



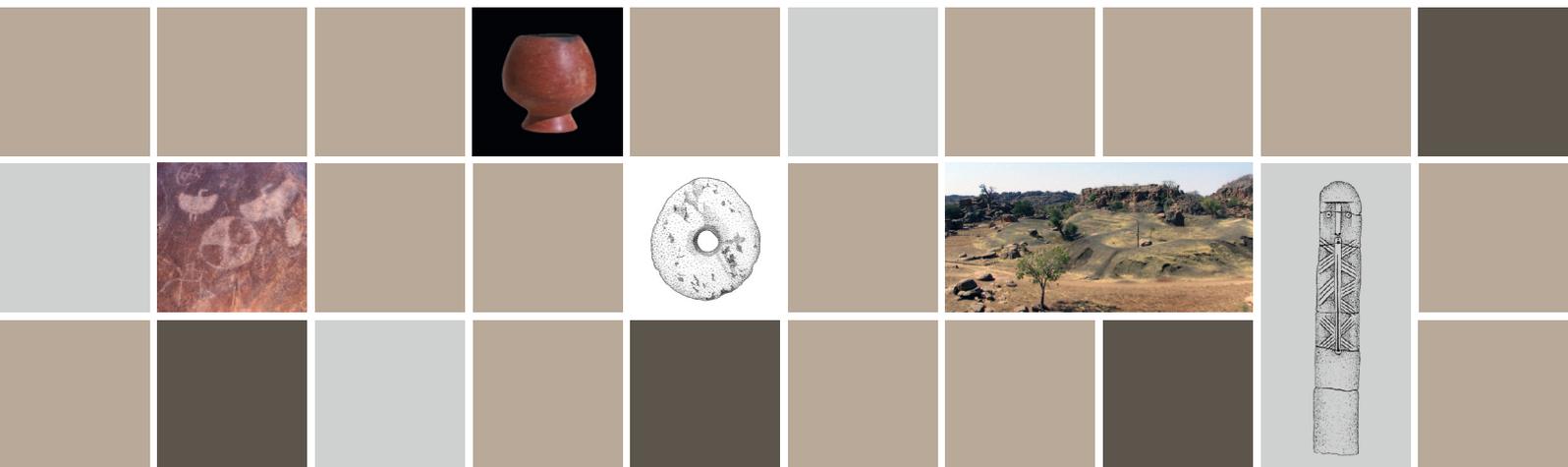
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Editorial office

Claire LETOURNEUX

Translation

MAGEN O'FARRELL

Layout, graphics

Fabien TESSIER

The contributions should be addressed to:

REVUE P@LETHNOLOGIE

Vanessa LEA, Research associates

TRACES - UMR 5608 of the CNRS

Maison de la recherche

5 allées Antonio Machado

31058 Toulouse cedex 9, FRANCE

Phone: +33 (0)5 61 50 36 98

Fax: +33 (0)5 61 50 49 59

Email: vanessa.lea@univ-tlse2.fr

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Article outline

MATARA:

the Archaeological Investigation
of a City of Ancient Eritrea

Francis ANFRAY

1 - Chronological context	13
2 - From Pre-Aksumite to Aksumite	14
2.1 - Brief summary of research at Aksum	14
2.2 - Aksumite remains on the high Eritrean-Tigrean plateau	14
3 - Characteristics of Aksumite architecture	15
4 - Matara	16
4.1 - Presentation of the site	16
4.2 - The stele	18
4.3 - The excavations at Matara	19
4.4 - Archaeological potential for the future	45
Bibliographic references	45

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MATARA:

the Archaeological Investigation of a City of Ancient Eritrea

Francis ANFRAY

Abstract

Following an overview of the chronological context of Eritrean-Ethiopian antiquity, and a brief summary of research on the Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite periods, this article presents the results of the archaeological excavations carried out by the author and the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology at the site of Matara, in Eritrea. Four residential complexes and two religious edifices, including a basilica, have been discovered; they belonged to the Aksumite phase. Tombs and numerous inscriptions attest to long occupation of the site from the Pre-Aksumite period, the underlying levels having not been investigated.

Keywords

Matara (Eritrea), ancient archaeology, Aksum (Ethiopia), Pre-Aksumite, Aksumite, architecture.

1 - Chronological context

During the last fifty years, archaeological research has made notable contributions to our knowledge of the early history of Eritrea¹ and Ethiopia. Abundant material evidence has been gathered and numerous remains have been revealed: building substructures; inscriptions engraved in stone, metal and earthenware; pottery and various other objects, together with gold, silver and bronze coins. Today the period examined in this study, from the 1st millennium BC to the 1st millennium AD, appears in a new light. We generally divide this period in two on the basis of archaeological observations and epigraphic studies: the Pre-Aksumite period covers approximately the 1st millennium BC, and the Aksumite period (named for the famous metropolis of Aksum, in northern Ethiopia), corresponds to the 1st millennium AD (more specifically, the evidence available to date covers only six or seven centuries – from the 1st to the 7th century AD). Subdivisions have progressively been introduced into these two major periods in line with the discoveries made; as one might expect these have sometimes been the subject of debate, since although they represent a useful tool with which to determine classifications, they are nonetheless somewhat artificial².

1. Independent state since 1993.

2. R. Fattovich and K.A. Bard (2001), on the basis of their research at Aksum, propose the following divisions: Pre-Aksumite Period (ca. 700-ca. 400 BC); Proto-Aksumite Period (ca. 400-ca. 150 BC); Aksumite Period (ca. 150 BC-ca. AD 700); Post Aksumite Period (after ca. AD 700).

2 - From Pre-Aksumite to Aksumite

2.1 - Brief summary of research at Aksum

Until the mid-20th century, what was known of the material and cultural realities of the ancient period in the Eritrean-Tigrean region was extremely limited. Carlo Conti Rossini (1928) had done the groundwork on the history of the period and it was thought that South Arabia (in other words the kingdoms of Ma'in and Saba) exercised a dominant influence over the north of the high African plateau. Later, the development of epigraphic analyses forced a modification of this view; the discoveries made, together with a close examination of the facts, revealed that a cultural action had in fact taken place (perhaps from the end of the 2nd millennium BC), but in relation to a population of local origin that was already politically structured and which possessed its own culture (Fattovich, 1992).

An important stage in the research was the discovery, around thirty years ago, of Pre-Aksumite levels on the site of Aksum, which was later to become the metropolis of the Aksumite kingdom and on which, until then, no activity from that period had been indicated. Ten kilometres to the south, however, the sites of Goboshela, Enda Tcherkos and Haoulti had already produced inscriptions in stone, remarkable monuments, female statues and a niche 1.40 m high which, with some other pieces, indicated the influence of the kingdoms of South Arabia in the 8th century BC (Contenson, 2005). In 1972, at Seglamen, 7 km south west of Aksum, peasants also discovered a slab engraved with a seven line inscription in the south Arabian characters known as “monumental” and dating perhaps from the 8th century BC. The names of a king and his wife are mentioned; there is also a reference to a temple dedicated to gods belonging to the south Semitic pantheon and the local religion (Bernand *et al.*, 1991). But was Aksum really unoccupied during this period?

In the 1970s and 1980s, on the hill of Beta Giyorgis, to the north west of Aksum, an Italo-American team discovered a site indicating the late 1st millennium BC establishment of a political power which a few centuries later was to become a powerful state (Fattovich, Bard, 1996, 1997; Fattovich *et al.*, 2000b). Archaeological investigation revealed the ruins of an architectural complex dating from the period covering the mid-2nd century BC to the mid-2nd century AD). At the base of the single preserved construction could be seen some of the characteristics of what would become Aksumite architecture. At the same time, also at Aksum, a British expedition studied an assemblage of significant structures in the sector of the giant stelae and Nefas Mawcha (a gigantic megalithic monument) – the “Tomb of the False Door”, “Tomb of the Brick Arches” and “Mausoleum” – through which is manifest the construction expertise possessed by the Aksumite kingdom at the peak of its power in the 3rd and 4th centuries AD (Munro-Hay, 1989; Phillipson, Phillips, 1998).

2.2 - Aksumite remains on the high Eritrean-Tigrean plateau

This fully developed and typically Aksumite art persisted for at least three centuries, as shown by a discovery in the 1960s. This discovery took place in Dungur, located a few hundred metres to the west of Aksum. The Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology with the French Mission of Archaeology had uncovered the ruins of a residence, the structure of which suggested that of a member of the upper classes of Aksumite society. A noble, a landowner, a rich merchant? The exact attribution remains unknown (Anfray, 1972; Bernand *et al.*, 1991). In 1906, a German expedition had discovered and studied three major partially preserved architectural structures at Aksum; their dimensions, the quality of their masonry and their position at the heart of the ancient city earned them the title “princely residences” or “royal palaces” (Littmann *et al.*, 1913). At the same time and at the other end of Aksumite territory, on the coast of the Red Sea at Adulis, an Italian expedition led

by Paribeni discovered other architectural remains demonstrating similarities to those of the monuments of Aksum (Paribeni, 1908).

While Adulis is among the sites for which we have the earliest sources (Fauvelle-Aymar, 2009; Anfray and Godet, forthcoming), there are several others which, during the 20th century, have revealed their share of evidence. In 1953 a chance discovery at Addi Gelemo, near Wukro in eastern Tigray, caught the attention of archaeologists. A variety of objects were found under a slab of stone, including a seated female statuette the base of which was engraved with an inscription in South Arabian characters; four metal bowls, one of which bore Meroitic decoration; incense burners and a metal object engraved with an inscription in the name of GDR (unvocalised letters), king of Aksum. This is the first written evidence, in Ethiopia, for a king of Aksum. The object has been dated to the early 3rd century AD (Admassou Shiferaw, 1955; Bernand *et al.*, 1991). Twenty years later, in a neighbouring region, in the church of Abuna Garima at Addi Kaweh, two incense burners engraved with “royal inscriptions” (i.e. mentioning the name of kings) in South Arabian writing were discovered (Schneider, 1973, 1976; Bernand *et al.*, 1991)³.

The central region of Eritrea contains a large number of archaeological sites, such as the former province of Akkele Guzay, where several sites present the ruins of ancient urban settlements among which Qohayto is one of the most important; mounds of ruins topped by pillars extend over a vast area, some of them having stood since the 6th or 7th century AD. The high plateau is also of great epigraphic interest: around one hundred examples of graffiti, some in cursive South Arabian writing, some in proto-Ethiopian, are engraved on rocks. About a dozen of these texts use a script related to the South Arabian “monumental” style; these are also executed in relief inside a frame. In the 1950s, a schist plaque was found at Safra, not far from the archaeological site of Qohayto, bearing several texts engraved in proto-Ethiopian. Epigraphists have dated some of these graffiti to the 2nd century AD (Drewes, 1962; Drewes and Schneider, 1976). It is interesting to note that further schist plaques with similar inscriptions have been found at Matara, thirty kilometres to the south.

3 - Characteristics of Aksumite architecture

Before examining the results recorded on the site of Matara, a description of the features that characterise all of the major edifices encountered on the Aksumite sites will enable us to simplify the presentation of these results, as these constructions follow the same model (Manzo, 1997). Dating from a period between the 3rd and 7th century AD, this model relates to both domestic and religious constructions.

All of the buildings have a square or rectangular plan. Their rubble-work masonry is of quarry stones bonded by earth mortar. A main building is surrounded by outbuildings; a variety of spaces of different sizes lie between the two. The main building is raised on a substructure made of tiers 44 to 50 cm high and between 6 and 7 cm wide at their apex. These substructures are characterised by a trapezoidal silhouette to which cohesion and stability were often given by quoins (blocks of faced stone). Sometimes, a continuous band of faced blocks runs along the sides of the building at the top of the substructure. In addition to this stepped base, another remarkable characteristic of Aksumite construction is the alternating use of projections and recesses in the external faces of both the substructures of the principal structures and their outbuildings.

3. In 2007, excavations were undertaken on the site of Maqaber Ga'ewa, in Tigray, not far from Wukro; as Hiluf Berhe (2009) reminds us, it is from this site that the inscriptions of Addi Kaweh – actually named «Addi Akaweh» – originate. The new inscriptions discovered during these excavations were published by I. Gadjaj *et al.* (2009) who dated them to the 7th and 6th centuries BC.

Broad monumental steps of (often) seven degrees with paved doorsteps flank the central building on one, two or three sides. What we will call the “ground floor” of the central building was thus constructed on top of the substructure. This ground floor is generally divided into nine rather small rooms arranged in rows of three. In a corner room, an angled masonry block leads us to suppose that a (wooden) staircase was installed in this location. These rooms were often paved (when the paving slabs are absent there is evidence to suppose that they have been removed after the building was abandoned). The cramped nature of the rooms and the presence of a staircase lead us to suppose that they were used as storerooms and not as residential spaces; the latter would have been on the floor above. The available space would have been even smaller as it would also have been encroached upon by the posts or pillars that supported the structure above. The presence of these elements is suggested, in some spaces in the substructure, by the presence of circular heaps of masonry on which slabs were placed to provide stable bases for the supporting posts.

Wood was used in the construction of Aksumite buildings for the execution of floors, the frames of doors and other openings, and for beams and joists, which were sometimes embedded in the walls. Baked brick was also used for some purposes.

These were the principal elements of Aksumite architecture, which, it must be remembered, should be considered only as those of major edifices. This classic model is the rule throughout Aksumite architecture, although subject to minor variations and irregularities.

4 - Matara

4.1 - Presentation of the site

A village on the edge of the small town of Sénafé lies beneath the shelter of a high rock, the *amba* Matara (figures 1-2). The site is located 1.5 km into the plain, at the foot of a rocky hill called “Goual Saïm” (“the daughter of Saïm”), itself dominated in the south by the *amba* Saïm, a haughty eminence of 3 000 m (figure 3). The site has been known since the visit of Rivoire in 1868. Denis de Rivoire saw ruins, a broken “obelisk”, capitals of columns and granite tables. The latter references are not without interest, since although Conti Rossini could still see them thirty years later (Conti Rossini, 1928), the only remaining feature today is the “obelisk” (stele engraved with an inscription). In 1905, Dainelli and Marinelli (1912: 509-511) saw the remains of several constructions and a staircase on a small hill. In 1906, the German expedition to Aksum led by Littmann drew up a sketch plan of the ruins then visible, among which was “the stone base of a royal throne” (Littmann *et al.*, 1913 quoted in Anfray, 1963; in Anfray and Annequin, 1965 and in Drewes and Schneider, 1967).

Foreigners named this field of ruins “Matara”, while the local people called it “Enda Zalatat” (“the ruins”) or “Zala Kaleb Negus” (“the ruins of King Kaleb”). This last expression refers to a popular tradition preserved in a manuscript of the 15th century and according to which the hermits of the mountain were persecuted by the people of Bour, undoubtedly the inhabitants of the neighbouring settlement (for the name of which we would then have an indication). To avenge them, King Kaleb came from Aksum with his army, via a tunnel, and destroyed the town which was then dubbed “the Gate of Aksum⁴” (Anfray, 1963; Schneider, 1963). A link is thus established with the capital of the ancient kingdom. There are other links, of archaeological nature.

4. The name “the Gate of Aksum” appears in the *Storia d’Etiopia* of Carlo Conti Rossini (1928: 242). In the early 1960s we ourselves observed that the legend relating to the Gate of Aksum still lived in the memory of the old priests attached to the church of Kidane-Mehret in the village of Matara.

Figure 1 - View from the *amba* Matara (“mount” Matara). In the background, the *amba* Saïm. In front of this hill, the small rocky hill of Goual Saïm; at the northern foot of this hill is the archaeological site of Matara (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 2 - To the north, mount Matara (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 3 - Close up view of the site of Matara, at the foot of the small rocky hill of Goual Saïm (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



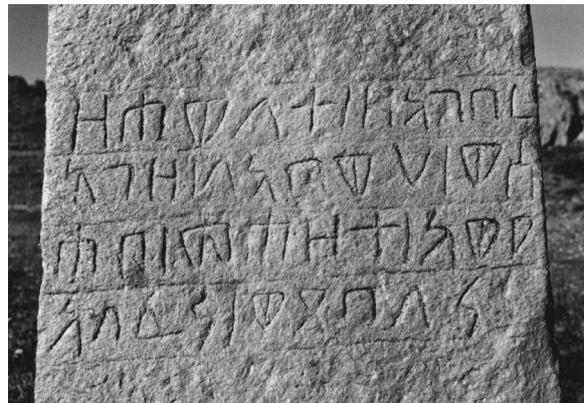
4.2 - The stele

A major monument of the site of Matara, the stele ([figure 4a](#)) that for a long time lay on the ground in two pieces near the hill of Goual Saïm has attracted the attention of travellers. In the 1920s it was repaired and set up on the edge of the track leading to the village of Berakit. The stele is approximately 5 m tall from ground level, and bears on its apex the “disc on crescent” symbol of Astarte, sculpted into the stone (pantellerite, a type of trachytic rock). This symbol is often reproduced on stelae, incense burners and above all on coins, from the early centuries of the Pre-Aksumite period to the 3rd century AD. In the 4th century AD, it is replaced by the Christian cross. In addition to this symbol, four lines of an inscription are engraved at eye-level; these inform us that the stele was erected by AGZ for his ancestors and transported by his friends, the names of whom are indicated ([figure 4b](#)). Palaeographic study of the form of the letters enables the monument to be dated to the 3rd century AD (Littmann *et al.*, 1913; Bernand *et al.*, 1991; Drewes, 1998; Kropp, 2006).



Figure 4a - The stele of Matara with the four lines of the inscription, 3rd century AD (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé). Damaged during the war, the stele of Matara was restored in the 2000s, under the supervision of Yosef Libsekal, the director of the National Museum in Asmara, and F. Anfray; Tristan Schebat and Girmay Gebre-Maskal lend their technical expertise. Funding was provided by the Eritrean authorities, Unesco and the French Alliance. Figures 4a and 4b presented here date from the 1960s. At about the same time, at the initiative of Anne Saurat-Anfray, the old village church of Matara (which, in the opinion of many historians, dates back to around the 15th century), underwent major restoration work, within the same cooperation frame to which was added funding by the World Monument Fund.

Figure 4b - The inscription in “Ancient Ethiopian” engraved on the stele (photograph: J. Leroy).



4.3 - The excavations at Matara

In 1959, the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology undertook investigations on the site of Matara. During the previous years, research had above all taken place at Aksum and its surroundings (see above). At this stage it appeared appropriate to widen the field of research. Akkele Guzay presented significant density in archaeological terms. The choice of Matara was dictated by the conditions that it offered: it was free of any occupation which would have hindered operations (figure 5). Farmers from neighbouring villages cultivated the soil over the ruins, but they were employed on the archaeological site to compensate them for the meagre income lost as a result of the excavations.

During the campaigns carried out in late 1959 and continued in the following years⁵, several architectural assemblages were revealed: four residences, two churches and a sector of around thirty ordinary houses (figure 6). The substructures of these edifices, which were the only feature preserved, generally to a height of 2 or 3 metres, constituted the upper layer of the site. The pottery which was associated with these ruins was abundant and varied, and together with the coins and small inscriptions engraved on vases enabled these monuments to be dated to the end of the Aksumite period, the 6th and 7th centuries AD. However, two buildings, designated A and C on the plan, may have been constructed earlier, in the 4th or 5th century AD.

Figure 5 - View of the ruin field before the excavations took place. In the background, the village of Matara, dominated by the rock of Matara (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



5. The excavation campaigns at Matara: 28 November 1959 to 12 January 1960; 27 April to 25 May 1961; 8 April to May 1962; 9 April to 1st June 1963; 4 April to 2 June 1964; 5 April to 12 May 1965; 30 May to 11 July 1966; 3 March to 15 April 1963; 8 April to 15 May 1969 and 15 May to 29 June 1970. No campaign took place in 1967.

4.3.1 - Upper class residences

The structure called “A” (figure 6, reference A) was discovered during the first campaign. This was a quality construction which was an upper class residence, judging from its architectural arrangement and the particular care given to the masonry, indicating the undoubted social importance of its occupants (Anfray, 1963; Anfray, Annequin, 1965). Evidence gathered during the examination of the pottery, and various characteristics of its decoration such as the absence in the archaeological level of material evidence present in other levels of the site, enable this monument to be dated to around the 4th century AD. The central building (figures 7-9) is a rectangle of 12.60 × 11 m. Surrounding it on all four sides are outbuildings which have not all been uncovered. On the west side (figure 9), a staircase with seven steps is 2.70 m wide at its base and 2.20 m wide at the level of the doorstep. This major edifice was built on the ruins of a previous building, of which remained fragments of walls constructed of rough masonry. Similarly, on top of the substructure were found the remains of walls of poor quality constructed of reused stones, indicating a late reconstruction following the destruction of building A. Building A reproduces the architectural model observed throughout the Aksumite area (see above).

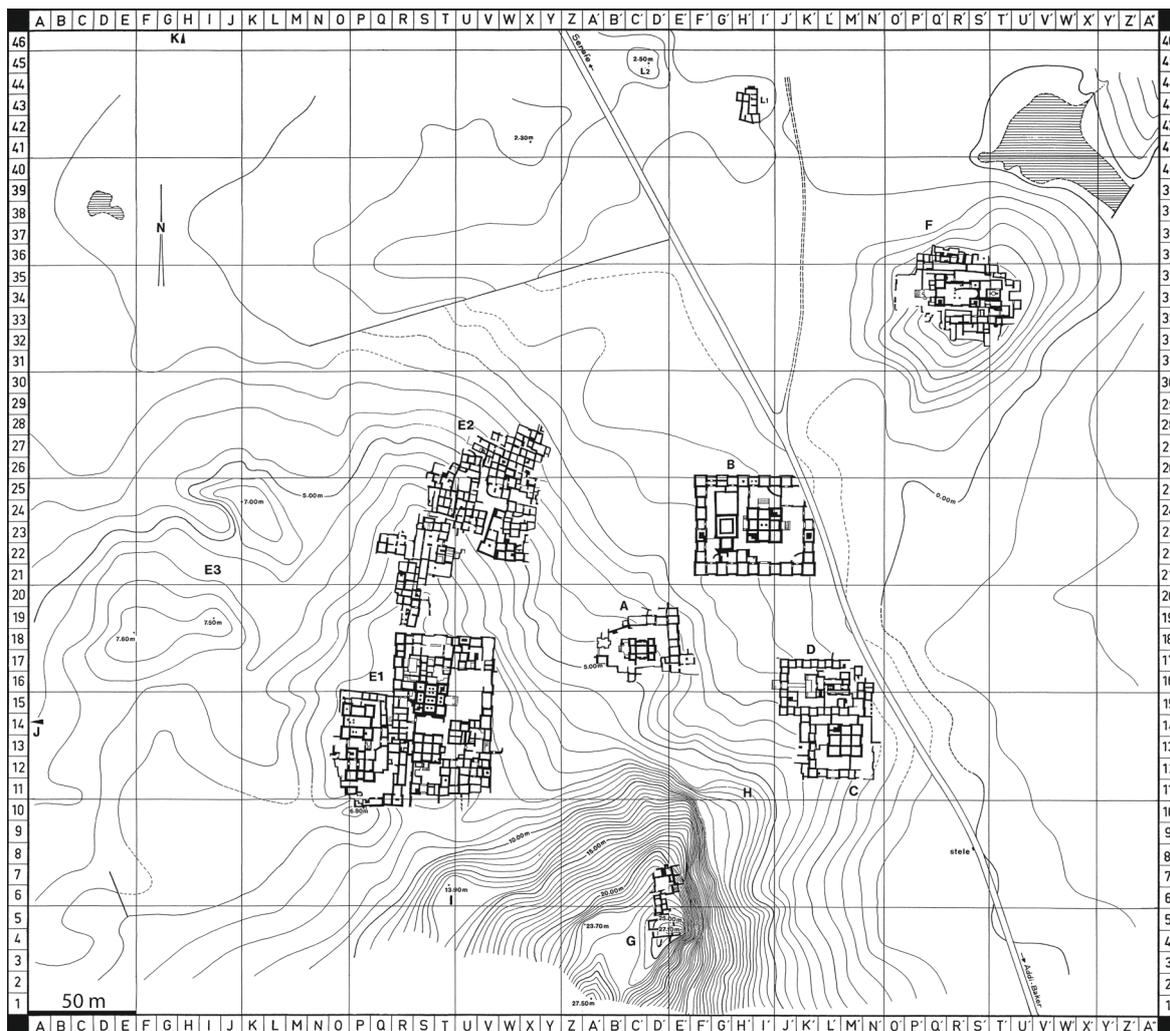


Figure 6 - General plan of the archaeological site of Matara (drawing: J. Gire).



Figure 7 - Structure A, substructure of the central building, east facade (photograph: Kebedé Bogalé).



Figure 8 - Structure A, substructure of the central building, north facade (photograph: Kebedé Bogalé).



Figure 9 - Structure A, substructure of the central building, west facade (photograph: Kebedé Bogalé).

A massive stepped substructure surrounded by outbuildings was discovered not far to the north east of structure A. This was designated structure B (figure 6, reference B). Its construction follows the classic model: a central substructure with alternating projections and recesses, and monumental staircases on the north and east sides (figure 10). The width of the eastern staircase (the largest) is 4.90 m at the base. These two prestigious monumental staircases form the principal entrances of the central building. The latter has a square plan measuring 17.50 m per side. Surrounding this building are thirty additional constructions composing the usual courtyard, with long sides of 50.50 and 49.00 m.

Of a third upper class residence, C on the plan (figure 6, reference C), only the central building has been uncovered (figure 11). It has the classic plan (figure 12): a massive stepped substructure measuring 15.20 m per side at the base, projections and recesses, quarry stone masonry bonded in earth mortar and with quoin stones. The ground floor possesses an unusual characteristic: there is no staircase in place on any of the four sides, the stones that constituted the stairs having perhaps been removed at a later date for use in another construction on the site.

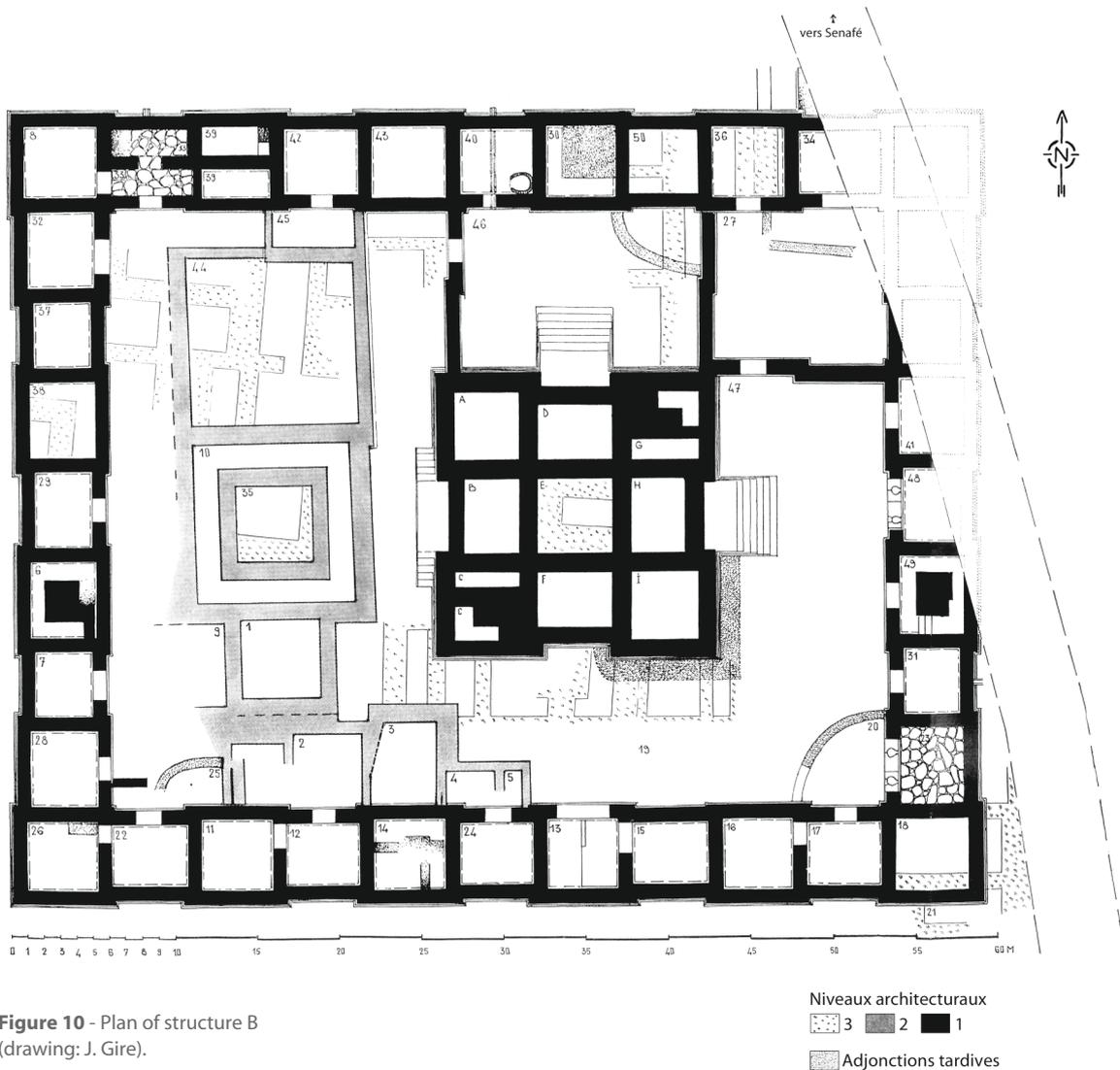




Figure 11 - Structure C, central substructure (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

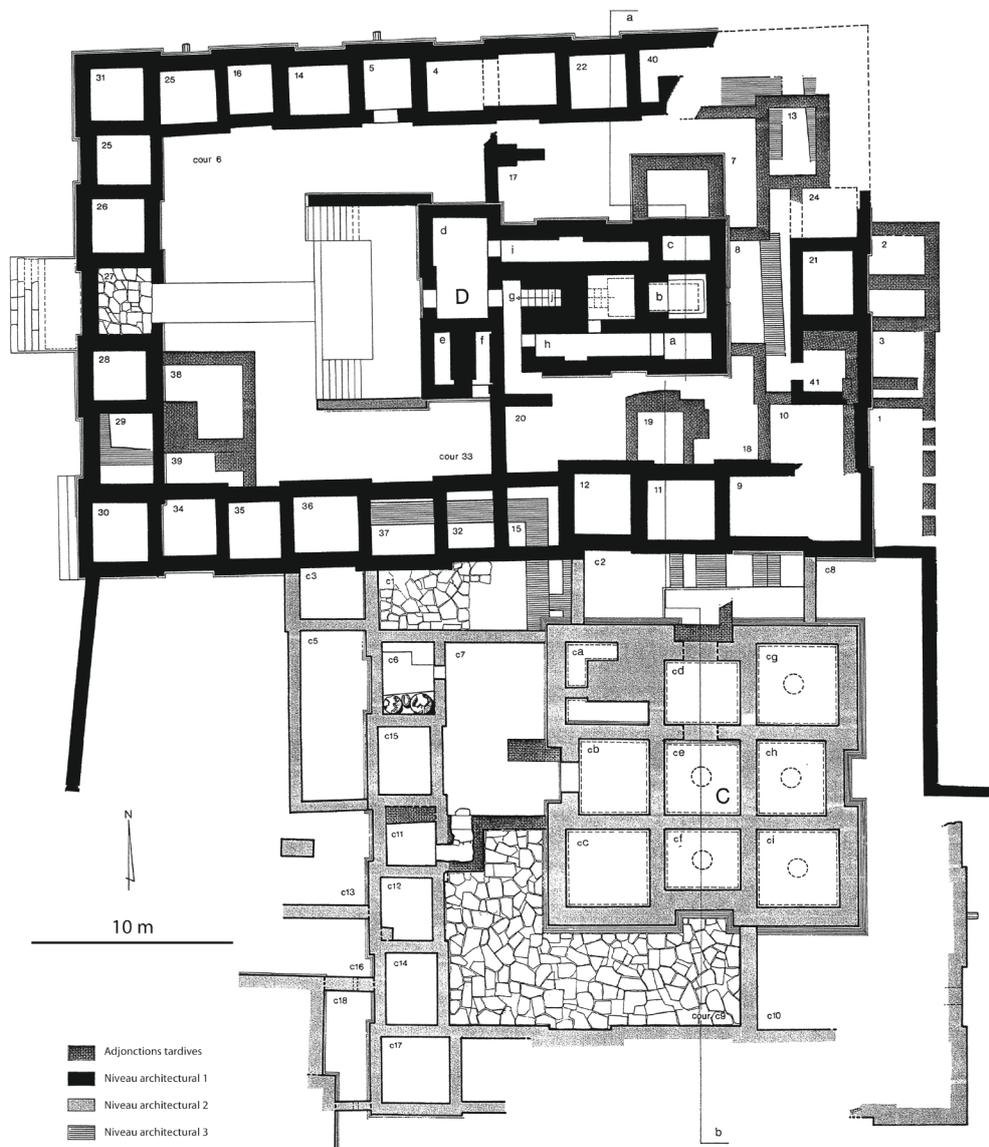


Figure 12 - Plan of monuments C and D (drawing: J. Gire).



Figure 13 - Plan of the constructions of sites E1 (drawing: J. Gire).

A fourth architectural large structure was discovered to the west of the site, in a significantly elevated position compared to the ruin field. This structure, E1 on the plan (figure 6, reference E1), forms a group of constructions similar to those revealed elsewhere; they are, however, less well-preserved due to their situation on rocky terrain, which has led to a more pronounced levelling of the walls (figure 13). Here we observe the remains of a stepped construction flanked by a staircase and, in front, a vast courtyard; to the north, abutting the edifice, were additional constructions in a compact group forming a courtyard of the usual type. To the south and the south-east, with no clear separation, other buildings surrounded three quadrangular edifices; the latter are similar to each other and to the principal monuments, but their smaller dimensions and certain irregularities undoubtedly indicate the inferior social status of their occupants.

To the north of this architectural assemblage is located a sector of commoners' houses, E2 on the plan (figure 6, reference E2). Distributed on either side of what seems to have been a narrow, sinuous street, thirty square or rectangular attached houses seem to have been left to the hazards of urban development without any obvious plan.

4.3.2 - Two religious edifices

To the east of the site, abutting structure C in the north, were buried the ruins of a construction whose general architecture is identical to that of the other edifices: a central building of 15 × 10 m surrounded by a courtyard with additional constructions forming a rectangle whose external dimension, at 39 × 26 m, constitutes a significant structure, designated “D” (figure 6, reference D, figures 14-15). However, the central building demonstrates dissymetries: the arrangement of the projections and recesses is not regular; nor is that of the internal rooms (Anfray, Annequin, 1965; Anfray, 1974). The edifice also possesses an unusual characteristic: in the west, after a vestibule, is a staircase with 14 steps (95 cm wide) which descends beneath the central part of the building. At the base of this staircase, a rectangular room (2 × 1.25 m) has a tiled geometric paved floor (the diamond-shaped tiles measure 20 cm per side). Beyond this vestibule, an opening aligned with the staircase (1.20 m high and 1.02 m wide) leads to a “vault”. An Aksumite-type cross is sculpted into the lintel. Like the whole of the structure leading to it, the vault is constructed of large, neatly-hewn blocks. The vault is 2.80 m long, 1.72 m wide and 1.70 m high. Its ceiling is made of two heavy slabs. No object was found in this vault, nor in the staircase, which was full of earth when it was discovered. Was this a funerary vault? Undoubtedly. It occupies a central position in the basement of the building, which cannot be anything other than a funerary chapel. Was it intended for the remains of an ecclesiastical dignitary or revered figure, making it a place of pilgrimage? The excavation did not continue beneath the floor of the vault, and the remains of a burial may yet be found there.



Figure 14 - In the foreground, the ruins of structures C and D (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 15 - Structure D, external wall of the funerary chapel, north facade (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

Two discoveries made in the upper level of the ruins reinforce the religious nature of the edifice: firstly, in the central building a flat ring pierced by holes for attaching candles (the remains of a chain for hanging the ring was still attached) is reminiscent of the *polycandelon* used to light Byzantine churches; secondly, in the same building, hidden in the floor of a side room was a bronze vase containing 14 Roman coins from the time of the Antonine dynasty, fitted with rings so that they could be suspended as pendants, together with Byzantine-style crosses and three chains, one of which may have been worn by a high-ranking churchman (a bishop?) (figures 16-19). Everything from the general organisation of the building to the artefacts found evokes a site dedicated to the Christian cult – most probably a chapel.



Figure 16 - Bronze vase (height: 18.8 cm) containing gold objects, late Aksumite period, 6th-7th century AD (photograph Kebbedé Bogalé).

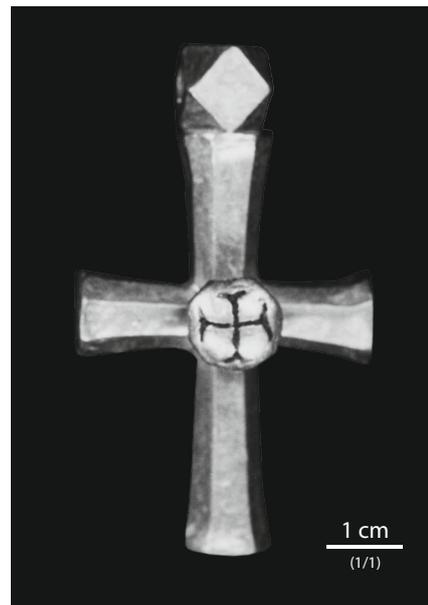


Figure 19 - Gold cross (height: 6.8 cm) of Byzantine type, in a classic model. The cross is fitted with a loop to be worn as a necklace (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

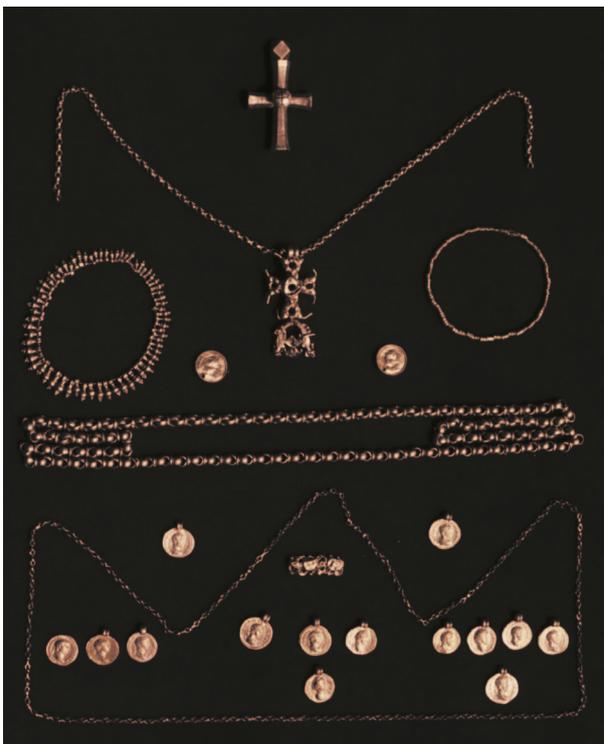


Figure 17 - This collection of gold jewellery was in the bronze vase shown in figure 16; it included small chains and a brooch from the late Aksumite period (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 18 - Gold coin with the figure of Antoninus Pius (138-161 AD). The loop indicates that this coin had been transformed into a decorative object, worn as a necklace (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 20 - Structure F, ruins of the basilica (level 2), taken from the west side (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

The remains of another sanctuary were found at the far eastern end of the ruin field, beneath the stones of a mound, and designated “F” (figure 6, reference F). This is a basilica with a classic plan, with a central nave separated from the collateral naves by two parallel rows of four pillars (the bases remain). A semi-circular apse within a square chevet is flanked by two square rooms (figure 20). The church has a rectangular plan, with a length of 22.40 m and a width of 13.50 m (figure 21). It is surrounded by the usual courtyard, delimited in this case not by additional constructions but by a boundary wall. This edifice has another unusual feature: to the east of and in line with the building a construction had been added, containing a baptistery created in line with the central nave; the basin was reached by two staircases of six steps each, symmetrically arranged (figure 22). A conduit enabled the supply of this basin with water from the exterior; it was constructed of Mediterranean amphorae with their ends removed so that they could be fitted together (figure 23). This basilica had undergone four different phases of alterations, the stages of which were revealed by the excavations. The discovery of two superimposed pavements (figure 24) separated by a layer of fill of around 30 cm thick may thus indicate that the upper pavement, of late date, was constructed over the ruins of an edifice (a church) of a prior period (although we cannot state which).



Figure 21 - Structure F, plan of the basilica and its outbuildings (drawing: J. Gire).



Figure 22 - Structure F, baptismal basin in the basilica (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 23 - Structure F, conduit made of amphorae fitted together in order to supply water to the baptismal basin (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 24 - Structure F, paving in the basilica, level 1 (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

4.3.3 - Underlying archaeological levels

The work of the archaeological expedition has only concerned the upper levels of the site. It has, however, enabled the observation in a number of places of the existence of structures some of which may date to the early 1st millennium BC. It has also enabled the discovery of stones engraved with South Arabian inscriptions reused in the walls of the upper levels and providing evidence of much earlier periods.

4.3.4 - The inscriptions

The inscriptions constitute an important aspect of the documentation of the site. Some of these date to around the 8th century BC; others date from the Aksumite period. The majority were discovered in the upper layer, being reused in the walls or among the stony debris (figure 25). These are inscriptions in South Arabian writing engraved into the stone (14 “monumental” inscriptions) or on pottery sherds (the great majority in cursive script, but many of the sherds present characters in “monumental” South Arabian script; figure 26). It is above all Ethiopian that appears in its most ancient forms, without vocalisation, and designated by the specialists as “proto-Ethiopian”, “Old Ethiopian” or “Ancient Ethiopian” (Drewes, Schneider, 1976; Schneider, 1981, 1983; Anfray, 1990; Ricci, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2003).

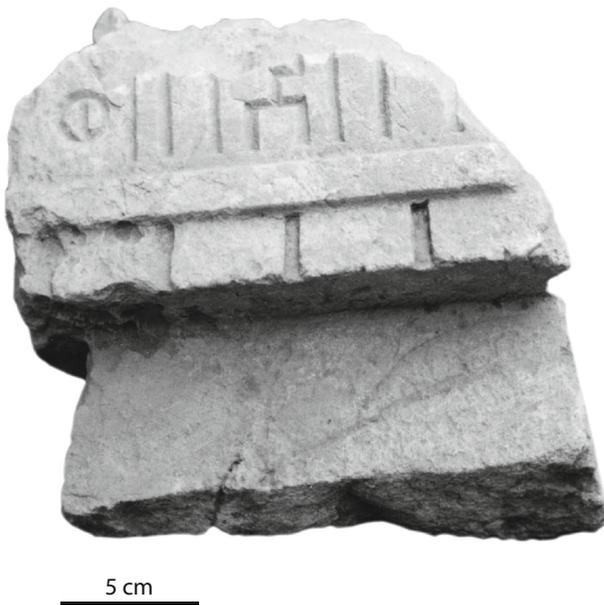
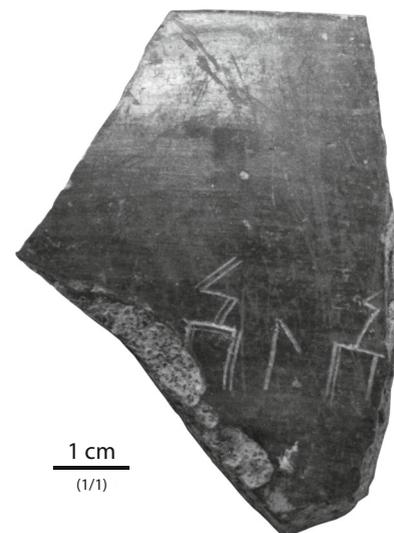


Figure 25 - Fragment of stone incense burner engraved with the remains of a south Arabian inscription, 8th century BC (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

Figure 26 - Sherd of pottery engraved with a south Arabian inscription, probably around the 7th century BC (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



The inscriptions in South Arabian script transcribe the classical Sabaean language. Some of these inscriptions seem to emanate from the Sabaeans themselves; others transcribe a distorted South Arabian which, according to the epigraphists, was written by people of local origin (Drewes, Schneider, 1991). These ancient inscriptions are almost all fragmentary, engraved on pieces of libation altars and incense burners reused in ordinary masonry during the Aksumite period. The inscribed sherds (figures 27-28) are particularly interesting (Bernand *et al.*, 1991a; Manzo, 2003a). Prior to the work carried out at Matara, very little was known of inscribed pottery sherds. None had been found at Aksum, Yeha or Adulis. At Matara, 71 have been discovered. They show that a tradition of cursive writing – for which the oldest evidence comes from this area of the high plateau – continued on the site from the start of the Pre-Aksumite period until the Aksumite period; they also enable us to follow its development. They supply elements of knowledge in regards with the origins of Ethiopian writing.



Figure 27 - Inscription in proto-Ethiopian writing (epigraphic stage A) engraved on a sherd of pottery, around the 2nd century AD (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 28 - Sherd of pottery with letters engraved in "Ancient Ethiopian", 3rd century AD (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

3 cm

To these epigraphic documents can be added two slates on which proto-Ethiopian inscriptions are found on both faces. One of the slates (figure 29) is 22 × 15 cm and the other (figures 30-31), is smaller, at 9 cm. They are of irregular shape. They were found on the ground, a few hundred metres from the site⁶. Experts are currently incapable of providing a certain translation of these texts, of which some words appear to belong to the lexicon of the Ge'ez language.

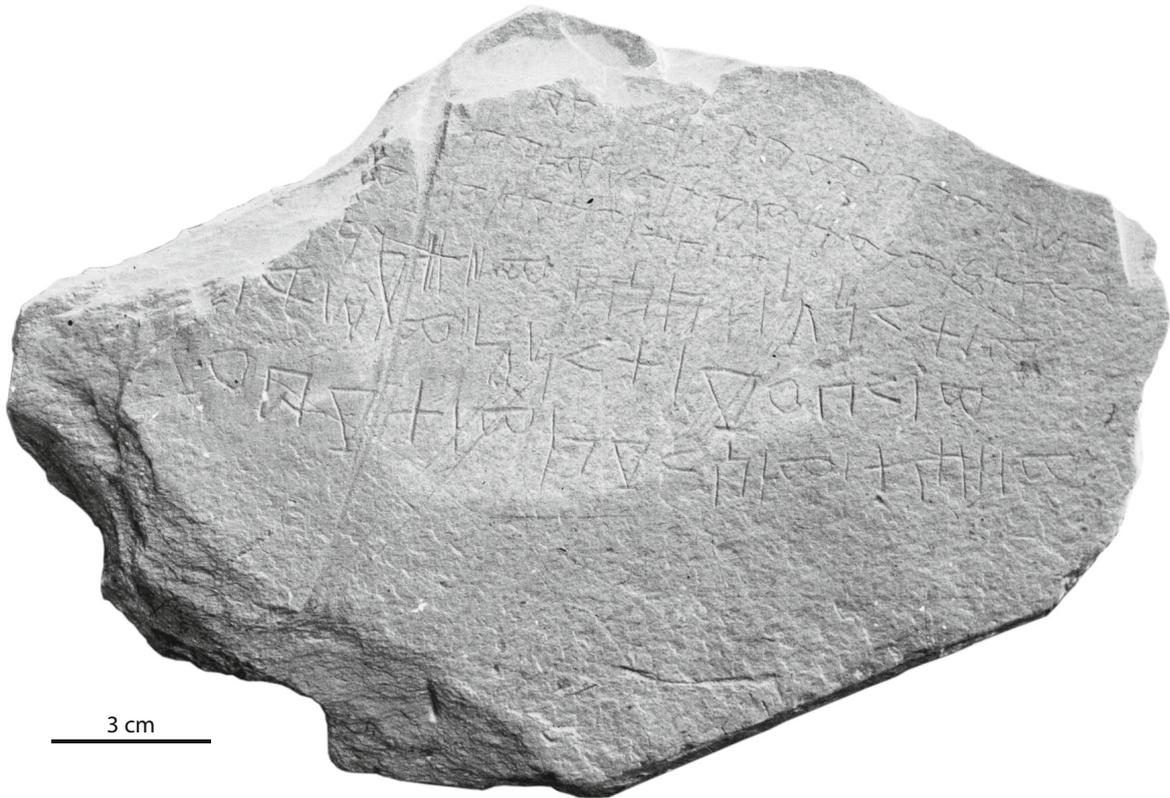


Figure 29 - One of the two examples of slates (schist plaques) found close to the site of Matara; they bear inscriptions in proto-Ethiopian writing (epigraphic stage B), 2nd century AD. (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

6. A third schist plaque was discovered at Matara, at an unknown date and published by L. Ricci (1999).



Figure 30 - Face A of the other plaque found close to the site with its inscription engraved in proto-Ethiopian writing, 2nd century AD (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 31 - Face B of the same plaque (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

4.3.5 - The tombs

On the upper part of the flank of Goual Saïm hill, 10 tombs dug into the rock have been discovered (Anfray, 1967). They strongly resemble those of Yeha in terms of form: the access shafts are of variable depths, between 2 and 4.50 m, and some of them were closed with a slab. There is one difference, however: at Yeha, the tombs have two or three chambers, while the Matara tombs have only one. Their content was not uniform. Objects from various periods were mixed together, some of Pre-Aksumite type (tulip vases, chalices; figures 32-33) and others from the Aksumite period. This observation tends to indicate that these tombs, undoubtedly dug in the early Pre-Aksumite period, were reused later by the inhabitants of the Aksumite town. One of the tombs

Figure 32 - Earthenware cup-shaped vase and pot with geometric decoration, Pre-Aksumite period. This pottery was found in a grave dug out of the rock on the hill of Goual Saïm (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

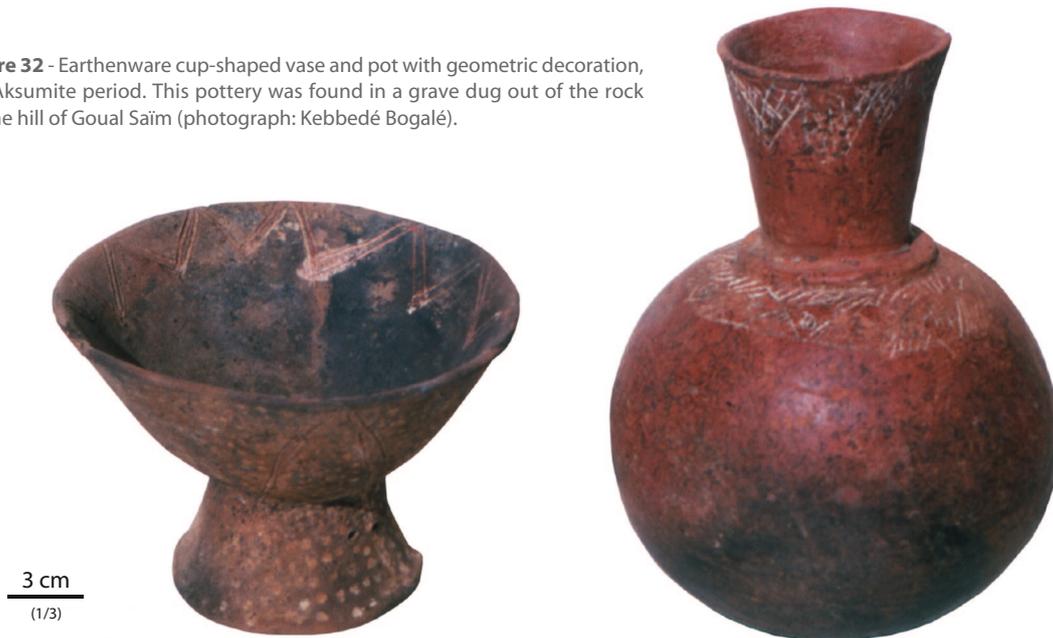


Figure 33 - Two earthenware tulip vases, Pre-Aksumite period. They were discovered in a grave at Goual Saïm (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

contained 403 white sandstone discs (102 in another sandstone), which are very common objects in the Aksumite level of the site (figure 34) and whose use remains unknown. There were also a variety of metal objects (bronze and iron), for example a knife and a pendant representing a hand and an arm. However, no coins were found, nor earthenware vases marked with the Christian cross or any of the vases so characteristic of the upper layer of the ruins. When human bones were found, they were in a very poor state of preservation.

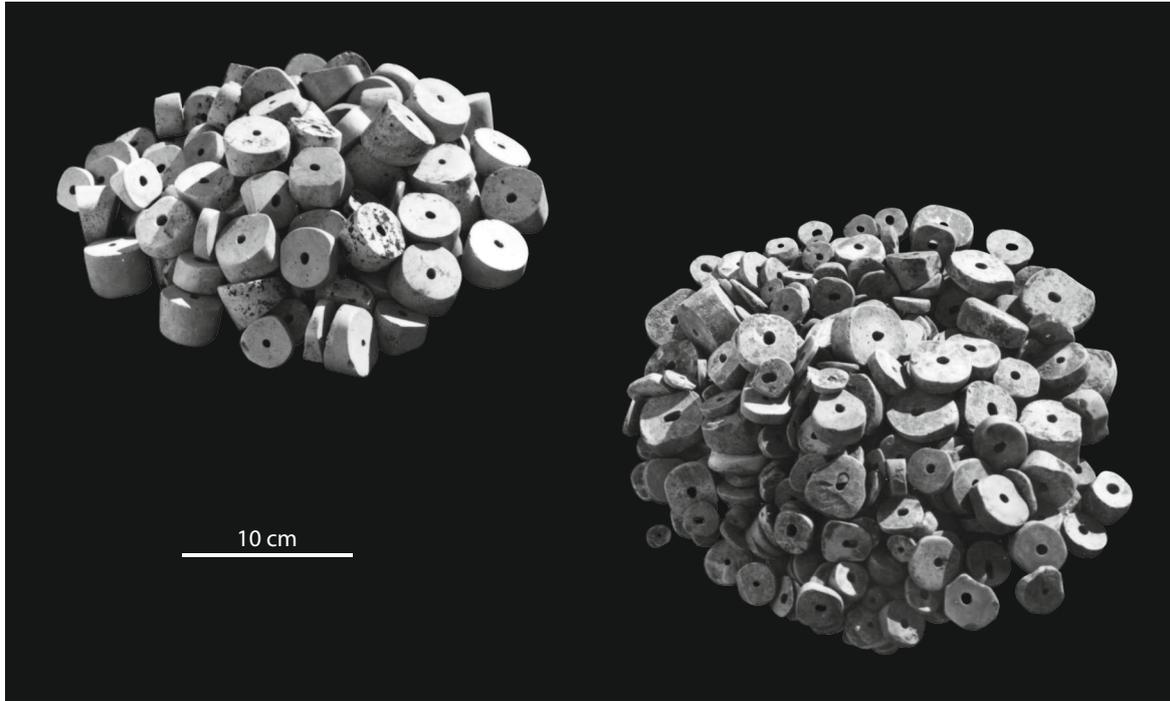


Figure 34 - White sandstone “rondelles” found in great numbers on the archaeological site, principally on the upper level, late Aksumite period. These two items were discovered in two graves at Goual Saïm (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

4.3.6 - The pottery and other artefacts

A distinctive feature of Matara is the overabundance of vases, particularly in the upper level. These are made of common pottery in black or red ware, the latter being more widespread. There is no indication that a potter’s wheel was used (figure 35). Of a variety of forms – from minuscule cups to jars 80 cm high – the containers are of several types: cooking pots, basins (figure 36), bowls, goblets, jugs, horned vases (figure 37) and vases with a central console adorned with a geometrical engraved decoration. Still more varied is the decoration – incised, relief, painted (figures 38-39), modelled or stamped – and the crosses – surrounded by various ornamentation, sometimes composed of a kind of bushy plant motif executed in relief in the bottom of terracotta bowls (figures 40-41). There is reason to believe that these representations prefigure a type of cross that has continued throughout the centuries and up to the present day in Ethiopia and Eritrea. We also find here the classical form of the Aksumite cross (four equal branches, enlarged at their ends, similar to the cross of Malta), not only represented on a great quantity of pottery, but also sculpted in stone or centrally represented on the majority of coins minted since the reign of king Ezana, in the 4th century. The fact that this cross was placed in the bottoms of vases where it was hidden from sight shows that this was not merely a simple decoration imposed by habit but rather the indication of a Christianity more deeply anchored in the minds of the inhabitants.



Figure 35 - Red earthenware bowl with the exterior surface decorated with geometric patterns and crosses. This type is representative of the pottery from the site; the sides are sometimes engraved with inscriptions (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

3 cm



Figure 36 - Earthenware bowl, Aksumite period (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

3 cm



Figure 37 - Three-horned earthenware container, probably a brazier, early Aksumite period (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

3 cm



Figure 38 - Piece of red ware jug (broken neck). Aksumite crosses (in negative) decorate the shoulder of the vase which is painted a purplish red (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

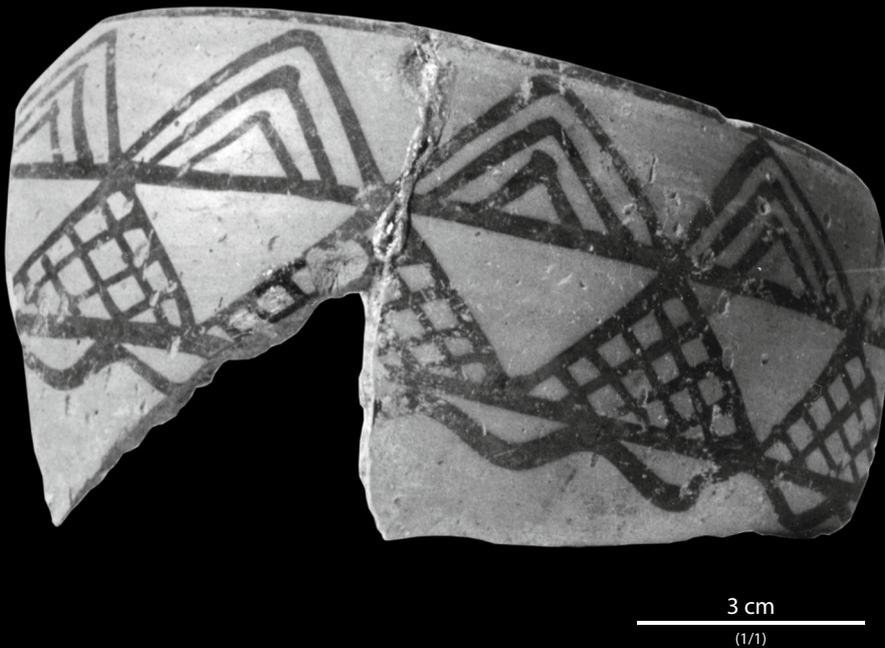


Figure 39 - Bowl with sides decorated with painted geometric patterns, late period, 6th and 7th centuries AD (photograph Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 40 - Red earthenware bowl: the bottom bears stamping reproducing the “embellished” cross motif very common at Matara, 6th and 7th centuries AD (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 41 - Relief stamped “embellished” crosses in the bottom of earthenware vases. A common motif in pottery decoration at Matara, 6th and 7th centuries, upper level of site (drawing: Y. Baudouin).

Widely distributed in the upper layer, one type of vase deserves a special mention, particularly as it does not seem to have existed on any other site: a simple vessel with a flat bottom, vertical sides and a horizontal dimple beneath the lip above parallel furrows incised in the red ware (figure 42). This type of vase possesses a further distinctive mark: the number of parallel furrows varies according to the size of the vessel; if the vase is small it has only a single furrow, but the number increases (up to four) in line with its size (Anfray, 1965, plates LVII, J.E. 2801, J.E. 3019, J.E. 2374).

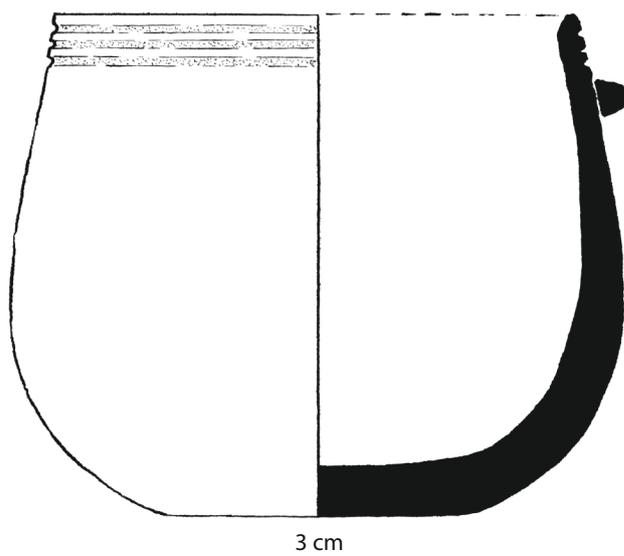


Figure 42 - Section drawing of a earthenware bowl, characteristic of the pottery of Matara, with longitudinal furrows beneath the lip and a dimple on the side. This type of bowl was popular in a variety of sizes during the late period (drawing: Y. Baudouin).

Another group of vases enables us to distinguish an immediately inferior level which is dated to the first centuries of the Aksumite period. The majority of these vases are in black ware, but examples in red colour have also been found. One vase is particularly representative of this lower level (figure 43): it is made of black earthenware with a streamlined shape, and a geometric motif is incised on the shoulder; it also bears the signs of proto-Ethiopian writing, which constitutes valuable date evidence.

Figure 43 - Black earthenware bowl engraved with geometric patterns, early Aksumite level (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



The pottery is sometimes unusual in form, such as this vase in the shape of a bird (figure 44). In addition, investigations on the site of Matara have revealed a large quantity of other objects, such as stone axes, mortars, dice (figure 45), rings (figure 46), seals (figure 47) and glass cups (figure 48). Among these objects, one category has particular importance; that of the coins bearing the effigy of the kings of Aksum (figure 49). The legends inscribed around the edges of these coins indicate their names; those of the sovereigns who ruled between the 3rd and 7th centuries AD.

The existence of a Pre-Aksumite level at Matara is indicated by the discovery, in the upper levels, of sherds relating to a type of pottery listed in the collections of other sites such as Yeha, Haoulti and Aksum, where this pottery has been the subject of systematic classification.



Figure 44 - Red ware ewer in the form of a partridge and decorated with the patterns characteristic of the late period (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 45 - Ware dice, Aksumite level (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 46 - Red sandstone ring found in E1. An animal resembling a zebu is engraved on the oval flat (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

Figure 47 - White limestone seal (length: 4.3 cm) pierced with four symmetrically placed holes between two "V" shaped patterns with points facing, Aksumite level (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

Figure 48 - Glass cup with moulded face (probably of Roman origin; height: 3.5 cm), wine coloured. It was found in structure D, in room XV, at a depth of 2.5 m (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

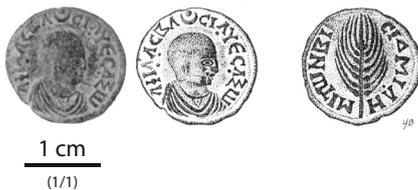


Figure 49 - Bronze coin of Aphilas (diameter: 1.6 cm), king of Aksum in the late 3rd century AD. The Greek inscription contains grammatical faults (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé; drawing: Y. Baudouin).

A test excavation was carried out to a depth of 5 m in the centre of the area studied, to the north of structure D, outside the north wall of the architectural structure (figure 50). In this test area a layer of pottery sherds was found near to a broad wall, beneath around 2 m of archaeologically sterile soil. These sherds were well fired, resistant to impacts and with horizontal handles beneath the lip: jars resembling the pottery of Es-Sober in South Arabia, not far from Aden⁷.



Figure 50 - Structure D, deep level of the site (between 4 and 5 m); numerous sherds of jars with horizontal ridges beneath the rim, early Pre-Aksumite period. The pottery is of high quality and demonstrates rare craftsmanship (photograph: Kebeddé Bogalé).

7. In October 1969, Dr. Muhammad Abdulwahed, Director of Antiquities of the People's Republic of Southern Yemen, invited me to visit the archaeological site of Es-Sober. On the hill, sherds of jars with horizontal ridges caught my attention as they appeared to me to present similarities with those of the deep level of Matara. I imagined technical and typological parallels between the two pottery types. Closer examination will one day tell us whether this impression is correct.

Among the pottery remains of the upper layer of the site were also found a category of vases originating in the Mediterranean world. These are the ribbed amphorae (figures 51-52). We have found around twenty of these, intact or almost so. Did some of them serve to transport wine or olive oil? We know from an indication in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Casson, 1989) that these products were imported to the African coast. This Greek text mentions Italy and Laodicea as regions from which they came, but many of these amphorae may have been manufactured in Egypt. Large numbers of these sherds were discovered in the ruins of Matara. Also found, but in much smaller numbers, were fragments of African sigillata ware (figure 53), including a small, nearly complete bowl. Another category, present above all on the site as sherds, is well represented by a large blue glazed vase (figure 54) originating in Sassanid Persia (probably around 7th century AD). All of this tableware must have been introduced to the high plateau through the port of Adulis.



Figure 51 - Imported Mediterranean amphora, *in situ* (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 52 - Imported Mediterranean amphora with ribbed sides. The neck has been broken, and a stone plate acts as a stopper. This amphora was buried; its final use was to hold mortal remains of an infant (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



3 cm

Figure 53 - Dish in *terra sigillata africana*, probably imported from Egypt (photograph: Kebedé Bogalé).



3 cm

Figure 54 - Blue glazed vase (height: 30 cm) undoubtedly originating in Sassanid Persia, 7th century AD (photograph: Kebedé Bogalé).

4.3.7 - Where South Arabia reappears

The discovery of an object which can be described as a “work of art” is of particular interest. This object is 41 cm high and was found, lying on its side, 1.80 m deep into a rock cavity which constituted the base of the constructions of locus 49, sector E1. The object is a bronze lamp (figure 55abc). An oblong-shaped bowl imitating a seashell rests on a base composed of a colonnade of 13 stylised palm trees; the edge of the bowl is decorated with small flames. It is topped by a motif representing a bounding ibex (its horns broken and lost during Antiquity) being attacked



Figure 55a - Bronze lamp discovered in a rock hollow, *in situ* (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 55b - Another view of the bronze lamp. The animal motif atop the bowl illustrates the theme of the sacred hunt (the dog is wearing a collar) practised in South Arabia (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).



Figure 55c - Detail of the bronze lamp: ox skull in relief on the back of the bowl (photograph: Kebbedé Bogalé).

by a hunting dog whose jaws are sunk into the hindquarters of its prey. On the back of the bowl, beneath the rear paws of the dog, an ox skull is depicted in relief (height: 5 cm). It is thought that this lamp was manufactured in South Arabia in a context with Hellenistic influences; Arabia is indicated by the ox skull and the ibex, which are symbols from its sacred bestiary, but also by the dog, which evokes the sacred hunt practised in the ancient period. The fact that in South Arabia, four other pieces of the same type have been discovered, although of smaller size and less well executed in aesthetically terms, clearly reinforces the original assumption.

4.4 - Archaeological potential for the future

One essential objective of this summary has been to highlight the archaeological resources represented by Matara. The site is vast, and it extends beyond the perimeter of the research carried out to date. We have no accurate estimate of its total area, because it appeared too difficult to evaluate while working on the site. Firstly, the uneven relief of the area prevented the execution of an accurate topographical survey. Secondly, given the nature of the land, which has been often turned and in some places levelled by the passage of oxen and iron ploughs, one can no longer distinguish the limits of the ancient site (which, in addition, must have varied between the 10th century BC and the 7th century AD). In other words, it is undoubtedly true to say that a large part of the site remains to be explored. Moreover, as we have already stated, the excavations have only concerned the upper level of Matara. We have therefore not mentioned in these pages the two fragments of sculpture found as erratics in the upper level. One depicts the profile of a head of a female statuette, the other a fragment of an ibex, and they are not without similarity to the monuments at Haoulti (Anfray, 1965, plate LXIII, figures 1-2). They suggest the existence, in a deep level of the ruins, of a temple among the remains already mentioned of an occupation dating perhaps to the 8th and 7th centuries BC. Future research on the site will provide greater understanding of this city of Antiquity, for which one historian (Kobishchanov, 1966) suggested an identification with the Coloe mentioned in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.

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Francis ANFRAY

Former director of the Mission Française
d'Archéologie en Éthiopie



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