

Early evidence of South Arabian settlement in Ethiopia

New project in Wuqro in the highlands of Tigray

German archaeologists have begun a new project aiming at the research of the cultural relations between the Arabian peninsula and Africa within the first millennium B.C.E.

A temple from the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. was excavated in Ethiopia in November 2008 by archaeologists of the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) in cooperation with the Tigray Department of Culture and the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena. The sanctuary is dedicated to the Sabaean main deity Almaqah and represents one of the earliest evidence of South Arabian settlement in Northeast Africa.

Various cult objects of finest sculptural quality were found in the course of excavations near Wuqro in the highlands of Tigray conducted by the Ethiopian Department of Culture in December of last year. These include an altar bearing a votive inscription, in which a so far unknown king makes mention of his enthronement in the temple of Yeha, that is the most important Sabaean sanctuary in the highlands of Tigray, northwest of Wuqro. "Herein we find the first written record of the central Sabaean sanctuary in Ethiopia", as Prof. Norbert Nebes, project director from the Friedrich Schiller University of Jena, explicates. "The character shapes and their elaborateness are comparable to the early evidence of Ancient South Arabian high cultures on the Incense Road, as we know them from Yemen."

Furthermore, among the finds are a female limestone statue and various altars. An extensive ritual courtyard was located in front of the temple including several side rooms, in which excavations shall be continued in the course of the following campaigns. In the centre of the ritual site an altar was erected holding a sacrificial font, discharges in the shape of bull heads and a drain gutter several metres in length. "Its Quality and preservation are singular so far in the still young Ethiopian Archaeology", as project director Prof. Ricardo Eichmann, director of the Orient Department of the DAI, states. Regarding its completeness and the clear relation to the temple, there are no comparable architectural evidence within the Ancient South Arabian area until the present day.

Excavation director Dr. Pawel Wolf, Berlin, who also directed the archaeological survey, is convinced that the temple did not stand alone, but rather suspects further settlements from the first half of the first millennium B.C.E. around the sanctuary. Future excavations shall shed light on the settlement of the Ethiopian highlands by the Sabaeans and their coexistence with the native population.

Prof. Ricardo Eichmann (DAI) und Prof. Norbert Nebes (FSU) have recently signed a cooperation agreement with the director of the Tigray Tourism and Culture Commission (TCC) Ato Kebede Amare providing for a large-scale landscape archaeological research including detailed excavations at selected places of discovery. A further project aiming at mapping the archaeological finding-places in the highlands of Tigray shall be conducted in the future by Professor Steffen Wenig, Berlin.

fig. 1 Survey of the excavation area with protective building covering the central building of the Almaqah sanctuary

fig. 2 Altar from the inside of the Almaqah sanctuary with sacrificial font and discharge in the shape of a bull's head