JIA 11.2 (2024) 215–236
http://www.doi.org/10.1558/jia.27070
Journal of Islamic Archaeology
Journal of Islamic Archaeology
ISSN (print) 2051-9710
ISSN (online) 2051-9729

First Archaeological Insight from Fedis: Preliminary Survey Results from a Medieval Islamic Settlement Site in Eastern Ethiopia

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Islamic archaeology in Ethiopia has until recently been understudied, despite the religion's enduring influence in shaping the country's cultural and historical landscapes over centuries. The present paper presents the preliminary results of surveys conducted by the authors in and around the site of Melka in the Fedis district located south of Harar. This was one of several Islamic polities in the southeastern region of the Rift, and the discussion is complemented with a historiographical overview of medieval sources and 19th- and early 20th-century accounts. Despite appearing regularly in the historiography of Ethiopia, sites in Fedis had not previously been examined systematically. Surveys in 2021 and 2022 identified various remains, including the ruins of a drystone defensive wall, a mosque, a monumental stepwell, storage pits and burial sites. Material culture collected from the surface by local inhabitants was also documented for the first time: the many discoveries include a carnelian-made artefact with an Arabic inscription, beads of various kinds and pottery, providing parallels with other Islamic sites in the region. This pilot research has provided new archaeological insights into Fedis, offering a foundational understanding of its historical significance and cultural heritage. It is hoped that future work will allow a better understanding of the process of Islamization and the conditions in which the medieval Muslim principalities of Ethiopia emerged.

Introduction

Medieval Ethiopia was a crossroads of contacts and population mobility between Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Far East and the Indian Ocean. Due to this strategic location, the country also has historical significance as one of the early centres of Islam. According to Islamic tradition, the first companions (*ṣaḥāba*) and families of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) migrated

Keywords: East Africa, eastern Ethiopia, Fedis, Islamic archaeology, medieval Islamic sites
Submitted September 22, 2023; Accepted April 2, 2024

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to Aksum (part of present-day Ethiopia) due to persecution by the Quraysh in 615 CE, an event known in Islamic sources as the "First Hijra" (Trimingham 1952; Chekroun and Hirsch 2020). King Naǧāšī is said to have welcomed the refugees, allowing them to live freely in his territory and practise their religion and so setting an early example of religious tolerance in the region. This historical event emphasizes Ethiopia's early connection with Islam.

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence attest that the oldest Islamic settlements on the western side of the Red Sea are in the Dahlak Islands, dating as far back as the 9th century CE (Insoll 1996). Bilet has also recently been confirmed as a subsequent inland Islamic settlement in the northern region, dating back to the 10th century (Loiseau *et al.* 2021). Islam also developed in other regions of Ethiopia, leading to the emergence and consolidation of Muslim polities and sultanates in the central part of the country around the 12th century (Chekroun and Hirsch 2020). About the same time, the port of Zaila on the coast near the current border between Djibouti and Somaliland developed as an Islamic and trade centre (Fauvelle-Aymar and Hirsch 2011).

Islamization in the Horn of Africa and its accompanying changes have become a subject of archaeological and historical research in the 21st century, and there have been some fruitful collaborations between archaeologists and historians in the region. These include several EU-funded projects: the British "Becoming Muslim" project, working in eastern Ethiopia and focusing on the sites of Harlaa and Harar (2016–2022); the French "HornEast" (2017–2023), in northern and central Ethiopia; and the Spanish "StateHorn", in Somaliland, Djibouti and the Ethiopian Somali Region (Insoll *et al.* 2014; Insoll 2017; de Torres 2020). These projects have shed new light on the beginnings and expansion of Islam, on medieval trade networks, on local industry and on Islamic architecture in the region. Harlaa, for instance, was identified by the "Becoming Muslim" project as the earliest Islamic settlement of eastern Ethiopia, with radiocarbon dating placing it in the mid-12th century (Insoll 2021). Several studies have also been carried out in central Ethiopia, for example at the sites of Ifat and Nora (Poissonnier *et al.* 2011; Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2017; Chekroun and Hirsch 2020; Kelly 2020; Insoll 2021; Hirsch and Fauvelle-Aymar 2022; Pradines 2022).

However, despite this work, and despite the enduring influence of Islam in shaping the cultural and historical landscape of Ethiopia over centuries, Islamic archaeology and history remain under-researched. This is partly because Islam was seen as a threat by the ruling classes of imperial Ethiopia, whose ideology and national narrative were deeply intertwined with Christianity (Crummey 1988; Hussein 1992). In the late 19th century, Ethiopian rulers justified the expansion of their empire by invoking the ancient Christian presence from the Highlands to the Red Sea.[1] Foreign intellectuals also participated in the construction of this narrative: for example, in the 1920s and 1930s François B. Azaïs (Père Azaïs), a French Capuchin friar and missionary, was commissioned by the Ethiopian government to visit and document ruins in eastern Ethiopia, and one of his aims was to prove the ancient presence of Christianity in the region. As such, and although he conducted important research, he incorrectly interpreted ruined settlements and mosques as the sites of ancient churches that had been destroyed by the Muslims (Azaïs and Chambard 1931; Chekroun 2011).

1. See e.g. Menelik II's letter to Queen Victoria of 14th Miyazia 1883 (Incarnation Era, corresponding to 21st April 1891 CE) (British National Archives, FO 95/751). In this circular, sent to several European heads of states, Menelik defines Ethiopia's ancient boundaries that he wishes to re-establish as being far as apart as the White Nile basin, the Red Sea and Lake Nyanza.

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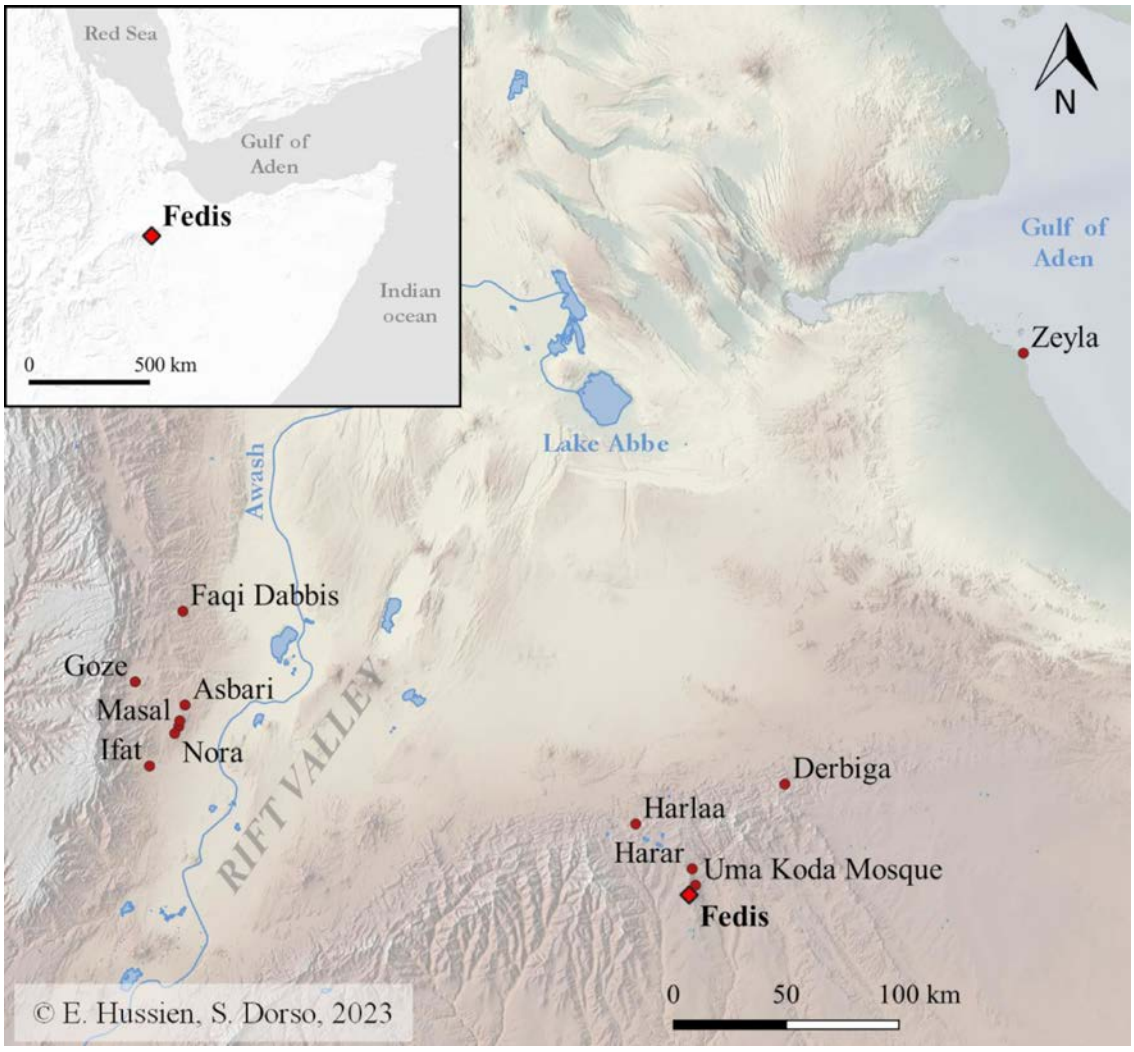

Figure 1. Map showing the location of Fedis and the distribution of other Islamic sites in eastern Ethiopia (prepared by Endris Hussien and Simon Dorso, 2023).

The present authors conducted a preliminary survey in Fedis district, a neglected area in eastern Ethiopia. The aim of this study was to identify archaeological remains, establish techno-typological parallels with other Islamic sites in the region and understand the historical significance of the area, so complementing other recent research on historical Islam in Ethiopia.

Review of historical sources

Background information on the geographical and historical context of Fedis can be found in sources from the 14th/15th and 16th century and from accounts form the 19th and early 20th century. The oldest document to be identified as perhaps containing a reference relating to Fedis is *The Glorious Victories of Amdä Ṣəyon*, a chronicle of Emperor Amdä Ṣəyon (r. 1314–1344). The dating of this work, written in Gəʿəz, is debated: for a long time it was dated to the reign of

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Amdä Ṣəyon, but in recent decades it has been suggested that it might be an epic fiction from the 15th century (Hirsch 2020). However, whatever the case, it records several toponyms of Muslim principalities. These principalities are presented as independent states, as they appear with the titles of their respective kings or governors. The work has been edited and translated into English by Huntingford (1965), and an Italian edition has been produced by Marrassini (1993). As translated by Huntingford, the king is said to have sent his army "into all the lands of the Muslims, those which are called Kwĕlgora, Gedäya, Kubät, Fädse [Fädəse], Qädse, Hargaya, and Bĕqulzar, and into all the land of Shoa" (quoted in Huntingford 1989, 89 [based on Huntingford 1965, 56, with updated orthography]). However, there is no precise information in this record about the location and boundaries of the territories mentioned.

Another possible mention of a medieval "Fedis" is in a travel itinerary from a collection assembled by Alessandro Zorzi in Venice in the early 16th century. The item is a letter that Zorzi obtained from an Ethiopian monk named "Brother Zorgi" in 1519, and part of it describes Zorgi's journey from "Barara to Soa [Shoa]". Zorzi mentions "Fence", "Gence" and "Colare" as three stations on this itinerary, and Crawford, who published a translation in 1955, argued that these are probably "Fadse", "Qadse" and "Kuelgora-Kalgor",with the last of somewhere within 20 miles east of Debra Berhan (Crawford 1955, 65–66). Therefore, it seems a medieval "Fedis" existed in the 14th–16th century somewhere around the region of Ifat (Fauvelle-Aymar *et al.* 2017).

In contrast to these two early works, sources from the 19th and 20th centuries that mention "Fedis" place it as a district south of Harar in eastern Ethiopia, which can still be identified today. The earliest work is a short anonymous Arabic text from Harar which describes events from the 1820s. This document was copied into a manuscript (Addis Ababa IES 276) by a Harari scholar named Ato Ahmad aš-Šāmī between 1946 and 1954 and published with an English-language translation in 1974 (Wagner 1974, 220–224). The text lists 40 villages around Harar that were destroyed in the 1820s under unclear circumstances. Among them, seven were in the "Fadiš region". Some of these destroyed villages (such as Umarcul) are still known today within the present-day district of Fedis (Ibid., 222). Five decades later, in 1876, an article on Harrar by the Egyptian commander Mohammed Moktar for the *Bulletin de la Société khédiviale de géographie du Caire* mentions the "Fedeches" as a coffee-cultivating group in the Harar region (Moktar 1876, 374).

The first Western informant to mention ruins in the region of Fedis is Philipp Paulitschke, an Austrian geographer and traveller who stayed in Harar and explored its surroundings for several months during 1884–1885. He subsequently published several reports, studies and maps based on his travels. He mentions "Fidis" as a region south of Harar, inhabited by Oromo people (Figure 2). A map from 1885 includes several ruined sites in the area, including settlements (Paulitschke 1885). Three years later, he described the towering ruins of "palaces" and "castles", Bia Ibrahim Fissa and Bia Kamóna, which he wrote were built in the landscape of "Fidis" before the arrival of the Oromo people (Paulitschke 1888, 242).

A few years later, the area south of Harar was visited by the Italian explorer Luigi Robecchi Bricchetti, whose account was published in 1896 under the title *Nell'Harrar*. Bricchetti relates that it was an hour's walk to reach "Bia Kamona" from the south-southwest of the Abdulkadir Jeylan shrine (about 19 km south of Harar). At "Bia Kamona" he visited the "ruins of an ancient building" displaying a multi-sided polygonal layout. He described ruined structures such as collapsed walls, corners, peristyles, gates and steps, all of which had been built from square-

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cut blocks fitted together (Bricchetti 1896, 245–248). The present authors are convinced that Bricchetti's descriptions of the ruins at "Bia Kamona" and the same toponym mentioned by Paulitschke (1888) match the location and characteristics of the Melka sites.

Père Azaïs, mentioned above, followed in the explorers' footsteps in the 1920s, using Paulitschke's map as he travelled through the "Land of Fadis". Here he enquired about the ruins of "Aleja Dible", which Paulitschke had reported on, but learning that the site was located three hours away at the foot of a precipice, he decided to continue on his way. He and his co-author describe the region up to the desert plain of Bia Woraba as being well cultivated, with many villages and water reservoirs called *aro* (Azaïs and Chambard 1931, 47).

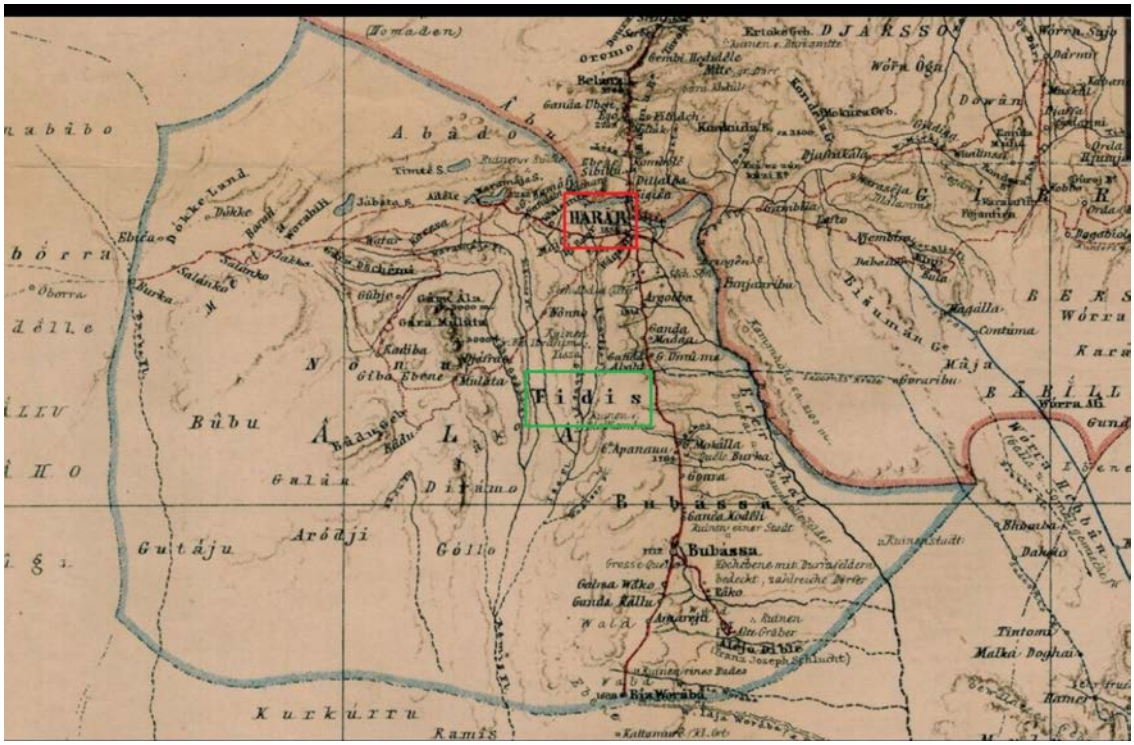

Figure 2. A late-19th-century map locating "Fidis" and other medieval settlements ruins, south of Harar, in eastern Ethiopia (modified from Paulitschke 1885).

In 1922 Gäbrä Sellasé Wäldä Arägay, the emperor's minister of pen (*ṣähafé te'ezaz*), mentioned a place called "Fedissa" in his Amharic *Chronicle of Menelik*. Menelik II had been King of Shewa from 1865 to 1889 and Emperor of Ethiopia from 1889 to 1913, and the chronicle gives an account of his conquest of Harar in 1887. It explains that the "Gate of Argobba" (or Argob Beri), located east of Harar, is the one through which the people of "Fedissa" came. Maurice de Coppet, who annotated the French translation of this chronicle in 1930, adds that "Fiddis" was then a "district or tribe located about 25 kilometres southwest of Harar" (Coppet, in Sellassié 1930, 247, translated by authors).

Finally, the *Guida dell'Africa Orientale Italiana* (*Guide to Italian East Africa*), published in 1938 by the Italian fascist colonial administration (1936–1941), describes Fádis as a "vast fertile area" south of Harar with lush coffee plantations (Consociazione Turistica Italiana 1938, 453, trans-

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lated by authors). At that time, Fádis had become headquarters of a *presidio* (garrison), and the cultivation of grain, sugar cane, and oilseeds was beginning there.

From the above sources, it is difficult to be certain whether there is a connection between medieval "Fädəse" and then "Fadiš" and "Fedis" of the 19th and 20th centuries. What is clear, however, is that from the 1820s onwards, "Fadiš" referred to a district south of Harar and was a widely known toponym in the region. It was mentioned by various informants and sources and corresponds to the present-day area of the *woreda* (district) of Fedis.

Study area description: Current setting

Fedis is located about 25 km south of Harar and is today one of the districts (*woredas*) of East Hararghe Zone in Oromia Regional State (Figure 3). It lies between 8°02'30"–09°00'14" N and 42°06'02"–42°19'00" E, with an elevation range from 500 to 2118 m asl. Boko is its administrative centre. Fedis district is bordered to the north by Harari Regional State, to the northwest by Haramaya, to the west by Girawa, to the southwest by Meyu muluke, to the southeast by the Erer River, which separates it from the Somali Region, and to the east by Babile.

The majority of the current inhabitants of the area are Oromo people, who practise agriculture, animal husbandry and small-scale trade. The major produce of the area is khat (*Catha edulis*), as a cash crop, as well as sorghum and maize. Other agricultural production includes fruit and vegetables, pulses and oil crops.

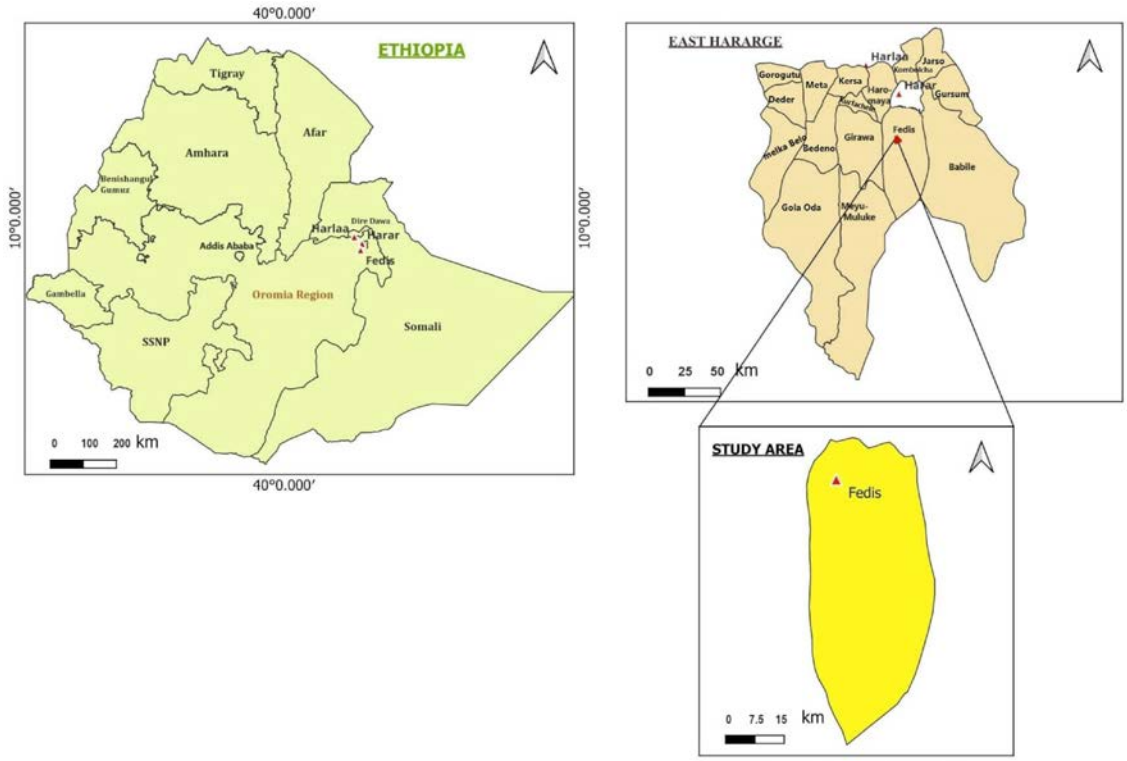

Figure 3. The location of Fedis in East Hararghe Zone (made by Meftuh S. Abubaker, 2023).

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The archaeological reconnaissance in Fedis

In attempting to locate the ruins mentioned by Paulitschke and then by Azaïs, the authors visited the district of Fedis and carried out preliminary archaeological exploration in the *kebele* (subdistrict) of Melka in 2021 and 2022. Melka is located about 10 km northeast of the town of Boko (Figure 4), and archaeological remains were identified there between 09°20'43"N 42°12'49" E and 09°12'59" N 42°7'10" E. They comprise stone-built defensive walls, watchtowers, an existing mosque with older foundations, two cemetery sites and a burial cairn, a water well, which takes the form of a stepwell, and storage pits of various sizes. Material culture collected from the surface by members of the local community was also documented for the first time. These include a carnelian-made seal with an Arabic inscription, pottery, beads of various kinds and moulds, all providing parallels with other Islamic sites in the region, among many other discoveries.

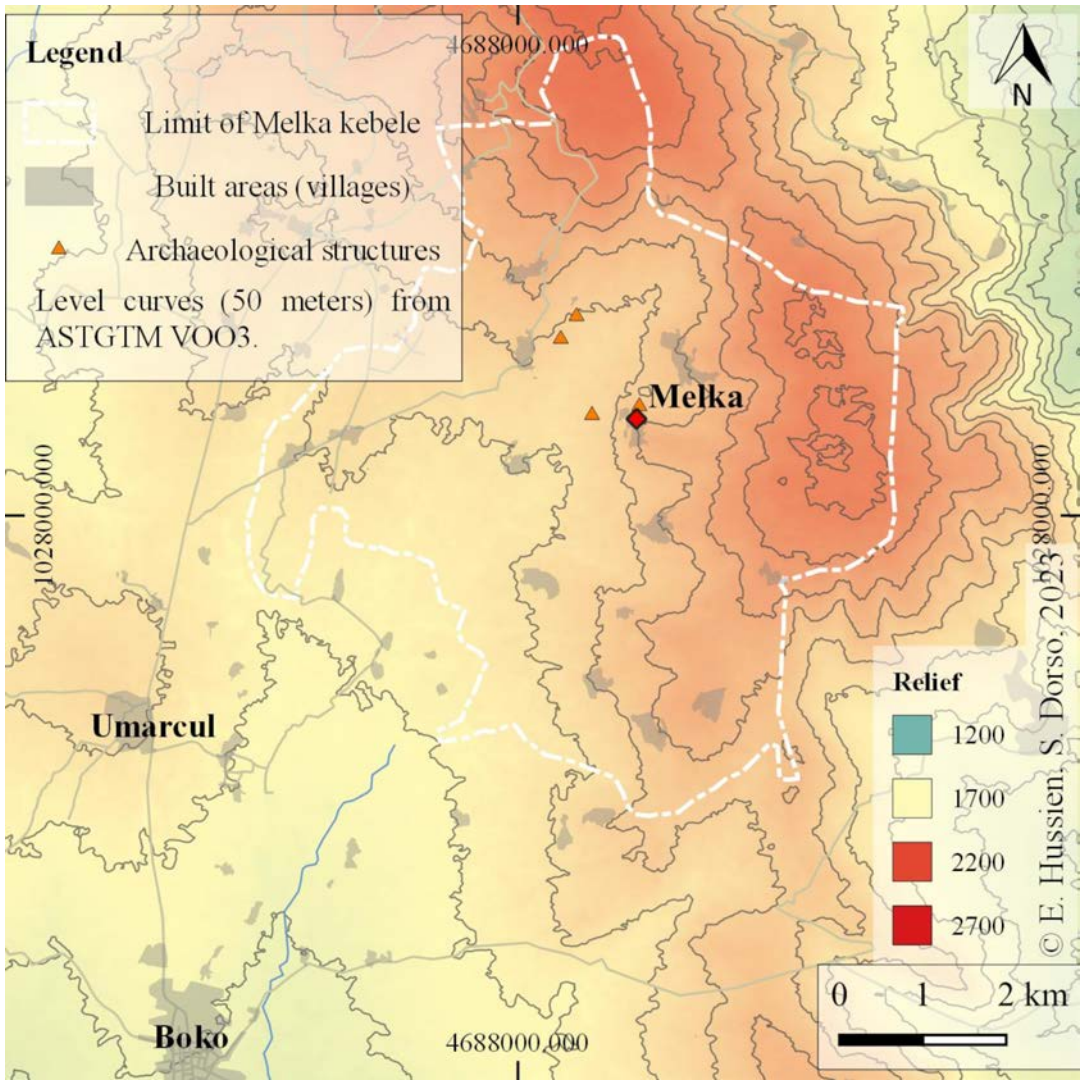

Figure 4. Map locating Melka (prepared by Endris Hussien and Simon Dorso, 2023).

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Also, interviews were conducted with various stakeholders, including the district's Culture and Tourism Office experts as well as elders, religious leaders and individuals within the Melka local community who owned the artefacts. The aim was to record stories or oral traditions about the site and its historical significance, the past inhabitants who built the ruined structures and the stepwell, and how locals had collected the artefacts they possessed.

Present-day locals attribute the origins of the ruined structures and artefacts to mythical ancient giants called the Harla people, and as material imprints of an abandoned medieval Islamic town that had been used as a trading station for caravans. According to them, the site was the last one to have been occupied by the Harla before they abandoned it and took most of its stones to Harar for the construction of Sofi Ber (probably a reference to *Suqutat bari*) near the southern gate of the walled city.

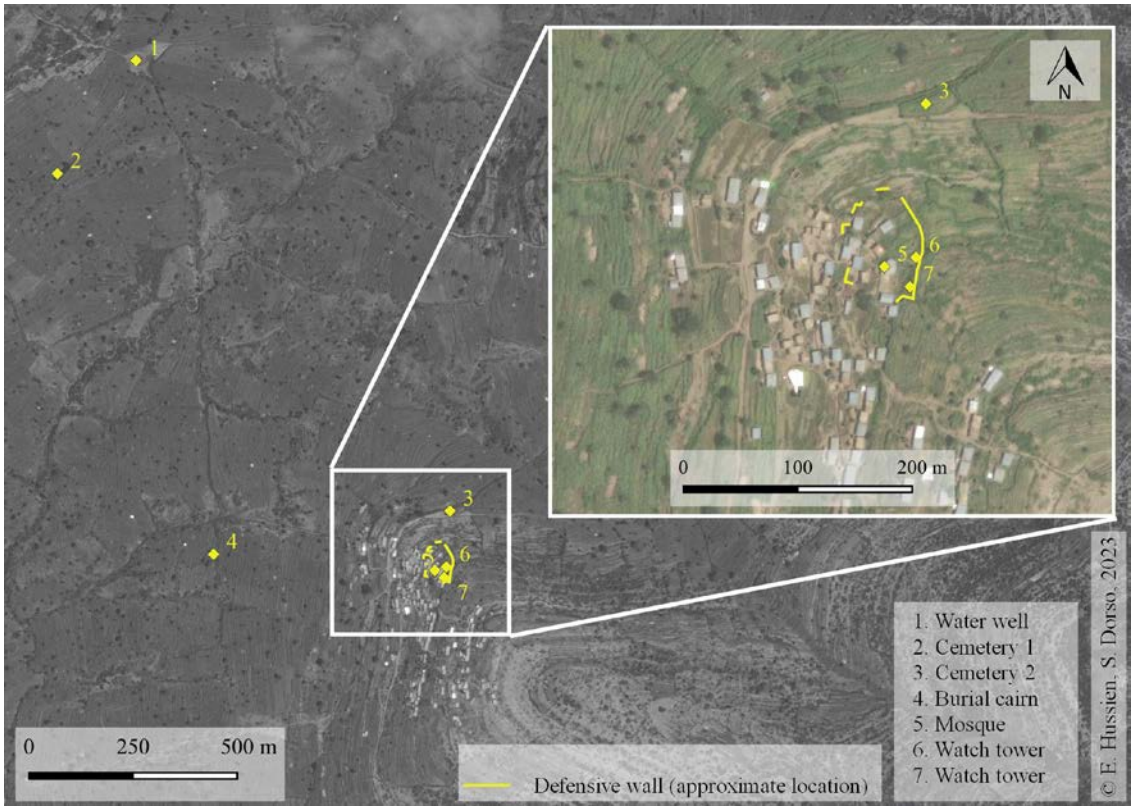

Figure 5. A site map locating surveyed areas and associated archaeological structures in Melka (prepared by Endris Hussien and Simon Dorso, 2023).

Discussions of the identified findings

Ruined defensive wall and watchtowers

The various archaeological remains identified at Melka include a partly preserved stone wall (Figure 6). Stone-built towns with defensive walls are characteristic of the archaeology of medieval eastern Ethiopia (Chekroun 2011); the enclosures had a defensive purpose, as the majority of the surrounding community was not Muslim (Insoll, pers. comm., 2024). At Melka,

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the wall took an oval shape and covered an area of approximately 160 × 80 m. The eastern and part of the northern sides of the wall are well preserved and comprise drystone masonry in the form of rectangular carved stones ranging 40–60 cm long × 30–40 cm tall × 40–50 cm deep. Some parts of the wall are up to 2 m high. The enclosure formed a residential area in which many of today's residents still live.

Figure 6. (a–b) Eastern and (c) northern sides of the ruined enclosure; and (d) a partly preserved gate on the northern side of the wall (photographs by Endris Hussien, 2022).

The most distinctive feature of the walls is the presence of watchtowers erected a few metres apart along their length (Figure 7). Two watchtowers were documented as having been built with a masonry technique similar to that of the wall itself. They are round and partly collapsed. Watchtowers are a commonly found feature of medieval stone-built towns in the region, such as at Harar (Insoll and Zekaria 2019).

The current inhabitants of Melka *kebele* confirmed that the wall had been built as a defensive wall and explained that it had formerly had four gates, in the four cardinal directions. Two of those gates (on the north and east) remain visible but have mostly collapsed. Thick and large rectangular, well-matched cut blocks (on average 50–90 cm long × 40–50 cm tall × 50 cm deep) were used in the masonry of the gates, along with rectangular-carved flat stepping stones at the entrances (Figure 6d).

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Figure 7. Ruined watchtower on the eastern side of the enclosure (photograph by Endris Hussien, 2022).

The Mosque ("Balda Mosque")

Mosques are one of the earliest material manifestations of Islamic culture, and archaeological evidence of their presence is invaluable for confirming whether a site is an Islamic settlement (Insoll 2020). Archaeological investigations have uncovered numerous examples (Chekroun 2011; Insoll 2017; Pradines 2017, 2022; Insoll and Zekaria 2019; de Torres 2020; Ayenachew and Assefa 2023; Chekroun *et al.* 2023; Cornax-Gómez and de Torres 2023).

At Melka, foundations of an older building are visible under the village's present mosque, which is located in the middle of the enclosure (at 9°13'30" N 42°10'36" E) next to some houses. The present structure is roughly rectangular, although with an exterior *mihrab* projecting from the *qiblah* wall (Figure 8a). The foundations indicate that the older building was larger than the present one: the northern wall was 18 m long, compared to 9.40 m today; the western wall was 12 m long, compared to 10.20 m; the southern wall was 14 m long, compared to 9.10 m; and the eastern wall was 25 m long, compared to 10.40 m. The southern wall of the older building has collapsed, but the others are well preserved, reaching heights of 1.30–2.30 high on the northern side, 2.30 m high on the western side and 1.80 m high on the eastern side. No exterior *mihrab* is documented in the foundation (Figure 8b). Also, whereas the modern building was constructed with smaller stones (on average10–30 cm long × 10–20 cm high × 20–30 cm in deep) cemented with mud, the older one was made of drystone masonry, using large well-matched cut blocks (on average 40–100 cm long × 40–50 cm tall × 40–60 cm deep).

The current inhabitants of the area told us that they call this mosque "Balda Mosque", and they identify the ruined foundations as an old mosque built by the ancient Harla people. They say the old mosque was originally built by "Aba Yazid" and later remodelled by "*garad* (chief) Balda", whom they say were "*garads* of the Harlas". In eastern Ethiopia, another abandoned mosque is also attributed to "Aba Yazid". This one is located about 50 km west of the Harar–Dire Dawa main road on the way to Laga Oda near the village of Hulul Mojo. It was built using a drystone masonry technique similar to that of the Balda Mosque in Melka, and it has well-preserved walls about 2 m high in some parts. In the city of Harar there is also a mosque dedicated to "Aw Abādir Yāzīd el-Bistami" and a grave where "Abādir Aba Yāzid' or 'Abu Yazid el-Bistami" is said to be buried (Foucher 1988, 1994). This saint is also known in the Islamic world

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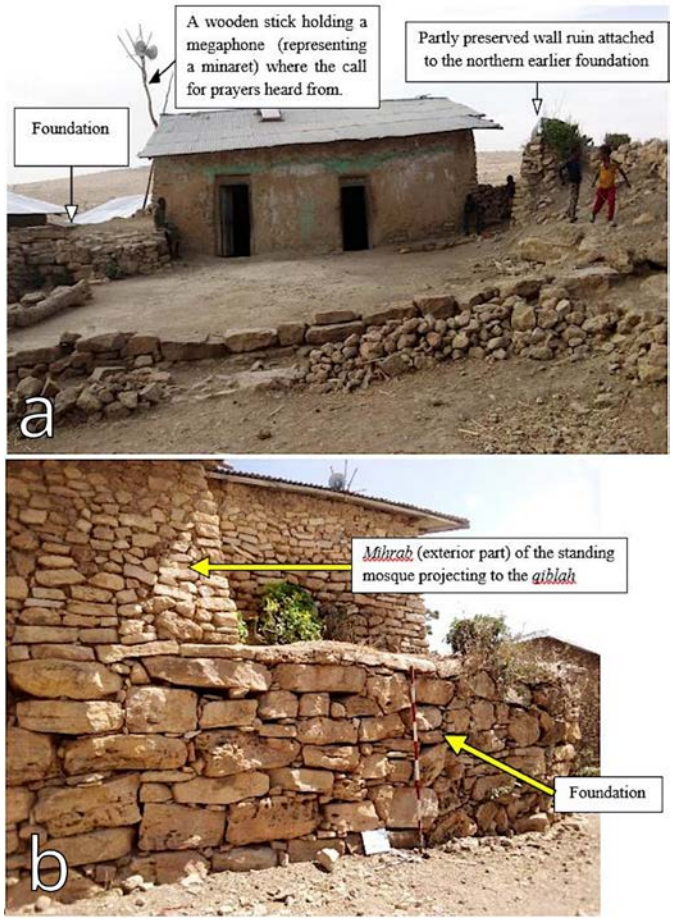

Figure 8. Balda Mosque at Melka: (a) from its southern side; and (b) from its northern side, with earlier foundation (photograph by Endris Hussien, 2022).

as Bāyazīd Bistāmī (804–874 CE) and is celebrated for his mysticism. However, he died in Iran and his tomb is located there in Bastam (Keeler 2021); this is not the only instance in Islamic Ethiopia where a saint who is known to have died elsewhere is said to be buried there (Foucher 1988).

Currently, the Balda Mosque is used as a *majlis* for the surrounding Muslim community. Religious leaders and elders gather there to discuss various social and religious matters or to resolve conflicts. The locals believe that the previous inhabitants used it for a similar purpose. It is also used as a Friday mosque of the surrounding community.

The Stepwell

Another important result of the surveys is the stepwell, which was identified about 1 km northwest of the remains of the enclosure (09°12'59" N–42°7'10" E). The researchers visited it during both survey seasons: in 2021 it was filled with water, making its architectural construction and depth difficult to discern (Figure 9a), but these details were clearly visible during the second season, in 2022, and so was able to be documented. The well is rectangular at the top, the northern and southern sides being 19 m long and the western and eastern sides being 18 m long. The stone-lined steps appear somewhat curved and become narrower from top to bottom (Figure 9b). Seven metres away from the well is a 70 cm-high drystone wall, possibly to protect the area from run-off and silting.

Compared to other wells identified by archaeologists in the region (for example, at the Harlaa site—Ayantu 2016; Insoll *et al.* 2017), the stepped drystone masonry of the well in Melka stands out, and its dimensions suggest a sizable population in the area. To harvest large volumes of water, the well is wider at the top, and the steps give the inhabitants easy access to water whenever its levels are low, for example during the dry season. The only well with a similar stepped architecture in the region was found within the compound of the Uma Koda Mosque (Figure 9c) near the village of Medero about 19 km south of Harar. This could have been used to preserve water for the *wudu* purification ritual, in which Muslims wash their face, hands, arms

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and feet before prayer. According to Leslau (1965), the mosque is dedicated to the best-known female Muslim saint in Ethiopia, "Umma Kōda".

The inhabitants of this village refer to the mosque as an old building, but it was under renovation during the authors' visit in January 2024. The stepwell of Uma Koda differs from that of Melka in being circular and much smaller (about 2 m in diameter). Also, although both wells appear similar in their architectural engineering, the stones used to construct the steps at Uma Koda are smaller and cemented with plaster, so that no step is formed from a single stone, whereas at Melka large well-matched cut blocks (on average 90–120 cm long × 40–50 cm high × 70–90 cm deep) formed flat steps overlapping one another.

Figure 9. (a) Part of the stepwell was filled with water at Melka (photograph by Habir Mohammed, 2021); (b) the Melka stepwell when empty (photograph by Endris Hussien, 2022); and (c) the stepwell in the compound of Uma Koda mosque (photograph by Héloïse Mercier, 2024).

The inhabitants attribute the stepwell at Melka site to the Harla people. They also believe that its architects designed it to conserve drinking water for themselves, their plants and their animals during the dry season. This function continues into the present. The locals call it "*Laga Gollo Wadassaa*", referring to "river" (*laga*), the locality (*Gollo*) and *Cordia africana*, a species of tree known in English as Sudan teak (*wadassaa*).

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Artefacts

During the survey, members of the local community brought us many artefacts they had collected, explaining that they had found them by chance in their residential areas and farmlands during their engagement in routine activities such as farming, digging and quarrying. They usually keep the remains but occasionally sell them to tourists.

Beads

Most of the beads that have been collected are identical to those found in Harlaa by Insoll between 2015 and 2020. During the survey conducted in Melka, 30 beads were counted in the possession of villagers. These ubiquitous artefacts appear either to have been made locally or imported through trade, with evidence for banded agate, glass, rock crystal and carnelian (Figure 10a). Large quantities of red glass and rock crystal beads drilled and polished into oval form were also found. There are also some undrilled red carnelian and glass beads in cup-shaped, circular and oval forms. The same variety of shapes, sizes and colours as well as materials and manufacturing techniques was found at the Harlaa site. Imported and locally produced, these beads could suggest the existence of regional and long-distance trade contacts as well as knowledge transfers in eastern Ethiopia, possibly during the medieval period (Insoll 2020, 2021; 2023; Insoll *et al.* 2021).

A carnelian with carved Arabic text

During the survey in Melka, the authors documented as one of the artefacts collected and owned by the locals a carnelian of 1.6 cm in diameter with carved Arabic text on one side (Figure 10b). This text is of great significance as evidence for Islamic conversion, reading "*Lā ilaha ilā Allāh wa Muḥammad Rasūl Allāh*" ("There is no deity but God and Muḥammad is His Prophet")—the *shahada*, Islam's profession of faith and the first of its Five Pillars. However, the text does not clearly indicate the purpose of the artefact: the *shahada* may be used for ornamental or prophylactic purposes, or as a seal or stamp by a religious or political administration.

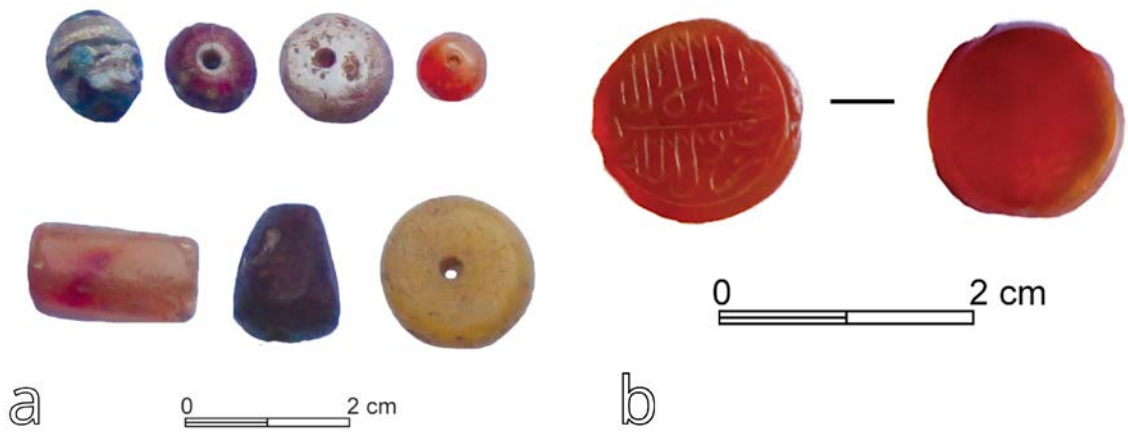

Figure 10. (a) Beads collected from Melka; (b) a carnelian-made seal with carved Arabic text from Melka (prepared by Endris Hussien and Simon Dorso, 2023).

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Pottery

One pottery find was also documented (Figure 11): an almost complete large ceramic storage jar, 50 cm high, with a wide body and neck and a rim 26 cm in diameter. The artefact was found by a local man while digging in his compound; it was uncovered *in situ* with ashes and burnt earth fills, and he kept it in his house as such. In terms of material and form, it is an unglazed, light brown, burnished ware (Figure 11) that resembles the wares identified in Harlaa (Tait and Insoll 2021). More specifically, it is a slipware, with a zig-zag line pattern at the base of the vessel's neck. It has a poorly sorted coarse inclusion (6 mm in size) and appears to have been handmade. The rim is partially broken.

Figure 11. A slipped appliqué ridge jar on its neck from Melka (photographs by Endris Hussien, 2022).

Stone-made mould and ground tool

The locals also showed us a mould and a grinding tool made of stone. Although there is no evidence of a pouring canal to identify it clearly as a mould, it looks like a broken half with

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a semi-circular carved part and one circular depression at the centre of the negative shape (Figure 12a). It was probably used to make ingots of copper, bronze or other metals, which typically have an elongated shape (Iles and Lyaya 2015). Comparable archaeological remains with a variety of carved or cut patterns serving similar purposes was also identified at the Harlaa site (Insoll 2021), suggesting contact and knowledge transfer. The ground tool (mortar) is made of sandstone and is polished and worn at the bottom (Figure 12b), probably due to prolonged use. It could have been used by the people of Harlaa or Oromo in later periods to grind plants, medicinal herbs and food grains.

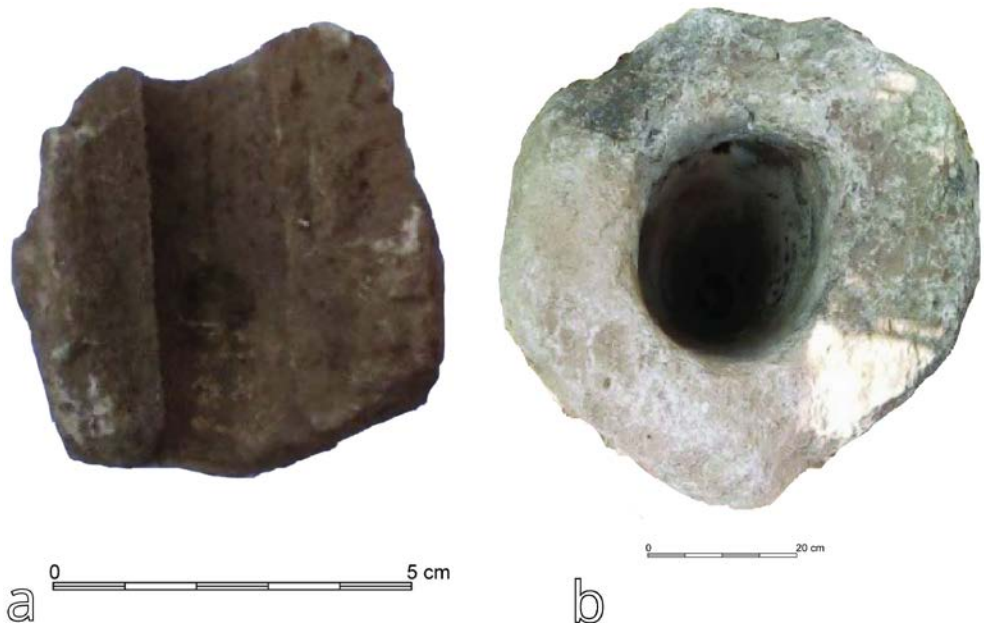

Figure 12. Mould and mortar from Melka (prepared by Endris Hussien and Simon Dorso, 2023).

Storage pits

The tradition of digging pits for storage and other purposes has a long history in Ethiopia, and is a practice continued to this day by rural farmers, particularly to store grain. Several storage pits are believed have been used by medieval caravans and were recorded in Harlaa by the "Becoming Muslim" project (Khalaf and Insoll 2019; Beldados *et.al.*, submitted). In the site of Melka in Fedis, a total of 12 pits were documented (Figure 13a). Many of them show resemblance with those in Harlaa in their digging technique, depth and size. The dimensions of the pits vary from 70 cm to 100 cm in diameter and from 1 to 2 m in depth (measurements were taken for some unfilled pits) (Figure 13b). Some of those pits are partly dressed with rectangular-carved stones, especially in the upper parts, up to 50 cm deep, where the loose soil ends and a compact layer (which seems like a limestone surface) begins (Figure 13c).

According to the current inhabitants of the area, the pits might have been used by medieval caravans to store their trading commodities or by the Harla people for grain storage. During the survey, we observed that many of them had been re-filled with earth and covered with stones by the present-day villagers to protect their children and cattle from falling into them (Figure 13d).

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Figure 13. Storage pits at Melka (photographs by Endris Hussien, 2022).

Cemetery sites

Cemeteries often provide significant information regarding the religious identity, materiality and burial traditions of a given community, as well as patterns of population mobility (Pryor *et.al.* 2020; Loiseau *et.al.* 2022; Dorso and Lagaron 2023). During the archaeological reconnaissance two funerary sites (Figure 5, indicated as "Cemetery 1" and "Cemetery 2") and a burial cairn were detected. However, no inscription was found on any of the graves in the cemeteries or on the cairn.

Cemetery 1 is located about 1 km northwest of the ruined enclosure near the stepwell, while Cemetery 2 was found near the enclosure about 100 m north. The number of individual graves was not fully counted in either cemetery, as many of them were covered with dense bushes and shrubs. Nevertheless, 28 graves from Cemetery 1 and eight from Cemetery 2 were documented. The individual graves in Cemetery 1 are Islamic, as can be seen from the shape of the grave markers and their eastward orientation towards the *qibla*—the direction of Mecca. They are rectangular and lined with rough, round and rectangular-cut flat blocks of varying dimensions (Figure 14a). The local community believes that this cemetery was used by their ancestors, suggesting a recent date.

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Cemetery 2 (Figure 14b) is known by the locals as "*Gora* Cemetery", and the state of visibility and conservation of the site made it difficult to record the shape of the grave markers and their orientation accurately. This is because grave markers and defined limits for the graves were missing in most cases, if not all, with only a few scattered blocks of worked or unworked stones present covered by shrubs. According to the present-day inhabitants, this cemetery site is believed to have been used by the ancient Harla people.

The cairn, meanwhile, is located some 200 m west of the enclosure (Figure 14d). It has a circular-shaped platform and was built from a few large boulders and a pile of smaller unworked pebbles, cobbles and earth. It is 10 m in diameter and structurally akin to a tumulus. A few trees on the western side and short scrubs and shrubs that have grown all over the cairn were also observed. The locals believe that it was a group burial of the ancient Harla people.

In addition to these cemeteries, four Muslim burials (again identified from eastward orientation) were also identified within the enclosed area close by northeast of Balda Mosque (Figure 14c).

Figure 14. Burials at Melka (photographs by Endris Hussien, 2022).

Conclusions

This study is a footstep in the archaeology of Fedis, eastern Ethiopia. The archaeological remains of Melka *kebele* had never been explored archaeologically before this survey, even

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though Fedis as an Islamic polity appears to have been mentioned in various sources and historical accounts from the 14th century onwards. Inspired by medieval and later documents mentioning "Fädəse" in the 14th/15th and 16th century and then "Fadiš" then "Fedis" from the 19th century onwards, the authors identified archaeological materials, including the ruins of defensive walls, a mosque, old foundations, a stepwell and other artefacts. The stepwell in particular stands out for its unique size and monumental architectural quality. The discoveries shed light on the historical significance and material culture of the site and highlight its similarities with other Islamic sites in the region.

Despite the archaeological potential of the site, the chronologies of the site and its findings have not been reconstructed. This research was completed within a short period through surveys without excavations that could have unearthed more archaeological remains. For a more complete picture of the history of the site, intensive archaeological investigation using various approaches including excavations and radiocarbon dating will be taken into consideration in the next stages of the research, which will be carried out as a PhD project. Given the limited number of Islamic sites excavated in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, we hope that this will increase our archaeological knowledge of medieval Islam in the region.

The current inhabitants—who reside within the compound formed by the ruined defensive wall and use the mosque for religious services—were observed quarrying stones from the ruins for house construction and digging the land to expand their settlement and farmlands, thereby endangering the archaeological remains. Continued dependence on the old stepwell for access to water also risks causing damage. The authors also learnt that the locals occasionally engage in selling the archaeological remains they collect. To properly manage the site, there should be a concerted effort by all stakeholders (including the Culture and Tourism Office of the district) to work towards conservation, preservation, further research and establishing protective measures for this site to remain a landmark for the area.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our appreciation to those who assisted us in accomplishing our preliminary surveys. The authors are grateful to the Fedis District Culture and Tourism Office experts for their unreserved support in facilitating the fieldwork. The Culture and Tourism Office Officer of the District, Nejash Abrahim, deserves special recognition for his kindness in providing us with vital information and for his direct supervision of our activities during the fieldwork. We are also grateful to Addis Ababa and Haramaya universities for offering us supportive letters that helped us to get permits from the relevant bodies to conduct our survey. We are extremely grateful to Dr Simon Dorso and Ms Héloïse Mercier for their immeasurable contributions and support in preparing maps and illustrations and for editing the manuscript. Our wholehearted appreciation also extends to Professor Timothy Insoll and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions about the organization of the paper. We are also grateful to the Head of the Harari Peoples Regional State Culture, Heritage and Tourism Bureau, Mr Tawalada Abdosh, for his cooperation during our surveys in Harar and the surrounding areas. Last but not least, we are thankful for the generosity and hospitality of the Fedis District community, which were remarkable.

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