

ERITREA

German Fieldwork in Eritrea

Steffen Wenig

Phil. Fak. III, Institut Asien- und
Afrikawissenschaften

Seminar für sudanarchäologie und
Ägyptologie

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Berlin, Germany

The German Archeological Mission to Eritrea (G.A.M.E.), headed by Steffen Wenig from the Humboldt University of Berlin Seminar for Sudan Archaeology and Egyptology, carried out a first season of field work on the plateau of Qohaito north of Adi Qeyeh in Southern Region (Zoba Debub, former Province Akkele Guzay), Eritrea, between the end of September and middle of November, 1996. Financial support came mainly from the German Foreign Office and from the collaborating Museum of Fine Arts, Vienna (Austria) and the project was also supported by Humboldt University and the Eritrean Relief Organization in Germany. The permit for such work was granted by the National Museum of Eritrea. We are very grateful to its director, Dr. Yoseph Libsekal, who supports the aims of the mission, and to his collaborators, who accompanied the mission. Their help was of great importance.

During a short visit to the area in October 1995 it was found that many ruins mainly from the Axumite period cover the plateau of Qohaito where Cushitic speaking Saho are living. Only a very few of these ruins, among them a dam supposed to be from the pre-Axumite period, were already recorded by Stanislaus Russell in 1860, J. Theodore Bent in 1892, by Max Scholler and Georg Schweinfurth in 1894, and by Enno Littmann in 1906. Qohaito is neither a village nor a single site like Toconda or Matarra but a high plateau on an altitude of 2500 to 2600 m and covers approx. 30 to 35 km². Several villages like Saro or Safira are located there.

The aim of the researchers, consisting of two surveyors, an archaeologist and an architect, was to start surveying the areas for a topographical map and describing the ruins. In certain cases better preserved ruins of buildings were recorded in detail.

But the mission also had to carry out protective measures. Because of agricultural activities and intentional destruction, many of the ruins are severely endangered. Resettlers who came to the plateau after the war ended are also using part of the ruins for their dwellings.

The length of the plateau (north-south direction) is 12.6 km, the width (east-west direction) between 2.5 and 3.5 km. It is estimated that several hundreds of complexes of ruins cover the plateau, making it one of the most extensive archaeological areas in sub-Saharan Africa. Most of the ruins originate from the Axumite period, but potsherds from the pre-Axumite period were also found. Stone tools from the Middle Stone Age and from the Neolithic period were found in abundant quantities as well as early Islamic open prayer places. The plateau of Qohaito could be reached from the Adulis plain either via the Haddas Valley west of the plateau or via the Komaile Valley east of the plateau (see the map given by Duncanson in *Antiquity* vol. 21, 1947, p. 161). At least three very steep descents lead from the plateau to the valleys. People using the easternmost descent report that they reach Zula/Foro within three days, but fighters from the EPLF made it within two days.

Work started at the edges of the eastern and southeastern cliff. During six weeks of fieldwork between the cliff and the village of Safira, where the so-called dam is situated, some dozens of complexes of ruins were found and mapped. In this area are situated several buildings which have a podium with pillars. Some of them were already recorded by Littmann (*Deutsche Aksum Expedition*, Berlin 1913). Two of these buildings (Littmann nos. 6 and 8) with still standing pillars were cleaned and fenced, one of the buildings (Littmann no. 8) was studied in detail by the architect of the mission, Dr. D. Eigner.

The results of the first field season are encouraging. In ca. 1-2 % of the area which was studied in detail we found ruins of houses and edifices (mainly made of stone), large enclosure walls, streets and several cisterns. It really seems, as proposed by Schoeller, that this place on the plateau may have been a kind of garden city (J. Theodore Bent, *The Sacred City of the Ethiopians*, London 1893, p. 222: *summer residence*; Max Schoeller, *Mittheilungen über meine Reise in der Colonia Eritrea (Nord-Abbyssinien)*, Berlin 1895, p. 168 *Villenstadt*) for the

upper classes of Adulis which contained hundreds of houses, estates and religious buildings. Between them were, as today, extended areas for cultivation. There can be no doubt that the site must have been one of the most important ones of the Axumite Empire. But the supposition that the ancient town Koloe is to be located here (suggested already by Russell, Bent 1893: 223, Schoeller and many others) has to be considered very cautiously because Qohaito was apparently not an urban center like Toconda or Matara.

Koloe was mentioned by the author of the *Periplus of the Erythraen Sea* (4:2.6) "From Adulis it is a journey of three days to Koloe, an inland city that is the first trading post for ivory, and from there another five days to the metropolis itself, which is called Axomites [Axum]" (quoted in Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Princeton 1989, p. 53). The geographer Ptolemy placed Koloe wrongly south of Axum which led F. Cailliaud to the supposition that it was in the Sudan (*Voyage à Meroe ... 1826 III: 169*).

Coming from Adulis, Qohaito seems to be the first major place on the plateau. But caravans which intended to reach the highlands could have used much easier the aforementioned valleys which either reach Heshmale (a little north of Adi Qeyeh)

and the nearby Toconda or the ancient town of Matara. The latter was proposed by Kobishchanov (Axum, University Park, Pa. 1979) to be a serious candidate for Koloe (see also Munro-Hay 1991: 47) and was doubted e.g. by Casson (1989: 106). But I would consider Toconda also to be a candidate for Koloe.

Eritrea is a country very rich of antiquities (estimations say between 7000 and 8000 sites) which is no wonder because it was in ancient times the pivot for trade and commerce between the great empires of Egypt, Meroe, Rome, Byzantium, the kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf and even India. Most of the scholars now agree that the famous land of Punt, goal for expeditions from Egypt for millenia and country of origin for frankincense, was located on both shores of the Red Sea. Part of Punt was not too far situated from the highland of Qohaito which was so to speak the hinterland of Punt. Archaeological research is badly needed in Eritrea. Excavations are at the moment not possible because no legislation permitting them exists. But as soon as they start the historic picture of the Horn of Africa will change immediately. Our second season started 1st of October and will last till the middle of November, 1997. Detailed reports will appear somewhere else.