

Synopsis of the Archaeological Findings from the Greater Asmara Area



Fig.1. Excavated household units from Mai Chihot(left) and Sembel(right)

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The 1st millennium B.C. is an important period to understand changes in settlement, technology and economies that gave rise to the development of complex societies in various regions of the African continent. The Horn of Africa saw the development of extensive highland agro-pastoralist village communities as well as elite ritual centers in highland Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. The expansion of cultural exchanges and interaction patterns during the epoch had significant impacts on the development of agro-pastoralism, permanent village settlement and continuation of ritual manifestations.

The 1st millennium B.C. witnessed the culmination of socio-economic and socio-political patterns and processes that began earlier around the 5th millennium. Already established food production strategies blossomed into full-fledged intensive agro-pastoral traditions by the 1st millennium B.C. Pastoralism was coupled with intensive cultivation of domesticated cereals and pulses of both African and Near Eastern origin. Stone tool technology was linked with metal technology as already established ceramic tradition became elaborated.

The 1st millennium communities also developed long established patterns of interaction, further expanding trade engagement with people from surrounding regions. The appearance of new forms of iconography and material culture is a testimony, in one way, of an expansion or intensification of established contacts with other peoples of the southern Red Sea. The elaborate manifestations of

interregional cultural contacts appear in places like Matara and Keskesse during the 1st millennium B.C., a time of expanded political and commercial activity in much of Africa and the Indian Ocean world.



Fig.2. Pottery typical of Greater Asmara Communities from Sembel site

While continuities are apparent, there are also important discontinuities in settlement between the pre-1st millennium B.C. populations and the 1st millennium B.C. populations in northern Horn of Africa. Such discontinuity is particularly apparent in the settlements that flourished in the Asmara Plateau, where sedentary agro-pastoral communities appear around or just after 900 B.C. The absence of pre-1st millennium cultural layers in the Asmara Plateau is quite unique in the region.

The fact that the communities settled in areas and in concentrations not apparent in the preceding periods had provoked archaeologists to look into the evolution of complex communities in the Horn differently from long-held assumptions and postulations. Many interpretations by scholars interested in the development of complex societies in the northern Horn are based on a view that attributes the development of African social complexity to foreign influences and innovations, stressing one way donor-recipient relations. Near Eastern societies were portrayed as bestowing civilizations on African communities.

Interpretations focusing on external influences as the primary catalyst for complex societies and state development in the Horn of Africa were not critically assessed prior to the findings from the Greater Asmara and this edition

of the column will highlight how ancient 1st millennium B.C. settled communities in the Asmara plateau have helped shape/ change previously held perspectives of social complexity in this part of the Horn. The local elements of the settled communities in the Asmara plateau are emphasized to show how they differ from contemporaneous highland civilization in the northern Horn.

The highlands around Asmara supported the earliest settled agro-pastoral communities known in the Horn between 800 B.C. and 400 B.C. These communities predate and are in one way contemporaneous with 1st millennium B.C. settlements in central highlands of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. The agro-pastoral settlements that flourished around Asmara are seen as vital precursors to the later mid-1st millennium B.C. urban settlements in the central highlands of Eritrea at sites such as Matara, Keskesse and perhaps Qohaito. The demographic complexity seen at the sites around Asmara between 800 B.C. – 400 B.C. is an extraordinary period in the ancient history of the Horn.

A constellation of settlements was distributed over much of the plateau and various excavations at the sites of Sembel, Ona Gudo, Mai Husta, Weki Duba, Adi Segdo, Adi Abieto and Mai Chihot provided key insights into the variation of the settlements in the region. The excavations uncovered architectural remains and several household units further providing important evidence of daily life including diet, economy, ritual and ideological life, trade and domestic activities. Two phases of settlement history have been understood in the Greater Asmara Area, with both the earlier and later phases particularly demonstrating the nature of social organization in the region.

Dates from the archaeological sites of Sembel, Mai-Hutsa, Ona Gudo range from the 9th century B.C. to the 4th century B.C. implying the earlier phases of the settlements can be understood from these sites. Similarly, radio carbon dates from Mai Chihot site provide perspectives on the later phases of the 1st millennium B.C. settlements in the Asmara plateau. Dates from Mai Chihot fall within the spectrum of 300 B.C. to 220 B.C. and the interpretation is further corroborated by the very different material culture and architecture at the site.

The settlements in general represent an agro-pastoral society living in communities of varying size from scattered homesteads to villages and small

towns with a high regional population density. The settlements in the Asmara Plateau are characterized by few or little evidence of architectural features making them distinct from ceremonial or ritual centers like Matara and Keskesse which flourished in the mid-1st millennium B.C. The settlement history, especially in the main settlement phases is marked by a high degree of egalitarianism and thus far with few signs of social or political differentiation, perhaps a characteristic that arises partly out of pastoral roots.



Fig.3. Bronze artifacts (left) and beads (right) from Mai-Temenai

As far as diet is concerned, the communities relied heavily on domesticated animals where sheep, goats and cattle provided the bulk of the diet. The diet was supplemented by mammals, domestic chicken and game birds from the natural surroundings in sites like Mai Chihot. Moreover, macro-botanical remains that were recovered from domestic food preparation areas point that the communities were fully agro-pastoral during the earliest occupation of the region, planting crops such as emmer, bread wheat, lentils and linseed early on, and adding taf towards the mid- 1st millennium B.C.

The communities that flourished in the Asmara plateau by the 1st millennium B.C. also distinctively developed an extensive network of gold mining as communities were located nearby gold mines. Evidence from Ona Gudo and Weki Duba reveal the demographic complexity resultant of the exploitation of the gold mines. The manufacture of bull's head fashioned out of chipped and

ground stones also united the communities around ritual and ideological manifestations. The objects are commonly scattered over the central part of the Asmara plateau between 700-500 B.C.

In conclusion, the claims that peoples of the highlands of Eritrea owed their cultural genesis to interactions with the peoples of the South Arabian Peninsula of the Nile basin are not reflected in the Asmara plateau. The majority of the communities in the Asmara Plateau grew in an organic manner and evidence for monumental architecture, epigraphic evidence and specialized funerary ceramics is virtually lacking. Only towards the terminal stage of the settlements do we see instances of differences in material culture and architecture that possibly mark social differentiation.

The coming of bronze objects and beads reveal a change linked to the rise of elites in settlements like Matara in the later stages. Such objects were uncovered from Mai Chihot and Mai-Temenai and elaborate funerary treatments reflected in items like bronze tweezers, bracelets, earrings as well as beads which may point to a presence of small elite. Ceramics from Mai-Temenai show affinities to Yeha further demonstrating the rise of elites in the early 4th century B.C.

Yet, these objects are not manifest in the majority of settlements in the Asmara Plateau further compelling archaeologists to conclude that the 1st millennium B.C. communities were urban precursors to the civilizations which started to flourish in the central highlands of Eritrea by mid-1st millennium B.C. The local agency demonstrated in the settlements around Asmara also helped critically envisage the development of social complexity in the Horn of Africa during the period, a phenomenon that for long was ascribed to external influences.

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