

Asa Koma. Site néolithique dans le bassin du Gobaad (République de Djibouti)

Dirk Seidensticker

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ethnoarchaeological detail for anyone to afford to miss it. Weedman Arthur's unique longitudinal and deeply personal perspectives on stone tool production definitively accomplish the challenge set out by one of the key interlocutors early in the book — to show the world that the work of the Gamo hide-scrapers is important and worthy of respect. *The Lives of Stone Tools* has great potential to make a lasting impact on archaeological studies in and beyond Africa for decades to come.

Steven T. Goldstein

Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, Jena, Germany

 goldstein@shh.mpg.de  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6703-7033>

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Asa Koma. Site néolithique dans le bassin du Gobaad (République de Djibouti), edited by Xavier Gutherz. Montpellier, Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, Collection Mondes Anciens, 2017, 272pp., €23 (hardback), ISBN 978-2-36781-257-1.

The development of agro-pastoralism and the general introduction of Neolithic lifestyles during the late Holocene has been discussed for East Africa in some detail. However, the Horn of Africa has seen far less research. Therefore, this detailed report on features and finds from Asa Koma, as well as from other sites within the Gobaad Basin in southern Djibouti, is of special importance in furthering our knowledge of this process. The quality of the publication is outstanding and the text is abundantly illustrated with colour pictures and diagrams. The content is divided into 17 individual contributions organised within nine main chapters, which cover all essential aspects of the excavations and surveys, as well as the analysis of the finds.

The archaeological site discussed is situated on the highly eroded volcano Asa Koma, located at the rim of a lacustrine depression close to the border of Djibouti and Ethiopia. The first chapter gives a general overview of the research that has taken place at Asa Koma, an open-air site dating to the third to second millennia BC. The site was discovered in 1982/83, during the first surveys within the Gobaad Basin, and it was excavated over the course of five campaigns between 1988 and 1996. The main excavation covered 68 m², while the setting on the slopes of the volcano was assessed through four smaller test trenches. The first chapter also contains a very useful, short overview of the cultural history of the Gobaad Basin since the Pleistocene. A short appendix to this chapter describes a series of hearths, consisting of burned stones and ash layers, while a second appendix describes various structures made of worked stones within the vicinity of the excavation and the surroundings of the site. The second chapter covers the geoarchaeological studies, first and foremost micromorphology, through which it was possible to distinguish phases of dense occupation, as well as periods of abandonment. Sedimentation could be linked to the phases of occupation, but a general stratigraphy with distinct horizons could not be established.

The main assemblage of about 10,000 potsherds found at Asa Koma is presented in Chapter Three. About one-third of the sherds were decorated or otherwise diagnostic, but a high degree of fragmentation hindered more detailed analysis, especially with respect to ceramic technology. The classification and typology, especially of decorative elements, are presented in detail. Numerous illustrations provide a valuable reference too, though their hapless layout divorces

the illustrations from the text. Although the authors argue that the development of a robust ceramic sequence for Asa Koma and other sites in the Gobbad Basin was rather difficult, one wonders if an analysis of the spatial distribution of the types encountered within the excavated area, as well as a more quantitative approach, might not have shed more light on this. Following the detailed description of the pottery, the chapter highlights ceramic inventories from several other sites that the project examined within the Gobaad Basin. Using this corpus of pottery finds, the team was able to distinguish three, at least partially contemporaneous, ceramic groups. As these groups do not share the same distribution, one might think of them as representative of distinct social groups that shared some aspects of their pottery technology and style. On the other hand, the authors state that the chronology of these groups is not firmly established so they might succeed each other within the third millennium BC.



Chapter Four presents the typo-technological analysis of the lithic assemblage found at Asa Koma. The most abundant raw material was obsidian that could be found locally and within the vicinity of two other nearby volcanoes, as well as in the Afar depression. The lithic production sequence was studied in detail, relying on the quantification of debitage from different stages of the *chaîne opératoire*. While the authors were able to distinguish four major groups of lithic artefacts produced through two different modes of reduction, an analysis of the spatial distribution of those groups across the site might have provided further insights, especially since the authors state that the existence of two different reduction sequences precluded the identification of the artefacts with any specific culture or group. The identified toolkits are claimed as mainly being geared towards hunting and fishing. However, with respect to artefact function, the analysis relies solely on typological approaches, without the benefits of microwear and residue analyses.

Following the chapters on ceramics and lithics, the volume turns to a detailed analysis of archaeozoological remains. The faunal record is dominated by cows and donkeys, but there is also evidence for long-term exploitation of seasonally caught fish, which played a major role in subsistence. The faunal remains also include a variety of tools and ornaments. The chapter offers a discussion of the process whereby pastoral and Neolithic lifestyles were introduced into the Gobaad Basin during the third millennium BC, but, unfortunately, the available data from Asa Koma and elsewhere only offer a first glimpse into this process. Possible paths of propagation might have followed the coast of the Red Sea or the Eastern Rift Valley. Furthermore, based on the distribution of obsidian on both shores of the Red Sea, influences from across the Bab el Mandeb and thus from Yemen also need to be considered.

Chapter Six covers the charred botanical remains and illustrates correlations between changes in vegetation and changes in the water levels of nearby lakes, while Chapter Seven discusses the human remains found in three graves at Asa Koma, with the osteological analysis of each individual presented in separate, distinct sub-chapters. The succeeding chapter then discusses burial practices in the broader region from the fourth millennium BC up to the Islamic period. The book's final chapter provides a summary of the volume and further discussion of the emergence of agro-pastoral lifestyles and societies in eastern Africa. Thus, the volume provides a crucial dataset that enhances our understanding of the introduction of the Neolithic in the Horn of Africa.

Dirk Seidensticker

Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University, Rozier 44, B-9000 Gent, Belgium

 dirk.seidensticker@ugent.be  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8155-7702>

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