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Article

A Hitherto Unattested Ethio-Sabaean King in a Woman’s Altar Dedication from Ṣǝrḥan (Tǝgray/Ethiopia)—Discovery and Context

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A Hitherto Unattested Ethio-Sabaean King in a Woman’s Altar Dedication from Ṣǝrḥan (Tǝgray/Ethiopia) —Discovery and Context

GIDEY GEBREEGZIABHER, TCTB

This article presents the first results of a rescue survey carried out by the Tǝgray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB) at Ṣǝrḥan (ወረዳል ወረዳ) and the epigraphic analysis of the Ethio-Sabaean inscription found at the site. Further systematic surveys are planned by the TCTB. These discoveries at the site of Ṣǝrḥan confirm the importance of further archaeological investigation in Ethiopia, particularly in Tǝgray, which is essential for our still nascent understanding of the development of civilizations in northern Ethiopia.

![Fig. 1 The area of Ṣǝrḥan Archaeological Site, photo © Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019)](image)

**First reports on the inscription and the site**

Following repeated field trips into the Aḥfärom wäräda (‘district’), Gidey Gebreegziabher was informed by the Aḥfärom wäräda public relations expert ገፋወ ፊር ከሚ, that there were local reports on a so-called ወንን (‘inscribed stone’) in Ṣǝrḥan in Aḥfärom wäräda, considered to be of importance for
our ongoing survey in the area. Following this, a documentation was first carried out on 18 November 2018, after which the epigraphist Norbert Nebes and the ethnohistorian Wolbert Smidt were asked for contextualisation and interpretation. Peasants found the inscription stone in the ṭabiya (‘village district’) of Ṣ̱rdi-Ǧäganu (ᅠᅠᅠ�� ISBN wārāda. According to traditional local territorial partition, this area belongs to a historical Ṭǝgrayan province called Sāb’ā Ṣggäla (ᅠᅠᅠ ISBN እገላ), named after the ancient Ṭǝgräňña-speaking sub-group Ṣggäla.1 In local parlance the specific site, where the inscription was found, is called Ṣ́ḥan. Originally the stone inscription was found by the peasant Ato Gābrāmāsqīl Bärhe in the farmland of his neighbor Ato Kiros Asāffa on 18 June 2018.

Due to the discovery of Aksumite artefacts near the Ṣḥan site during the following preliminary surveys, it was identified as a potentially important archaeological site. It was documented photographically by the TCTB on 16 February 2019 (Figs. 1–2). This survey was carried out within their mandate to document ancient sites in the Regional State of Ṭǝgray, for the preparation of later preservation measures and possible research endeavours.

**Context: The local view on ancient heritage**

Activities assuring the preservation and an improved accessibility to the cultural, historical and archaeological heritage of Ṭǝgray and the dissemination of knowledge on the ancient civilisation of this region are increasingly popular among the local population. They generally see themselves as guardians of their ancient heritage, including their culture and inherited rights of land. Locally, many rural inhabitants expect that the recognition of their heritage will also increase the recognition of their own role in its preservation and their ownership. This perspective is also the basis for the TCTB’s endeavors to improve knowledge of the heritage in Ṭǝgray and create chances for its preservation.

Since its discovery the stone inscription is kept in private custody, as the local population has inherited a strong sense of duty towards ancient heritage, which they consider their own. This is again linked with local beliefs often connected to ancient objects. Based on local historiographical traditions, the peasants believe the inscriptions originated in the Pre-Aksumite period, which conforms with the findings presented here. The inscription stone has been moved from its original place during farming, but appears to originally have been connected to stone structures in the ground. These stone structures have not yet been documented. There are no other inscriptions, judging from local reports available so far.

1 On this Ṭǝgräňña-speaking sub-group, which is already known from medieval sources: ‘Iggäla’, EAe, II (2005), 238a–239a (W. Smidt and Tsegay Berhe).
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The specific use of the inscription stone by the local farmers’ family is significant as it illustrates the role of local traditions regarding such a heritage. Objects identified as belonging to a culture of ancestors are not seen as museal objects, whose historical importance alone justifies their preservation. The connection between today’s culture and ancient heritage is locally often loaded with strong beliefs, integrating them into local household practices. In this case, after discovering the stone in the field, the family decided to put it in the house fireplace to support the metal cooking pot (dosti) above the fire. This was not a decision based on practicality, but the conviction that the inscription stone would protect the house from lightning if positioned in the fireplace. The script on the stone was seen as ‘coming from God’, and the stone identified as sacred bearing great protection power. Due to its placement just above the fire, it was greatly blackened and affected by smoke and charcoal. When the family removed it from the fireplace to preserve it elsewhere, they washed it. The inscribed letters remained dark, however, due to the long contact with smoke and charcoal (see the photo of the inscription, Fig. 6). During the survey, the stone was just photographed as it was found in the private household and no other measures were taken.

Location of the site

The site of Ṣ́ǝrḥan is situated in the central zone of the Regional State of Ṭǝgray in the district of Afhūrom wǝråda, in the subdistrict (tahiya) of Ṣ̣ǝrdi-Ǧägan at 14° 23’ 640 North, 39° 10’.917 East and 1700 MASL. It is located some 17 kms northeast of Ṣ̣ǝntǝč ̣č ̣o town and just less than a kilometre east of the road connecting Ṣ̣ǝntǝčo and Gorḥusännay. The archaeological site of Ṣ́ǝrḥan is found approximately 150 m northeast of the recently established small town of Ṣ̣̣daga-Robu’. It is situated 30 m from the base of the steep knoll of Qomoqora ( tanı wəyt) in the south. Administratively, the site currently belongs to the Gorḥusännay subdivision administration of Afhūrom wəråda.

The gently sloped hill of Kontoro ( ర o ḋ o ) with very rough terrain descending to its base lies to the north. The Kontoro and Qomoqora hills to the north and south of the site respectively are separated by a narrow east-west orientated erosional stream flowing east-west, running close to the northernmost end of the site. The site is located in a hot semi-arid area. Contrary to the vegetation at other sites of higher altitudes in the ḏäga and wäyná- ḏäga, the Ṣ́ǝrḥan site features much barren land. Scrub trees grow on the steep rocky slopes and the flat land is but sparsely dotted with a few acacia plants. However, some large evergreen plants and cactus trees occupy the eastern side of the site bordering the stream. The steep
knoll sides expose a great deal of bare rock, notably on the site’s southeastern part area where the terrain is stony coarse and sandy, preserved in the hollows. The flat plain extending westward from the site across the newly established settlement area is covered with reddish silt type alternate with white and yellowish streaks.

Fig. 3 The visible base of Aksumite structure with its pillars, photo © Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019)
Description of visible structures and artefacts on the surface

Covering an estimated area of 3 ha, the Ṣǝrḥan site comprises abundant material remains such as finely dressed rubble stones, piles of mound, rectangular wall structure, carefully curved impressive pillars, and fragments of scattered potsherds. The recently created village is located on the ancient site of Ṣǝrḥan. The ruins of complex structures with distinctive stepped walls at the ground are covered by recently constructed houses and compounds. Even though the original wall structures have been disturbed, their east-west orientation can still be made out. Significantly, the color of the soil within this specific site is ashy and quite different from the soil located outside the main archaeological site zone.

Very narrow, disturbed wall structures connecting the main site to the pillar field or mound site can be seen. At the eastern end of the main site, one cylindrically shaped undressed stele or pillar has been erected close to the entrance of the house of Ato Kiros Asafa. It had been there for many years. The quarry site for the stele is still unknown. But according to local informants, the slabs were collected from the western side of the main site. There are narrow-base and wide-top almost rectangular shape stone slabs and a disturbed wall, which runs east-west. Within this site there are six impressively carved monolithic reddish color pillars, variously coloured pottery of different sizes, stone artefacts such as obsidian and metal objects. The site calls for serious archaeological investigation (Fig. 3–5).

According to local informants, the name Ṣǝrḥan is derived from the Tǝgrǝñña word šārāḥu (šeràḥu) meaning ‘mentioning someone / a specific place’. Similar
place names in Tǝgray are, however, more likely seen as derivations from geminated šäreḥä (ጭረሐ) with a different meaning, signifying ‘marking an area of demarcation’, for example demarcating a location which separates the territories of two villages from one another. Several place names in Tǝgrǝñña-speaking areas derive from this term relating to territorial administrative practice. However, the Gǝʿez meaning of the term sorḥ (ሄርሃ), referring to a palace or temple or other
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elite structures,\(^2\) appears to render a better explanation. Further research is required to identify the possible existence of oral traditions linked with this denomination and to determine whether or not they contain specific references to the ancient site.

**The inscription stone’s shape**

The shape of the inscription stone is roughly rectangular. Its height is about 46 cm, thickness 0.9 cm, and width 13.4 cm.\(^3\)

**List of References**


**Summary**

An inscription stone was found by peasants in a site at Ṣǝrḥan in the Aḥfärom ṭäräda of the Tǝgray region. The author examined the site and carried out an archaeological outline of it for the Tǝgray Culture and Tourism Bureau. The original condition of the inscription, however, had been affected by the peasants’ handling of the stone, which in the same time offers an instructive insight into local traditions. Furthermore, the high resolution photography taken of the inscription has been lost due to looting during the recent war. However, lower resolution photography has survived.

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\(^2\) Dillmann 1865, 1273: ‘structura excelsior, arx, palatium’, with the possible meaning ‘templum’ in the construction ṭርሐ መቅዳስ or ‘palatium’ in the construction ṭርሐ መንግሥ.

\(^3\) Acknowledgements: I wish to thank the TCTB of the Tǝgray Regional State who allowed us to publish the preliminary results of the survey for their unlimited support, and also Wolbert Smidt for the discussions on the ethnohistorical and philological aspects of this finding. The publication has been delayed, due to the computer, containing most of the photographic site documentation, being looted by Eritrean soldiers in late 2020, as well as the general internet blackout caused by the war, delayed communication and making backups impossible.