

Incipit-CSIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL CAMPAIGN 2019  
(18/02/2019-15/03/2019)

Preliminary Report



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## 1. Introduction

The archaeological site of Xiis is a tumuli field found 1 km east of the village of Xiis, under the shadow of the Majilin hill and in front of a small volcanic island which constitutes a geographic benchmark in the coast. The site was first mentioned by Georges Revoils, who visited it in 1881 and found Roman materials in some of the tombs. He also identified the site with the old Mosyllon, a trade port used by the Greek sailors which appears described in the Peryplus of the Erythrean Sea, a Greek text of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. In 1975 the place was visited by Neville Chittick, who excavated a couple of looted tumuli in the area.



Figure 1: Location of Xiis area

In 2018 the site was visited by the Incipit-CSIC Spanish Archaeological Mission, who confirmed the antiquity and importance of the place and conducted a preliminary survey of the area. During three days the team surveyed the almost 300 tumuli and recovered interesting materials which show strong contacts between Somaliland and the Roman Empire, India and Persia during the Antiquity (1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD). Only a similar place has ever been found in the Horn of Africa (Ras Hafun, in Somalia), which speaks clearly of the importance of Xiis to understand the history of the Red Sea during the first half of the first 2 century AD. Given this importance, the Incipit-CSIC team prepared a new archaeological campaign for 2019 exclusively based on Xiis, to try to understand one of the most important archaeological sites in the Red Sea.

## 2. Objectives of the 2019 Campaign

The objectives of the 2019 campaign are four:

2.1. To document perfectly the site, identifying and cataloguing every structure to create a database which in the future will help to choose the better areas for grexcavation and to organize the archaeological work

2.2. To establish a chronology of the site based on the materials found in surveys and excavations, to understand if all the structures are of the same chronology or if they were built in different periods

2.3. To understand the funerary traditions of the people which lived in Somaliland during the Antiquity (before the arrival of Islam)

2.4. To understand the territory around Xiis, identifying new archaeological sites

2.5. To visit the ancient town of Maduuna during the return to Hargeisa, to make a first assessment of the importance of the site and its chronology

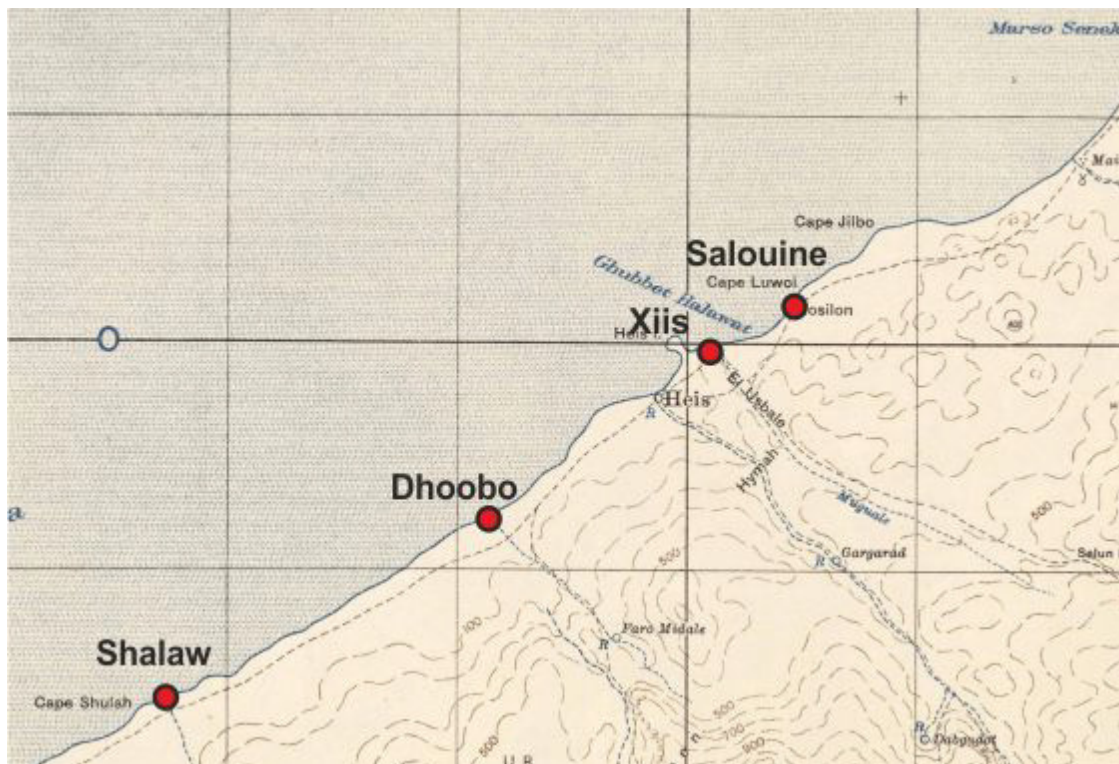


Figure 2: sites excavated or surveyed during the 2019 campaign

## 3. Methodology

Given the multidisciplinary approach of the project has involved the combination of very different methodologies and techniques. The topographic documentation of the site of Xiis has included the use of total station, drone flights and GPS georefering. During the excavation, in addition to the traditional archaeological methods 3D modelling has been extensively used to



document the different stages of the excavated structures. Regarding the cataloguing the tumuli, a mobile application Ibapp has been developed by one of the members of the team to document, classify and catalogue the more than three hundred structures located so far in the site.

#### 4. Xiis

For the sake of efficiency, the site of Xiis has been divided into six areas (A-F), with different characteristics and according to natural features of the terrain. Area A is where most of the tumuli are located, while areas B, E and F have smaller concentrations. C and D areas correspond to two other, smaller archaeological sites: one in the small island in front of the Majilin Mountain and the other one on the top of the same mountain. The 2019 campaign focussed primarily on the areas A and F, where 240 of the 300 tumuli are located.

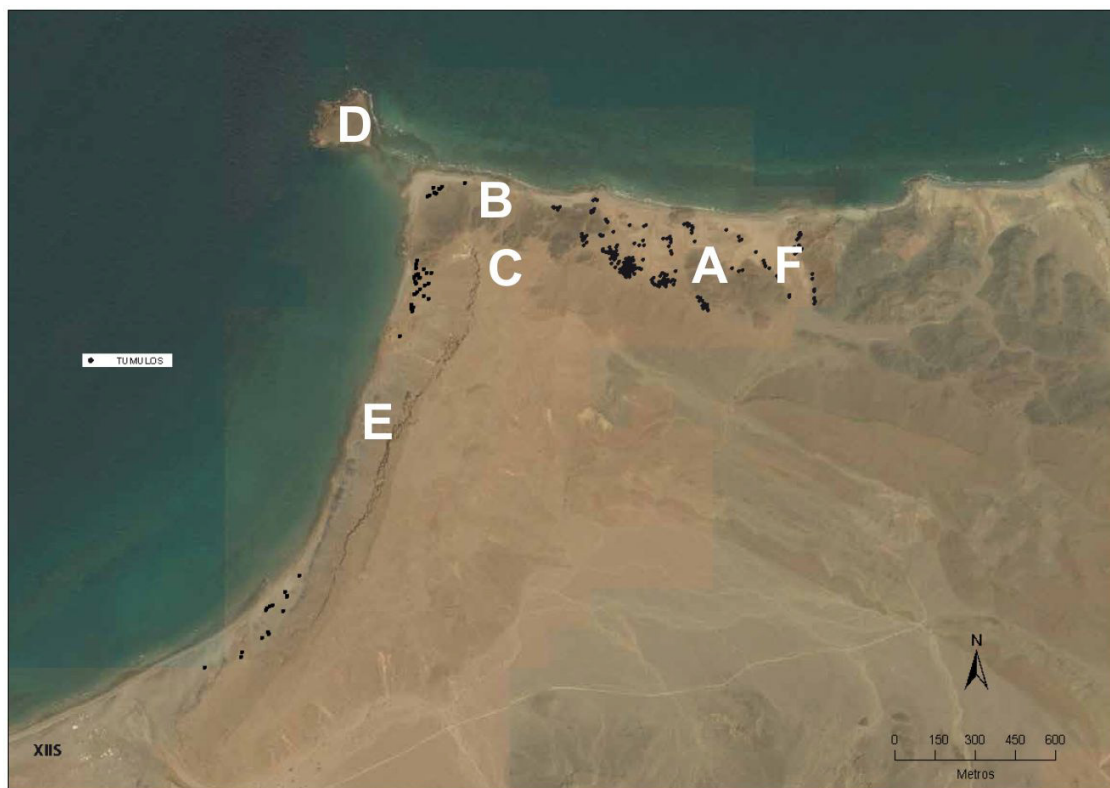


Figure 3: areas of Xiis site

##### 4.1. Topography

One of the priorities of the 2019 campaign was to prepare a proper topographic grid which will be useful in the next campaigns to be. During the first week of fieldwork a series of topographic bases were installed to identify any findings and structures with a error of less than 1 cm. In addition, a series of drone flights photographed the whole area of the archaeological site, providing an excellent quality photographs from where the whole site can be studied and 3D models can be built



Figure 4: topographic work at Xiis

## **4.2. Cataloguing**

One of the most ambitious parts of the project has been the comprehensive survey of all the archaeological areas where there are tumuli to catalogue them archaeologically. This cataloguing has included 1) the georeferencing of the tumuli with GPS coordinates 2) the photographing of all the tumuli, paying special attention to the constructive techniques, the evidences of looting and any special features in the structure such stelae at the base. A total of 241 structures have been documented so far, raising in 25 new tumuli the previous 216 found in 2018. The information provided by this catalogue will help in future decisions about the management of the site, including the decisions about which tumuli excavate in the following years and the number of preserved structures in the site.

In addition to the cataloguing, a thorough survey has been conducted throughout the site, paying special attention to the materials collected within or in the immediate area of the tumuli. 80 structures have rendered materials which, once analyzed, will allow the Incipit-CSIC team to understand better the chronology of the site and the evolution of the graveyard through time.

## **4.3. Excavation**

Four structures have been excavated during the 2019 campaign, the first ones to be excavated scientifically in Xiis. Each of them was selected to solve some kind of archaeological problem and to improve our knowledge of the site and the funerary traditions in the area. All the tombs were carefully excavated and documented and were backfilled after the excavation. The

chronology of the site is 700 years prior to the beginning of Islam, and therefore none of the burials are Islamic.

#### **Structure 49**

The structure 49 is a stone circle of 2,5 m of diameter located in one of the main concentrations of tumuli in Area A. The objective of the excavation of this structure was to determine if this type of structures were tombs or other kind of funerary buildings. This structure is not a cairn as is made of a simple ring of stones of big size, with one plain stone in the centre acting as a marker for the tomb. The excavation documented a very simple pit with the burial of a child 6-8 years old, whose remains had been disturbed by looters who refilled the pit. No grave goods were found in the burial, which after the excavation and documentation was backfilled with sand



Figure 5: Structure 49 before the excavation

#### **Tomb 75**

This tomb consisted in an undisturbed cairn located in the main concentration of tombs in Zone A. It consisted in a ring of stones of big size covered by several layers of different types of stones: plain slabs, coral small stones and big volcanic stones. Under these layers the body was buried in a pit dug in the coral reef which constitutes the geological base of Xiis, and it was covered by a wood structure made of short beams or planks disposed horizontally, whose remains have been documented in both sides of the grave. Under this wood structure the body was disposed horizontally in a prone position, oriented east-west. No grave goods were found in the tomb, which was refilled after the excavation and documentation were ended.



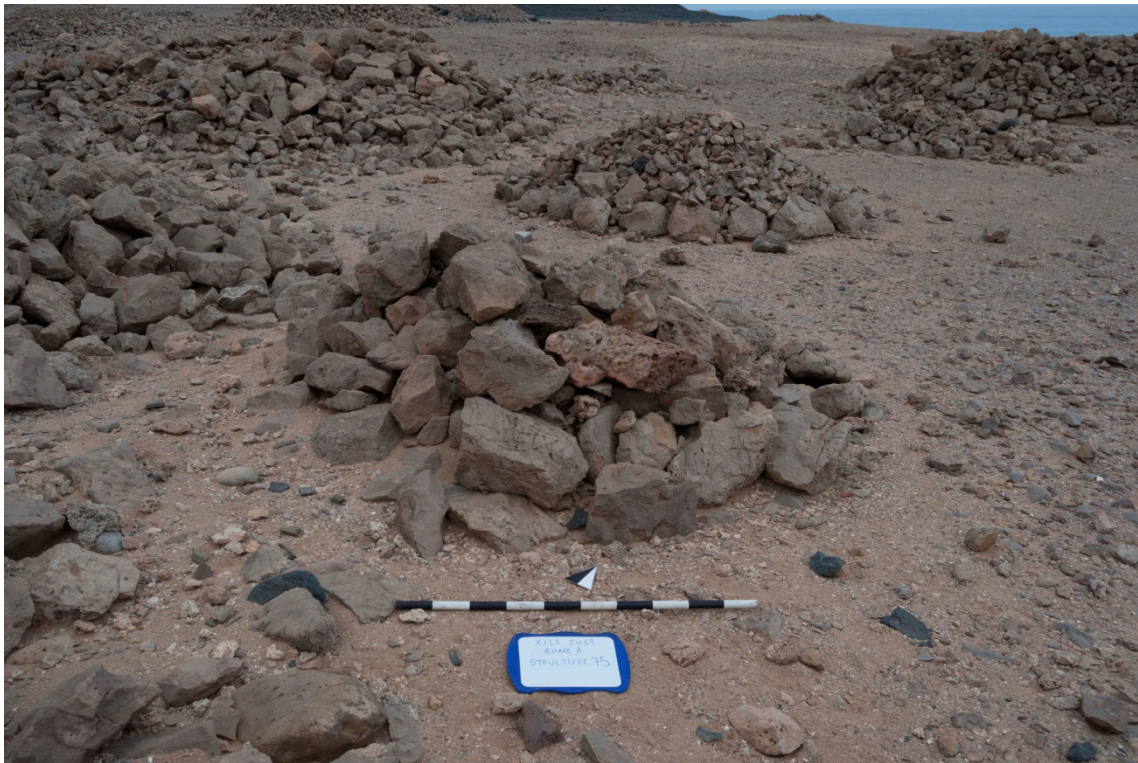


Figure 6: Structure 75 before the excavation



Figure 7: wood imprints in the grave



## **Tomb 120**

The structure 120 is a round cairn of about 3 meters of diameter and two meters of height, located in the same concentration of tumuli that tomb 75. It shows evidences of an unfinished attempt of looting. After the removal of the cover of stones, two different, very compact levels of sand mixed with gypsum were found sealing the tomb. After the removal of these layers, the skeleton of a 10 years old child was found accompanied by a glass jar of roman origin and a chronology of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The jar, which was recovered, has been protected using different methods of preservation due to its extreme fragility, which will require the work of a specialist in preservation before it can be displayed. After the excavation and documentation of the tomb and the recollection of the jar, the tomb was backfilled.



Figure 8: Structure 120 before the excavation





Figure 9: Roman jar found during the excavation of tomb 120

### **Tomb 153**

This tomb consists on a flat circle of stones with a series of slabs disposed north-south. The tomb has been looted probably in an ancient period, but the interest of the remains found around the grave during the 2018 excavation led to the decision of excavating the whole structure this year. The excavation hasn't shown any human remains, but a significant amount of archaeological materials have been found, some of them identical to those discovered by Georges Revoil in 1881. They include glass inlays and bowls, glazed Parthian pottery, Mediterranean containers, Indian red slip wares and one glass bead. The study of this important materials can be key to understand the network of contacts developed by the nomads trading in Xiis during the Antiquity.





Figure 10: Structure 153 before the excavation



Figure 11: excavation process of tomb 153



## **Conclusions**

The excavation of the four tombs of Xiis has provided interesting information about the burial traditions during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries AD. They show a high variety of burial rituals, including sealing layers, simple pits and wood structures, with no two identical burials. The skeletons, however, are disposed in a very similar way, west-east oriented, looking upwards and with both arms lying extended at both sides of the body. This is the first time that a pre-Islamic burial is excavated scientifically in Somaliland, and the following excavations will increase significantly our knowledge of the populations which inhabited the region before the arrival of Islam.

### **4.4. Survey of the Xiis island**

In addition to the work in areas A and F, a survey was conducted in the small island in front of Xiis, the main landmark for the sailor which sailed in the Red Sea and which appears described in the Peryplus of the Erythrean sea, written in the first century AD. The survey documented a big (15 meters of side) rectangular building and a series of small artificial terraces which could have been huts for sailors. Scattered throughout the site there are numerous fragments of coarse pottery similar to that found in the main site of Xiis and other areas along the coast, which could be tentatively dated in the 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. Some other materials are however significantly more modern, as a bangle identical to another found in the Ottoman fort of Dubar, close to Berbera.

## **5. Surveys in areas close to Xiis**

In addition to the main activities in the area of Xiis, a series of surveys have been conducted in some specific sites around the village. Some of them had been previously studied by other archaeologists, while others were completely unknown before. This surveys have allowed to improve our understanding of the regional context of the site of Xiis and its evolution through time.

### **5.1. Salouine-Cape Jilbo**

Although the main concentration of tumuli is undoubtedly around Xiis, there is a significant number of structures between the ravine of Salouine (the easternmost side of Xiis) and the cape Jilbo, on the road from Xiis to maydh. A full survey was conducted in this area, during which 156 structures were documented in a length of 2 kilometers. Most of these structures are very similar to those of Xiis, although there are some architectonical differences and in general they present less materials in the surface. They are distributed along the coast and in some cases getting inland along the wadis.



Figure 12: Tumuli close to Cape Jilbo

Two special groups have been documented during the survey: the first one is composed of about 20 small tumuli placed along the slopes of one of the hills, using big boulders as support to compensate the slopes and with small standing stones on the top of the cairns, and a group of nine flat tombs decorated with four types of stones which provide a chromatic effect on the tomb. The second group has some parallels with some of the tombs of Shalaw and could be of the same chronology, the first millennium BC. A drone flight was made of this interesting group which deserves a deeper study.





Figure 13: Flat tomb with chromatic effect

## 5.2. Dhoobo

During a visit to the well of Dhoobo to get water for the team a completely unknown prehistoric site was found close to the beach and the end of the wadi. The site is marked by a strong concentration of lithic materials and some pieces of pottery distributed along 40 meters parallel to the coast. Most of the lithic tools are rests of knapping activities and flint cores, no proper tools have been found. Given the presence of pottery, a tentative Neolithic chronology has been proposed for this interesting site which requires a more detailed study.

## 5.3. Shalaw

The site of Shalaw is well known by the Saabeen inscription first documented by Sada Mire and then re-studied by Carl S. Philips who has suggested a chronology of the 800-500 BC for the tomb. The Incipit-CSIC team visited the village to document the inscription and to map any other structures corresponding to this almost completely unknown period of the history of Somaliland. The site is located to the south of the village, in an area of low hills crisscrossed by shallow ravines. The tomb consists in a round flat structure with a perimeter of low slabs and infilled by small pebbles. In the centre rests the inscription, relatively well preserved. Around the tomb there are similar structures and smaller mounds of stones which are undoubtedly tombs, most of them looted. Given the small size of these cairns, it seems obvious that these burials were not inhumations, but followed a cremation ritual. A second graveyard of these low mounds of stones has been located to the southeast of the inscription, with most of the tombs still intact. In addition of these graves, a large scattering of materials from the Saabeen period has been found to the north of the tombs, consisting in pottery of reddish brownish



colour and flint materials. In addition to these older tombs, a number of cairns of unknown chronology and several Islamic graves were also documenting, attesting the importance of Shalaw as an archaeological site during thousands of years.



Figure 14: Tomb with Saabean inscription



Figure 15: Saabean cemetery

All the tombs were georeferenced and the most important were also photographed. A drone flight was made of the different graveyards as a preliminary step for the cataloguing of the



structures, and a 3D model of the Saabean inscription was also made. Sample materials were collected in the different concentrations of materials.

## **6. Maduuna**

Although not directly related with the Xiis area, given the importance of Maduuna and its position close to the Silanyo road, a short visit was conducted during the return trip to Hargeisa. The objective was to make a first assessment of the characteristics and archaeological potential of the site and to collect some archaeological materials which could provide a tentative chronology of the place. It also aimed to compare the urban and architectural features of Maduuna with those cities situated to the west, as Amud or Abasa. This first visit showed clear differences between Maduuna and the westernmost medieval cities of Somaliland, with round houses against the square ones of Abasa and Amud or a concentrated vs disperse urban layout. The main building of the site –the mosque–also shows significant differences with those of the Sultanate of Adal, as the presence of a forward courtyard, the external round shape of the mihrab or the lack of stone columns inside the building. All these data point to different chronologies for both types of settlements. Unfortunately, the surprising lack of materials in Maduuna doesn't help to establish a chronology for the site, although some small fragments of pottery and glass would point to dates of the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries for this important place. During the visit, a drone flight mapped all the structures, and a comprehensive photographic session was conducted to document the most important architectonic features.



Figure 16: View of Maduuna from the west



Figure 17: Maduuna mosque

## **7. Work at the Museum**

While the main team was conducting fieldwork at Xiis, several members of the Department of Archaeology worked at the Museum cataloguing and doing basic maintenance work with the archaeological materials recovered by the Spanish Mission and other archaeological teams. During the last days of the campaign, they have also supported the Incipit-CSIC team in the management of the materials and the closing of the season.

## **8. Preliminary conclusions and plans for the future**

The 2019 fieldwork campaign has been extremely successful, with almost all the goals planned being achieved throughout the season. The comprehensive work of cataloguing, mapping and georeferencing done during the campaign ensures that, for the first time, the whole site of Xiis is perfectly monitored and documented, something crucial to plan future campaigns and to protect the site. With the new tumuli discovered during this year, the total of structures in Xiis site has risen to 310, and if we consider those tumuli found in the survey between Salouine and Cape Jilbo the total raises to 470, making of the Xiis area one of the biggest concentrations of burials in Somaliland. The presence of tumuli of different chronologies increases the interest of this area to understand the role of Somaliland in the trade networks which connected the Horn of Africa to the rest of the world.

Regarding the excavations, the data gathered about the funerary remains constitute the first reliable data about the beliefs and traditions of the nomads of the region centuries before the arrival of Islam, and constitute a precious set of data which will likely grow in the future. Finally, the surveys conducted around Xiis have shown the incredible potential of the region to

understand the history of Somaliland, and point to several research threads that can be followed in the future.

For the 2020 campaign and assuming funding is available, the Incipit-CSIC team will most likely continue the work in Xiis, focussing its efforts in the excavation of tumuli once the cataloguing and mapping of the site has been finalized. Currently several members of the Incipit-CSIC team are applying for funding to European and Spanish institutions to ensure that a long term project of at least three years can be launched on this important site.

## **9. Acknowledgements**

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