Afr Archaeol Rev (2016) 33:61–74
DOI 10.1007/s10437-016-9214-2

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Shay Culture of Ethiopia (Tenth to Fourteenth Century AD): "Pagans" in the Time of Christians and Muslims

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Published online: 9 March 2016

Abstract A new medieval culture called the "Shay culture" has recently been described in Ethiopia: it is characterised by hypogean and megalithic funerary structures, collective burial practices and a highly distinctive material culture including funerary potteries. These characteristics indisputably define a "Pagan" culture, in a region and at a time (tenth to fourteenth century AD) where Pagans could only face the expansion of Christianity and the development of neighbouring Muslim polities. While documenting some aspects of this cultural entity on archaeological grounds, this article re-envisions the Ethiopian Pagans no longer as "pre-Christians" and/or "pre-Muslims" but as historical competitors with, and economic partners of, their neighbours.

Résumé Une nouvelle culture médiévale, appelée « Shay » a récemment été décrite en Ethiopie; elle est caractérisée par des structures funéraires hypogées et mégalithiques, des pratiques d'ensevelissement collectif et une culture matérielle hautement reconnaissable, notamment la poterie funéraire. Ces caractères définissent indiscutablement une culture « païenne », dans une région et à une époque (les Xe-XIVe s. AD) où ces Païens firent face à l'expansion du christianisme et au développement de formations politiques islamiques. Tout en documentant certains aspects de cette culture sous le jour de l'archéologie, cet article invite à ré-envisager ces Païens éthiopiens non plus seulement comme des « pré- » chrétiens ou des « pré- » musulmans, mais comme des acteurs en compétition historique et en partenariat économique avec leurs voisins.

Keywords Ethiopia · Middles Ages · Funerary structures · Megalithism · Christianity · Islam

Archaeological time period: Middle Ages

Country and region discussed: Ethiopia

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Introduction

A new Ethiopian medieval culture called the "Shay culture" has recently been described by the authors (Fauvelle-Aymar and Poissonnier 2012). It is characterised by collective funeral structures: tumuli, dolmens and hypogea, which, together with the burial practices and material culture displayed in these, indisputably define a "Pagan" culture, if by Pagan, non-Christian, non-Muslim and non-Jewish societies are meant. We acknowledge that the word Pagan carries derogatory meanings, because it is a subjective and relative term used in some historical contexts to designate unwanted cults. But it seems to us acceptable to use the word Pagan in this context. "Animist" would not be

more acceptable because it bears a heavily colonial bias towards indigenous religions; "Polytheistic" or "non-Monotheistic" seems unfit because not all Ethiopian indigenous religions can be labelled polytheistic (e.g., the traditional Oromo religion). What we know for sure about these cults is that they found themselves precisely challenged by Muslim and Christian religions to the effect that they came to be considered Pagan.

Not only does this discovery fill a historical gap in Ethiopian history between the end of the Aksumite civilisation of late antiquity and the post-thirteenth-century Christian kingdom, it also fills an "empty region" in the centre of the Ethiopian highlands, where Pagans were to face the expansion of Christianity and the development of neighbouring Muslim polities. Thus, a Pagan society, though almost completely obscured in contemporaneous written sources, can now be documented as a highly homogeneous cultural entity. This is an invitation to re-envision Pagan societies not simply as pre-Christian and/or pre-Muslim but rather as historical competitors with, and economic partners of, their Christian and Muslim neighbours. This view of such societies in terms of synchronism and interactions with other historical societies has strong heuristic potential in Ethiopia and elsewhere.

The Ethiopian Middle Ages: the Challenge of Political and Religious Diversity

Ethiopia is well known for its famous ancient civilisation of Aksum (ca. second to seventh century AD), once a major actor in the trade networks between the eastern Mediterranean and the western Indian Ocean (Munro-Hay 1991; Phillipson 2012). At urban sites, such as Adulis and Matara (both in modern Eritrea) (see, most recently, Anfray 2012), and Aksum itself (in modern northern Ethiopia) (Phillipson 2000), the eponymous capital of the Aksumite kingdom, monumental architecture including elite residences and gigantic monolithic stelae (see, most recently, Poissonnier 2012), and stone inscriptions in several languages and scripts, are but snapshots of this brilliant civilization. It is not precisely known how and when Aksum collapsed as a political power, but it is assumed that this had to do with the sudden rise of Islam as a new religious, political and economic power in the Red Sea region by the mid-seventh century. In any case, following this event, Abyssinian (i.e., Eritrean and Ethiopian highland) Christians found themselves deprived of their former privileged access to the main economic networks of the region, and it is thus no surprise that they almost entirely faded away in the later records. However, it is indisputable that some Christian and political institutions did survive through the centuries, since a Christian monarchy re-emerged in the late thirteenth century together with henceforth abundant written documents in Ge'ez (the language of ancient Aksum as well as the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Church) (Tamrat 1972; Derat 2003). The so-called Solomonic dynasty which then held power from 1270 to 1974 did its best to produce an ideological apparatus asserting its legitimacy as the true successor of the ancient Hebrew kings and the Aksumite dynasts. Such a historical narrative not only produced the side effect of obliterating their Christian predecessors, the Zagwe kings, from written records, with the result that we know little more than a few names and places associated with them (Derat 2006, 2010), and the remarkable but isolated rock-hewn complex of Lalibela (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2010; Bosc-Tiessé et al. 2014). It also contributed to masking the political diversity that existed in the previous period (Fauvelle-Aymar and Poissonnier 2012, pp. 13–31; Fauvelle-Aymar 2013b) (Fig. 1). Thus, it is no surprise that it took time for modern historians to challenge this *continuist* and *linear* view of Ethiopian history. It is indeed only very recently that it has become possible, based on archaeological surveys, architectural study and re-examination of the literature, to "rediscover" and document the presence of medieval urban Muslim communities symbiotically linked to the Christian kingdom (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2010, 2011), part of the documentary and material record of the Zagwe period (Bosc-Tiessé 2010; Derat 2010) as well as the diversity and historicity of Christian remains, both early (Phillipson 2009) and late medieval (Derat and Jouquand 2012).

If "Paganism" here means all indigenous religions (remembering that Paganism is not a religion in itself), then "Pagans" are not entirely absent from the historical records of Ethiopia. Many Christian sources do actually depict Pagans in the process of being defeated and/or evangelised, though always providing stereotyped descriptions. Pagans are thus seen only through the lens of later and hagiographic accounts, which emphasise the miraculous achievements of Christian holy men fighting evil spirits with the help of angels. On the other side, archaeologists have previously documented medieval funerary sites in South Ethiopia (Joussaume 1995,

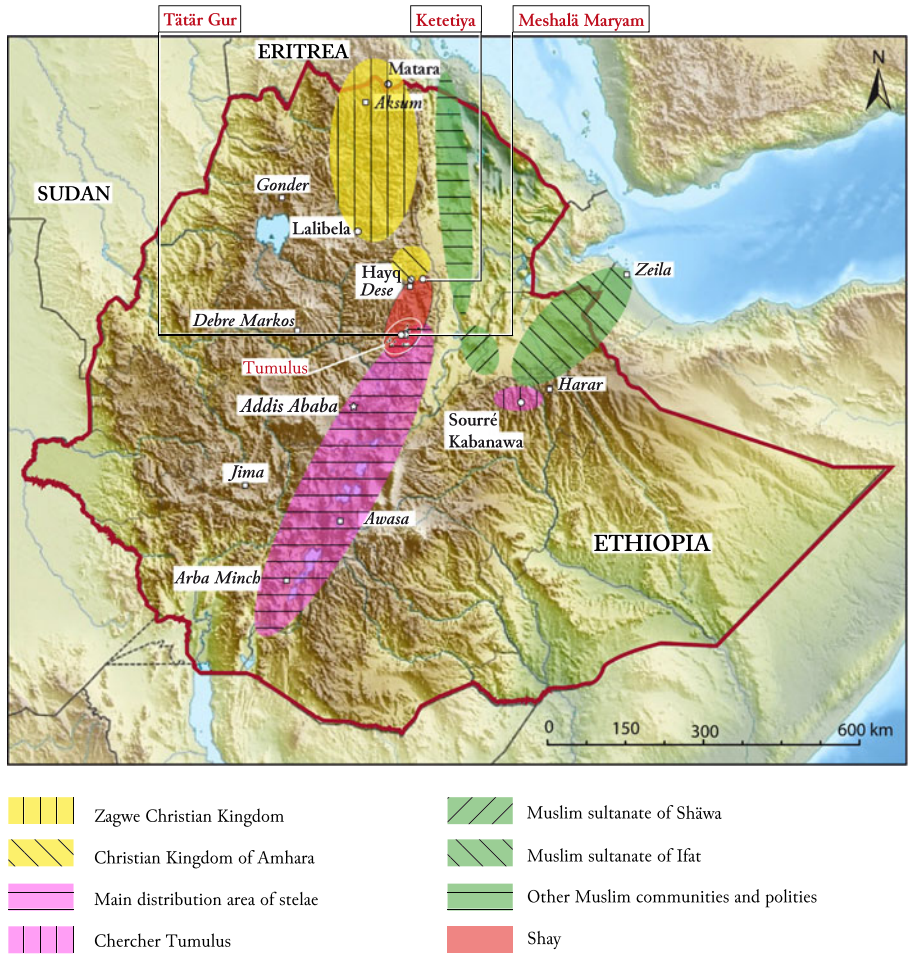


Fig. 1 Political and cultural map of Ethiopia, tenth to thirteenth century, with the distribution area of Shay sites (B. Poissonnier). No archaeological or historical evidence supports such precise delineations on the map, which are thus only suggestive. Image in full colour online

2007, 2012) that can only be attributed to Pagans in that they display phallic or anthropomorphic stelae associated with graves, which are perfectly coeval with Christian and Muslim polities known from the written sources. But the fact is that nothing allows us either to reassess the written accounts in the light of archaeological data, or to question archaeological data in the light of written accounts. They are simply not coextensive. The story differs with regard to the Shay culture because its very remains allow us to grasp something of the Christians and Muslims, thus making it possible to reconnect the separate histories.

The Shay Culture: an Overview

Consisting mainly of hypogean or megalithic funerary structures, the Shay culture is now documented by about a hundred sites (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2007–2008). Attention was first called to these sites by Francis Anfray (1983), but it was not until the late 1990s that archaeological investigations began (Hirsch and Poissonnier 2000; Fauvelle-Aymar and Poissonnier 2012). The distribution area covers the eastern part of the province of Shäwa and south-east Wällo, i.e., the eastern fringe of the central plateau of Ethiopia (Fig. 1). All known monuments and sites are found at an altitude of 2,600 to 3,200 m, in topographic situations where they sometimes overlook deeply incised rivers, such as the Shay (whose name was given to the culture), belonging to the uppermost and easternmost reaches of the Blue Nile catchment. At any rate, the spatial distribution of the Shay culture as it is known today is certainly at least partly biased by survey strategy, which is strongly influenced by the accessibility of the region.

Currently, the Shay culture can only be described by its funerary aspect *sensu lato* (monuments, funerary practices, and funerary ceramics and ornaments). It

should be added here that, in many instances, the tumuli are considered by the local people to be former buildings (not graves), somehow related to gigantic and semi-legendary Christians or Muslims.

Typologically, most monuments are tumuli, including a few dolmens (megalithic passage graves) *stricto sensu*, with only a few hypogea and stelae. Morphologically, the tumuli are circular mounds of 10 to 25 m in diameter, with a height generally not exceeding 5 to 6 m. In some instances, where the monument had been laterally encroached, it is possible to see the outer stone facing. All tumuli are still more or less covered with large blocks of the local raw material, most often basalt. The tops of the monuments most of the time display a sort of crater which indicates either the collapse of the internal chamber's roof or dismantling of the stone pile and destruction of the roof. In such cases, it is possible to see vestiges of the columnar basalt slabs initially arranged to cover and conceal the funerary chamber.

All these technological and taphonomical traits are insufficient evidence of a new archaeological "culture." However, ample evidence is provided by the ceramics, which present a high level of homogeneity in terms of both techniques, forms and decorations. The Shay ceramic is handmade, often decorated, with the coexistence of two types: burnished carinated forms, from dark grey to black in colour, with engraved patterns or small bumps, and lighter rounder forms, with patterns that are often impressed, sometimes in relief and sometimes painted in white. Six main categories define the ceramic assemblage of this culture: "flying saucer" shaped (closed ultra-carinated containers, with round bottom and tubular neck), carinated bottles, globular bottles, jugs, "*cruchons*" (small jugs) and several rare open forms (bowls, basins, plates) (Fig. 6).

In terms of chronology, only four radiocarbon dates have been obtained from two sites (Table 1), which suggest the development of the Shay culture from at least the ninth until the fourteenth century AD, in a space and time when it could only sense a Christian and Muslim presence around it. Considering indeed that, in the fourteenth century, the Shäwa region became a zone of warlike rivalry between Christian and Muslim polities, there is no doubt that the Pagans had in previous centuries found themselves in an intensifying context of religious conversion, economic exchange and political competition.

Hypogeum *Versus* Tumulus

The results of two archaeological investigations are presented here to show the dichotomy between two types of graves: built and underground.

Ketetiya (Wällo Region)

The site of Ketetiya was fortuitously discovered by the inhabitants of this village of South Wällo; it has since been the object of several archaeological campaigns, but the practical conditions of the interventions have prevented documenting the site as it deserves. The site has four hypogeum chambers accessible from the current ground level by two vertical access shafts (Fig. 2). These chambers have yielded dozens of ceramic pots as well as human bones, largely disturbed by the discoverers, though clearly testifying to their funerary nature. One of the chambers (Tomb D on the layout), still undisturbed at the time of the first archaeological intervention, yielded human bones in anatomic connection though the posture of the body was not observed. This was found above an underlying level containing numerous pots (for an exposé of the conditions of the archaeological interventions made by the authors and others, see Fauvelle-Aymar and Poissonnier 2012, pp. 131–135). A very limited excavation (0.60 × 0.60 m) was conducted by the present authors inside the lower level, to the bottom of the structure. It allowed the observation of typical Shay pottery containing a little ashy sediment, which yielded rare unidentified small burnt bone fragments and a few human teeth which may have filtered down from upper layers. Two radiocarbon dates on charcoals found in two different pots from the lower level indicate that this grave was in use from the end of the twelfth century AD at the earliest, to the fourteenth century AD. Interestingly, one of these pots (the one containing the sediment dated to the twelfth–thirteenth century) shows a fascinating decoration made of a thrice-forked cross repeated three times around the belly (Fig. 3). The repetition of this pattern makes it likely evidence of a Christian veneer in a cultural atmosphere that was still Pagan.

Meshalä Maryam (Shäwa Region)

Around 20 tumulus-like monuments were identified on the site of Meshalä Maryam, known as having been an important site of the Christian kingdom during the fifteenth century (Hirsch and Poissonnier 2000; Derat and

Table 1 Radiocarbon dates for sites of the Shay Culture

Site	Lab code	Material	Uncalibrated BP	Cal AD (2 sigmas)[a]
Tätär Gur	Ly-10194	Charcoal	1190 ± 30	720–944
Tätär Gur	Ly-10237	Charcoal	1,075 ± 30	895–1020
Ketetiya	Beta-252711	Charcoal	800 ± 40	1170–1280
Ketetiya	Beta-252712	Charcoal	560 ± 40	1300–1370
				1380–1430

[a] OxCal v. 4.1.7 (calibration curve IntCal 04)

Jouquand 2012). One of these monuments, Tumulus 2, has the aspect of a stone heap with a crater at its summit that suggests an initially corbelled roof above a circular chamber. This chamber had been plundered before the

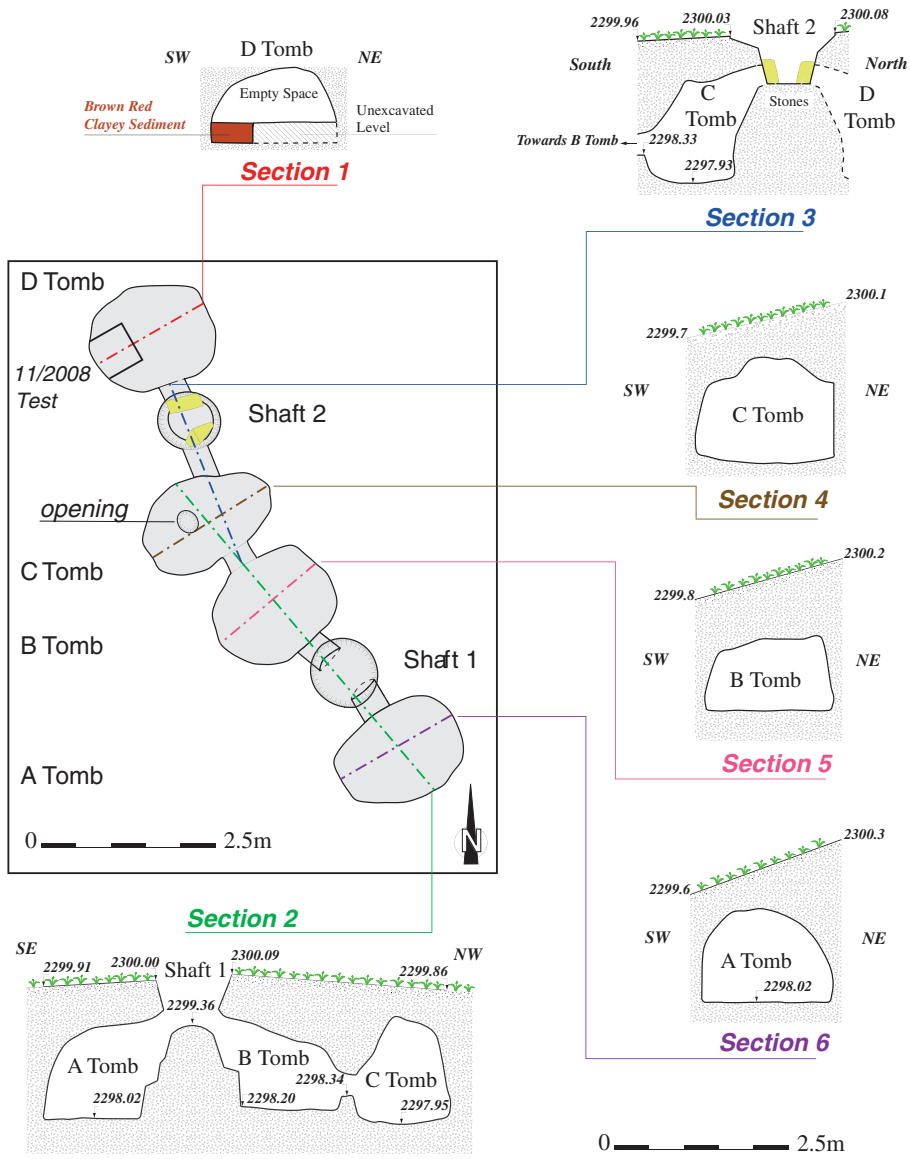


Fig. 2 Plans and sections of Ketetiya (L. Fadin, B. Poissonnier) (image in full colour online)

Fig. 3 Ketetiya: carinated bottle showing three engraved crosses ($H = 198$ mm) (photo: A. Letricot)

excavation, but the deepest archaeological levels were not disturbed. The upper one contained many human bones, some being found alongside the walls, that seemed to have retained their anatomic connections (more detailed observations were made impossible due to the extremely bad condition of conservation of the bones). Many animal bones, including parts of three bovines and two ovines, were buried with the human bodies. The lower level, about 30 cm thick, contained around 30 whole ceramic pots. Many artefacts were found, including several hundred beads (mostly Indo-Pacific, see below), four red stone ear-ornaments, ten bracelets and other small metal items. Two stages were reconstructed in the functioning of the monument: first, an individual (MNI is 1, but poor conservation of the remains allows the possibility of a few other individuals) was buried with an important set of ceramics; second, individuals were successively buried, making up a group whose composition evokes family-like ties. The minimum number of individuals buried in this monument is 19, including two aged individuals and five juveniles.

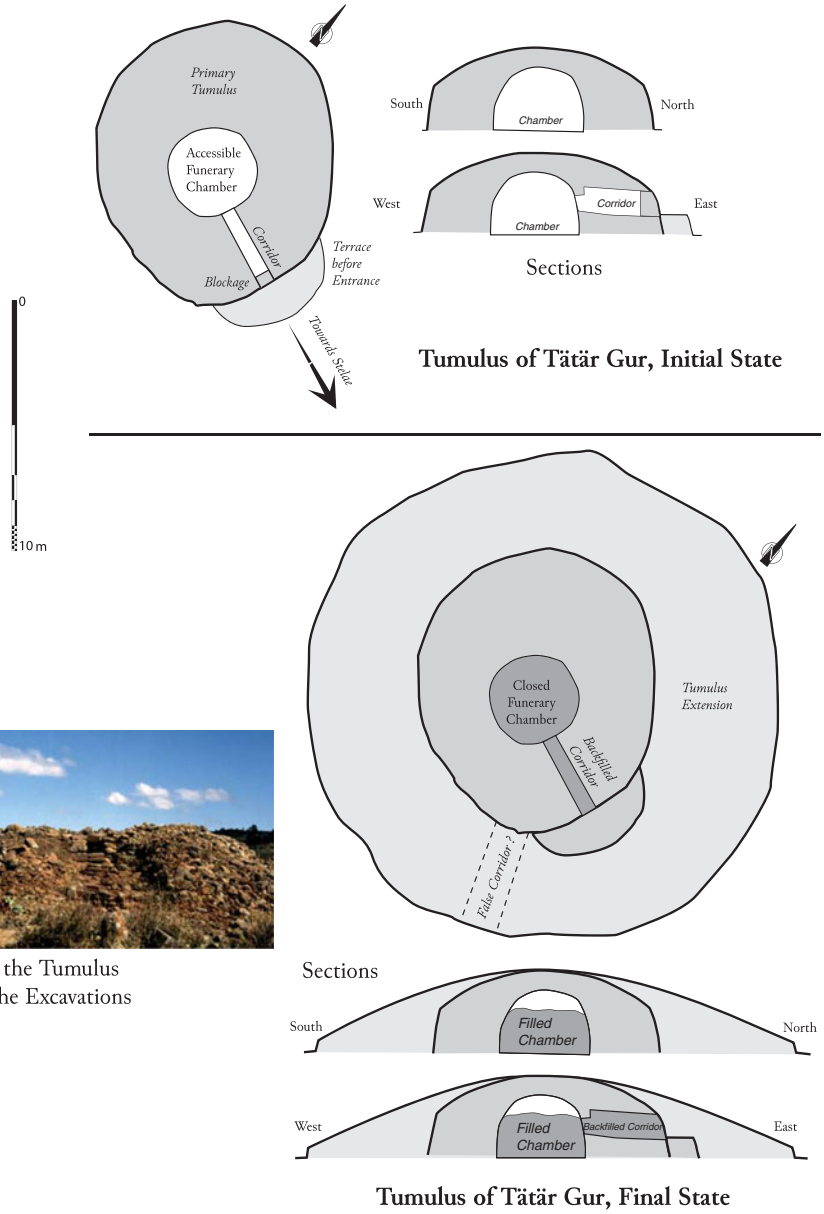
The Tumulus of Tätär Gur

The tumulus of Tätär Gur, found near Meshalä Maryam (Mänz), was the object of a full campaign of excavations. This revealed a new type of tumulus architecture in this region, as Tätär Gur seems to be the first dolmen (in the strict sense of a megalithic passage grave) clearly documented in East Africa. We have established that an initial stage saw the construction of a round funeral chamber with a diameter of 3.50 m, equipped with an access corridor, inside a primary tumulus of 10 × 11.50 m. Towards the end of the monument's use, it was itself sealed by a second tumulus with a diameter of 19.50 m, and its initial corridor backfilled, while a linear structure of a different orientation was built to resemble a "false" corridor (Fig. 4).

The sepulchral levels, intact and 40 to 50 cm thick on the levelled bedrock, revealed the remains of several successive deposits organised around an individual buried in a central position. The artefacts were made up of 74 Shay pots belonging to several types including an ultra-carinated type (flying saucer); 152 iron, copper or silver bracelets; an iron sword; numerous beads and metallic ornamental twists (gold, silver or copper) and other metal items; several hundred glass beads (see below); diverse stone ornaments; and clothing remains. Two charcoal samples collected at the construction and first-use level of the monument yielded overlapping radiocarbon dates that set the initial functioning of the monument in the first half of the tenth century (Table 1).

The bones and teeth in the sepulchral levels show a high rate of alteration. However, the chamber contained at least 20 adult bodies (MNI = 20). The organisation of the bones reflects two patterns: primary inhumations and secondary rearrangements of bones (Fig. 5). Wherever reliable observations were possible, the beads appeared in connection and situated near the remains of skulls or teeth, evoking hair ornaments or necklaces. Bracelets and anklets were discovered encircling radius-ulna groups and a tibia. The presence of bone remains and prestigious objects in a central position in the chamber inevitably raises the question of the social status of this individual and of his relationship with the deceased situated peripherally (Fig. 7).

The ceramics show two main components: the first mostly black, burnished and carinated; and the second lighter and rounder, less burnished, but often decorated by printing. Figure 6 shows a sample of the main ceramic forms: flying saucers (Fig. 6, 1–4), with a diameter range from 1.5 to 2 times the height, carinated bottles (Fig. 6, 5–6), globular bottles (Fig. 6, 7–11), jugs (Fig. 6, 12–15) and some open forms (Fig. 6, 16–18). Decoration is common, including scratches, incisions, printing, reliefs and even (likely) white painted motifs (Fig. 7).



Front of the Tumulus during the Excavations

Fig. 4 Tätär Gur: Plans of the two successive phases of the monument (R. Bernard, B. Poissonnier)

The Shay Non-ceramic Artefacts: the Islamic Connection

Among the artefacts found in Shay tombs are very numerous, monochrome drawn-glass beads of mainly Indo-Pacific origin. These are tubular or discoidal small beads, a vast majority of them with a diameter c. 2 mm only, with ends rounded through reheating. Their colours were blue, yellow, brick red, black, orange, white, light grey and green (Fig. 8).

Established since ancient times, Indo-Pacific production flourished from at least the seventh century AD, especially in the polity of Srivijaya, probably centred at Sumatra, before its collapse in the late eleventh century (Francis 1986, 2002a). As we proposed for the first time for the Horn of Africa (Fauvelle-Aymar and Poissonnier 2012), most of the drawn beads found in Shay contexts may be linked to this trade. This assumption is based only on morphological and technological observations. It is true that recent chemical analyses

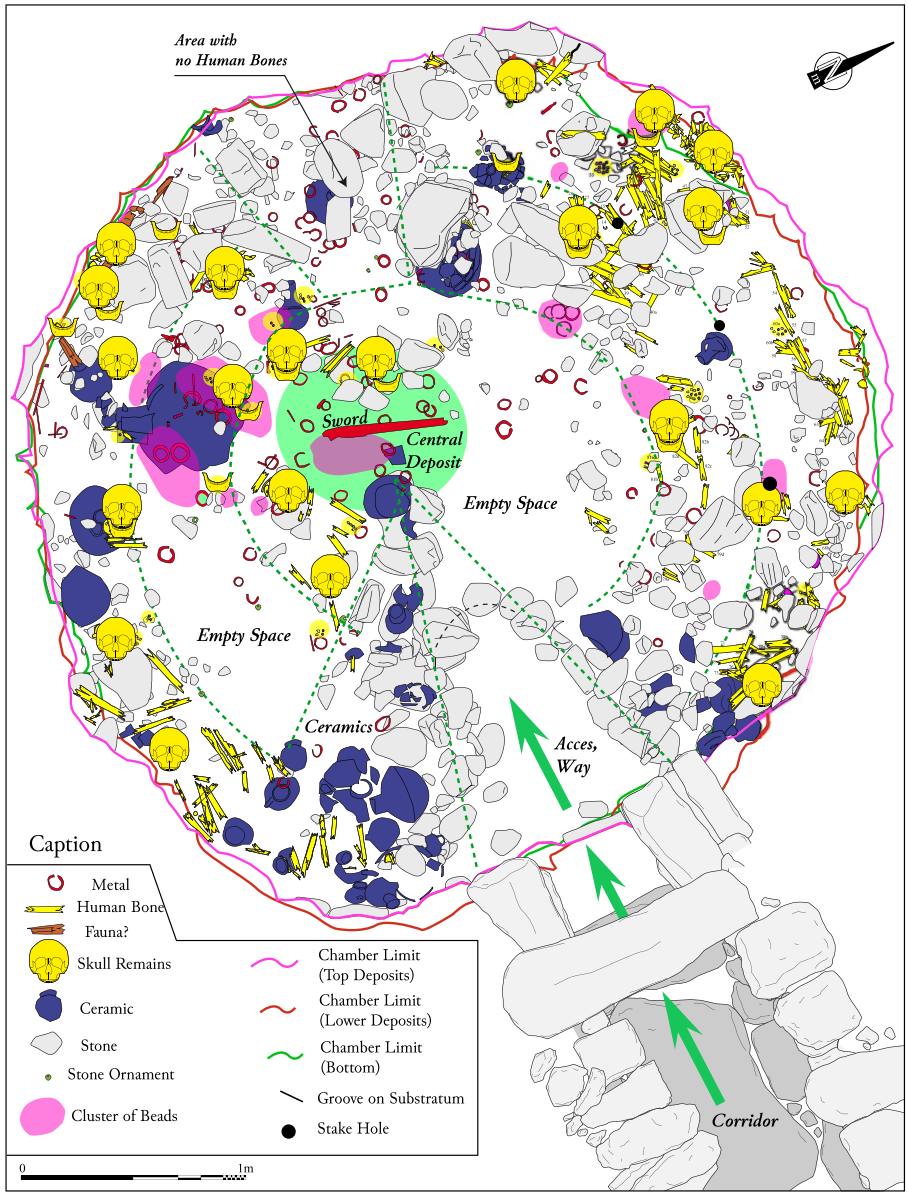


Fig. 5 Tätar Gur: Plan of the combined deposits (R. Bernard, B. Poissonnier, B. Farago) (image in full colour online)

have shown that some drawn glass beads found in medieval archaeological contexts in Africa may be related to the Near East (likely Iran) in terms of raw material components (Robertshaw et al. 2009; Robertshaw et al. 2010). However, in terms of technology and typology, the tiny monochrome drawn beads are clearly a specialty of Indo-Pacific production at that time (Francis 2002a). A way to resolve this apparent discrepancy is that beadmakers are not necessarily glassmakers (Francis 2002a, b; Henderson et al. 2004; Wood 2012). Glass was produced in several large centres in Western Asia, and the raw material was exported to secondary centres of manufacture. In any case, the drawn beads called "Zhizo" found in southern African sites from between the eighth and mid-tenth century AD, where the glass analysis points to Near Eastern origins, likely Iran (Robertshaw et al. 2010; Wood 2012), are not known from Ethiopia so far.

Other types of glass beads have been noted. Eye beads (Fig. 9: 5, 7, 9, 10) belong to ancient and common types produced in the eastern Mediterranean that continue at a lower frequency during the early Middle Ages.

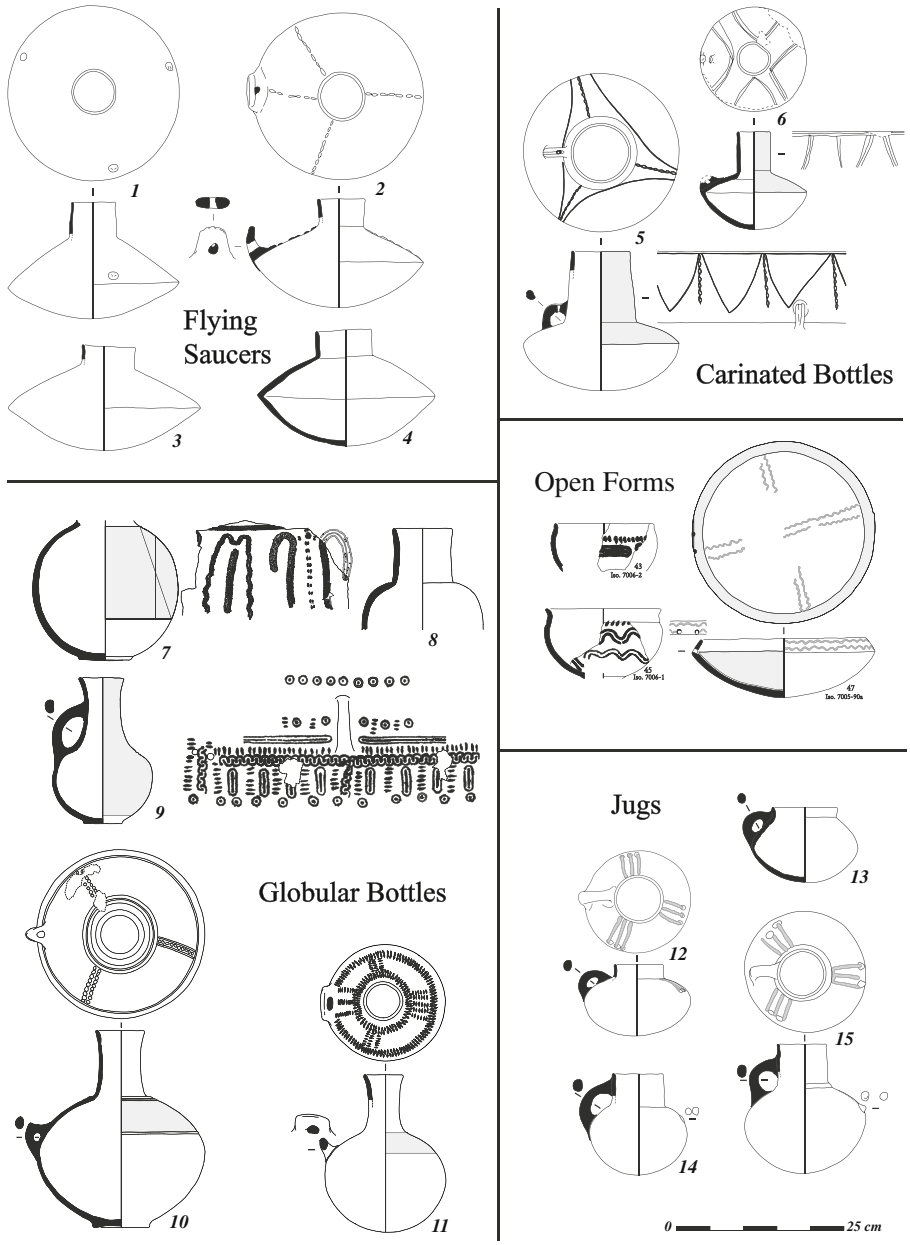


Fig. 6 Tätär Gur: Selection of pots (A. Wittmann, B. Poissonnier)

A unique wound bead from Tätär Gur (Fig. 9: 4), light blue with a thin red line, was made by winding a thin thread of hot glass around a wire. At each end, due to a relatively low temperature, small "peaks" appear. This "coil bead" is very likely of Chinese origin, like those that were exported during the Sung and Yuan periods towards East Africa, and were found at Fustat, Great Zimbabwe, and Kilwa (Beck 1931; Chittick 1974; Francis 2002b). Some dark wound beads with a white central stripe (Fig. 9: 11) find their exact parallels in Fustat (Francis 2002b), although their place of production remains uncertain.

Segmented monochrome beads, known from 300 BC to AD 1200 (Francis 2002a, p. 90), are also abundant in Shay material culture. These were manufactured from a reheated and constricted tube cut at regular intervals. During the fifth and seventh centuries AD, some stone moulds testify to such production in Alexandria (Rodziewicz 1984, pp. 242–243). In the Middle Ages, the workshops moved from Alexandria to Fustat

Fig. 7 Tätär Gur: Prestigious objects in a central position in the chamber, during excavation. In the *foreground*, iron sword and silver bracelet (photo: B. Poissonnier)

(Francis 2002b, p. 15), which is likely the origin of part of the Shay assemblage.

Other segmented beads contain gold or silver metal foil, trapped in clear glass (gold-glass beads). These are usually produced by two transparent glass tubes, the thinner of which is covered by a precious metal sheet and then slipped into the second. The whole is heated and crimped to create bulges. Known since the Hellenistic period, and likely an innovation from Alexandria, this sort of bead was still produced at the beginning of the Islamic period and then exported massively to the East. Imitations were produced there, notably in Takua Pak (Thailand) and Vijaya (Palembang, Indonesia), from raw clear glass imported from Egypt or the Near East (Francis 2002a, pp. 93, 94, 99). A unique, square drawn bead from Tätär Gur, shows blue and white stripes at each angle. It combines two techniques documented in the Indo-Pacific area and beyond: on the one hand, the "square drawn tube beads" (square section, no stripes) are produced from Sri Lanka (Mantai) to the South of the Indochina Peninsula (Oc Eo) and are found inland in Southeast Asia as well as in China and Korea. On the other hand, the "striped drawn beads," obtained by adding coloured lines to the glass cone before stretching, were produced in at least two sites: Mantai (Sri Lanka) and Takua Pa (Thailand), where in the latter case, dark blue beads with six to ten white stripes were apparently produced (Francis 2002a, p. 44).

Among the stone ornaments, the likely ear ornaments made from red stone (bauxite?) appear to be typically Shay (Fig. 9: 2). Other pendants or trinkets are known from this material or from soft green stone. A discoidal bead from amazonite (Fig. 9: 6) may originate of Ethiopia, where deposits are known in the south (Konso). But sardonyx beads and most of those of carnelian may be of Indian origin (Fig. 9: 12).

The Shay metal findings are very similar to those found in the tumuli of the Chercher massif (eastern Ethiopia). For example, the spiral silver Shay rings are identical to those from Raré and Sourré Kabanawa (Joussaume 1980, Figs. 80, 83). The silver (silver source not yet known) bulged bracelet from Tätär Gur (Fig. 9: 8) resembles the copper bracelets from Sourré Kabanawa (Joussaume 1980, Fig. 89). The iron sword with likely ivory handle from Tätär Gur (Fig. 5, in red in the centre) and the iron knife from Tumulus 2 of Meshalä Maryam are reminiscent of daggers documented in Chercher, and the same can be said of rare solid gold beads (Fig. 9: 1).

From what precedes, one can easily draw attention to the fact that most of the artefacts found in the Shay tumuli constitute an assemblage that reflects the extent of the eastern commercial catchment of the Islamic world of the time. Artefacts from various regions of production within this economic catchment would circulate towards Africa, thanks to the mediation of various classes of merchants acting between commercial thresholds located in Western India, the Red Sea shores and the Swahili Coast (Fauvelle-Aymar 2013b), as well as Islamic merchants based at entrepôts in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Among others, Alexandria and Cairo/Fustat possibly were such entrepôts as suggested by archaeological findings (François 1999; Francis 2002b) and by written sources. Thus, it can be said that the very presence of such artefacts in the Pagan graves of the Shay cultures implies the agency of intermediaries acting on a regional scale and connected with Muslim commercial places, if not with Muslims themselves.

Discussion

The corpus of Shay culture is far from complete; it is only delimited by our fieldwork surveys. But the data

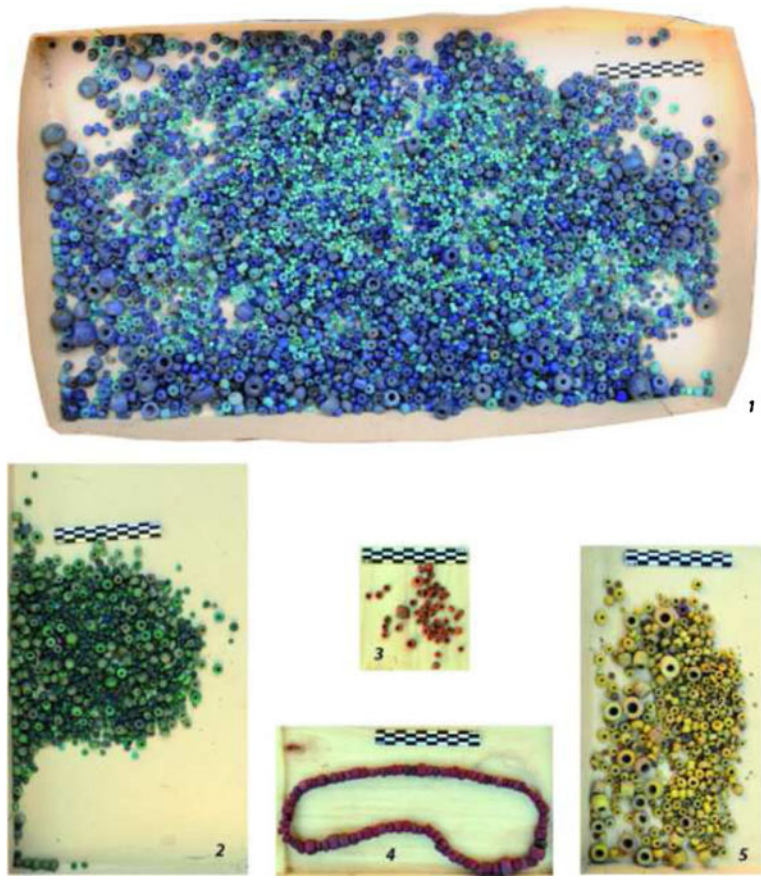


Fig. 8 Monochrome blue, green, brick red and yellow beads from Tätär Gur (photo: B. Poissonnier) (image in full colour online)

gathered thus far strengthen the sense of a strong cultural identity.

The early development of this culture is until now not well documented. In Aksum itself, a carinated bottle was published as belonging to "Grey Aksumite Ware" (Wilding and Munro-Hay 1989, pp. 308, 310, Figs. 16, 447), but in our opinion, the disturbed stratigraphy does not allow confident dating. In Yeha (a pre-Aksumite site in North Ethiopia), another carinated bottle, very similar to those of the Shay culture, was found in a grave (Robin and de Maigret 1998, p. 779, Fig. 53). It remains undated and may postdate ancient times, or may have been reused in the middle ages. In Matara, some pottery including at least two typical Shay flying saucers was found during the 1960s excavations (Anfray 1963; *in litteris*, 2000, 2008). One of the flying saucers bears a *graffito* written in proto-Ethiopian, stage B, which is dated by palaeographic comparisons to the third century AD (Bernand et al. 1991, 1, 471 and 2, pl. 229, # 377). But in our opinion, the dating by epigraphy of only four letters cannot be conclusive, and in addition, these ceramics seem out of place among the abundant Aksumite findings. The possibility of post-ancient deposits, i.e., in graves simply dug in the ground, should also be taken into consideration.

Let us come now to the question of the disappearance of the Shay culture. This occurred at the latest in the fourteenth century, to judge from Ketetiya. Interestingly, the latter is located very close to the famous Christian monastic centre of Lake Hayq, from where the evangelisation of Shäwa was initiated around the end of the thirteenth century (Derat 2003) (Fig. 1). Ketetiya would thus be a fascinating illustration of the ongoing influence of Christian monks on a Pagan substratum. Whatever the case, it is remarkable that no traces of Shay are documented after the fourteenth century. The disappearance of large collective and visible funeral structures such as Tätär Gur can be understood easily as the result of the adoption of a new dominant ideology of individual redemption, whether Christian or Muslim. The Christian cemetery set over the ruins of the church of Gabriel (Derat and Jouquand 2012) in Mänz, dating to the sixteenth to seventeenth century, and the cemetery of the Muslim

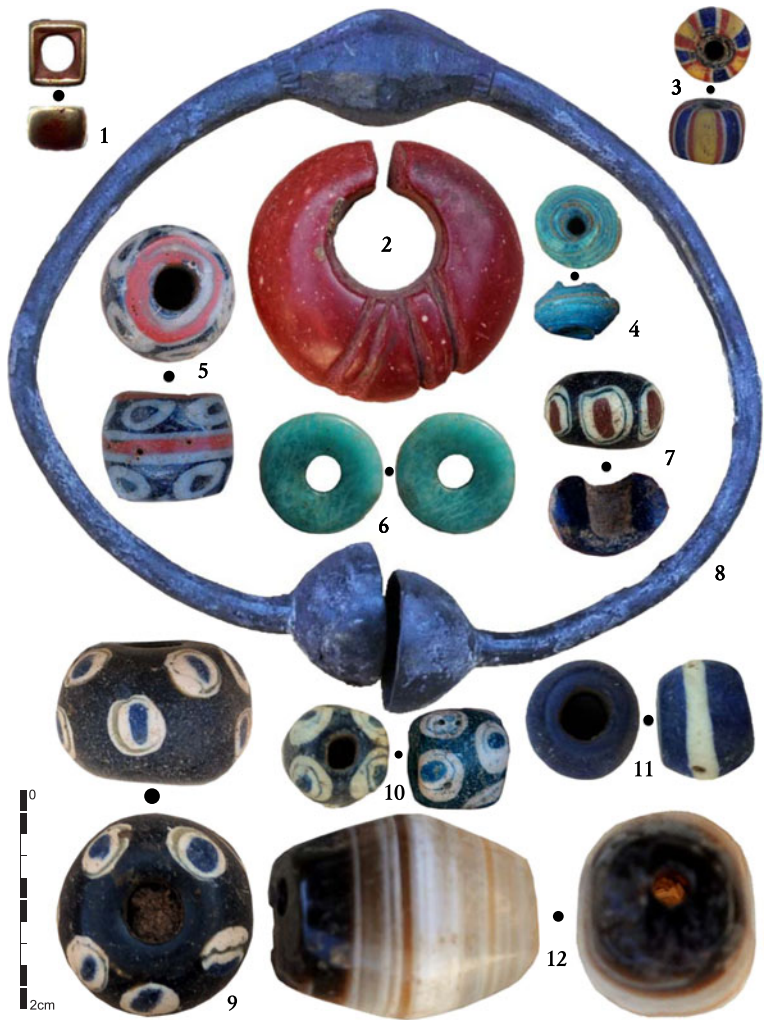


Fig. 9 Tätar Gur: Selection of ornaments (photo: B. Poissonnier) (image in full colour online)

urban site of Nora (Fauvelle-Aymar et al. 2010) in east Shäwa, dating to the fourteenth to fifteenth century, are good chronological limits for this cultural shift. The apparently complete replacement of the ceramic repertoire in post-fourteenth-century Ethiopia raises questions for which there are no easy answers. Should we assume that such a rapid replacement in the ceramic assemblage implies a population change? Both the forms and decoration of the pottery (and to a certain degree the technology) are indeed completely novel, while the Shay assemblage had previously shown remarkable stability for centuries. Or, reversing the perspective, should not we contemplate the possibility that the Shay ceramics were only a specific funerary ware, independent of the rest of their material culture?

Regardless, all these questions are strongly biased by a "declinist" perspective on the Shay Pagans. Indeed, by strongly emphasising the way in which Pagans disappeared (by simply gradually decreasing or by transforming themselves) in the face of the Christians and Muslims, we are unconsciously favouring a teleological perspective that makes the Christian or Muslim the 'winner' of the story. What we want to make clear here is that, however, the story effectively ends, we are not obliged to narrate it as the inescapable and irreversible decline of the Pagans. This has important implications, because whatever aspect of Shay culture has survived until the present, only to be rediscovered by the archaeologist, can be related in one way or another to a historical landscape within which Christianity and Islam already had a place. It is interesting, as we have seen,

that the flying saucer pots became at some point, at Ketetiya, the receivers of the Christian symbol of the cross, thus possibly designating this specific category of pots (precisely the one that we deem the more recognisably Shay) as the most religiously invested by Shay society. The presence of imported adornments in the Shay tumulus index a close relationship of the Shay culture with traders linked to the Islamic commercial world. It is indeed clear that Shay elites buried in these monuments owe their most valued belongings, and probably also part of their social status, to their ability to capture the benefits of trade and contact with the outside world. Thus, we could suggest that the story of the Shay Pagans is not one of decline in the face of cultural and economic novelties introduced by new religions, but rather one of power strengthening at the hand of a political and economic elite. That the Shay culture can only be documented, on archaeological grounds, as coeval with the development of Christian and Muslim cultures in Ethiopia may not be a paradox; on the contrary, it may reflect the very economic dynamics that made possible the emergence of powerful Pagan elites rival to their Christian and Muslim counterparts. Similar processes have already been suggested elsewhere in medieval Africa, from Western Sahel to Southern Africa (Fauvelle-Aymar 2013a, pp. 109–119). In the Ethiopian context, such a process could help explain the appearance (and maybe also the later disappearance) of a sumptuary complex that is all we know about this culture. As agents and beneficiaries of the introduction of material innovations in their society, the elites were later also probably well placed to introduce other spiritual changes and to negotiate the transformation of their sumptuary apparatus into new political or economic leadership. In this, they probably would be less victims than actors in the disappearance of the Pagans. In this also, Pagans possibly contributed more than we are inclined to believe to the emergence of their successor society.

Acknowledgments The authors wish to thank Claire Bosc-Tiessé (CNRS, IMAF, Paris, France) as well as two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article, and Becky Miller for her revision of the English. All field missions and material analyses referred to in this paper were conducted with the permission of the Authority for Research and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) in Ethiopia, and all the material collected from excavations conducted by the authors were deposited in Ethiopian museums (Addis Ababa and Däse).

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