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Kristina Pfeiffer – Iris Gerlach

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Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Zentrale, Podbielskiallee 69–71, 14195 Berlin, Tel: +49 30 187711-0

Email: [info@dainst.de](mailto:info@dainst.de) / Web: [dainst.org](http://dainst.org)

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## RAMA, ETHIOPIA (TIGRAY)

### Routes of Interaction – New Research in the Rama Valley



Seasons 2018 and 2019

**Orient Department, Sana'a Branch of the DAI**

by Kristina Pfeiffer and Iris Gerlach



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*The project »Routes of Interaction« is a collaboration between the Sanaa Branch of the Orient-Department, the Department of Earth Sciences – Physical Geography of the Freie Universität Berlin and the Egyptian Museum – Georg Steindorff, Leipzig University. Embedded into the SPP programme of the DFG »Entangled Africa«, field work has been carried out since 2018. The project investigates various forms of mobility and routes of interaction between the cultures at the northern Horn of Africa and the cultures of the middle Nile River and the northeastern Sudanese Gash Delta. Focusing on the Rama Valley, the survey concentrates on the material evidence for the dimensions of such networks during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.*

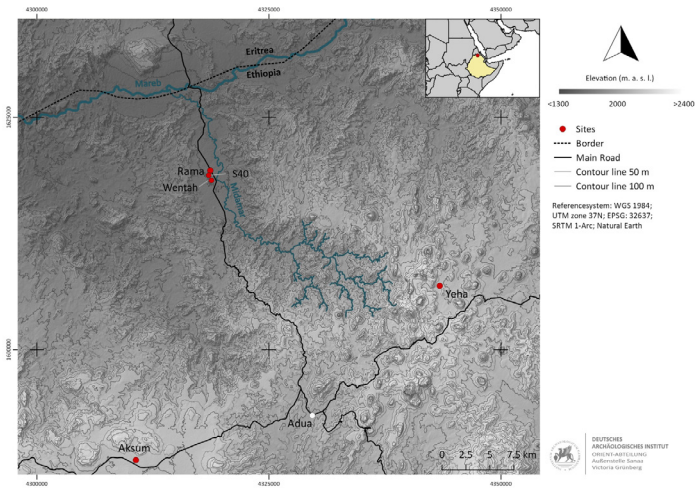
**Cooperation partner:** Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (Addis Abbeba); Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (Mekele).

**Financial support:** Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft SPP 2143.

**Head of project:** I. Gerlach, B. Schütt, D. Raue.

**Team:** C. Breninek, R. Busch, P. Collet, A. Grünberg, J. Hardt, N. Nir, K. Pfeiffer, N. Vögtlin Bruhn.

1 A systematic study of intra-African trade and exchange goods from the viewpoint of the northern Horn of Africa is still lacking. It is well known that the cultures of the Sudanese and Egyptian Nile Valley developed an increasing demand for precious goods such as obsidian, gold, ivory, incense and furs of



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- 1 Rama, Tigray/Ethiopia. Topography and location of the Rama valley, the border river Mareb/Gash and its tributary Midamar. (Map: V. Grünberg, DAI)
- 2 Rama, Tigray/Ethiopia. The prominent landmark »Wentah«. A granite boulder formation at the main road to Rama. (Photo: D. Raue, University Leipzig)

wild animals. Whereas the archaeological and epigraphic sources attest that these goods were imported to Egypt, the Gash region and eastern Sudan from at least the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC onwards, it is generally unknown which goods reached the northern Horn of Africa in return and which routes were chosen for this interaction. The northern Horn of Africa was part of a network of mobility systems such as migration of peoples, trade and exchange. Interaction routes were presumably used on land and at sea as the evidence points to a wide-ranging network of interaction. In addition to the maritime routes over the Red Sea, also rivers and river valleys such as the Nile River with its major tributaries, the Gash Delta as well as dry valleys were significant routes for cultural contact and material exchange.

- 2 In order to reconstruct settlement patterns and communication routes in the Ethiopian highlands as well as in adjoining regions, surveys and soundings have been carried out in the Rama Valley. The Rama Valley is located in the Ethiopian-Eritrean border area, about 30 km northwestwards of [Yeha](#) and measures c.12 km by 3,5 km (Fig. 1). Due to its altitude of c. 1350 m, it is assumed to have been of significant geostrategic importance as a corridor between the Ethiopian highlands and the river Gash, which leads via the Sudanese lowlands to the Blue Nile River.
- 3 The first field season in 2018 concentrated on archaeological surveys in different areas of the Rama valley. The areas were subdivided by topographical aspects and by points of interest that were based on an aerial imagery study. Altogether 43 sites were recorded that were characterized by surface finds of obsidian flakes, bovine and dromedary clay figurines, stelae and pottery sherds. The sites can be assigned to different time periods ranging between prehistory and sub-recent. Two sites were of special interest: The first site is a prominent landmark (S1) consisting of a granite boulder formation, located next to the main road between Rama and [Adua](#) (Fig. 2). Pottery sherds that were found in the immediate vicinity of the site called Wentah – the local term for the landmark – show a characteristic combination of very fine impressed and incised decorations on rim and body sherds (Fig. 3). Similar pottery decorations were frequently found in Sudan, where they can be dated between the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and the middle of the



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- 3 Rama, Tigray/Ethiopia. Selection of pottery sherds from the site of Wentah. The assemblage shows a combination of very fine impressed and incised decorations. (Photo: J. Kramer, DAI)
- 4 Rama, Tigray/Ethiopia. Views of a small bovine figurine from the site of Wentah. (Photo: J. Kramer, DAI)
- 5 Rama, Tigray/Ethiopia. Overview of the plateau site Gual Kor Nebri, where the archaeological sounding was excavated. (Photo: C. Breninek, University Leipzig)

1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. In addition, three clay figurines of bovines were found at S1 that also refer to Nile valley cultures (Fig. 4). Whereas several findspots revealed pottery sherds that suggest sub-recent dates or might be associated with the Aksumite period, five other survey sites displayed pottery decoration styles comparable to those revealed in S1. The second site lies southwestwards of the modern village of Rama, the plateau site Gual Kor Nebri (S40), which measures c. 50 x 50 m, is located on a hilly granite formation (Fig. 5). Similar to the site of Wentah, the collection of pottery on the surface displayed combinations of incised and impressed decorations (Fig. 6). Similarities to Ethio-Sabaeen pottery styles of the early first millennium BC in the Ethio-Eritrean highlands were not detected; the pottery finds rather suggest connections to the eastern Sudanese lowlands where these types of decorations occur between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.

- 4 Following up these investigations, field work was continued in 2019 and focused on archaeological-geographical surveys and on an archaeological sounding at the site of Gual Kor Nebri (S40). The sounding, measuring 3 x 3 m and a depth of 1,7 m, was excavated in eight steps. The soil layers consisted of a dense, sandy material with heavily weathered hard magmatic greyish rocks (syenite). Whereas archaeological structures were not found, all soil layers yielded sherds, some of which showed similar decorations to those found on the surface and, hence, indicate affinities to Sudan. Samples for dating and micromorphological studies were taken from the pottery sherds and their surrounding soil; analyses are in process. As of yet, this archaeological horizon seems to be unparalleled in Tigray and no identical formation in Sudan has been published.
- 5 Further surveys were carried out during the 2019 season and revealed 111 new sites from different time periods, ranging from prehistoric to sub-recent dates. Most of the visited places in the valley of Rama yielded few finds and thus hardly any indications of former settlement places. Especially the western part of the valley, which was first inhabited in modern times according to the local residents, seems to have only been used as pasture land. Contrary to that, the number of finds increased in the east: they consisted mostly of (post-) Aksumite products; whether the quantity of finds



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6 Rama, Tigray/Ethiopia. Selection of pottery sherds from the plateau Gual Kor Nebri. The assemblage shows a combination of very fine impressed and incised decorations. (Photo: J. Kramer, DAI)

7 Between al-Hissa and Mariam Shewito, Tigray/Ethiopia. View along a holloway, which has been eroded down to the bedrock by pedestrian traffic. (Photo: K. Pfeiffer)

indicates settlement sites remains questionable. In sum, there is not sufficient evidence of permanent dwellings yet.

6 The archaeological surveys were supported by geographical studies. Footpaths and paths, which are still used today, were surveyed, walked and tracked by GPS. The geographical survey focused on the field mapping of erosional landforms, which are mainly represented by gullies. Especially the interconnection between gullies and pathways are of interest, since pathways can induce linear surface erosion. Thus, the detection of gullies and gully heads can help to find ancient pathways. In addition, holloways were mapped and recorded – holloways are paths which have been used over a considerable time span and thus have eroded into the sediment and/or bedrock (Fig. 7). The geographical investigations led to numerous insights into the connection between gully formation and pathway development.

7 In summary, it becomes clear that the interdisciplinary research approach makes it possible to evaluate the localization, function and economic significance of the Rama valley within the supra-regional network studies and thus to work out what contacts might have looked like. These contacts might indicate a cultural horizon stretching from the Ethio-Eritrean highlands to the Sudanese lowlands.



## Authors

Dr. Kristina Pfeiffer

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – Außenstelle Sana‘a der Orient-Abteilung

Podbielskiallee 69–71

14195 Berlin

Deutschland

Kristina.Pfeiffer@dainst.de

GND: <http://d-nb.info/gnd/2117742-9> ↗

Dr. Iris Gerlach

Deutsches Archäologisches Institut – Außenstelle Sana‘a der Orient-Abteilung

Podbielskiallee 69–71

14195 Berlin

Deutschland

Iris.Gerlach@dainst.de

GND: <http://d-nb.info/gnd/2117742-9> ↗

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