

Somalia

Excavation of a first century AD tomb in Heis (Somaliland): evincing long-distance trade contacts

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Introduction

The cairn field of Heis (also referred as Hais or Xiis) is situated on the eastern Somaliland coast close to the village of the same name (Figure 1). The site lies at the foot of Majilin Hill, a steep, long escarpment about 145 metres high that runs north-south parallel to the coast and then turns to the east. There it is cut by the El Usbale wadi, around whose mouth a sandy slightly elevated plain is located, in which most of the archaeological remains are

found (Figure 2). In front of the northern side of Majilin Hill lies a small island which constitutes a prominent geographical feature used as a landmark by sailors throughout history. Although identified as a relevant archaeological site as early as the nineteenth century (Révoil 1882) and widely recognized as one of the trading stations described by the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (first century AD) (Tomber 2012), the site had been virtually unexplored until 2018, when a Spanish archaeological team from the Institute of Heritage Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council (Incipit-CSIC) started systematic research at the site. In this article we present the results of the excavation in one of the looted tombs, which provides evidence of long-distance trade with the Mediterranean, the Nile Valley, the Middle East and India.

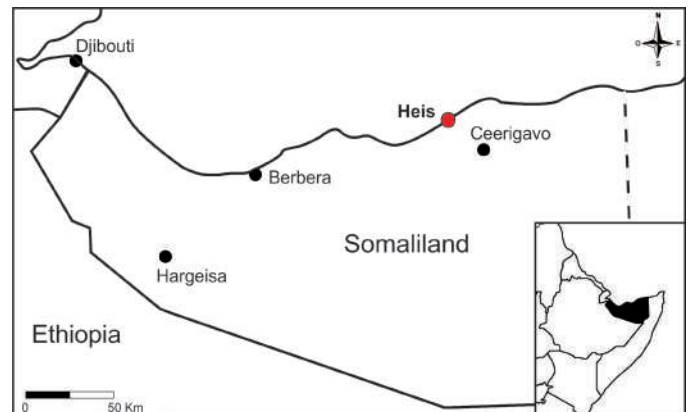


Figure 1: Location of Heis in Somaliland.
Map: J. de Torres.

Previous excavations

The site of Heis was accidentally discovered in 1881 by Georges Révoil, a French traveller who took shelter in this small village during a storm while travelling along the Somali coast. Révoil found a group of ancient cairns in the surroundings of the village. Recognizing their importance, he excavated three of them and donated the collected objects to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (Révoil 1882). This important find – Révoil correctly identified Terra Sigillata pottery and related the site to one of the trading stops described in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* – was surprisingly overlooked by researchers until 1975, when the site was briefly visited by Neville Chittick during a survey along the coast of Somalia (Chittick 1979). Chittick's survey and excavation of one looted tu-

mulus yielded Roman glass from the fourth century AD and other materials dated from the second to the fifth centuries AD, but his next campaigns focused on the important trading post of Ras Hafun (Chittick 1980; Smith & Wright 1988), and Heis was not studied again until 2018.

In the 1980s several studies of Révoil's materials in the Musée de l'Homme were conducted (Stern 1986; Desanges 1992), and in 1993 a comprehensive study of the historical context and the characteristics of the objects was published (Desanges *et al.* 1993). The latter included chemical analyses of some of the glass finds as well as a thorough list of parallels for the objects. Most of the glass vessels were dated to the first century AD and are pieces of great quality. Some connections could be established with objects found at Meroitic sites in the Nile valley. However, and despite the authors' efforts, little in the way of contextualization could be provided, apart from describing the site as a large cairn field. No photographs of the site have been ever published, with the exception of a view of the island from Majilin Hill (Chittick 1979: 274).

This situation changed in 2017 when the Spanish Archaeological Project in Somaliland decided to survey the site to assess its archaeological potential and the feasibility of conducting fieldwork at the site. This short survey, which took place in March 2018, confirmed the extraordinary interest of Heis, gathering archaeological materials similar to those found by Révoil and producing the first map of the site through the combination of Google Earth images and drone flights. More than two hundred tumuli were mapped, and a new site on the top of Majilin Hill was identified. The results of this survey as well as news about the possible construction of a harbour at the site made evident the need for in-depth archaeological research at Heis, and therefore a full mapping and excavation field campaign was undertaken in early 2019.

The 2019 campaign

The 2019 field campaign in Heis had three main objectives: the identification and cataloguing of all tumuli in the main cairn field (Figure 2), the excavation of several tombs and the survey of nearby areas with lesser concentrations of tumuli and other structures. A total of 302 tumuli were identified and mapped through a combination of surveys, GPS georeferencing, and drone flights. They were catalogued according to their general structure, main architectural features and state of preservation. The struc-

tures are distributed unevenly across the site: the majority (65%) of the total are located in the plain around the main mouth of the El Usbale wadi, with the other 12% located along a secondary mouth of this wadi immediately to the east. The rest of the tumuli are distributed along the shoreline on the slopes of Majilin Hill, with a small concentration at the head of the beach opposite the island.



Figure 2: View of the main cairn field from Majilin Hill. Photo M. A. Franco.

During the cataloguing of the cairn field, 80 of the structures yielded archaeological materials on their surface, most of them consisting of fragments of green glazed ceramic sherds and fragments of amphorae of Parthian provenance, although glass sherds were also relatively common. In 10 tombs, glass and stone (carnelian and agate) beads were documented. In general, the amount of materials around the tumuli and across the site was small. There was only one exception: the central-southern part of the cemetery where materials were very numerous, including Terra Sigillata and Indian Red Polished Ware (IRPW), Roman amphorae, millefiori fragments, and glass decorated inlays similar to those found by Georges Révoil in 1881 (Figure 3). Although many of the fragments – especially the containers – appear at some distance from the tombs, many others are clearly related to funerary structures, which in this area are significantly more eroded than in the rest of the site. Chronologically, all these materials very consistently date to between the first and third centuries AD. The amount of materials in the central-southern area led to the excavation of one of these tombs (Tomb 153), which has provided the most interesting set of materials documented so far in the site.

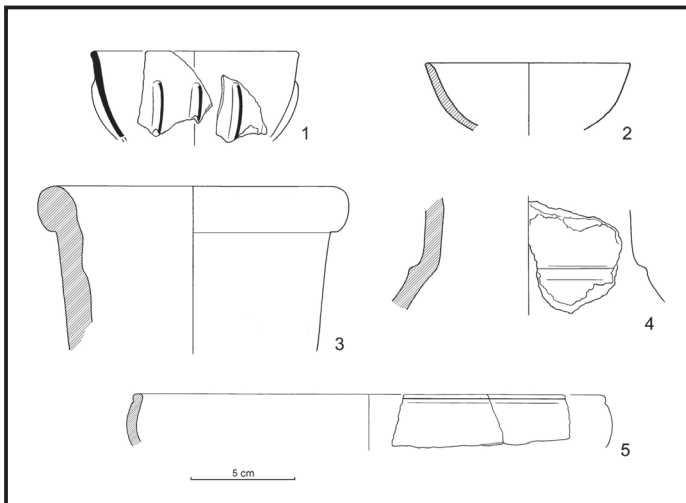


Figure 3: A sample of finds from surface survey in Heis: 1. Roman ribbed-bowl, 2. Italian terra sigillata, 3. Dressel 2-4 amphora from Central Italy, 4. Parthian glazed ware, 5. Indian Red Polished Ware (IRPW). Drawings A. Rodríguez.

In addition to Tomb 153 – which is described in detail below – three other tombs were excavated during the 2019 field season. They were selected due to their good state of preservation (Tombs 75 and 120) or in the case of Tomb 49 – a stone ring – to determine if they actually corresponded to a grave or to another type of structure. Tomb 75 consisted of a small circular cairn of 3 metres in diameter with a ring of large stones at its base. The excavation of the tomb recorded an adult individual, east-west orientated, without any grave goods but with evidence of a sophisticated burial practice, which included a wooden structure covering the body and a layer of shells piled over it. A second cairn excavated in the same area – Tomb 120 – contained a sub-adult individual who was buried with a necklace of bronze and glass beads and a Roman glass jar (Figure 4). This tomb presented evidence of a different burial practice, with a layer of whitish, very compacted sand sealing the grave, which might have been mixed with gypsum. Finally, one of the stone rings documented throughout the site was also excavated (Tomb 49), documenting the remains of two individuals – an adult and a child – who were buried without grave goods. These tombs are the first intact ones to be excavated with a sound archaeological methodology – those excavated by Revóil and Chittick had been looted – and have shown a surprising variety of practices and techniques, a variation that can also be appreciated in the fourth excavated grave, Tomb 153.



Figure 4: Tomb 120. Photo M. A. Franco.

Tomb 153

The fourth tomb excavated during the 2019 field season – Tomb 153 – is located in the south-eastern side of the main cairn field, close to the slope of Majilin Hill and near the only significant concentration of surface materials found in Heis. It was identified during the preliminary survey in 2018 as an important tomb based on the materials collected on the surface – green glazed Parthian pottery, fragments of amphorae, sherds of Roman glass ribbed bowls as well as millefiori and glass inlays – and considered a priority objective for the 2019 campaign. The tomb showed clear evidence of having been looted and it was in a very poor state of preservation. It seems have originally consisted of a rectangular pit measuring 2.5 by 1.2 metres, oriented north-south and delimited by flat slabs of medium size (Figure 5). The pit was surrounded by a ring of stones of medium size, now lost for part of the perimeter, marking a circular structure of 6 metres in diameter. The tomb was surrounded by other poorly preserved structures, which have been eroded by torrents flowing from the slope of Majilin Hill.

As expected, once the excavation started it became evident that the tomb had been looted long ago. This activity impacted the northern portion less than the southern portion of the structure which was severely disturbed. The infilling of the pit had been drastically altered, and it was impossible to determine the original stratigraphy of the grave. Surprisingly, human remains were also absent with the exception of five small bone fragments with a maximum length of 3 centimetres, one of which could

be identified as a phalanx. Archaeological materials, on the contrary, were very abundant although again severely disturbed and mixed, to the extent that pieces of the same object were found separated by a depth of one metre. In some cases, the materials showed evidence of having been affected by fire, although given the level of disturbance of the grave it is not possible to determine in which context this process took place. The tomb was significantly deeper than the other three, reaching 1.5 metres of depth.

The materials recovered at Tomb 153 are extremely varied and in a way provide a summary of the sample gathered in the site of Heis as a whole (Figure 6). They are also strikingly similar to those found by Révoil in 1881. As mentioned above, they are heavily fragmented and therefore it has been impossible to identify the exact number of objects originally buried in the grave. At least ten different objects have been identified so far based on the analysis of the different types and shapes. Glass fragments are the most abundant material, belonging to both monochrome and polychrome vessels as well as inlays of different types. The monochrome examples correspond to at least three different objects, and are highly fragmented. In the sample, a Roman ribbed bowl (see Figure 6, object 6) could be identified, which dates between the first century BC and the first century AD (Desanges *et al.* 1993: 53). Along with the monochrome glass, numerous fragments of at least two different polychrome, millefiori bowls were identified (see Figure 6, object 4). These are relatively common finds both during our surveys and in the Révoil collection (Desanges *et al.* 1993: 47-51). According to Stern (1986: 29), the production of this type of millefiori or mosaic glass seems to have ceased about mid-first century AD in Europe but its production continued into at least the end of the first century in Egypt.

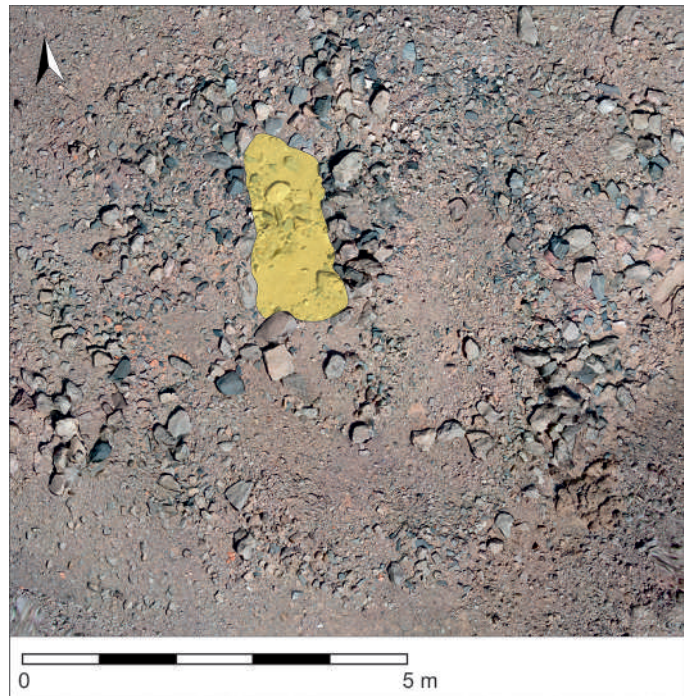


Figure 5: Orthophoto of Tomb 153, showing the position of the grave pit. Orthophoto and graphics M. A. Franco and J. de Torres.

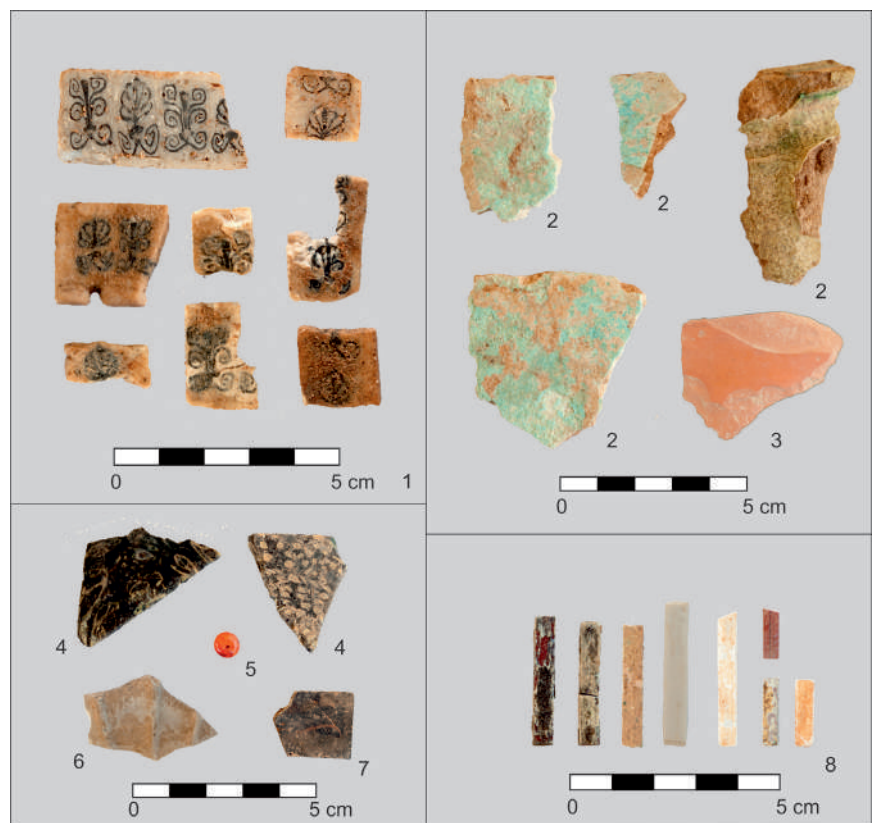


Figure 6: Sample of materials recovered from Tomb 153: 1. Stripes of inlays, 2. Green glazed pottery, 3. IRPW sherd, 4. Millefiori, 5. Carnelian bead, 6. Ribbed bowl, 7. Opaque black inlay, 8. Inlay bars. Photos M. A. Franco, plate: J. de Torres.

The most important set of glass objects documented in the tomb are a group of twenty-five inlays – bars or rectangular strips – which were possibly decorating a box or casket. Twelve of them (see Figure 6, object 8) are bars measuring about 3 millimetres in width and 4 centimetres in length when intact; they are mostly white (9) and also include red (2) in colour or are decorated with a pattern of red and black flowers (1). The other 13 pieces (see Figure 6, object 1) are nearly identical with strips of white opaque glass decorated with floral mosaics consisting of volutes and palmettes outlined in opaque black glass. The only exception is a black opaque square piece with a very faded orange or red line inlaid inside (see Figure 6, object 7). All these inlays clearly belong to the same object and are similar to those found by Révoil (Desanges *et al.* 1993: 34-35, 44-45). Regarding the chronology and comparisons, the only close parallel found so far for these pieces comes from one of the royal tombs of Meröe (Dunham 1957: 127, fig. 83, plate LXIX) and is dated to the mid-first century AD (Desanges *et al.* 1993: 34; Wenig 1978: 17), a chronology that coincides with that of the ribbed bowl and the millefiori mentioned above.

After glass, pottery is the most common type of materials in the tomb and it is similarly fragmented. At least four different pieces have been documented so far: 1) a small, green glazed vessel with a plain outward rim, straight neck and the imprint of a handle (see Figure 6, object 2), which most probably is of Parthian origin; 2) the remains of an amphora of unknown provenance; 3) the base of a unglazed, wheel-made small bowl; and 4) several sherds of an Indian Red Polished Ware (IRPW) vessel (see Figure 6, object 3). The sample of materials from Tomb 153 also includes a carnelian bead (see Figure 6, object 5) very similar to those found in Révoil's collection (Desanges *et al.* 1993: 58) and an unidentified fragment of iron. While these items lack a chronology as precise as the glass described above, they are all consistent with a first century AD date.

Conclusions

The second Incipit-CSIC field season in the cemetery has provided a range of results that lay the foundation for further research in the coming field seasons. First, all structures and archaeological areas at the site were com-

prehensively mapped and documented in preparation for a systematic study of the site. Second, the first reliable information regarding the range of funerary traditions and practices of the inhabitants of Somaliland during the first centuries of the first millennium AD was gathered. Third, our knowledge of the type of materials imported to the coast of Somaliland during this period has increased, confirming and complementing the previous information from Georges Révoil's collection. Although the archaeological materials are still under study, they show well-consolidated commercial links with the eastern and western Mediterranean, the Parthian Empire, and India.

One of the most interesting outcomes of this campaign has been the confirmation of some degree of integration between the commercial circuits of the Meroitic kingdom and the Somaliland coast. They manifest the capacity of the nomadic communities of Somaliland to acquire prestige objects, whose quality is akin to objects found in the royal burials of Meröe. Some of the containers recovered during the surveys and currently under study could have actually been made in the Nile valley, as suggested by Neville Chittick in 1976 (1979: 274). If this is confirmed, a more intense and direct commerce between both regions could also be considered, with the Red Sea as the natural trading route path for these commodities and goods. The chronology of our finds seems to span the first and third centuries AD, in contrast to the later date suggested by Chittick (1979: 274) for some of his findings. This might reveal a new, or alternate chronology for different parts of the necropolis. Further field seasons will hopefully clarify this and expand our knowledge on trading networks, burial practices and the material, social, and ideological background of the communities that put Heis on the maps of Antiquity (first to fifth centuries AD).

Acknowledgements

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