

# ETHIOPIAN-GERMAN EXPEDITION TO WUQRO

REPORT ON THE PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF ABUNA GARIMA AND SITE  
MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES AT THE ALMAQAH TEMPLE AT MEQABER GA'EWA  
AND ZIBAN ADI, NEAR WUQRO

**SEASON**

OCTOBER 2016



The village of Abuna Garima (viewed from the northeast)

Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts  
Orientabteilung  
Podbielskiallee 69-71  
14195- Berlin  
Germany

Author: S. Matthews



## 1. INTRODUCTION

A preliminary archaeological survey was undertaken on the 11/10/2016 and 12/10/2016<sup>1</sup> at the village of Abuna Garima, and site inspections on the 13/10/2016 of the Almaqah Temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa and Ziban Adi. The survey was conducted by S. Matthews, and accompanied by Giday Gebreegziabher, a representative of the *Tigray Culture and Tourism Board* (TCTB).

This survey of the village of Abuna Garima (designated site WQR4 by the survey conducted in 2009 by the Wugro project) was undertaken by invitation of the TCTB, to investigate potential areas for the placing of test trenches around the main church building in advance of planned renovations to the building. These renovations are deemed necessary by the local community due to the recent appearance of very large cracks across all the walls of the main building, most likely due to subsidence in the underlying platform upon which the church sits. The survey also incorporated a broader investigation of the archaeological potential of the wider village around the site of the church itself.

A thorough site inspection was undertaken at the Almaqah Temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa, as part of regular inspections of the reconstructed parts of the site, that now form the open air museum, and of the associated shelter that covers the site. A further site inspection of Ziban Adi was also undertaken, to check the ongoing condition of the site and the back-filled trenches from the 2015 excavation season.

### Project staff

Steven Matthews, Mag., assistant Field Director (GIA<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted as part of a field trip to northern Ethiopia between 10/10/2016 and 20/10/2016, which was kindly supported by the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung von Museen in Äthiopien e.V.* (GFMÄ) and the DAI Yeha Archaeological Project.

<sup>2</sup> Groningen Institute of Archaeology, Groningen (NL)

## **2. SURVEY AT WQR4**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Abuna Garima (WQR4) is a small village, some c. 250 x 400m in size, situated on a low hill positioned on the south-eastern escarpment of a large plateau (see cover photograph), located southwest of the town of Wugro. The village is situated c. 250m north of the site of WQR5 (Ziban Adi), where an early pre-Aksumite domestic structure was investigated between 2010-2015, and c. 700m south of WQR1 (Meqaber Ga'ewa), where a pre-Aksumite temple dedicated to the Sabaean deity Almaqah was excavated between 2007-2012.

The village (Figure 1) is comprised of four main blocks or enclosures, each surrounded by a low dry stone wall, constructed mainly of local limestone blocks. Each of these enclosures is made up of several individual compounds, containing both residential and livestock structures, as well as several small agricultural units connected to these compounds. The area of the village itself is largely flat except for two raised hillocks or mounds of approximately equal height. The first mound (Figure 1: Area 2) is situated in the central part of the village, occupied by a large residential compound consisting of a large domestic building and several smaller ancillary buildings, whilst the second mound is situated at the southern edge of the village, enclosed within the church compound (Figure 1: Area 1), which consists of the church, several ancillary structures and a number of terraced cemeteries to the north.

The preliminary survey focused primarily on the church compound (Area 1) itself, in order to identify surface finds or traces of sub-surface structures, so as to judge which areas of the church compound might profit from the application of further archaeological investigations, as well as determine which areas were suitable for excavation so as not to cause further disturbance to the main church building. A complete survey of the public areas of the village was also undertaken, to investigate the wider potential of the village for future investigation. Several compounds around the village were found to be abandoned or locked up, and it was therefore possible to survey these as well.

The survey was intended to identify and record any significant surface finds, such as pottery or other finds, and record details of structural remains evident on the surface. As this was a preliminary survey only, no excavation or subsurface investigation was undertaken, and no survey equipment was used, as this would have required further authorisation from the national and regional archaeological authorities.

The results of the survey can be assigned to four broad areas of the village: the area of the church (Area 1), a further elevated area of the village, which houses a residential building (Area 2), a lane which divides two of the compound areas of the village (Area 3), and a series of adjacent fields (Area 4).

### **2.2. Area 1**

The church compound (Figure 1, Area 1) encloses a small mound, with a shallow rise in the south and a sharp slope to the north. The main church building is situated immediately to the south of this sharp slope, with the north extent of the church building situated on the top of the natural rise. The rest of the church, however, sits atop a level platform (Figure 2), constructed on the shallow southern slope. This platform is enclosed by a low dry stone wall constructed of limestone, with a natural fill. The compound also consists of a number of other structures, comprising the gate house and kitchen in the south, a small chapel located on the steep slope immediately in front of the north

side of the church, and a recently built shower block located to the northwest of the church. The morphology of the land immediately surrounding the elevated area of the mound, upon which the main church building sits, is comprised mainly of a series of terraces. To the east, a walled terrace is occupied by dense tree coverage, whilst a series of terraces to the north, beneath the chapel, comprise several cemetery areas, and to the west a low lying area where the shower block is located.

Incorporated into a window and a doorframe of the main church building are several large stone fragments from the carved facade of a pre-Aksumite altar in a Sabaeen style (Figure 3), similar to that discovered at Meqaber Ga'ewa. A further almost complete facade, probably from the same altar, was originally positioned near the gatehouse to the church compound but has now been moved by the priests into the church. The church also contains three large pre-Aksumite stone incense burners carved with Sabaeen inscriptions (Figure 4)

However, no surface finds were noted and no significant structural or sub-surface structural remains were identified. Along the eastern exterior edge of the church the remains of a wall are visible on the surface (Figure 5). This is likely the original line of the east wall of the church, prior to its rebuilding at some point in the 1980's.

### **2.3. Area 2**

Area 2 is represented by a second large mound, located toward the centre of the village (Figure 1: Area 2). The entire mound appears to be enclosed by a single compound, comprising a large residential building (Figure 6) and several smaller ancillary buildings. The mound is accessed by a lane leading from the south up the southern face of the mound to the flat top (Figure 7), where the main building is located, and forms one of the largest buildings in the village. The compound is currently closed off, with access blocked by the construction of a dry stone wall across the entrance and the buildings having been padlocked. Despite this, there appears to be some occasional activity within the compound, as seen by the construction and use of a small earthen fireplace built next to the main building. The total area of the enclosure is made up of several different walled areas, most of which are now overgrown with trees and plants. No surface finds were noted and no structural remains identified. However, the melted redbrick and mortar feature (feature C) identified to the south of the mound in Area 3 extends most of the way up the eastern face of the mound to the summit.

### **2.4. Area 3**

Area 3 comprises a lane running east-west that divides two of the large walled enclosures (Figure 1: Area 3). A number of archaeological features were identified along the length of the lane (Figure 8).

The first area (feature A) is represented by the remains of an in situ wall (Figure 9), situated at the eastern edge of the lane. This is the very eastern limits of the village and the escarpment, and is formed by a steep slope. The wall is visible as a consequence of the same heavy erosion processes that are affecting the entire eastern slope. The remains here form the corner of a structure, with the walls extending roughly to the north and east. The second (feature B) comprises the low remains of a limestone wall (Figure 10), constructed of roughly hewn blocks set within mortar, now incorporated into the foundation of a larger and less well constructed dry stone wall, which forms the northern face of the lane. The remains of the wall are orientated roughly east-west. The third (feature C) is a large feature consisting of a mass of melted redbrick fragments and mortar (Figure 11), some 60cm wide and 100cm tall. The feature is positioned at the eastern limits of the enclosure that forms part of the wall of the enclosure, interrupting the line of the dry stone wall. The feature

extends north-westwards for several metres, up the slope of the southern face of the central mound. The last (feature D) comprises the remains of three lines of in situ walls running northwest-southeast across the lane (Figure 12), on the same axis as the melted redbrick feature.

## **2.5. Area 4**

Area 4 represents a large area of fields lying immediately to the west of the village (Figure 13), enclosed within the arc formed by the western enclosure block of the village. At the time of the survey the fields were cropped and with deep furrows from earlier ploughing activities. The surface of the fields were replete with the fragmented remains of pottery vessels and grindstones, as well as a dense and even distribution of limestone fragments. The fragments of pottery ranged from small to large c. 10 x 10cm sherds, commonly with a red slip exterior and thin in profile. At the western limits of this area two large cairns or piles of limestone blocks had been erected (Figure 14), presumably from clearance of the fields prior to or during ploughing activities. One of these piles was older and now completely overgrown with wild brush, whilst the second was more recent and clear of plants.

## **2.6. Summary of survey**

The archaeological potential of the village as a whole should be considered very positive, especially given its prominent geographical position between the pre-Aksumite sites of Meqaber Ga'ewa (WQR1) and Ziban Adi (WQR5). Within the church compound itself (Area A), the main church building (WQR4.1), given its similarity in size and orientation to that of the Almaqah temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa and the presence of the incense burners and altar remains stored inside the church, could very well have been constructed atop a potential pre-Aksumite building, as is known from other sites in Tigray. Despite the lack of surface finds and structural remains, the central mound (Area 2) has similar potential for early activity. Beyond these, the walls across the lane (Area 3, feature D), including the melted redbrick (Area 3, feature C), are of some antiquity, possibly as early as the Aksumite period. Differences in the construction of the walls, and the use of redbrick, which differ from that of pre-Aksumite buildings in the Wugro region, suggest they are not, however, much earlier. However, the well constructed mortared wall now positioned beneath the modern dry stone wall (Area 3, feature B), has the potential to be pre-Aksumite based on its similarity to the walls at Meqaber Ga'ewa and Ziban Adi. The fields in the south (Area 4) are also rich in surface finds, including large fragments of pottery and grindstones. The density of surface finds in these fields is also much higher than that seen in adjacent fields, including around Ziban Adi. However, seasonal agricultural activities can differentially affect the density of finds where simple field observation is concerned. Nonetheless, the density of finds and the size of much of the pottery suggest a potentially significant area. The two large piles of limestone blocks already amassed in the corner of the fields should be a point of concern in terms of the survival of any subsurface archaeological remains. The character of the pottery from this area suggests it might also derive from possible Aksumite activity.

## **2.7. Assessment for test excavations in Area 1**

The significant degree of subsidence now affecting the church building likely has its causes in the nature of the platform upon which it stands (Figure 2), with the dry stone retaining wall unable to take the weight of the church without significant structural movement, a problem which may have been precipitated as a consequence of the recent wet season.

The TCTB have chosen to take responsibility for the conservation of the church, which they do not wish to see dismantled. This severely limits the possibilities for locating archaeological trenches

around the church compound, so as not to precipitate further stability issues with either the church or the platform, especially in light of the lack of knowledge regarding the nature of the foundations of the main church building.

The areas to the west (Figure 15) and south (Figure 16) of the platform upon which the main church building sits provide the safest and most viable location for the placement of test trenches. Even here, though, there is a significant possibility for identifying structural elements related to any earlier building that might now lie beneath that of the church, given the propensity in pre-Aksumite times for ancillary structural elements, as seen at Meqaber Ga'ewa. As the north wall of the main church building appears to be located on the natural rise of the mound, it might be possible to also position a trench here, close to the building, without risking further subsidence. This would also provide an opportunity to establish the nature of the substructure, either in terms of the church on the site prior to its rebuilding or foundation structures. This also provides an opportunity to identify possible prehistoric structures which may also have been incorporated into later building phases.

### **3. SITE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES AT WQR1 AND WQR5**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

As an adjunct to the field trip to survey Abuna Garima, the opportunity was taken to undertake a number of site management inspections of those sites previously investigated by the Wugro project.

#### **3.2. Inspection of WQR1**

An inspection at the site of Meqaber Ga'ewa (WQR1) was undertaken, to check the general condition of the site and the shelter, and identify any site management issues that would need to be addressed during future seasons.

During the 2015 campaign, the net protecting the underside of the roof of the shelter had to be repaired, as several holes had formed and birds were once again beginning to nest inside the roof. IN that instance, the birds nest was carefully removed and the holes were repaired. A new, much smaller species of bird has now taken to occupying the underside of the shelter, and which are smaller enough to fit through the gaps in the net. As a consequence the site is heavily covered in bird faeces (Figure 17). Given its corrosive nature, it is a matter of some urgency that this is addressed.

The main entrance to the Almaqah temple, which had been reconstructed and restored is beginning to wear, and many of the steps up into the temple are now beginning to become loose (Figure 18). These need to be reconsolidated, again as a matter of some urgency.

On a positive note, the entrance doorway to the site has been rebuilt by the guards.

#### **3.3. Inspection of WQR5**

An inspection of Ziban Adi (WQR5i) was also undertaken in order to check on the general condition of the site and ensure that the backfill of the trenches from the 2015 season was stable.

The topsoil of the backfill of trench 1502, which was the southern facing and most exposed of the trenches from 2015, had suffered some significant degree of erosion. However, as a limestone rubble covering had been incorporated into the topsoil during the backfilling of the trench, this had

protected it from the worst of the erosion and plants had begun to take hold, consolidating the loose soil.

A small pit atop the mound (Figure 19), some 30 x 30 cm, and 25 cm deep, was noticed, presumably dug by a member of the public. However, the pit had clearly been abandoned as a consequence of the dense limestone rubble fill that forms the fill of the rooms of the building under the mound, and therefore no in situ archaeological deposits had been disturbed.

Otherwise the site was in a reasonable good state of preservation and no further disturbance was visible.

### **3.4. Administrative Tasks**

#### **3.4.1. Sign to Meqaber Ga'ewa**

The sign positioned on the main Wugro-Mekelle road, indicating the track to take to visit the open air museum at Meqaber Ga'ewa (Figure 19), is now completely obscured by a tree used to provide shelter for people waiting at the road side. This will need to be moved so as to be visible.

#### **3.4.2. Wages for the guards at Megaber Ga'ewa**

The DAI continues to employ three guards annually to ensure security of the reconstructed open air museum at Megaber Ga'ewa and the site magazine. The wages for these were paid to the TCTB representative Giday Gebreegzabher to be paid to the guards of Meqaber Ga'ewa.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The Wugro Project gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung von Museen in Äthiopien e.V.* (GFMA) and the DAI Yeha Archaeological Project for providing financial support and helping with the logistics for this field trip, and the kind assistance of colleagues from the national and regional archaeological bodies, the ARCC and TCTB, in assisting the work of this field trip.

## FIGURES

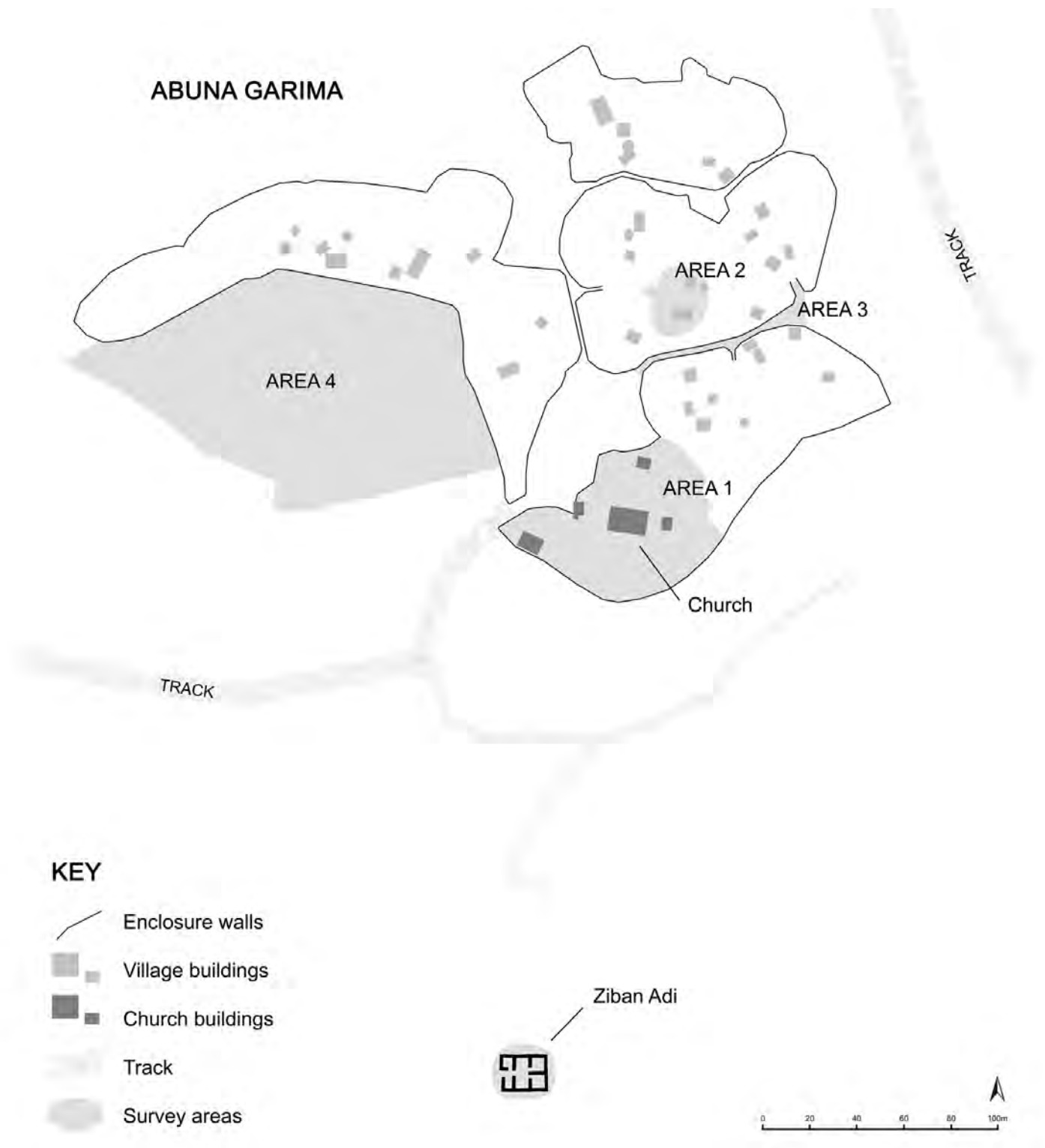


Figure 1: map of Abuna Garima (map: S. Matthews)





Figure 2: the main church building and platform on the southern slope of the mound (Area 1) (looking east) (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 3: remains of a pre-Aksumite Sabaeen altar, now incorporated into the window of the west wall of the main church building (Area 1) (looking east) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 4: the pre-Aksumite Sabaean stone incense burners. currently stored inside the main church building (Area 1) (composite photograph: P. Wolf)



Figure 5: the northeast corner of the main church building (Area 1), with possible foundation structure or original wall of the church (prior to its rebuilding in the 1980's) visible at ground level (looking northeast) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 6: the residential building located atop the central mound (Area 2) (looking east) (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 7: the lane leading up to the central mound (Area 2), now closed off by a wall (visible on the left side of the photograph), and the large residential structure on the top (looking southeast) (photograph: S. Matthews)



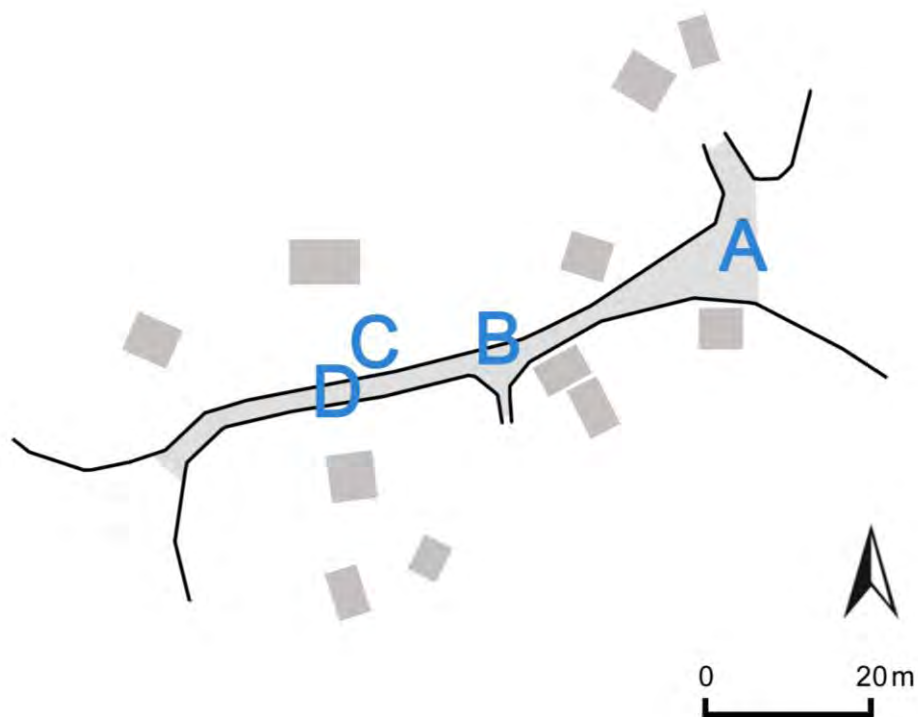


Figure 8: detail of the east-west running lane (Area 3), showing the location of the identified archaeological features (A-D) (map: S. Matthews)



Figure 9: the structural remains of the corner of a building (Area 3, feature A), located at the end of the lane on the eastern limits of the village (looking north) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 10: the remains of a well constructed limestone wall with mortar (Area 3, feature B), now incorporated into the base of a later dry stone wall, forming the western line of the lane (looking northeast) (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 11: the western line of the dry stone wall, which incorporates the remains of a linear burnt redbrick and mortar feature (Area 3, feature C), which extends northwestwards up the southern slope of the central mound (Area 2) (looking northeast) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 12: the remains of one of three identical stone walls that cut across the lane (Area 3, feature D) on a northwest-southeast axis (looking west) (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 13: the fields located immediately west of the settlement (Area 4) where dense concentrations of surface finds, including pottery and grindstones, were identified (looking east) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 14: the two piles of limestone blocks (centre of the picture, now overgrown with brush, and on the right of the picture), collected from the fields during agricultural activities (looking west) (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 15: west side of the church mound (Area 1), beyond the platform (looking south) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 16: south side of the church mound, beyond the platform (looking east) (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 17: bird faeces covering one of the restored walls of the Almaqah temple of Meqaber Ga'ewa (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 18: loose limestone blocks on the reconstructed entrance to the Almaqah temple at Meqaber Ga'ewa (photograph: S. Matthews)



Figure 19: disturbance on the top of the mound by the members of the public (looking west) (photograph: S. Matthews)





Figure 20: Tree obscuring the sign indicating direction toward the site Meqaber Ga'ewa positioned on the main road between Wugro and Mekelle (photograph: S. Matthews)