



Fig. 1: View over the modern settlement of Yeha with the sacred site and the Great Temple (©DAI Orient Department, Klaus Mechelke)

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN DANGER: THE CONFLICT IN TIGRAY (ETHIOPIA)

THE CONFLICT

Susann Harder

Since November 2020, a humanitarian catastrophe has been playing out in Ethiopia largely unobserved by the global public eye. At the start of November, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed deployed federal forces to Tigray, a region in the country's north that had been ruled by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) until this time. The invasion exacerbated the power struggle between the central government in Addis Ababa led by Abiy Ahmed and the TPLF, which was part of the ruling coalition up to 2018. After almost four weeks of active conflict, national forces supported by Eritrean troops marched into the regional capital of Mekelle (New York Times, 19 March 2021). The government in Addis Ababa declared victory on 28 November 2020, by which time several

thousand people are believed to have already been killed and, according to the International Crisis Group, about one third of the population of Tigray displaced. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that roughly 60,000 refugees have fled to eastern Sudan. In Tigray, the infrastructure and supply systems have largely collapsed, and homes, hospitals and schools have been destroyed by bombing. According to UNHCR reports, basic communication has been restored in part (at least in Mekelle) as have some of the basic supply services. However, the majority of the population still has no or insufficient access to food supplies, leaving millions of people in the region at acute risk of starvation.

Although the military campaign in Tigray officially ended last year, active fighting between the national forces and the remaining TPLF troops has continued, now even along the border with Sudan. Since February 2021, there have also increasingly been reports from international human rights organisations including Amnesty International about massacres of the population allegedly perpetrated by the conflicting parties. Growing evidence is moreover coming to light of damage to culturally significant sites, such as the al-Nejashi mosque near the town of Wuqro (BBC News online, 05.01.2021), and the looting of manuscripts from churches. The Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies (HLCEES) at the University of Hamburg responded on 13 January 2021 with an appeal to protect the threatened cultural heritage. In a public statement released on 5 March 2021, the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) also called on the conflicting parties to respect their obligations under the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954).

In the following article, Dr Iris Gerlach, who heads the Sanaa branch of the Orient Department at the German Archaeological Institute (DAI) and coordinates its archaeological research in Ethiopia, presents part of the Tigray region's archaeological cultural heritage. The aim is to draw attention to the rich cultural heritage of the Tigray region and the country of Ethiopia, which includes the World Heritage Site of Aksum with its famous stelae. She makes clear just how serious loss of the cultural heritage would be.



Fig. 2: The Great Temple of Yeha, seventh century BCE
(©DAI Orient Department, Irmgard Wagner)

THE 3,000-YEAR-OLD CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE TIGRAY REGION

Iris Gerlach

The war in the Tigray region in the north of Ethiopia has not only led to one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes in East Africa, but also threatens the country's unique cultural heritage. In addition to the rock churches and the World Heritage Site of Aksum with its palace buildings, burial grounds and famous stelae, there are a number of archaeological sites dating back to the second millennium BCE, before the Christianisation of the country. These sites and their archaeological museums are also in danger of being looted and destroyed by fighting.

The Tigray region had already been in close economic contact with areas far away 3000 years ago, with trade taking place across Nubia (present-day Sudan) as far as Egypt. There were also close ties with the polity of Saba in South Arabia (Yemen). The exchange and trade of luxury goods such as incense, gold, ivory, exotic animals and obsidian (volcanic glass) were particularly important.

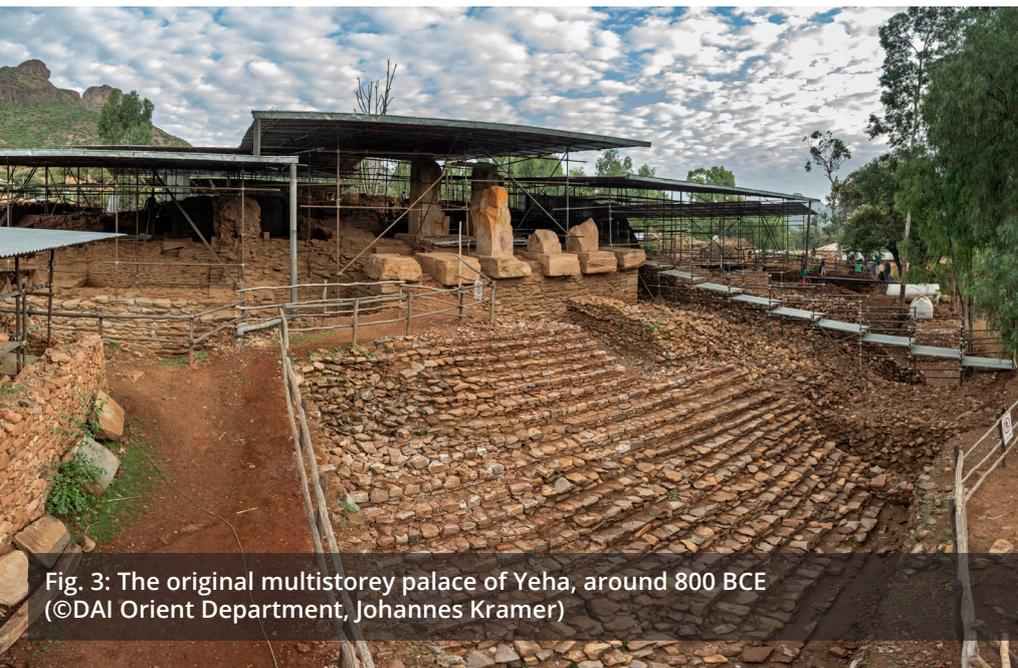


Fig. 3: The original multistorey palace of Yeha, around 800 BCE
(©DAI Orient Department, Johannes Kramer)

People from South Arabia (Sabaeans) settled in the Tigray region from the early first millennium BCE. They worked with the local population to develop and use the raw material deposits found there. The resulting economic boom led to major cultural and social advances: writing was introduced in this region for the first time and techniques for working metal developed. The system of rule and religion also changed under the South Arabian influence: new design processes were used to produce art.

The cultural and political centre of this early complex society is Yeha, which lies just 35 kilometres from Aksum. Other important sites from this period include Wuqro with its archaeological museum to the north of the provincial capital Mekelle as well as Hawelti and Melazo close to Aksum. The German Archaeological Institute has cooperated with the Ethiopia Department of Antiquities for more than ten years now to research, restore and develop all of these sites.

Evidence of a settlement at the Yeha site dates back to the late second millennium BCE (Fig. 1). However, it was not until the first millennium BCE that it became a supra-regional centre. At this

time, sprawling areas of housing were built, administrative and sacred buildings erected and several necropolises constructed. The 14-metre high Great Temple, which was built in the seventh century BCE using traditional South Arabian building methods, forms Yeha's landmark (Fig. 2).

The Great Temple is dedicated to the main Sabaean god, Almaqah. Perched atop the hill, it was converted into a church in the sixth century. It

remains a sacred place for Ethiopian Orthodox Christians to this day. Two other temples and a representative monumental building were also located in this sacred area. To the west of this stands the multistorey palace. Built in around 800 BCE (Fig. 3), its masonry consisted of wooden beams and rubble stones. With a base area of 60 metres by 65 metres, it is the largest known timber and stone building in East Africa to date. The necropolises of Yeha consist of shaft tombs cut vertically into the rock, which lead to burial chambers. Several deceased were buried here, possibly grouped by family, together with a variety of funerary objects.



Fig. 4: Altar in the sanctuary of Meqaber Ga'ewa / Addi Akaweh near Wuqro, 8th/7th century BCE
(©DAI Orient Department, Pawel Wolf)

A temple dedicated to the main Sabaean god Almaqah dating from the seventh or eighth century BCE was also discovered at the Wuqro site (Fig. 4). Inside is an altar that – together with the archaeological museum in Wuqro – today forms one of the tourism highlights of the Tigray region. The altar was made from local limestone by a stonemason originating from South Arabia. It was here that the priests performed important sacrifices, offering up the blood of sacrificial animals as well as liquids such as wine and other beverages to the gods. The altar resembles a small temple: it stands on a plinth above which is a façade featuring false windows.

In addition to Yeha and Wuqro, the sites of Hawelti and Melazo located 10 kilometres to the southeast of Aksum testify to the cultural change in the early first millennium BCE, which was caused by the migration of South Arabian groups of population to this region. A field of stelae can be found on one of the hills there to which this place also owes its name: Hawelti means stelae. The 21 known rectangular stelae fragments are not building pillars, but rather ritual monuments of various dimensions displaying varying traces of workmanship. They have no architectural relation to each other, even though most of those visible today are grouped around a depression more or less regularly. Originally, they were up to 10 metres high and weighed up to 30 tonnes. Unlike the renowned stelae of Aksum, those in Hawelti do not mark the sites of graves. However, a cultic or ritual use can be assumed, probably relating to the kings who reigned at the time. Two buildings, which no longer exist today, were once located close by. Given the numerous objects found in their vicinity, excavators of the time believed these were once temples. The two seated female statues and a throne adorned with reliefs are particularly worthy of note. These are now exhibited in the National Museum of Ethiopia in Addis Ababa (Fig. 5).

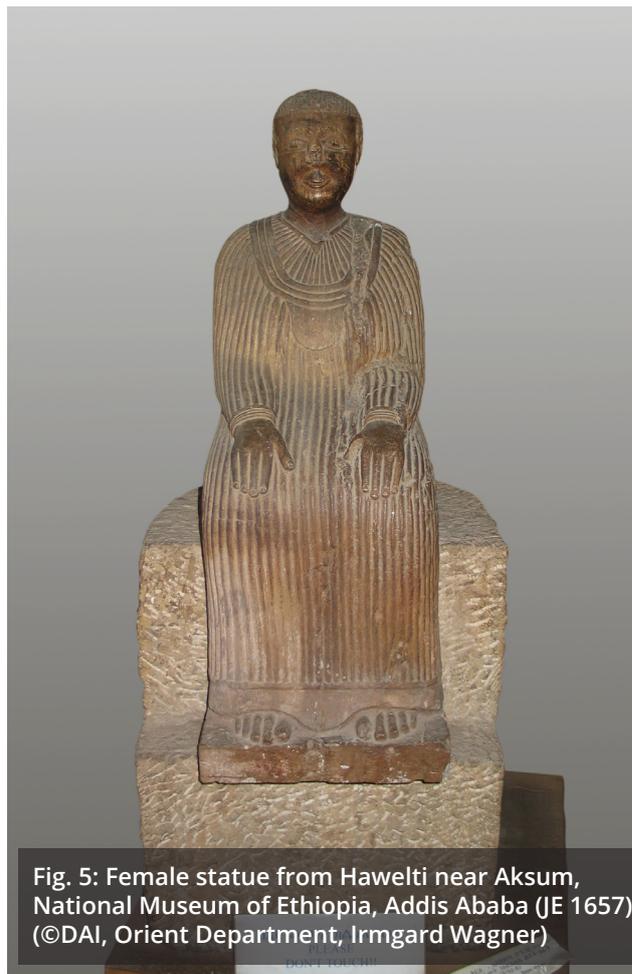


Fig. 5: Female statue from Hawelti near Aksum, National Museum of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa (JE 1657) (©DAI, Orient Department, Irmgard Wagner)

Due to the current political situation, the German Archaeological Institute is not conducting any field research in the Tigray region at the moment. We hope that Tigray's unique, 3,000-year-old cultural heritage will survive the perils of war and be open to visitors from Ethiopia and around the world again in the future.

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