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Simon Dorso, Julien Loiseau, Tadele Solomon. Preliminary Report Archaeological Surveys in Shinile district (Somali Region, Ethiopia), Novembre 2022. 2022. <halshs-05136510>

HAL Id: halshs-05136510

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-05136510v1>

Preprint submitted on 30 Jun 2025

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ERC project HornEast

Connections, Mobility and Exchange between
the Horn of Africa and the Middle East in the Middle Ages



Preliminary Report
Archaeological Surveys

Gunbur Bilen and Gulan: two Islamic sites in Shinile District, Somali Region (Ethiopia)

November 2022

Presented by
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To
the Ethiopia Heritage Conservation Authority
(EHCA)

2023



Centre français
des études éthiopiennes

PERMIT Ref. N°. a8/RL-8-2/004

TEAM COMPOSITION

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Nur Arab Abdi (Culture and Tourism Office of Somali): archaeological expert

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS¹

The mission wishes to thank several institutions and individuals for their support and the valuable help they provided during the campaign:

the Ethiopia Heritage Conservation Authority (EHCA), its Cultural Heritage Research Directorate Director Ato Andualem Girmaye, and its archaeological expert Dr. Tadele Solomon

the Office of Culture and Tourism of Somali (Jijiga), its Director Maxamed Naaji, and its archaeological expert Nur Arab Abdi

the District of Shinile, and its head of security,
the communities in Baraq and Mete,
the French Embassy in Ethiopia,
the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (CFEE), its Director Jean-Nicholas bach and its team (Anne-Lise Goujon, Abera Solomon, Hanna Siyum Tadesse),
the Institute for research and studies of the Arab and Muslim Worlds (IREMAM, Aix-Marseille University) and its director Richard Jacquemond,

Aix-Marseille University, its branch Protisvalor,
the European Research Council (ERC)

¹ This research has received funding from the Eu's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under Grant Agreement no 726206.

REPORT SUMMARY

The 2022 survey season in Shinile District followed a remote sensing survey of historic Islamic sites east of Dire Dawa, through the examination of Satellite imagery and modern maps and travelers accounts. It aimed at locating and documenting a possible candidate for the site of Hubat, mentioned in the sixteenth-century Arabic Sources as a place of refuge for Imam Ahmad and his followers before the great Jihad of the 1530s.

The main goal of the mission was to explore the site of Gunbur Bilen, east of the hamlet of Mete, which appears in nineteenth-century maps under the name of Hubetta. The site, not far from the caravan routes connecting Harar to the coast displays large remains identifiable as open air mosques and prayer areas as well as vast Islamic necropolis.

The mission was successful in reaching Gunbur Bilen. It carried an aerial survey by use of a drone and was able to document from the ground several funerary enclosures. The site also consists of many abandoned cattle enclosures and possible domestic units built with the local basalt which outcrops in the area. Numerous cairns and ring cairns, some reaching more than 25m in width have been identified and suggest a pre-Islamic, possibly prehistoric occupation of the site. They proved the long-lasting importance of the site as a funerary landmark. Surface collection of artefacts was very limited in Gunbur Bilen, with a only a single potsherd and some obsidian flaks. However, a significant collection of petroglyphs has been recorded, consisting either of inscriptions, non-figurative symbols and zoomorphic glyphs.

Other archaeological sites have been spotted between Mete and Gunbur Bilen, they consists exclusively of artefacts deposits non related to structures, possibly associated to semi-nomads and herders populations. The material collected from the surface consists of potsherds and lithics elements. The location of those secondary sites has been recorded through GPS and the material brought back to the EHA in Addis Abeba for further examination.

The site of Gulan, located east of Shinile was surveyed following indication about an ancient Islamic settlement by the district authorities. The site is located near the village of Baraq and consists of a ruin medium-size settlement including several square domestic units, a mosques as well as Islamic burials. Two other mosques or musalla-s (open prayer areas) were identified in the surroundings as well as large cairns. The musalla-s and the whole site of Gulan have been documenting from the air with a drone and a bone sample was extracted from the filling of a grave for datations. The site is easily accessible in comparison to Gunbur Bilen and it would deserve a complete study and archaeological excavations.

INITIAL STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PURPOSES (EHCA permit request)

Mobility and exchange have long been pointed out as basic elements of Islam considered as a connected world and a body of cities and routes covered by scholars and merchants. The comeback to political issues in Islamic studies has not weakened the model since the most recent studies on Hijaz and Yemen have emphasized the role of trade in power-building strategies. Facing the connected world of Islam, the Horn of Africa appears as soon as the mid-7th century AD as an inner island. However, remoteness and insularity should be asserted with caution, not least because the first destination of Muhammad's companions seeking for a haven in their exile (hijra) from Mekka was the empire of Axum.

Our precedent campaigns have focused on the oldest remains associated with Islam in Ethiopia: the funerary inscriptions of Bilet and Arra regions, which attest the presence of Muslim communities in the Northern part of the country between the 10th and the 14th century. We now seek to locate a Muslim territory mentioned in the Arabic and Christian sources from Ethiopia between the 13th and the 16th century under the name Hubat. Although the chronicles do not provide information on how Hubat adhered to Islam, it appears among a group of Muslim regions raided by Wālī Asma' by the end of the 13th century. Later on, it may have been subjected to the Christian kings but rebelled with other Muslim territories from the area in the following decades and was attacked in retaliation during the 14th century. In the 16th century, Hubat served as a basis and a refuge for Imam Ahmad.

Scholars have proposed different location for Hubat, relying exclusively on the topographical and geographical information preserved in the historical sources. According to the latter, the site would have been close (two stations) from Harar and would have been close to the Dawaro region. These two parameters fit well with a site depicted on Henry Salt map in the 1810's and recorded as "Hubetta" on his map (**fig. 1**).



Fig. 1: Extract from H. Salt's Map of Abyssinia (1814) with the location of Hubetta circled in white.

An examination of satellite views showed that it also corresponds to a large, ruined settlement comprising several mosques and funerary areas. The domestic and funerary structures in Hubat are reminiscent of those in the ruined town of Handoga (also spelled Hendoga) in nearby Djibouti, which seems to have been inhabited between the 12th and 16th centuries (see Kern R. 1969; R. Grau 1976, s. d.; X. Gutherz 2017, 2021; De Torres 2022). Both this typology and the toponym suggest the site could have perpetuate the memory of Hubat and was possibly its main centre, deserving a close inspection on the ground. The identification of Hubat, and the reconnaissance of a medieval settlement in the area will greatly improve our knowledge of the medieval geography of the region. Besides, it would also offer comparative material for the Islamic funerary traditions in a region which until recently has not been extensively documented.

The survey conducted by Dr. Simon Dorso and his team therefore aims at:

Documenting the site using a drone and photographic cover of the main settlement, with focus on funerary architecture, the main mosques and domestic structures.

Establishing a plan of the site to understand its organization and to serve for the future fieldwork.

Collecting pottery and other dating artefacts from the surface through systematic pedestrian surveys of diagnostic areas (to be determined on the site).

Evaluating the number of domestic/family units on the site.

Documenting eventual inscriptions.

Conducting small scale test pits to obtain a better understanding of the sequence of occupation and collect samples for absolute datations (C14).

Several other ruined settlements have been identified within the neighboring woredas, and should be visited for comparison, with a thorough documentation of their mosques and cemeteries.

PART 1 - GUNBUR BILEN and METE AREA

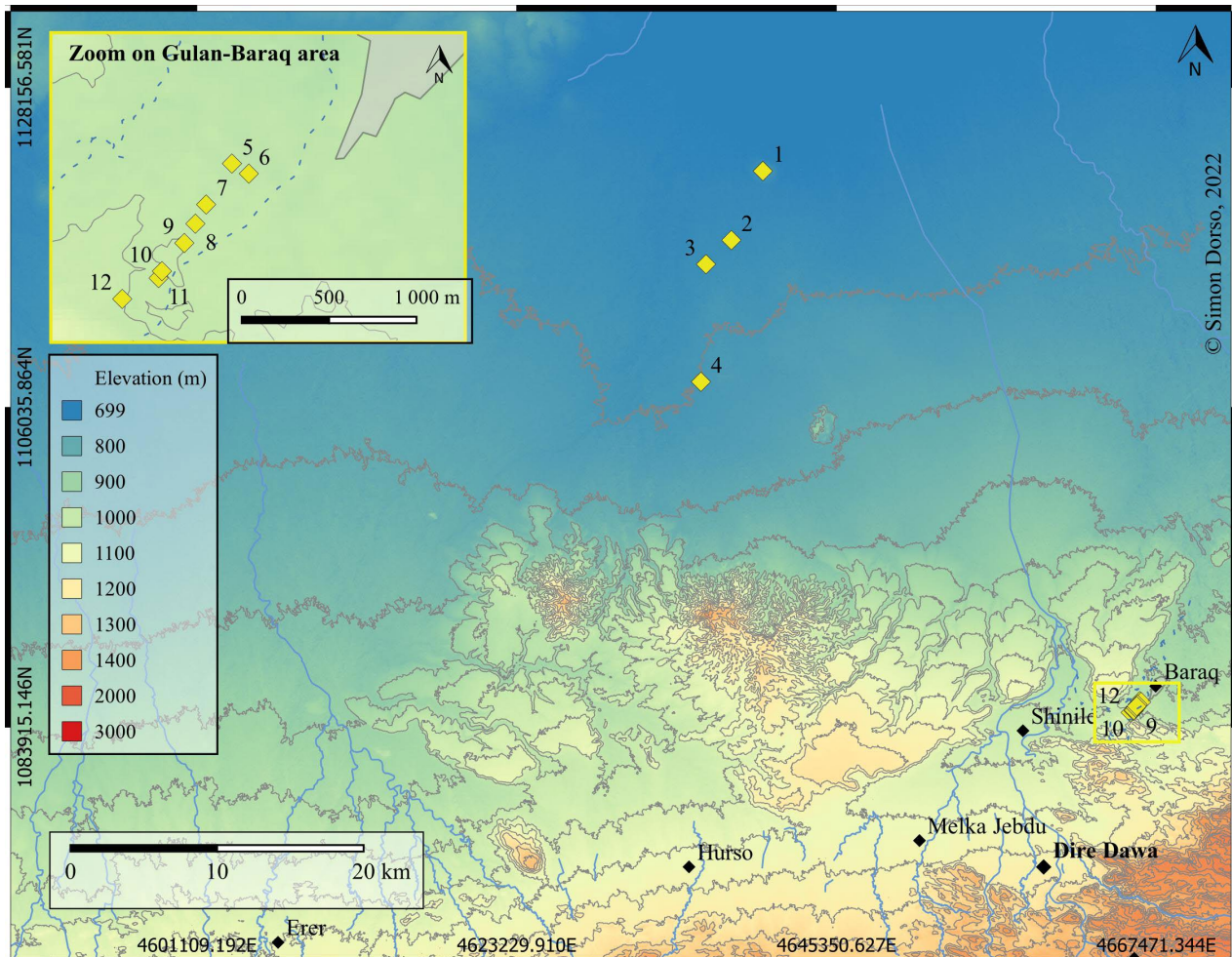


Fig. 2: Map of the survey area showing the location of the sites surveyed in 2022.

1. Gunbur Bilen, 2. Pottery Deposit 01, 3. Pottery Deposit 03, 4. Mete Village (Pottery Deposit 02), 5. Gulan, 6. Baraq 01, 7. Cairn 04, 8. Mosque 3, 9. Mosque 2, 10. Cairn 03, 10. Cairn 02, 11. Cairn 01

GUNBUR BILEN

Coordinates: 10.032096,41.682845

The site of Gunbur Bilen extends over 4 square kilometers. It is located 14.6 kilometers NNE from Mete in an arid area only inhabited by herders and away of current motor tracks. The site has developed on a basaltic lava outcropped which provide the main material for the construction of archaeological structures (cairns, enclosures and funerary enclosures). The latter are usually built immediately over the basaltic bedrock and local stratigraphy is limited to sedimentary deposits posterior to the structures or their anthropic filling. The site is surrounded by a ring free of vegetation and numerous termites mounds (**fig. 3**).

Several areas of interest had been identified from satellite views, including concentrations of Islamic funerary enclosures with *mihrab*. These enclosures, duly oriented toward the *qibla* are either

circular or rectangular. Inside the enclosure, one or several grave markers are visible, most commonly oblong mounds oriented perpendicularly to the qibla (here almost plain north) in order to allow the deceased, buried on his flank, to have his face turned toward the qibla.

Other remarkable structures are also rectangular enclosure with *mihrab*-s but either too large to be considered funerary enclosure or without visible grave markers. Our current hypothesis is those structures were proper mosques or open-air prayer areas (*musalla*). The largest of these structures is located in the northern part of the site and is 80 meters wide (**fig. 4**).



Fig. 3: General satellite view of Gunbur Bilen (Google 2023).

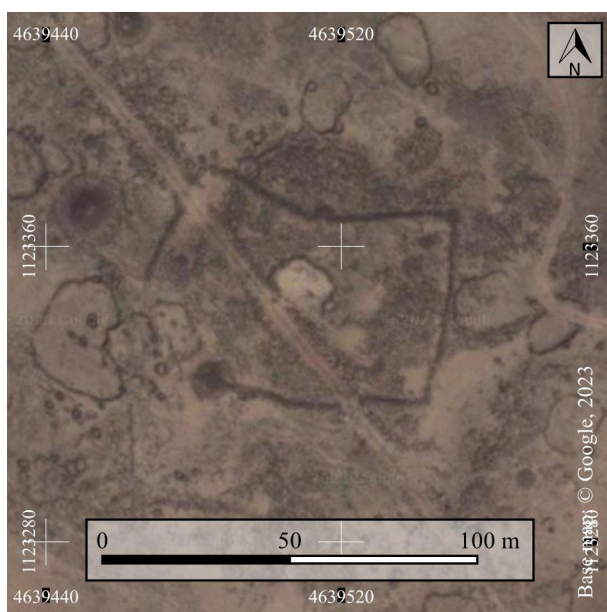


Fig. 4: Large enclosure with *mihrab* (Google 2023).

A preliminary estimation of the number Islamic funerary markers identified with confidence (of all types) reaches over 200 (**fig. 5**). Considering many enclosures host several burials, this number can safely be doubled to estimate the minimum number of Islamic grave of the site. It is noteworthy that funerary areas as well as isolated graves are located on the outskirts of the lava field. This is most probably to allow the deceased to be buried in plain earth as required in Islamic tradition.

Funerary enclosures

Funerary enclosures of various type have been identified both from the air and from the ground (**fig. 5**). Those with a *mihrab* usually belong to one of three main types: rectangular, circular or parallepiped. Their size differs greatly from one another

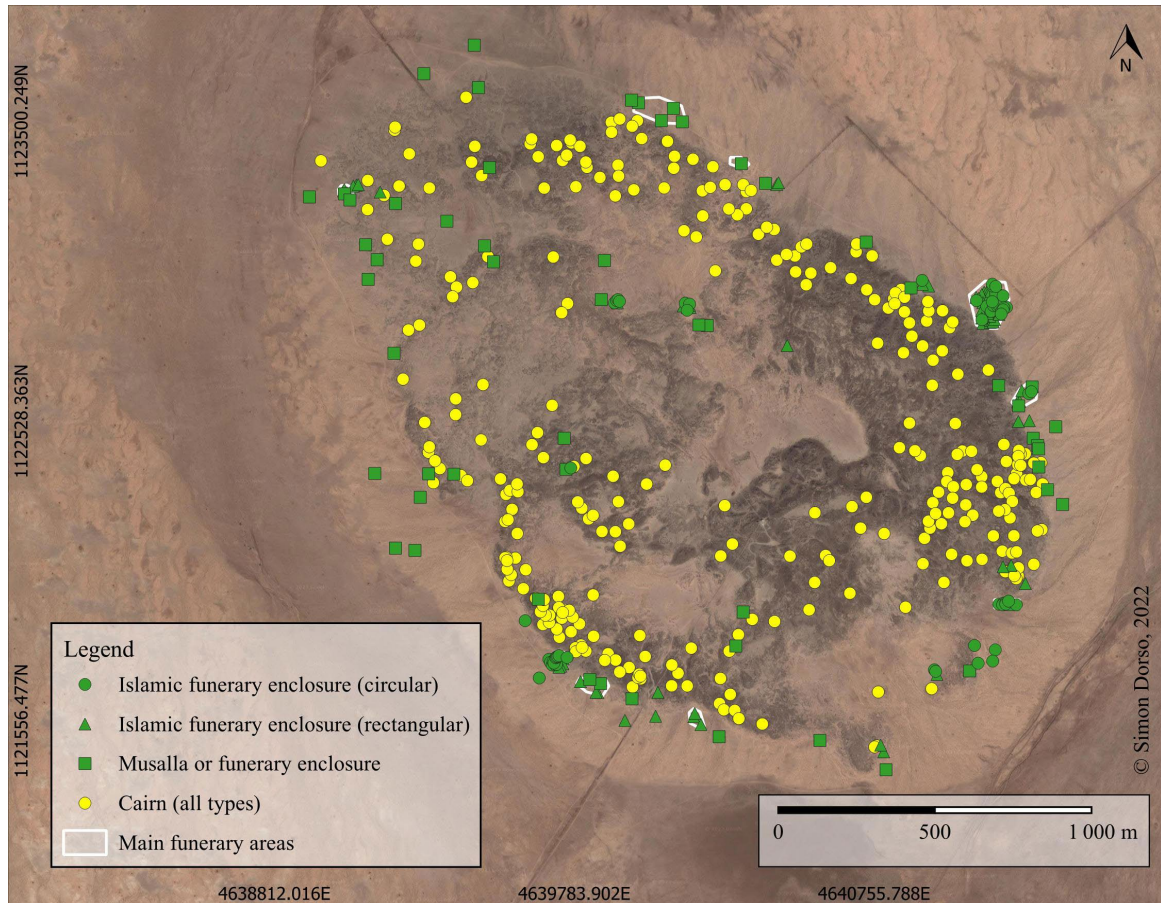


Fig. 5: General satellite view of Gunbur Bilen (Google 2023) showing the repartition of funerary structures by type .

even among the same funerary area. The enclosure consists of a low wall, usually made of one course of basalt boulders. The *mihrab*-s are well oriented in general although one remarks small orientation variations. Some enclosure seem to have more than one niche (fig. 6).

Entrance to the enclosure, when it exists, is always facing the qibla wall, and often take the shape of two diverging “horns” (fig. 8). Some enclosures share a wall with others, which might materialize a relations between the deceased and suggest some sort of planification inside the funerary area (fig. 8). Similar family link can be hypothesized when several grave markers are found in a single enclosure.

The grave markers are of different types, most commonly looking like heaps of stones or oval mounds, but some rectangular enclosure of “coffin” are also visible. There is no evidence for the use of stelae and the size of the markers and of the enclosures seem to be the main element of distinction among the funerary areas.

It is noteworthy that on several occasions, funerary

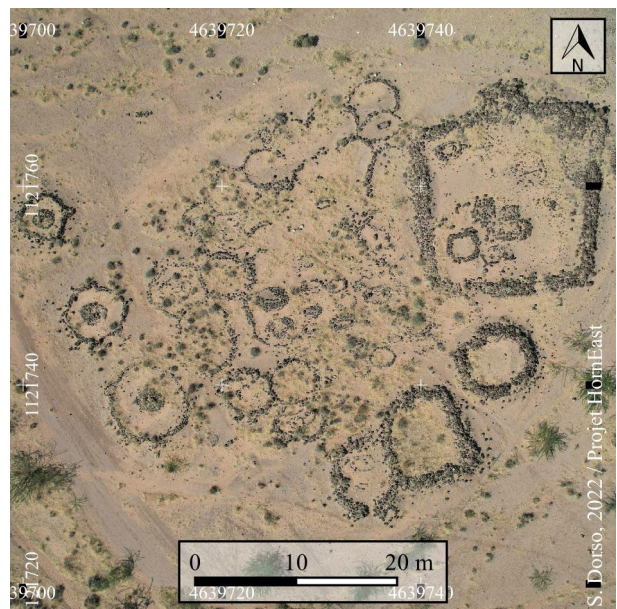


Fig. 6: Drone view of a funerary area south of Gunbur Bilen. The necropolis seems to have developed west of a large rectangular enclosure hosting several grave markers. It is composed of both square and circular secondary enclosures, mostly with individual grave markers.

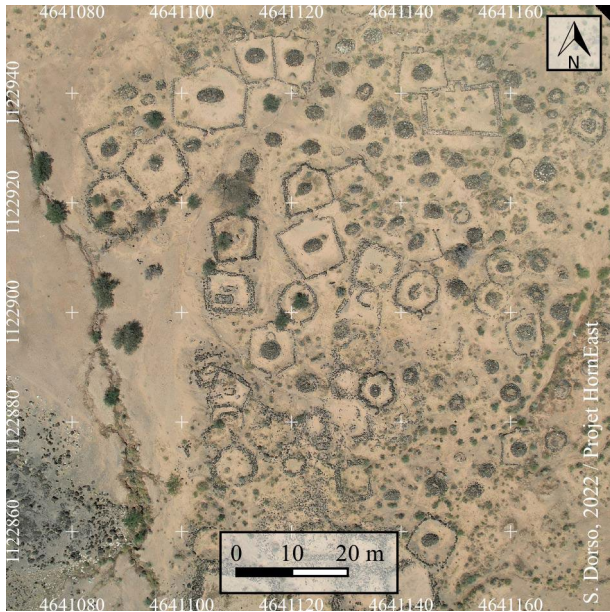


Fig. 7: Drone view of a funerary area north-east of Gunbur Bilen. The necropolis hosts circular and rectangular enclosures as well as grave markers without enclosure.

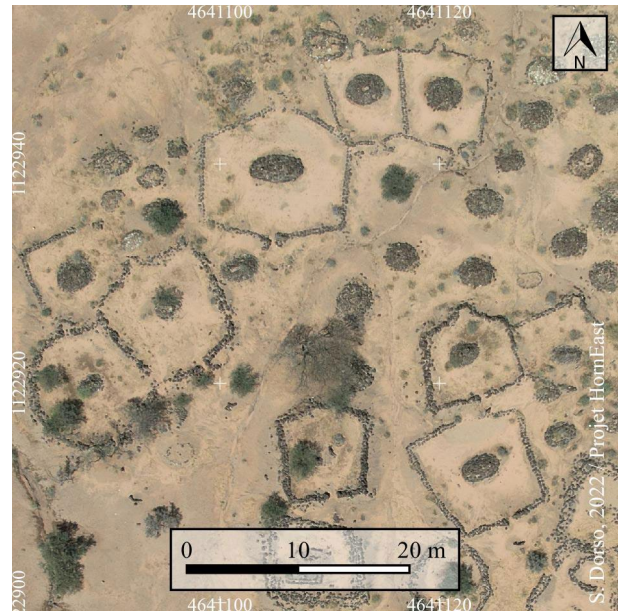


Fig. 8: Detail drone view of the same funerary area showing rectangular and pentagonal enclosures with mihrab and «horned» entrance. Enclosures commonly share a common wall, perhaps as a mean to manifest a relationship between the deceased.

enclosures seem to overlap or to have been dismantled and/or reuse in order to build new enclosures. This could indicate that funerary areas were used over a long period of times, perhaps sufficiently long for some deceased to be forgotten. In any case, it might help reconstruct the phasing of the site.

Cairns and stone mounds

More than 300 cairns or stone heaps have been spotted on aerial images (fig. 2). If some of them seem to have a funerary function, with clear evidence for inner chamber revealed after a collapse or due to looting, it is not certain whether all of them are funerary monuments and belong to the same period (fig. 10).

Some of the cairns are obviously part of the Islamic funerary landscape of Gunbur Bilen because they display a *mihrab* (fig. 11). Others, notably large ring cairns, are reminiscent of prehistoric structures known in Afar areas and in Djibouti.

Petroglyphs

Several petroglyphs have been spotted on basalt boulders, especially in two areas (fig. 12) although it is likely that many more exist on the site.

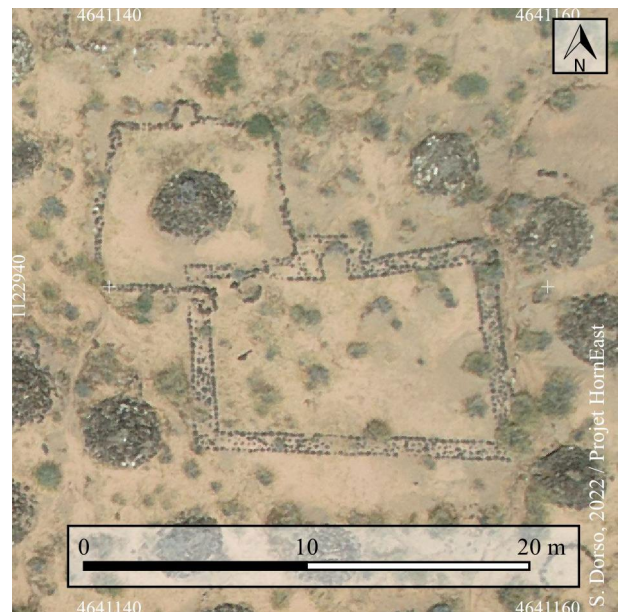


Fig. 9: Detail drone view of the same funerary area showing two large funerary enclosures overlapping. Note the carefully made outer and inner faces of the walls of the southern enclosure, and the absence of entrance. The enclosures are surrounded by circular stone cairns used as grave markers.

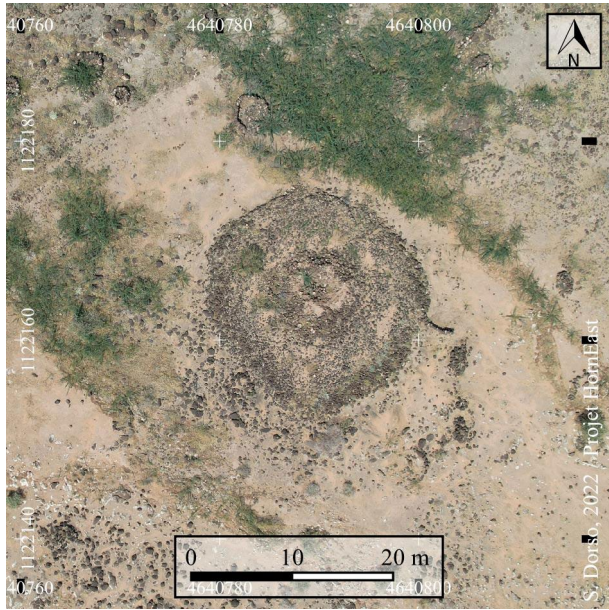


Fig. 10: Drone view of a ring cairn with a collapsed or looted central chamber.

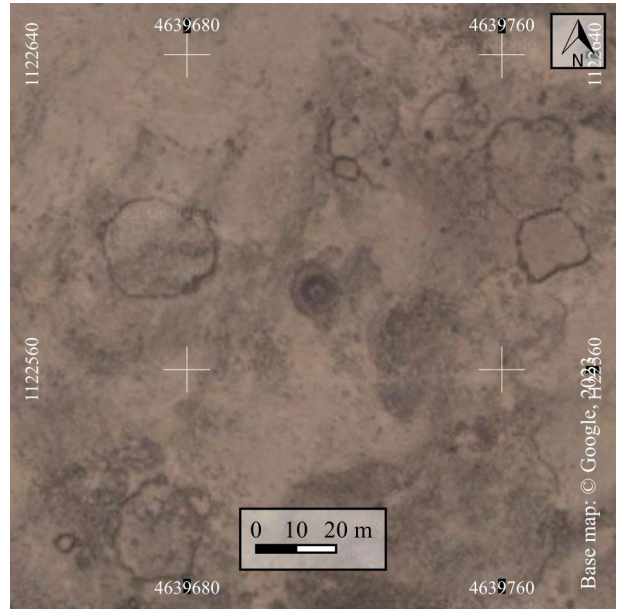


Fig. 11: Satellite image of a ring cairn in the north-western part of Gunbur Bilen.

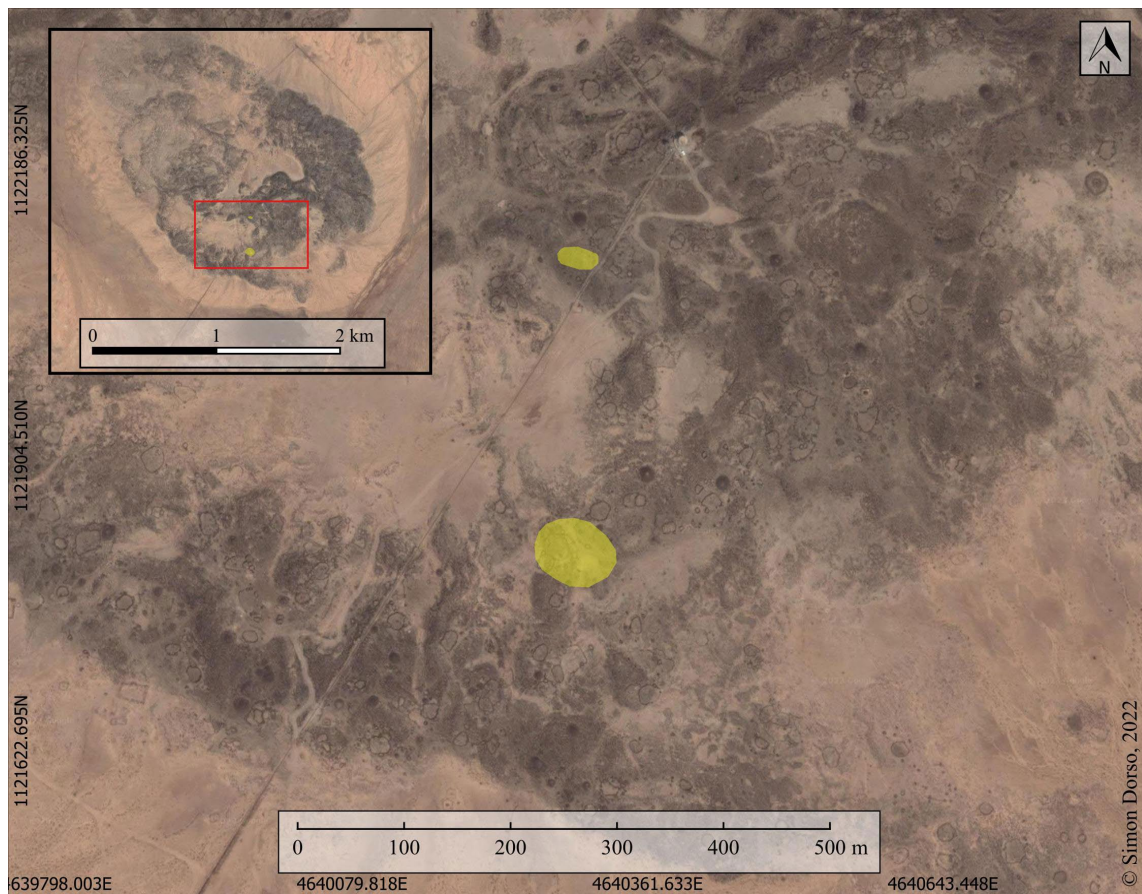


Fig. 12: Satellite view showing the location of the two areas with petroglyphs identified during the survey.

At this stage, it is difficult to propose a comprehensive analysis of the corpus and its spatial organization. It seems that most of the petroglyphs are concentrated in specific area, around circular enclosures. They belong mainly to three broad categories: 1. Inscriptions, 2. Symbols, 3. Possible zoomorphic figurations.

Inscriptions (**figs. 13-15**) are represented by a combination of several signs. The language and alphabet in used have not been clearly identified but for a single inscription reading MAXAMAD (**fig. 15**). The use of the Latin script for the writing of the personal Somali name allows to propose a relatively recent date for the carving. The other inscriptions may contain some Arabic letters, although in their isolated form.

The second category, the symbols (**figs. 16-20**), offers isolated or non-aligned grouped glyphs which are recurrent among the corpus. Two symbols are particularly frequent: two “horns” or “polo club” opposing each other (and reminiscent of the gate’s shape of some of the Islamic funerary enclosure on the site), and a symbol resembling the mathematical sign for infinity (∞).

The third category of glyphs is represented by possible zoomorphic representations (**figs. 21-24**) although some examples cast doubts, being more elaborate than the majority. The zoomorphic figure could depict a caprine, with a linear body and two legs, a tail, and long curled horns.

Basing ourselves on this preliminary identification, one suggests that the petroglyphs of Gunbur Bilen are representative of a herder’s culture associating possible cattle to symbols that could well be marks of ownership or family emblems, as is common in many other desertic areas like the Negev for instance.

The dating the petroglyphs is impossible at this stage although the color of the engraving sometime varies on a single bloc, suggesting different ages for the symbols.



Fig. 13: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 14: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 15: Inscription MAXAMAD (Muhammad). The use of the Somali Latin alphabet suggest this inscription likely postdates the official introduction of the latin script by the Supreme Revolutionary Council in 1972.



Fig. 16: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 17: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 18: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 19: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 20: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 21: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



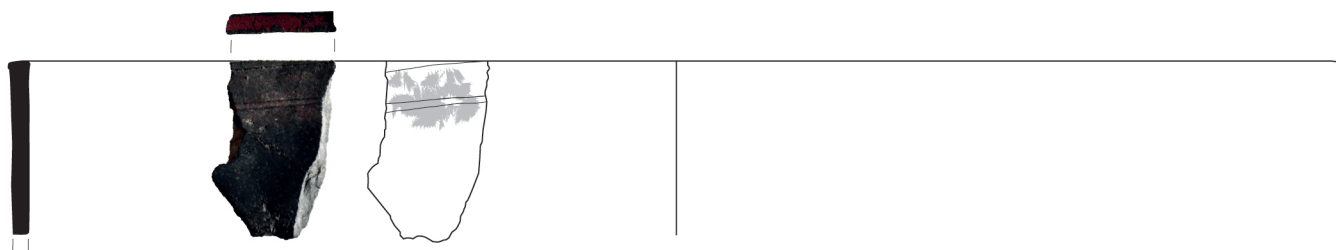
Fig. 22: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 23: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Fig. 24: A line of signs, possibly forming an inscription in an unrecognised script.



Gunbur Bilien 2022 - Funerary enclosure 1- 1

Scale 1/2
0 10 cm

Fig. 25: Potsherd from Gunbur Bilien collected near the funerary enclosure 01.

Material culture

Material culture in Gunbur Bilen is extremely rare on the surface. We collected some obsidian chips and a single potsherd (**fig. 25**). The black sherd belonged to the rim of a large vessel with a straight neck of more than 20 cm in diameter. The rim was decorated by two irregular incised line and a dark reddish painted cover.

In the area between Mete and Gunbur Bilen however, the following sites have provided obsidian and potsherds:

Mete Pottery deposit 01 et 02

Site coordinates: 9.90164/41.64705 Visited: 08/11/2023 Surface survey

Pottery deposit 03

Site coordinates: 9.97402/41.64876 Visited: 10/11/2023 Surface survey



Fig. 26: Potsherds and obsidian collected in Pottery deposit 03.

PART 2 - GULAN and BARAQ AREA

GULAN

Coordinates: 9.70650,41.91875

The ruined settlement of Gulan lies on the northern bank of the Lege Hida river, 1.5 km southwest of the current village of Baraq in Shinile District. The site, at an altitude of nearly 1000 meters above sea level, is located on a plain covered by semi-arid vegetation and is partly covered by small acacia trees and bushes, overlooked from the north-west by the Berjawin ridge (1152 m).

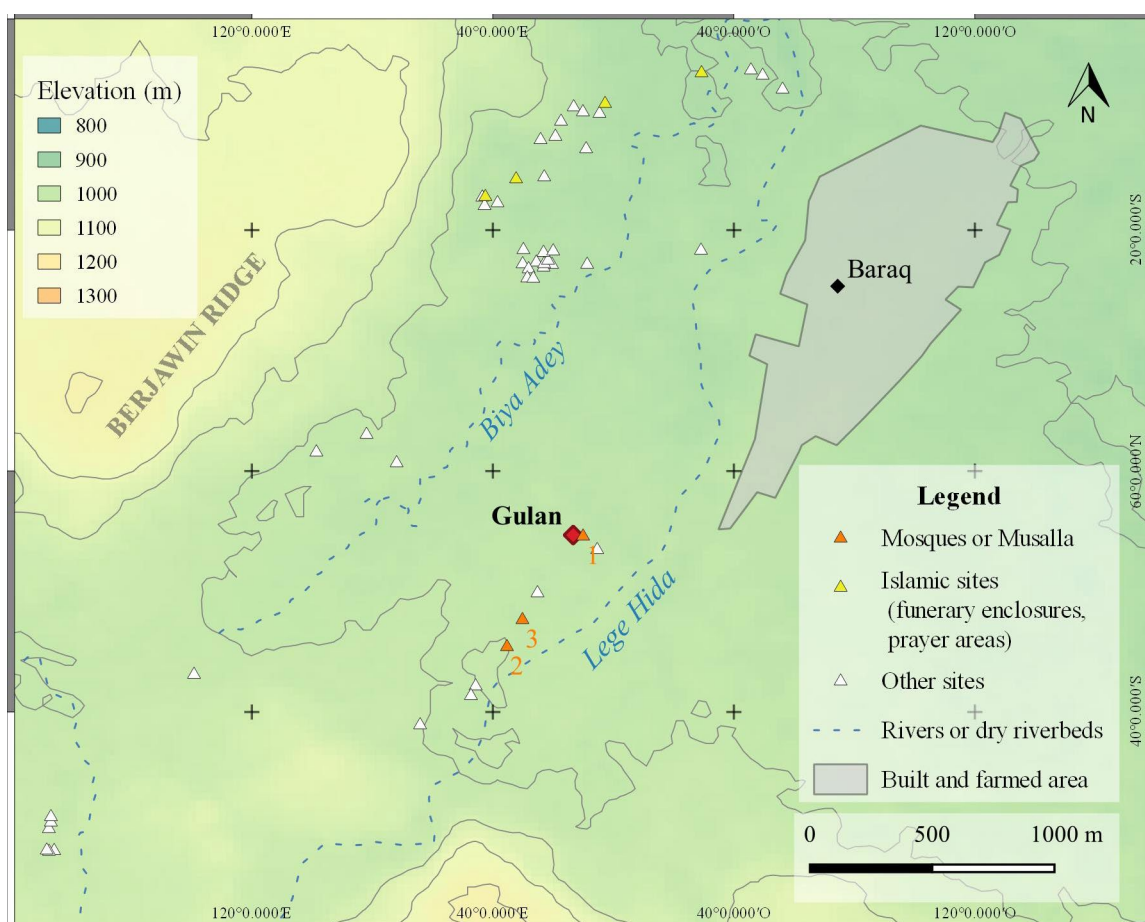


Fig. 27: Archaeological map of Gulan surroundings showing Islamic and non-Islamic sites recorded through field survey and satellite imagery analysis.

Several archaeological sites and structures have been recorded during the 2022 survey, mostly east and south of Gulan itself, including stone cairns, concentration of pottery and lithics artefacts as well as opened prayer areas (musalla) or proper mosques. Analysis of satellite imagery show that stone cairns are widely represented on the western bank of the Biya Adey as are a number of Islamic funerary enclosures with mihrab-s north of the site.

Mosque 3, located less than 400 m south-west from Gulan, is possibly adjoined by ruined structures now buried and would require further examination. The close location of at least three prayer areas

questions their function and the need so many such structures outside the village nucleus.

The archaeological site of Gulan itself, covering an estimated 13360 square meters (1.3 ha) consists of several recognizable built structures and others needing archaeological cleaning to be properly understood. The site appears to be organized along an east-west axis with a dense cluster of square buildings and more modest satellite remains scattered mostly north and east of the core settlement.



Fig. 28: General view from the site from the north.

Structures identified in 2022 include a large mosque (SPA 01, Mosque 1: 24 x 30 m) and secondary prayer areas or musalla-s (Mosque 2 and 3), as well as a number of adjoining buildings organized along two large walls west of Mosque 1. Judging from their diverging orientation, the construction methods and the material employed, some square buildings partly superimposed by others may represent an earlier phase of the settlement. The sequence of occupation of the site and the domestic function of the square buildings need to be investigated. If they indeed used to function as housing units, several of them were then used as funerary enclosures and currently host Muslim graves. Small niches and internal arrangements in and against the walls of the rooms have been spotted during the 2022 survey.

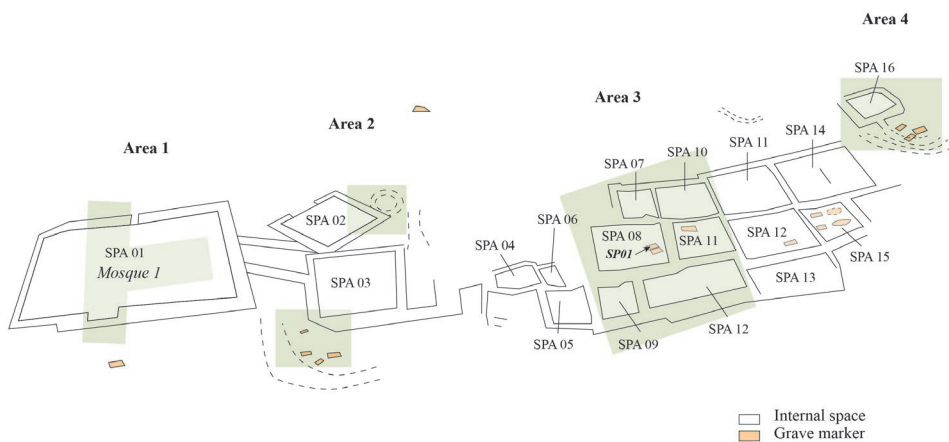


Fig. 29: General view from the site from the north.

Material culture

Potsherds were collected from the surface in Gulan and surrounding sites (**fig. 30**).

In Gulan itself, the assemblage is made of both open and close shapes, with round jars and pots, bowls and plates. Decoration is limited to impressions, usually on the rim.

Close to the village of Baraq, a concentration of potsherd was also spotted:

Baraq Area 01

Site coordinates: 9.70601/41.91928 Visited: 12/11/2023 Surface survey



Fig. 26: Potsherds from Baraq Area 01

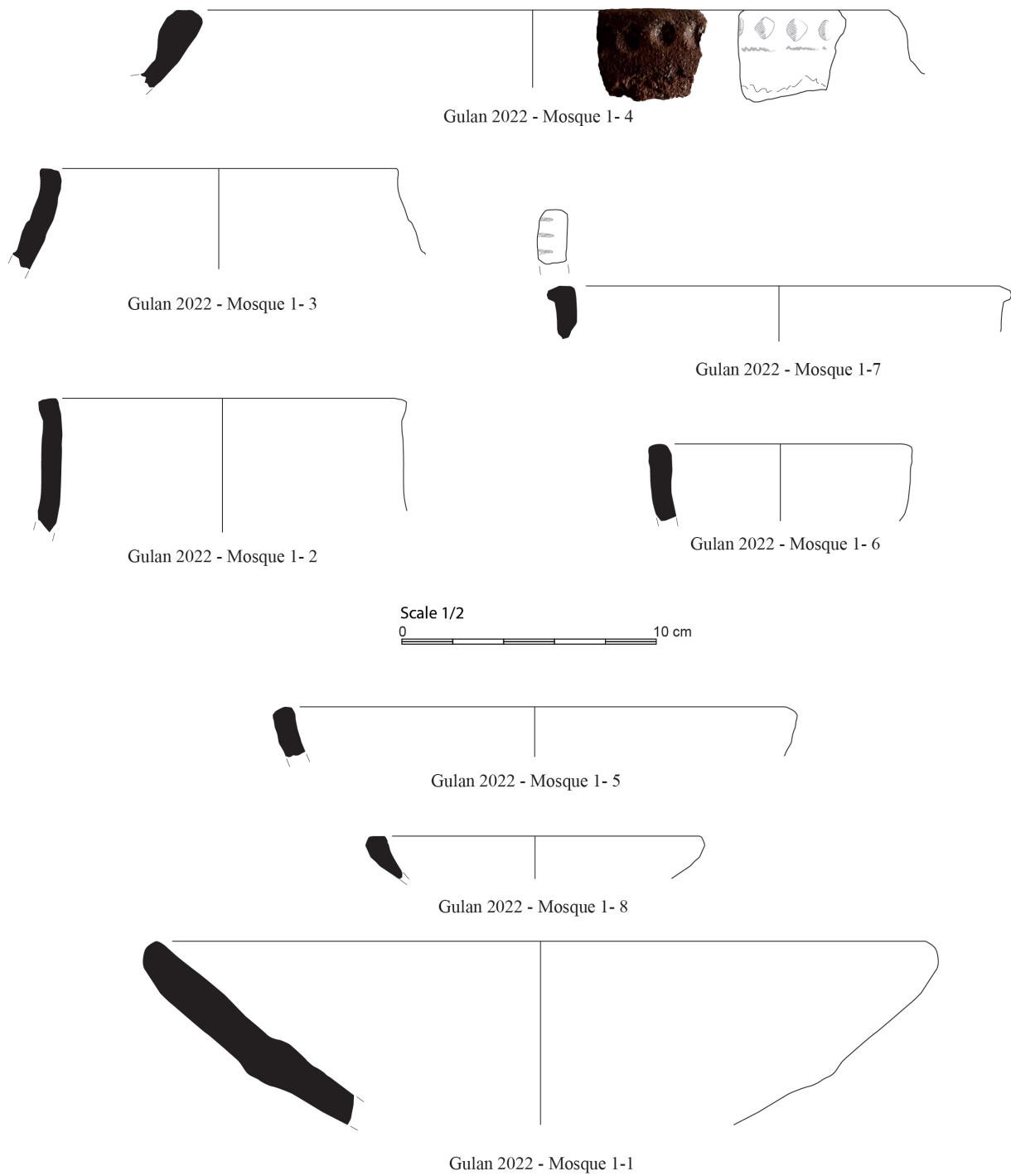


Fig. 30: Diagnostic sherds from Gulan.

