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

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Abstract

Islam in Ethiopia has a profound impact as one of the streams of its long history. It has been present in the country for almost one and a half millennia. It was first introduced to Axum in northern Ethiopia in AD 615, also referred to as the 'first hijra', followed by the subsequent expansions to Shoa in central and eastern Ethiopia through Dahlak and Zeila ports since the 9th century AD. The main agents of these expansions were caravan traders and refugees. Coinciding with such intensified trade and the Islamisation process, eastern Africa witnessed the emergence and consolidation of several Muslim principalities, including in modern-day Ethiopia, from the 11th century AD onwards. Fedis, as one of those principalities within modern-day Ethiopia, was mentioned in Amde Seyon's chronicle in the 14th century AD. However, Islamic history and archaeology in Ethiopia remain understudied until recently. As part of this negligence, Fedis site has never been studied until the completion of this research. Inspired by its historical mentions and an old map revealing several ruins of settlement sites south of Harar, the researchers conducted a preliminary survey of this particular site in 2021 and 2022. Accordingly, various remains were identified from Fedis that confirmed the site's archaeological potential. During the fieldwork, ruins of an elaborate stone-built defensive wall, a succession of mosques, a stepwell, carnelian-made seal carved with Arabic text, beads of various kinds, storage pits of different sizes and burials were the findings explored, among many others. As confirmed from these findings, this pilot research sheds new and first archaeological insight into the medieval Islamic site of Fedis in eastern Ethiopia.

Keywords: *East Africa; Eastern Ethiopia; Islamic archaeology; medieval Islamic sites; Fedis.*

Introduction

Ethiopia was one of the early centres for Muslims in the world. During the early days of Islamization in Arabia (*Mecca*), the Quraysh, whose religious belief depended on polytheism prior to conversion to Islam, persecuted followers of Islam and the families and relatives of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). Due to this reason, in 615 AD, a group of followers of Islam migrated to the state of Abyssinia, a country in east Africa ruled by a Christian king near the Red Sea coast, where they found asylum in Aksum (the administrative centre of the country in the north until about the 8th century AD). Traditionally, Muslim writers referred to this event as the '*first hijra*' (Trimingham, 1952). As for the migrants, the Axumite king had granted them the freedom to live, as long as they wished, and exercise their religion (Islam) in his territory.

Integrating with the locals, according to traditions, the migrants managed to expand their religion to the extent that they were able to build mosques. One of the oldest mosques in Africa and a currently serving mosque in Wukro district of Tigray, known as *Al-Nejashi*, according to tradition, came into existence that time though subsequently remodelled. Muslims from different parts of Ethiopia are practising yearly pilgrimages until this day. The Arab conquest of the Arabian Peninsula since the 7th century AD onwards forced many Muslims to flee to East African coasts as refugees. During the Fatimid rule of Egypt and particularly beginning from the 10th century AD, the Islamization of East African coasts was intensified through Dahlak, Zeila and Berbera ports accompanied by caravan traders and refugees (Hoffman, 2008; Breton & Ayele, 2019).

As mentioned above, the history of eastern Ethiopia was highly linked to trade and the Islamisation process. This historical process has been documented by various historical accounts (Trimingham, 1952; Tadesse, 1968; Hoffman, 2008), though they are characterised by a lack of clarity and uniformity in terms of chronological and spatial pieces of evidence. Most importantly, some archaeological studies (Fauvelle-Aymar & Hirsch, 2004; de' Torres, 2020) mentioned Zeila Port as one of the earliest gateways of

Islam into the East African interior as far as Harar and the surroundings in modern-day Ethiopia.

Despite a clear historical record of the presence of Islam in northern Ethiopia in the 7th century AD, the first arrival of Islam and Muslims in the eastern part remained unclear until the present. Different historical and archaeological research mentioned different chronological speculations. However, there are some significant and promising collaborative efforts being undertaken by archaeologists and historians in the Horn of Africa, especially under the framework of the European Research Council (ERC) since the first decade of the 21st century AD. These include projects of the British '*Becoming Muslim* that works in eastern Ethiopia (2016-2022)'; The French '*HornEast* (2017-2023)' working in northern and central Ethiopia, and the Spanish '*StateHorn*' that works in Northern Somalia and Djibouti (Insoll et al., 2014; Insoll, 2017; Loiseau et al., 2018; de' Torres, 2020).

The '*Becoming Muslim*' research project in eastern Ethiopia, for instance, recently completed intensive archaeological investigations in the Harar and Dire Dawa regions. This project sheds new insights into the beginning and expansion of Islam, medieval trade networks, local industry and architecture and other cultural developments associated with the Muslim medieval inhabitants of the region, otherwise known as Harla, who lived in the area until the 15th century AD (Insoll, 2017, 2023, 2021). The local community remembered those inhabitants as 'giants' who occupied vast areas extending from Chercher highlands all the way to Harar plateaus and Babile lowlands. Previous historical researches conducted in the region (Trimingham, 1952; Fauvelle-Aymar & Hirsch, 2004; Braukamper, 2022) also linked cultural remnants of the region with these peoples. Several material remains including elaborate stone-built settlement quarters, defensive walls, ruins of mosques, necropolises, water wells, storage pits, coins of different origins, stone-made and carnelian seals engraved with Arabic texts, imported and local ceramics, beads made of various materials, worked sea shells and precious stones were identified in eastern Ethiopia (Braukamper, 2022; Fauvelle-Aymar & Hirsch, 2004).

Other historical records also pointed out the formation of several Muslim states in eastern Ethiopia alongside the intensified trade and Islamisation process from the 11th century AD onwards. In this regard, Fedis that presently refers to a District which retained its historical name in East Hararghe Zone, as one of those Muslim principalities, was mentioned in the *Ge'ez* chronicle of 'Amda Seyon' (*r*. 1314-1344), as also recorded by Huntingford (1990, p. 89) and Marrassini (1993, p. 98). Other sources, such as Foucher (1988), also indicated that Fedis was one of the places of the Muslim venerated saints who propagated Islam in eastern Ethiopia. As recorded in the Arabic hagiography of Yahya b. Nasrallah '*Fath Madinat Harar*', also mentioned by Foucher (1988, pp. 266–273), two the Muslim venerated saints named 'Aslah-adin' and 'Ahmed al-Badawi (*Aw Guduro*) were believed to have lived at Fedis. Aslah-adin's burial tomb (*qubbi*) and a rock (*awliya*) in memory of Ahmed al-Badawi (*Aw Guduro*) were also reported to have been found in this particular site. These Sheikhs were among the companions of the most venerated Saint Abadir Umer ar'Ridah (the leader of the saints), who were believed to have come from Mecca with the arrival in Harar to spread Islam in the 13th century AD (Wagner, 1978; Foucher, 1988). Inspired by these indicative historical accounts and an old map made by the Austrian traveller Paulitschke (1854-1899) revealing several ruins of settlement sites south of Harar, the researchers conducted archaeological surveys in the Fedis District of East Hararghe Zone to put the various dots of Islamic cultural imprints together and reconstruct a fuller picture of Islamic history of the site.

As part of East Africa that was at the crossroads of contact and population mobility between Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Far East and the Indian Ocean during the medieval period, the history of eastern Ethiopia is also associated with the expansion of Islam, long-distance trade and the formations of Muslim states. Several types of research (e.g., the works of the '*Becoming Muslim*' project) pinpointed that inhabitants of the region, particularly the 'Harla' peoples, were able to control the caravan trade routes extending from the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden up to the Somali

Coast and actively engaged in the local trade (Insoll, 2021). Also confirmed from imported ceramics, beads, and coins of different origins (de' Torres, 2020; Insoll, 2021, 2023), they had maintained international trade connections within Africa (such as with Egypt and Somalia), Arabian Peninsula (such as Yemen and Saudi Arabia), South Asia (India and Sri Lanka), and the Far East countries (such as China).

Despite the historical fact that Islam played vital roles in moulding previously accepted traditions, beliefs, cultures, social constructs and livelihoods in Ethiopia in general, the study of Islamic archaeology has been neglected for a long time, as it seems to be deliberate. Although Muslims, in general terms, constitute almost half of the total population of Ethiopia today, Islamic history remains understudied to this day for several reasons.

Historical and archaeological studies in the country have been impeded by systemic biases of professionals in the fields regarding themes, timeframes and regions studied. Spatially, the northern hemisphere of the country has been prioritized over other areas (e.g., Tadesse, 1968; Phillipson, 2005). One of the reasons for this systemic bias could be that northern Ethiopia was the earliest Centre for the formation of Christian society and state and had served as the government seat for subsequent years until recently. The northeastern part of the country (e.g., the Afar area) has also given research focus, as key archaeological and paleoanthropological sites bearing evidence of the earliest biological and cultural developments are located. Temporally and thematically, the prehistoric archaeology of Ethiopia is more widely favoured by researchers than the historical one. Lithic and osteological materials have been given more attention than other archaeological remains.

Moreover, Islamic history has been ignored due to the Christian theocratic state structure approach Ethiopia had followed until the 1970s. This negatively affected the study of other cultural elements than Christianity, marginalizing the rest, by which rulers legitimized their power from the Aksumite period until the imperial regime collapsed in 1974. In this case, the French archaeological mission of 1922-1936 in eastern and south-eastern Ethiopia can be mentioned to support the argument with historical

references as to how much the prolonged Christian theocratic state structure and existing cultural and traditional ideology by which rulers claimed abused the study of Islamic history. Chekroun, in her review of *"A Capuchin archaeologist in Ethiopia (1922-1936): François Bernardin Azaïs"*, stated the interests and objectives of the imperial regime and French archaeological surveys. It reads as:

> "*The French had an ambition of developing their influence in East Africa by: (a) France's objective is therefore to conduct a policy of archaeological excavations and document collection in Ethiopia as the one carried out in Egypt to create a French Research Centre in Ethiopia; (b) research of ancient ruins and documents to establish and fortify the traditions that trace the origin of this country, on one side to the Queen of Saba, on the other to the Pharaohs; and (c) the Louvre Museum has no archaeological documents of the past of this old civilization, it would be an honor for the Museum, and a glory for French science to receive documents torn from the ruins of several years and able to help solve the historical problems relating to the origin of these peoples*" Chekroun (2011, pp. 1–2).

On the other hand, Emperor Haile Selassie I granted his permission to the French to conduct their survey after receiving their letter in 1922 with content emphasizing the purpose of the research as it was:

> "*to scientifically establish the antiquity of the Ethiopian Empire, to reveal its former glory and to prove that Islamization is merely an empire of devastation that ruthlessly pursues the ruin of the past by making a clean slate of its fanaticism, highlighting the struggle against Islam and valuing Ethiopia's past*" Chekroun (2011, pp. 1–2).

In sum, the aforementioned reasons negatively affected the study of Islamic history and archaeology as fields of study as well. Thus, this preliminary survey was completed to explore one of the neglected Islamic cultural remnants from Fedis District in eastern Ethiopia that provides first insight into the archaeology of the site in particular and fills the major research gap in the study of Islamic archaeology in eastern Ethiopia in a wider context. Specifically, this study has the following objectives:

1. To locate the medieval Fedis site with its cultural remnants.
2. To identify and document material remains in the study area.
3. To establish cross-dating and techno-typological comparison of the finds and the site itself with other previously studied sites in the region, such as Harlaa and Harar.

4. To understand the historical significance of the study area and its findings.

Fedis was mentioned as 'Fadse' in the 14th-century AD chronicle as one of the allied Muslim principalities in eastern Ethiopia and Shoa territory (an area in central Ethiopia where the Muslim Sultanate of Shoa (896-1285 CE) was formed) when King Amda Seyon I (*r*.1314-1344) sent his army to conquer them. Huntingford (1990) in his historical account entitled "*The Historical Geography of Ethiopia from the First Century AD to 1704*" mentioned 'Fadse' two times, as also recorded by the king's chronicle in a similar way. Firstly, Huntingford (1990, p. 89) quoted the chronicle's record as:

> ''*I sent my army into all the lands of the Muslims, those which are called Kwelgora, Gedaya, Kubat,* ***Fadse****, Qadse, Hargaya, and Bequlzar, and into all the lands of Shoa*'' (*Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon p.56*).

Secondly, Huntigford (1990, p. 91) mentioned similar narrative from the same chronicle on p.74 as:

> "*Muslim states allied with Ifat against the Christian Ethiopian King were Adal, Mora, Labakala, Hagara,* ***Fadse****, Gedad, Nagab, Zuba, Harla, Hobat, Tarsa, Eym or Edom, Elbero, Zel'a, Este and Dawaro*".

Furthermore, the Islamic state of Fedis was also appeared on Marrassini's (1993) Italian record titled "*Lo Scettro E La Croce La campagna di' Amda $eyon I contro l'Ifat (1332)*" from the 14th-century *Ge'ez* chronicle of Amde Seyon I. Below are the original texts in the chronicle in *Ge'ez* language and the Italian translation recorded by Marrassini (1993, p. 98):

a) The Ge'ez text reads as,

"ወካዕበ ፡[18] ሰምዑ ፡ እንግርከሙ ፡ ኦሕዝበ ፡[19] ኢትዮጲያ ፡[20] ዘከመ ፡ ጸብእዎ ፡
ተንብላት ፡ ዕልዋነ ፡[21] ሃይማኖት ፡ ለንጉሥ ፡ዓምደ ፡ ጸዮን ፡ ወዘከመ ፡
አስተጋብአ ፡ ነገሥተ ፡[22] ወመኳንንቲ ፡ ብእሲ ፡[23] ዘሰሙ ፡ ሳልሕ ፡[24]
ወሚመቱ ፡[25] ቃዚ ፡ አምሳለ ፡ ሊቀ ፡ ጳጳሳት ፡ ዘያከብርዎ ፡
ነገሥት ፡[26] ወመኳንንት ፡[27] ወይፈርህዎ ፡[28] ከመ ፡ እግዚአብሔር ፡[29] ወአንበልዑ፡
ኩሉሙ ፡ ጎብሮሙ ፡ ንጉሥ ፡ አደል ፡ ፩። ወንጉሠ ፡[30] ሞራ ፡ ፩። ንጉሥ ፡
ለበከላ ፡[31] ፩። ወንጉሠ ፡[32] ሀገራ ፡ ፩። ንጉሥ ፡ ፈድሴ ፡[33] ፩።[34]
ወንጉሠ ፡[35] ግዳይ ፡[36] ፩።[37] ንጉሥ ፡ ነገብ ፡[38] ፩።[39] ወንጉሠ ፡[40] ዙባ ፡[41]
፩።[42] ንጉሥ ፡ ሐርላ ፡ ፩።[43] ወንጉሠ ፡[44] ሆበት ፡[45] ፩። ንጉሥ ፡[46] ሐርገላ ፡
፩።[47] ወንጉሠ ፡ ተርሳ ፡ ፩።[48] ንጉሠ ፡[49] ኤይም ፡[50] ፩።[51] ወንጉሠ ፡[52] ኤልብሮ ፡
፩።[53] ንጉሥ ፡ ዜልኦ ፡ ፩።[54] ወንጉሠ ፡[55] ኤሰቴ ፡[56] ፩፡ ደዋሮ ፡
፱ መኰንን ።[57]ድልሆያ ፡[58] ፷[59] መኰንን ።[60] ውርጋር ፡[61] ፲ወ፪[62] መኰንን ።[63]"

b) The Italian translation of the above Ge'ez texts reads as,

> "*Ascoltate ancora, che io vi possa raccontare, o gente d'Etiopia, di corne i musulmani ribelli alla fede fecern guerra al re 'Amda ~eyon, e di corne radunè\ re e principi un uomo di nome Sale]:i, 1 che aveva la carica di qi'lzz~, si mile a quella di patriarca, che re e governatori onoravano e temevano corne un dio.3 Si unirnno e si radunarono tutti:' un re di Adal, un re di Mora, un re di Labakala, un re di Hagara, un re di Fadsé, un re di Geday, un re di Nagab, un re di Zuba, un re di I;farla, un re di Hobat, un re di I;fargalâ, un re di Tarsa, un re di Eym, un re di Elbero, un re di Zël 'a, un re di Estë; Dawi\ro nove governatori,' Delhoya 8, Wergar 12, Gâsâ 7, Go~an 8, Madgot 8*,"

In both the aforementioned original *Ge'ez* record appeared in the king's chronicle and Italian translation of it mad by Marrassini later in the 20th century, the list of Muslim states deemed to have been independent principalities with their own kings and administrative territories. They appeared with titles of their governors. Accordingly, Fedis, as one of the many Muslim principalities listed in Amde Seyon's chronicle, was mentioned in *Ge'ez* language as "***ንጉሠ፡ፈደሴ***", in which "***ንጉሠ***" means "***king of***" and "***ፈደሴ***" refers to **"Fedis"**. With the exceptions of the historical names, however, neither Marrassini nor Huntigford clearly stated where those Muslim states were geographically located including Fedis. However, Foucher (Foucher, 1978, pp. 266–273) mentioned Fedis as an Islamic site where the burial tomb (*qubbi*) and the rock (*awliya*) recalling the two Muslim venerated saints named Aslah-adin and Ahmed al-Badawi (*Aw Guduro*) respectively were found. According to this document, it is located 25 km south of Harar that geographically indicates the present-day Fedis District in East Hararghe Zone. Furthermore, the Austrians travel account entitled "*Übersichtskarte von dem Gabiet der Ejssa-Somãl, von Harar und den Nordlichen Gallaländern,* 1854-1899" by Paulitschke (1885) is the most vital available document with a recorded map of Fedis precisely. As shown in Figure 1, Fedis is appeared as 'Fidis' and its location was indicated south of Harar, exactly where the present-day Fedis is situated.

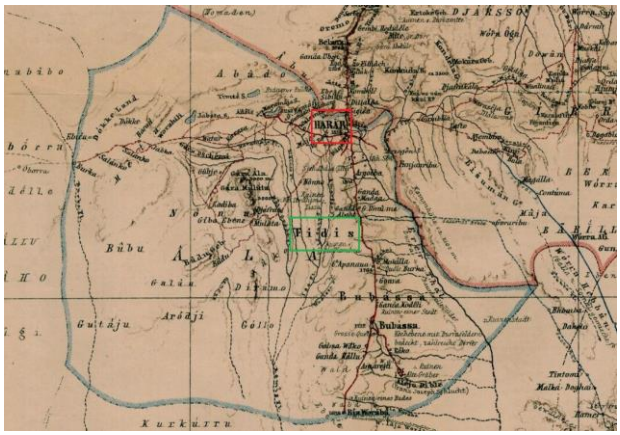

Figure 1. A historical map showing ruins of medieval settlement sites, such as Fidis/ Fedis and Harar in eastern Ethiopia (after Paulitschke 1885).

Fedis is one of the Districts of East Hararghe Zone in Oromia Regional State, and is located about 33 km south of Harar (see Figure 2). It has retained its historical name 'Fidis'/ Fadse with some minor terminological modifications. Geographically, it is situated between 8°02'30"-09°00'14"N and 42°06'02"-42°19'00"E. Its topography ranges from 500 to 2,118 m above sea level. Boko is its administrative city. Fedis is bordered in the north by the Harari Regional State, in the west by Girawa, in the northwest by Haramaya, in the southwest by Gola Odana Meyumuluke, in the east by Babile, and in the southeast by the Erer River that separates it from the Somali Region.

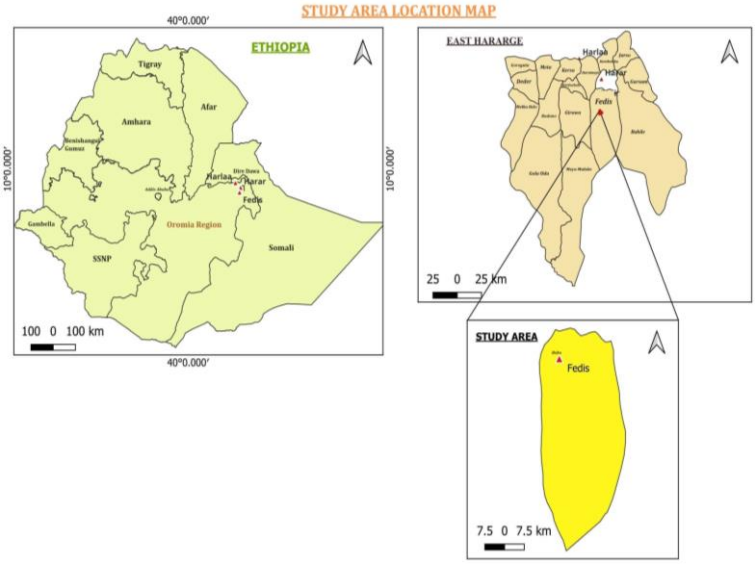

Figure 2. The location of Fedis in East Hararghe Zone (made by Meftuh 2023)

The majority of the current inhabitants of the area are ethnically Oromo. They practiced agriculture, animal husbandry and small-scale trade. A cash crop known as '*chat*' (*Catha edulis*), and sorghum and maize from the food crops are the staple produces of the area. Along with these crops, vegetables, pulses, oil crops and fruits are some other agricultural products with rain-fed and irrigation systems.

Based on the analysis of previously mentioned historical sources (e.g., the 14th-century Amde Seyon's Chronicle; Foucher, 1978; Paulitschke, 1885; Huntingford, 1990; Marrassini, 1993), satellite imagery and geographic considerations, the researchers conducted preliminary archaeological reconnaissance in Fedis District, located south of Harar in eastern Ethiopia. From the these sources consulted, the researchers were able to infer that both mentions, 'Fadse' and 'Fidis', refer to the present-day Fedis, as there is no other place anywhere in Ethiopia with similar nomenclature. Before conducting the survey, the site was browsed by the researchers using a satellite map on Google Earth and located some archaeological structures as well, including the ruins of a defensive wall and a water well.

Most of the archaeological remains in this research were retrieved primarily through surveys. The Culture and Tourism officer of Fedis District accompanied the researchers during their surveys in Melka Kebele, where the ruins of an elaborate stone-built defensive wall and a succession of mosques were found. The surveys were conducted in two seasons: October 2021 and March 2022. In the first season, some villages of Melka Kebele named Kuliliti, Shanqo and Belda were surveyed. Accordingly, some ruined structures and filled water wells were identified. However, the researchers were forced to quit the survey, as most of the archaeological materials were covered with shrubs and crops such as maize and sorghum. Moreover, the well was also filled with water, which made observing its overall structures and depth, and taking measurements a difficult task.

In both survey seasons, several fieldwork tools, including GPS recorders, tape measures, camera, arrows and scales of different sizes, were used. Photographs were

taken of the archaeological finds; field notes, measurements and GPS coordinates were recorded, and local community members were interviewed.

In addition to the surveys, interviews were another methodological tool the researchers used to retrieve relevant information. The interviews were conducted with different stakeholders including the Culture and Tourism Office experts, elders, religious leaders within the local community, and individuals who owned the artifacts. This was helpful in correlating or triangulating existing stories/ oral traditions about the site with identified archaeological materials and historical records. This was to gather some relevant oral information regarding the site and its historical significance; the inhabitants whom they think were supposed to build the ruined structures and the stepwell; how they collected all other artifacts they owned; and to whom they think the findings would belong historically.

Discussion

Fedis is an important medieval Islamic site mentioned in historical texts since the 14th century AD (e.g., the chronicle of Amde Seyon, Huntingford, 1990; Marrassini, 1993) though there is no much details about it. In this preliminary archaeological research, however, various material remains were identified including evidence for a succession of mosques and foundations, ruins of an elaborate stone-built defensive wall with watchtowers, a stepwell, storage pits of different sizes, a carnelian with carved Arabic text, beads of various kinds, ceramics, graveyards, stone jewellery moulds, and ground tools made of stones.

The remains were documented from three localities found in Fedis District namely: *Beldaa, Kuliliti* and *Shanqo*. These three localities in Melka Kebelle located about 10 km northeast of the administrative centre of the Fedis District known as *Boko*. Among the three, the former is the most archaeologically rich area where many of much of the remains were found including the ruined structures, artifacts and a stepwell. The latter two are the western and northern neighbouring villages of Belda

respectively. The houses of the local community are architecturally impressive. They are rectangular and made of dressings of curved stones cemented with mud. Some of the houses were built on top of the pre-existing foundations. Doors are wooden with stylistic carved decorations beautifying the gates of houses. In Shanqo, a mosque with a minaret was observed resembling modern-built as some of its construction materials are the result of modern technology and plastered with cement.

Ruins of a Defensive Wall

Among the various archaeological remains identified from Belda village, an elaborate stone-built defensive wall is one of the most impressive finds. This ruined defensive wall formed a residential area compound/ settlement site, where many of the locals from the village community built their houses and live in them. The most important feature of this defensive wall is the presence of watchtowers built on it with some meters away from one another (See Figure 3). This is a typical feature of medieval Islamic urban and settlement quarters in the region, such as Harlaa (Insoll, 2017) and Harar (Insoll & Zekaria, 2019). According to the locals, this defensive wall found in Fedis at the Belda village had four gates in its four directions.

a) Part of the ruined defensive wall (Photo by Endris 2022)

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b) Watchtower (photo by Habir 2021)

c) Part of the ruined defensive wall (Photo by Endris 2022)

Figure 3. Images (a & c) show ruins of an elaborate stone-built defensive wall with watchtowers, and (b) shows watchtowers

This defensive wall could be have been the Centre of the medieval Muslim principality of Fedis/ Fadse/ Fidis. A succession of mosques and foundations were also found within the compound formed by the ruins of the defensive wall. The local community further strengthened this inference as they informed the authors that the archaeological remnants found in their vicinity belonged to the historic people whom thay regard them as 'Harla', Muslims merchants believed to have been inhabited in vast areas in eastern Ethiopia including Fedis during the Medieval Period. The locals also added that the ruins at Fedis represent an old settlement and urban quarter of the

Harlaa caravan traders where they took rest and stored their trading items during the courses of their long travels. However, this contradicts the 14th century AD Amde Seyon's chronicle that recorded Harlaa and Fedis as two independent Muslim states with their own kings ('*King*' in Islamic state possibly refers to '*Sultan*'/ or '*Amir* who governs an Islamic state during the period under discussion).

A Succession of Mosques

Evidence of mosques is one of the significant discoveries in this research. It is one of the most valuable and reliable indicators in archaeology to confirm whether a certain site designates an Islamic settlement or not. Mosque holds a spiritual and holy space in Islam and is one of the earliest material manifestations that demonstrate Islamic culture in the Islamic world. Evidence of mosques has been detected in eastern Ethiopia by various researchers and projects, such as in Harar and Harlaa (Insoll & Zekaria, 2019). Likewise, a succession of mosques with foundations was one of the most significant remains that confirmed the site as a Muslim principality, as also documented in the 14th-century AD chronicle as well. Within the compound of the ruined defensive wall, a mosque appeared to have been subsequently remodelled is still in service by the local community. It is built over the earlier foundation.

The mosque, a rectangular structure with a *mihrab* projecting from the *qiblah*, is located alongside local houses within the compound (see Figure 4). The earlier mosque foundation is much larger than the standing mosque. The sizes of the rectangular carved stone used and cemented with mud in the construction of the standing mosque are smaller than those used without mud or plaster for the earlier foundation. There was no minaret documented for this mosque, which is typical for mosques dating to the early Islamic expansion in the wider Horn of Africa and the adjacent regions (Insoll, 2017; Schiettecatte et al., 2019; de' Torres, 2020). According to the information the researchers obtained from interviews, the locals call this mosque 'Belda Mosque', in which they repair an old, ruined mosque believed to have been built by, according to them, the Harla people who inhabited the area before they moved to Harar. They also

added that the inhabitants of Fedis abandoned their site and took most of the stones to Harar during their construction of '*Sofi Ber*', the southern gate of the walled city.

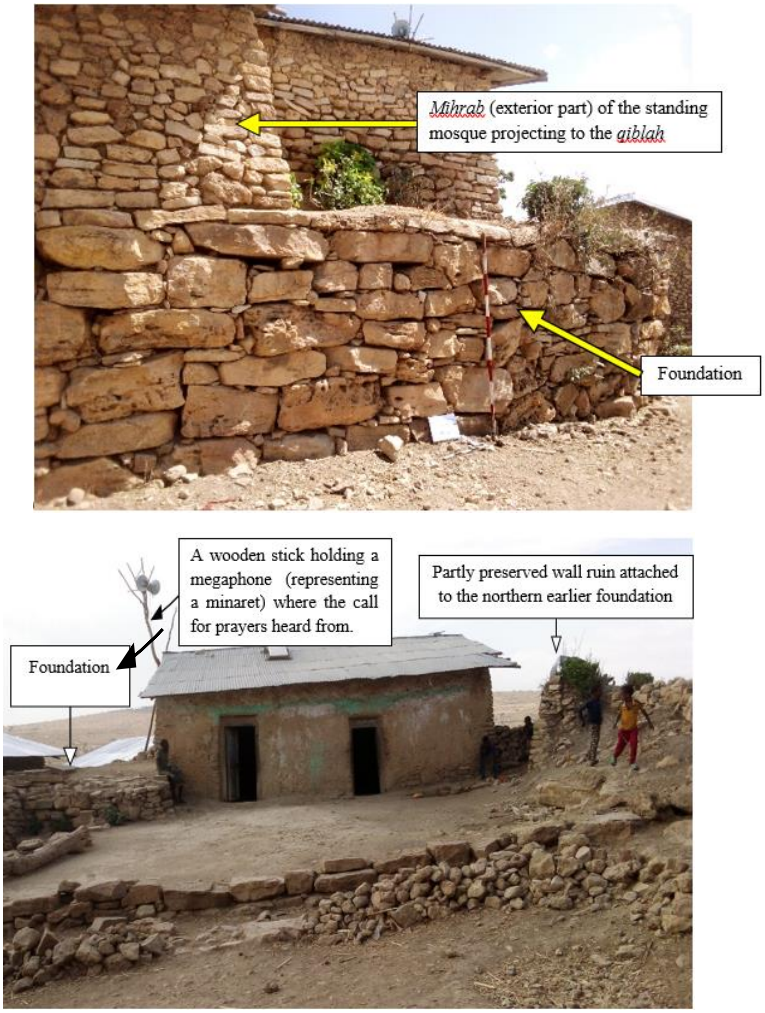


Figure 4. A succession of mosque, (a) northern side, (b) southern side
(Photos by Endris and Habir 2022)

According to the local community, their ancestors reused most of the stones from the ruins of the original mosque and defensive walls, carved them into smaller sizes than they previously were and cemented them with mud during its renewals. They also subsequently remodelled the mosque and changed the thatched roof with corrugated iron sheets.

The current community are using this mosque as a '*Majlis*' (a centre of socio-religious administration/ council for Muslims) for the surrounding Muslim community as they thought it was used for the same purpose by their predecessors as

well. Religious leaders and elders from the community gathered in this mosque/*majlis* to discuss various social and religious matters, such as to resolving conflicts and dealing with businesses. They also use it as a Centre for religious council, Islamic teachings, and Friday prayers as well. It has different sizes on its four sides (Northern = 9.40 m, Eastern = 10.40 m, Southern = 9.10 m, Western = 10.20 m).

As for the foundation, it is much larger than the standing mosque built on top of it. It also has a rectangular form with large carved stones used in the construction without mud/ plaster. Three sides of this foundation (western, northern & eastern) are well preserved with varying sizes (Western = 12 m with 2.30 m height, Eastern = 25 with 1.80 m height, Northern = 18 m with 2.30 to 1.30 m height, Southern = 14 m). No exterior *mihrab* projection is documented in this foundation.

A Stepwell

One of the governing factors in settlement preference is the availability of natural resources, such as water, among others. In localities characterised by erratic rainfall, frequent drought, aridity and limited surface water, inhabitants could develop adaptive responses to such conditions in several ways of water resource management. In the arid and drought-prone areas of East Africa, for instance, evidence of various traditions of water preservation mechanisms has been documented in several sites. According to Ochungo *et.al.* (2022), a number of hand-excavated deep wells were recorded from Southern Ethiopia and Northern Kenya. As this article indicates, such traditions of the indigenous water-harvesting system supported the community in overcoming the problem of water shortage and developed a distinctive biocultural heritage that ensures the smooth functioning of customary institutional leadership structures.

In eastern Ethiopia, likewise, the tradition of developing water-harvesting strategies was also identified at the medieval Islamic site of Harlaa (see Figure 5c) as reported by the *Becoming Muslim* project (Insoll, 2017) and previous surveys (Ayantu,

2016). This well is not stepped and engineered with stones sharply dressed ach of them on top of the others.

At the Fedis site, an impressive large stepwell was identified (See Figure 5b). The researchers visited it in two survey seasons. During the first season of archaeological reconnaissance of the site, it was filled with water (see Figure 5a), and hence, it was difficult to observe its architectural engineering and depth. However, these features were clearly visible during the second survey season, as the water level was low (see Figure 5b). It exhibits quite a different architectural engineering than the others previously documented from elsewhere in Ethiopia. The distinctive feature of this well is its stepped stones engineering. In discoveries made so far around the globe, it resembles a stepwell in India. Generally, this stepwell is rectangular at the top with 16x18 m in its north-south and east-west sides, respectively. The steps became somehow curved and narrower, descending from top to bottom. At about 7 m distance from the top edges of this stepwell, there is another rounded wall with some height built with stones to protect the well from run-off and flooding entering into it.

Similar to the defensive wall and mosque ruins, the exact chronology and architects of the stepwell remained unconfirmed in this research. However, the locals suggest that the same historical people (whom they call 'Harla') who constructed the defensive wall and the mosque might also have built the stepwell as well.

The locals also believe that the architects of this stepwell designed it to preserve water and maintain access during the dry season for drinking and watering plants and animals. This purpose of the well also remains the same for the current local communities as well. Presently, the locals call this stepwell as '*Laga Gollo Wadassaa*', an *Affan Oromo* term in which '*Laga*' means 'river', '*Gollo*' is the name of a place where the well is exactly located, and '*Wadassaa*' refers to a plant name '*Cordia africana*' that dominantly grows in the area.

a) The same stepwell filled with water at the same site (Photo by Habir 2021)

b) The same stepwell in its empty condition at the same site (Photo by Endris 2022)

c) A well at the Harlaa site (After Ayantu 2016)

Figure 5. Water wells (a & b) show the stepwell at the Fedis site, and (c) shows a well at the Harlaa site

Artifacts

In this research, artifacts were one of the archaeological materials collected through surveys. During the surveys, individuals from the local community privately owned most of the artifacts, which they collected in many ways. According to the owners, they found the artifacts randomly from their residential area and farmlands during their engagement in routine activities, such as farming, digging, and quarrying. They usually keep the remains in their hands, but also sell them to tourists on some occasions.

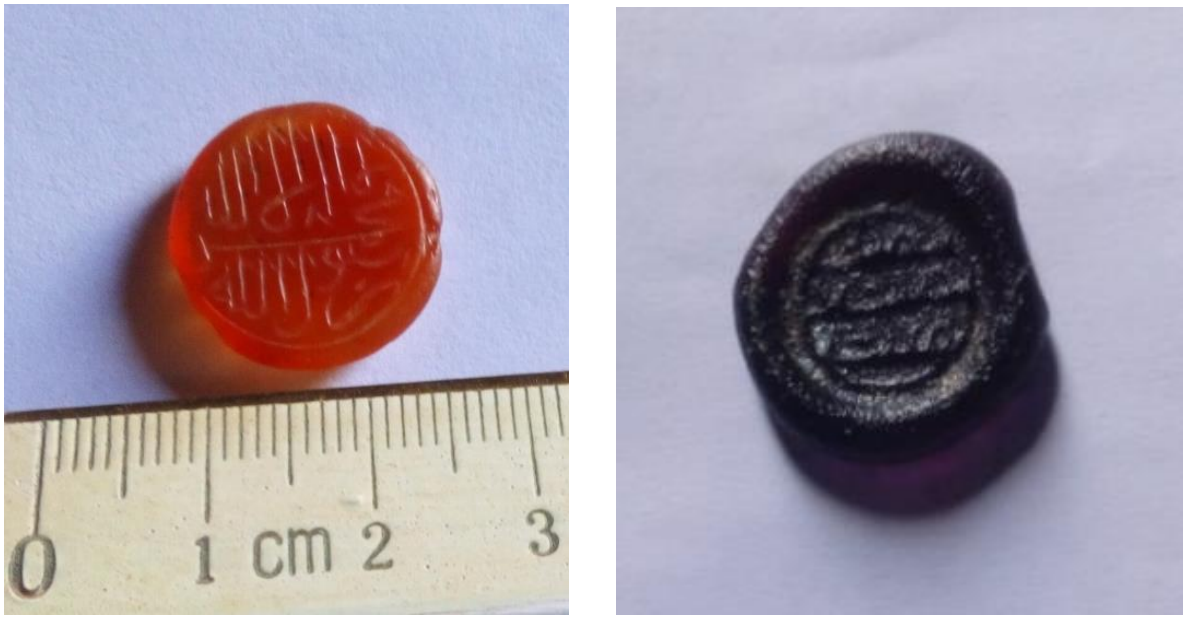
Beads

Most of the beads collected from Fedis are identical to those found from the Harlaa site by Insoll (2017). Medieval Muslim inhabitants, particularly the Harla in eastern Ethiopia, were known for their local production of various kinds of beads, as they used them in their internal and external trade exchanges. The presence of beads of various kinds at the Fedis site (see Figure 6) could also suggest that the inhabitants might use them as trading items, and for decoration purposes. They could have been locally produced and/ or imported through trade networks.

Figure 6. Beads from the Fedis site/ Beda village (photos by Endris 2022)

A carnelian with carved Arabic text

Among the artifacts identified from the Fedis site, a carnelian with carved Arabic text on one of its sides is the most important archaeological record (see Figure 7a). The Arabic text carved holds a significant place as far as the spread of Islam and Islamic conversions are concerned. The text reads as "*La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadan Rasulu-Allah*", the first of the five pillars of Islam. In English, the text duly translates as, "*There is no deity worth of worshipping except Allah (God), and Mohammed is the messenger of Allah*". It is also known as '*Shahada*' or 'profession of faith', which refers to an Islamic oath and creed that non-Muslims must say during their conversion to Islam and are obliged to fulfil in their lifetime, as it is the most sacred statement in Islam. Regarding the purpose of this carnelian find, it could be used as a seal/ stamp for religious/ social administrations, as similar carnelian-made seals and others made of stones with carved Arabic texts reconstructed to hold similar significance were identified from the Harlaa site (see Figure 7b) by the *Becoming Muslim* project.



a) A carnelian with carved Arabic text from Fedis

b) A carnelian with Arabic text from Harlaa

Figure 7. Carnelians with carved Arabic texts: (a) found at the Fedis site, and (b) from the Harlaa site (photos by Endris 2022)

Pottery

As shown in Figure 8 below, a filled jar is also one of the archaeological remains identified in this research. One of the locals found this large, decorated jar when he was digging in his compound. He found it filled with burnt soil and ashes, removed from its in-situ context and kept in his house with its fills. Pottery was one of the locally produced household materials used for different purposes in Ethiopia since the beginning of permanent settlement.

Figure 8. A large filled and decorated jar from the Fedis site (photos by Endris 2022)

Stone jewellery moulds and ground tools

Stone-made jewellery moulds and ground tools were among the remains identified from the Fedis site (see Figure 9). Such kinds of archaeological materials were also among the dominantly found remains from the Harlaa site by the Becoming Muslim project. Stone-made moulds were used to provide jewellery and other productions with defined shapes and forms. Ground tools made of stone were also used to grind plants and food grains, and they are one of the indicators of the presence of permanent settlements in the past.

a) A stone-made jewellery mould

b) A polished ground tool made of stone

Figure 9. Photos (a) stone-made jewellery mould and (b) a ground tool made of stone, both found from the Fedis site (photos by Endris 2022)

Storage Pits

As shown in Figure 10, pits with different sizes were one of the findings identified at the site of Fedis. People in the past used hand-excavation deep pits for storage purposes. This tradition of using hand-excavation of deep pits for storage purposes, particularly grains, is a continued practice by rural farmers in Ethiopia. Archaeologically, a number of pits have been identified from different areas. In eastern Ethiopia, storage pits believed to have been used by medieval caravan traders were recorded by the *Becoming Muslim* project from the medieval site of Harlaa (Khalaf & Insoll, 2019). In this research, likewise, various pits with different sizes and depths were identified at the Fedis site as well. Some of the pits are dressed with stones from their half to the top. In a similar purpose to those found at the Harlaa site, the caravan merchants might have used the pits at Fedis to store trade commodities or as grain storages of inhabitants. The current locals covered many of these pits with stones and filled them with earth to protect their children and cattle from falling into them.

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Figure 10. Storage pits of various sizes (photos by Endris 2022)

Cemetery Sites/ Graveyards

Cemetery sites or graveyards are one of the markers of settled societies, and they are one of the most significant archaeological records to reconstruct human culture and history. Burial customs also designate a certain culture and community. In this research, graveyards with several burials were documented (see Figure 11).

Three cemetery sites were detected: two of them are north of the settlement site where the defensive wall and mosque ruins were found, and the other is found about 1 km west of the defensive wall compound. Of those two sites in the north, one is located immediately in a residential area (a & b), and the other is near the stepwell (c). The current local community inhabited the area suggest that the cemetery site found immediately north of the defensive wall compound is believed to been used by the historic inhabitants who lived there, and the other, far from the compound but near the stepwell, is themselves. The third burial, located west of the ruined defensive wall, is an independent grave with no others akin to it around. As shown in Figure 11d, it is a cairn-like mound with a tree in the middle of it and blocks of stones collected on it.

According to the locals, it was a group burial of the people Harla in the past. In addition to the aforementioned cemetery sites, Muslim burials were also observed around the mosque, within the compound of the ruined defensive wall.

a) A burial within the defensive wall compound (Photo by Endris 2022)

b) A burial immediately northwest of the defensive wall (Photo by Endris 2022)

c) A burial nearby the stepwell (Photo by Habir 2021)

d) A cairn-like burial mound west of the defensive wall/residential area (Photo by Endris 2022)

Figure 11. Cemetry sites in the Fedis site

Conclusion

This research is the preliminary step in the archaeology of Fedis site in eastern Ethiopia. It provides the first archaeological insight as this site had never been studied prior to the completion of this study. In the pre-field period, the researchers consulted several historical accounts. Historically, Fedis is confirmed to be one of the Islamic

states with its own king/sultan, as mentioned in the 14th century AD chronicle of Amde Seyon, who ruled the Christian Kingdom/Abyssinia from 1314-1344. According to this chronicle, Fedis/'Fadse' was one of the various allied Islamic states and other surrounding Islamic kingdoms that threatened his kingdom.

In this research, several archaeological remains were identified, primarily through archaeological reconnaissance. Ruins of defensive walls and mosques, which have been typical archaeological remains signifying the medieval Islamic culture of eastern Ethiopia, were among the most significant remains. The presence of a ruined defensive wall in this particular site further consolidates the inference made by other researchers that medieval trade quarters and Islamic settlements were walled. The stepwell evidence also made the site of Fedis unique, as its stepped architectural engineering has never been explored elsewhere in Ethiopian Medieval sites. It is also the largest of all water wells so far identified locally through archaeological and historical studies. Others, such as beads, a carnelian-made seal engraved with Arabic text, beads of various kinds, stone-made jewellery moulds and ground tools, ceramics, and burials, were also among the identified material remains. In sum, with these material discoveries, this pilot research could not only provide us with the first archaeological insight about the Fedis site but also amplifies the level of our knowledge of the medieval Islamic archaeology of eastern Ethiopia in particular and eastern Africa in a wider context.

Despite the historical significance and archaeological potential of Fedis, neither the site nor its findings were precisely dated using absolute methods to reconstruct accurate chronology. This research was also completed primarily through survey that could potentially limit the recovery of more archaeological remains particularly from the underground. For a more complete understanding of the history of the site, intensive and scientific archaeological investigation using various approaches including excavations and dating is required.

On the other hand, during the surveys, locals were observed residing in and around the defensive wall ruins, utilizing the mosque for religious services, quarrying

stones from the ruins for house construction, digging lands to expand settlement and farmlands thereby consequently destroying underneath archaeological resources. The authors also learnt that the locals occasionally engage in selling the archaeological remains they privately owned. The stepwell is also in service by the surrounding local communities to access water that could potential cause to lose its originality and accelerate the deterioration rate. As these conditions obviously destroy and damage heritages and history, the concerned bodies (including the culture and tourism office of the district) should intervene in various heritage protection ways including awareness creation to stop further destruction. As people could rather learn about their history and thereby develop a sense of belongingness, ownership and self-esteem from heritage sites, the concerned culture and tourism authorities should use those local heritages to create awareness, foster domestic tourism and cultural exchanges.

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