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Review

LUISA SERNICOLA, *Ancient Settlement Patterns in the Area of Aksum
(Tigray, Northern Ethiopia)—Ca. 900 BCE–800/850 CE*

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REVIEWS

LUISA SERNICOLA, *Ancient Settlement Patterns in the Area of Aksum (Tigray, Northern Ethiopia)—Ca. 900 BCE–800/850 CE*, BAR International Series, 2860 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2017). 139 pp. Price: £30.00. ISBN: 978-1-4073-1474-7.

The book is an updated and revised English version of the PhD dissertation that Luisa Sernicola defended at the Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale” (UNO) in 2008, in which she analyses data coming from several field surveys carried out in 2005 and 2006 at Aksum. The main object of the research was the reconstruction of the ancient settlement patterns in the area of Aksum between the early first millennium BCE to the Late Aksumite phase (third quarter of the first millennium CE). The interdisciplinary methodology was based on the environmental, ethnohistorical, and archaeological data collected as part of the UNO Landscape Archaeological Project, which enlarged on a previous research programme centred on the hilltop of Betä Giyorgis led by Rodolfo Fattovich and Kathrin A. Bard.

The data set was categorized into several ‘surface archaeological records’ (SARs) according to quantity, composition, distribution, and dimension—features which are registered in six very technical appendices at the end of the book. The analysis spans nine dense chapters illustrated with a large number of maps, in which georeferenced data are distributed, and which constitute the larger portion of a very rich and informative iconographical apparatus.

Chapter 1 introduces the environment, focusing on geology and geomorphology, as well as on water resources and the dynamics of climate. The hydrological and climatic premises are well described and explain vegetal and faunal distribution and adaptation: while deforestation and increased aridity contributed to a progressive reshaping of vegetal biodiversity in Təgray since the second millennium BCE, faunal remains, by contrast, suggest that little has changed during the last three millennia as far as domestic species are concerned—but this was not so for a number of wild species, especially in recent times (i.e. nineteenth–twentieth centuries CE). The history of archaeological investigation in Ethiopia is also summarized (Chapter 2), and traced back to the first travel accounts of European explorers in the sixteenth–nineteenth centuries (e.g. Alessandro Zorzi, Father Francisco Alvares, and Manoel Barradas), all of whom noted items of archaeological interest, well before the first scientific reports appeared in the early twenti-

eth century (Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, the Italian intervention, and the activities of the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology).

Chapter 3 describes the methodology and data collection strategies used during the two field surveys carried out in 2005 and 2006, which enhanced the existing archaeological evidence, allowing for the georeferenced positioning of 698 records on a new archaeological map of the Aksum area (cf. p. 38, fig. 21), whose different layers are described in greater detail in Chapter 4. Naturally, one of the main issues also concerns the preservation and promotion of heritage sites of a region that has undergone great urban development and expansion in recent times. The situation is of course very differentiated in terms of archaeological distribution, a situation which has not been helped by the irregularity of previous investigations. The archaeological data are analysed with great attention to topography as well as to different types of land use, which may also have caused different degrees of alteration to the anthropic surface, while some architectural elements have survived thanks to their incorporation into the successive buildings. The quantitative analysis of the collected data in a diachronic perspective shows that the loss of archaeological evidence has been particularly acute over the last forty years, mainly due to natural and anthropic factors—but, of course, data availability in this regard may not always be consistent across space and time.

The core of the investigation is described in Chapter 5, where surface records are organized according to several parameters (quantity, composition, and extension), taking into account the variety of monumental and architectural typologies. The settlement units have been categorized into a chronological framework according to quality and quantity of the materials. Since they are based on surface clusters, we must consider that such proposed chronological profiles could possibly be revised by future diggings, which may offer a more complex scenario in terms of continuity and disruption. The thematic maps presented in Chapter 6 offer a valuable account of the spatial distribution of the settlement of Aksum. The various residential units are organized according to the cultural phases (Pre-Aksumite, Proto-Aksumite, Early Aksumite, Classic Aksumite, Middle Aksumite, and Late Aksumite), differentiating between elite and non-elite categories. A number of maps also include further parameters: for instance the diverse soil resources according to their availability; the distribution of secular and religious monumental buildings, cemeteries, and stone workshops, as well as epigraphic documentation (cf. p. 75, fig. 64). This approach offers a tentative but comprehensive analysis of the organization of the territory.

It is well known that, between the fourth and the seventh centuries CE, Aksum reached its apogee over an area of about 180 ha, when the centre of

this well-organized urban space gradually extended towards the plateau south of Betä Giyorgis, an area noted for the grandeur of most of the monuments realized at this time (Chapter 7). The study concludes, asking whether ancient human activity and exploitation strategies have contributed to soil erosion. Archaeological and paleo-agricultural evidence allows us to conclude that the causes of soil degradation are probably the recent demographic decrease and the consequent lack of land maintenance.

In conclusion, the book is a good contribution to the reconstruction of the ancient settlement strategies of the Aksum region and a very technical synthesis in which the archaeological data have been successfully organized and discussed; it will be a reliable reference work for those scholars involved in future investigations in the area of Aksum and on the Təgrayan plateau.

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DENIS NOSNITSIN, *Catalogue of Ethiopic Manuscripts*, Catalogue of Oriental Manuscripts, Xylographs, etc. in Danish Collections, 11 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press–Det Kongelige Bibliotek, 2017, pub. 2018). xv, 208 pp., photographic illus., also colour pl. Price: £160. ISBN: 978-87-7694-231-1.

This publication contains the description of thirty-one Ethiopian manuscripts in Det Kongelige Bibliotek (Royal Library) in Copenhagen. The first part of the Introduction (pp. ix–xii) gives detailed information about the background, the history, the original ownership, and how the Royal Library acquired these manuscripts.¹

One manuscript (Cod. Etiop. 1, pp. 3–7), containing the *Gädlä zäMikaʿel Arägawi* and the *Gädlä Gäbrä Krəstos*, was purchased by a Danish member of the so-called Niebuhr expedition to Yemen (1761–1767), financed by King Frederik V. The German scholar Carsten Niebuhr was the cartographer of the Danish mission and the only one who finished the journey, and wrote a report on the voyage.² Formerly, the second manuscript belonged to the Københavns Universitetsbibliotek (Copenhagen University

¹ At the end of each description there is information on the respective acquisition.

Therefore, the catalogue offers an extensive overview about the different sources of the collections and about the purchase of the manuscripts.

² The name of the German scholar is mentioned in the Index, p. 170, as ‘Niebur, expedition’, the other entries have the correct spelling, Niebuhr: pp. ix, 4, and 172.