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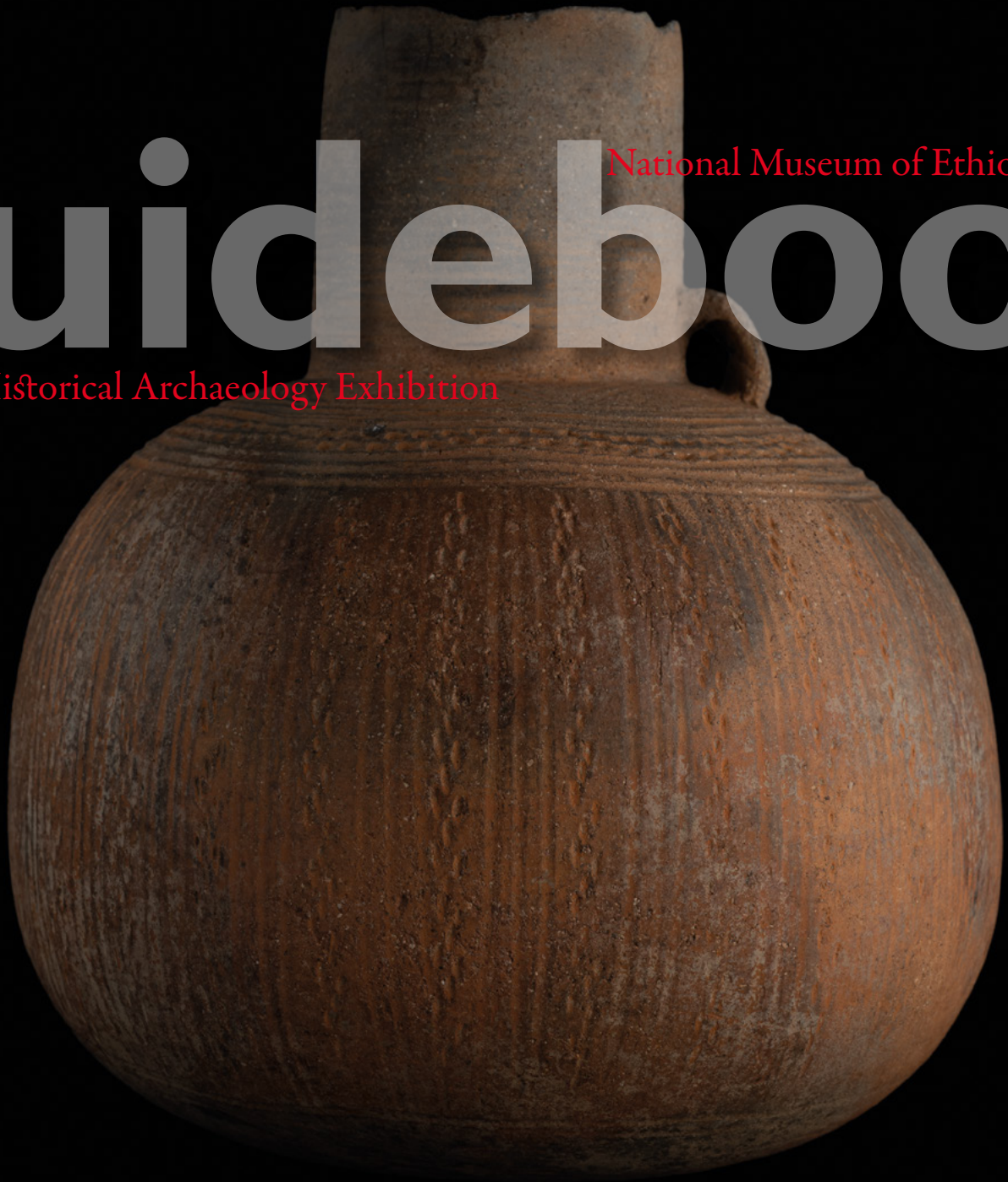
les nilotiques

National Museum of Ethiopia

guidebook

Historical Archaeology Exhibition



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Dahlak
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Adulis
Matara
Debre Dammo
Sabea
Yeha
Gunda Gunde
Aksum
Hawelti
Ger'alta
Addi Galamo
Tigray
Mikael Amba
Wukro
Kwiha/Bilet
Mekelle
Maryam Nazret
Gondar
Azazo
Misfas Barhi
Tana
Yemhrana Krestos
Genneta Maryam
Daga Estifanos
Lalibela
Emmekina Medhane Alem
Rema Medhane Alem
Lasta
Hayq Estifanos
Zayla
Wollo
Atronsa Maryam
Meshala Maryam
Tater Gur
Manz
Faqi Dabbis
Amba Gabriel
Rassa
Asbari/Gendabelo
Ferewanda Beri
Nora
Walaqa
Ifat
Enselale
Debre Berhan
Sure Kabanawa
Harlaa
Derbiga
Rare
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Tchertcher
Addis Ababa
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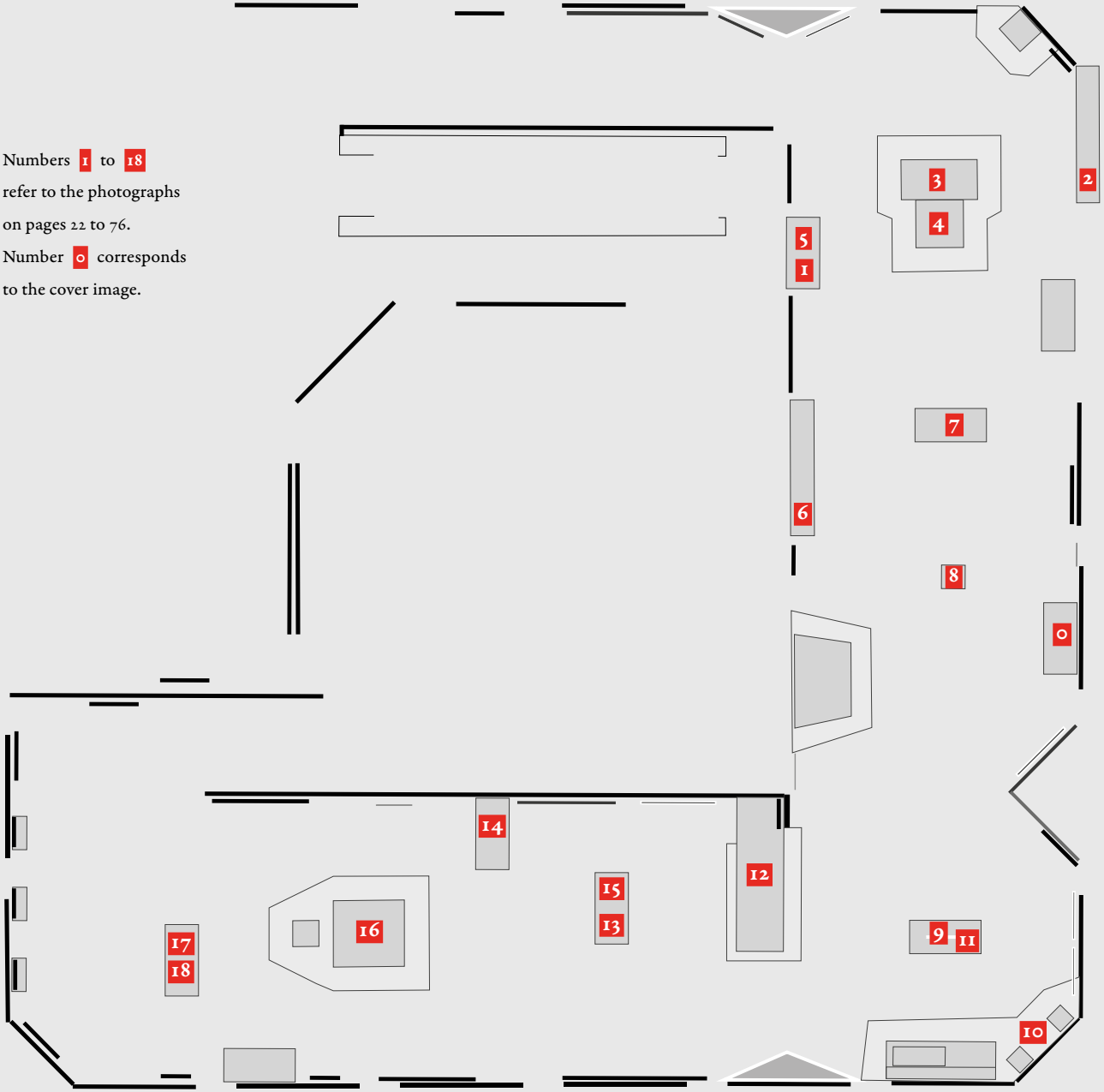
Simplified map of the Historical Archaeology Exhibition

Numbers 1 to 18 refer to the photographs on pages 22 to 76. Number 0 corresponds to the cover image.



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Aksumite bottle
2nd to 4th century
Ceramic, height 20 cm,
diameter 17 cm
Medogue, Je 1394
Cf. page 38.

National Museum of Ethiopia

guidebook

Historical Archaeology Exhibition

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Contents

Foreword

The following document is a guide for the Historical Archaeology Gallery of the National Museum of Ethiopia. It begins with an introduction that outlines the exhibition's purpose and the scope of historical archaeology in Ethiopia, which is a specialized field in Ethiopia that explores the period from the 1st millennium BCE through to the 19th century, encompassing the rise and fall of ancient kingdoms, the spread of religions, and the evolution of diverse societies. Through meticulous analysis of material evidence—sites, monuments, and artifacts—archaeologists seek to understand not only the grand narratives of political power and cultural change, but also the daily lives, beliefs and adaptations of the peoples who shaped this land.

Ethiopia's archaeological heritage is exceptionally rich, with numerous sites recognized as Unesco World Heritage Sites. This heritage has been revealed by a long tradition of research, making Ethiopia one of the most studied countries in sub-Saharan Africa in the field of historical science. This research is vital to understanding the development of agricultural techniques, the intensification of trade networks, the rise of complex political structures, and the coexistence of diverse societies. This 3,000-year period laid the foundation for the emergence of contemporary Ethiopia.

The journey of archaeological research in Ethiopia began in earnest in the 20th century with the German-archaeological expedition to Aksum. This expedition revealed a large set of monumental ruins and sparked considerable interest in the region's past. Subsequent surveys, particularly in Southern Ethiopia, further expanded our understanding of Ethiopia's ancient civilizations. Figures like François Azaïs played a foundational role in establishing archaeological research in the country.

The establishment of dedicated institutions, such as the Archaeological Section at the National Library and the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology, underscores the commitment to preserving and studying Ethiopia's heritage. These institutions,

now forming the Ethiopian Heritage Authority, have played a crucial role in conducting field surveys, excavations, and in the study of collected artifacts. The French Center for Ethiopian Studies has also greatly facilitated research through collaborative programs.

The collections of the National Museum are a testament to this long history of research. Composed primarily of artifacts discovered during excavations, these collections reflect evolving research interests over time. Initially, the focus was on sites related to Aksum and Ethiopia's Christian roots, but this has expanded to encompass other sites and periods. The collection includes artifacts from Aksum, Hawelti, Yeha, Adulis, and Matara. These objects serve as primary sources for understanding the past, each one being a piece of the puzzle of history.

The exhibition aims to bring these discoveries to the public, presenting the artifacts within their historical and cultural context. It uses notices, maps, and scale models to enhance understanding and reveal the lives of the people who created them. The chronological organization of the displays, coupled with educational materials, seeks to demonstrate the methods of archaeology, emphasizing the importance of conserving artifacts for future research and understanding.

The exhibition includes both iconic pieces and objects of daily life, chosen for their aesthetic value and their ability to illustrate aspects of the past. It seeks to provide a more comprehensive picture of Ethiopia's cultural and heritage diversity, including the medieval period and the megalithic cultures that pre-dated or co-existed with the Aksumite Kingdom. Through these displays, visitors are invited to engage with the tangible remnants of the past, and to gain a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of Ethiopian history.

In essence, this exhibition and its accompanying guide provide a unique window into the history of Ethiopia, underscoring the crucial role of historical archaeology in revealing the complexity and diversity of the country's past ■

Andualem Girmaye,
CEO, National Museum of Ethiopia,
January 2025

From Sites to Collections

the Pathway to an Exhibition

Defining Historical Archaeology in Ethiopia

Archaeology is a science that studies past societies through the analysis of material evidence, including sites*, monuments and objects. It aims at understanding every possible aspect of human occupations, from daily life to ruling or belief systems. The discipline was originally assigned the role of describing boundaries and the evolution of cultural groups and political entities through time, to supplement the gaps in historical records. Nowadays, it also seeks to understand the diversity of human societies and their adaptations to singular environmental contexts.

What is referred to as "Historical Archaeology", in Ethiopia, is an academic area of specialization that covers the period* ranging from the 1st millennium Before the Common Era* (BCE) up until the 19th century, covering Antiquity* and the Middle Ages*. This three-millennia period was marked by the emergence and the enhancement of agricultural techniques, the intensification of trade with routes lengthening over the centuries, accompanied by the development of complex political structures, and the coexistence of societies both with and without writing. This vast time period is thus of great interest in documenting the societies that led to the foundation of contemporary Ethiopia.

Ethiopia is widely known for the diversity of its environments and its rich heritage, with several archaeological sites listed as Unesco World Heritage Sites. Thanks to a long research tradition, Ethiopia is certainly one of the most studied countries in Sub-Saharan Africa in the field of historical sciences. This is the result of the numerous research projects engaged in a wide array of fields and periods ranging from Prehistory to the last decades of the 20th century. Within this picture, historical archaeology holds a prominent position.

From Scientific Expeditions to Heritage Institutions

Although described by European travellers since the 16th century, antique monuments in Ethiopia had not been investigated before the 20th century. The giant stelae of Aksum were among the first to be properly excavated, while studied as part of the German-archaeological Expedition to Aksum. The latter revealed a large set of monumental ruins dating back to the 1st millennium of the Common Era (CE) and can be considered the starting point of historical archaeology*. The next important archaeological surveys* were conducted in Southern Ethiopia in the 1920s and 1930s, respectively, by François Azaïs and the Frobenius Institute. They had a major impact in revealing these numerous megalithic monuments to the world of archaeology.

François Azaïs, who could be described as the father of archaeology in Ethiopia, operated with the support of the future Emperor Haile Selassie, and laid the foundations for an institute dedicated to archaeology, whilst initiating privileged cooperation with France in this field. It was not until 1952, however, that this became a reality, when Haile Selassie funded the first institution dedicated to archaeological research, in cooperation with French researchers assigned by the French government. The Emperor granted it substantial resources and issued regulations to protect heritage. The archaeological section at the National Library (1952-1961) and later the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology

(1961-1966) undertook numerous field surveys, excavations, and inventories of manuscripts* that constitute an important source of knowledge to this day. During the 1970s, archaeological excavations in Northern Ethiopia and Eritrea continued, but now under the supervision of the Ethiopian Antiquity Administration thanks to a new proclamation issued in 1966 which also regulated paleontology, and witnessed an unprecedented diversification of research all over the country.

With the new revolutionary Derg regime (1974-1991), the Antiquity Administration then became the Department for Research and Conservation of National Heritage, under the Ministry of Culture and Sports Affairs, while a new proclamation was only promulgated in 1989. At the turn of the 1980s, the Derg regime restrained most foreigners from conducting archaeological research but a few of them and Ethiopian scholars kept working at several sites and with inventories of cultural heritage.

The fall of the Derg and the coming to power of the EPRDF (1991-2018) coincided with an important renewal of research during the 1990s. After 1994, the Institution became the Centre for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (1994-2000) and later the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (2000-2021). It would accompany and encourage the renewed dynamics of research by training and hiring large numbers of professionals, in Addis Ababa, as well as in regional and zonal bureaus all over the country. In 2010, offices and dedicated facilities were relocated and built close to the National Museum. It was finally transformed in 2021 into the Ethiopian Heritage Authority and placed under the Ministry of Tourism.

Such efforts coincided with the establishment in 1991 of the House for Ethiopian Studies, an Ethio-French research institution based in Addis Ababa, heir to the Ethiopian Archaeological Institute. In 2007, it was renamed the French Center for Ethiopian Studies (Centre français des études éthiopiennes, or CFEE) and administered by the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) along with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MEAE). Since then, the CFEE has greatly facilitated research and Ethio-French collaborative programs.

Collections as a Record of the Research History

The National Museum's collections are constituted of artifacts brought by people, given or bought, but mainly of excavations' material, objects and sample collected during fieldwork. The first record in the inventory dates back to 1952 when the French researchers working for the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology created the Entry Journal to record each artifact entering into the national collections. This inventory record was used until the 1970s and is still a precious source of information to manage the collection. Evolving research interests and questions, as well as the discoveries of new archaeological sites, have shaped the national collection over the decades.

The Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology was founded in 1952 to study Ethiopia's heritage in its entirety, but the Emperor placed particular emphasis on research related to Aksum and Ethiopia's Christian roots. This explains that the main focus was first put on the ancient sites of Tigray and Eritrea (at that time, part of a federation with Ethiopia and, later a province of its Empire).

But, inventories of the monuments and archaeological sites were carried out all over Ethiopia, thanks to published literature, aerial or terrestrial surveys, as well as discussions with local residents and authorities. In this way, the first South-Arabic objects entered the collections, some brought back to Mekelle's office, and others that farmers had discovered by chance in their fields and kept preciously, pointing archaeologists to the Hawelti site where excavations were undertaken a year later.

From 1953 to 1974, several sites at Aksum, Hawelti, Yeha, Adulis and Matara were studied, considerably expanding our knowledge of Ethiopian Antiquity, and it still today constitutes the largest volume of collections. Archaeological research built up collections throughout major excavation campaigns. But following up fieldwork, important efforts were made in studying, listing and publishing findings in the *Annales d'Éthiopie*, the scientific journal of the institute.

Once the Derg rose to power in the 1970s, northern Ethiopia became almost inaccessible for archaeological fieldwork. For a time, the developing interest for paleontology and prehistory, with the discovery of important sites like Melka Kunture (50 km South to Addis Ababa), also oriented efforts toward those periods and seemed to make historical archaeology a secondary concern. That's when the focus of the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology shifted towards the east and south, with the development of megalithic monument studies and excavations of sites like Sourre Kabanawa, Gattira Demma, and Tiya.

Archaeologists also started research in Central Ethiopia, on the Royal Churches, for example. In Gondar, in the numerous carved churches, and to a lesser extent in Lalibela. The architectural and historical art approaches have been preferred, and archaeological researches have started on these sites more recently. Collections gathered during the Derg period remain scarce. This can be explained by the focus on large-scale surveys rather than excavation campaigns. Similarly, the nature of the monuments and the less abundant material culture explain the lower proportion of collections associated with this period of Ethiopian archaeology.

Research conducted since the 1990s, and especially in the 2000s, has profoundly renewed our understanding of the diversity of past societies that evolved in Ethiopia during the last three millennia. Several research projects were particularly interested in identifying, excavating and understanding the diversity of medieval occupations across the country.

This research effort would greatly supplement previous projects focusing on earlier periods and would help to fill important gaps in historical sources, especially in Eastern and Central Ethiopia. Ongoing archaeological research has permitted a continuous renewal of data and interpretations regarding the past of the country.

All the collections resulting from excavations conducted in the country since 1952 are curated by the Ethiopian Heritage Authority in Addis Ababa, except for those that were deposited in the museums of Aksum, Wukro, Dessie, Harlaa and Melka Kunture. As a result, despite a relatively young age, the institution hosts rich collections of fossils and artifacts and is frequented daily by researchers from all over the world. And although they have been subject to the inconvenience of several moves, leading to time-restricted access to the collections, the collections remain an ever-renewed source of information.

Silhouette stele* at Osolo in the area of Silte, 1967.

Zoomorphic clay figurines from Hawelti, 1959.

Portraying Historical Periods through Exhibitions

As early as 1955, a presentation of the collections by site and type was installed within the archaeology section's building. It was organized and visited by Emperor Haile Selassie as part of the jubilee of his 25-year reign. Two years later, while the archaeology section was too narrow, a new museography* was designed to reflect the dynamic of the research field and installed in the new building of the National Library, as the Museum of Antiquities. There was a willingness to help visitors understand the methods used in archaeology. Beside displaying objects, sites were presented using notices, maps and scale models.

In 1966/67, a National Museum was created in Addis Ababa at Hamist Kilo, in a wide compound originally owned by *Fitaweri* Shimelis Habte (a renowned patriotic leader of the 20th century). It had been then occupied by the Fascists who built the old villa, today known as "the Italian building" (1937-1941), and then taken back by Prince Mekonnen Haile Selassie as a residence (1941-1949), before it became the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1949-1966). To date, relatively little is known about the permanent exhibition between 1967 and 1999.

Collections of all kinds—paleontology, prehistory, ethnography and historical archaeology—were displayed on two floors, in spaces that were limited, given the number of major objects kept by the institution. The need for a larger, dedicated exhibition space was identified as early as the 1970s, and was certainly spurred on by the Unesco World Heritage movement, which was in the midst of a formative phase.

The current National Museum building was therefore built in the 1980s and inaugurated in the early 1990s. It is an original and modern building whose displays have been reorganized several times since its first opening. Its exhibitions are spread across four major themes (paleontology and prehistory, historical archaeology, fine arts and ethnography) of about 100-200 square-meters each. The museum attracts a large number of visitors, especially school pupils who come with their classes to see iconic artifacts and fossils.

Before its last renovation from 2019 to 2022, the historical archaeology display had been rearranged in 1999. The exhibition had been displaying masterpieces and some impressive artifacts from antiquity, but the contextualization was limited, and it was difficult for visitors to appreciate the significance and value of the collections. Moreover, as research on medieval sites was only in its beginnings, this period was displayed in a very limited way.

The recent renovation project, therefore, had several objectives. In addition to refreshing an outdated presentation, the renewal of research from the 2000s onwards, particularly for the medieval period, whether in the North, East, or South, has enabled a more comprehensive picture of Ethiopia's cultural and heritage diversities to be displayed. While the section devoted to antiquity still welcomes visitors to the exhibition, a large area is now dedicated to medieval Christian, Muslim, and megalithic cultures, predating or co-existing with the former. Given the museum's public, the presentation was designed to be educational, with a chronological approach to the sites in terms of what they tell us about the life of past societies through the objects and the contexts in which they were discovered.

There are emblematic pieces, which are the subject of notices in this guide to the collections, as well as items of a more daily nature. The objects have been selected for their aesthetic quality, but above all for their demonstrative power, and the museography aims to make them understandable to a wider audience. The display concludes with an introduction to the techniques of archaeology, with particular emphasis on the contribution made by object and material studies, highlighting the importance of conserving archaeological artifacts for their potential for valorization, as well as for research ■ [C.M.,L.D.,A.-L.G.]

The exhibition in the National Library building, 1957.

Ethiopian Antiquity

from a Plurality of Societies to a Unified Polity

The term "Ethiopian Antiquity" refers to the period marking the beginning of the historical era in Ethiopia to the dawn of the Middle Ages. It thus covers the period from the start of the 1st millennium BCE, with the earliest inscriptions, to the 7th and 8th centuries CE, when the Kingdom of Aksum collapsed.

In the current state of research, textual and archaeological data make it possible to outline a chrono-cultural era covering a large part of present-day Eritrea and the northern Highlands of Ethiopia. This vast region presents a variety of landscapes, dominated by the High Plateaus and bordered by the Red Sea coastline. The environment and climate played an essential role in the development of ancient Ethiopian civilizations, shaping the resources available that could be extracted, produced, and exchanged.

Thanks to the study of obsidian* lithic tools, there were well-documented trade relations between the Horn of Africa and Arabia, as early as the 6th millennium BCE. They were intensified from the first millennium BCE onwards, to reach a peak during the Aksumite period. The use of the South Arabian alphabet, the integration of technical innovations such as metallurgy, the minting* of coins, and the incorporation of belief systems all bear witness to these links.

Due to the countless monumental remains such as the Great Temple of Yeha, or the stelae field of Aksum, Antiquity has long been the focus of archaeological research in Ethiopia. In 1905, the first archaeological mission (the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition), focused scientific and diplomatic attention on the holy city of Aksum. Monuments, objects and inscriptions were studied, sparking a lively interest that remains unabated to this day.

Ethiopian Antiquity has long been examined through the prism of the ruins of the Aksumite Kingdom. The latter has thus become the reference point for researchers in establishing chronology. Accordingly, they have classified all traces of antiquity by the periods and terms of "Pre-Aksumite", before the advent of the Kingdom of Askum, "Aksumite" during its flourishing, and finally "Post-Aksumite", between the disappearance of the political entity and the advent of the Zagwe dynasty in the 9th century CE. These designations are still used for convenience, although they do not provide an accurate and overall account of historical reality.

Today, historical and archaeological studies have made it possible to sketch out nearly two millennia of ancient history in Ethiopia, where we see the succession, between kinship and continuity, of several great original cultures, which developed on an agro-pastoral* substratum. These civilizations were characterized by civilizational practices that demonstrate the development of durable, highly interconnected societies and political entities, from the plurality of the so-called pre-Aksumite societies to the unified Aksumite polity ■ [L.D.]

The Great Temple of Almaqah in Yeha, 1950s.

Excavations of the rock-cut tombs
beneath the Great Temple of Yeha, 1960.

The "thrones", basis of votive monuments
in the precinct of Maryam Sion in Aksum, 1950s.

The Stelae field in Aksum, 1950s.

Kingdoms of the 1st Millennium BCE:
from the Ethio-Sabean Power to the Beginnings of Aksum

If the 2nd millennium BCE seems to have been strongly marked by cultural exchanges with the Upper Nile Valley, for instance with Sudan, South Arabia took a dominant role in the 1st millennium BCE. A significant cultural transfer from the South-Arabian kingdoms marks a turning point in Ethiopian history—the first evidence of the use of writing. Borrowing the Sudarabic alphabet, the earliest known inscriptions, dating from the 8th century BCE, were produced to transcribe a language showing strong ties to those of South Arabia, but with distinct local features. Such borrowing can only be explained by intense exchanges, the main catalyst of which was primarily trade.

In addition to lithic tools, luxury goods like gold and elephant ivory, an important concern was the control of the frankincense* trade routes which grew in the Horn of Africa and the South-Arabian peninsula. Therefore, both regions are considered to possibly be the ancient "Land of Punt," mentioned in ancient Egyptian sources as a place of exchange and trade. In any case, the Kingdom of Saba, in South Arabia, is known to have played a predominant role in the frankincense trade, including in the Highlands of Ethiopia.

This is stated by the sites and artifacts found in an area extending from the northern Highlands of Ethiopia to the Eritrean coast along the Red Sea. The material record demonstrates that art, architecture, religion, and kingship were patterned after South Arabian traditions and particularly those of the Kingdom of Saba. This period is therefore referred to as "Ethio-Sabean". Settlers established themselves progressively beside the local populations and their respective cultures developed in parallel, while also interacting. It is difficult to assess to what extent all the population categories were included in these cultural exchanges. The indigenous societies have often been overshadowed by the Ethio-Sabean monuments and are still poorly documented.

Recent research tends to show that the area dominated by settlers might have been rather limited, suggesting that the predominant part of the indigenous populations, continued to develop alongside each other with little upheaval.

The main Ethio-Sabean remains were found at Yeha, Hawelti, and Wukro and reveal the emergence of an important political entity composed of one or several kingdoms that began around 800 BCE. The data allow the site of Yeha to be identified as the center of Ethio-Sabean power. A temple, a palace and rich rock-cut tombs, show the presence of Sabean individuals and a wealthy elite. To depict this Ethio-Sabean political entity, it is possible to refer to a valuable inscription found on the site of Hawelti-Gobochela. It mentions the "mukkarib of D'MT and SB" which indicates a territory ruled by a king, whose kingdom is referred to as D'MT.

Many inscriptions have been preserved from vanished religious monuments. Most of these were reused in later buildings, often churches. They reveal the existence of an Ethio-Sabean temple in the area, and religious buildings are the most thoroughly documented monuments for this period. Alongside the Great Temple of Yeha, two other temples have been excavated at Hawelti and Wukro. These reveal floor plans,

Excavations at the Grat Be'al Gebri in Yeha, 1970s.

and construction techniques using ashlar stone*, which were directly copied from South Arabian examples, such as the Sirwah temple in the Arabian Peninsula. Religious monuments found in Ethiopia were all dedicated to the Moon or Sun god Almaqah. The deities honored during the Ethio-Sabean period were the same as those honored in South Arabia. However, other beliefs and rituals likely developed in parallel locally. Offerings of various types were discovered in or around the temples. They were brought by the worshippers to honor the gods. This provides some information about the ancient cult and the people living at that time. Stone altars* and incense burners belonged to a wealthy section of the population that borrowed from South Arabian art, while terracotta models of human, animal, or architectural forms provided information on the local tradition of modest offerings. Some objects show ties with the distant regions of Egypt, Sudan, or India. These offerings are further proof of various cultural trends among pre-Aksumite societies.

In Hawelti and Yeha, there were also two examples of monumental constructions for administrative and/or palatial use. The Grat Be'al Gebri site is just a few dozen meters from the Great Temple at Yeha. Excavations revealed a major pillared construction built on a massive podium* using a wooden-frame building technique. This Ethio-Sabean domination seems to have collapsed around 500 BCE. Sites show signs of a brutal desertion or even deliberate destruction, as at Grat Be'al Gebri, which was destroyed by fire. A still imperfectly documented period followed, during which pre-Aksumite societies continued to develop, enriched by contributions and borrowings from South Arabian culture, gradually laying the foundations for the future kingdom of Aksum ■ [L.D.]

The frieze of the ibexes re-employed in the masonry of the church Abuna Atsfe in Yeha, 1950s.

Funerary material found during excavations of the rock-cut tomb n° 6, Yeha, 1960.

Identity mark in the shape of an ibex
8th to 6th century BCE

Discovered during the 1960 excavation of a grave cut into the bedrock* close to the Great Temple of Yeha, this artifact is emblematic of the Ethio-Sabean period.

This openwork* copper-alloy object features an inscription in the Sudarabic alphabet, enclosed in a rectangular frame to which four legs, a triangular head with two horns and a tail have been added allowing one to recognize an ibex, a typical animal of the South Arabian bestary. This object was cast in a mold, before adding a grip ring welded to its reverse side. The latter is also zoomorphic, perhaps representing an ibex whose horns have been broken off. The four letters of the inscription have been deciphered as the personal name "*ḥn't*".

The National Museum's collections include about forty seals found on the Ethio-Sabean sites of Yeha, Matara, Hawelti and Sabea. Their size varies considerably, from just under a centimeter long to almost a dozen centimeters for the largest. As for their shapes, these range from simple geometric and symmetrical forms to highly elaborate ones, as in the case of zoomorphic objects.

Fish, birds, sheep, bulls, lions or ibexes, the bestiary could refer to a religious symbolism, without allowing for much further elaboration. Similar objects are documented in South Arabia, but zoomorphism is a particular feature that has only been found in Ethiopia. Their shapes are both unique and specific from one object to another, and the presence of letters, which in some cases can be read as proper names or their abbreviation, have led to these objects being referred to as "identity marks".

They are generally interpreted as administrative tools, with the design and grip ring suggesting their use as seals, enabling them to be printed on a ductile material such as raw clay. They may have been used to identify the owner of an object. Imprints were found on pottery sherds, or even a building, such as a bull stamp imprinted in clay fragments found in the collapsed entrance of the palace of Grat Be'al Gebri in Yeha. Mostly found in tombs, these luxurious objects were retrieved among many other items, which supports the hypothesis that they belonged to powerful owners, whose power was also displayed in their seals.

Seals in terracotta or stone were produced locally, as early as the second millennium BCE. They feature geometric patterns, often set in an oblong or almond-shaped frame, and have a perforation suggesting they were hung from a string. They demonstrate the need to mark goods, and are thus proof of the growing importance of trade in these societies.

The special features of seals from the Ethio-Sabean period lie in the materials used, implying the use of metallurgy, the typological evolution with zoomorphic motifs, and the language employed, which uses the Sudarabic alphabet while transcribing local names. They testify to the acculturation* of pre-Aksumite societies through contact with South Arabia, creating the original Ethio-Sabean culture ■ [L.D.]

Identity mark in the shape of an ibex 1

8th to 6th century BCE

Copper alloy, height 6.5 cm, width 8.7 cm, depth 1.3 cm,

Yeha, Grave 6, Chamber B, JE 2220.

Inscribed altar from Gobochela
5th to 4th century BCE

This altar is one of the first pieces that entered the collection following archaeological excavations in 1955. In addition to its meticulous execution and the context of its discovery, it bears an inscription that is especially revealing for the study of cultural contacts between the southern Arabian Peninsula and the northern Horn of Africa.

Carved in fine limestone, this altar features four rectangular sides. The stepped base presents three degrees, giving the altar a pyramidal shape evocative of South Arabian temple architecture. It is covered by an alabaster plate showing a tenon* on its downside face, fitting exactly into the roughly circular cup carved into the somital part of the limestone. On two sides, it bears an inscription set out in three lines in boustrophedon—a style of writing alternating written from left to right and from right to left. The carving of the characters displays a monumental script, allowing the production of the altar to be dated to the 5th to 4th century BCE.

The inscription can be transliterated as follows:
1. ←*(A) (symbol)*| *ṢBḤHMW* *(B)* | *w*| *LḤY* | *bn* | *FQM* |
2. →*(B) M* | *ḌMRYB* | *ḥqny*|
3. ←*(B) ʾLMQH* | *lṭl* |
It reads: "*ṢBḤHMW and LḤY, from the family of FQMM of (the tribe of) Marib, dedicate this altar to the god ALMQH so that their lives are prolonged.*"

The inscription features a typical dedication* structure, mentioning the names of the dedicators, followed by their ancestry or origin, then specifying the recipient (the god) and the content of the vow. It also refers to the god Almaqah. In Ethiopia, every temple excavated to date and most inscriptions are dedicated to this deity, showing that he was the main entity worshipped in the D'MT kingdom. In addition, Almaqah was the tutelar god* of the Kingdom of Saba, whose capital was Marib, in present-day Yemen. It is interesting to see this site mentioned here since Saba is considered to be the main origin of the emigration from the Peninsula to the Horn. Moreover, the family or clan name FQMM was found in several inscriptions, alongside others bearing the name GRB, showing offerings from a consistent group across generations.

This altar was found close to another one at the northern end of a temple, excavated in Gobochela, a site located in the surroundings of the Hawelti Melazo temples. It was first dated from the 5th to 4th century BCE, given the material found. However, the composite aspect of the site and later discoveries led this interpretation to be reconsidered. First, it is thought that this altar was brought with other cult artifacts bearing the dedications and names mentioned above. Second, fragments fitting the altar exactly were found reemployed as blocs into the southern wall. It may be assumed that the original limestone cover was broken, and replaced by the alabaster plate.

Archaeologists suggest that this altar was brought from a more ancient temple located in the vicinity of Gobochela, before the construction or the completion of the new building in the 3rd or 2nd century BCE. The reuse of cult objects has led to the hypothesis that the Gobochela monument might have been a sort of family sanctuary, keeping the memory of relatives and beliefs which may have already been disappearing ■ [Y.G.S.,L.D.]

Inscribed altar 2

5th to 4th century BCE

Limestone, height 44.5 cm,
width 28 cm, depth 24 cm;
Cover plate, alabaster,
height 4 cm, width 34 cm,
depth 25 cm;
Gobochela, JE 110.

The Hawelti Sculptures
5th to 4th centuries BCE

In the 1950s, exceptional discoveries brought to light a group of sculpted monuments, consisting of two female statues and a sculpted baldaquin presenting a fine bas-relief* featuring a historiated scene. They significantly expanded the corpus of human figures in the art of this period in Ethiopia, and also highlight affinities with neighboring cultures. These drew mostly from South Arabia but potentially also from the Nile Valley, and enabled the development of original local art.

The archaeological site of Hawelti is situated in today's Tigray Region, approximately 10 km southeast of the city of Aksum. In 1959, archaeological excavations unearthed two square buildings of about 11 meters on each side. These excavations yielded a wealth of votive* offerings within the monuments' precincts, including terracotta statuettes depicting various animals, pottery, and bronze* objects. Archaeologists have proposed that Hawelti was a religious or sacred site, dating back to the 5th to 4th centuries BCE, even if its precise chronology remains elusive due to various disturbances over time.

Between the two buildings, fragments of sculptures were retrieved, recognizable by their exceptional qualities. They were completely exposed and documented, accompanied by detailed information regarding their characteristics. This allowed the restoration of three sculpted monuments: two statues and a third one, designated as a "throne".

The first statue uncovered at the Hawelti site is 80 cm high and was meticulously carved from a single block of limestone. It originally lacked its head, but this was subsequently located and carefully reattached to the main body. The statue portrays a female figure in a seated posture with her hands gently resting on her knees. Her face shows a soft expression, wearing a short hairstyle depicting curls. She is garbed in a pleated dress, complemented by a substantial triple necklace. This flowing robe may make us think of traditional women's *shama* dresses today. An interesting element is the presence of a rough surface underneath, probably serving as tenon to put the statue on a base that was made separately.

A second seated female statue, which is almost identical but without a head, was found nearby. Carved with similar stylistic features, she is seated on a stool, of which some uprights are still partially recognizable.

Although these are not the sole discoveries of female representations, other examples remain limited in number. Among them is one of the first antique objects to enter the collections of the national museum—the limestone statue from Addi Gelamo—even if the context of its discovery remains unknown. It depicts a woman, adorned and dressed in a tunic with rosettes and a fringe, seated on a stool and holding a beaker in each hand. The sculpture is supported by a stepped pedestal bearing an inscription, formulating a wish for the birth of a child. An identical statue was discovered in 2007 near Wukro, inside the Meqaber Gaewa Temple, dedicated to Almaqah

The Hawelti Sculptures 3
5th to 4th centuries BCE
■ **Statue of** a woman
Limestone, height 82 cm,
width 26 cm, depth 80 cm,
Hawelti, JE 1657.

and dated to around 800 BCE. Among the votive items found on this site, a stone piece shows a reduced model of a statue placed into a covered frame, linking back to the Hawelti discoveries.

The third monument found in Hawelti was originally referred to as a "throne." Crafted from a single block of limestone, the box-like sculpture is supported by four bull's feet, forming the legs of a furniture-like footing. Above it, three vertical panels rise to 1.4 meters in height, forming a kind of niche closed at the top by a slightly vaulted ceiling. It is adorned on three sides. Decorating the front face, two friezes of ibex facing each other run along the uprights, while the same motif runs all around the cover and the opposing animals meet at the top on either side of a tree of life.

Only the side panels bear historiated scenes. The first panel depicts a prominent, bearded man wearing a cape tied over his bare chest and a fabric loincloth. He is carrying a sort of fan above a female figure in a long-pleated dress and cape, still wearing a short, curly hairstyle, carrying a stick in front of her. The same scene is visible on the opposite panel, except that an inscription designating a certain Rafas is positioned above the female figure and the man is holding, in addition to the fan, an elongated tool that is difficult to identify. It has been suggested that the latter may be a mace or a throw-stick.

It is interesting to note that in terms of iconography and style, many elements are reminiscent of South Arabian art where other bas-reliefs depict women of this type, while the figure of the man is similar to a male statue found in the Temple of Awwam, in Marib. The representation of ibexes is also shared with South Arabia. But similarities with Nile Valley art have also been highlighted, especially as Meroitic bowls have been found in Tigray, and the Hawelti site has yielded scarab and frit figurines, including one representing the Egyptian god Ptah. A synthesis of influences must therefore be suggested.

To sum up, this so-called throne could have been a shrine* within which a statue was placed. It might even have welcomed one of the female statues found in direct association. The prevalence of female subjects in Ethiopian sites, particularly in temples and ceremonial centers, suggests the significant role of women in these societies, whether as deities or as persons of high social status. Such depictions likely mirror the cultural values and social norms prevalent in the region ■ [T.H.,L.D.]

The Hawelti Sculptures 4

5th to 4th centuries BCE

■ **Throne**

Limestone, height 140 cm,

width 67 cm, depth 57 cm,

Hawelti, JE 1658.

The ibex bottle

Pottery as a medium is particularly valued by archaeologists, because it enables them to follow the evolution of societies, sometimes in great detail. As far as ceramics from the 1st millennium BCE are concerned, we mainly know about material from the contexts of Ethio-Sabean sites. These show both direct borrowings and adaptations of local traditions to exogenous cultural patterns. This glossy item of black pottery, discovered during excavations in 1960 in Yeha, illustrates this process well.

The artifact is a locally made ceramic bottle produced to contain liquid. Bottles are generally characterized by a globular body with a long and narrow neck. Bottles are relatively rare in this period, as well as during the Aksumite times, while jars—having a wider opening, with one or several handles, are more common. This bottle has a black color resulting from smocking, and a shiny surface obtained by burnishing*. This surface treatment is a typical feature of ceramic production in the ancient Horn of Africa.

The decoration consists of carved motifs, which were then painted. A band defined by two lines of edging runs around the neckline, punctuated by vertical lines from the neck to the rim. On the shoulders of the bottle, semi-circular motifs form a festoon attached to the band. The belly is decorated with a carved shape of three pairs of ibexes facing each other. Their bodies are depicted in schematic drawing style, but they are easily identified by their long horns.

The symbolism of the animal representation remains unclear but it was frequently used in South Arabian. It is commonly found in Ethiopia, like on friezes of the ancient temple of Yeha, and on the throne of Hawelti, as an identity marker made of bronze, or in architectural sculpture. While ibexes were very common in Ethio-Sabean luxury goods, carved or painted decoration of ibexes on pottery is unique to this object.

The quality of the object, together with its function and the presence of decoration, may suggest that it was a ritual offering. This interpretation is further supported by its context of discovery. It was found among many other pottery items deposited in the access shaft of a tomb, between 2.8 m and 3.2 m below the surface level.

Other pottery sherds were collected from the same layer but their original shape could not be reconstructed. Human bones as well as ribbed whitish sherds were found mixed with this large collection of pottery. The fragmentation and mixing of artifact, and the fact that some potteries were excavated upside down, suggest that the context was disturbed, probably by grave robbers. Other excavated tombs, some of which were discovered untouched, show that funerary* rites might have included a ceremonial feast with ritual deposits of leftovers. Thus, the offering objects inform us about both the deceased and the community that gathered around his or her death, a community steeped in both local traditions and South Arabian culture ■ [H.B.]

The ibex bottle 5
Ceramic, height 22.5 cm,
diameter 12.5 cm,
Yeha, Tomb 4, JE 2132.

Aksum: an African Empire on the Red Sea

The origins and early development of the Aksumite polity remain unclear. From the second half of the 1st century CE, classical authors mention a powerful kingdom named after the site of Aksum, while archaeological evidence points to the continuous expansion of its cultural and political hegemony over the territories connecting the present-day Tigray highlands to the Eritrean shores of the Red Sea. The Kingdom of Aksum was recognized by a Persian historian named Mani, as one of the great empires of the time, alongside Rome or Persia. Military expeditions were led against neighboring polities, as inscriptions describe the submission of tribes or kingdoms, such as Meroe (Sudan) and Ḥimyar (South Arabia).

Whether he is referred to as *negus*, *malik*, or *basileus*, there is little doubt that the polity of Aksum was ruled by a king. The first ge'ez inscription to speak of the kingdom was found at Addi Galamo around 200 CE and bears the mentions "GDR King of Aksum." Other inscriptions were found on votive thrones often dedicated to the pagan god Marhem (Ares in Greek), the god of war and the dynastic god of the Kings of Aksum.

During the reign of Ezana, the language of royal inscriptions evolved from unvocalised to vocalised Ge'ez and, as of 340 CE, they gradually became dedicated to Christ religiously. The stele of Ezana—written in Greek, pseudo-Sabean, and Ge'ez—is regarded as the monument witnessing the King's conversion to Christianity, and Aksumite society gradually became Christian.

The Aksumite rulers erected large stelae that marked burial sites and built imposing palaces as a display of their power. Dating from the 3rd to the 4th century, the iconic monolithic* stelae are the visible features of subterranean burials. By observing the carved decoration of giant stelae which copy the style of ancient buildings, archeologists made reconstructions of other monuments. Indeed, the decor depicts the combined use of wood and stone, which is an important feature of the Aksumite architecture. The substructures of large architectural complexes with a central pavilion using this technique were found in Aksum and Matara and have been interpreted as palaces.

Excavations reveal that Aksumite civilization was a complex society with multiple classes. The power of the ruling class was demonstrated by the magnificence of their residences or tombs. Urban settlements display several types of monuments: religious buildings, elite structures such as large houses or palaces, together with modest and dense settlement areas. Simultaneously, the density of rural settlements shows the important share of peasants, while workshops reveal a class of skilled craftsmen. As Aksum appears to have been the political and religious center of the kingdom, important cities have also been identified within the territory, such as Matara, on the caravan* route leading to the Red Sea.

Written evidence and data from excavations at Aksum, Matara, or more recently Wakarida, reveal the importance of Aksum in the long-distance trade between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, or between Africa and Arabia. Aksumite caravans brought slaves, gold, ivory, and wild animals along the trade route linking Aksum to the port of Adulis, where

Monumental staircase of the so-called palace of Dungur in Aksum, 1968.

merchants from the Roman Empire, Arabia, and India exchanged luxury goods and spices. Imported manufactured goods, such as vessels or textiles, were particularly appreciated. The upper-class tastes show strong connections with those of existing international elites. In addition to prestigious goods of foreign origin, Aksumite craftsmen were also able to produce luxury objects in glass, precious metals, ceramics, or even ivory, by drawing strongly on external influences. This cosmopolitan polity issued its own currency from the 3rd to the 7th century, which implies a strong centralization and the ruler's ever-increasing control over trade. It is likely that other forms of exchange currencies, such as salt bars, existed prior and simultaneously to coinage.

The kingdom likely reached its political and economic peak between the 4th and 6th centuries, before declining. The expansion of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and around the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean regions from the 7th century onward is considered crucial. The earliest events attested by sources was a mercantile blockade in the Red Sea littoral following the occupation of the Dahlak Archipelago by Arab forces in the early 8th century. Later traditions also mention the spread of general strife and rebellions by subject peoples, such as Beja in the northwest, or, a queen from the south, who launched an assault on the kingdom and its capital city, leading to the collapse of the state structure. Arab geographers and historians of the end of the 11th century even mention a new seat of power called Adafa or Kubar.

Archaeological data show that the Aksumite sites were gradually abandoned towards the end of the 7th century. Coin minting stopped, imported goods became scarce and the material culture changed. The tombs were looted, and some stelae probably even pulled down. Evidence points to an evolution towards new cultural trends that were less urban, and less monumental. The ruins of buildings were squatted, perhaps using lightweight wooden structures. Scenarios of this shift are still debated, but include the interruption of trade routes linked to the spread of Islam, possibly coupled with an environmental crisis ■ [L. D.]

Base of a stone throne with the inscription of Hatsani Daniel, Aksum, 1950s.

Aksumite coinage
3rd to 7th century

The Book of Aksum, a texte from the Pre-Modern period, and the travelogue of the Portuguese missionary Francisco Alvarez both mentions Aksumite coins were known to be found by chance every year after the heavy summer rains in the ploughed fields around Aksum. The Kingdom of Aksum was the only sub-Saharan African polity that minted its own coinage during Antiquity. Besides its chronological value, coinage is a rich historical source of information about a society's political system, economy and beliefs. Aksumite coinage existed for about 350 years, starting from the 3rd century up to the early 7th century CE. The use of coin currencies in trade must have replaced—or supplemented—barter systems, and should have required an already well-developed system of exchange leading to the development and expansion of commerce. Aksumite coinage was probably inspired by the earlier traditions of Roman and southwestern Arabian coinages. Aksum appears to have adopted the Roman weight system and their coins were probably modeled on Roman coinage.

The front side bears the effigy of the king with his name initially written in Greek and later in Ge'ez. The reverse side depicts either the king again or another symbol: an ear of wheat or a religious mark. The images provide information on insignias that symbolized power, such as the spear, the cap, the radial crown, or emphasized beliefs: for example, a crescent surmounted by a disc and then the cross during the reign of Ezana and after the conversion to Christianity. The coins' inscriptions have made it possible to establish a list of kings who issued coins.

The first Aksumite king to start coin production, Endubis, reigned during the second half of the 3rd century CE, and the last ruler to mint coin, was King Armah in the early 7th century.

The generally accepted list of kings runs broadly as follows: Endubis, Aphilas, Wazeba, Ousanas, Ezana, MHDYS, Ouazebas, Eon, Ebana, Nezana/Nezool, Ousas/Ousanas, Kaleb, Ella Amidas, Wazena, Iyoel, Hataz, Israel, Gersem and Armah. This Aksumite coinage series includes a number of so-called "anonymous" coin types whose issuing kings could not be identified. Numismatic historians have attempted to reconstruct the chronology of the Aksumite state based on coinage, which has led to the "short chronology" of the Kingdom of Aksum. The latter only represents the period during which the kingdom issued coins.

Coins were minted in three different metals. At the beginning, the preferred material was gold and silver. Bronze was introduced later, once coinage circulated throughout the whole society. The minting was probably local, maybe located in Aksum. As the Kingdom of Aksum began to decline from the end of the 6th century, it appears that the coins issued began to show signs of less standardization in the size and shape of their dies, as well as in their weights.

It seems that the coins tended to lose their value, indicating a gradual weakening of the currency. In the end, this devaluation would certainly have led to the abrupt cessation of coinage, which occurred at the beginning of the 7th century. Then, it was not until the 9th or the 10th century that another sub-Saharan state produced its own coins, when the Sultanate of Kilwa in East Africa began minting ■ [A.T.]

Aksumite coinage 6

3rd to 7th century

- Endubis (270-300 CE), silver, diameter 15-16 mm;
- Ezana (320-360 CE), drawn from a golden coin, diameter 17 mm;
- Armah (600-630 CE), guilded copper alloy, diameter 22-23 mm.

Aksumite ceramics three-legged jar
2nd to 4th century

The material culture from the Aksumite period shows the very common use of pottery in daily life. Ceramic techniques were highly developed, demonstrating the mastery of craftsmen in this art. Ceramic objects can be found in all kinds of contexts, from the kitchen, where robust, crude objects were used for everyday tasks, to the elite contexts of palaces and tombs, where vessels and fragments show the existence of fine, high-quality artifacts. If the most characteristic shapes are bowls with pedestals and handles, or globular jars with cylindrical necks (see cover picture), Aksumite pottery shows a large diversity of forms, and some are especially original.

This tripod jar was discovered fortuitously alongside other vessels in 1958 in Kuhi, in the region of Na'eder. The presence of large stone slabs and stelae suggests that it came from a burial site. This object is known as a tripod, in reference to the three feet supporting a large ovoid body. The feet, one of which has been repaired, are in the shape of human legs, facing outwards. Two rough handles were applied to the upper part of the body, where incisions can be seen at the joints, serving both to ensure solidity and for decorative purposes. Two nipples with a large single incision in the middle complete the decoration, suggesting the representation of a feminine character. Starting from the neck, the upper section of the jar is missing, so that its original shape and function remain unsure.

Another tripod jar, with a short cylindrical neck covered by a lid, was discovered in a funerary context during the excavation of the Gudit stelae field in Aksum. Other similar objects are known to be from Matara and Aksum, but their discovery context remains unclear to attest if these artifacts were reserved for funerary deposits. It is still difficult to be explicit wether they were used for decoration or to contain and serve liquid, but there is often a handle and a spout. A great variability of forms exists: some tripods are bird-shaped, and others have a human head or a globular neck. This type of anthropomorphic* and zoomorphic* tripod or jar belongs to the classic Aksumite period, from the 2nd to the end of the 4th century.

Aksumite ceramics show great consistency throughout the Aksumite Kingdom's area of influence. Although, current research tends to highlight the existence of several regional traditions (Matara, Aksum, Wakarida and Adulis).

In general, Aksumite pottery is well-fired, and there are even a few places where bricks from local production were retrieved, showing the ability of Aksumite ceramic production to adapt to new technology, probably borrowing from Roman and Mediterranean techniques.

Aksumite pottery indeed illustrates cultural and trade exchanges, as shown by the finds of amphoras, or blue glazed* ware and even African red slipped ware (or Terra Sigilata). The latter is considered to have been an imitation of bronze vessels, and Aksumite potters adapted this type of pottery to elaborate fine Aksumite red ware, which shows imprinted motifs and a red slipped surface.

Thus ceramic tradition provides a glimpse of the great creativity of the kingdom's craftsmanship, which, while rooted in earlier local traditions, demonstrates the vitality of this cosmopolitan state ■ [H.B.,L.D.]

Aksumite ceramics 7

three-legged jar

2nd to 4th century

Ceramic, height 21.5 cm,

diameter 19 cm

Kuhi, JE 502.

Oil lamp featuring a hunting scene
2nd to 3rd century

This oil lamp, found in Matara, is a particularly sumptuous testimony to the use of imported luxury items during the Aksumite period. A copper-alloy workpiece, it consists of an open pear-shaped oil bowl, whose spout detail evokes the shape of a shell, and a handle on the round sculpture depicting a royal hunt, skillfully using the various elements of the scene to serve its purpose as a grip.

At the back of the bowl is a bull's bucranium* design from which springs an openwork scroll. Increasing the points of anchorage for the handle, it also serves to evoke the landscape in which the scene is set; emerging from the vegetation, the dog sinks its fangs into the hindquarters of a bounding ibex, creating a highly dynamic scene. The whole piece rests on a solid pedestal with an openwork arcature* pattern. Given the lamp's size and weight, and the absence of suspension rings for a chain indicate that it was standing and not hung, as was often the case with bronze lamps.

It is possible to link this object to a type of lamp produced in South Arabia, featuring an ibex motif, and often compared to the general Achaemenid model, found all over the Ancient Near East. According to its features, the lamp's date could range from the 5th century BCE to at least the 3rd century CE. In this particular case, it may be suggested that the lamp was produced in around the 2nd and 3rd centuries, in comparison with the specimens from the Louvre and the British Museum.

However, both its size and the quality of its workmanship set this lamp apart from the others already known, confirming the prestigious and sumptuous nature of the item. The fabrication techniques—carving, lost-wax casting* and cold chiseling*—indicate the work of highly skilled craftsmen. Other prestigious objects found on Aksumite sites include gold jewelry and intaglios*, bronze vases and Persian glazed ceramics, millefiori beads and ivory marquetry decorated with richly carved scenes. All these objects, whether imported or not, allow us to reconstitute the existence of a refined elite, linked to the elite's customs of the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, and demonstrating the prosperity of the Aksumite Kingdom.

The context of its discovery in 1965 at the Matara site is, however, puzzling. The lamp was discovered in the E1 complex, a cluster of elite podium buildings surrounded by courtyards. Other structures of uncertain function were later added to this architectural complex. The lamp was found in a rock cavity of a room where there was a masonry unit made of baked bricks, a rare material in Aksumite architecture. What could this room have been used for? Was the lamp in its context of use, or was the object buried to hide it and prevent looting? The presence in this place of such an exceptional artifact raises many questions. Whether the lamp was an object of plunder, a diplomatic gift, or a commercial exchange of luxury goods, its highly probable South Arabian origin illustrates the persistent contacts between the two shores of the Red Sea right up to the end of Late Antiquity ■ [L.D.]

Oil lamp featuring a hunting scene 8

2nd to 3rd century

Copper alloy, height 41 cm, width 39 cm,

depth 14.5 cm, weight 7.5 kg,

Matara E1, loc. 49, JE 3439.

The oil-lamp at its uncovering in Matara, nowadays in Eritrea, 1964.

Medieval Ethiopia

at the Crossroads of Faith and Trade

The "Middle Ages" in Ethiopia cover the period from the collapse of the Kingdom of Aksum in the 7th century, to the middle of the 16th century and the war between the army of the sultanate* based in Harar and the Christian Kingdom of the Highlands. During this long period of almost ten centuries, over a vast geographical area covering the present-day countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somaliland, a wide variety of Christian, Muslim and non-Abrahamic* societies coexisted. These religious choices determined the organization of different political entities. After the 16th-century war, some of the territories previously controlled by the Muslim sultanates and the Christian kingdom came under the authority of Oromo groups. From this period onward, a complete reconfiguration of the various political entities took place.

As of the 4th century, as the northern Highlands became Christianized, a powerful Christian kingdom, first dominated by the Zagwe dynasty (11th to 13th centuries) and then by the Solomonic* dynasty, occupied an increasingly large area. At the height of its power in the early 16th century, it controlled the entire central Highlands of the Horn of Africa. Although Christianity was the dominant religion, non-Abrahamic and Muslim communities coexisted in the heart of the kingdom as well as on its fringes. Vast areas of the Horn were also under the control of non-Abrahamic societies to the west and south of the Christian plateau, of which only the Damot Kingdom (13th and 14th centuries) is known in written sources. Part of the south and the east, stretching as far as the Gulf of Aden, were controlled by powerful Islamic sultanates such as Shewa (12th to 13th centuries), Ifat (or Awfat, 13th to 14th centuries), and Barr Sa'd ad-Din (or Adal, 15th to 16th centuries).

Textual and archaeological sources do not document these different societies in the same way. Until fairly recently, the writing of the medieval history of the Horn was dominated by the history of the Christian Kingdom. Other populations were portrayed as marginal and as minorities. This could be explained by the Ethiopian Christian kingdom's influence in the Mediterranean (Alexandria, Jerusalem, Rome) which accelerated in the last centuries of the Middle Ages. But above all, the main explanation could be found in the numerous, extraordinarily rich texts written in Ge'ez. These texts have been preserved until today in the libraries of monasteries and churches. In contrast and at the same time, Muslim societies have left only a few brief funerary inscriptions and less than five texts. They are known mainly from indirect sources, in texts from present-day Yemen and Egypt. As for the non-Abrahamic or megalithic societies, they have left no written trace at all and are barely mentioned in the texts of the neighboring populations. This textual imbalance is at the root of the imbalance in our understanding of the history of the region.

Since the start of the 21st century, archaeological research into the remains of Muslim sultanates (in Ifat, at Harlaa and in Somaliland, etc.) and megalithic societies (in the Tchertcher and the Ethiopian Rift Valley) has tended to rebalance history. These societies were dominated by powerful elites and were highly organized. Some were urbanized and all had strong links with long-distance trade. The archaeological material which has been collected (including pottery, shells, ostrich shells, glass beads, etc.) reveals cultural and economic exchanges between these different societies and their integration into distant trade networks

via the Red Sea and the Islamic world. Indeed, these political entities were complementary: the Muslim sultanates were responsible for transporting the products of the long-distance trade (fabrics, Indo-Pacific pearls, Chinese ceramics), from the coast and ports of the Red Sea to the foothills of the Highlands. They traded them with the Christian Kingdom, or with other societies, in exchange for gold, ivory, and slaves. In this effort to better understand the past of Ethiopian societies, archaeological research into Christian communities has sought to go beyond a single focus on churches, their architecture, and decoration. Other traces have been revealed to better understand the societies in all their dimensions, through investigations into the royal settlements, secular* occupations, and cemeteries.

Recent archaeological research shows that the medieval history of Ethiopia, which is in the midst of a revival, was far more complex and richer than textual sources suggest. Multi-cultural and multi-religious, the various societies that populated the region between the 7th and 16th centuries were interlinked with each other and connected to the rest of the medieval world. After the 16th century war, the profound transformations within Ethiopian societies led to a complete reconfiguration of political territories and the religious landscape.

For the period spanning the 16th to the 18th centuries, research on the various entities remains uneven, especially in terms of material culture. The main focus has been on the city of Harar, which developed into a sacred center for Muslim societies, and the Christian Kingdom, which relocated its center to the area around Lake Tana. Gondar subsequently became the royal capital during the 17th and 18th centuries. Numerous buildings, comprised mainly of castles and churches, were erected from the second half of the 16th century across a large area surrounding Lake Ṭana. They were built in a new style of architecture that reflected encounters between the Ethiopian and Portuguese worlds. Most of these sites have been inventoried but not systematically surveyed. The only site that has been fully excavated is the Jesuit* building in Azazo, which is next to a royal settlement of King Susenyos ■ [A.C.,M.-L.D.]

The Churches

Following the decline of the Aksumite Kingdom in the 7th century, the construction of churches in the Ethiopian Highlands continued and increased. While previous elite material cultures were displayed in palaces, temples, churches, and tombs, it would appear that the churches were the most significant accumulator of wealth in Christian Ethiopia. This may also explain the construction of a considerable number of churches and monasteries between the 8th and 16th centuries. The 13th century saw the expansion of monasteries and churches to the center and south of Ethiopia. The ascendance of the Solomonic Dynasty (from 1270 onwards) inaugurated a new epoch, characterized by the advent of a network of monasteries that were aligned with the Christian state. The networked dynamism of these institutions facilitated the further expansion of Christianity in newly occupied territories in the following centuries. In addition to monasteries, royal churches flourished from the 13th century onwards. They played an invaluable role in safeguarding the Christian heritage of Ethiopia. These churches were supported financially by the medieval kingdom, with generous endowments from the royal treasuries.

The medieval churches of Ethiopia are known to us in several different forms. Some are only known as remains, which may or may not have been the subject of archaeological excavations. Examples of this include the church of Mifsas Bahri on the shores of Lake Ashange and the church of Maryam Nazret, situated to the south of Mekelle. In some instances, the churches have survived to the present day. This is exemplified by the churches constructed in caves, such as Yemrehanna Krestos and Emmekina Medhane Alem in the Lasta region.

Additionally, some churches were rock-hewn, means entirely carved out of solid rock. These are undoubtedly the structures that have undergone the least change over time. The churches of the Ger'alta valley and the monumental complex at Lalibela serve as striking examples of this phenomenon. The monolithic and semi-monolithic churches were predominant in the northern part of the country, with the exception of a few churches in Walaqa province in the south-west of Wollo, or Adadi Maryam in the Gurage region. Similarly, other churches were constructed in caves, including Arsi Yohannes in Shewa.

Although they are technically very different, built churches and rock-hewn churches are typologically similar in many ways. In general, these churches are distinguished by their basilical*, or occasionally cruciform*, plan. The round churches that are a prominent feature of the Ethiopian landscape today did not emerge until the 16th century. The architectural vocabulary employed in the construction of these churches, whether they are built or carved into the rock, is inspired by Aksumite architecture. This includes the use of alternating recesses and projections, wood and stone, and the incorporation of monkey heads* protruding from wooden uprights. Additionally, monolithic pillars are a prominent feature to support the architrave* of the central nave*. Innovations such as the appearance of vaults and domed cubes in the sanctuaries (*maqdas*) from the 11th century onwards contributed to the modernisation and updating of this architectural vocabulary. Similarly, the decoration of wood carvings, or imitations of such carvings in rock, employed motifs that were well-established in the Aksumite period (such as false windows or palm leaves) while introducing new geometric forms, inspired by motifs found on imported fabrics.

During the Middle Ages, monarchs commissioned the construction of churches and provided them with substantial endowments. Each sovereign founded at least one church: for example, the Church of Gannata Maryam in Lasta, founded by King Yekuno Amlak, as evidenced by an inscription written below a painting representing the king with his two counselors. However, kings also frequently established several churches in the central regions of the kingdom, and it was customary for one of these churches to serve as the burial place of the founding monarch. Furthermore, royal churches served as indicators of the transient capital (*katema*), as well as venues for significant events, including religious ceremonies (such as Passover and the Feasts of the True Cross), as well as grand banquets marking the New Year, or celebrations of military victories. These events were often held close to prominent royal churches.

These remarkable royal churches were built across a vast expanse of the medieval territories, particularly in the regions of Amhara (like Atronsa Maryam), Shewa (for example Debre Berhan), and Fatagar (as exemplified by Mertula Mikael and Aseda Mikael).

Main entrance to the rock-hewn church of Mikael Amba, present days.

Church (of dedication) in the Gunda-Gunde monastery, 1950s.

The architectural models of these churches were also identified in Dawaro (Arsi) and in the distant region of Gamo. The remains of two royal churches (Tewodros Gemb, situated close to Yerer mountain, and Enselale) were unearthed in the 1970s. The churches were adorned with intricate stonework and portions of them are currently exhibited at the National Museum of Ethiopia. The architectural style of the royal churches is distinguished by the incorporation of sculpted decorations in the masonry work, including twisted bands, zigzag arches, chevrons, rosettes, interlacing, and crosses.

Churches and monasteries are also the repositories for a large part of the culture of Christian societies. Icons*, wall paintings, liturgical* objects, and manuscripts containing religious and lay texts were preserved in these spaces and allow us to trace the history of the kingdom and its inhabitants. Amongst the oldest of the known churches and monasteries is the library of the monastery of Hayq Estifanos. This was one of the most important and, according to an inventory made at the end of the 13th century, contained 85 manuscripts. The library still preserves the manuscript of the Gospels that was given by the founding monk, Iyasus Mo'a, and in which many royal donations were recorded. In the 15th century, some monks were developing the art of icons, for example, the painter Fere Seyon, from the monastery of Gwegweben on the eastern shore of Lake Tana, made a name for himself with his painted panels, examples of which can be found at Daga Estifanos and Rema Medhane Alem. These artifacts, along with the architectural features of the churches, serve as the primary sources of evidence for tracing the cultural and religious history of the Christian kingdom ■ [M.-L.D.,D.A.]

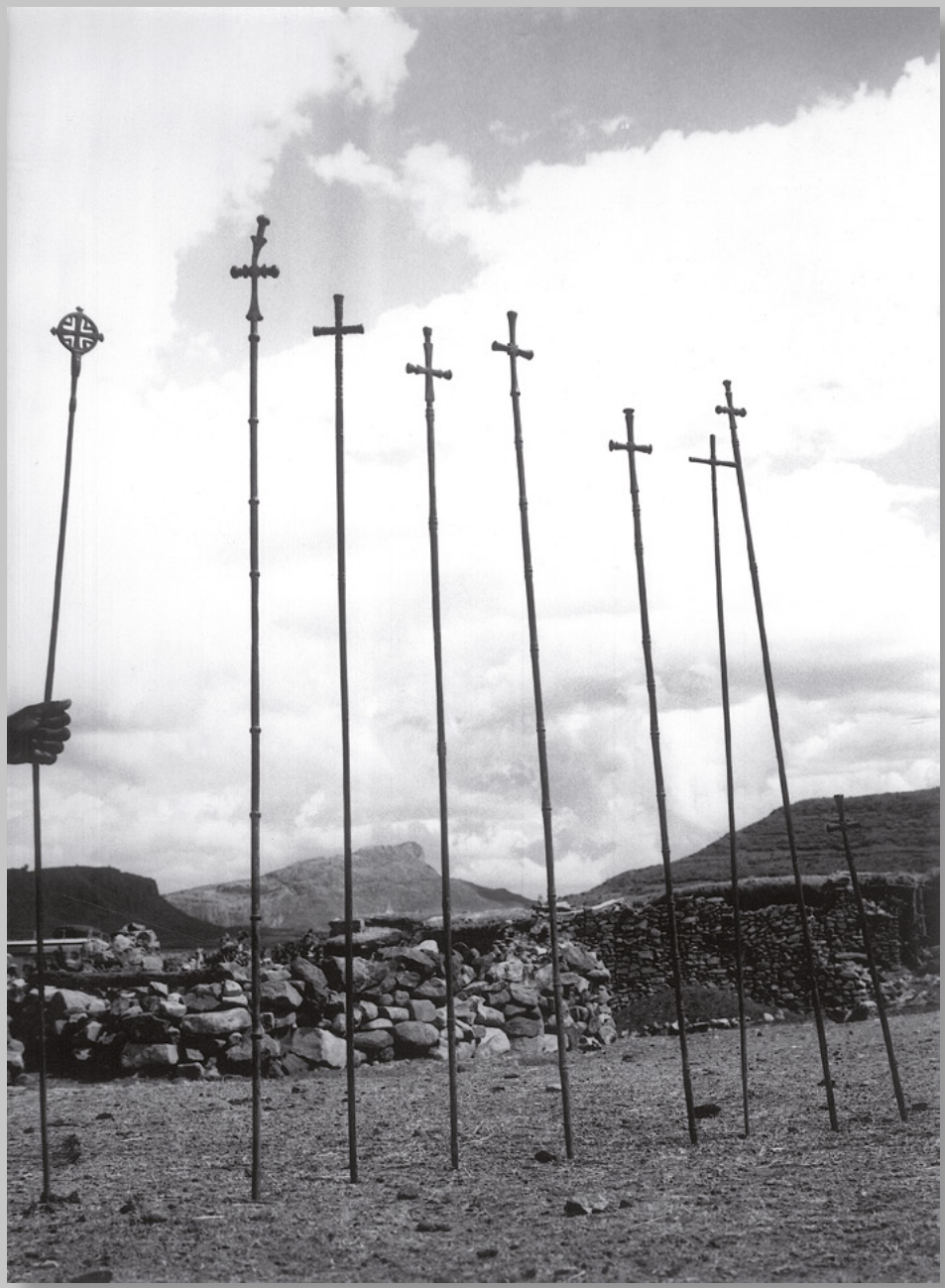
Proclamation cross

This iron cross and its shaft were crafted together as a single piece. The end of a long staff is topped by patted cross with short lateral arms and simple circular or semicircular finials. Originally, the cross may have been enhanced by lightly incised designs, as is the case on similar crosses, but it is now very oxidized. This may also point to its having been found during excavation, but information on its discovery is lost. It is not recorded in the museum's handwritten entry journal.

No scientific analysis has been carried out on this type of cross, and little is known about the metal's composition, origin, manufacturing, and distribution process. It is frequently alleged that these are the oldest types of cross.

Indeed, simple crosses with long shafts are depicted in the hands of Aksumite kings on coins from the 5th century onwards. In the 13th century, in particular, they were painted in murals, as in the church of Genneta Maryam. In any case, this cross must be dated before the 15th century when more varied and complex shapes were developed, often in copper alloy, which can sometimes be dated by inscriptions mentioning their donor.

Long shafted crosses are usually described as processional* crosses, which they can also be on occasion. In current liturgical usage, however, they are primarily held in the priest's hand for the ceremonial presentation and reading of the Gospel during the service. It is therefore more of a proclamation cross ■ [C.B.-T.]



A series of metal proclamation crosses planted in the ground, Ura Masqal, unknown date.

Proclamation cross 9

Iron, height 144 cm, width 14.5 cm,

Unknown place and date.

Wooden church arch
8th to 12th centuries?

This semi-circular wooden arch, carved from a single piece of wood, is beautified with bas-relief carvings. Greek meanders* adorn the archivolt*, while interlocking crosses, with arms of equal size, cover the intrados*. In its center, interlaced lines compose a circular motif. The arch comes from the ancient church of Yeha, nowadays dedicated to the saint Afṣe (Enda Abba Afṣe), in northern Tigray.

In the early first millennium BCE, this site was most likely the capital of the ancient kingdom of D'MT, linked to the South Arabian kingdoms. After the region became Christian, from the 4th century onwards, a church was set up in the ruins of the ancient temple of the God Almaqah. Only the baptistery remains today, built below ground level, and modeled on similar structures in the Christian East and other sites in the region. The church could have been built during the Christian Aksumite period (the 4th to 7th centuries), but also as late as the 12th to 13th centuries. In any case, the church probably underwent several phases of development.

In the 1520s, Francisco Alvares, chaplain to the Portuguese embassy to King Lebna Dengel (who reigned from 1508-1540), reported that another church had also been built a few dozen meters away. It was itself remodeled several times. In 1906, photographs taken by the Deutsche Aksum Expédition show a carved wooden arch within a window. It was similar to the one now in the National Museum in Addis Ababa, though the central part of the intrados differed, with three superimposed tubes instead of the interlaced circle motif. These windows adorned with arches may have been made for the first church in the temple before being reused in the nearby one.

Such woodwork can also be seen in the region's oldest churches, though only roughly dated to between the 8th and 12th centuries. The churches of Debre Dammo, Aramo and Mika'el Amba still preserve arches with similar motifs. The only variation is the circular element, which is sometimes absent, as at Debre Dammo. In the smaller churches, only the passageway between the nave and the sanctuary, to which only the priests had access, was surmounted by a triumphal arch of this type. In larger monuments, however, they also adorned the colonnade* between the nave and the aisles. At Mika'el Amba, two such arches now top the church's double entrance door.

In 1949, the church in Yeha was rebuilt, and several carved wooden arches were removed. In 1954 and 1955, Jean Leclant and Jean Doresse carried out preliminary research there, as recounted by Kebbede Mikael and Jean Leclant in their introduction to the first issue of *Annales d'Éthiopie,* detailing the creation of the archaeological section at the museum and its first actions.

Leclant and Doresse chose what they considered to be the most beautiful arch to display in the museum, but the operation seems not to have gone smoothly, as the institution's records mentioned a crack resulting from issues during the acquisition. The object was however exhibited at the museum, before being put back into storage and presented to the public again in the new permanent exhibition inaugurated in 2022 ■ [C.B.-T.]

Wooden church arch 10

8th to 12th centuries?

Wood, height 70 cm, width 149 cm, length 30 cm,

Yeha, JE 16.

Incense-burners
13th to 16th century

Incense is an important resource and part of the local and regional Ethiopian economy and has been traded across the Red Sea, Mediterranean, and Indian Oceans since ancient times. Frankincense and myrrh are the most famous, but a wide range of aromatic plants and odorous saps are used locally. The practice of offering sacrifices, particularly incense, to accompany the dead has been widespread in pre-monotheistic as well as in Christian and Islamic cultures.

Ceramic incense burners are among the rare items placed with the deceased in burials, as demonstrated by excavations on a small rocky outcrop in Manz, known as Amba Gabriel. These ceramics were typically found on or near graves and were likely used during funeral ceremonies or commemorative rituals. In a few instances, this type of vessel has been discovered inside the grave itself, though the intentionality of such placements is uncertain.

The incense burners found at this site are of three types, none of which is decorated. The first is a flared cup with a straight rim and a thick profile, which likely evolved into a general semi-truncated shape. However, the hollow base of these cups is almost always broken. The second is a small, circular, concave vessel without a base, characterized by thick, irregular walls suggesting a lack of care in shaping. The third type shares this form but is made from the rather coarse sherds of a spherical vase.

The latter two types raise questions about the artisans: could these roughly made cups have been produced by just anyone, in contrast to the first type, which appears to reflect the work of specialized potters? Another question arises from the soot deposits regularly found on the rims of these vessels: was the burning material liquid, burning with a flame at the end of a wick?

At Amba Gabriel, incense burning was practiced across various phases of occupation. In the 13th to 14th centuries (corresponding to a non-Christian period in which some stelae were associated with burials), cups of the first two types represent one-tenth of the total ceramic corpus.

The third type only appeared in the 15th century, following the construction of a church dedicated to Gabriel and the installation of five tombs inside the church. At this time, the use of incense burners increased, while it decreased after the 16th century, when around a hundred tombs were placed in the ruins of the church, subsequently destroyed by a violent fire. This distribution suggests that the pre-Christian funerary tradition of offering incense persisted and was adapted into Christian liturgy, reflecting a continuity of cultural practices.

One of the incense burners is a pottery fragment shaped like a truncated cone, likely the base of a larger vessel. This piece is notable for its distinctive form, meticulous craftsmanship, and intricate geometric engravings. It was found in a rectangular pit located in the church's sanctuary, in which an exceptional deposit of glass beads, sherds of imported vessels, finely engraved copper plates, etc. was kept. The ceramic fragments were the only locally made items among this buried treasure. The designs and the high level of technology are reminiscent of the ceramic tradition of the megalithic society that held power in the area before the Christianity spread, dating from the 10th to 14th century ■ [A.-L.G.,M.-L.D.]

Incense-burners 11

13th to 16th century

Ceramic,

■ height 6 cm,

diameter 10.5 cm,

8023.9;

■ height 6 cm,

diameter 10.5 cm,

8049.1;

Gabriel.

The Sultanates

Contacts between Muslims and Ethiopia date as far back as the origins of Islam. According to Islamic tradition, a group of Prophet Muḥammad's followers are said to have been granted asylum in Aksum in 615 CE in the so-called "first *hijra*", seven years before the Hijra* to Medina. Resident Muslim communities are thought to have been established in Ethiopia by the 8th century. However, there is no concrete proof of this, thus far, outside of the earliest Arabic funerary inscriptions that were found in Dahlak Islands (Eritrea) dated to 864 CE and, in the hinterland in Bilet, Tigray, dated to 972 CE. In other areas, archaeological evidence points to the arrival of Muslims at a later date. At Nora in Ifat, the first occupation of the mosque was radiocarbon-dated to between the mid-12th and late 13th century. At Harlaa, near Derre Dawa, the earliest Muslim presence dates to the mid-12th century.

According to the few written documents of the time, these settlements were linked with different Muslim sultanates and states that developed in medieval Ethiopia. In the 12th century, a mosaic of small Muslim regions or towns (including Shawah, Djidayah and Kaldjur) was mentioned in eastern Ethiopia in one endogenous Arabic text, as well as in Yemeni documentation. It seems that these places were absorbed by the Sultanate of Ifat (Awfât in Arabic) in the late 13th century. From that time, documentation on Muslim populations began to multiply. The Sultanate of Ifat was mentioned in the first half of the 14th century by the Arab author Ibn Faḍl Allah al-Umari as one of the seven Muslim regions on the border of Christian Ethiopia (namely Ifat, Dawaro, Arababni, Sharkha, Bali, Darah and Hadya). With the notable exception of Ifat, where archaeological sites (including Nora and Faqi Dabbis) have been identified as its main cities, and possibly the archaeological site of Harlaa, which may have been Hubat or Hobat, the capital of what could have been the Harla Sultanate (late 13th to early 16th centuries), little is known, as yet, about the organization, practices and culture of these regions.

No endogenous documents have been preserved from this period, and Christian texts make little mention of them. However, although relations with the Christian kingdom were sometimes conflictual, it would be wrong to reduce them to this: economic, diplomatic, and marital relations existed between these sultanates and the Christian power. At the beginning of the 15th century, a major territorial reconfiguration took place. Several hitherto Islamic territories came under the control of the Christian kingdom, including Ifat. They continued to be inhabited by a majority of Muslims, who paid tribute to a Christian governor. A powerful new sultanate emerged further east, from the Rift Valley's eastern Highlands to the port of Zayla on the shores of the Gulf of Aden. This sultanate was called "Adal" in Christian sources in Ge'ez, but "Barr Sa'd ad-Din" in endogenous Arabic sources. Its capital city was Dakar (still not located today), and then Harar from 1520 onwards. It was from this city that Imam Aḥmed b. Ibrahim al-Gazi waged wars against the Christian kingdom in the 1530s, as recounted in the *Futuḥ al-Ḥabasha*. The dynasty of sultans that dominated the sultanate disappeared in the second half of the 16th century, leading to the disappearance of the last great medieval Ethiopian sultanate.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Muslims largely controlled long-distance trade, which connected Ethiopia to the Red Sea, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and

to the Indian Ocean. Textual sources attest to these exchanges. Thus, a Yemeni trade manual from the late 13th century gives details for merchants wishing to trade with Muslims in Ethiopia, the means (including the use of kamili dirhams*, copper coins and iron needles), and goods exchanged (gold, civet, fabrics, etc.) including eunuchs*. At the beginning of the 14th century, Ibn Faḍl Allah al-Umari explained that the inhabitants "trade, for the most part, by exchanging sheep, cows and grain, etc., except in five of the climates on the Muslim border, namely in the climate of the city of Ifat, where they use gold and silver coinage, and in the climates of Dawaro, Arababni, Sharkha and Hadya, where they have a kind of coinage called *hakuna*, which is a piece of iron fashioned into the shape of a long needle."

Another example was the market of Gendabelo, in Ifat, described by a Venetian in 1523 as a "great mercantile city, where the caravans of camels unload their merchandises in warehouses" and where "the currency is the silver coins of the Moors [i.e. dirhams from Egypt], and by this route various things are brought from all over India." Gendabelo was remembered in the 19th and 20th century oral tradition as the "market of the world" (*ye-lam gabya*) where there were all kinds of merchandise that existed in the world, and merchants from all nations.

Although only some items survived archaeologically, archaeologists were still able to reconstruct different patterns. Stone and glass beads were widely traded in the interior of Ethiopia; some came via Indian Ocean networks from bead-making centers such as India.

Glazed ceramics from Egypt, Yemen, and China were sometimes used in trading settlements. Silver and bronze coins, mainly of Egyptian origin, might have been used for currency or were melted down to produce other artifacts, such as jewelry, and there was extensive local trade in ceramics, metalwork, and probably textiles ■ [A.C., T.I.]

The excavation inside the Mosque of Nora, 2008.

An Arabic funerary stele from Bilet
10th century

Several Arabic funerary stelae evidencing an ancient Muslim cemetery have been found in Bilet, in the vicinity of Cherqos Kwiha (Eastern Tigray), since the early 19th century and the first report by the English traveler Nathaniel Pearce. Funerary stelae were quite usual in the Islamic world despite the legal prohibition regarding the adornment of tombs. Carved on unprepared basalt blocks found on site, sometimes also on sandstone, Bilet's stelae were placed at one or at both ends of the tomb marker, which indicated the location of the grave. Recent excavations in Bilet have exposed rectangular tomb markers made of small stone slabs. In a single case, a funerary stele has been found in the primary position, on the head side of the tomb marker, the inscription facing outwards. Several tomb markers, however, were deprived of any stele, whose use was restricted to prominent families or individuals. Actually, most of Bilet's stelae were found in a secondary position, delineating field edges, or in a single case preserved in the sanctuary of Cherqos Kwiha church. With 40 items discovered so far, the Bilet cemetery has provided the most important collection of Arabic funerary stelae from the whole of Ethiopia, most of which date to the 5th century Hijra Era/ 11th century CE.

This stele is one of the earliest items from the Bilet cemetery, carved in Arabic with a beautiful ornamental Kufic* script, without any additional decoration, unlike other stelae adorned with geometric designs such as six-pointed stars. It recalls the memory of a Muslim woman called "Kasamuwa, child of Ibrahim, son of Nizar, son of Ḥafṣ, son of "Umar al-Yamami," who died on Dhu l-qa'da 9, 396/August 7, 1006". In fact, forty percent of the stelae found in Bilet are linked to women. In this case, the buried woman bore a local personal name but her ancestry, going back up to four generations bore Arabic names. The family, to which seven individuals buried in Bilet belonged, claimed origin from the Yamama, an area in the central Arabian peninsula, hence the relation name "al-Yamami". Several stelae found in Bilet attest to other remote origins like Mecca in Arabia, Egypt or even Iran. This woman, however, was likely born in Ethiopia as were probably her parents.

Ancient Muslim epitaphs* usually recall the full name of the deceased and his/her death date given to the day in the Muslim calendar and the Hijra era. They also open with a Basmalla ("In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy"), the customary formula which introduces private or public documents, and includes a quotation of the Qur'an. Here the epitaph quotes both Qur'an 9, 128-129, a verse dealing with the Prophet's mission, and Qur'an 3, 185, a verse often quoted dealing with death and the afterlife. In the present case, the inscription ends with the death date, with no final prayer to the Prophet, his Companions, and all the Muslims, as is sometimes the case.

The Arabic funerary stelae from the Bilet cemetery provide critical evidence of the ancient establishment of Islam in Tigray, dating back to the second half of the 10th century, in relation to the Red Sea trading networks, and notably the Dahlak Islands in Eritrea. The deceased buried in Bilet in the 10th to 13th centuries, however, were not only foreign merchants but also native Muslims including numerous women. Islam at that time was deeply rooted in Ethiopia ■ [J.L.]

An Arabic funerary stele 12

10th century, Basalt, height 4.5 cm, width 4 cm, length 21 cm, Bilet.

An inscribed stone mold from Ferewanda Beri 14th to 16th century

This mold made of a soft dark stone (steatite) was used to cast gold or silver finger rings and medals. Similar jewelry molds have been found in several medieval Islamic sites like Harlaa where a jeweler's workshop has been excavated, but also in Cherqos Kwiha or in Derbiga (in the present-day Oromia Region), a possible candidate for the city of Dakar, the unidentified capital of the Barr Sa'ad al-Din Sultanate before 1520 CE.

Such molds are composed of two parts or more which were adjusted perfectly, allowing liquid metal to be poured via narrow channels hollowed in from the sides of the molds. During the cooling process, the metal took the form of the negative matrices and after extraction, the final product required only minimal reworking.

This mold, found on the site of on the site of Ferewanda Beri, in Ifat, is broken, but it was evidently used at least on two faces, a common practice to make the most of a stone of rare quality. On one side, three delicately carved matrices were used to produce finger rings with heads featuring fine geometric decoration. One of them also bears an Arabic inscription possibly reading "bi-llah" (with or through God), a favored Islamic saying with a prophylactic* function also highlighting the piety of the ring holder. The final isolated letter (lam) may have been added only for the sake of symmetry.

On the reverse side, a unique circular matrice served to cast medals inscribed with the Shahada, the Muslim declaration of faith: "There is no deity but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God." A fundamental sentence inspired by the Qur'an, the Shahada is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and regulates the life of Muslims, being whispered in the ear of the newly born child and of the dying believers. It is therefore frequently found on Islamic jewelry up until today. In Fedis, a late-medieval site located south of Harar, the Shahada was carved into the circular carnelian* center stone of a now-lost ring.

This mold was discovered in 2010 during surveys in the urban area of Ferewanda Beri, the archaeological site identified with the capital city of the Ifat Sultanate. It was found alongside other artifacts carved in the same type of stone and attests to the existence of a workshop specialized in soft stone used to manufacture luxurious tableware, jewels as well as pious or devotional items.

Together with imported pottery from Asia and the Islamic lands, seashells and glass beads, the material recovered on the site reflects the high economic level of the city and its population. The mold itself says much about the important place of Islamic culture and religion in the daily life of the city's elites, who could afford precious items. More generally, as with the other elements of imported material culture, the widespread use of Arabic in Ferewanda Beri, on personal artifacts and grave markers, also demonstrates the integration of the sultanate into the wider Islamic world through shared norms and aesthetic values ■ [S.D.]

An inscribed stone mold 13

14th to 16th century

Steatite, height 4 cm, width 3 cm, depth 1.5 cm,

Ferewanda Beri.

Hakuna-s (?) from Nora
14th to 16th century

During excavations in the medieval city of Nora, which was part of the Ifat Sultanate, three similar bundles of iron stems linked together were discovered in a house dating from the 14th century. Each of the complete bundles contains about 50 iron stems, 40 to 50 mm long and 1 to 2 mm in section, each bundle weighing 23 grams. They could correspond to a type of iron artefact used in some regions of medieval Ethiopia and mentioned by the contemporary Ibn Fadl Allah al-Umari (d. 1349) in his description of the Sultanate's trading activities: "The inhabitants of this country [Ethiopia] trade, for the most part, by exchanging sheep, cows and grain, etc., except in five of the climates on the Muslim border, namely in the climate of the city of Ifat, where they use gold and silver coinage, and in the climates of Dawaro, Arababni, Sharkha and Hadya, where they have a kind of coinage called *hakuna*, which is a piece of iron fashioned into the shape of a long needle; three thousands of these needles are worth one dirham. [...] It is a piece of iron about the length of a needle and the thickness of about three needles. There is no fixed market prices for goods: a good cow sells for 5,000 *hakuna-s*, a good sheep for 3,000."

Hakuna-s, or similar items called *jika-s*, were already in use earlier, as evidenced by the late 13th-century Rasulid treaty on administration and commerce entitled *Nur al-Ma'arif*: "Apart from the territory of the Wala Asma, Kaljur and their region, which are part of the countries of Islam, the dependent territories of the Amḥara [the Christian kingdom] use in sales the *jika*, that is iron given the shape of needles, which are then tied, each bundle containing 100 [needles]: these are their [coins of] silver, copper and gold. In their country, the treasuries of the sultans are full of them."

Comparable copper-alloy objects are known to have existed elsewhere in medieval Africa, notably through the testimony of the famous traveler Ibn Battuta (d. 1368). Some were even excavated, for instance in Koumbi Saleh (Mauritania), where 106 of them were found in a small pot inside a house in the merchants' quarter, and others in various context dated between the 11th and the early 15th century.

The *hakuna-s* of Nora illustrate the complex and complementary use of different currencies, well adapted to the multi-cultural environment of medieval Ethiopia and especially to the urbanized milieu of Ifat where Christian, Muslim and non-Abrahamic actors were involved in trade. Although medieval Ethiopia, and before that all the regions ruled by Muslim sovereigns, were well integrated into the long-distance exchange networks of the Islamic world, via the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, it seems that the economy of medieval Ethiopia remained little monetarized in the traditional sense. Indeed, coin finds are so far relatively scarce prior to the 16th century. Though Islamic coins, usually minted in Egypt, the Bilad al-Sham (greater Syria) and Yemen, are found in sites like Harlaa, Derbiga, Rassa or Sure Kabanawa, they seem not to have circulated widely among local populations, being mostly used for international trade or for non-monetary purposes (as precious metal or for jewelry) ■ [S.D.,A.C.,R.M.]

***Hakuna-s* (?)** **14**

14th to 16th century

Iron, width 4-5 cm, diameter 1.2 cm, weight 23 grams,

Nora ■ NOR-08-2-B05-2038-005; ■ NOR-08-2-B05-2038-006.

Chinese ceramic sherds from Harlaa
Dire Dawa, 6th to 15th century

Chinese ceramics were exported throughout the Indian Ocean world by the 9th century. They were normally transhipped from southern China to entrepots in South Asia, and from there to entrepots in western Asia and Africa—even as far as the Iberian Peninsula in south-western Europe—via Islamic merchant networks. They are found at many archaeological sites in these regions.

These ceramic sherds were excavated at the site of Harlaa, occupied between the 6th to 15th centuries and marked by Islamisation from the mid-12th century. Excavations of mosques, domestic structures and jewelry workshops have revealed a rich range of artifacts, such as glass fragments and beads from North Africa and Asia; shell, stone and glass beads, jewelry molds, stone tools, coinage (including Chinese coins), and locally produced and imported ceramics from Yemen, Iran, Egypt, India, and China.

Over 200 Chinese sherds were recorded at Harlaa, mostly celadon sherds from medium-sized bowls, whitewares, brown-glazed storage jar sherds from southern China or perhaps Southeast Asia, and a grey-glazed sherd possibly from Myanmar. They date to the 12th to 14th centuries, and constitute the largest and earliest dated assemblage* excavated in Ethiopia, so far.

The two green sherds are celadons from the Longquan kilns. Celadons—ceramics made from stoneware* and porcelaneous* material primarily with green glazes—were the most common export ceramic in the Indian Ocean world between the 9th and 15th centuries. The white sherd is a Dingware, a type of thinly potted whiteware with a porcelaneous material produced in northern China between the mid-10th and 12th centuries. It has an ivory-cream coloured glaze with mulded scroll-like decoration.

More than three-quarters of the celadon sherds have been modified, or reshaped, into discs and polygonal forms, which is quite unique. Many were recovered from the workshop area where they were produced through knapping and abrasion. These technologies are associated with lithic tool production and lapidary work, industries well-attested at Harlaa whose workshops produced beads and seals from imported carnelian, quartz crystal and shell. They have been interpreted as cabochons* for use in jewellery or metalwork in a similar manner to semi-precious stones.

In Ethiopia, Chinese ceramics have been identified at several inland sites associated with the sultanates, including Ferewanda Beri, Asbari and Tchenno in the central Highlands and Harlaa, as well as Harar and Jaldassa in the eastern Highlands. There are also infrequent examples from Christian sites, such as the 14th to 15th century blue-and-white sherds recovered at Enselale Church in Shewa. Although the study of Chinese ceramics in Ethiopia is in its infancy, it is already clear that Ethiopian cultures have been importing, using and circulating Chinese ceramics for over 800 years.

These ceramics not only testify to Ethiopia's trade connections to the Indian Ocean World but also to aspects of a shared material culture. They were used for a variety of functions, including food consumption, transport and storage of goods, as a raw material for artisanal products, ritual containers, as objects for display, gift-giving and diplomatic tribute, and for the consumption of coffee which continues to this very day ■ [H.P.-M.]

Chinese ceramic sherds 15

6th to 15th century

Celadon, Longquan kiln complex,
Zhejiang Province, China:

- Base sherd from a medium-sized bowl, 6 cm footring, approx. 75 × 40 × 25 mm, HAR 18(M)1a;
- Small octagonal sherd, 8.7 × 7.6 mm, HAR 15(B)9a.

Whiteware, Ding Kilns, Hebei Province, China:

- Sherd from a bowl, 15.3 × 22.3 mm, HAR 19(E)28b, Harlaa.

The Megalithic Cultures

Megaliths have been erected throughout Ethiopia from the 2nd millennium BCE to the present day. Megalithic societies created large stone monuments to honor their dead, to mark their territory or as a sign of their power. These monuments are of different types: barrows* or tumuli, stelae and dolmens. Their construction required large workforces, organized by strong ruling authorities. They are visible in the landscape, and are rare and precious testimonies of the historical existence of ancient complexes that participated in the medieval history of Ethiopia.

However, these non-Abrahamic societies would classically be considered as proto-historical*, because they can appear in historical written sources without producing any sources themselves. Their monuments have withstood the test of time, migrations, acculturations and religious conversions that have profoundly altered the cultural landscape in recent centuries, to the extent that these megaliths have become a common heritage, usually attributed to a mythical giant, petrified humans or a historical figure. These megaliths were mentioned by several travelers at the end of the 19th century. They were studied in the north at the beginning of the 20th century, and in the south notably by François Azaïs. But it was only at the end of the 20th century that archaeologists began the work in central and southern Ethiopia, gradually enabling us to gain a better understanding of this ancient cultural substrate.

The oldest megalithic monuments are dolmens—*dega kofiya*. These are large horizontal slabs supported by vertical pillars. They mark individual tombs dating from the 2nd millennium BCE and are found in large numbers only in the Harar Mountains. Ethiopia's Antiquity is famous for the stelae of Aksum, which include the highest-erected monoliths in the world, which are 24 meters high. In addition to these monuments built for the kings, numerous stelae form a vast necropolis* Finally, the medieval period saw the flourishing of the use and diversification of megaliths throughout the Ethiopian Rift Valley. A great variety of sites and funerary practices indicate a common tradition with peculiarities that make it sketch out some regional cultural eras.

Hundreds of burial mounds are scattered throughout the central Highlands and are attributed to a single culture known as the Shay, from the name of the river in the Manz region, where the first burial mounds were surveyed and excavated. The megalithic architecture of the tumuli is characterized by a circular chamber connected to a lateral cell or a dolmen corridor, all covered by a more or less high pile of stones. These burial monuments seem to be similar to those found in their hundreds, scattered in the Tchertcher Mountains, on the eastern side of the Rift Valley. These collective burial sites are characterized by the richness and quantity of the material deposited in the tombs, especially beads of local and exotic origin, which indicate the existence of an elite and the role of this society as a hub of exchange between different regions and their integration into global trade networks. These comparable megalithic sites were contemporaneous and date from between the 10th and 14th centuries CE.

Further south, many bas-relief stelae were erected between the 11th and 13th centuries. They are particularly numerous in an area formerly known as Soddo, which stretches from the south of Addis Ababa to Hadiya. *Soddo* is also a term used in various Ethiopian languages

Tiya stelae line seen from the back with the vertical slabs surrounding graves, 1990s.

Tumuli and stelae in the northern Shewa area, 1978.

to specifically refer to stelae scattered throughout central and southern Ethiopia. It comprises many toponyms over the entire medieval megalithic region, from the North Shewa to Lake Abaya.

Along the western foothills of the Rift Valley, six generic types of monoliths have been identified in terms of the stylistic variability of their sculptures. These include the sword stelae, such as those found in the famous cemetery at Tiya (inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage List in 1980), the silhouette stelae, the drum stelae, the figurative stelae, the mask stelae, and the phallic stelae. They were erected either at the foot of individual or collective tombs, on the edge of a larger cemetery, or even at the top of a low mound.

However, their attribution remains unclear, their distribution areas may overlap, and different types of stelae may be found in the same site. In addition, a few stelae sites are also known on the Ethiopian plateau, characterized by some distinctive decorative features that can be compared with those found in southern Ethiopia.

Apart from the variety of carved figurations, one pattern is common and almost systematic: a decorative sign is known as "forked" or "vegetal." The design is either engraved or carved in bas-relief and is located on the lower part of the stelae or around the navel. The meaning of this widespread symbol may be related to the source of life or the ensete (*Ensete ventricosum*), an endemic plant of great cultural importance and nutritive value throughout southern Ethiopia.

The diversity of the *Soddo* suggests the existence of distinct political entities with common cultural practices. They coexisted with northern kingdoms (Damot and the Christian kingdom) and sultanates (Shewa, Ifat) from the 11th to the 16th century.

The southernmost megalithic area is located in the eastern foothills of the Abaya Lake and represents one of the largest concentrations of monoliths in Africa. Thousands of huge phallic stelae are scattered over an area of 150 km, on almost every promontory of this hilly region. These monoliths are isolated, lined up in tens or grouped in hundreds, of which Chelba-Tutitti with its thousands of phallic stelae is the most famous example. Some are associated with burial mounds dating from the 8th to the 12th centuries, while others, which show no signs of burial, may have been used as a memorial site.

In the central part of this megalithic region, phallic stelae were later reused and then redesigned as anthropomorphic stelae to be deployed as funerary markers on more or less large cairns*, formed by the accumulation of tombs.

One of the best-known sites, because it has been intensively excavated, is Tuto Fela, a cemetery used from the 12th to the 15th century, where more than 300 stelae were placed on a large cairn. This cairn was constructed in several phases: first, deep shaft tombs were dug and marked with reused phallic stelae, then several graves were covered with stones, marked with anthropomorphic stelae reshaped from older phallic monoliths. Numerous ceramics were deposited in the cairn. A few glass beads have been recovered, demonstrating the cultural and economic exchanges between southern megalithic societies and northern polities in medieval long-distance trade ■ [A.-L.G.,A.B.]

Fragmentary stele of unknown origin

This stele, made of a monolithic slab of ignimbrite, is of unknown origin. It is fragmentary, as the upper and lower parts are missing. It presents a carved decoration on its front face, while the back is in its raw state. Given the number of objects and characters sculpted in bas-relief, it belongs to a specific group known as *figurative stelae*. Therefore, it has been designated as "South Soddo". While *Soddo* is a commonly used term used to refer to stelae, it was also used to specifically refer to the area south of Addis Ababa and through to Hadiya, where monoliths show great stylistic diversity.

A dented border adorns both sides of the stele. Three anthropomorphic figures and a few enigmatic objects are visible: one or two horsemen, one man standing with an equid animal and one may be standing behind a shield, a kind of bag or bell, snaffle bridle, a downward-pointing arrow, and other undefined shapes. These designs are organized around a central pattern made of a cross with a trapezoidal base, topped by a long grooved vertical line from which two levels of a curved "V" begin.

This form is recurrent from Shewa to Gedeo, in more or less sophisticated stages of development, evoking spraying, and is attributed to vegetal representations and more generally to life.

This artifact was described twice in the *Annales d'Éthiopie* in 1976, and 1982, at the time that the Ethiopian Institute of Archaeology's team reoriented their research on the megalithic monuments distributed along the Rift Valley. Regarding the conservation state of the sculpture, authors considered that it was kept in a house or under a shelter, before being acquired by the National Museum in April 1974. Although the provider indicates Marèko as the origin, archaeologists can't find a memory trace of it during their investigation in this area. Due to the composite decoration, they suggest that it comes from Silte or Meskan, 170 km south of Addis Abeba, where the other *figurative stelae* have been registered. These stelae were associated with simple monoliths, but due to the frequent displacement of stones, the clear relation between each other cannot be identified nowadays.

In total, 18 monuments of this type have been documented, of which nine appear to be still *in situ,* while three are kept in the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient in Rome. Correlation within this restricted group of monuments makes it possible to assume that this fragmentary stele had a head, discs at the breast level, and was almost two meters tall.

The *figurative stelae* were first photographed and described in the 1920s when the sole excavation of these monuments until then had been conducted by François Azaïs. These monuments have therefore never been dated. The stele was securely maintained by big blocks and by a large slab at its back. A tomb was discovered in front of the stelae at a depth of three meters. It appeared to have been looted previously, and its architecture disturbed. However, a chest built with massive slabs on its side and covered by large circular carved stone was reconstituted. This suggested that these remarkable stelae were prestigious markers reserved for people with a particular status. Carved designs appear generally to tell the story of an important person or to express the symbols and values of a society ■ [A.-L.G.,A.B.]

Fragmentary stele of unknown origin **16**

Ignimbrite, height 116 cm, width 97 cm, depth 9 cm.

Carinated bottle of the Shay Culture 10th century

This ceramic bottle has a remarkable shape, compared by archaeologists to a "flying saucer." It has become an iconic form of the material culture left by the non-Abrahamic Shay culture in the Ethiopian central Highlands. This pottery was discovered in the tumulus of Tater Gur in Manz dated to the 10th century. This and dozens of similar tombs are located near the Shay River, which gave its name to this prominent medieval culture.

This artifact, with a round bottom and short tubular neck, is characterized by its abrupt carination*, giving the pot its distinctive profile. The diameter-to-height ratio of this jar is particularly low, and the angle of the carination is less than 40°, which is a real technical feat to ensure that the ceramic did not collapse on itself during fabrication. As for the fracture running along the entire diameter of the lower part, the bottle was likely formed in two stages. The upper part may have been made first and the lower part added when the first half was almost dry, or vice versa. The bottle's surface treatment is a typical feature of Ethiopian ceramics: the black and glossy color is generally obtained by a complex operation. First, the surface is compacted by a repeated process of coating, burnishing, and polishing, while the black color is obtained by smoking* the recipient as it comes out of the fire.

The Tater Gur's circular funerary chamber measures around 9.6 sq. meters, and is covered by a corbel* and accessible by a corridor. At least 20 sepultures have been identified in the chamber with two distinct groups of individuals buried around a central figure. More than 70 ceramic items have been found on the ground of the chamber, complete or partially broken. They were either close to skeletons, or along the wall, but mainly on both sides of the entrance.

Singularly, this pictured ceramic does not show any further decoration but belongs to a corpus of numerous objects made of a few carinated* vessels and a larger number of globular bottles, both regularly decorated with geometric patterns engraved, in relief or painted.

The whole set represents an exceptional collection in understanding better the ceramic tradition of the time. However as they were used in a funerary context, and most of them for the presentation and consumption of liquids, they cannot be representative of the whole domestic corpus. Some of them were maybe possessions of the deceased, as some breakage and chipping seem to have appeared during prolonged domestic use.

Beyond the numerous ceramics, the funerary deposits are particularly rich: hundreds of glass beads sewn onto fabrics or maybe mounted on necklaces and bracelets, 52 bracelets in iron, copper alloy and silver, stone jewelry, and even a short iron sword with a likely ivory handle. Together, the collection reflects a rich society which was well-connected to long-distance trade.

The complex decorations and the carinated shapes constitute a specific ceramic style found on diverse funerary sites of central Ethiopia, from tumulus to hypogeum, and dated from the 10th to the 14th century. The disappearance of this carinated ceramic type occured between the 13th and the 15th centuries, which were an important cultural and political transition in the area ■ [A.-L.G.,B.P.]

Carinated bottle of the Shay Culture **17**

10th century

Ceramic, height 15 cm, diameter 28.5 cm, op. diameter 7.5 cm

Tater Gur, Inv. 7005-142a.

Beads from the tumuli of Manz and Tchertcher
10th to 12th century

Beads are among the prestigious artifacts uncovered from the archaeological sites belonging to the ancient and medieval periods in all contexts: Christian, Islamic as well as from the megalithic societies. In the latter case, two collections are particularly important and were uncovered in funerary tumuli: one from the site named Tater Gur in the so-called Shay Culture area of the central Highlands, and the other one from Rare and Ganda Miju in the Tchertcher area of Harar. These two sites are around 200 miles apart and yet contemporary, with shared funerary architecture and material culture.

Tater Gur, belonging to the Shay culture, is defined by the richness and quantity of the material deposited in the tombs, and especially by the beads. It was excavated 25 years ago, and several hundred glass beads were found. The site is dated to the 10th century. The majority of the beads from Tater Gur are of small size, at about 2 mm.

The several techniques of bead production in the Indo-Pacific are found in this corpus. Stretched and segmented glass beads are produced by the drawn technique. For this, small drawn glass tubes were heated and then segmented by rolling on open molds with grooved or crenelated surfaces.

The other technique produced the coiled beads: wrapping the heated glass then spinning the rod around and letting it coil. There are stretched beads of various solid colors: blue, yellow, red, black, orange, white, light grey, and green, mainly cylindrical and more rarely tubular or barrel-shaped. Some of the segmented beads are monochrome blue, violet, or yellow, while other beads are of complex fabrication, apparently with gold or silver leaf inserted in the transparent paste. A few special glass beads have ocellated decorations, such as white lines on a dark blue background, evoking a spiral. A light-blue coiled bead has thin reddish threads and sharp breaks at the perforation, due to the manufacturing process. A remarkable bead shows juxtaposed bands of yellow, red, white and blue. Stone beads were also recovered from Tater Gur, made of carnelian, sardonyx, undefined green rock, amazonite, and probably jade. It is suggested that glass beads, and probably the agate and carnelian beads, likely functioned as a currency.

Rare and Ganda Miju archaeological sites were excavated in the 1970s and similarly dated from the 10th to the 12th century. In this case, over 200 glass beads were collected: tinted yellow or blue, can be single, double, triple, or even quadruple. Copper alloy beads, made of rolled metal foil and faceted metal core have also been found. Some are solid gold, while others are of limestone, which might also be a misread because of their state of preservation.

In the Shay and Tchertcher cultures, exotic glass beads are leading collections that have received better research attention than the beads of local origins, such as those of stone and metal. Analyses of the 34 glass beads from Tater Gur and the neighboring Meshale Maryam site have identified several production sites: North Syria, Iran-Iraq-South Syria, Egypt, and Palestine. This provenance analysis sheds light on international trade and intercultural connections, showing Africa as an important market for bead producers in the Eastern Mediterranean area.

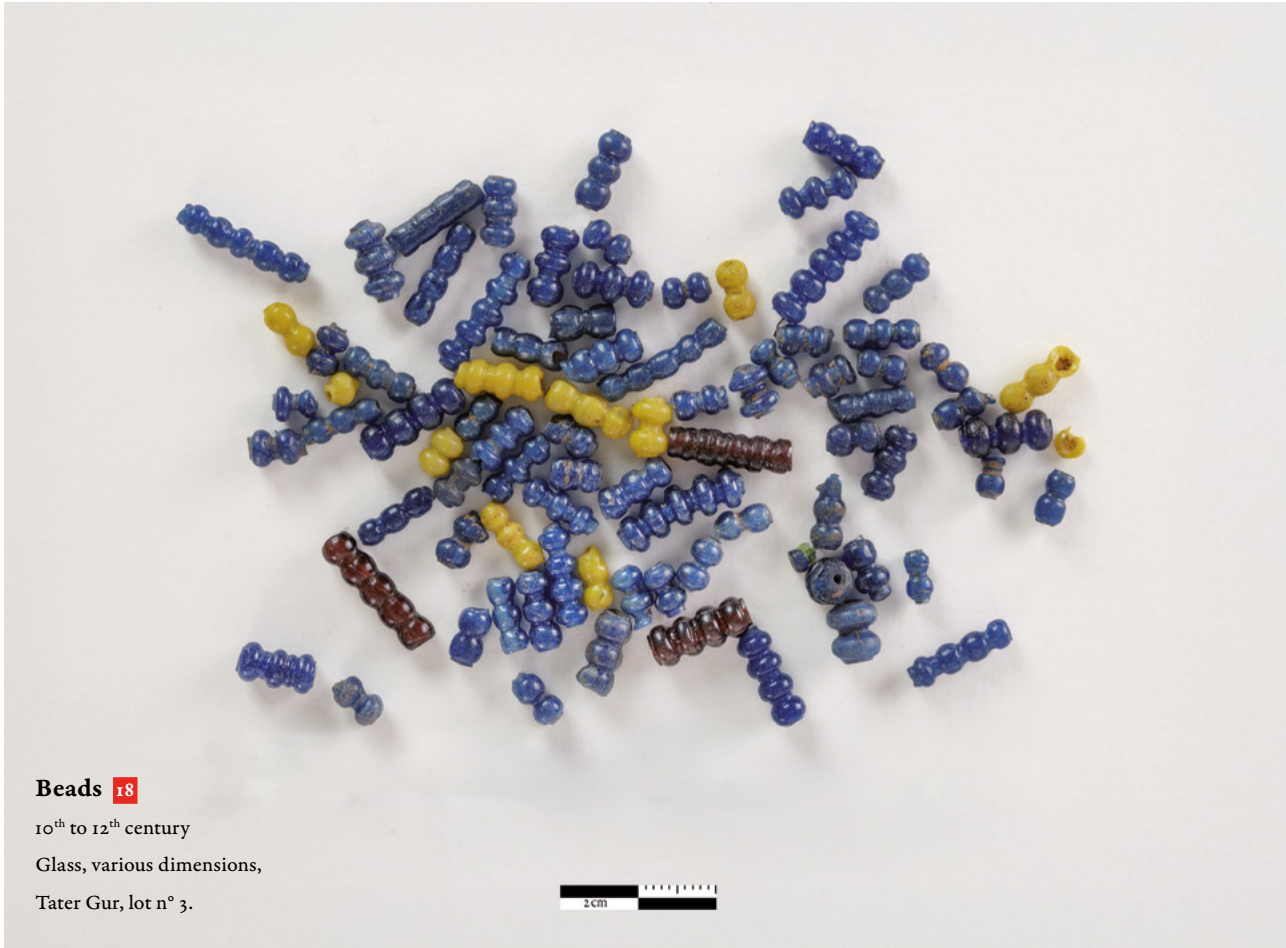
Beads 18

10th to 12th century

Glass, various dimensions,

Tater Gur.

In general, the bead collections from the tumuli of Shay and Tchertcher represent a considerable volume of assemblages that point to the existence of a rich society that might have been ruled by a privileged elite. Moreover, it indicates the role of this society as a pivot in trade between different regions. It also shows the extent of the commercial catchment of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern trade areas of the time in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, it evidences that the megalithic societies along both sides of the Rift Valley shared trading routes and networks in their acquisition of exotic objects. To this end, beads are key to our understanding of the local circulation as well as intra- and inter-regional trading networks during the medieval period in the Horn of Africa ■ [A.B.]



Beads 18

10th to 12th century

Glass, various dimensions,

Tater Gur, lot n° 3.

Archaeological Sciences

Archaeology is a science that aims to reconstruct the history and way of life of past societies through careful observation of all available traces. Archaeological research is interdisciplinary and often involves dozens of different specialists.

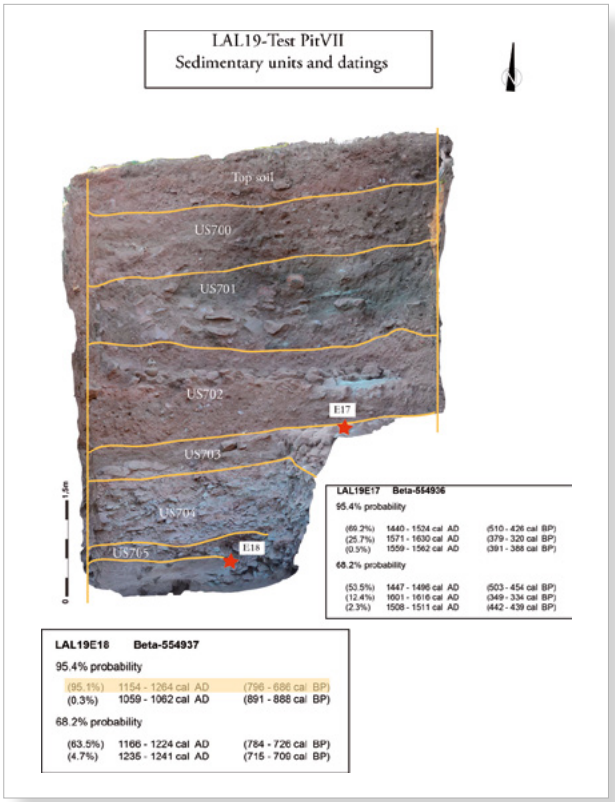
Archaeologists conduct excavations to unearth remnants of past settlements. They thus meticulously record every detail of a site, from the location of artifacts to the nature of the sediments covering them. Artifacts are only one of the archaeological traces that researchers study and thus need to be understood within a holistic material context, including: sediment levels, architectural features (from walls to postholes), domestic or funerary structures (from fireplaces to the buried positions), as well as human and faunal remains.

Data and documentation remain after fieldwork and these are interpreted and published. Archaeologists dedicate a long time in the laboratory to organize, process, and analyse the materials collected.

Collections are studied by specialists regarding the nature of the material in question: lithic, ceramic, metal, bones, and some exports specifically study beads or imported ceramics. Specialists consider in which context, at which level, a series of artifacts have been found, how they can be properly or relatively dated; if there is continuity or rupture in the production technique, in the style; if there are traces of uses which could inform on the daily or ceremonial life of the ancient people.

In parallel, ethnoarchaeology serves to study the techniques of the past through analysis of today's knowledge. Attention is given especially to the concept of *chaîne opératoire* (literally the "operational chain"), which means the series of technical operations that transforms a raw material into a final product. Understanding present-day phenomena allows for a better understanding and interpretation of ancient ones. The final paragraphs present the processing of stones, ceramics, and metals, which are three materials that are especially well preserved over time. They highlight the methods of study and the problems raised ■

Drawing on a photography of a stratigraphic section of Qeyit Terara site in Lalibela, 2019. The stratigraphy studies the succession of the sediment levels which allow to distinguish the different occupations of a site.



Stone Architecture

Ethiopia, a country with a rich cultural heritage and a diverse history, is renowned for its unique stone architecture. This architectural style reflects the country's ancient civilizations, religious significance, and the adaptation of local materials and techniques. From the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela to the ancient obelisks of Aksum, stone architecture in Ethiopia tells a story of innovation, spirituality, and resilience.

The history of stone architecture in Ethiopia dates back to ancient times, and was particularly remarkable during Antiquity. The Aksumites were skilled builders who utilized local granite to create monumental structures. The most notable examples are the so-called "obelisks," the Aksum stelae, which served as markers for tombs or underground burial chambers and which were intricately carved with multi-story false windows and false doors as decoration.

The proximity of quarries facilitated the transportation of the extracted stone, which is a distinctive pinkish granite that is both durable and aesthetically pleasing. After planning the layout of cuts and identifying the natural fissures in the rock that could be exploited to facilitate the extraction process, quarry workers would insert wooden or iron wedges into square holes cut into the granite. By hitting the wedges with hammer, they would create pressure to fracture the stone. Archaeological evidence suggests that iron tools, such as chisels and hammers, were used to make the necessary cuts and shape the granite to the final design. After extraction, the massive granite blocks needed to be transported to construction sites. The Aksumites developed a sophisticated logistics system that likely involved sledges, rollers, and manpower. The quarrying of granite in Aksum was a complex and labor-intensive process that demonstrated the ingenuity and skill of the Aksumite civilization.

Religion has played a crucial role in shaping Ethiopia's stone architecture. The Ethiopian Church has influenced the design and construction of numerous churches and monasteries throughout the country. One of the most significant achievements in Ethiopian stone architecture is the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, erected during the reign of King Lalibela in the 13th century. These churches were carved directly into the rock, a soft layer of scoriaceous basalt, showcasing an extraordinary level of craftsmanship and devotion. Lalibela was then designed to be a "New Jerusalem," and the churches are a testament to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's influence. There are still today 11 monolithic churches, each with unique architectural features, including intricate carvings, cross-shaped designs, and elaborate frescoes. The most famous of these is today the Church of St. George (Beta Giyorgis), which is renowned for its stunning cross-shaped layout and remarkable preservation.

Despite the good quality of this material and the enormous volume removed from the ground, there is no dressed stone building in this region. Indeed, Lalibela Churches have been rock-hewn by "destructive cutting", meaning without the aim of using the removed stone in other constructions. The site is still nowadays covered by huge amounts of stone debris. These piles are very useful for archaeologists as different phases of the excavation can be identified by studying their different layers. In Lalibela, no ancient quarrying remains have ever been found. A lot of stonework in the Ethiopian Highlands comes from an unknown troglodytic culture likely dating back to before the 13th century. The Washa-Mika'el site

for example, located about 50 km from Lalibela, is a cave cut into the interior of an ignimbrite massif and entirely decorated with hunting scenes carved on the walls by an unknown culture. This cave was transformed into a church in the 13th century.

In addition to Lalibela, other notable religious sites include the Debre Damo Monastery, perched on a cliff, and the other churches of Tigray, which are often rock-cut into the sides of mountains. These structures not only serve as places of worship but also as symbols of faith and resilience against external pressures.

Ethiopia's diverse geology has provided a wealth of materials for stone architecture. The use of local granite, basalt, and sandstone has allowed builders over the centuries to create structures that are not only durable but also harmoniously integrated into the landscape. Building techniques, such as dry-stone construction and the use of mud mortar, have been passed down through generations. These methods reflect a deep understanding of the environment and the resources available, allowing for the creation of structures that withstand the test of time.

Despite the historical significance of Ethiopia's stone architecture, many sites face challenges due to environmental factors, urbanization, and tourism. Efforts are being made to preserve these architectural treasures, including restoration projects and the establishment of Unesco World Heritage Sites ■ [A.G.]

Picture plate "Heads from Sidamo", phallic stelae with anthropomophic figure carved in ignimbrite, unknown site, JE 001 and JE 002, 1953.

Ceramics

Clay materials are sought after for their malleability, plasticity, and ability to harden while drying. The mastering of ceramic production, an irreversible transformation of clay into a ceramic object through a firing process requiring a temperature of at least 600 °C, was a fundamental step in the history of techniques. As containers, ceramics are a crucial extension of the human body and can act as a second stomach, allowing a space and time gap between production and consumption. The specific properties of ceramics are their durability, impermeability, and heat conductivity.

These make ceramic objects useful for cooking, fermentation, and long-term preservation. Ceramics are also used for various activities: pipe stoves, fumigation, roofing, nozzles, etc.

Ceramics, which appeared in Ethiopia around the 5th millennium BCE, are the most abundant material found in historical sites. The fragility of ceramics leads to fragmentation, migration, and even the disappearance of sherds. Depending on the context of the excavation layer, only a few or thousands of sherds may be unearthed. Complete ceramics can be found, reconstituted and restored. Carefully studied and compared, this material can provide information on chronology, social or economic aspects, as well as technology.

Pottery production follows different operative chains with similar universal steps: collecting and preparing the clay, shaping (roughing, forming, and finishing), surface treatment, decoration, and firing. Each of these stages can be carried out using different techniques, and the processes for implementing these techniques are numerous. Thus, pottery traditions express cultural traditions. Archaeologists try to identify the shape and function of the pottery objects recovered and the technology used to better understand and characterize the societies they study.

The study process includes careful storing and labeling of objects in the field, to keep fully the information associated with its discovery. Then, a ceramic corpus may be sorted in a laboratory, within the sets given by the archaeological context or layers, and regarding the main issues raised by their excavation, concerning fabrics or forms. The (re-)assemblage of objects in the lab should be properly quantified by layers, which can explain the variability of the occupation's nature. The main relevant pieces are described, drawn and photographed. These sherds are called diagnostic elements when they bear an edge, a foot, a handle, or a decorative feature, all elements which permit the type of pottery and decoration to be reconstituted. The typology of potteries is considered in its context and can then lead to a chrono-typology in which some specific forms may indicate a particular period of time. The typology can also highlight cultural and economic exchanges, while analysis of organic residue left on ceramics give precise information about their function ■ [A.-L.G.]

The Metal

Metallurgy occupies a special place in human history through the production of materials with properties that do not exist in nature. Metals, whether non-ferrous (gold, silver, copper, bronze and brass) or ferrous (iron, steel and cast iron), are mostly hard, opaque materials with shimmering colors, and which conduct heat. They also have the distinctive feature of being recyclable. Their production requires a long series of stages during which the physical and chemical properties of several raw materials are combined and modified. Metallurgists must separate metallic atoms from oxygen atoms and other elements contained in ores to obtain metal. This transformation requires very high heat (above 950 °C for silver, around 1,100 °C for gold and copper, and between 1,100 and 1,500 °C for iron). After building a furnace, the metallurgists introduce ore and fuel into it. They light the fire inside the furnace, and, thanks to an air supply, the temperature rises. After a few hours, the metal is separated from the waste. Non-ferrous metals are then cast in a mold or formed to make axes, rings and coins. Ferrous metals are stretched and shaped

when hot to make hoes, knives and arrows. The properties of the various metals produced enable them to be used in all areas of life: agriculture, crafts, armaments, ornamentation, and construction. Since the introduction of metallurgy, craftsmen have constantly created new metal combinations, modified their production techniques, and produced original objects. The prism of metallurgy thus offers a unique opportunity to cross history and territories by questioning the place of metallurgies and metallurgists in societies and, in so doing, follow the stages of invention, innovation, and dissemination of metallurgy. The identification of these mechanisms is an essential issue in the understanding of the societies where metallurgy originated, and those that learnt from others or consumed the products of other societies.

In the African continent, the history of metals escapes any evolutionary perception. It unfolds at a distance from a technological determinism that would in some way force each society to pass successively through the Copper, Bronze, and Iron Ages, as was the case in Eurasia. From the point of view of the metals sought and their order of appearance in the history of technology, the African continent can be divided into three regions covering distinct histories. Firstly, northern Africa, spanning from the Mediterranean coast to the Red Sea coast, shows a metallurgical evolution similar to that of Europe and Asia, albeit slightly later. The history of metallurgy starts there with the use of native metals (gold, silver, copper and meteoritic iron which was used only in Egypt) beginning in the middle of the fifth millennium BCE. This was followed by the transformation of copper ore into metal and by the mastery of copper-based alloys from the third millennium, and finally the introduction of iron in the middle of the first millennium BCE. Secondly, the Saharo-Sahelian zone witnessed the simultaneous development of copper and iron metallurgy during the 1st millennium BCE, by populations belonging to different cultures and occupying distinct yet interconnected territories. Finally, sub-Sahelian Africa has a completely original history of metallurgy. It also began in the first millennium BCE (perhaps earlier), but only with iron metallurgy and without any other non-ferrous metallurgy having been established previously.

In Ethiopia, the use of metals has been attested since the first millennium BCE. These were more adorned objects imported from Egypt, Nubia and Arabia. They testify to the considerable trade in goods and long-distance contacts during this period. It seems that it was not until the first half of the first millennium CE that the Aksumite civilization developed local metal production, enabling it to produce a wide range of coins, objects and tools. However, the material evidence of this activity is still very tenuous and remains to be discovered and studied. In the medieval period, knowledge of paleometallurgy expanded beyond northern Ethiopia to cover almost the entire country. All types of metal were produced and used, but it should be noted that the southern regions only produced iron due to the absence of silver, gold and copper ores. From the 17th century onwards, the craft industry, and more specifically the production of metals and metal objects, was destabilized by strong political and economic interactions with Western colonial powers. It faced stiff competition from Western imports of raw materials and finished products. As a result, these activities were gradually abandoned. Some products are still produced by marginalized and ostracized populations ■ [C.R.-B.]

Afterword

This beautiful guidebook not only reflects the long history of Ethiopia, but also the extended scientific exchanges among the Ethiopian, French and international scientific communities, at the intersection of which stands the renowned Ethiopian Heritage Authority (EHA). Within this long history, the teams of the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (CFEE), with the support of the French Embassy in Ethiopia, have strongly contributed to the production of a constantly renewed knowledge of archaeology and history in the region, alongside the EHA and the institutions that have preceded it, since the 1950s.

The accumulated knowledge has emerged from the countless fields of research patiently explored by the members of the archaeological missions who have made it possible to collect, classify, study and compare thousands of artifacts. Over the decades, this patient work has formed the exceptional collections of the Ethiopian Heritage Authority, to which only scholars and a few privileged visitors are allowed access. However, the broader public and curious visitors can now get a relatively accurate idea of this wealth and Ethiopia's history by visiting the permanent exhibition of Historical Archaeology at the National Museum of Ethiopia in Amist Kilo. This new exhibition aims specifically at making available to a wide audience, and especially to Ethiopian nationals, the results and perspectives gained from the most recent archaeological research in the country.

The permanent exhibition of Historical Archaeology located on the first floor of the National Museum of Ethiopia was inaugurated on September 29, 2022 by Her Excellency President of Ethiopia Sahle-Work Zewde, and His Excellency Ambassador of France Rémi Maréchaux. The archaeological teams of the EHA and the CFEE, gathering leading researchers, supervised the design of this exhibition within the framework of collaborative programs on heritage management and valorisation, notably sponsored by the French Embassy and the CFEE since 2019, thus reflecting the continuous cooperation of Ethio-French researchers and diplomats.

It is not only consistent but also important that this scientific cooperation and cultural diplomacy should continue through the production of a Guidebook for this permanent exhibition of the EHA, with the renewed support of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, the French Embassy in Addis

Ababa, the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies, Soleb Editions and the non-profit organization Netsanet. This guide aims to share the general state of knowledge of Historical Archaeology and highlight some of the artifacts which deserve further explanation.

Ethiopia's Antiquity occupies an important place within the exhibition and within this Guidebook. A new selection of artifacts presents the emergence of writing, the ties with South Arabia and Mediterranean space, as well as the daily life of Ethiopia's ancient peoples. The country's medieval cultures have been well documented in the last decades, and are equally represented, to bear witness to Ethiopia's complex archaeological record across the whole historical period. Indeed, for the medieval era, while societies have been classically presented through the lens of religions that emerged in Ethiopia during the historical period, contributors also show here the importance of the links between these societies based on shared material cultures. This return to the very long history of Ethiopia reminds us that identities, religions, culture, and borders are not static but fluid, and shaped over the very long run by multiple and complex factors.

As the Ethiopian Heritage Authority curated collections from most of the sites in Ethiopia, it was possible to present the diversity of the material cultures that have been documented these last 70 years throughout Ethiopia, accompanied by some archive pictures kept by key institutions, researchers, and international libraries. The selection of the artifacts exhibited involved important work conducted with curators to identify, clean and reorganize all the Historical Archaeology collections. Their contextualization was made possible by the work of an international scientific committee, mainly of Ethiopian and French specialists. I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Director General of the EHA, the Director of the National Museum and their teams, the fantastic dedication of the curators who followed the project since its emergence until the very publication of this Guidebook, the members of the Scientific Advisory Board, the publisher Soleb who enthusiastically accepted to support this ambitious project, and the cultural cooperation team of the French Embassy for their constant and full support ■

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Glossary

Abrahamic The Abrahamic religions are the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They are so called because all three claim to be descended from Abraham.

Acculturation Changes that occur in a cultural group as a result of constant contact with a group belonging to another culture.

Agro-pastoral Practicing both agriculture and cattle herding.

Altar Raised table on which offerings to the deity were placed, sacrifices were offered to the gods.

Anthropomorphic Representing non-human being or thing in a human shape.

Antiquity Antiquity is an era in history succeeding Prehistory. It conventionally begins through the development or adoption of writing. The transition from Prehistory to Antiquity therefore occurred at different times for different peoples
Some of the civilisations of these pivotal periods did not have writing, but are mentioned in the writings of other civilisations: they are placed in Proto-history.

Arcature A series of small decorative arches.

Architrave A main beam lying horizontally on a colonnade.

Archivolt Ornamental moulding or band following the curve of the extrados' arch.

Ashlar stone Cut and dressed stone, worked using a chisel to achieve a specific form, typically rectangular in shape. The term can also refer to a structure built from such stones.

Assemblage In archaeology, the concept of "assemblage" refers to a group of different artefacts discovered in the same context.

Barrow A large mound of earth or stones over one or several burials.

Bas-relief Sculptural work in which the objects depicted do not protrude very far and are partially embedded in the block.

Basilical plan Common in religious buildings, but also used in civil buildings, it is a rectangular plan with a central hall surrounded by a colonnade that supports the roof.

Bedrock Solid rock that underlies looser surface material.

Bronze An alloy of copper (at least 75%) and often tin (but sometimes zinc or lead), strong, not easily altered, with a beautiful dark colour and sound properties.

Bucranium Ornamental motif consisting of an emaciated ox head with horns adorned with garlands and flowers, used as a decorative element.

Burnishing Surface treatment consisting of rubbing the surface of a ceramic with a hard tool, often a stone, to make it compact and shiny.

Cabochon Precious or semi-precious stone, polished but not cut, with a rounded shape.

Cairn Accumulation of stones generally visible in the landscape and covering graves.

Caravan A group of people (merchants, travellers, pilgrims, nomads, etc.) mounted on stock animals who come together to cross deserts or regions with difficult access.

Carinated A container with a carinated shape is characterised by a biconical profile.

Carnelian A brownish-red mineral commonly used as a semi-precious stone.

Chiseling A carving or decorative technique that involves sculpting the material with a chisel.

Colonnade A group of columns arranged at regular intervals, in one or more rows, inside a building or along the façade or around a public square.

Common Era (CE) Used when referring to a period after the birth of Jesus Christ, when the Christian calendar counts years. Before Common Era (BCE) refers to a period before the birth of Jesus Christ.

Corbel A structural element in architecture, made of stone, wood or metal, which protrudes from a wall to support the weight of an overhanging load.

Cruciform plan The plan of a cross-shaped building.

Dedication The act of placing a work under the patronage of a god or personage. An inscription may be placed at the head of the work to recall this patronage.

Epitaph Inscription placed on a tomb to commemorate a deceased individual.

Eunuch Man deprived of the ability to reproduce as a result of castration. Eunuchs often served a specific social function, especially as a servant.

Frankincence and myrrhe Aromatic gum resins containing a volatile oil obtained from trees growing in Eastern Africa, Arabia and Asia, it has long been valued in worship and as a medicine.

Funerary Relating to death, the remains, the memory of a person. Used at or relating to funerals.

Glaze A vitreous substance fused on to the surface of pottery to form an impervious decorative coating.

Hijra Means "migration" or "exile" in Arabic, and traditionally refers to the departure of Muhammad and several of his companions from Mecca to the oasis of Yathrib, formerly known as Medina, in 622. This event marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

Icon Holy image, often painted on wood, venerated by the faithful of the Eastern Church, including Ethiopia.

Intaglio A fine and hard stone engraved in hollow to serve as a seal or stamp.

Intrados The inner surface of an arch.

Jesuit A Roman Catholic priest who is a member of the Society of Jesus, a religious group begun in 1540 by Ignace de Loyola.

Kamili dirham Type of silver coins minted during the reign of Ayyubid Sultan Al-Kamil (1218-1238).

Kufic Refers to a style of arabic script characterized by angular, rectilinear letterforms and its horizontal orientation. It gained prominence early on as a preferred script for Quran transcription and architectural decoration, and it has since become a reference and an archetype for a number of other Arabic scripts.

Liturgical Related to regulated ceremonies and prayers used in the worship of a deity.

Lost-wax casting A precision moulding process used to produce a metal sculpture from a wax model. This technique is used to make unique, high-precision pieces in glass or metal.

Manuscript A handwritten or copied work. In Ethiopia this refers to books written on parchment, usually kept in churches.

Meanders Architectural or embroidery ornament consisting of broken or criss-crossed lines.

Middle-Ages Period of world history between Antiquity and the Modern Age.

Minting Making a coin by stamping metal.

Monkey heads Name of the protuding ends of the beams used in the timber framed constructions.

Monolithic Refering to monuments or feature made of a single large stone, or carved from a single block of stone.

Museography All the techniques used to present and enhance museum collections and exhibits.

Nave A large, elongated room or gallery of great height. In a church, there is a central nave which may be flanked by aisles (secondary naves).

Necropolis Large cluster of individual or collective burials, sometimes featuring monumental structures.

Obsidian Glassy volcanic rock rich in silica. The Great Rift Valley is a region where this material is present in significant quantities.

Openwork A term used in art for any technique that produces decoration by making holes, piercings, or gaps that go right through a solid material such as metal, wood, stone, pottery, cloth, leather, or ivory.

Pantheon All the divinities of a polytheistic religion.

Podium In architecture, a podium is a masonry structure raised above the ground and used as a low base for one or several buildings.

Porcelain ware Fine, translucent ceramic, originally developed in China, produced from kaolin, a white mineral containing silica, by firing the wares at over 1,200 °C.

Processional A solemn march of a religious nature, accompanied by ritual demonstrations (songs, prayers, etc.).

Prophylactic Protects health from anything that could be harmful. Keeps disease at bay, protects against it.

Proto-historical From Proto-history, see Antiquity.

Secular In Christianity, the term secular clergy refers to deacons and priests who are neither monks or members of a religious order..

Shrine A sacred space dedicated to a specific deity, ancestor, hero, martyr, saint, daemon, or similar figure of respect, in which they are venerated or worshipped.

Site In archaeology, place or group of places in which evidence of past activity is preserved (either prehistoric or historic or contemporary), and which has been, or may be, investigated and represents a part of the archaeological record. Sites may range from those with few or no remains visible above ground, to buildings and other structures still in use.

Smoking A technique which consists of surrounding ceramic objects with smoke in order to impregnate their surface with carbon particles and thus obtain a black or grey colour, sometimes iridescent.

Solomonic The Solomonic dynasty was an Ethiopian dynasty that claimed

to be descended from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, ruling of the Ethiopian Empire from the 13th to 20th centuries.

Stele Upright stone, sometimes presenting inscriptions or ornamental reliefs.

Stoneware Broad term for vitreous or semi-vitreous ceramic made primarily from stoneware clay or non-refractory fire clay, and fired at a relatively high temperature.

Sultanate A muslin state of varying size governed by a ruler called a sultan.

Survey Various exploratory methods aimed at identifying the presence of archaeological evidence and collecting archaeological data.

Tenon Protruding part of an assembly, made at the end of a piece to fit exactly into the corresponding cavity called a mortise on the corresponding piece.

Tutelar god Designates the protective god or goddess of a city.

Votive Relating to a vow, offered in fulfilment of a vow.

Zoomorphic Representing non-human being or thing in an animal shape ■

The exhibition in the National Museum of Ethiopia (Antiquity part), 2025.

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Timeline of the historical period in Ethiopia

The colours correspond to the major cultural areas, mainly defined by their religion. Their geographical extensions are shown on the map in the same colours. This representation is schematic, societies are more complex, multicultural and multi-religious.

■ **Purple:** non-Abrahamic religions and megalithic societies

■ **Orange:** Antique societies

■ **Blue:** Christian societies

■ **Green:** Muslim societies

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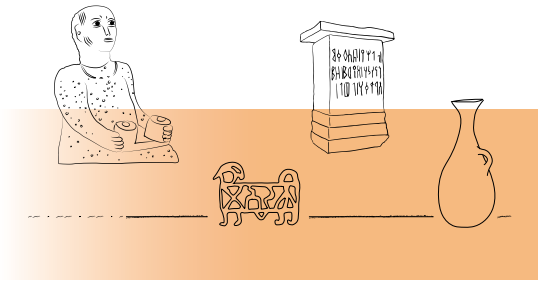

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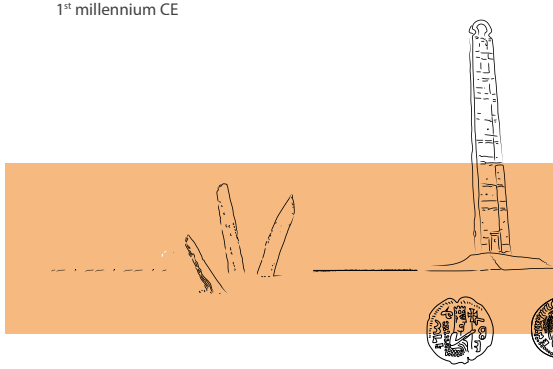

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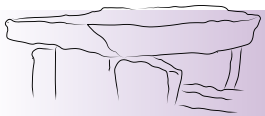

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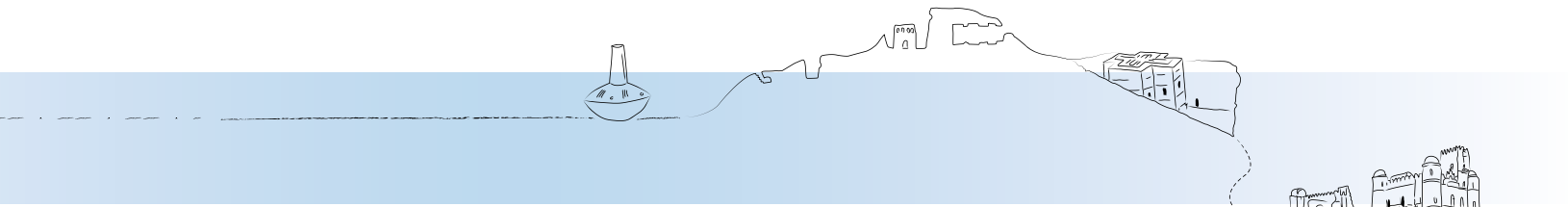

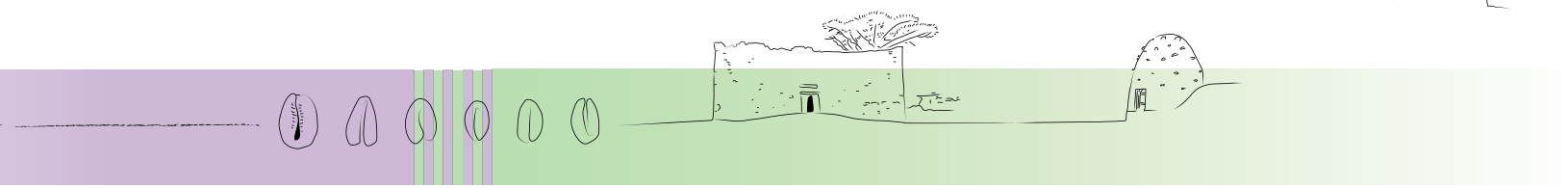

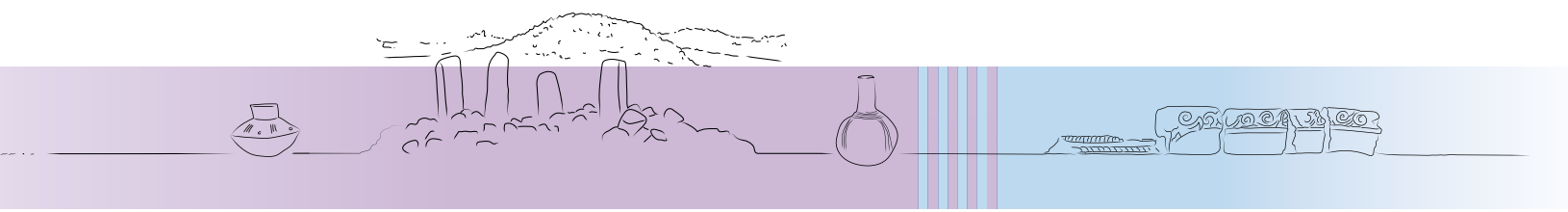

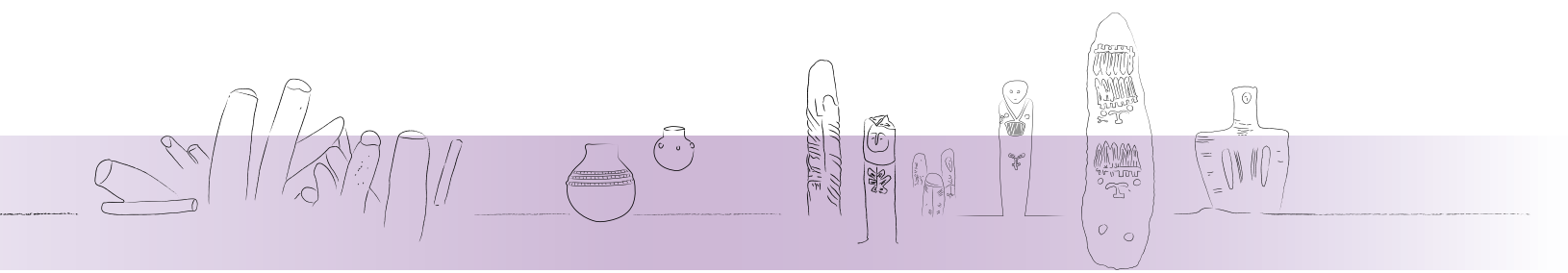

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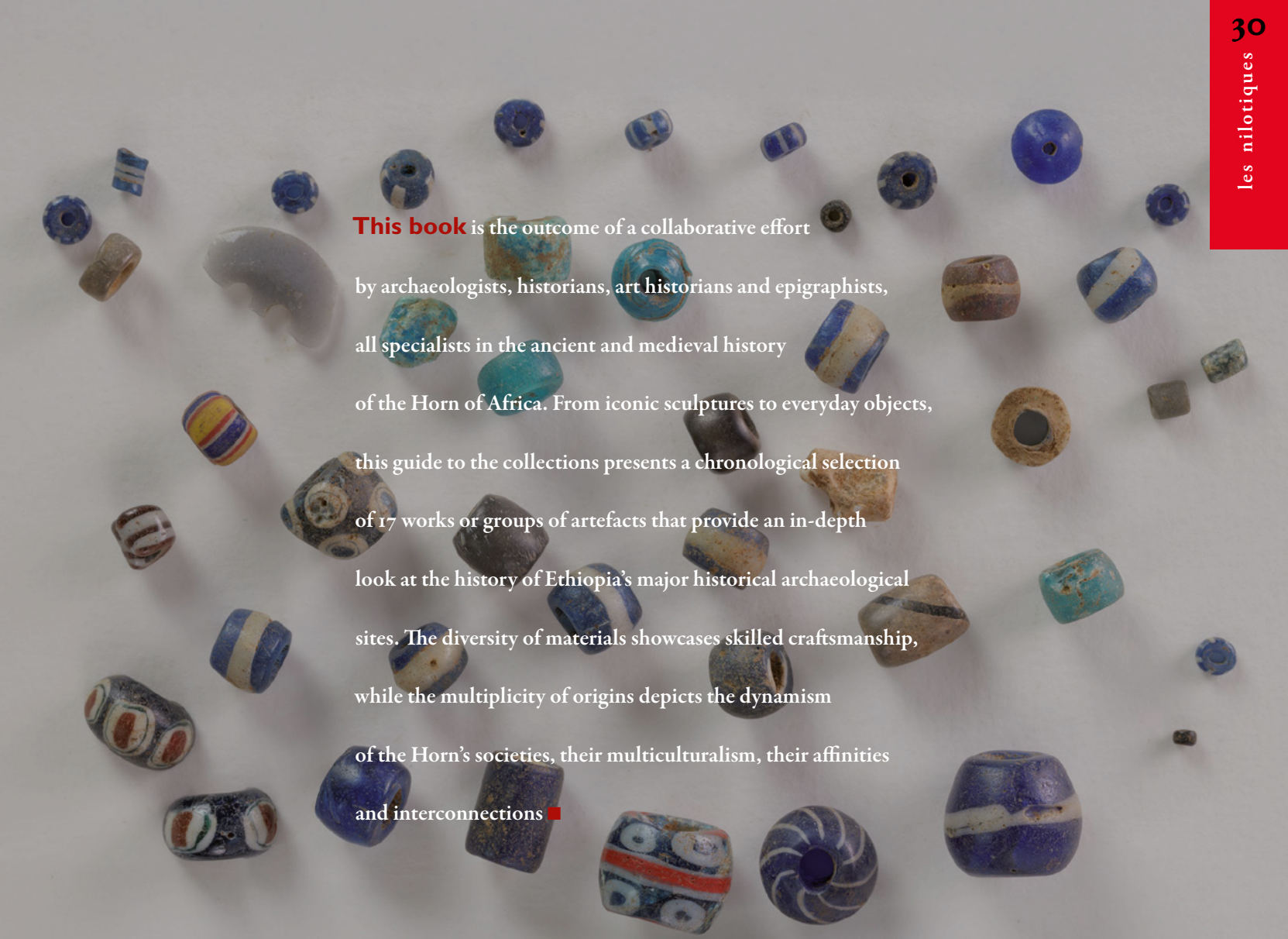

This book is the outcome of a collaborative effort by archaeologists, historians, art historians and epigraphists, all specialists in the ancient and medieval history of the Horn of Africa. From iconic sculptures to everyday objects, this guide to the collections presents a chronological selection of 17 works or groups of artefacts that provide an in-depth look at the history of Ethiopia's major historical archaeological sites. The diversity of materials showcases skilled craftsmanship, while the multiplicity of origins depicts the dynamism of the Horn's societies, their multiculturalism, their affinities and interconnections ■

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