge itself and its summit used to be inhabited and many structures can still be seen there (**fig. 72, 73**). A marelle or “Nine Men’s Morris” game board is incised on the rock of the upper platform (**fig. 74**). The site provided a natural refuge and seems to have been enclosed or protected by a wall at some point. The view from the summit encompasses the whole area on 360°, covering both the plain in the west and the mountainous slopes to the east (**fig. 75**). The foundations and fireplaces (**fig. 76, 77**) of several round houses (**fig. 78**) were identified in the area as well as ruined rectangular buildings and walls (**fig. 79, 80 and 81**).

Several large terrace walls are also visible on the northern part of the ridge, delimitating three rectangular enclosure and circular houses (**fig. 82**). Another one lies between two peaks of the ridge (**fig. 83 and 84**).

The remains of circular houses, some of which still present door jambs and internal settings resemble those identified in Ona Addi/Ksad Merere and the site located north of the quarry (**fig. 85 and 86**). This kind of



*Fig. 72: Arra ridge seen from SW.*



*Fig. 73: Arra ridge seen from Meqabr Harras cemetery.*



*Fig. 74: Marelle incised on a rock of the upper platform.*



*Fig. 75: View from the top of the ridge looking toward ESE.*



Fig. 76: Fireplaces and ashtrays from a circular house on the ridge.



Fig. 77: Fireplace full of ashes on top of the ridge.



Fig. 78: Circular houses at the top of Arra ridge.



Fig. 79: Foundation wall of a rectangular building.



Fig. 80: Foundation of a rectangular building in the foreground, note the large defensive wall following the upper terrace of the ridge along its western side (facing Adi Gudem plain).



Fig. 81: Wall on top of the ridge on the northern end of the central ridge.



Fig. 82: Large rectangular enclosures and circular houses on the northern ridge (front arrow shows the inner side of the lower platform, back arrow the location of several circular houses)



Fig. 83: Large rectangular enclosure and circular buildings on the ridge



Fig. 84: Front arrow indicates large outer wall of a rectangular enclosure, back arrows shows circular buildings.



Fig. 85: Circular house with fireplaces and ashtrays on the eastern slope of the upper ridge.



Fig. 86: Ruined circular houses with its standing doorjambs.



Fig. 87: Ruined neighbourhood west of the ridge below the mosques.



*Fig. 88: Ruined neighbourhood west of the ridge looking south.*



*Fig. 89: Circular houses and enclosures west of the ridge. Arrows indicate stone cairns including Qalqel Rway cairn and inscription.*



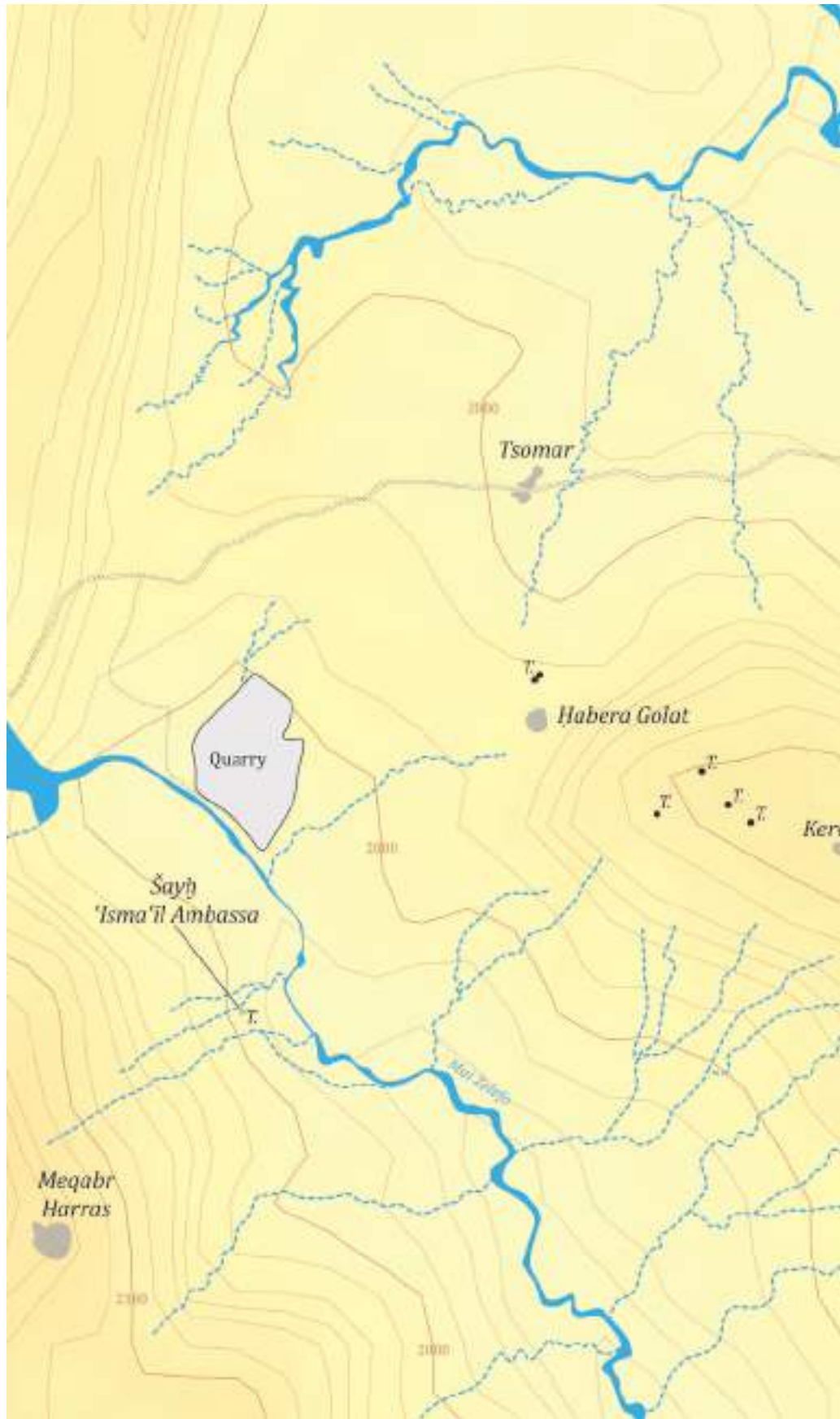
Fig. 90: Habera ridge seen from Arra (west), with Habera cemetery to the south.

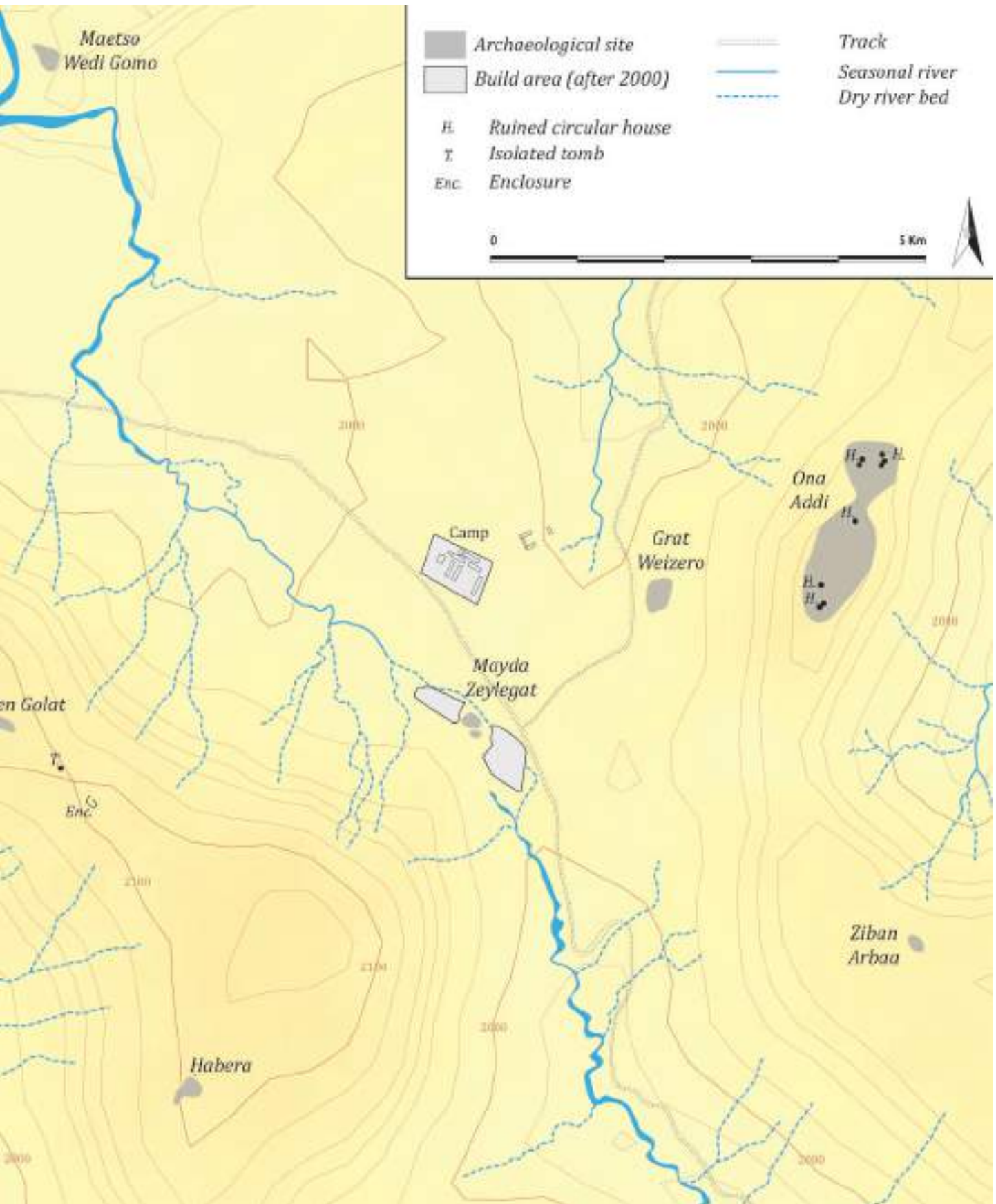
domestic units seems to have been replaced by the current rectangular houses and thus might belong to an older period.



Fig. 91: Habera cemetery seen from Šayḥ 'Isma'īl Ambassa.

Map III : General plan of the surveyed area east of Arra showing the sites identified during the mission.







*Fig. 92: Arra seen from Habera cemetery.*



*Fig. 93: The view from Habera toward the south. Note the railway bridge under construction to the left.*

Test pits inside the structures of the upper ridge area might provide clues on their functions and raddiocarbon dating can be expected by samples from the fire structures (fireplaces/ovens). The whole area would deserve a proper survey and mapping. However, and despite the relatively high density of semi-buried structures, surface finds were very meagre, with only a few potsherds.

Two large, ruined neighbourhoods are still standing at both feet of the ridge, one immediately below two of the mosques (**fig. 87, 88 and 89**). The reasons of its abandon are not clear, but the standard use of a vernacular Tigrayan stone-houses is believed to last between 80 and 120 years (Lyons 2007 : 183, 194). Many of the houses currently standing on the eastern part of the village, beyond Faqih Muḥammad's cemetery, seem quite recent and it is possible that settlement in Area shifted from the ancient ridge area toward the east during the last century.

## 1.2 ḤABERA

Site coordinates: 13.25841/39.60071 Visited: 16/12/2018 and 10/10/2019 Surface survey and drone photography.

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay, Šayḥ ‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Abd al-Qādir

The cemetery of Ḥabera was first surveyed in December 2018 and a short report of its discovery was included in a preliminary reports delivered to the ARCCCH (Loiseau et al. 2019 : 85-92). Since then, it has also been mentioned in several publications (Loiseau et al. 2021; Loiseau et al. 2022; Dorso & Lagaron forthcoming). The first survey of the site led to the discovery of 16 inscribed stelae or fragments of stelae after only a few hours spent on the site. Considering the extent of the site and the suspected presence of many more stelae, a longer and more systematic survey of the site was required.

Landscape: The site is located near the southern end of the Ḥabera ridge, on the western edge of the summit plateau (**fig. 90**). The area is almost exempt of vegetation, set aside a few bushes and small trees among the cemetery. It overlooks the Mai Zelefo valley and faces Arra and its modern Muslim cemeteries. The graveyards related to Faqih Muḥammad (his maqam and the southern cemetery, Meqabr Harras and Šayḥ ‘Isma‘īl Ambassa’s tomb) are all visible from Ḥabera (**fig. 91 and 92**). Toward the south, the view from the cemetery embraces a large portion of the hilly depression (**fig. 93**).

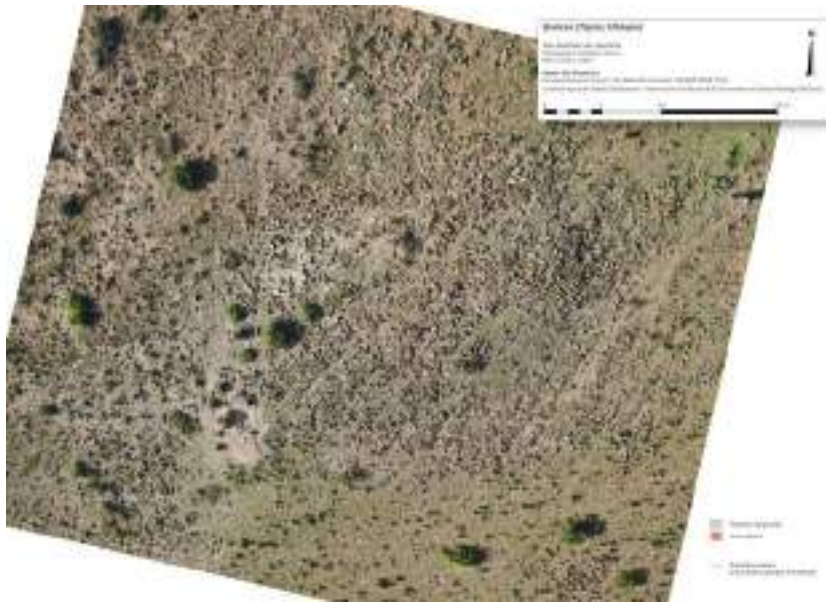
Toponymy: The name of the site appears to derive from the name of the ridge on which it lies. Our informants sometimes refer to it as Ḥabera Bokta (“the high” or “from the top”, in opposition to Ḥabera Golat, the lower).

*Description:* In our current understanding of the site, we believe the cemetery to cover at least 0,2ha. It is by far the largest medieval cemetery of the area (**fig. 94 and 95**).

Several dozens of tombs were observed from the surface but not a single building (**Pl. 4-6**). Surface markers present a great diversity in terms of shape and size. Circular markers can be a simple round



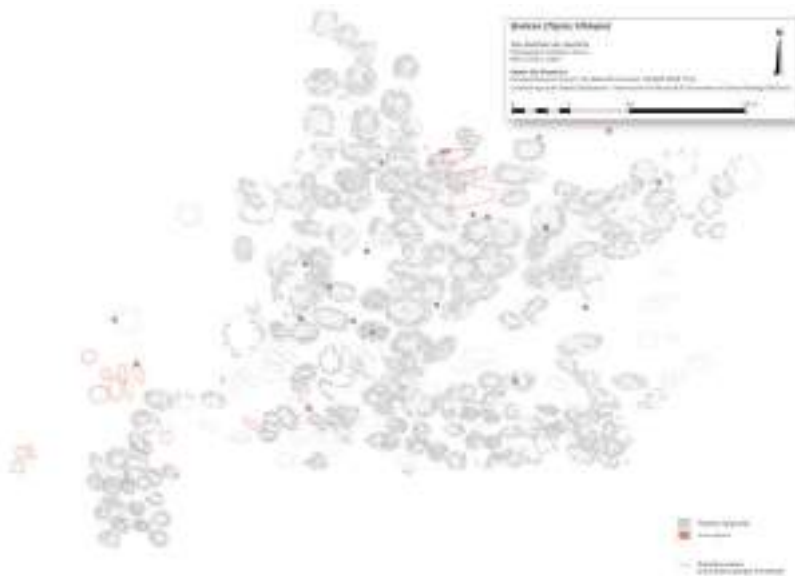
*Fig. 94: General Drone view of the cemetery. Note the density of the tombs and possible alley lines inside the main nucleus.*



Pl. 4 : Drone view of the site.



Pl. 5 : Tentative reading from the drone view and observations on the ground.



Pl. 6 : Draft sketch plan of Habera (not definitive, 2019).



Fig. 95: Habera cemetery seen from Šayh 'Isma'īl Ambassa.



Fig. 96: Circular tomb with stele in secondary position (upside-down on the picture).



Fig. 97: Circular or nave-shape tomb with inscribed stele (arrow, possibly in situ but inclined toward the right).



Fig. 98: Irregular circular tomb made of two concentric circles.



Fig. 99: Circular tomb with an epigraph standing stele.



*Fig. 100: Circular tomb without stele. The arrow shows inscribed stele H008.*



*Fig. 101: Circular mound-like tomb.*



*Fig. 102: Box-like enclosure inside a circular tomb with a stele (arrow).*



*Fig. 104: Nave-shape (mound-like) grave marker made of several courses of stones. Note the enclosure in the centre (vertical slab-stones).*

*Fig. 103: Nave-shape (mound-like) grave marker made of several courses of stones. Note the enclosure in the centre (vertical slab-stones).*



*Fig. 106: Rectangular slabs-cover in a probable circular tomb.*



*Fig. 105: Rectangular slabs-markers possibly integrated in a larger tomb.*



*Fig. 107: The difficult reading of some contexts: inscribed standing stele H010 on what is probably a circular mound-like tomb.*



*Fig. 108: Several inscribed stelae deposited on a large nave shape mound-like tomb.*



*Fig. 109: Relative chronology: superimposition of circular markers.*

enclosure (**fig. 96 and 97**), concentric circles (**fig. 93**) or circles made of slabs pointing toward the circle centre (**fig. 99 and 100**). Sometimes, especially in the case of the latter type, markers protrude from the walking level, forming a kind of small mound ('mound-like' tomb) (**fig. 101**). Some of the simplest circular markers enclose a smaller rectangular structure whether a coffin-shaped structure or simple horizontal slabs (**fig. 102**).

Many other enclosures are rectangular or nave-shape (**fig. 103**). While the circular markers rarely exceed more than 1,5m in diameter, the size or the enclosure-type markers varies between less than a meter to more than two m in length. They can form some elongated mound made of several rows of blocks (**fig. 104**).

Several rectangular or paving-like slabs structures may correspond to small tombs markers (**fig. 105 and 106**) maybe located inside larger surface markers.

Although they were discovered still standing (most probably in situ), the context of some stelae was difficult to read without proper clearing or excavations (**fig. 107**). Some of them were also found deposited on specific tombs, evidencing the removal, and gathering of the stelae in recent times (**fig. 108**).

The whole site seems organized with groups of tombs gathered around a bigger circular mound-like marker or following rows or plots (**Pl. 6**). At this stage of our investigation, it is not clear whether this organisation results of several phase of use or if it was determined by other factors (sex, age, social status...). The overall understanding of the site's organisation and chronology would deserve a proper mapping. The difference of conservation and sedimentation as well as opposing orientations might indicate different period of use and discontinuity in the spatial management of the site. This is also suggested by the relative chronology, some markers being cut or superimposed by other markers (**fig. 109**).

Most of the longitudinal markers seem to follow a roughly E-W orientation but some in the contrary might be orientated N-S (**Pl. 6**). In-situ standing stelae were found at the head or feet of rectangular or nave-shape enclosure markers. For those lying (deposited?) in the middle of circular markers or less frequently buried in the middle of the circle it was of course impossible to attribute a specific orientation. Inscribed faces can be directed toward the exterior as well as the interior of the grave.

The virtual absence of surface artefacts should be stressed. Only a handful of small potsherds have been collected on the plateau.

*Conservation:* The site is well preserved and visited mostly by herders and local faithful. However, this visits alone hardly explain the fact that many inscribed stelae were discovered broken, sometimes in shattered in very small pieces, or displaced, buried or upside down. This might be the result of conscientious vandalism, most probably dating back to a relatively remote period judging by the sediment covering some stelae.

*Tradition:* Ḥabera is the final station of a seasonal or yearly circuit performed by local Muslim women. According to our informants, women having reached the puberty and married women gather on the site to request the deceased intercession (*mihlila*). The *ziyāra* includes other cemeteries from the area, notably Tsomar, Mayda Zeilegat, Grat Wāyzāro and Zəban Arba 'a.

Despite the vivid interest manifested by the local Muslim community, when asked no one was able to offer a narrative or a date for the site. It is regarded as an ancient place and indeed as a Muslim site but, unlike in Zəban Arba 'a for instance, no specific historical traditions were recorded.

*Inscriptions:* In October 2019, 9 new stelae (H0017-25) were added to the 16 stelae or fragments discovered in 2018. Ḥabera corpus therefore amounts to a total of 25 stelae or fragment, representing in the current stage of research, the second largest Arabic epigraphic corpus of Ethiopia after Bilet. Some inscriptions were taken to the mosque of Addi Gudem in order to preserve them (see below).

### 1.3 Mayda Zeylegat

Site coordinates: 13.2661383/39.6067651 Visited : 10/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay, Ṣayḥ ‘Abd al-Raḥman ‘Abd al-Qādir

The cemetery of Mayda Zeylegat was first visited in 2018, on the same day as Ḥabera, and it has been mentioned in the same publications. This first visit resulted in the discovery of 8 previously unreported inscriptions or inscribed fragments of stelae, including a stele dated 657H (1259 CE).

Landscape: The site lies at the bottom of the valley situated east of Ḥabera, very close to the current trail (**fig. 110**). Description: The site consists of one main burial area (**fig. 111**). The cemetery consists of at least three group of circular surface markers with stelae (**Pl. 7**). The markers, a simple circle of stones sometimes formed small mounds (**fig. 111, 112 and 113**). Inscribed and non-inscribed stelae stand in the middle of the circles. The internal organisation and logic behind the grouping of markers is not elucidated so far.

Judging from aerial photographs, the number of tombs could amount to about a hundred.

Inscriptions: The second visit to the site yielded two additional inscriptions or fragments (MZ009 and MZ010). During the first survey in 2018, a number of inscriptions were discovered buried inside the markers, relatively deep into the ground and although they were placed vertically, it raises the question of whether they were in primary or secondary position (**fig. 114, 115, 116 and 117**).

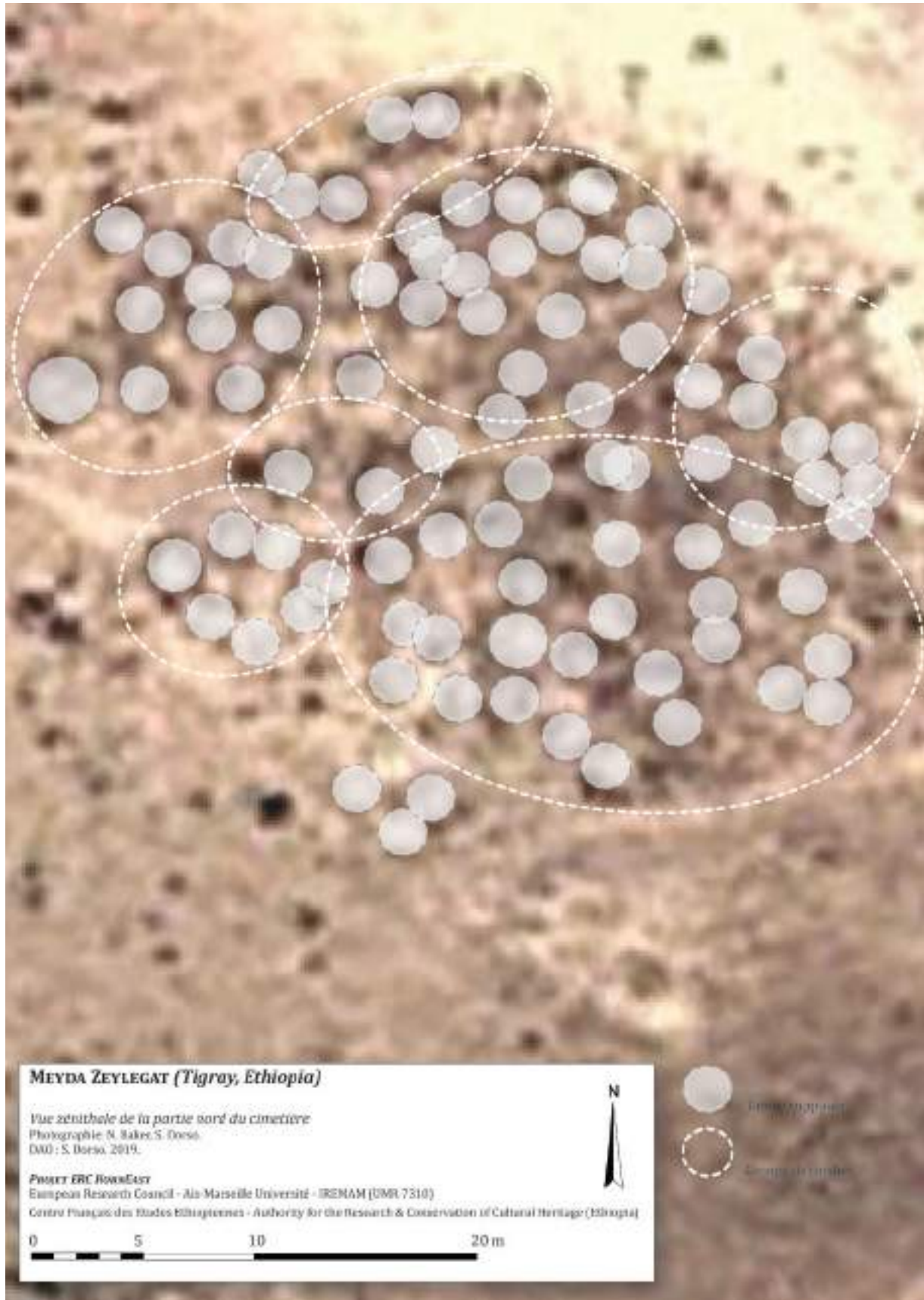
Conservation: The site was recently threatened by the installation of a storage compound for vehicles and construction furniture by the Chinese company building the railway. However, judging from the older satellite pictures, and despite heavy mechanical activities, it seems that the main group of burials was relatively well preserved (**fig. 118**).

Dating: Preliminary dating of Mayda Zeylegat’s steale indicate an occupation during the second half or the H7<sup>th</sup> /13<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

Traddition: Mayda Zeylegat is part of the same network of pilgrimage site as Ḥabera. It is visited seasonally by faithful especially Muslim women.



*Fig. 110: Mayda Zeylegat cemetery seen from the South-West. Note the Chinese workcamp and the two storage areas.*



Pl. 7 : Distribution of markers observed on the ground at Mayda Zeylegat on a satellite image (draft sketch).



*Fig. 111: General view of the cemetery from the west.*



*Fig. 112: Circular tomb marker in Meyda Zeylegat.*



*Fig. 113: Several circular markers in Meyda Zeylegat.*



Fig. 114: Circular marker with a deposited anepigraphic stele.



Fig. 115: In situ inscription MZ10 barely protruding from ground.



Fig. 116: In situ inscription MZ10 in the middle of a circular tomb.



Fig. 117: Inscription MZ10 with only a line on eighth visible above the ground.



Fig. 118: Satellite imagery (Google) showing expanding activities near Mayda Zeylegat (A: 2012, B: 2013, C: 2014, D: 2019).

## 1.4 Tsomar

Site coordinates: 13.27226/39.59100 Visited: 09/10/2019 Surface survey, and drone photography.

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The site is located at the bottom of the valley (alt. c. 1900 m) north of Habera ridge and has been cut by the modern motor track. It lies on a natural way of communication along which are also found Mayda Zeylegat and possibly Grat Weizero (**fig. 119 and 120**).

The track divided the cemetery in two parts, the northern one lies against a natural depression created by a seasonal brook (**fig. 121**). There, water and precipitations have washed the upper ground and stones till the bedrock, possibly damaging part of the cemetery. The southern part of the site stands one or two meters above the track on the northern slope of a very shallow mound partly covered by high grass and bushes. (**fig. 122**). The view from the site extends mostly toward the north-west i.e. toward the hills and the depression of the Ha-Imele River (Maetso Wedi Gomo cemetery).

Toponymy: According to our informant the name of the site refers to a flower.

The cemetery currently extends over 0,15 ha but it is fairly possible that it used to be larger before its destruction by the track and the seasonal rains. Its western part might also have been damaged by the crop field to the west (**fig. 123**).

The vast majority of the markers are circular, sometimes plain or mound-like mostly empty in the middle (**fig. 124 and 125**). A few coffin-shape structures can be observed in the middle of some circular structure presenting a general EW orientation.

Inscriptions: A total of eleven inscribed funerary stelae or fragments of stelae were discovered on the site. In the southern part, two inscribed stelae were found still standing, the epitaph facing W or slightly WSW (**fig. 126 and 127**). It is not certain if those stelae are located at the head or feet extremities. Several large flagstones are visible on both sides, and contrary to a previous observation it is possible that the epitaphs are related to markers to the north-east. If so, the inscribed faces would have been directed toward the exterior of the grave. It is very likely that those flagstones markers were encircled by a larger stone circle partly eroded toward the east.

The surrounding of the in situ markers was drawn on scale before the stelae being removed to prevent any further damage. Although no other standing stelae were found in the immediate vicinity, the mound host more graves and circular markers are clearly visible toward the east among the bushes (**fig. 128**).

The area would deserve a proper cleaning to better understand its organisation. Most of the visible markers belong to the northern part of the site. They all seem to fall in the circular type, sometimes with a coffin shape structure in the middle. It was difficult to assess the exact number of markers from the ground, but it exceeds 40.

Conservation: The site is clearly endangered by recent activities and development in the area especially by the construction work of the railway track. The motor track has also increased the natural erosion and the southern mound shows clear evidence of accelerated erosion which might soon lead to the exposition of the graves. Termites' colonies were spotted in the area that could cause disturbance to the human remains. For those reason conservation work on the southern part of the cemetery, or salvage excavation should be carried on. To the north-east it is possible that the extension of the fields bordering the motor track have disturbed part of the cemetery.

The 11 stelae from Tsomar (TS001-011) were deposited in the Mosque of Addi Gudem under the care of imam ‘Abd al-Qādir to prevent looting or damage (see below).



Fig. 119: Location of Tsomar cemetery along the road at the bottom of the valley north of Habera ridge.



Fig. 120: The cemetery seen from the north-east, with a seasonal brook in the foreground.



Fig. 121: The cemetery from the north east. Note the recent road dividing the cemetery, with the southern area (A) and the northern area (B). Circle indicates circular tombs.



Fig. 122: View of the slightly upper southern area, with the team around inscribed stelae.



Fig. 123: Zenithal view of the northern area indicating some of the circular markers. To the west (bottom), crop fields might have damaged part of the cemetery.



Fig. 124: Partial view of the northern area with arrows indicating circular markers.



Fig. 125: Partial view of the northern area with arrows indicating circular markers.



Fig. 126: Inscribed stele TS001 found in situ.

Fig. 127: Inscribed stele TS002 and possible flagstones indicating the body orientation.



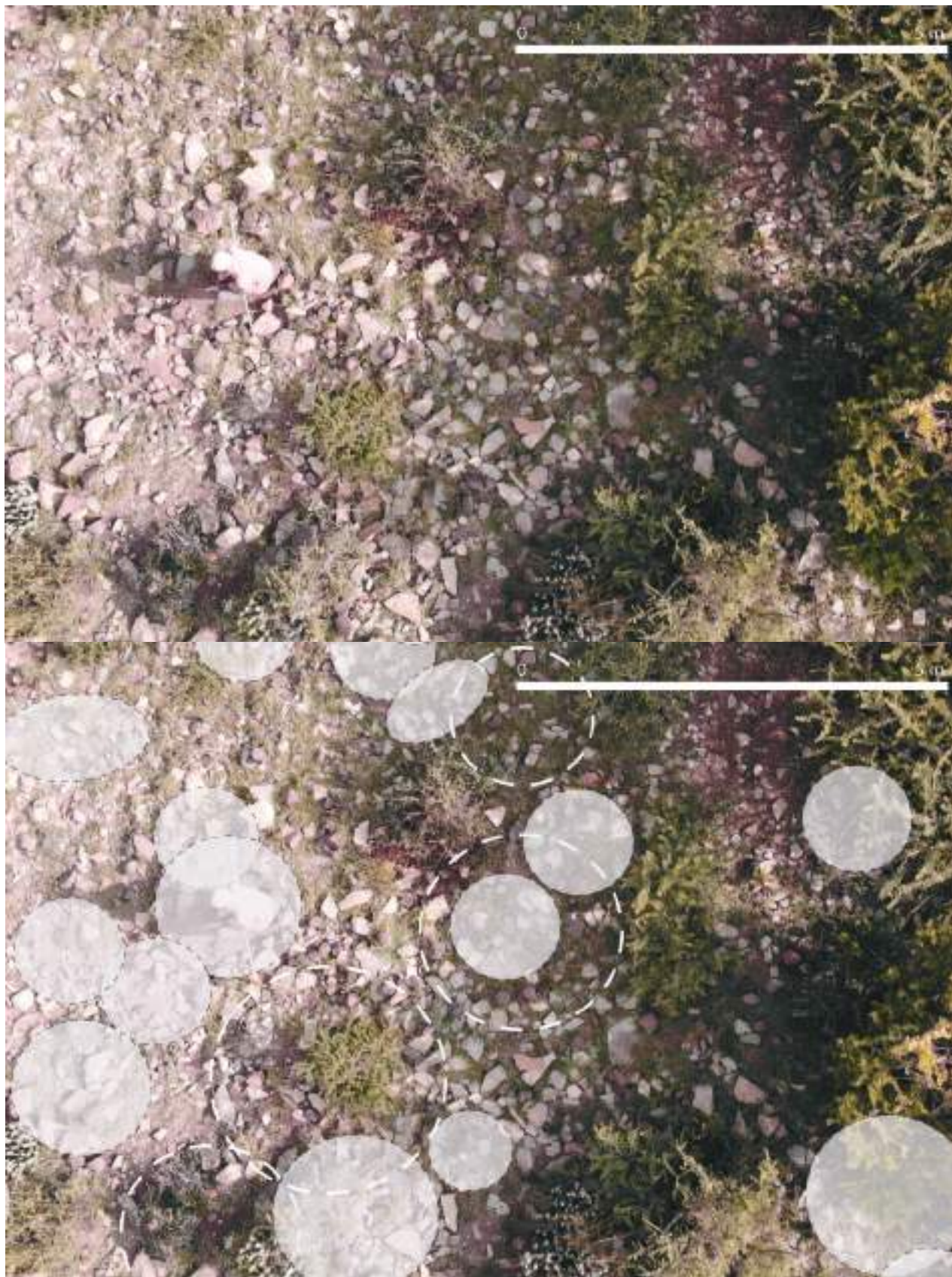


Fig. 128: The difficult reading of the southern area: circular markers with standing central stelae?

## 1.5 Keren Golat

Site coordinates: 13.26655/39.59511 Visited: 11/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The site is located on the northwestern plateau of the Ḥabera ridge toward the West, facing Arra (**fig. 90**). The view from the site toward the west is almost identical as in Ḥabera. It overlooks the Mai Zelefo valley and the Muslim cemeteries related to Faqih Muḥammad are all visible from the site (**fig. 129**). It is surrounded on three sides by fields of teff, which was fully grown during our October visit. This plot is known to belong to the Mosque of Arra (**fig. 130**). The cemetery itself seems to have been unploughed and unplanted and the surface markers were clearly visible.

Toponymy: Keren means « hill » or « mountain ».

Description: A cemetery of several dozens of graves divided among three main areas. The surface markers belong to four main types: 1) rectangular enclosures (**fig. 131-135**), 2) circular graves (**fig. 136-138**) and 3) nave-shaped enclosures (**fig. 139-140**) or nave-shaped or circular hips of stones (**fig. 141**). Some of the rectangular markers are found inside a circle of stones (**fig. 137**). Most of the graves appear to follow a north-south orientation although with slight variations.

The surface markers visible in the southern part of the cemetery are of small size suggesting children graves. The concentration of markers in this area is very dense.

To the west at the beginning of the slope, several concentric circles have been noticed (**fig. 137-138**). Their diameter is about 3 to 3,5m. It is not clear whether they include a single nave-shape grave in their centre or those are collective burial. This type seems to be limited to one area only inside the site.

The spatial division and the typology of surface markers is unrelated, the main three types being used in the same area.

Conservation: The site is well known by farmers and herders and has been protected so far. It is generally well preserved.

Tradition: According to Muḥammad ‘Alī, the two stelae he kept at his house, and showed us in 2018 saying they came from Arra were in fact taken from Keren Golat. He later showed us the spot where he thinks they were collected. During our own survey, no additional inscriptions or fragments were uncovered from the site and it is therefore unsure if any inscription did ever originate from this site.



Fig. 129: The view from Keren Golat toward the west: Arra ridge and its cemeteries (1-5) and surface markers in surface (6).



Fig. 130: Keren Golat : Surface markers near the field belonging to the Mosque of Arra.



Fig. 131: Keren Golat : large rectangular surface marker.



Fig. 132: Keren Golat : small rectangular surface marker.



Fig. 133: Keren Golat : small rectangular surface marker.



Fig. 134: Keren Golat : small rectangular surface marker.



Fig. 135: Keren Golat : a group of rectangular surface markers.



Fig. 136: Keren Golat : small circular surface markers.



*Fig. 137: Keren Golat : very large circles of stones incorporating smaller surface markers.*



*Fig. 138: Keren Golat : large stone circle.*



*Fig. 139: Keren Golat : small nave shape surface marker.*



*Fig. 140: Keren Golat : nave shape surface marker.*



*Fig. 141: Keren Golat : hips of stone (surface marker).*

## 1.6 Ḥabera Golat

Site coordinates: 13.26833/39.59128 Visited : 9/10/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The site stands on a small plateau above the main track in the valley, overlooked by the northern end of the Ḥabera ridge (**fig. 90**). Vegetation was scarce (small trees and bushes) offering perfect conditions of visibility.

Description: The site is currently divided in two parts, cut by a herding path or a seasonal brook (**fig. 142**). It is a large cemetery with dozens of circular and rectangular surface markers, some very large. The area is very densely occupied by surface markers, and it is somewhat difficult to identify each grave due to the many stones scattered all around.

Surface markers present an important variety. The majority belong to the circular types, many having an anepigraph stela standing in their centre (**fig. 145-147**). Circular markers are often forming small mound with peripheral stones orientating longitudinally toward the centre, resembling the medieval graves of Tsomar, Mayda Zeylegat or Ḥabera (**fig. 148-149**). Some have coffin-like structures inside (**fig. 150**), other very large one incorporate several markers in their midst (**fig. 151**). Beside the circular markers, rectangular one (**fig. 152**) as well as hips (**fig. 153**) of stones have been spotted.

A few potsherds and obsidian flakes are scattered near the site (**fig. 154**).

Conservation: The site is relatively well preserved, but its location on low ground, at a limited distance of the new quarry would deserve regular inspections.

Tradition: According to our informants, in the hills surrounding Ḥabera Golat to the north men sometimes sacrifice sheep before the rain season (usually in June) in order to provoke precipitations.



*Fig. 142: Ḥabera Golat : the two areas of the site seen from the northern edge of Ḥabera ridge.*



Fig. 143: Ḥabera Golat : a high density of surface markers, not always allowing the identification of individual graves.



Fig. 144: Ḥabera Golat looking toward south and Habera ridge : a high density of surface markers, not always allowing the identification of individual graves.



Fig. 145: Ḥabera Golat : circular surface marker with standing anepigraphic stele.



Fig. 146: Ḥabera Golat : circular surface marker with standing anepigraphic stele.



Fig. 147: Ḥabera Golat : circular surface marker with standing anepigraphic stele.



Fig. 148: Ḥabera Golat : circular surface marker.



Fig. 149: Ḥabera Golat : circular surface marker with standing anepigraphic stele.



Fig. 150: Ḥabera Golat : Two coffin-like structures inside a circle of stones.



Fig. 151: Ḥabera Golat : several surface markers inside a large circle of stones.



Fig. 152: Ḥabera Golat : Rectangular, platform-like surface markers.



Fig. 153: Ḥabera Golat : hips of stones.



Fig. 154: Ḥabera Golat : potsherd and obsidian flake.

## 1.7 Zəban Arba‘a

Site coordinates: 13.26147/39.61623 Visited : 10/10/2019 Surface survey, and drone photography

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The site is located on the western edge of the southern plateau of the Amrere ridge, culminating around 2065m and overlooking the valley of Mayda Zeylegat and Grat Wāyzāro. The location of the site is very similar to that of Ḥabera, although the two cemeteries cannot be seen from each other. The area presented very little vegetation, apart some bushes and low grass allowing an excellent visibility. No artefact was found in surface.

Toponymy: “Zəban” means plateau and “arba‘a” forty. The name of the site refers to the 40 pilgrims believed to be buried there and who according to the local tradition (here ‘Abd al-Raḥmān) were found dead on the spot while returning from the haḡḡ. This tradition is known from other places in Ethiopia.

The site (alt. c. 2080m above sea level) covers c. 0,15 ha and consists of two groups of tombs (**Pl. 8-9**). The first group to the east is composed of c. 30 circular tombs and a single nave-shape marker oriented WNW-ESE (**fig. 155**). The markers are made of several rows of black or dark boulders as well as lighter brown or grey raw stones, forming a circle in the middle of which stands one uninscribed stele in the centre (**fig. 157-159**). There is no indication of the stelae following any specific orientation. On some of the markers, the bichromy is evidently underlined with one or more rows of white blocks being deposited on top of darker stones (**fig. 160**). The markers are very different in size, diameters varying from 2 to 5 meters. One marker in the north is twice as big as the average size, possibly belonging to a higher status deceased or serving as a collective tomb (**fig. 156**). It is also possible that some of the markers were grouped maybe according to family ties or other criteria.

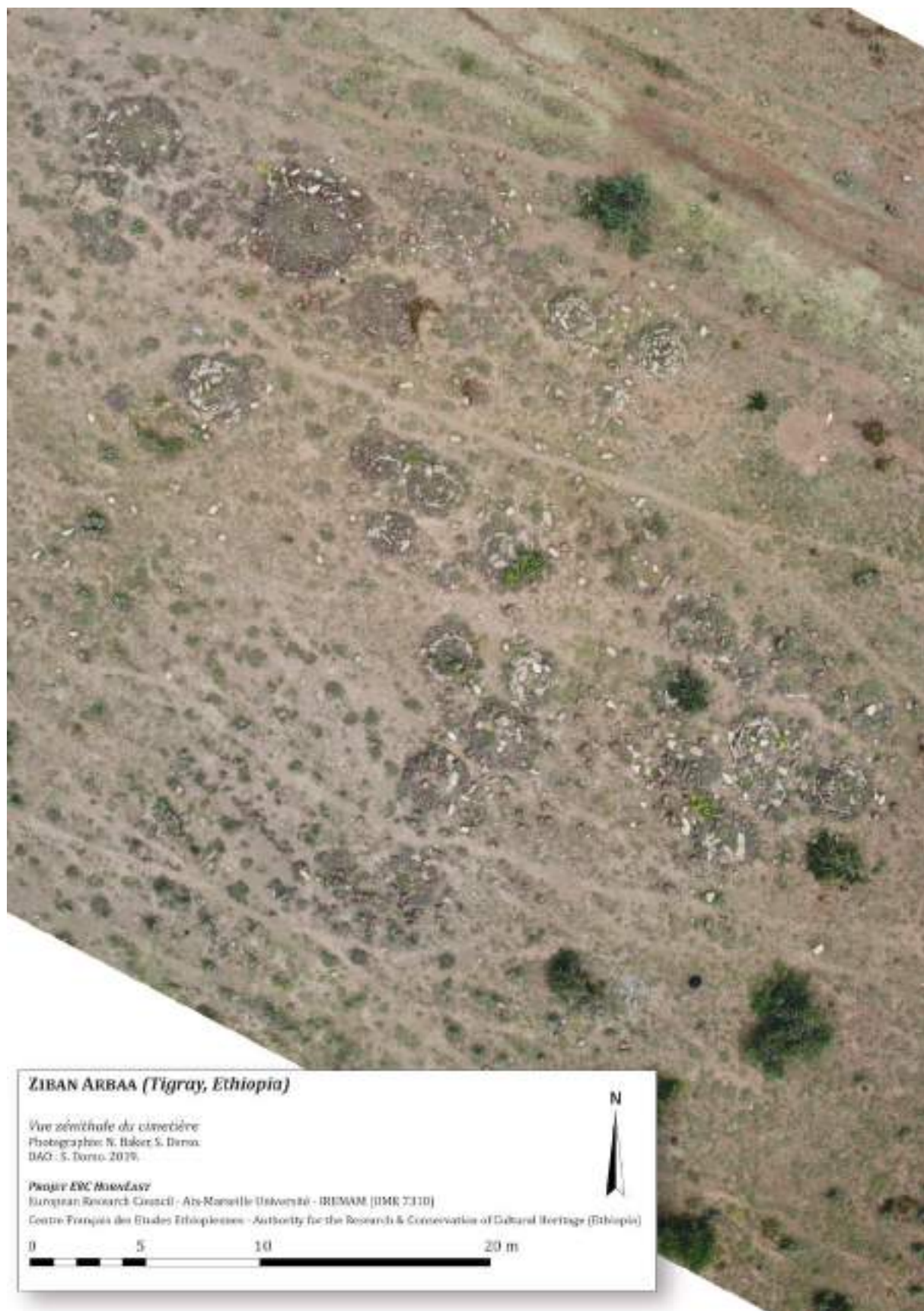
The second group of tombs lies c. 10-15 meters to the west of the precedent. It is composed of a dozen of nave-shape markers following a NW-SE orientation (**fig. 161**). They are poorly preserved, half buried and without stelae.

The overall aspect of the site suggests two different phases of occupation. The limited sedimentation on the first group of tombs may indicate a relatively recent date (modern period?) although the location of the site on high ground exposed to wind and rain may have contributed to the current state of the site. Judging only by the sedimentation, the second group might be older than the first one. Its orientation, although slightly divergent remains compatible with Muslim graves.

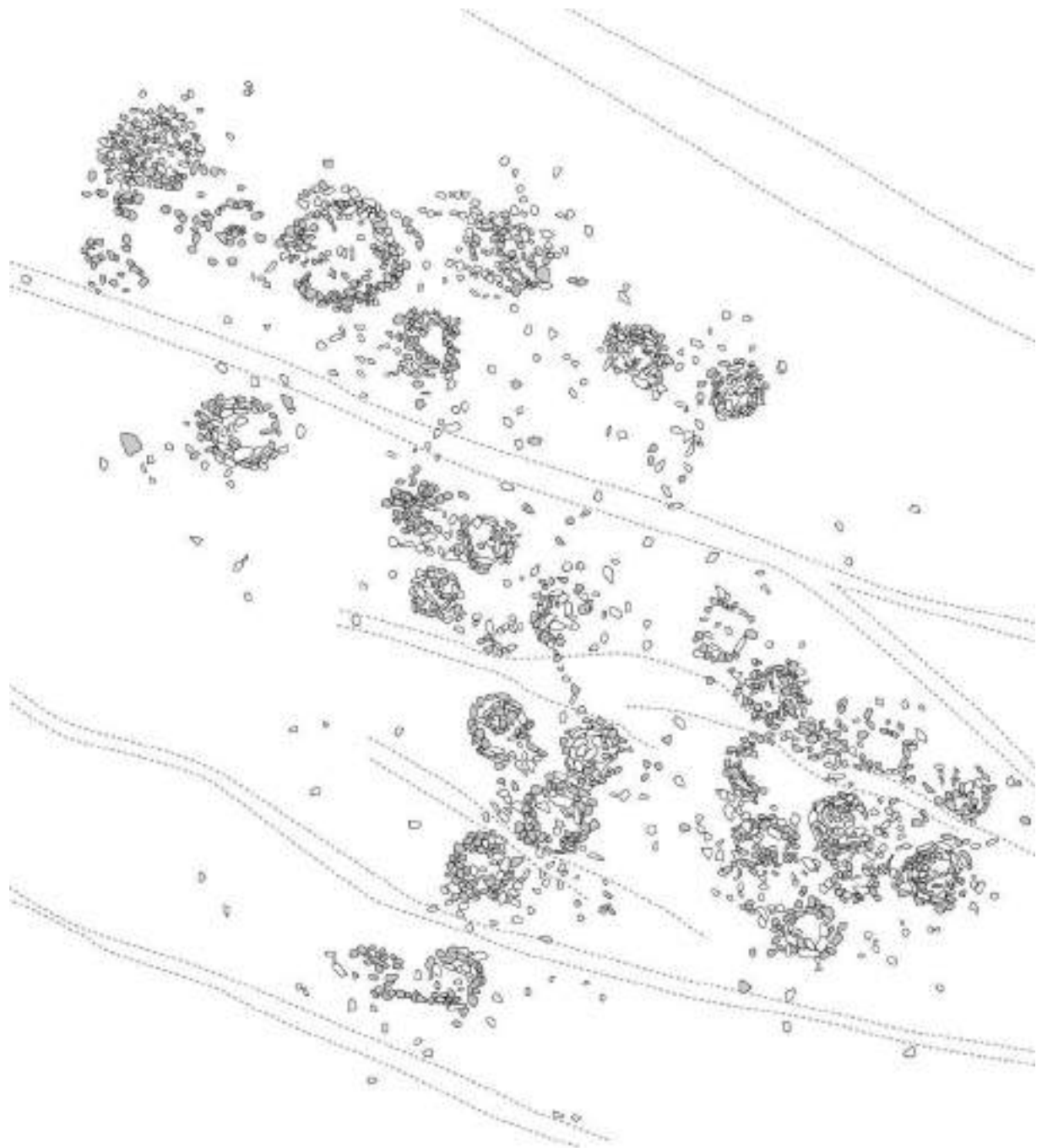
Conservation: The state of preservation of the tombs is diverse. Some of them are reduced to a heap of stones with only one standing row. Many stones which doubtlessly belonged to the structures are found scattered in the area although it cannot be ascribed to deliberate looting since grazing cows are frequently passing by the area.

Tradition: Zəban Arba‘a is part of an active network of cemetery visited on a seasonal and yearly basis by local Muslim women. According to our informants, women having reached the puberty and married women gather on the site on August 23 to pray and request the deceased intercession (*mihlila*).

To the north of Zəban Arba‘a, on the slope, halfway to Grat Wāyzāro, several circular structures were spotted, sometimes encircling a quadrangular enclosure.



Pl. 8 : Drone view of Zaban Arba 'a.




**ZIBAN ARBAA (Tigray, Ethiopia)**

Vue zénithale du cimetière  
Photographie: N. Baker S. Dama.  
D60 - S. Dama, 2019.

Projet ERC Horizon 2020  
European Research Council - Aix-Marseille Université - IREMM (UMR 7310)  
Centre Français des Etudes Ethiopiennes - Authority for the Research & Conservation of Cultural Heritage (Ethiopia)

0 5 10 20 m

■ Basalte  
□ Grès/calcaire  
--- circulation actuelle



Pl. 9 : General plan of Zaban Arba 'a.



*Fig. 155: Zaban Arba 'a : drone view of the site.*



*Fig. 156: Zaban Arba 'a : a large circular surface marker surrounded by several smaller circular markers.*



*Fig. 157: The cemetery from the north east. Note the recent road dividing the cemetery, with the southern area (A) and the northern area (B). Circle indicates circular tombs.*



Fig. 158: Zəban Arba'a : small circular marker without stele.



Fig. 159: Zəban Arba'a : small circular marker.



Fig. 160: Zəban Arba'a : small circular marker; note the intentional polychrome layers of stones.



Fig. 161: Zəban Arba'a : possible nave shape or rectangular marker near the circular markers .

## 1.8 Grat Wāyzāro

Site coordinates: 13.26881/39.58930 Visited: 10/10/2019 Surface survey, and drone.

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The site is located in the valley, east of Mayda Zeylegat across the road (**fig. 162**). It is just below Ona Addi’s ridge and might be connected to the old settlement there. Half-way before the summit, large circular structures reminiscent of round houses can be seen (**fig. 166-169**).

Toponymy: The word “grat” refers to a farmland and “wāyzāro” is a Ge’ez female title designating a lady. Of ancient origin, the title was still granted by the emperor during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to ladies outside the royal family and should not therefore be considered as dating evidence.

The site consists in a vast cemetery (c. 0,35 ha) with numerous graves visible in surface. The markers are diversified, rectangular as well as circulars and nave shape (**fig. 164-165**).

Tradition: Like Zəban Arba‘a, Grat Wāyzāro host an annual pilgrimage on August 23. The site is visited by women only, after they reached puberty. The itinerary of the pilgrimage ends in Ḥabera.



*Fig. 162: Grat Wāyzāro seen from Mayda Zeilegat. The site is located at the bottom of the hills in the upper right corner.*



Fig. 163: Grat Wāyzāro general view of the site.



Fig. 164: Grat Wāyzāro a hip of stones among circular and quadrangular graves.



Fig. 165: Grat Wāyzāro : nave shape surface marker.



Fig. 166: Grat Wāyzāro : large circular structure.



Fig. 167: Grat Wāyzāro : large circular structure.



Fig. 168: Grat Wāyzāro : large circular structure.



*Fig. 169: Grat Wāyzāro : large circular structure above the cemetery, perhaps belonging to Ona Addi.*



*Fig. 170: The view from Ona Addi looking WSW.*

## 1.9 Ona Addi and Ksad Merere

Site coordinates: 13.27067/39.27067 – 13.26937/39.61428 Visited: 12/10/2019 Surface survey.

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The site is located on the same ridge as Zəban Arba‘a, further to the east. Toward the south-west, it overlooks the valley and both Mayda Zeylegat and Grat Wāyzāro, offering a grand view on Ḥabera ridge (**fig. 170-171**). To the north and to the east it overlooks the large valley of the Agulel River (**fig. 172**). The site can be divided into three main parts, one at the summit, one on the western slope toward Grat Wāyzāro (**fig. 173**) and another one toward the north on a relatively flat platform which probably hosted the most important part of the settlement (**fig. 179-180**). To the south east along the slope, one also finds a platform of this type, but there is no apparent remains in this area.

Toponymy: The site bears the same name as a pre-aksumite and aksumite site (Gulo Makeda Woreda) excavated by the Eastern Tigray Archaeological Project (Simon Fraser University). Possibly meaning “old ruins” or old settlement. The northern part of the site is known as Ksad Merere.

The site consists of dozens of large circular structures which can be identified with the remains of ruined round houses (**fig. 173-175**). Inside the houses many internal structures can be seen, mostly fireplace and ashtrays (**fig. 176-178**). The base of the houses was made of large boulder or vertical flagstones and the elevations may have been of earth and woods, judging from the minimal numbers of debris inside the collapsed houses. On the contrary, some of the northern houses may have been built largely of stones and also they are easily visible they form relatively high piles of stones nowadays (**fig. 185-187**).

The settlement nature of the site is evidenced by the unusual amount of potsherds scattered over all the area (**fig. 188-190**). Among the surface finds obsidian flakes and pottery were not collected, but a fragmentary bronze bracelet decorated with crosses pattern and found on the summit near a ruined house was brought back to Mekkele with the aertefacts from Bilet (**fig. 191-192**). It may dates from the Aksumite period.

The discovery of this site is very important as apart from the ancient settlement on top of Arra ridge, no settlement is otherwise recorded. Considering its location in the vicinity of the other cemeteries, it would deserve more detailed investigations in order to understand its possible connections with the funerary sites.



*Fig. 171: Tsomar seen from Ona Addi.*



Fig. 172: The Agulele River seen from the northern platform of Ona Addi.



Fig. 173: Remains of a circular house in Ona Addi with the sites of Mayda Zeylegat and Grat Wāyžāro in the background.



Fig. 174: Remains of a circular house in Ona Addi summit.



Fig. 175: Remains of a circular house in Ona Addi summit.



Fig. 176: Internal structure from a house at the summit of Ona Addi.



Fig. 177: Internal structure (fireplace) from a house at the summit of Ona Addi.



Fig. 178: Internal structure (ashtray or braseiro) from a house at the summit of Ona Addi.



Fig. 179: The view from the northern platform of Ona Addi with Habera and Mayda Zeylegat in the background.



Fig. 180: The view from the northern platform of Ona Addi, note the summit and outcropping walls.



Fig. 181: Ruined house of the northern platform of Ona Addi.



Fig. 182: Ruined house of the northern platform of Ona Addi, note the dressed blocks.



Fig. 183: Ruined house of the northern platform of Ona Addi.



*Fig. 184: Ruined house of the northern platform of Ona Addi, note the internal structure.*



*Fig. 185: Ruined house of the northern platform of Ona Addi, note the base of the house made of vertical flagstones.*



*Fig. 186: Ruined house of the northern platform of Ona Addi.*



Fig. 187: Location of Tsomar cemetery Ruined house of the northern platform in Ona Addi. Note the base of the house made of vertical flagstones.



Fig. 188: A handle from the surface of Ona Addi.



Fig. 189: Potsherds and obsidian flake from the surface of Ona Addi.



Fig. 190: Potsherds from the surface of Ona Addi.



Fig. 191: A fragmentary bronze bracelet from Ona Addi.

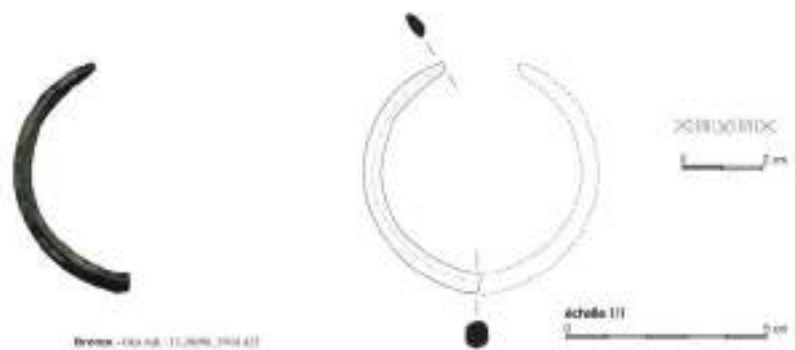


Fig. 192: Drawing of the fragmentary bronze bracelet from Ona Addi.



*Fig. 193: Location of Maetso Wedi Gomo cemetery looking north west.*

## 1.10 Maetso Wedi Gomo

Site coordinates: 13.27983/39.59784 Visited : 12/10/2019 Surface survey.

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay

Landscape: The cemetery of Maetso Wedi Gomo is located on the northern part of the surveyed area, beyond a small river, at a lower altitude than the previous site (c. 1920 m above sea level) (**fig. 193-194**). Therefore, the site cannot be seen from any other cemeteries. It stands on a bank north of the river, on slightly higher ground than the surroundings but below the enviroing hills. To the south-east it faces a steep rock wall (**fig. 195-196**).

Toponymy: Name of the local river?

The site consists of at least a few dozen graves marked in surface. The visibility during our visit was relatively poor and it was not always easy to distinguish the markers. The latter are mostly circular, sometimes very large (**fig. 197**). Sometimes anepigraph stelae and possible coffin-like structures can be seen in their middle (**fig. 198-199**). Other surface markers are of the nave-shape and possibly rectangular type (**fig. 200**).

Conservation: The site has recently been cleared in some places to allow cultivations. Our informants mention large stones removal.

Tradition: No tradition was recorded in relation with the site.



*Fig. 194: The river flowing toward the north and the depression.*



*Fig. 195: The Rock face overlooking Maetso Wedi Gomo, typical landscape of the depression toward the east.*



*Fig. 196: Maetso Wedi Gomo seen from the north east with Habera ridge in the background.*

## 1.11 Alem Segeda

Site coordinates: 13.214560/39.589325 Visited : 01/12/2019 Surface survey

Informant: Muḥammad ‘Alī Kabsay

The site of Alem Segeda was not visited during the October campaign, but a month and a half later, during the excavation campaign in Kwiha. It is integrated in this report due to its relevance for the surveyed area.

Landscape: The site is located near the current locality of Alem Segeda, immediately south of Arra. The cemetery itself can be reached by a trail through fields of cereals which goes down to the depression between the main core of the village and a small hamlet to the north. There again, the environment is very contrasted between the agricultural plateau (**fig. 201-202**) and the arid landscape of the depression (**fig. 203**). The cemetery is located on the northern slope of the depression among bushes and acacia trees (**fig. 214**).

Toponymy: Name of the ancient settlement.

The site is located behind the tallest trees in the surrounding, the latter being associated with the figure of Šayḥ Marḡan (**fig. 218**). Most of the graves are located in the wood itself, trees having often grown in the middle of circular markers. Slightly south, another group of graves is marked by large circular markers hosting standing anepigraph stelae and coffin-like structures, sometimes several inside one stone ring (**fig. 207-214**). Remains of low walls are also present near the sites (**fig. 209**).

The cemetery is most likely linked to an old (modern?) settlement, the ruins of which are visible on the satellite imagery of the area (**fig. 204-206**). Two churches overlook the cemetery, an old one on the northern eminence, not far from the ruined village, and a new one (octagonal) on the southern eminence, close to the main village nucleus (**fig. 216-217**).

A few potsherds were found on the surface (**fig. 215**).

Tradition: The site seems to be modern, and could belong to the same phase as Arra, i.e. the modern islamization of the area. It is strongly associated to the memory of its supposed founder Šayḥ Marḡan, who is believed to be buried there and was famous for his knowledge and healing abilities. The tallest tree at the entrance of the site to the west is remembered as the place under which he read and used to teach the Quran (**fig. 218**).



*Fig. 201: Landscape west of Alem-Segeda.*



*Fig. 202: The trail leading to Alem Segeda*



*Fig. 203: The arid environment of the depression before of Alem Segeda.*



Fig. 204: General view of the site (center).



Fig. 205: The cemetery and wood of Alem Segeda with the tree of Šayḥ Marḡan and the old church in the north-east.



Fig. 206: Alem Segeda: detailed view of the old settlement and of the modern church overlooking the cemetery.



Fig. 207: Aslem Segeda: Large circle of stones with rectangular markers and stelae.



Fig. 208: Alem Segeda: Large circle of stones with rectangular markers and stelae.



Fig. 209: Alem Segeda: remains of walls (round houses?) south of the cemetery.



Fig. 210: Alem Segeda: Large circle of stones with rectangular markers and stelae.



Fig. 211: Alem Segeda: Large circle of stones with rectangular markers and stelae.



Fig. 212: Alem Segeda: rectangular markers and coffin like structures in one of the large circles.



*Fig. 213: Alem Segeda: rectangular markers and coffin like structures in one of the large circles.*



*Fig. 214: Alem Segeda: possible round house and doorjamb.*



*Fig. 215: Alem Segeda: Decorated handle from the surface.*



*Fig. 216: Alem Segeda: the old church overlooking the cemetery in the north.*



*Fig. 217: Alem Segeda: the new octagonal church overlooking the cemetery in the south.*



*Fig. 218: Alem Segeda: the tree of Šayḥ Marḡan.*

## GENERAL REMARKS

### *The cemeteries*

In total, fourteen cemeteries or funerary sites have been surveyed in the vicinity of Arra, four of which inside the precinct of the village itself (the “southern” cemetery, Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel, Meqabr Harras, and Qelqal Rway) and one a little further but directly related to the “Faqi Muḥammad” group of cemeteries (Şayḥ ‘Isma‘il Ambassa). Only three sites can be ascribed with absolute certitude to the medieval period thanks to their Arabic inscriptions (Ḥabera, Mayda Zeylegat and Tsomar) (see **table 1**). The inscriptions of Arra (Qelqal Rway) and Keren Golat are problematic because they were not found in situ or are isolated. For the two inscriptions formerly kept in Arra, one has to rely on the testimony of our main informant, Muḥammad ‘Alī Kahsay who exceptionally offered two different narratives in 2018 and 2019. After telling us that the inscriptions originally came from Arra, he later stated they were in fact found in Keren Golat.

If nothing allows to propose a date or a chronology for the remaining five burial grounds (Ḥabera Golat, Mayda Zeylegat, Grät Wäyzäro and Maesto Wedi Gomo and Alem Segeda), one must stress the similarities they share with the medieval cemeteries in terms of markers architecture as well as the absence of settlements directly related to the funerary areas. The possible relationship between Grät Wäyzäro , Zəban Arba‘a and Ona Addi/Ksad Merere need further investigation.

<i>Site</i>	<i>Inscribed stelae</i>	<i>Inscribed stelae of uncertain origin</i>	<i>No steale or anepigraph stelae</i>	<i>Dating provided by the inscriptions (AD)</i>
<b>Arra</b>	x			1189
<b>Qelqal Rway</b>		x		1163
<b>Ḥabera</b>	x			1225-1357
<b>Mayda Zeylegat</b>	x			1260-1273
<b>Tsomar</b>	x			1289-1292
<b>Keren Golat</b>		x		n. d. (1189 ?)
<b>Ḥabera Golat</b>			x	n. d.
<b>Zəban Arba‘a</b>			x	n. d.
<b>Grät Wäyzäro</b>			x	n. d.
<b>Maesto Wedi Gomo</b>			x	n. d.
<b>Alem Segeda</b>			x	n. d.

*Table 1: Sites with and without stelae.*

### *Location, environment, and internal organisation of the funerary areas*

In South-Eastern Tigray, medieval Muslim cemeteries are found in different locations, both at the bottom of valleys along the roads or on plateaus relatively difficult to access. It is noteworthy that the use of different and somehow opposing topographical locations occurred contemporarily as was the use of a large variety of surface marker. A second important point evidently relates to the relatively high density of cemeteries in the area and the reasons pertaining to their spatial dispersion. It is too early to draw any conclusion in this regard and new surveys in the region may complete the picture. The limited knowledge we have on medieval Islam in South-Eastern Tigray does not provide any basis for such high density of contemporary cemeteries in such a small area.

In western Somaliland, the recent discovery of “hundreds of burial sites” in a relatively poorly settled area is interpreted as evidence for nomadic populations. There, cemeteries are located along the road connecting the interior to the coast, on high grounds indicated by stone cairns (González-Ruibal et al. 2017). The interpretation and understanding of the (current) isolation of the Tigrayan cemeteries is reminiscent of sites like Iskudar which is understood as a nomadic “supra-local necropolis” in use during the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries and “located along the optimal routes uniting the coast and interior” (González-Ruibal et al. 2017). The possible nomadic origin of the deceased buried around Arra may provide an explanation for the virtual absence of identified settlements. The relatively long span of use of the cemeteries over decades would in this case imply a seasonal frequentation of the site, perhaps linked with herding practices or seasonal trade. This aspect will hopefully be elucidated through the study of the funerary inscription.

The small scale of our survey is perhaps misleading, but the concentration of medieval cemeteries on top or at the foot of Ḥabera ridge gives the impression that the mountain itself may have had an importance as a natural landmark recognisable from afar or delimitating the border between two environmental units (the hilly depression and the plain). At sites scale it is obvious that graves were on several occasions polarized around a prominent tom. This phenomenon seem to impacted the general organisation of the cemeteries and may have provided us with a relative chronology to be better studied. It is also possible that one cemetery attracted the others, or that the historical or religious importance ascribed to an ancient site, be it funerary or not, would have caused the burial grounds to concentrate around the mountain. This raises again an issue of chronology and the question of the Islamic origin of the funerary areas. Were those cemeteries Muslim from the beginning? Were there only Muslim deceased buried there? In absence of identified permanent settlement, which factors may have influenced the establishment of cemeteries there?

It is tempting to associate the Medieval Muslim cemeteries near Arra with the so-called Eastern Tigray Road, a major commercial axis between Massawa and the Shoa where other Muslim communities are attested between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. But the discovery of new cemeteries on the edge of the depression leading to the sea also leads to reconsider the role of Muslim groups in the interaction between the oriental coastal area and the western highlands. The main Eastern Tigray Road seems to have followed the edge of the plateau through the plain, and was presumably connected to permanently settled agglomerations and trading centres, such as Wəqro in the north. The current historiography usually links the presence of local Muslim communities to trading activities. This hypothesis works well in the case of Bilet cemetery near Kwiha and the probable presence of a mosque in Wəqro (both sites also hosting Christian communities), two important historical stations along the main north-south axis. However, the location of the cemeteries found around Arra differ, these being situated away from the road, and no obvious settlement having been recognised yet. It is noteworthy that Arra’s sites are located beyond the plateau, seemingly away from the main road and Christian agglomerations, in a changing environment.

Despite their contemporaneity and the limited distance separating them, the medieval Muslim cemeteries located east of Arra were not intervisible. The location of Mayda Zeylegat and Tsomar along the same riverbed probably implies a conscious and voluntary distinction between the two sites, possibly related to family or clannish divisions and obviously attesting complex subjacent motives.

A reflexion on intervisibility also leads to acknowledge that, the mountain set aside, nothing in the landscape would have indicated the presence of the cemeteries from afar (contrarily to the stela fields from the Aksumite period for instance), which in regard to the use span of the cemetery, raises the question of knowledge transmission of their location and again a seasonal or continuous use of the site. If the populations who buried their dead around Ḥabera belonged exclusively to nomadic or semi-pastoral groups (a hypothesis relying only on the relative absence of contemporary settlements) one should wonder how the knowledge about the burial grounds was transmitted.

On the contrary, the modern cemeteries of Arra are deeply connected to the settlement itself. Unlike the unique Christian burial ground, which is located immediately against the church compound, Muslim cemeteries are scattered around the village, essentially outside its main nucleus and in the periphery. There a preliminary chronology is suggested by the historical narratives composed around the founding figure of Faqi Muḥammad. The first burial ground would have developed around its maqam and later ones would have been established around the graves of some of its family members in a second phase, around his son’s

tomb (Šayḥ ‘Isma‘īl “Ambassa”) and women of his family (Meqabr Harras). The remaining burial ground of Qelqal Məşdaf Gimel is not related to the figure of Faqi Muḥammad in the oral tradition but is regarded as Muslim by the local community. It is interesting to note that the Muslim cemeteries of Arra did not develop near the mosques but are strongly polarized around prominent tombs, which makes it difficult to link their locations to settlement shifts. Although remains on Arra ridge and the general disposition of the village suggest the site was settled anciently, both the date of the church and Faqi Muḥammad’s traditions imply a revival characterized by a monumentalising process on the site between the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The Islamic geography inside the village is not fully understood yet but one can note that the modern burial grounds are all visible from Ḥabera ridge where the current mosque also possesses land. It is therefore possible that the medieval Muslim cemeteries, at least Ḥabera itself, influenced the location of the modern burial grounds in Arra.

### Funerary architecture

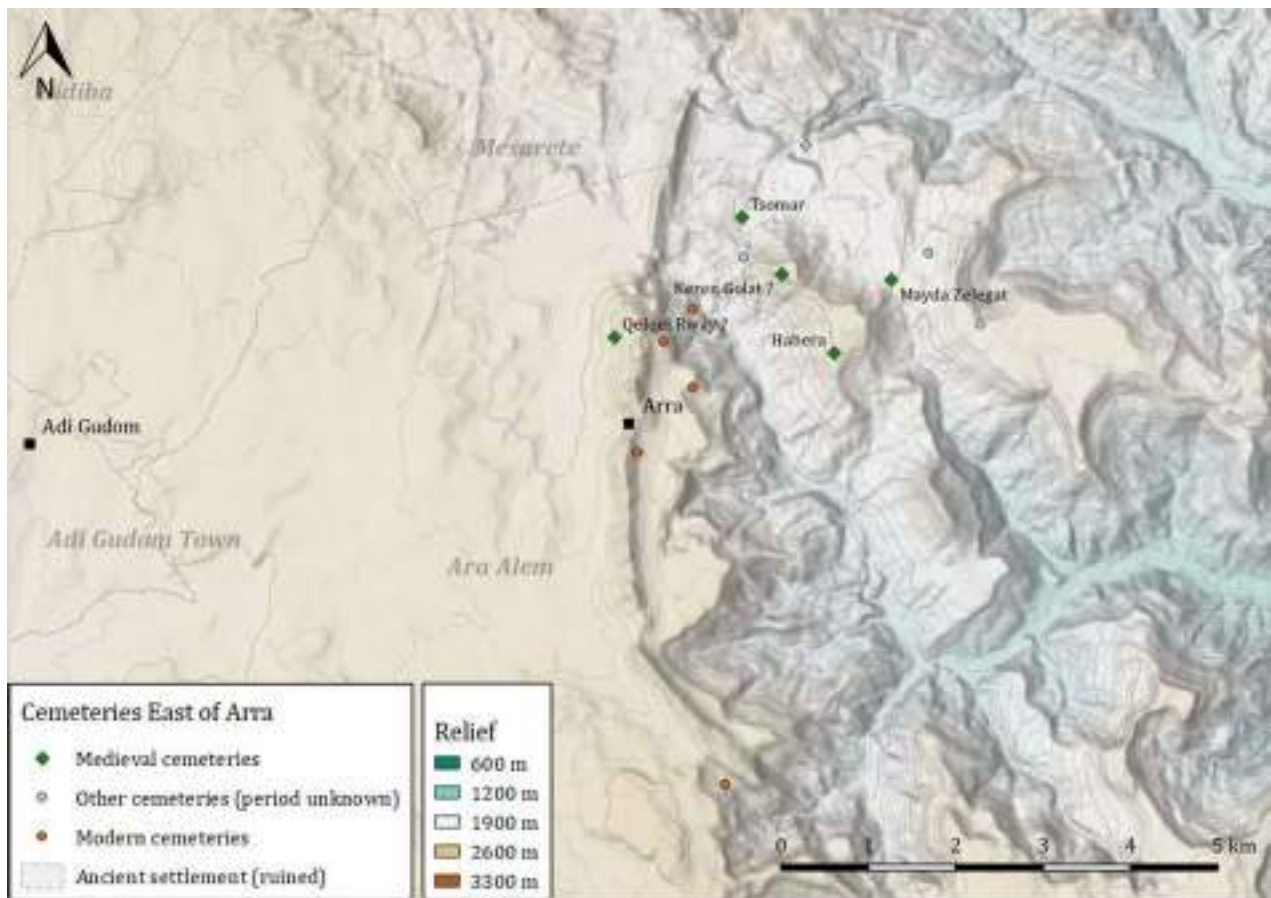


Fig. 219: The cemeteries around Arra in their enhanced topographical environment.

The Ḥabera ridge Muslim cemeteries considerably add to our knowledge about Muslim funerary architecture in medieval Tigray. So far, it was limited to the site of Bilet, where tombs excavated in 2018 belong to an homogenous type of rectangular platforms built of several courses of dry stones, presenting a rather regular WNW-ESE orientation (Loiseau et al. 2021). Irrespective of the orientation, these surface markers were reminiscent of modern tombs belonging to Muslims and Christians alike, both in Kwiha and Arra. In at least two instances rectangular surface markers in Bilet were also surrounded by a partially preserved ring of stones. The picture from the Ḥabera cemeteries is a much more complex and varied one. It seems that different types of surface markers cohabited on the sites, with or without inscribed funerary stelae. Here circular markers seem to predominate, and high platform-type markers are virtually lacking. Instead, new types of markers such as nave-shape cist, rectangular or irregular nave-shape cists can be seen, isolated

or inside a larger circular marker or ring. Among the circular markers themselves, different subtypes can be discerned, markers being formed by a single row of stones disposed longitudinally or toward the centre, covering entirely the circle or delimitating an empty space in the centre. Those markers sometimes protrude from the ground or are barely visible. Others can be made of several rows of stones and filled with earth or delimitating a very large area possibly hosting several graves. It is important to note that the circular markers attested on medieval sites are in every way similar to some markers from the modern cemeteries in Arra and Alem Segeda, and that the cairn of Qelqal Rway is so far unique,, raising questions of its authenticity as a grave marker.

This diversity among surface markers, which we cannot attribute with certitude to chronological evolutions, raises many questions concerning local (non-Muslims) or extra-regional influences, for instance with neighbouring areas such as Nubia or the Somali coast (Cerulli 1926 ; de Torres et al. 2018). However, one common trait between the medieval graves of Tigray is their relative modesty and rusticity, which differs strongly from the more prestigious and monumental tombs of later Muslim elites of the southern Ethiopian Muslim Sultanates (Bauden 2011).

Although circular markers and markers surrounded by rings of stones are known in Muslim contexts elsewhere, often in desert areas or in relations with nomadic populations, they question the need for distinction through a clear and “orthodox” qibla orientation especially in a region under strong Christian influence. In fact, set apart the Arabic inscriptions, evidently identifying the deceased as Muslim faithful, the architecture of the tombs themselves would not have constitute a clear marker of confessional affiliation or religious identity. One can only speculate on the reasons why Muslims around Habera, favoured the choice of a comparatively more neutral surface markers than in Bilet for instance. The status of the community may serve as an explanation, if they were from different origins or influenced by local traditions or nomadic groups importing their customs along the road, but the relatively later dates might also point to a different social and political context than in Bilet. The cemeteries east of Arra are contemporary of the building of a hegemonic Christian kingdom, the conflicts between Christian populations of the Northern Highlands and the overthrow of the Shewan Sultanate by the new Ifat Sultanate to the south (Cerulli 1941). In this context, it is possible that Muslim communities, possibly engaged in trade between enemy states, would have been relegated outside the firmly controlled Christian agglomerations and would have chosen a more discrete type of funerary architecture.

Although one tends to assume that the cemetery with inscriptions were exclusively Muslims, the choice of a non-distinctive funerary architecture can also hints towards a mixed community, i.e. in which Muslims and non-Muslims cohabited (at least in their final resting homes), or where Muslims chose to conserve pre-existing types of surface markers (for consequences on regional monumental funerary practices, see Gallay 2018) . These central questions can only be investigated further through excavations.

Turning to a typological approach, the limit of which is obvious, cairns or small mound-like structures surrounded by a stone ring have parallels in Ethiopia, in Somaliland and elsewhere in East Africa (Curle 1937 ; Lewis 1961 ; Chittick 1976 ; Davies 2013 ; Mire 2015 ; Cros et al. 2017). So far, megalithic monuments received more attention than the modest tombs with whom however, they share some similarities. In the region of Harar, some tumuli were dated between the eight and the thirteenth century and were therefore contemporaneous with the south-eastern Tigray Muslim cemeteries studied by our project (Joussaume 2017). More recently, other contemporary megalithic funerary monuments were also identified in the Ethiopian Highlands of the Mänz and Wällo. The Shay culture which is attested between the tenth and the fourteenth century bring evidence of the persistence of pagan beliefs and funerary practices at the time of expansion of local Christian and Muslim political formations (Fauvelle, Poissonnier 2016). In the Mänz, some cairns are associated by local traditions to the tomb or domestic buildings of sixteenth century Muslims (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2007 : 334-336) but seem to date from the ninth or tenth centuries. The Islamic context of these cairns is therefore dubious. The closest parallel for similar Islamic burials, both architecturally and chronologically are found in Nubia (Adam 2019) and Somaliland (de Torres Rodríguez 2020). It is very tempting to connect these two areas to the highlands of Ethiopia, for they would have been part of an Islamic network connecting the eastern African coast and the Red Sea, to the Nile in a critical time of Islamic expansion over the Christian kingdoms (in Ethiopia but also in Makurian Nubia). In Nubia, circular graves have been associated with the Beja people and are sometimes associated with Muslim funerary

inscription from the 9th century onward (Owen 1937 : 186 ; Glidden 1954). In Somaliland as well, stone cairns and graves surrounded by rings are attributed to nomadic populations, sometimes evidently Muslim communities (González-Ruibal et al. 2017).

***Dating (fig. 220).***

Considering the vernacular nature and rusticity of the funerary “monuments”, one should remain cautious about any conclusion regarding the state of conservation of the structures as a dating factor. We have shown that some of the structures are subjects to continuous care, maintenance and even rebuilding which clearly affect their current aspect. We have also seen that inscriptions were sometimes deliberately broken, moved, or deposited on certain tombs which implies that a deliberate destruction of inscribed stelae might have occur on some of the sites causing chronological discontinuity. Even inscriptions should be regarded for what they are: each a valid evidence for a year only, and the use of funerary stelae with Arabic script might have been limited to a group, a social class or a moment in time although it is often our only evidence for Muslim burials.

In absence of dated inscriptions and given the absence of associated cultural material from the surface, only proper excavations would allow, through the study of funerary practices, to tell more about the population and date of the cemeteries.

Nevertheless, the identification of the ancient tombs as “Muslim” by local communities even in absence of inscribed stelae or specific orientation and despite the variety of markers architecture is itself very interesting. It is especially noteworthy that this identification takes place independently of any historical narrative, be it written or oral, and that a memorial continuity between the medieval and the current local community seems unlikely. Our local informants from Arra and Addi Gudem all consider the cemeteries as anterior to the re-establishment of local Muslim communities sometime around the nineteenth century, but they do not propose any specific date for the ancient burial ground. The medieval date of some of the inscribed stelae was recognised by Şayḫ Muḥammad Sarağ of Godjabele around the 1930’s and have been accepted as such by the community leaders since then. This identification may have conferred a new cultural and religious status to the sites, although nothing is known of their importance and relevance for the local communities (either Muslims or Christian) prior to this date. It is possible therefore that pilgrimages and ziyara on the cemeteries started only recently. It is also probable that other funerary sites, be they Muslim or not, benefited of the renewed interest for ancient cemetery after the reintroduction of Islam in the area. Muslim Medieval Past has served as a “stimulating factor” in the re-islamization elsewhere in Ethiopia (Braukämper 1987) and it is plausible that the remains of ancient Muslim communities played a role in the decision of Faḳi Muḥammad to settle a community in Arra.

The relationship between identified Arabic inscriptions and local Muslims communities call for further investigations. The rediscovery of the sites was possible thanks to the benevolence and knowledge of local Muslims, and it is possible that similar sites and inscriptions in the vicinity have escaped attention where the current population is entirely or predominantly Christian and where no one has knowledge of Arabic.

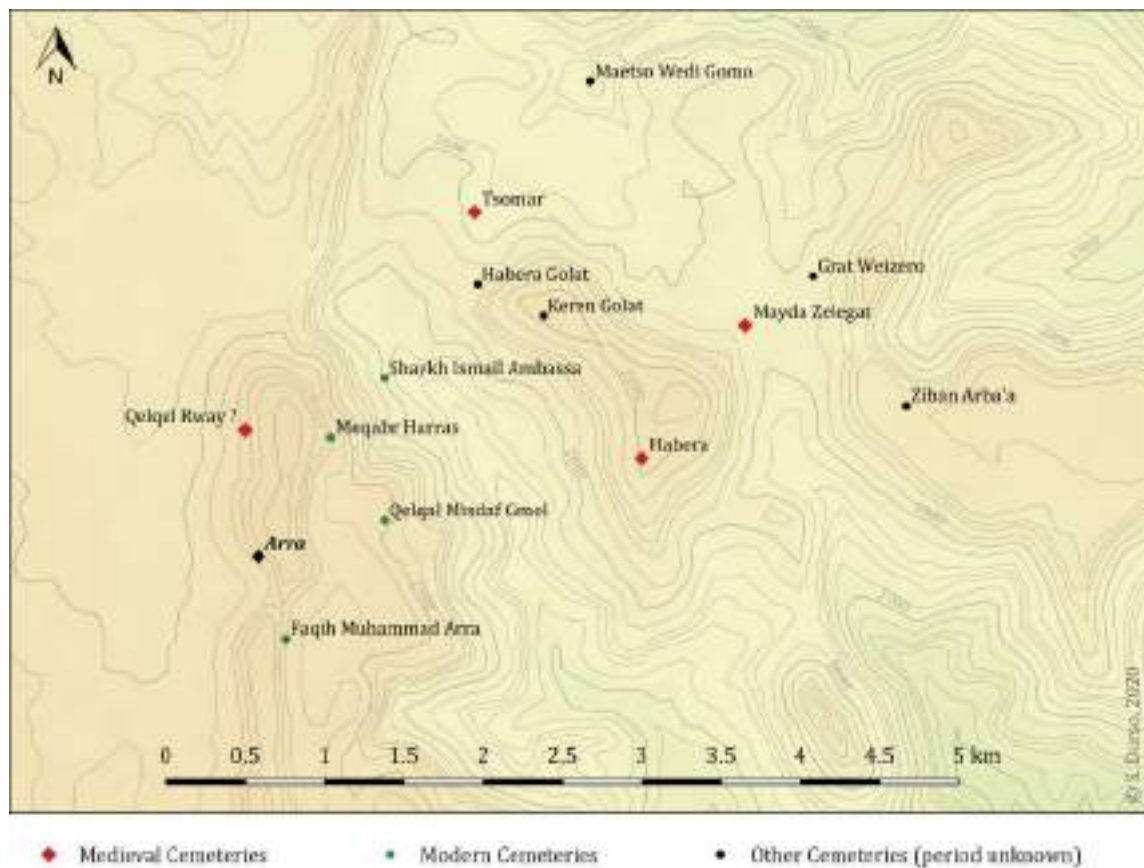
Interestingly, contrarily to many other places, no relations seem to have been established in Arra between the presence of Muslim graves and the conquests of Imam Aḥmad and our interlocutors never mentioned it, but sometimes evoke the medieval tombs as those of “ancient Arabs” establishing de facto a discontinuity in local Muslim settlements and the supposed allochthonous origin of ancient Tigrayan Muslim communities. This identification evidently stems from the language of the inscriptions, but the oral tradition systematically presents the deceased as foreigners rather than local Muslims. In this context of memorial discontinuity, the religious reinvestment of the site through small scale seasonal events and rituals is, again, particularly interesting. It calls for further comparisons with local Islamic and non-Islamic intercessions ceremonies and rites. The historical narratives which can be expected in such cases of re-appropriation would also deserve a thorough investigation outside the scope of our own project.

### *Chronology of the cemeteries*

Despite being in use during the same period as Bilet, the medieval cemeteries from Arra Region present many differences. The surface markers are not similar and usually less prominent than in Bilet. Most circular and angular markers do not protrude much from the ground, and they are most commonly built of only one course of stone leaving the stelae as the most prominent and visible feature. In this respect, the Qelqal Rway cairn in Arra and the site of Zəban Arbaʿa stand isolated. The reading of the inscription will confirm if Qelqal Rway refers to a collective burial, which might explain the unusual shape of the marker. One of the features reminiscent of Bilet is the association in Ḥabera and Keren Golat of the square marker enclosed in a ring of stones.

When it was possible to determine, the orientation of the grave also seems to differ with that of Arra. In Tsomar they seem to be orientated NS or NNE-SSW which is consistent with Bilet, but a majority of markers from Ḥabera observe a WE or NNW-SSE orientation.

At this stage, the position and orientation of the stelae do not seem to follow a strict orientation. Stelae are found both in the head and feet extremities of the grave as well as in the middle of the marker. In Ḥabera most of the in-situ stelae were orientated toward the interior of the grave, as were the two standing stelae from Tsomar according to the possible covering slabs inside the rings of stones. In Bilet on the contrary the standing stele B024 and a negative of a neighbouring grave were both located at the head of the grave, B024 being orientated toward the exterior of the grave.



*Fig. 220: A tentative chronology of the cemeteries around Arra.*

It is difficult to consider orientation and stelae position as clear marker of chronology yet. It is clear however that one could learn more in studying the relative chronology of the surface markers of some of the sites. Tsomar and Ḥabera present clear examples of superimposed markers, and of deconstruction/reconstruction of the markers, implying a complex gestion of the funerary area and possibly several phases

of use. Even without excavations, a proper cleaning of some test areas could provide valuable information regarding these aspects.

### *Preliminary conclusion*

Madeleine Schneider suggested that the Yamāmī from Bilet may have come from from the wādī al-‘Allāqī (Schneider 2009). From the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards, arab tribes who migrated in the Area were involved in extensive Gold Mining. They were in contact with Nubia and Ethiopia where they seem to have recruited slaves to work in their mines (Power 2008 ; 2009). The Tigrayan inscriptions and graves indeed bare some similarities with the Khor Nubt cemetery in wādī al-‘Allāqī south of Assouan (Klemm, Klemm 2012 : 378-390).

Since Schneider’s work, Bilet cemetery has essentially been considered in relation with the north-south axis linking Egypt/Sudan to the north of Ethiopia via the Dahlak archipelago (Lusini 2001 ; Smidt 2010a). Only G. Lusini suggested possible exchanges with the Danakil depression i.e., between the northern edge of the Ethiopian plateau and the arid plain neighbouring the coast, the latter presumed to be Islamised at a relatively early date. The discovery of thirteenth century Muslim cemeteries south of Bilet, closer to the eastern depression and possibly on a secondary road linking the eastern Tigray road to the coast invite to consider the existence of trade and exchange on a East-West axis as well, and the penetration of Islam on the northern Ethiopian plateau, not only from the north but also from other Muslim settlement along the coast.

Although thin, the new sites from Tigray allow to question the current understanding of both a chronological and division between the NS axe and the later southern EW axis. Considering the relatively later dates of the southern Tigrayan corpus, this division now appeared blurred or less severe. This might also be confirmed by new data from the south. Harlaa seems to be flourishing during the 12th-13th c. and at that time the site possessed a Mosque. Engraved Arabic Stelae from the same period are also recorded there and in Baté, Garbica, Munessa and possibly other sites (Schneider 1969, Insoll, Mac Lean and Engda in press, Bauden 2011:296, Chekroun 2011:79). Is it possible that Islam also penetrated northern Ethiopia from the south before the thirteenth century?

## PART 2 - A reconstruction of Álvares's itinerary in south-eastern Tigray

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After his six-years stay in Christian Ethiopia between 1520 and 1526, the Portuguese chaplain Francisco Álvares wrote an account of his trip in highland Ethiopia. For the first time by a European, he described the territories of the Christian kingdom, just before the jihad (1531-1543) and the profound upheavals that followed, marking a new era in Ethiopian history. Therefore, his account is very precious (Álvares, 1961). On April 9, 1520, he reached Massawa. Then, he traveled south, to reach the royal camp of King Lebna Dengal in Säwa, October 19. During his crossing of Tigray, he reached “a town named Belete,” on August 14, “where there was a Beteneguz, a good place to stay. The site of the town is very pleasant and good water is plentiful” (p. 178-179). This is, as we have demonstrated elsewhere, most likely the first known mention of Bilet (Hirsch, 2018). It seemed relevant, during this prospecting mission south of Kwiha/Bilet, to try to retrace the Álvarez' route south of Bilet to the border between Endertā and Angot and the Ancient Muslim town of Manadeley. Indeed, only the map proposed in 1958 by Álvarez' English editors, Buckingham and Huntingford, has so far attempted to redraw his itinerary and to locate the town of Manadeley –for which there is no entry in the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*.

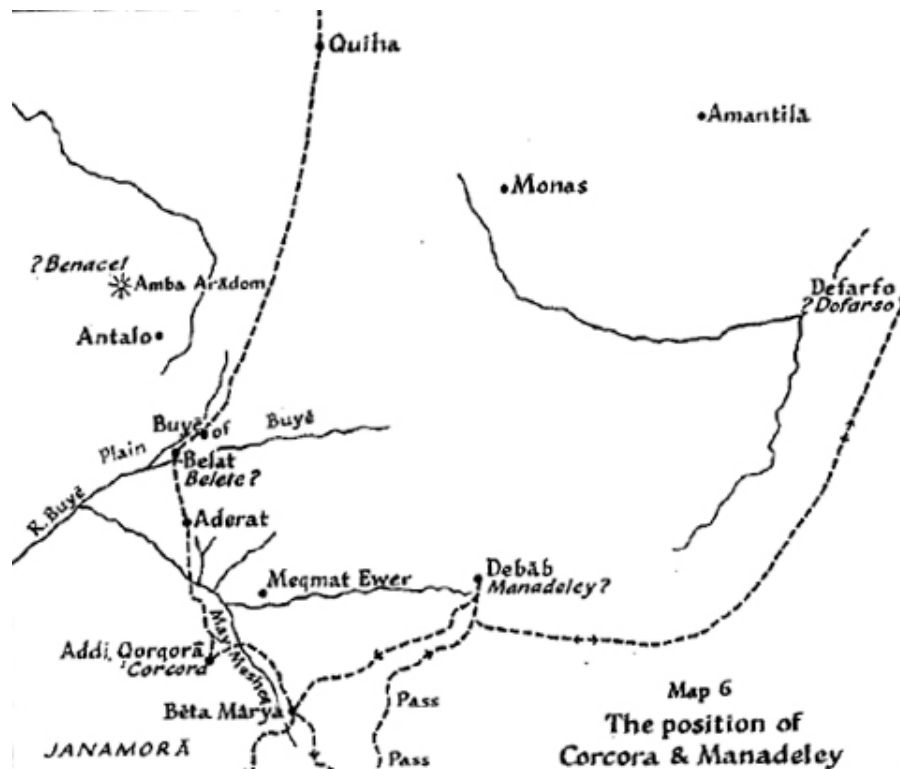


Fig. 221: Map by Beckingham and Huntingford, 1961, p. 184.

This map is highly debatable, mostly because the two authors base themselves on inaccurate maps from the 1950s, without any field investigation, and according to an inaccurate logic. As a matter of fact, while Álvares' route to the Christian king court is quite logical and faces due south, Beckingham and Huntingford propose to locate Manadeley and Dofarso due east, in the middle of the Afar depression. Thus, they imagine these two places on a very long detour on the road to the south. This proposed location could be explained by the both very much vague assonance between the current locality of Debāb [Dehub] and Manadeley and between Defarfo and Dofarso. It was time to set off again in the footsteps of Álvares and to try to locate the town of Manadeley and thus the border between Endertā and Angot at the beginning of the 16th century.

## 2.1 Qorqora

After Bilet (that we now know is Kwiha), Francisco Álvares' next stop is in:

After Bilet (that we know is now Kwiha), Francisco Álvares' next stop is in: "...a small village where there is a good church; its patron is Quercos. [...] On the following day we went forward little more than half a league to the Beteneguz [...]; this is at a town called Corcora, with very good houses for resting in, and a very good church. [...] They told us that to the east of this town there was a large monastery named Nazareth; they say it is one of large revenues and many monks." (Álvarez, 1961: 182-183).

October 12, 2019, we went to Qorqora (13°4'35"N 39°28'9"E, alt. 2320 m). Several churches from different times are still located in Qorqora, which is a famous place for holy water, west of the town of Hiwane on the asphalt road. The "large monastery named Nazareth", for Māryām Nāzrét, was built on an Aksumite structure in the twelfth-century, and was most likely the episcopal seat in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Derat, 2020). An Ethio-French archaeologists' team is currently excavating this fascinating place, which is located few kilometers east of Qorqora (13.100305, 39.564024). During our visit of Qorqora, people explained to us that it was an ancient Beta Negus, linked to the figure of King Amda Şeyon (14th century). An oral tradition tells that Amda Seyon would have stayed in Māryām Nāzrét. After a conflict with Māryām Nāzrét monks and the Patriarch, he came to Qorqora and built a Beta Negus there. The Beta Negus of Qorqora was built around 2 km far to the north-east of Maryam Qorqora church. The present church preserves several manuscripts, including a manuscript of the 4 Gospels, probably dating from the 19th century, which contains a list of the church's manuscripts as well as land grants donated to the church from different local royal families and governors during the reign of king Yohannes IV (r.1872-1889). A new church is under construction. On the hill overlooking the church, an area has been indicated to us as the former location of a Muslim community. Nothing indicates it today. Below the church, we were shown several sites that oral tradition considers to be the location of a prostitute's quarter, and further on to the east the location of Amda Seyon's palace or the Beta Negus (13.083197 - 39.485684).



Fig. 222: One of Qorqora churches.

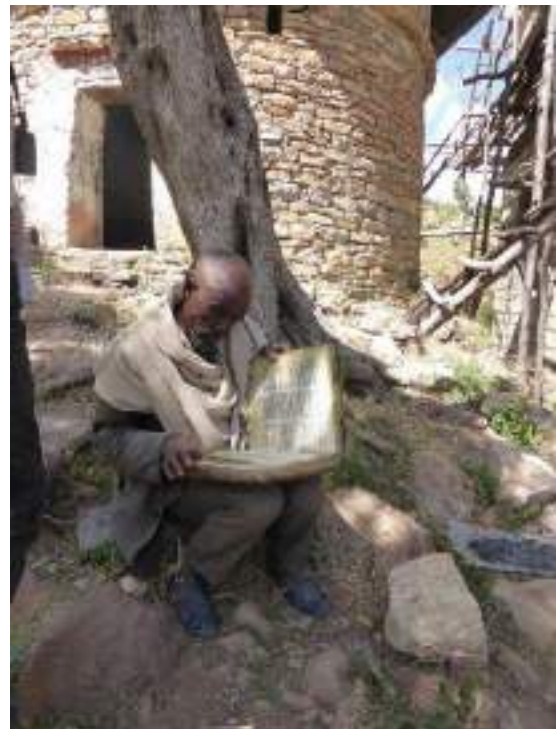


Fig. 223: A priest with a 19<sup>th</sup> century manuscript.



Fig. 224: Location of the «Muslim Area».



Fig. 225: Location of (former) Amda Seyon's palace.



Fig. 226: Land charter from Maryam Qorqora.

## 2.2 The “church of our Lady”

After leaving Qorqora, Álvares describe his journey:

“We began our journey for the space of two leagues up a river which was very pretty with verdure, and trees without and with fruit; on either side were very high mountain slopes, with many fields sown with wheat and barley, and beautiful wild olive trees which looked like young olive trees, because they are frequently pruned and cut to allow of wheat and barley growing. In the middle of this valley is a handsome church of Our Lady. It has around it small houses for the priests, and twelve cypress trees, [...]. Close to the principal door there is a very pleasant spring, and around the church large fields” (Álvares 1961 : 183-184).

Leaving Qorqora and following the asphalt road along the Mishig river toward the south, one arrives in a steep irrigated valley with many fields and to a village named Enda Medhane Alem (13°01'03.2"N 39°31'49.2"E, Alt. 2470 m). There is still a church dedicated to Maryam at the foot of a spring. Although the building has obviously been rebuilt many times since the 16th century, and a new church has founded, it seems that this is the spring and the church of Mary described by Álvares.



*Fig. 227: The two Enda Medhane Alem churches, on both sides of the paved road, at the bottom of the valley valley in the present town called Bete Maryam.*

## 2.3 The “gates” of Addi Gura Pass

After this church and this spring, Álvares continues:

“At the head of this valley there is a very high ascent, and before the summit there is a church which has no other village except a very few houses for the priests; it is a very dry country. At the summit is an old wall, in which are what appears to be gates, as though in former times they used to guard that pass, which guards itself by the wildness of the mountains.” (Ibid.)

When we continue the asphalt road, the road goes up indeed abruptly at the end of this valley, until the pass of Addi Gura ( $12^{\circ}58'35.4''N$ ,  $39^{\circ}31'45.1''E$ , Alt. 3085m). The gate is called Amba Alaje, it is well remembered in modern Ethiopian history because it was the first phase of the battle of Adawa in 1896. The Italians came as far as Amba Alaje to defy the Ethiopian army. The army of Menilek II (1889-1913) fought at this gate of Amba Alaje against Italian soldiers in December 7, 1895. The Italians were defeated and they fled to Mekelle. (Bahru Zewde, 2003). If today it is difficult to identify the church mentioned by Álvares, perhaps it is the church on the slopes of Amba Alaje, and the “old wall” seems to have disappeared; it is undoubtedly the pass in question, which still today remains an obligatory passage to the south.



*Fig. 228: An overview of the Amba Alaje natural fortress.*

## 2.4 Cherqos church

Álvares continues:

“Descending this mountain by a descent like the ascent, we came to a great plain of many big fields [...] At the entrance of this plain there is a large and handsome church, its patron saint Quercos, accompanied by good houses for the priests, almost like an enclosed monastery, and then a [very fine] Beteneguz, and a large town above it. This plain or valley is about two leagues in length, and half a league wide, and on either side are very high mountain ranges. At the foot of the hills, on both sides, there are many small towns and churches in them. Among these churches are two monasteries, one at one end, the other at the other. One is of Holy cross, the other of St. John. Both are small, and of few monks. [...] In this plain we began to change to a new type of country, entering a mountain range not so much high as deep.”

The present road does not seem to have deviated much from the 16th century road. Coming down from the pass, the road winds up to the town of Addi Shehu (Alt. 2469 m). This town is located at the end of a very large and fertile valley crossed by a river. At the entrance of this valley there is still a church dedicated to Cherqos in the plain valley of Atsela. The present building is a recent construction. It dominates the whole valley. The valley is entirely cultivated, and the dwellings are relegated to the foot of the mountains on both sides, just like Alvarez described it. Several small churches are located there. It was impossible for us to identify the ones mentioned by Álvarez. There is no doubt that this fertile plain is the one described by Álvarez.

At this plain, the Álvarez route deviates from the current route, which continues south to the town of Maychew. Álvarez’ route follows the great plain, which is oriented west-east. Moreover, he specifies that the climate and the landscape begins to change. Indeed, at the eastern end of the plain, a small series of relatively narrow mountains separates this fertile plain from the lower land area, below 2000 m of altitude. The landscape changes significantly, as does the climate.



Fig. 229: Cherqos church, at the western end of the Atsela plain.

## 2.5 Looking for Manadeley

According to Álvares, the most interesting place is located after this plain. It is a huge Muslim market town, “about 1000 inhabitants”, named Manadeley / Manadel. This city was already an important market in the middle of the 15th century, as attested in the chronicle of the reign of Zara Yaqob. Following the death of Sultan Badlay, it is noted that his body was dismembered, and the pieces were sent to the country’s major markets, including Manḥadbê, which can easily be associated with Álvares’s Manadeley:

“Then the head, hands and feet of the infidel Arwé Badlây were cut off; his body was torn into pieces and pieces were sent to all the provinces: his head to ‘Ambâ and the other members to Aksum, to Manḥadbê (መንሐድቤ), to Wâshl, to Jedjeno, to Lawô and to Wiz.” (Perruchon, 1893: 65).

About his visit to the city in 1520, Álvares devoted several pages. It seems to have been a place of important exchanges, bringing together merchants and goods from all over the Islamic world:

“This town is one of about 1000 inhabitants, all Moors tributary to the Prester John. At one end, as if apart, there live twenty or thirty Christians, who live here with their wives, and these Christians receive dues like toll charges. [...] This town of Manadely is a town of very great trade, like a great city or seaport. Here they find every kind of merchandise that there is in the world, and merchants of all nations, also all the languages of the Moors, from Giada [i.e. Jeddah], from Morocco, Fez, Bugia, Tunis, Turks, Roumes from Greece, Moors of India, who are like inhabitants there, Ormuz and Cairo; also they bring merchandise from all parts.”

About his visit to the city in 1520, Álvares devoted several pages. It seems to have been a place of important exchanges, bringing together merchants and goods from all over the Islamic world:

“On the next day, we [...] came together in a town which was about two leagues from where we slept [i.e. at the end of the plain], which is called Manadel. [...] And because I said that the nature of the country had changed, I say that it was two months since we began to travel, and it was always winter, but in this country which we are entering, and where we are losing ourselves, it is not winter; rather indeed it is a very hot summer. This is one of the countries, that is to say, of the three that I named before in chapter XXV, where it is winter in February, March and April, and this country is named Dobaa. [...] These lands which have the winter season changed are low lands lying beneath the mountains. The size of this country of Doba’a is five long days’ journey in length; I do not know what its width may be, because it enters far into the country of the Moors, so that I could not learn it” (Álvares, 1961: 186-187).

If it was not possible for us to locate the exact site of the town of Manadeley, we were able to identify an area, in the northern surroundings of the town of Mehoni, at the end of the great plain that starts from Cherkos Atsela church, beyond the mountain range that merges into the plain, located at about 1700-1600 m. This region, Doba’a, presents, as described by Álvares, a climate radically different from that of the neighboring mountains where all the other points visited are located. It is the climate wäyna däga (temperate, between 1500 and 2300 m), while Qorqora and the church of Cherkos Atsela are in the climate däga (cool, temperate, between 2300 and 3300 m). Doba’a is still today the name of this lowland territory, and the name of a population (see Pankhurst, 2005).

The local memory retained nothing of Manadeley. On the other hand, several ancient places have been indicated to us.

### 2.5.1 Old Muslim cemetery, Bâro

An ancient Muslim cemetery has been indicated to us, named Bâro, altitude 1770 m, 12°49'1" N 39°39'29" E. The place was formerly covered with cactus. It is a set of circular tombs, about 1.5 meters in diameter. Part of the cemetery has been destroyed, and the section shows a strong presence of bones, ceramics and charcoal (see photos).

Sheikh Makin Ibrahim Dadiye, who lives not far from Bâro, told us that before the arrival of the Italians, Muslims lived there and then moved to the city or to the Afar region, or elsewhere. They did not have mosques but prayed in one of the houses. According to him, these Muslims were Afars and Oromos. They could have come to settle in the region coming from the Awash region, after the time of 'Ahmad Grañ', i.e., the 16th century. There would have been written documents but they would have been burned during the TPLF war. According to him, neither stela nor inscription are found on this cemetery.

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Fig. 230: Views of the ancient (Muslim?) Bâro cemetery

### 2.5.2 Qorbeta

Sheikh Makin Ibrahim Dadiye does not know of any other ancient cemeteries in the area, with the exception of another smaller cemetery in the “Old City” of Mehoni. Old Mehoni, formerly called “Qorbeta”, is located northwest of the present city of Mehoni, after the church of Giyorgis ( $12^{\circ}48'55''\text{N } 39^{\circ}37'10''\text{ E}$ ; Alt. 1870 m). In the area of Qorbeta, there is no memories of this old cemetery, but they say that it was a place of an old Muslim market place, but they have no other information about it.



*Fig. 231: So-called Qorbeta.*



*Fig. 232: Giyorgis church at the back, being Qorbeta.*

### 2.5.3 Hujira Werabaye

Along the Mehoni – Alamata asphalt road, south of Mehoni, in the Oromo raya region, there is a ruined mosque dating from the Italian period (1935-1941) (39.639524 - 12.673593; 12°51'25"N 39°38'4"E; Alt. 1100 m). A new mosque was built next to it (on the picture in green and white).



Fig. 233: Views of the mosque.



Fig. 234: Inside the mosque.



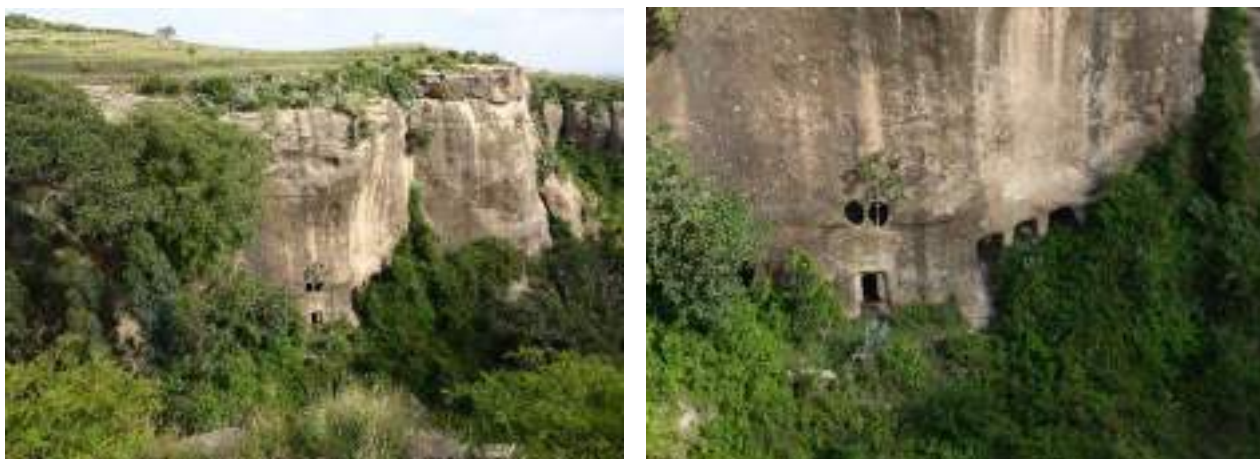
Fig. 235: Inside the minaret.

#### 2.5.4 Maryam Zəban Das rock church

Finally, we visited the Rock church dedicated to Maryam Zəban Das ( $12^{\circ}50'58.8''N$   $39^{\circ}42.4''E$  Alt 2100m). This church is carved into a cliff in a gorge that cuts through a vast fertile plateau. The cliff, made of sandstone and where the church of Maryam Zəban Das is carved, faces west direction while in front of it is similar cliff facing east. The two cliffs are divided by a stream that has its source between the cliffs. The area above the cliffs is cultivable with a gentle slope towards south direction. The rock-hewn church does not seem to have been previously inventoried among the rock places of the region. It is possible that this rock place was not dug to be a church, and that it was reinvested as a church in a second time. At the foot of the gorge, a tap was installed to give the faithful easy access to this water.

At the foot of the eastern cliff, there are three rock-cut churches arranged south to north, all facing westward. In the southern church, there are three rooms interconnected through passages, but also each room has separate entrance from west. The three rooms are separated by two free standing pillars at the entrance. The southern room (R3) is connected with the central room (R2) through a 1.50m wide open passage. R2 and the northern room (R1) are connected through two passages; the eastern passage is 1.07m wide while the western passage is 2.08m wide. The pillar between the western and eastern passages is 1.05m by 0.60m wide. In the middle of the northern room (R1) there is a Holy water.

The central church has a single entrance. It is carved almost at equidistance between the southern and northern sections. Above the entrance, there are two windows to let light in for the room. This room has no



*Fig. 236: General view (from the west) of Maryam Zəban Das rock-hewn church.*



*Fig. 237: Rock-cut entrances of the church.*

pillar; it is one single room. Due to its long-time abandonment of service, the room is filled with bats' poop. As a result, it was not possible to take time by staying inside the room for detail measurement. The height of the room from the poop level to the ceiling is 2.24m at the center, 1.96m on the south and 1.85m on the north. The surface of the room is fully covered with the poop to a height of considerable centimeters. The inner edge is 0.26m incised from the outer edge of the entrance.

The northern church is comprised of two rooms with separate entrances separated by a single pillar (P1) on the western edge. It has well-polished square pillar in the middle of the entrances. It has the best carved shapes and angels inside the room. On its eastern limit, a pillar (P2) attached to the mother rock juts out to form two rooms. The passage between P1 and P2 is 1.75m wide. P1 is 0.59m (N-S) by 0.56m (E-W) wide. The height of this room at the center is 1.90m excluding the obscured surface level of the room; the height of R1 on its western and central part is 2.06m 1.90m, respectively; while R2 is 2.50m and 2.10m high on its western and central part, respectively. The floor of this room is filled with bats' and other animals' waste.

The local people narrate that Maryam Zəban Das was used since the time of King Lalibela. Its tabot in the village used to come to celebrate yearly the feast of St. Mary, the 21 Sene. Now this feast at this rock church is interrupted ten years ago due to its difficult access. The inhabitants could not support to climb the difficult cliff and the church services could not be held into two places. Nevertheless, the holy water is still used by the local people for divine healing. It is also fetched only by young deacons or virgin girls. They believe it can cure any disease. A new church is built above this plateau around 1km far north of Maryam Zəban Das.



*Fig. 238: View of the southern section's room and the Holy water in the northern room with wooden cross (Note the irregular shape of the passage and the pillars. This section is free of bat'swaste due to its uninterrupted function for the Holy water by the local people.*



*Fig. 239: View from the north toward Maryam Zəban Das rock-hewn church (indicated with a arrow).*

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**APPENDIX 1 - List of the funerary stelae with Arabic inscriptions deposited in the mosque of Addi Gudem in October 2019**

*Habera cemetery*

H04, H07, H09, H11, H20, H21, H22, H24.

*Mayda Zelegat cemetery*

MZ01, MZ04, MZ05, MZ06, MZ10

*Tsomar cemetery*

TS01, TS02, TS03, TS04 & 05, TS06, TS07, TS08, TS09, TS10

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