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Article

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A Hitherto Unattested Ethio-Sabaeen King in a Woman's Altar Dedication from Šərḥan (Təgray/Ethiopia) —Discovery and Context

GIDEY GEBREEGZIABHER, TCTB

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



Fig. 1 The area of Šərḥan Archaeological Site,
photo © Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019)

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 Ḥadduś Bärhe, that there were local reports on a so-called *šəḥuf əmni* (ፅሐፍ እምነ, ‘inscribed stone’) in Šərḥan 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 ‘Ḍrdi-Ġāganu (ዕርዲ ጅጋጉ), Ahfārom *wārāda*. According to traditional local territorial partition, this area belongs to a historical Təgrayan province called Sāb‘a Ḍggāla (ሰብዓ እገላ), named after the ancient Təgrəñña-speaking sub-group Ḍggāla.¹ In local parlance the specific site, where the inscription was found, is called Šərḥan. Originally the stone inscription was found by the peasant *Ato* Gābrāmäsqäl Bärhe in the farmland of his neighbor *Ato* Kiros Asäffa on 18 June 2018.

Due to the discovery of Aksumite artefacts near the Šərḥan 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 Təgray, 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 Təgray 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 Təgray 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 Təgrəñña-speaking sub-group, which is already known from medieval sources: ‘Ḍggāla’, *E Ae*, II (2005), 238a–239a (W. Smidt and Tsegay Berhe).

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 (*dəsti*) 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 Ṣərḥan is situated in the central zone of the Regional State of Təgray in the district of Aḥfärom *wäräda*, in the subdistrict (*tabiya*) of 'Ērdi-Ĝäganu at 14° 23'.640 North, 39° 10'.917 East and 1700 MASL. It is located some 17 kms northeast of Ēntəččo town and just less than a kilometre east of the road connecting Ēntəččo and Gorḥusännay. The archaeological site of Ṣərḥan is found approximately 150 m northeast of the recently established small town of 'Ēdaga-Robu'. It is situated 30 m from the base of the steep knoll of Qomoqora (ጳጳጳጳ) in the south. Administratively, the site currently belongs to the Gorḥusännay subdivision administration of Aḥfärom *wäräda*.

The gently sloped hill of Kontəro (ጳጳጳጳ) with very rough terrain descending to its base lies to the north. The Kontəro 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 *däga* and *wäyna-däga*, the Ṣərḥan 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



Fig. 2 The farming land of Mr. Kiros Asäffa: the approximate area where the inscription was found, photo © Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019)

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 Šərḥan 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 Šərḥan. The ruins of complex structures with distinctive stepped walls at the ground are covered by recently constructed houses and compounds. Even though the original



Fig. 4 Reddish color potsherd, photo © Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019)



Fig. 5 Obsidian from the site, photo © Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019)

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 Asäfa. 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 Šərḥan is derived from the Təgrəñña word *šärähä* (ሀረሐ) meaning ‘mentioning someone / a specific place’. Similar



Fig. 6 The inscription stone after having been washed by the peasants' family, low-resolution detail from the photo by Gidey Gebreegziabher (16 February 2019; the photo from the original documentation was lost during the recent conflict)

place names in Təgray are, however, more likely seen as derivations from geminated *šärrähä* (ሀረሐ) 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 Təgrəñña-speaking areas derive from this term relating to territorial administrative practice. However, the Gə'əz meaning of the term *šərḥ* (ረሐ), referring to a palace or temple or other

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

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Summary

An inscription stone was found by peasants in a site at Šərḥan in the Aḥfārom *wärāda* of the Təgray region. The author examined the site and carried out an archaeological outline of it for the Təgray 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.

² Dillmann 1865, 1273: 'structura excelsior, arx, palatium', with the possible meaning 'templum' in the construction ብርሐ መቅደስ or 'palatium' in the construction ብርሐ መንግሥት.

³ Acknowledgements: I wish to thank the TCTB of the Təgray 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.