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THE SUPERIMPOSED CEMETERIES OF TUTO FELA IN GEDEO COUNTRY (ETHIOPIA), AND THOUGHTS ON THE SITE OF CHELBA-TUTITTI

Roger JOUSSAUME

Abstract
In Gedeo Country, southern Ethiopia, the tumulus of Tuto Fela has yielded two groups of steles, some phallic and some anthropomorphic. The latter belong to a monument formed by the successive addition of the tombs of which they are the markers. The phallic steles, which could have been re-employed for this use, originate from an earlier period of the monument characterized by tombs dug into the substratum. This first period has been dated to between the 11th and the 13th centuries AD. It was possible to verify some of the hypotheses proposed for Tuto Fela through the study of the neighboring site of Chelba Tutittti, which has phallic steles only.

Keywords
Africa, Ethiopia, megalithism, phallic stele, anthropomorphic stele, Tuto Fela, Chelba Tutitti.

In southern Ethiopia, the tradition of standing stones upright probably goes back more than a thousand years (figure 1). Most peoples of this region gradually abandoned this custom when they adopted Islam or Christianity between approximately the 13th and 14th centuries. Others, however, such as the Konso and their neighbors to the south, the Gewada, or the Arsi and Hadiya on both sides of the large lakes of the Rift Valley, continued this practice until recently in association with the death of certain individuals (Joussaume, Cros, in press).

Figure 1 - Map of Ethiopia and the location of Tuto Fela.
During the last thirty years, we have studied several stele sites in southern Ethiopia, each chosen for its specific nature: Tiya in Soddo, a cemetery with steles with engraved swords, today designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Joussaume, 1995); Tuto Fela, a tumulus with steles with crossed lines; and Chelba-Tutitti, a site with many phallic steles. These two latter sites are located in Gedeo Country (figure 2). Ethnoarchaeological studies have also been made among the Konso and Gewada peoples.

Here we present only the raised stones of Gedeo country, and in particular, the tumulus of Tuto Fela, which has been published in a monography (Joussaume, 2007), and which was already the subject of studies conducted in 1925 by F. Azaïs and R. Chambard (1931), and in 1935 by the Frobenius mission under the direction of A. E. Jensen (1936).

1 - The tumulus of Tuto Fela

The tumulus of Tuto Fela, located at 2000 m altitude on the eastern border of the Rift Valley, is more or less oval shaped and approximately 40 m long and 20 m wide, with a maximum thickness of 1.5 to 2 m. It is situated on a slight north-east / south-west incline (figures 3-4) and is composed
of numerous rhyolitic stones buried in the vegetation with a few emerging raised stones that are sometimes decorated with an engraved face above superimposed crossed lines. Most of the steles were in fact broken. Seventeen of the most representative ones were collected by the Frobenius mission and transported to Frankfurt, Germany, where they remain today (Joussaume, 2007).

The excavation of a surface of 150 m$^2$ of the approximately 800 m$^2$ occupied by the tumulus was realized during five sessions between 1993 and 1997. The excavation team was composed of around twenty persons, including two anthropologists (C. Bouville and J.-P. Cros), one pottery specialist (S. Barbier), one topographer (R. Bernard) and three archaeologists (B. Poisblaud, B. Poissonnier and R. Joussaume), with help from representatives of the Ethiopian administration and local workers. The complementary studies were realized in the following years at the National Museum of Addis Abeba.

Figure 3 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela before its excavation (photograph: R. Joussaume).

Figure 4 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela after its excavation (photograph: R. Joussaume).
The monument was formed by the lateral and vertical amalgamation of small, juxtaposed stone tumuli that protected the bodies of one to four adults, which were more or less stacked up in a contracted flexed position. These bodies sometimes appear to have been tied up or even possibly placed in a sack. They were successively deposited in the tombs, which were thus sometimes reopened several times. It therefore appears that there was a space arranged in the pile of stones, with a corbelled cover or enclosure of branches, to receive the corpses.

The deceased were accompanied by grave goods, including several stereotypical ceramic vases with a rounded bottom and a neck. These vases were often decorated with dots or lines on the upper part (figure 5). There are very clear differences between the forms and decoration of these pottery items (figures 6-7) and those of the site of Tiya in the Soddo region, which is another cemetery, this one with steles with swords, that we have also studied (Joussaume, 1995), and which appears to be contemporary with the Tuto Fela tumulus (12th-14th century). It thus appears that these two sites are associated with two different populations with different funerary customs. At Tiya, the bodies were deposited in more or less deep cylindrical pits located toward the back of the decorated stele that indicates the merit of the person who is buried there, and who was sometimes joined by his wife (?) in the tomb. Here, children were usually not buried with the adults.

Among the other remains recovered around the Tuto Fela tombs are a few small multicolored glass beads, spiral copper alloy rings, iron bracelets, a few fragments of polished stone axes and numerous obsidian artifacts (segments, trapezes, scrapers and flakes), whose direct association with the burials cannot be confirmed, though it is probable. Moreover, we find this same assemblage of obsidian tools, especially segments and trapezes, in association with the phallic steles of the site of Chelba-Tutitti, located a few kilometers to the south-west of Tuto Fela.

Probably more than a thousand bodies were deposited in this tumulus. They were mainly adults, but the comparatively small surface area studied prevents us from knowing if children were excluded from this vast group of tombs, or if they were placed in another part of the cemetery: because our excavations were limited to the central part of the monument, we do not know if our observations apply to the entire site. There could have been social distinctions in the distribution of bodies, with some sectors reserved for a particular type of person. These are the types of questions that remain to be answered.
Figure 6 - Tumulus de Tuto Fela, poteries (drawing: S. Barbier, INRAP).
Figure 7 - Tumulus de Tuto Fela, poteries (drawing: S. Barbier, INRAP).
2 - The steles

Several tombs located in their own small tumulus were indicated by a stele, but this was not generally the case, either because the stele has disappeared, or because there never was one. Not all the burials had the right to a stele, so to say, but we were not able to identify the required criteria for having one (figure 8). Due to the development itself of the tumulus by horizontal and vertical accretion, the steles located lowest on the slope have sometimes been completely buried under a mass of stones (figure 9). It is therefore impossible to know the exact number of steles that were erected here.

Figure 8 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, standing stones (photograph: R. Joussaume).

Figure 9 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, section. The presence of steles at different levels indicates that the tumulus grew through vertical and horizontal accretion (photograph: R. Joussaume).
Some steles are nearly 2.50 m high. Many others are smaller, between 1.50 and 2.10 m, and some are very small, only 0.70 m high.

Our inventory of stele fragments and whole steles visible on the surface confirms the presence of 320 steles, in addition to the 17 specimens kept in Frankfurt. Two hundred and thirty were plotted on map with the location where we found them (figure 10). A brief description sheet accompanied by a photograph and a number corresponding to that on the plan was given to each of the 337 steles or fragments, which obviously constituted only part of the total group that was associated with the tumulus. This file was recorded on a CD-rom and deposited at the Heritage Service of the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture (ARCCH) in 2003.

**Figure 10** - Tumulus de Tuto Fela, plan of the locations of the steles (mapping: R. Bernard).
The steles were typologically classified as follows:
- the phallic steles, which are cylindrical with a hemispherical top delimited by a groove or ring (figure 11). They appear to have been collected from a deconsecrated site and then re-used in the tumulus. Others belong to the lower cemetery that we will discuss below. The height of some was greater than that of the tumulus and thus showed above its surface:
- the steles with engraved crossed lines, which can be subdivided into three sub-groups:
  • those with simple crossed lines and no phallic features or faces. A central, vertical groove cuts through the center of two or three superimposed sets of crossed lines (figure 12).
  • those with crossed lines and phallic features. These steles were made from a phallic stele with a groove or ridge (figures 13-14). They have no face.
  • those with crossed lines and a face. Some have phallic features and some do not. These are anthropomorphic steles sometimes made from an ancient reworked phallic stele (figures 15-18). These are the most numerous steles.

Among the reused steles, there are several phallic ones reworked with the head on the bottom, as well as one phallic stele transformed into a stele with crossed lines and a face, onto which a guebeta game was added between two periods of use as a standing stone. For the game to be playable, the stele had to be laid down (figure 19). A certain amount of time thus passed between the two periods of use of the stele.

On a few of the steles at Tuto Fela there is also a typical radiating decoration, obtained starting from a cupule on the phallic steles at Sidamo. Finally, a few of the steles of the tumulus are slabs of unworked stone placed in an upright position.

It is interesting to note that the oldest phallic steles were shaped by heavy pecking (figure 20), while the anthropomorphic steles with faces were shaped using a metal adze (figure 21).
Figure 12 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, non phallic stele with superimposed crossed lines and no face (drawing: R. Joussaume).

Figure 13 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, phallic stele with crossed lines (photograph: R. Joussaume).

Figure 14 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, phallic stele with crossed lines (photograph: R. Joussaume).
Figure 15 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, phallic and anthropomorphic stele with three superimposed crossed lines (drawing: R. Joussaume).

Figure 16 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, phallic and anthropomorphic stele. This is one of the highest steles of the site (photograph: R. Joussaume).

Figure 17 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, phallic stele with crossed lines and a face (photograph: R. Joussaume).
Figure 18 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela; a, b and c: faces represented on three phallic steles with crossed lines; d: face represented on a non phallic stele with crossed lines (see also figure 22) (photographs: R. Joussaume).
Figure 19 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, phallic stele knocked down. A *guebeta* game was engraved on the shaft of the stele while it was lying on the ground. The stele was then stood up again and a face was engraved on a side that had been shaped with an adze. The face is composed of two eyes and a nose above two sets of superimposed crossed lines that may represent the ribs of the individual (drawing: R. Joussaume).

Figure 20 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, close-up of the "heavy pecking" used to shape phallic steles (photograph: R. Joussaume).

Figure 21 - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, traces characteristic of the shaping of anthropomorphic steles with an adze (photograph: R. Joussaume).
3 - The humans of the tumulus

The data presented below result from the anthropological studies of C. Bouville and J.-P. Cros.

In the cairn that supported the anthropomorphic steles and the reused steles, 54 burials (figure 22a) were studied. They represent at least 86 individuals. Single burials are the most numerous (63 %), followed by double burials (20 %; figure 22b), triple burials (11 %) and quadruple burials (6 %). This shows that many individuals were deposited in multiple burials (figures 23a-b).

Due to time constraints, we could not excavate the entire surface of the Tuto Fela tumulus, which contains at least a thousand burials. We thus decided to concentrate on a specific sector and to study its entire depth, thus forgoing demographic analyses.

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**Figure 22** - Tumulus of Tuto Fela, a: two skeletons deposited at the base of an anthropomorphic stele; b: close-up (photographs: B. Poisblaud, INRAP).

**Figure 23** - Tumulus of Tuto Fela (study: J.-P. Cros).
There is relatively little data pertaining to the physical anthropology of the subjects studied due to the poor preservation of bone remains. The stature of 24 subjects was evaluated based on the length of long bones using the Manouvrier table corrected by G. Olivier, indicating 16 men, 6 women and 2 undetermined individuals. The height of both sexes varies from 1.74 m to 1.52 m, with an average of 1.64 m for the men and 1.63 m for the women. This slight difference, which is unusual between men and women, is probably due to the small size of our sample. At Tiya, the men attain 1.68 m and the women 1.59 m, which is a more common difference.

Based on cranial data, the physical anthropologists concluded that “the skull of Tuto Fela is much longer and wider, as well as being lower with a slightly lower face than that of Tiya. Morphologically, we observe a strong inter-orbital separation [...]. A main feature thus becomes evident: the two populations differ in that the Tiya specimens are generally more gracile than the Tuto Fela specimens, while these latter are more similar to those of the Somalis and Oromos” (Joussaume, 2007: 146-147). This is not surprising given the historic and linguistic elements available for these two regions.

4 - The lower cemetery

The first tombs of the cemetery were placed in small depressions in the ground and then covered with stones. Others were then put on top of these. We were nonetheless surprised to observe that on the ground of the excavated area, two unmodified phallic steles, one of which was decorated with the radiating motif typical of this type of stele, were placed vertically in the opening of a cylindrical pit filled with stones to maintain the steles upright (figure 24). We deduced from these that the primary role of phallic steles was to mark the tombs of certain individuals. Other pits dug into the ground nearby were closed by slabs of horizontal stones or wood planks that had become black with age. There was thus another cemetery located in the ground itself (figure 25).
It consisted of cylindrical pits of varying depths, each of which led to a lateral, sloping cell (a “sock-shaped” tomb), at the bottom of which the flexed body of an individual was placed (figure 26). The few tombs of this type that were excavated contained only one skeleton, but this observation cannot be generalized. Once the body was deposited in its cell with no accompanying objects, we can imagine that the cell was closed with a wooden partition that protected it from the stones used to fill the pit. The skeletons were indeed surrounded by fine sediments that probably resulted from an infiltration that gradually filled the empty space above the body. Due to their very poor state of preservation, it was not possible to obtain \(^{14}\text{C}\) dates from the bones, and no archaeological artifacts were recovered from near the bodies or in the pits. Only one date obtained from a wooden plank covering one of the pits, between 1050 and 1280 AD (Gif-10725: 850 ± 40), indicates that the cemetery was used sometime during the 11\(^{th}\) to 13\(^{th}\) centuries, obviously earlier than the construction of the tumulus with anthropomorphic steles.

Figure 25 - Tuto Fela, schematic representation of the superposition of the two cemeteries (drawing: R. Joussaume).
5 - Chelba-Tutitti: an example of a site with phallic steles

It was necessary to verify our hypothesis of tombs in pits marked with phallic steles by looking at a site with phallic steles that had not been contaminated by more recent steles. We chose to study the site of Chelba-Tutitti, located approximately ten kilometers away. According to divergent estimations, this site could have contained between 1,300 and 1,700 standing stones (figure 27). The largest one, on the ground, was 11 m long (figures 28a-b).

The first test pits made in 2009 yielded very curious results since none of the stones among the fifty studied was associated with a tomb in a pit similar to those of the Tuto Fela cemetery. We were thus forced to acknowledge that at Chelba-Tutitti, the phallic steles must have had a different function.

This is when we remembered the excavation conducted in 1925 by F. Azaïs and R. Chambard (1931) at Waheno, in Sidama Country, north of Gedeo. This was a long earth tumulus covered with phallic steles over a surface well beyond the perimeter of the mound. Under the earth composing this mound, the explorers discovered a pit dug into the lateritic soil; this pit contained a few very poorly preserved bones, along with a few pot sherds, a “beautiful” whole polished axe and many obsidian objects. At the northern extremity of Chelba-Tutitti, however, a mound hidden under coffee bushes was covered with truncated steles whose in situ bases appeared on the surface.
Figure 27 - Site of Chelba-Tutitti, plan of the whole group of phallic steles (recorded: R. Bernard).
Figure 28 - Site of Chelba-Tutitti, standing phallic steles (photograph: R. Joussaume).
The excavation of this entire tumulus, around twenty meters long, allowed us to uncover around one hundred steles (figure 29), one of which, painted with vertical and horizontal bands, was installed at the extremity of a pit dug into the ground (figure 30). Unfortunately, only a few traces of what could have been a skeleton remained in this pit. Two fragments of polished stone axes, a few obsidian objects, including one segment, and a large decorated pottery fragment were recovered in the sediment that filled this pit, which was more than 50 cm deep. As at Waheno, this could be the burial of an important person. This tomb would have been worshipped through time with an occasional installation of new steles. Indeed, we observed that the size of the standing stones increases toward the south, which seems to be the direction of the development of this particular site, which constitutes the largest group of standing stones known in Africa. What remains in the collective memory of this first event? It is very difficult to say, though we can note that while our excavations incited no particular manifestation on the part of the local population in 2009, the chief of the clan came in full dress with his assistants in 2010, on the first day of our intervention, to perform a small ceremony on the tumulus to ensure that the spirits would accept our presence.

6 - Conclusion

Our studies have contributed new information on the stele sites of Sidamo. Two periods of use of the steles were identified:
- The oldest period is associated with phallic steles, which are more or less numerous and have multiple functions. They mark the individual tombs of specific persons who could have been, for example, the founder of the clan whose tomb is worshipped over the long term, or which served as a territorial marker, as we have shown for an occupation site in the Wolayta region at Ofa Sere (which we did not discuss here). These phallic steles occupy a vast territory centered in the Gedeo, Sidama and Wolayta regions, and the earliest ones could date to the 10th or 11th century AD.
- The latest period is associated with anthropomorphic steles with crossed lines that mark tombs contained within a stone tumulus, which increases in size over time. They belong to a human group whose territory is much smaller, covering part of the Gedeo region. This group succeeded those who erected the phallic steles and often re-used the steles of their predecessors. Though they modified these steles, they usually maintained their phallic nature. This symbol of power, associated with fertility, is still used by modern Gedeo, Borana and Konso groups in the form of the Elesha, a metallic phallus worn by worthy persons on their forehead.

Over the past thirty years, we have devoted fifteen years of fieldwork and laboratory analyses to the subject of standing stones in southern Ethiopia. And a lot remains to be done! While we are certain that no one will again dare to suggest that these peoples, who erected the earliest of these standing stones barely one thousand years ago, are the ancestors of the Egyptians (on this subject, see the film by P. Cazes, La route des millions d’années, shown on Arte in 1998), we have above all realized that a long road must still be travelled in order to obtain a deeper understanding of these steles and their authors. To achieve this goal, we must first make efforts to ensure that they are not destroyed (or sold), as we have witnessed time and again over the past years.
Figure 29 - Site of Chelba-Tutitti, phallic steles uncovered under the mound (photograph: R. Joussaume).

Figure 30 - Site of Chelba-Tutitti, pit located under the mound and its painted stele (photograph: R. Joussaume).
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