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■ **ETHIOPIA**

**Archaeological excavations at Bieta Giyorgys (Aksum, Tigray):
A preliminary report on the 1994
field season**

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Introduction

From May 27th to June 12th, 1994, the Italian Archaeological Mission at Bieta Giyorgis (Aksum, Tigray) of the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Naples, in collaboration with Boston University, conducted its second field season at the site of Ona Enda Aboi Zague on the Bieta Giyorgys hill to the northwest of Aksum. Members of the expedition were Prof. Rodolfo Fattovich, I.U.O., Naples, archaeologist and director of the Mission; Prof. Mauro Coltorti, University of Siena, geomorphologist and geoa-
rchaeologist; Dr. Livio Crescenzi, Soprintendenza Archeologica per il Lazio, Rome, classical archaeologist and surface surveyor; and Dr. Michael DiBlasi, African Studies Center, Boston University, Boston, archaeologist. The Center for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage, Addis Ababa, was represented by Ato Tamrat Wodajo, while the Regional Tigray

Culture and Sports Bureau, Mekele, was represented by Ato Tekle Hagos and Ato Girmay Elias. Fieldwork was conducted with grants from Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), and Ministero per l'Università e la Ricerca Scientifica (MURST), research funds 60%, Rome.

The site

The site of Ona Enda Aboi Zague (OAZ) is located on the northeastern side of the Bieta Giyorgys hill. It extends over an area of about 10 hectares. The site is partly covered by a modern village and most of the surface is disturbed by cultivation. It is located along the gentle slope of a small hill with a North-South trend. The site consists of an Aksumite stelae field with over one hundred stelae still visible on the surface. The stelae were originally erected on at least three man-made platforms. The northernmost area of the site is marked by a quite isolated, roughly hewn monolith. Excavations were conducted at this site in 1993 by the I.U.O./B.U. Archaeological Mission, under the co-direction of Rodolfo Fattovich (I.U.O.) and Kathryn A. Bard (B.U.). The 1993 field season made evident that the site was occupied in pre-Aksumite times, a platform associated with rough stelae and pit-tombs was built in proto-Aksumite times (ca. 1st century B.C., and the site was used as a stelae field up to early Aksumite times (Bard and Fattovich 1993a, 1993b; Fattovich and Bard 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Fattovich 1994). The 1994 systematic mapping of the site by Dr. Livio Crescenzi made it clear that most stelae are located on a platform in the south-eastern sector of the site.

Excavations

A test excavation was conducted at the northern end of the site, where an isolated, and apparently very ancient stele is erected at the top of a small outcrop of granitic rock (Stele 1). The area was chosen to ascertain the possible age of this stele. It turned out to be a very rough monolith, about 5 m high, 1 m wide, and 0.50 m thick.

An excavation unit, 10 m² in size, (Unit III) was created around the monolith. Unit III was divided into a grid of twenty-five 2 m² squares, marked from A to Y. The stele was included in the

square Q. The excavation was conducted in conformity with Harris' stratigraphic units procedure. The surface of the unit was not disturbed by ploughing or recent structures.

Topsoil was removed from squares F, G, K, L, M, N, P, Q, R, S, U, V, W and X. A stratigraphic test to the natural bedrock was conducted in squares L and M, where bedrock was reached at a depth of about 2.50 m. Squares O and T included a 1993 test trench which was archeologically sterile (Fattovich and Bard 1993b).

The excavation made it clear that the stele was associated with a very rough and massive man-made stone arrangement, without any mortar. This arrangement fitted the broken rocks of natural bedrock, and included some of them at the base. At present, this stone arrangement cannot be defined either a proper platform or a tumulus.

The monolith was erected in a hole cutting a quite compact yellow soil. This soil included some broken rocks of natural bedrock. About half the monolith was buried in the hole. The filling of the hole consisted of: 1. a compact brown soil sealing the hole at the top; 2. a soft reddish clay containing some big stones in the middle; 3. a reddish clay mixed with big stones at the base of the monolith.

The following stratigraphic units (SU) were distinguished during the excavation:

- SU 1. Topsoil consisting of a hard reddish-brown clay with granular texture. This soil covered the whole Unit III with an average thickness of 0.10-0.15 m. At some spots, it was 0.50 m thick. This soil covered some big stone slabs, with an horizontal arrangement, reinforcing the monolith.
- SU 2. Compact yellow-brown clay partly covering the man-made stone arrangement, with an average thickness of about 0.10 m. This soil sealed the possible original surface where the monolith was erected.
- SU 3. Massive coarse stone arrangement in the squares F, G, K, P. The stones lay over each other without any mortar. This structure was about 0.90 m thick and fitted the broken rocks of the bedrock at the base.
- SU 4. Dark brown soil with traces of ashes, about 0.10-0.20 m thick, covering some big stones

to the East of the monolith. This soil was the original surface where the stele was erected, and filled the upper part of the hole.

- SU 5. Very compact yellow clay, including big natural rocks, visible to the east of the monolith. This soil was cut by the hole to erect the stele.
- SU 6. Soft dark reddish yellow clay, about 1 m thick, filling the hole to erect the stele. It included some big stones.
- SU 7. Stratum of stones mixed with a darker reddish clay, about 0.15 m thick, at the base of the stele.
- SU 8. Dark red clay, with a few stones, about 0.15-0.30 m thick. This was the bottom of the filling in the hole under the base of the monolith.
- SU 9. Weathered natural reddish violet bedrock at the base of the hole.

The preliminary interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence at OAZ III is as follows:

1. The stele was erected in a hole, about 2 m deep and 1.50 m wide, that was cut to the bedrock in a hard yellow soil including natural rocks.
2. The stele was placed at the eastern edge of the hole to be directly sustained by the yellow soil and broken rocks of the bedrock. Some stones were placed at the bottom of the hole to reinforce the base of the monolith. Another layer of stones was placed close to the base to keep the monolith standing.
3. A massive stone structure, fitting the natural blocks of bedrock, was built to the west and north of the monolith. Large stones were also assembled to the south and east of it.
4. The hole was filled with a reddish clay including a few scattered big stones, and a dark brown soil with ashes at the top. Some large stone slabs were placed on the surface of the dark red soil to reinforce the monolith.
5. A hard yellow soil covered the whole hole and part of the stone structure. 6. Eventually, topsoil accumulated over the whole area.

So far, this is the coarsest stone arrangement found in the region of Aksum. It seems that the natural outcrop was arranged to form a platform. No tomb is apparently associated with it.

Only nineteen fragments of pottery were collected in OAZ III. They are mostly undecorated body sherds. Two rimsherds and one decorated body sherd were also found. Collected from the topsoil (SU 1) were: two fragments of black ware with a black paste and many very small mineral inclusions, 1.1 and 1.3 cm thick; one is a fragment of a dish with a rounded top and slightly everted rim. Also found was one fragment of orange ware with an orange paste and many coarse, middle and small mineral inclusions, a smooth surface, 1.1 cm thick; it represents a flat rim of a bowl with a rounded and everted top, and a moulded horizontal rib along the rim. One fragment of orange ware with an orange paste and many coarse and small mineral inclusions, 0.5 cm thick, and one fragment of brick-red ware with a red paste and few mineral inclusions, 0.6 cm thick were also collected.

From the stone structure (SU 3): five fragments of orange ware with an orange paste and many middle and small mineral inclusions were collected, and a possible red slip, 0.9 cm thick. One of these was decorated with a moulded arc with vertical incisions. Also collected was one fragment of orange ware with an orange paste and many middle and small mineral inclusions, 0.8 cm thick (eroded), along with two fragments of orange ware, paste with a light gray core and inside surface, with many coarse and small or only small mineral inclusions, 0.8-1.1 cm thick (eroded). Two fragments of brick-red ware with a red paste and few small mineral inclusions, 0.5-0.7 cm thick, and two fragments, part of the base of a miniaturized pot, brick-red ware with a red paste and few small mineral inclusions, 0.5 cm thick were also found, along with one fragment of fine light brick-red ware with red paste and few mineral inclusions, 0.8 cm thick (eroded).

In the very compact yellow soil (SU 5), only 1 fragment was found, coarse orange ware with an orange paste and many small mineral inclusions, 1.5 cm thick (eroded).

Other finds recovered from the topsoil (SU 1) were: one fragment of a polished black stone (?) with an horizontal band of vertical impressions, 0.5 cm thick; one spherical bead of clay, 1.7 cm in

diameter and one vertebra of a big mammal. From the very compact yellow soil (SU 5): one quartz microblade with terminal flaking was collected.

The pottery evidence, though scarce in quantity, suggests a possible date for the man-made stone structure and stele at OAZ III. No typical proto-Aksumite or early Aksumite potsherd occurs in this assemblage (Fattovich and Bard 1993a, 1993b; Wilding in Munro-Hay 1989:235-316). Most fragments, on the contrary, might date back to pre-Aksumite times.

Orange ware with orange paste and mineral inclusions is frequently found in pre-Aksumite assemblages in Tigray, and occurs in proto-Aksumite and early Aksumite assemblages in the same region. Orange ware in light gray clay occurs only in pre-Aksumite assemblages in Tigray. Brick-red ware occurs only in pre-Aksumite assemblages in Tigray (Fattovich 1980). A moulded arc with vertical incisions occurs as a decorative pattern on pre-Aksumite and proto-Aksumite pottery. Miniaturized pots are very frequent in pre-Aksumite assemblages in Tigray and Eritrea. They occur in the proto-Aksumite assemblage at OAZ, as well (Fattovich 1980; Fattovich and Bard 1993a, 1993b). Black ware occurs mainly in Aksumite and post-Aksumite assemblages. The orange flat rim-shoulder from topsoil might be compared to early Aksumite specimens (Wilding in Munro-Hay 1989).

On this evidence, we suggest that the structure and monolith at OAZ III could be of pre-Aksumite age.

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