

Miscellaneous Articles

The Seals of Sib'at

by TEKLE Hagos¹

This article provides a short description of two seals discovered on the surface at the site of Sib'at near the town of 'Adwa in a disturbed context, which are currently in the custody of Saint Mika'el Church.

*Fig. 1: The two seals of Sib'at*²

The archaeological site of Sib'at is located in the northern tip of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in Central Tigray Administrative Zone (Tekle 2011). It was discovered in 2008 by an archaeological survey conducted by the Eco-Tourism Project of Addis Ababa University under the direction of Dr. Mulugeta Fesseha (Mulugeta et al. 2010). Actually, it was the local people from the site of Sib'at, particularly the clergymen and *Ato* Haile Kidane Tesfamichael, who initiated the Eco-Tourism Project to investigate the same site.



The Eco-Tourism Project documented remains of an ancient church ruin and several artifacts from the disturbed surface of the same site tentatively dated between about the 2nd and 7th centuries A.D. (for methodology and description of the site, see Tekle Hagos 2011). Some of the artifacts that were documented by the same team are the two seals which are the subject of this article. One seal is bigger than the other: the smaller is 20 mm by 10.5 mm and the larger is 30 mm by 20 mm.

Both seals are made of greenish black soapstone. They have perforated projections at their back. The surfaces of both seals are polished and smooth. Both seals have well designed surfaces with depressed impressions. The larger one has 30 dotted depressions enclosed by three parallel longitudinal lines. The surface of the smaller seal has 14 zigzag depressions. The surfaces depressions of both seals seem to have been executed perfectly with sharp tools that were probably made of metal. Such perfection indicates the sophistication of Aksumite artistry and artisans in late Aksumite times.

A third seal, red in color and larger than the previous ones was recently discovered during illicit excavations carried out by the local people to construct a museum for the church (Haile Kidane Tesfamichael, personal communication; a photo of this seal could not be provided).

¹ Department of Archaeology and Heritage Management, Addis Ababa University.

² Photo courtesy of the author.

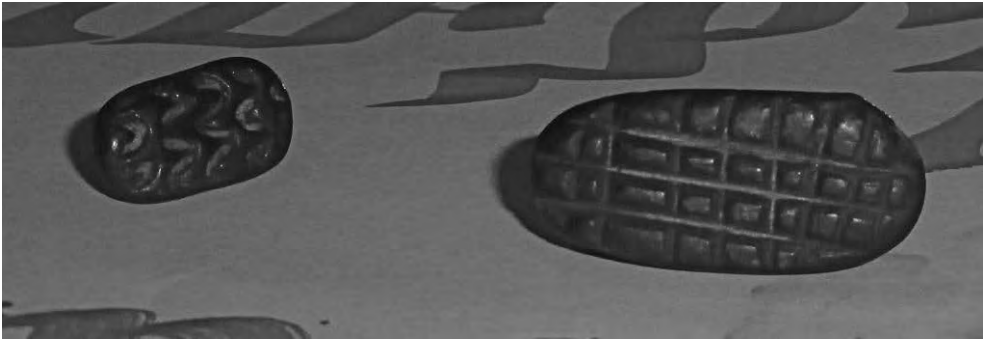


Fig. 2: The surface depression of the large seal (right) and the small seal (left)³

Such types of stone seals have never been documented in Pre-Aksumite, Proto-Aksumite and early Aksumite context dating between the first millennium BC and the first quarter of the first millennium AD. However, similar seals were documented at a single Aksumite site by Professor David Phillipson in the 1990s. Archaeological excavations carried out by Phillipson in 1995 at the domestic site which is located on the northern outskirts of the town of Aksum revealed seals that are similar to those of the site of Sib'at (Phillipson 2000).

The function of the stamps or seals that are known from the Pre-Aksumite context in general and the royal tombs of Yeha in particular has been debated by scholars. Unlike the seals of Sib'at, the stamps of Yeha were made of bronze or copper alloy with zoomorphic representation of sacred animals such as lion and ibex. According to Anfray (1990), such stamps were considered as 'identity marks' (*marques d'identité*), brands or stamps (Phillipson 2012). The controversy on the function of the objects appears to have been settled by the discovery of South Arabian artifacts bearing the impression of similar objects that seem to have been used as seals (Manzo 2009). From this evidence, it appears that the seals of Sib'at were used by the Aksumite elites or governors of Sib'at for administrative purposes such as taxation and inspection in late Aksumite times.

Seals are the result of a highly stratified society or a centralized state machinery as we can infer from seals of Yeha dating to the middle of the first millennium B.C. and the seals of the domestic site dating to the middle of the first millennium A.D. It appears that the seals of Sib'at and the domestic site were contemporary although the former were documented in a disturbed context. Furthermore, the seals of Sib'at and the domestic site were in use when Aksum was prosperous in agriculture and trade in late Aksumite times between the 5th and 6th centuries A.D.

³ Photo by Wolbert Smidt (November 2012).

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The discovery of seals at Sib'at similar to those of the domestic site confirms that Sib'at was an important Aksumite administrative centre that controlled the Eritrean lowlands to its north and the Tembén lowlands to its south. The archaeological site of Sib'at has never been systematically investigated by archaeologists and requires further research to understand its complexity. The local people must stop vandalizing the rich archaeological resources of the site. It is also the duty and responsibility of the local authorities to stop illicit archaeological excavations without any official permit by the concerned government authorities.

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