

A Fragment of a Monumental Inscription at Metera

by Bruce 'Skip' Dahlgren

During the last days of the final season of excavation at Metera under the direction of Francis Anfray, the author spent some time photographing noteworthy details of the various remains. This photo (fig. 1), taken on 1 June 1970, shows a fragment of an inscription in the Sabaic abjad on a stone block that had been reutilized in a wall in one of the larger foundations in the area designated as Mat-E1, constructed during the Aksumite period, sometime between the third and the sixth centuries CE. It is a small portion of a monumental inscription from a pre-Aksumite structure dating up to 1000 years earlier, it consists of two letters and a marker indicating word separation: *r | f* (seen here reading from right to left). Given the possibility that the inscription may have been written in boustrophedon (alternately right to left and left to right lines of text), the original orientation of the fragment cannot be determined, but it seems plausible that *f* is the last letter of one word, and *r* is the first letter of the next. The letters were approximately 20 cm in length. The inscribed block appears to be sandy limestone, as do the two large blocks beneath it in the wall, perhaps reutilized as well from the same earlier structure.



Fig. 1: Inscription on reutilized stone fragment, photo by the author

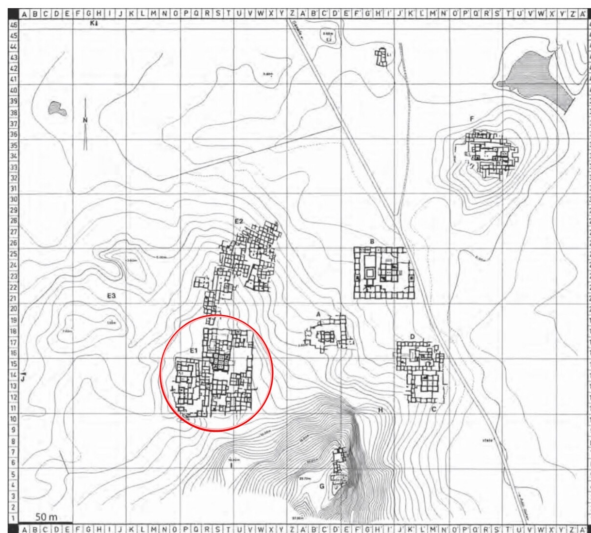


Figure 1: Metera Archaeological Site Plan showing location of area Mat-E1



Figure 3: Mat-E1, location of inscription on north wall of large villa foundation

The plans of Metera reproduced above (figs. 2-3) were originally found in F. Anfray, 2012, "Matara, the Archaeological Investigation of a City of Ancient Eritrea", in F.-X. Fauvelle-Aymar (ed.), *Palethnology of Africa*, P@lethnology, 4, 11-48.

Below are a selection of photos showing parts of the area designated as Mat-E1, which the author took between 1-27 June, 1970. As can be seen on the large-scale plan on the previous page, this section of the city consists of a small number of large square Aksumite style foundations, similar in form to the central villas in the larger palaces, surrounded by closely packed small rooms, courtyards, and pathways. Note in the bottom right photo (fig. 9) a section of wall that includes some large reused stone fragments of the same type as the inscribed fragment.



Figure 4: Overview of Mat-E1, photos 4-9 by the author



Figure 5: Foundation walls of large building



Figure 6: Pathway between buildings



Figure 7: Steps at entrance to large building



Figure 8: Doorways into individual rooms



Figure 9: Drainage slot; reused building stones

Biographical note

Bruce 'Skip' Dahlgren earned a BA in anthropology with emphasis on archaeology at the University of Pennsylvania, and an honors certificate in the Arabic language at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey California. He lived in Asmara from January 1968 until August 1972, serving as an Arabic linguist at Kagnev Station in Asmara. During this time he also was a team member at the excavations at Metera in 1969 and 1970, and at Yeha in 1971 and 1972, all under the direction of Francis Anfray. Since returning to the United States he has served as an announcer and program host on Public Radio stations, has been writing a novel set in Yeha and Ma'rib during the 10th Century BCE, as well as maintaining fluency in Tigrinya and continuing research on the past of Ethiopia and Eritrea. He has created an extensive virtual museum called Abyssinia, originally under the auspices of the Science Circle Foundation, but now independently, displaying replicas of excavation sites in Ethiopia and Eritrea restored to their original status in three dimensions. He currently lives in central Arkansas.



Figure 2: Bruce Dahlgren in Yeha, 1971