



# Stone Monuments, Tools, Potteries and Artifacts of the Mahbere Degou, Haoulti and Melazo Archaeological Complex of the Aksum-Yeha Region of Tigrai State: New and Preliminary Investigations and Plans to Salvage these Sites for the Promotion of Heritage Tourism in Aksum, Ethiopia

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## Abstract

Degou town which is 14 Kms from Aksum town in Northern Ethiopia has revealed several ruins and archaeological assemblages of the early pre-Aksumite, Late Post-Aksumite, Early Aksumite and Early Post-Aksumite site clusters. Degou in Tigrinya literally means: Land of Generous people. In 1973 Anfray (Journal of Ethiopian Studies, Vol.xi) and in 1974 Joseph W. Michels made a principal survey of these sites by which they depicted the archaeo-topographical changing settlement patterns in the Aksum-Yeha region of Ethiopia. On the way to Degou from Aksum, (about 5 kms), the author found a few prehistoric sites towards the eastern side on a disparate chain of cliffs which needs a detailed examination and test pit excavations. Much more remains to be explored, surveyed and assessed on the above said sites by which his team has earnestly tried to explore the vicinity and the periphery of those sites which has not been surveyed by western scholars.

## Topography

Elevations extrapolated from the available contours on East African Grid system of Asmara Sheet (National Science Foundation, Third EAF edition, Washington, 1946) shows that Degou, Haoulti and Melazzo predominantly are Old Testament sites, situated at a height of 2500 feet and 2440 feet respectively above the sea level. The area surveyed by the team varied potentially with respect to topography, soil type and other ecological relevant features. The standard agricultural complex seen in this southern periphery of Aksum is the abundance of wheat, barley, teff, finger millets and beans cultivation and bioarchaeological toponomy

also reveals the same wild and domesticated forms of crop were the staple food of the ancient Aksumite people. Degou and Melazo –Haoulti topography reveals black Welka cracking clays which are alkaline with deeply cut alluvial features.

Local farmers say it is excellent for the full growth of a number of Cereal crops like maize, sorghum and that no fallowing is required as long as a systematic crop rotation is practiced. One can glean more information from V.Kazmin's book (1973, Geological Map of Ethiopia) on the soil and rock formations of the Southern Periphery Zone of the former Aksumite Kingdom.

## **The Southern Periphery of the Aksumite Kingdom**

Some of the principal archaeological sites in this zone are Gobocho Melazo mound, Melazo, Haoulti, Mazaber or Mai Agazen basin chiefdom, Mai Siya, Adi Gunda, Adi Satiah, Adi Gezi, Enda Cherqos, Gobo Debre, Adi Wuferti, Adi Berekti, Gobocho, Adi Atero and Enda Mariam Behaleiti. The population recorded during the early Aksumite period (150 BC-450 AD) of the southern periphery of around 52 Sq.Km stands around 773 for an area of 22 Sq.Kms surveyed within seven sites is a notable feature (Joseph Michel, 1975). Analogous with the appearance of elite residential complexes, one can witness the absence of religious structures i.e., both shrines and temples. Although the Mai Agazen basin chiefdom fell under the Aksumite kingdom, nothing is visible about a mortuary or burial tomb celebrating a particular personality (the Chief) than with the adoration of any specific God. But there are remnants of building structures and monumental architecture (Fattovich, 1998, 2000, The Aksum archaeological area: Preliminary assessment, Napoli University, Italy). The statistics given by Joseph Michels amply goes to substantiate about the presence of a gregarious population and with a few scattered ceramic clusters and artifacts found, reveals the habitation of common man settlements in this Southern periphery of the Great Aksumite Kingdom. Moreover absence of commercial militia in the case of a defensive fortified settlement exists for this period (150 AD – 450 AD), goes to indicate an absence of interregional conflict probably owing to the absence of economic contacts. About the nine elite precincts Joseph Michels (2005) which is reminiscent of Degou-Haoulti-Melazo and Gobocho-Melazo, mentions the following:

“Five of them resemble Ona Nagast in having multiple structures within a single precinct .The relative scale of the elite complexes is difficult to ascertain since no secure estimates of size are available for the three of the key precincts: Ona Nagast, Seglamen and Gobocho-Melazo. Accordingly one cannot yet ascertain that the Ona Nagast complex was qualitatively different in architectural style from the other two or indeed from a number of the other elite precincts .Thus despite provisional acceptance of the notion that the Ona Nagast leadership formed the basis for Aksumite kingship, the kingdom in its earliest phase, most likely involved the participation of leadership cadres embedded within polities geographically dispersed within the survey region and fully comparable organizationally”.

A palace about 2000 sq.mts of the early post Aksumite settlement (750 AD- 850 AD) is noticed at Haoulti and there are lots of monumental architecture found near the Enda Cherqos

church just below the mound of Haulti. The southern periphery chiefdom appears to represent continuity with all the previous periods despite the evident reduction in the number of settlements associated with it. However unlike the Late Aksumite Period where no elite residence could be found or documented, a replica of a palace scale residence is always associated in these areas surveyed by the team.



**Figure 1. The Modern church of Enda Sadkan, Degou. The ancient ruins of the church near Enda Sadkan (39 AD)**

Mahbere Tsadkan is the site near to Degwe which is about 15 kms south west from Aksum town on the way to Naeder where several artifacts like potteries, grinding stones, stone tools, amphora etc has been found here. Local legends attribute this place as a religious congregation of the followers of Jesus Christ resulting in the formation of an association when Queen Atezhin Indeche was ruling Ethiopia ( Aksum and its attractions, Tigrai Tourism Development project, 2009, p.49-50). It is said that Mahbere Degou association was formed by 3000 saints in 6666 BC ( the dates are literally exaggerated) as per the oral traditions and one can see the black sandy and coarse soil scattered over the Hauolti and Melazzo plains. Degou is a circular plateau surrounded by steep valleys on all its four sides and rock shelters and caves. The depression is a valley on all sides of Degou is around 100 to 200 feet. Here one can see the Abba Libbanos or Meta rock hewn church (about 9 kms from Aksum) from the peak of Enda Sadkan church. This church has numerous pottery and ancient treasury collections but need to be conserved and documented well with a chronological and genealogical history.



**Figure 2. The Monumental structure and walls of the ancient ruined church. Mkmat Abozgyu church. The present Church stands on ancient foundational steps**



**Figure 3. Monolithic geological structure standing on a small rock-2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> Cent BC –Living place of God at the Mkmat Abozguy church.**



**Figure 4. The monolithic edifice of the ancient church, Degwe. The lateral view and the basement of the monolithic rock or the living place of God**



**Figure 5. The pathway leading to the Holy water site of the Mkmat Abozguy Church, Degou. Samples of stone tools, Quartz and potteries from Degou**

Near the ruined church of **Enda Sadkan** there are remnants of archaeological ruins with artifacts scattered all over and the ancient foundation walls are rapidly getting eroded due to the menace of slope cultivation and water erosion besides the local residents are involved in looting the natural heritage properties. Abundant remains of bricks go to point out an advanced material civilization preferably of the middle and late Aksumite civilization. Most of the rock formations are formed of red sandstone and corrosion weathering is clearly visible. The ancient church of Enda Sadkan was established during the reign of King Kaleab wherein the 3000 saints came to establish the association in 365 AD.



**Figure 6. Pottery collections found on the western side of Degwe plateau. The rocky hill slopes of the western part of Degwe where numerous attributes of ceramics were found**



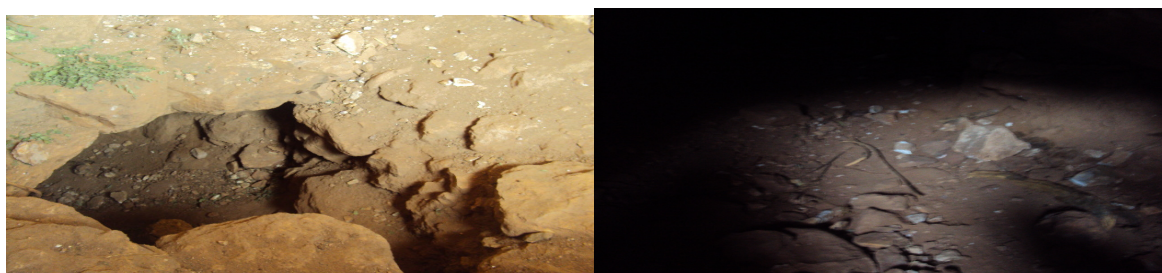
**Figure 7. Historic Heritage dwelling on the western slopes of the Degou, The foundational structures and bricks of elite residential structures found on the western side of Degou**



**Figure 8. The Landscape erosion of the ancient church and the settlement walls of elite residential cum architectural structures of Degou**



**Figure 9. The house where the Enda Sadkan Cave is protected on the way to Aula village**



**Figure 10. Enda Sadkan Cave of Adi Tahasos or Angesa Hamlet, 2 kms from Degou plateau. The inner part of the cave**

The Enda Sadkan Cave is located on the way to Aula Village which is about 2 kms north east of Degou bus station. This cave measures about 1.6 meters in length and 1.6 meters in breadth and its depth measuring around 1.20 meters. This cave must have been used as a secluded prayer habitation by the saints and here there are a chain of such caves for example the Mai Ambesa (Lions water Cave) and Endaba Abel caves which is about two hour walk by foot to reach this place from Degou town through Daroh Aflash.

The Enda Abel Cave church at Mai Ambessa Village: Just about 3kms to the south of Degou on the right side of the main road we have a plain suddenly falling down about 300 meters

deep into a slope leading to a lush green rocky oasis obviously a biodiversity zone of Mahber Degou . In the midst of this small pocket of forest area lies a huge basement rock where the modern church has been built and we also have the tomb of the famous saint Enda Abel dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> Cent.AD. This rock cut cave church is exquisitely carved and nearby this basement church we have evidences/ruins of ancient monumental architecture, traces of residential places and religious structures .Although well preserved this area needs test pit excavation.



**Figure 11. The rich biodiversity of Enda Abel cave church (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cent AD), Mai Ambessa Hamlet, Degou**



**Figure 12. Ancient pot found on the Enda Abel cave church entrance. The ancient monumental and architectural ruins of the Enda Abel cave church which needs test pit excavations**



**Figure 13. The modern church of Enda Abel built within the ancient Cave church. The tomb of the Saint Enda Abel, Mai Ambessa Hamlet Degou**



**Figure 14. The fortified enclosure showing the ancient ruins of steps leading to the ancient Enda Abel cave church, Mai Ambessa Hamlet, Degou**



**Figure 15. The Mariam Welya church in the gorge of the valley overlooking the Mai Ambessa Village: The Hauolti-Melazzo archaeological complex: Influence of the Sabaeans**

Hauolti is an extension of the palace complex or an elite residential complex (about 2000 Sq.mts) with exceptional fertility and here in Hauolti and Melazzo small ruined elite residences are found dating back to the early Aksumite, middle pre-Aksumite, Early Pre-Aksumite and Late Aksumite periods. Amid the vast fertile plains Hauolti-Melazzo is located on a dome shaped hill or a huge circular mound marked by monolithic pillars. Here in 1958-59 Dr. Henri de Contenson (1961, “Les fouilles a ouchatei Golo pres d Axoum en 1958”, *Annales d’ Ethiopie* 4,3-16.) on behalf of the Institute of Ethiopian Archaeology found a fine covered throne of carved limestone, its sides showing low reliefs and a frieze of ibexes in the South Arabian style besides a small figurine being seated with the hair and facial features resembling the South Arabian style. (David W. Phillipson., 1998, *Ancient Ethiopia. Aksum: Its antecedents and Successors*, British Museum Press, London; also see Munro-Hays S.C., 1991, *Aksum-An African Civilization of late antiquity*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University press; Nespereira, J., Blanco, J.A, et.al., 2006, *Problems in the use of the Salamanca sandstone in historic monuments-Geophysical Research abstracts*,8,00940; Fattovich, R., 1990., “Remarks on the pre-Aksumite period of Northern Ethiopia”, *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*,23,1-33.). Later in 1975, the Hauolti archaeological complex was excavated by the Italians under the Dergue regime and most of the huge stone blocks made of sandstone are left open and even the Ministry of agriculture has dug a small pond for water to be stored in that pit complex but eventually they abandoned the work with the loss of several archaeological sequence and artifacts. Just on the slopes of this mound i.e. to the eastern side, a ground radar survey is essential so as to detect the structures beneath it. These sandstones were brought/quarried from Adigrat, on the outskirts of Edagarbi town and the Tekeze Sandstone found in some of the gorges, located 15 kms away from Yeha (Asrat A., 2009, “The Temple of Yeha: Geo-Environmental Implications on its site selection and preservation” in the *Proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup> International conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Ed., by Harald Aspen, et.al, Trondhiem). Just diagonally to the southern direction of Hauolti, just a few 100 meters away from the Hauolti site lies the Mai Agazi basin and overlooking it is the Enda Chirqos site where a lithic workshop has been found. The Gobocho-Melazzo Mound complex shows of Early and middle pre-Aksumite occupations. Chinch Baakel (brown sandy soils) are found at Hauolti and Chinch Baakel Soils (limestone, dolomite, sandstone shale and granite) are seen at Melazzo where as, at the summit of the Degou plain, one can see the Welkay a brown clay soil. Degou is represented by diagnostic ceramic attribute clusters.

The Aksumite buildings of clay models denote a rectangular thatched structure although no such traces are noticed commonly in the archaeological records of the Aksumite periods but the models retrieved from Hawelti offers us a round and rectangular specimen possibly dating back to the Pre-Aksumite period ( 200 BC-100 AD) (Phillipson,1998).

Archaeozoological evidence from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, in the form of pottery figurines of yoked oxen , from the tomb of Brick Arches at Aksum is also corroborated at Hawelti with a specimen of Baroca which goes to say that yoked oxen were used for ploughing even much before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, although there are speculations about these clay figurines being an Indian import commodity.The same figurines are analogous the bronze ones of Mahabere Degwe and Zeban Kuntur that both humped and humpless varieties of cattle was in vogue during the Aksumite times (Phillipson, 1998).Many of the Hawelti- Melazzo artifact collections are stored and exhibited in the National Museum of Addis Ababa.



**Figure 16.The Gobochela –Melazo mound showing the ancient ruins of a lithic workshop**



**Figure 17.Mai Agazen Basin and Enda Cherqos where Pre-Aksumite settlements and populations (about 52%) were dominant. The ruins of Enda cherqos church is seen on the slopes of this mound**



**Figure 18.The vast plains of Mai Agazen Basin showing the abundance of rock formations obviously a lithic workshop for the Aksumite kingdom**





**Figure 19. Unfinished stelaes scattered all over the lower part of Haoulti-Melazo mound**

The contemporaneity of South Arabian intrusion and the formation of the town of Maheber Degou-Houlti-Melazzo complex indicate that the early Pre-Aksumite population of the region continued to migrate into the area all during the period and that there was scanty resident population before 400-500 BC., which is evident in the scattered material remains. But the migrations were from elsewhere within the Aksumite Culture area (i.e., northern Ethiopian Plateau) and not from South Arabia or elsewhere outside the cultural region (Joseph W. Michels., 2005, *The Changing settlement patterns in the Aksum-Yeha Region of Ethiopia*, 1974, Cambridge university press). The above said three ancient complexes are located on bluffs overlooking drainage basins which can be seen on the western slopes of Degou and the eastern escarpment of Degou running down towards Melazzo- Hauolti plains. Ancient terrace farming and irrigated lands are more distinct on the lands near to the valleys with heavy erosion and utility of the soil with acidic characteristics evident in the present day soil of Degou and its fringe complex. These land forms of Degou amply testify that micro catchments of irrigation in a small scale, stream fed and canal irrigation have been imminent indigenously to the early Aksumite period and the same is true today.



**Figure 20. The huge sandstone (quartzose arenite) blocks at Haoulti, a replica of the Yeha palace structures and the Almoqah temple. The pillars are the same like Grat Be'al Gebri site at Yeha. The texture and the architectural styles are similar**



**Figure 21. The evidence of a small scale like palace (2000sq.mts) showing sandstones foundations probably of an elite residence at the peak of the Haoulti Mound**



**Figure 22. The ancient ruined boundary foundational structures disturbed while digging a water reservoir and the potteries found on the site at Haaulti-Melazo mound**

## **Conclusion**

Monumental architecture in the form of impoundment and canal and drainage features show ancient irrigated farmlands and both the eastern and western side of Degou town is testified by a small category of residential structures with architectural features that needs to be conserved and preserved for the future. Research in the past and currently by the team reveals percentages of all diagnostic sherd counts going up to 52% or more, has been recovered from sites within spatial grouping .More interesting are the evidence of ancient religious structures and lithic workshops being noticed on the southern edge of Melazzo. At Gobochele Melazzo early Aksumite structures and small elite residences not less than 2000 square meters (150 AD-450 AD) are visible. According to local chronicles these towns (archaeological complexes) were used as ritualistic and for religious sacrifices during the period of Queen Sheba, King Bazen and Renhay as part of the Old Testament beliefs.

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