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Kristina Pfeiffer – Silvio Reichmuth – Adrian Lienig – Hanna Hamel  
**Addi Akaweh, Tigray, Ethiopia. Archaeological rescue excavations at the site of Abunä  
Gärima in Wuqro (Tigray, Ethiopia). Season 2017**

aus / from

## e-Forschungsberichte

Ausgabe / Issue **1 • 2018**

Seite / Page **20–23**

<https://publications.dainst.org/journals/efb/2106/6435> • urn:nbn:de:0048-dai-edai-f.2018-1-2106

Verantwortliche Redaktion / Publishing editor

**Redaktion e-Jahresberichte und e-Forschungsberichte | Deutsches Archäologisches Institut**

Weitere Informationen unter / For further information see <https://publications.dainst.org/journals/efb>

Redaktion und Satz / **Annika Busching (jahresbericht@dainst.de)**

**Gestalterisches Konzept: Hawemann & Mosch**

**Länderkarten: © 2017 www.mapbox.com**

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## ADDI AKAWEH, TIGRAY, ETHIOPIA

### Archaeological rescue excavations at the site of Abunä Gärima in Wuqro (Tigray, Ethiopia)



Season 2017

#### **Orient Department of the German Archaeological Institute**

by Kristina Pfeiffer (Berlin Head Office), in collaboration with Silvio Reichmuth, Adrian Lienig and Hanna Hamel



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*The 2017 season was undertaken in early spring 2017. It included excavations at the church of Abunä Gärima (AG) in Addi Akaweh, as well as consolidation activities of the church walls. The main focus for the season was set on the church of Abunä Gärima as being part of a rescue excavation which aimed to study the possibility to consolidate the walls to avoid further wall cracks. The excavation was further associated with research regarding the potential of being an Ethio-Sabaeen cultic site.*

The famous church of Abunä Gärima is located on a high plateau. The walls of the church show the usage of spolia of libation altars and, inside the church, three large Ethio-Sabaeen incense burners are stored that have king's inscriptions from the 7th century BC (Fig. 1). Due to personal communication with the priests, these objects were found during the construction of this quite young church. Due to the request of the TCTB three archaeological soundings at the church were carried out. These works had the aim to

**Financial support:** DAI Orient Department, Sana'a Branch; Jena University; Gerda Henkel Foundation.

**Head of project:** K. Pfeiffer.

**Team:** H. Hamel, A. Lienig, S. Reichmuth.



1 The church Abunä Gärima with cracked walls and spolia built within the walls (©DAI, photo: A. Lienig).

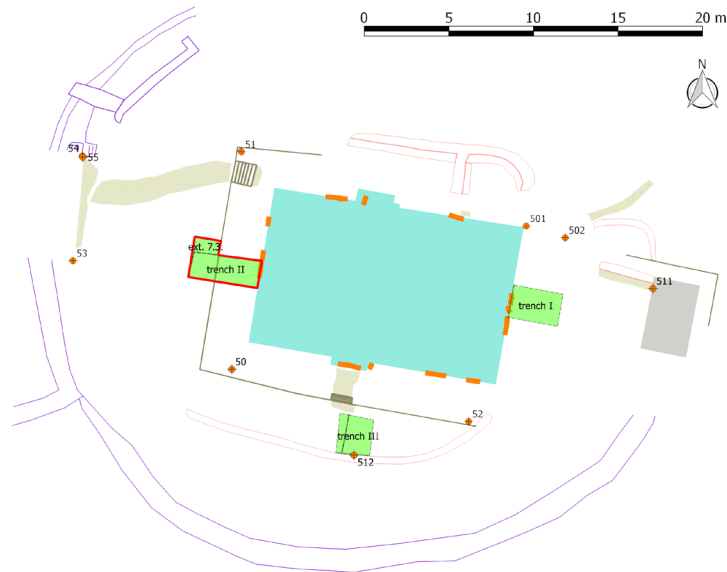
#### WUQ17

##### Overview

CRS: local  
(based on WGS84, UTM 37N)  
1:200  
11.3.2017  
S. Reichmuth

##### Key

- church
- trenches
- trench II
- book house
- portal
- stone pavement
- fix points
- terrace
- dry stone wall
- enclosure wall
- cracks in walls



2 GIS plan of the site of Abunä Gärima with the three trenches and the church hill (©DAI, fig.: S. Reichmuth).

assess the static situation and to enable restoration and building modifications at the church. During a visit on the site in 2016 and the dialogues with the priests the urgency of archaeological rescue excavations became quite clear. The topographic setting on the highest peak of the site above the plain as well as the inscriptions and spolia with their cultural historic importance supported the assumption that – in comparison with other Sabaeen sites in Tigray – there is the main sanctuary of the region. This hypothesis is strengthened by the above mentioned altars that were probably dedicated by different kings to a local deity. We expected from the rescue excavations insights into research issues that were already formulated at other sites in Tigray, e.g. at Yeha. Amongst other questions dealing with migration activities of Sabaeen opulations from South Arabia on the Abyssinian highlands and the related cultural and technical transfer, interaction processes with the indigenous populations are of special interest. The cultural influences of the Sabaeen people to the indigenous population is reflected by the material culture as well as by the language, scripture, religion and the political institutions during the first half of the 1st millennium BC.

The archaeological field work began with the setup of a coordinate-based grid system at the site of Addi Akaweh and beyond. Aerial Images by quadcopter provided the documentation of Addi Akaweh and especially of the 12 × 23 m area covering the church building of Abunä Gärima from different perspectives.

Excavations were carried out by three soundings at the fringe of the church building. They were set up as close to the church as possible, without disturbing the statics of the building. The size of the soundings depended on the findings with the aim to e.g. follow specific architectural features. The excavated structures are documented by terrestrial laser-scanning, drawings and photographs.

The soundings were excavated in the eastern, western and southern part round the church. It was planned to open the western trench as a slope-trench at the church hill. The choice of the trenches was based on expected diagnostic architectural features that serve as indicators for the layout and location of Ethio-Sabaeen temple buildings and their predecessors.



3 Western wall of the modern church of Abunä Gärima; largest fissures portrayed (©DAI, photo: S. Reichmuth).



4 Ethio-Sabaeen walls with corner, horizontal & vertical recession and disturbing graves. View towards west (©DAI, photo: H. Hamel).

Additionally, the trenches were chosen in consideration of the wall cracks and an assessment towards the consolidation of the church. The church is surrounded by a terrace which is partly enclosed by a shallow stone wall and dense vegetation. Hence, it was decided on-site where to locate the trenches (Fig. 2).

In the soundings 1 and 3 predominantly building collapse and tumble were found, burnt lime stones that were dressed in square shapes were found mixed with graves of a modern graveyard. Sounding 2 revealed the most interesting features: apart from the fact that the entirety of this area lies on a relatively young burial ground with agglutinated, intersecting, often unstructured and simple earth graves with stone piles, parts of a strongly burnt architectural construction appeared.

Sounding 2 was located at the west wall of the modern church building where a large crack runs vertically through the entire wall, from the middle window to the floor. With the aim to find out the static misbalance causing this crack, Trench II was opened here aiming at the investigation of the foundation and tracing the continuation of the crack below ground level (Fig. 3).

At the end of the excavation, a wall remnant with a corner, L-shaped, became clearly visible in the entire trench, the preserved wall appeared 15 cm below the surface in the western part of the trench (Fig. 4). A comparison with archaeological features in Yeha, the structure could be defined as an Ethio-Sabaeen building. The structure features a corner in which the walls are interlocked. The east-west wall is preserved with a length of 3.55 m. 1 m of its width is exposed in the trench, where 18 stone courses from 5 cm to 12 cm each were found, as well as a recessed layer in which a wooden beam was once horizontally placed (Fig. 5). In the western corner another small niche appeared in which another wooden beam had once been set vertically, but it is not preserved.

Imprints from wood could also be documented in the traditional mortar in the interior corners of the niche. Otherwise, white – probably burnt – residues of that mortar are dominant. Altogether, and in correspondence to the known architecture at the site of Yeha, the interpretation of this wall as an Ethio-Sabaeen structure is supported by a) the use of rectangular limestone



5 Charcoal remains in a horizontal layer in the wall Locus 031. View towards South-West (©DAI, photo: S. Reichmuth).

with the long edge outwards as a façade, b) mortaring of the visible joints with ‘chiqa’ mortar, c) exact and layered setting of the stones, d) height and width of the preserved walls and primarily d) the wooden reinforcement with horizontal and vertical, solid wooden beams at regular intervals.

Recent <sup>14</sup>C datings of the charcoal samples from the wooden beams in sounding 2 gave evidence for the preliminary dating of the structures in the Ethio-Sabaeen period: sample 1 dates between the 8th-6th century BC cal., sample 2 dates between the 7th and 6th century BC cal.

Taking the results from all trenches into consideration (Poz-99178, Poz-99061; measured by T. Goslar, Poznań Radiocarbon Laboratory; OxCal v4.2.3 Bronk Ramsey [2013]; IntCal 13 atmospheric curve (Reimer et al. 2015) it has to be stated that the site of Addi Akaweh is of great archaeological importance. The extensions of the archaeological site cover the entire church mound and consist of at least one building of Ethio-Sabean times.