

The finding context of an Ethio-Sabaeen inscription fragment from Melazo, Tigray

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The inscription presented in this report was documented during ethnohistorical field research at the locality of Melazo, La^olay May Ch'ew district in Central Tigray, which focused on legends and traditions regarding old settlement sites in Melazo and its wider surroundings. On 30 October 2024 a peasant priest reported the authors about the discovery of an ancient inscription by one of the neighboring farmers, *ato* Hagos Welemetryam. During a first visit on 6 November 2024 to the farmer's compound and fields, family members reported that their brother Solomon Hagos had found the stone inscription while ploughing in 2020, after the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, in the first months after the research activities of the German Archaeological Institute team had stopped.



Figure 1: The inscription stone (centre) in the compound of ato Hagos Welemetryam (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 6 November 2024)

The inscription fragment was found during ploughing in a field located behind the peasant *ato* Hagos Welemetryam's house directly above the May Gubt'ish valley and is now kept at his home (fig. 1). The family also led us to the exact site of the finding, situated at 38°48'3" E, 14°3'58" N, at an elevation of 2090 meters above sea level (fig. 7). The May Gubt'ish river below the site joins the May ^oAgazén further north (in local tradition still known by elders as the May ^oAgǝ'azén, with some variations). The slab is 43 cm long and 33 cm wide (fig. 3) and broken (fig. 4, 9); some layers of the stone are missing, which is why some of the characters are incomplete. The thickness of the

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Figure 2: Measurement of the letters

stone on the side of the inscription is 12.3 cm (maximum thickness), while it is 13.7 cm (maximum) on its other end. The characters, written in Boustrophedon, show the hand of an experienced stone mason (figs. 2, 3). Measurements show that letter lengths vary slightly from each other, but measure around 5 cm (upper line: W = 2.7 cm; separation sign = 5.2 cm; W = 2.7 cm; M = 5.1 cm; Q = 5.4 cm; M = 5.2 cm; c = 2.6 cm; R = 4.8 cm; T = 4.4 cm).



Figure 3: The inscription kept at the residence of ato Hagos Welemariam (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 7 November 2024)

The farmers have also reported that some dressed rectangular stone wall structures have frequently been exposed and observed while ploughing, and that they have collected some to use for constructing their houses (fig. 5).



During their visit, the authors could observe ancient pot sherds, diverse broken dressed stones indicating architectural structures, and grinding stones, scattered over the surface of the field where the inscription was found. The remnants of wall structures found at the place are highly disturbed due to ploughing.

Figure 4: The broken inscription stone from above, underside of the stone (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 6 November 2024)



Figure 5 (left): Other spolia kept in the compound (photo by Amanuel Abrha, 6 November 2024)



Figure 6 (right): The dressed sides of the inscription stone (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 7 November 2024)



The spatial context may be significant for the understanding of the site as it is linked with local religious rituals. About 20-25 meters from the field, a rock plate at the edge of the slope and of the field is used by the local community to slaughter animals during the yearly *Mesqel* celebration taking place below the slope, the slaughtered animals being described as "offerings"² (fig. 8). This rock plate is also used on other occasions, sacred and profane, to slaughter cattle, sheep, and goats. In addition, the May Gubt'ish valley is the site for the yearly Epiphany celebrations (*T'imqet*), which means in practice a water-centred ritual, which could go back to a pre-Christian period and then may have been integrated into local Christian practice. During these celebrations, prayers, processions, and blessings of water are performed in the valley.

Figure 7: The field behind the house of ato Ḥagos Welemariam, where the inscription was found, with remnants of structures and scattered findings (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 7 November 2024)

² An ethnohistorical analysis is in preparation.



Figure 8: The rock plate above the May Gubt'ish used for ritual slaughtering, with view on the mountain Imba Gelila in the background (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 7 November 2024)



Figure 9: The non-inscribed dressed side of the inscription stone (photo by Wolbert Smidt, 7 November 2024)