

**THE PRESERVATION OF THE CULTURAL
HERITAGE OF ERITREA**
(CASE STUDY QOHAI TO)

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Introduction

The territory of Eritrea is bordered by a 1,000km. Red Sea Coastline to the North and East Ethiopia and Djoubouti to the South and Sudan to the West. It encompasses roughly 124,000 square km. a number of islands and 3.5 million people.

During the long struggle for independence the longest war in Africa, the Eritrean People is Liberation Front has made a tremendous contribution in documentation of Eritrea Cultural Heritage and history recognizing its influence in the consolidation of national identity.

After liberation on 1st of February 1992 the National Museum of Eritrea was officially inaugurated.

Since Eritrea is a newly independent country (10 yrs) , there has never been a systematic or scientific survey in Eritrea, during the Ethiopian colony. In fact cultural Heritage was totally ignored or neglected for political reason.

There was not a single nominated site in Eritrea during the Ethiopian colony not even the site of Adulis which is universally known. (Dated 2nd millennium B.C almost 4,000 years old). But now Eritrea has five archaeological site nominated for World Heritage List. Eritrea multi cultural heritage dates back to many millennia. Countless Stone Age Sites ranging from Acheulian open air 200,000 B.P to Neolithic painted or engraved caves 5,000 B.P dot the country site.

It is very likely now that the material collection or immovable cultural heritage pictures of ancient rock paintings, monuments steles, inscription on stone, ruined buildings, structural designs work of art, ancient pottery with the help of documentation give the testimonial evidence.

The National Museum collection are the result of excavation and surface collection from Adulis the ancient port city dated in the B.C and Metera Southern Zone. The little research everdone at all was by the Italians. Different colonizers have looted artifacts and documents. Since then that little is known about dating and exact spot of excavation about most things. It remains to be studied all over again in due time. So our information concerning a most of the sites remains scanty and incomplete.

Eritrea has been a land of great historical reputation and a treasure house of a wealthy cultural heritage since a long time. The past casts a brilliant reflection of tremendous civilization. I think it was due partly to its geographical position of the Red Sea that Eritrea had never escaped the dangers of threat from its coast the Red Sea. It was usually a prey for the incoming invaders and colonizers for across the sea. Therefore the successive colonial domination had not only hampered the monument of earlier civilization but also disrupted the whole cultural achievement.

Eritrea having established its sovereignty and political identity in 1993 is now faced with the task of cataloguing and preserving its multiple cultural heritage. That modern Eritrea has emerged into the political arena recently should not overshadow the fact that its inhabitants, the fauna and flora of the land within its modern borders, and the mosaic diversity of its people have along and ancient history. Like many African nation-states which have undergone colonialism, Eritrea's early history from antiquity to the present needs to be studied, keeping in mind that the present boundaries and inhabitants may reflect historical discontinuities as well as interactions with various peoples in the region.

To ensure an accurate depiction of early history and identity, Eritrea's cultural heritage, it is necessary to examine the material remains of its antiquity, and re-examine the non material data regarding the origins of its people and their way of life. Predominant archaeological, anthropological, linguistic and historical theories regarding the rise and fall of civilizations dissemination of cultures, languages and institutions, conquest, assimilation and resistance of peoples need to be reviewed in order to assess existing hypotheses or claims.

Archaeological remains are culturally a primary source of data for reconstructing the socio-economic and cultural history of a region.

-The Archaeological sites of Eritrea hold a rich and unparalleled heritage;

-Eritrea has one of the highest densities of archaeological sites known in the African continent;

-It is estimated that there are about 25-30,000 archaeological sites within Eritrea with remains from practically all periods: paleontological, prehistoric sites, proto-historic sites, rock paintings and engravings, historic sites such as medieval churches, early Islamic monuments and magnificent necropolices, and what we have classified as recent sites i.e. the creative underground dwellings (schools, pharmacies, garages, hospitals, factories, offices, entertainment halls, etc.) the result of the long struggle for independence.

Paleontological finds: are perhaps the most exciting aspects of all of Eritrea's archaeological discoveries. In the Debubawi Qeyeh Bahri (Southern Zone of the red Sea) region at a place called Buya several well-preserved hominid fossils dating about 2 million years ago, were unearthed in 1995.

Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sites: So far fifty one prehistoric sites have been documented whose geographical distribution covers a large part of the country. In northern Eritrea close to the Sudanese border is the Karora site and at another end of the country close to the Ethiopian border in the south are found other prehistoric sites near Beilul.

Rock Art: Rock paintings and engravings represent one of the most remarkable aspects of Eritrean archaeology, Rocks were the first canvas used by prehistoric people. Rock art reveals the most ancient testimony of human economic and social activities. It provides a unique insight into their intellectual life and cultural patterns, since it describes people's life such as hunting, herding, family life and existence of both wild and domestic animals.

A large concentration of known rock art is found in the Debub (south) region. At Iyago near Qohaito there is an open shelter 8m long has 90 figure painted. In other rock painting at Hismele 26 figures are depicted of which 17 are bovines. At Selum Baati a rock shelter 33m long 275 figures are more abundant and diversified.

Awalu Ghalba Rockshelter

On July 2, 1997 members of the National Museum of Eritrea and University of Florida team investigated the Awalu Ghalba Rockshelter on the Awalu Guda plateau. The Awalu Guda plateau is located approximately 2 km north of the town of Adi Qeyeh (south) approximately 1 km north of the rock painting sites documented by Paolo Graziosi at Hishmele (Graziosi 1964 - . New discoveries of Rock Paintings in Eirtrea and approximately 3.5 km west of the Qohaito plateau. The Awalu Guda plateau is located at the point where the Hishmele valley area and Himbrten canyon area meet situated at the base of the Awalu Guda plateau is the Saho Community of Hayenba.

The Awalu Ghalba Rockshelter is located approximately 50m down the northwestern cliff face of the Awalu Guda plateau. Saho people from the community of Hayneba use the place names "Awalu Guda" and "Awalu Ghalba" referring to the plateau and rockshelter respectively. The rockshelter measures approximately three meters in depth from the deepest point at the base of the interior wall to the shelter's drip line. The length of the rockshelter is approximately 12m. The floor of the rockshelter was observed to contain a dense concentration of ceramic sherds, many of which resemble Gray/Black Aksumite wares (as described by Wilding 1989). Similar ceramic sherds were documented in great density on the top of Awalu Guda plateau and on the Adi Qeyeh plateau.

The Awalu Ghalba rockshelter was observed to contain elaborate pictographs in red, white and black pigments. A number of pictographs have been destroyed by natural exfoliation, and by the chipping of images from the wall by the people. Humpless longhorn cattle and possible human-like figures are depicted on the rockshelter's walls. While one cattle figure is depicted in a highly schematic form, the majority of cattle figures are depicted in a largely naturalistic fashion reminiscent of the Sorre-Hamakiya style of pastoral rock art (Cervicek 1979). Several of the cattle figures at Awalu Ghalba resemble those documented by Paolo Graziosi at the Ba'atti Sollum rockshelter near Ghenzabo, Eritrea (Grazziosi 1964 a). The human like figure are so faintly depicted and damaged due to exfoliation and chipping that interpretation was not possible. In addition to the pictography a petroglyph inscription of probable South Arabian Script is visible on the northern side of the rockshelter wall. Rough sketches of the pictographs and inscription were made and slide photographs taken. The sketches and copies of the slide photographs are available in National Museum of Eritrea, for reference. From the data presented tentative pattern of ancient settlement on the Adi Qeyeh plateau can be proposed:

- (1) The existence of human occupation over a large area of the survey area, as evident in the wide ranging aerial extent of ceramic sherd scatter distributions.
- (2) A relatively dense settlement pattern in the form of ancient mound sites closely spaced throughout much of the survey area; and
- (3) Spatial dominance of three large mound sites seemingly strategically placed on the plateau periphery overlooking adjacent canyons and valley areas.

In addition to the 27 mound sites documented and mapped on the Adi Qeyeh plateau via systematic transect survey, reconnaissance survey data gathered around Adi Qeyeh in July 1997 suggest that at least 35 additional mound sites are located within a 5 km radius of the Qohaito plateau. Based on a non systematic estimate of mound site size, these 35 sites range from under 500m² to 4-6 hectares in areas.

Such sites await systematic investigation, but when combined with the systematic transect survey mound site data, it is possible tentatively to suggest that the density of ancient settlement in the Qohaito area may be similar to that documented for the area surrounding the ancient urban center of Axum in Tigray, Ethiopia. (Littman et al. 1913; Michels 1994; Philipson and Reynolds 1996).

It must be recognized that the 1997 Adi Qeyeh Survey project was designed to provide a relatively rapid first attempt to document archaeological resources threatened by rock quarrying and building construction.

Qohaito

The Debub or the southern region is one of the richest historical regions in Eritrea. The ancient urban city of Qohaito's position at the crossroads of the main communication axes between the Red Sea area in the north and the mainland of Mettera and Axum in the south made it one of the most important political centers of the kingdom of ancient Eritrea.

Qohaito appears to have been a garden city, with cultivated areas between the building complexes. There are dozens of these ruined complexes varying greatly in structure, size and depth; only further survey will reveal precisely the configurations and numbers of these features on this landscape. There are also about half a dozen

column structures or temples on platform dispersed widely. On one of the temples, a tall pillar balances curiously a four sided capital as if to affirm and announce the past glory of this antique city. There are certain indications about the existence of several dams. Today, however, only one dam exists that still serves the local population as the main source of water. The dam is found at a place called Saphira. The wall of the dam is built of large rectangular blocks of stones; the largest measures 98cm x 48cm. On one of the rocks inside the dam are some inscriptions in ancient Ge'ez.

The temples were referred to in the Saho language as “Weiro Omyiler or Weiro” and the location upon which they are standing was locally referred to as the “abode of the prestigious ones” or as the guide put it in Tigrigna “Sefra Abeyti”

An underground tomb which was previously and erroneously referred to as “Meqabir Ghibtsi” or “Egyptian tomb” is located close to one of the temples at Qohaito. The tomb which faces east and overlooks the Hedmo river is known as “Amharti Kebri” by the local population. It is a rectangular construction made of large blocks of stones. Inside the tomb carved on walls and facing each other are two quadrifoil (flower shaped) crosses.

The site of Qohaito, positioned on top of the Qohaito plateau at an elevation of approximately 2,600m.a.s.l, contains many large mounds, elaborate monumental architecture, cistern-like features, and a large ancient dam and reservoir basin (Anfray 1981; Dainelli and Marinelli 1912; Litman et al.1913; Wenig 1997). It has been suggested that Qohaito might be “Koloe” (Bent 1893; Munro Hay 1991: 47) an ancient market city described by the Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy (Stevenson 1932) and mentioned in the first century A.D. merchants’ document the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (Huntingford 1980; Casson 1989).

Research in July 1997 revealed pockets of dense ancient occupation and an intricate pattern of settlement linking Qohaito with its hinterland.

As I have already mentioned a systematic survey and inventory was done at Qohaito by the National Museum of Eritrea in collaboration with the German University of Humboldt and another survey was accomplished at the plateau of Adi Qeyeh in collaboration with the University of Florida.

The archaeological survey of the season 1997 had the aim to enable an idea of the extent and wealth of the site and the variety of the monuments. Thus the survey

was conducted for the most part by personal GPS - receivers. Due to methodical considerations and the priority assignment of the project, the survey has focused on the archaeological evidence presumably coming from the pre-Axumite and Axumite culture - equivalent mainly to remains of architecture in general.

This objective has been realised to an unexpected extent. The complete plateau with an area about 32 square kilometers was surveyed. The whole plateau is covered by archaeological features - more than eight hundred objects were identified, mapped and documented in that season.

As a result of this overall survey a preliminary archaeological map of the plateau of Qohaito was prepared; showing the present state of knowledge. Archaeological objects and features contained in a catalogue are almost exclusively architectural remains and come presumably mainly from the Axumite culture. These objects are distinguished into several types. The most frequent type are separate mounds. They may still show remains of architecture in a different state of preservation. The greater part of mounds is included in extensive structures of different size, complexity and number of objects. Depending on these criteria, these structures are described as mound complex, agglomeration of mounds or "town ruin". Other architectural remains, like ground plans for instance, are preserved at ground level only. According to the visible architectural remains a number of objects could be identified as podium buildings with or without pillars, further as terraced buildings or (large) platforms. Further types of architectural remains are terrace retaining walls, situated mostly in context with other archaeological features as well as ancient roads or streets.

Mapped were also structures of water supply, like cisterns, basins, dams or reservoirs - irrespective of their ancient or modern origin. The modern hydraulic installations were recorded with regard to the requirements of a masterplan for resettlement and the development of infrastructure. Although for methodical reasons, they did not represent the actual subject of the survey, all rock engraving and inscriptions are noted when they were met. The same applies to places with lithic artifacts, which are scattered in large number all over the plateau. Special surveys have to be effected for a complete record of these features, methodically adapted to their specific nature.

SYSTEM OF THE CATALOGUE

All features are named according to the designation of the square of the grid-system, in which they are located. Then they are numbered consecutively within the square. Preliminary information is provided by the term describing the object ("mound" "mound complex" etc.). Added are remarks giving more detailed information concerning the superficially visible architectural remains and their state of preservation for instance "mounds with remains of walls" "of building" etc. Sometimes only a term like "remains of building" or "plan of building" is used as description for the type of object. The mission of the term "mound" indicates then an isolated structure into further preserved or visible archaeological context.

The objects are listed in alphabetical order of their designation relative to the grid-system. Therefore they are simultaneously in topographical order, proceeding from North to south. The positions of the objects are mostly given in global coordinates of decimal degrees as shown by the personal GPS - receiver. Within "town ruins" mound complexes or agglomerations of mounds, the positions are given as polar coordinates (distance and direction in relation to GPS - measurement point. Metrical coordinates (UTM System Molodensk 37 North) of objects measured by electro - optical theodolite are comitted.

Descriptions of the superficially visible features of objects were made, a part of them is shown in ground plan. Layout plans of mound complexes, agglomerations of mounds and of the so called "town ruins" were prepared. Further are shown detailed drawings of some special features and finds like architectural blocks, potsherds etc. Drawings of ground plans exactly recorded (original drawing in scale 1:100) are presented in a scale of (c) 1 : 200; plans recorded more approximately are shown in scale 1:500 or 1:1000 to provide an impression only. "Town runins" etc (original drawing in scale 1:000) are shown in a scale (c) 1:2000 finds and architectural blocks are in scale of (c) 1;1 upto 1:100. Rock engraving and inscriptions were sketched only and are shown not in scale. Photographs were taken of remarkable objects and surface finds, but not shown in the catalogue.

This is an example of a sampe study achieved in the surrounding of Qohaito which is unique of its kind for, the country has never had a systmatic or scientific survey before indipendence.

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