



The archaeological remains of Qohaito are located on top of the 32 Km² Qohaito plateau at an elevation of 2600 meters above sea level. The Qohaito plateau holds many mounds and ancient settlement complexes with substantial architectural features, monumental structures with platforms, cistern like features, ancient dams and reservoir. As far as the archaeological bounty in the plateau is concerned, Qohaito represents not one site, but a plethora of single sites and clusters of sites distributed over much of the landscape. In fact, the Qohaito area has recently been referred to as the Qohaito Cultural Landscape to describe the nature of heritage contained in the plateau.

Cultural landscapes are cultural properties and represent the “combined works of nature and man”. They are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal. The Qohaito plateau represents such an ensemble, which attests to cultural processes that took shape on the escarpment over millennia. Hundreds of separate archaeological sites have been documented on the plateau basin. The monumental structures, inscriptions and pottery remains documented at Qohaito point that much of the plateau was occupied in the 1st millennium A.D. Yet, given the site’s strategic position on the escarpment of the northern Horn, occupations of earlier periods that included permanent settlements of 1st millennium B.C. perhaps exist on the plateau. The monumental platforms marked by pillars are found in multiple locations of the plateau and have received much attention since the turn of the 19th century.

A great deal of the archaeological features is situated in the Safira localities of the Qohaito plateau. The dam (67 m long and approximately 3m in height at its center) located northeast of a cluster of platforms and pillar remains and adjacent to the Saho community of Safira has also been of a primary focus of documentation activities in the past two centuries. Rock-hewn shaft tombs, commonly referred to as ‘meqabr gbsti’ (Egyptian tomb) and ancient brick furnace associated with locally produced glass artifacts are among the fascinating features documented in the Qohaito Cultural Landscape. These finds highlight the complexity of the civilization that flourished across much of the 1st millennium B.C. and 1st millennium A.D. Schweinfurth, a German amateur archaeologist, in 1894 found about 70 skeletons from the so-called ‘Egyptian tomb’ and he took 32 skulls to Berlin, where it has been recently mentioned that 29 are still preserved.

From the density of archaeological features documented in the plateau, Qohaito seems to have been one of the largest ancient settlement areas of the 1st millennium A.D. It was one of the most strategically placed communities along the axis of settlements that stretched from north-central Tigray to the Gulf of Zula, following the route linking the port city of Adulis and its

adjacent harbor on the Red Sea to much of the interior of the northern Horn. Qohaito has been suggested by some to be “Koloe”, an ancient market city described by the Alexandrian geographer Ptolemy as an interior town, the first major settlement on route from Adulis to the hinterland. The “Periplus of the Erythraean Sea” (a 1st century A.D. merchants’ document) also refers to Koloe as an inland town, a three day journey from Adulis via a caravan route. However, the surmise around Koloe, archaeological mapping and documentation by the German Archaeological Mission to Eritrea and surveys by archaeologists by the National Museum of Eritrea suggest that Koloe, or Qohaito for that sake, was much more than a market town as described by ancient texts. Qohaito, therefore, represents a complex ancient metropolis with a diverse range of functions and was no doubt a major ancient settlement linked to an expansive urban hinterland to the west of the plateau. It should also be noted that Qohaito functioned as both a political and market center located at a strikingly strategic and profitable setting in the heart of the northern Horn.

As far as the layers of history constituted in the landscape are concerned, Qohaito resembles a settlement beyond its 1st millennium B.C. - 1st millennium A.D. heritage. The large numbers and diverse range of stone tools present on the Qohaito Cultural Landscape suggest that the plateau was long used if not inhabited by communities dated back to Middle Stone Age or early Late Stone Age. Moreover, the Qohaito Cultural Landscape contains one of the highest densities of rock-art in the northern Horn including a range of paintings and engravings depicting wild animals and pastoral events- images that help us understand early economy, cultural and symbolic systems of the highland communities.

Today, the plateau is home to several dozens of Saho-speaking communities. The plateau also played a significant role in the 30-year Eritrean armed struggle for independence, where its position above the Haddas valley enabled Eritrean fighters to move between lowland and highland areas.

The elements of cultural heritage contained in the Qohaito plateau were first documented in the 19th and early 20th centuries by foreign travelers, scholars, military personnel and Italian colonial officials who visited the plateau. Theodor Bent visited the Qohaito plateau in 1893 and recorded the pillared platform areas of the landscape as temples. German travelers and scholars Max Schoeller and Georg Schweinfurth produced a map of the northern part of the Qohaito plateau and a drawing of a podium structure referred to as Temple II in 1894. The Deutsche Aksum Expedition and the Italian geographical, geological and ethnological expeditions of the early 20th century allowed a more complete reporting of principal sites and evidence of monumental architecture. Visits to Qohaito only resumed after independence when the National Museum of Eritrea began documentation and preservation planning. The German Archaeological Mission to Eritrea in 1996-97 also enabled the documentation and mapping of over 900 archaeological sites. A wide range of ancient sites and features including town ruins, podium buildings, cisterns, mound features, individual building structures and wall features, paved roads, rock engravings and inscriptions were properly documented. Further documentation activities were also carried by the National Museum in 2006-07 as part of the preparation of the Draft Management Plan for the Landscape. At present what we know about the Qohaito Landscape solely comes from documentation works. Given the inclusion of the Qohaito Cultural Landscape in the UNESCO Tentative List, it becomes urgent that a baseline

Urban Hinterlands in Antiquity: View from Qohaito Cultural Landscape

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chronology for the landscape be established through systematic excavations in the plateau. The landscape begs a better systematic approach to provide information on economy, trade, craft production and domestic and elite settlement patterns. Qohaito undoubtedly played a key role in the development of food production, urbanism and state development in the Horn and the landscape offers a vital interface onto the ancient world. Further detailed studies in the Qohaito Cultural Landscape will bring greater clarity to the most important period of human history in our region.