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### Author

Wendrich, Willeke

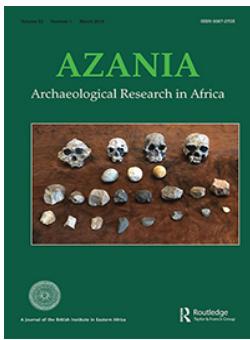
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## Mifsas Baḥri: a Late Aksumite frontier community in the mountains of southern Tigray: survey, excavation and analysis, 2013–16

Willeke Wendrich

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manner. In addition, Chapter Three also considers the location and identification of eight ‘lost’ missions.

Chapter Four shifts the focus to a more interpretative and theoretical tone, considering the politics of power relations as revealed through architecture and monumentality and hinting at, but never overtly articulating, the role of ideology as a conditioning factor (an Althusserian, or neo-Marxist approach). Section 4.5 (‘The regulation of manners’) offers a brief consideration, never fully worked out here — but perhaps on the basis of this work something to be considered later on down the line — of the role of Bourdieu’s *habitus*: frameworks of behaviour, conditioning and human action. The final chapter (Chapter Five) draws together the major themes of the monograph, while the appendices present the technical conservation, laser scanning and geophysical reports, alongside (perhaps most crucially) a consideration of public and community archaeology. Particularly charming is the child’s drawing of a bearded archaeologist in Figure A.5.4, proof indeed of the efficacy of the team’s outreach work and also of the project’s legacy.

This is a first-rate and comprehensive study, richly illustrated and (as one would expect with Brill) well presented, although again to echo common complaints about monographs dealing with African archaeological projects, how do we make the information openly available to indigenous scholars and libraries in an economically viable manner? This volume alone comes in at 165 Euros in hardback *and* as an e-book; the same pricing structure for the latter format has always struck me as curious. This issue aside, it sets the standard for historical archaeological work in eastern Africa and will hopefully encourage other archaeologists, working with Ethiopian heritage professionals, scholars and communities, to engage with some of the more recent sites, all places that have much to reveal about the complex and rich history of imperial Ethiopia and its engagement with the outside world over the last six hundred or so years.

Niall Finneran

*Department of Archaeology and Anthropology,  
University of Winchester, United Kingdom*

 Niall.Finneran@winchester.ac.uk

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**Mifsas Bahri: a Late Aksumite frontier community in the mountains of southern Tigray: survey, excavation and analysis, 2013–16**, edited by Michela Gaudiello and Paul A. Yule. Oxford, BAR Publishing, BAR International Series 2839, 2017, 299 pp., £55 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4073-15799.

The Late Aksumite period in northern Ethiopia has seen very few systematic excavations that have been published. Thus, the four excavation seasons at Mifsas Bahri contribute significantly to our understanding of the end of the Aksumite period and ancient Ethiopia in general. The results of the work are a description of the building phases of an abandoned church, the location of which has been known for centuries from historic maps.

While it is laudable that the team has published the results of their 2013–2016 survey and excavation seasons as early as 2017, speedy publication seems, however, to have resulted in

several unfortunate flaws. Most of these are editing issues that could have been avoided. The two forewords, for instance, list the site as being respectively 60 km (Maryam Nasret) and 130 km (undefined) south of the nearest Aksumite site. The text would have benefitted greatly from a thorough check by a native English speaker.

The book is mostly a presentation of excavation and survey data, with little to no emphasis on research questions or interpretation of the site and region in any broader setting. It is not clear, for instance, why this is considered a frontier community. The dearth of research does not preclude the fact that other Late Aksumite sites existed, but this is not discussed in the volume. The form in which the data are presented, many pages of printed tables, is not ideal. Hundreds of photographs and a few of the site plans are already accessible through the database of the University of Heidelberg: <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/> - SKVO 'Mifsas Bahri Project'. In general, the illustrations in the book are beautifully produced in full colour, making plans and charts easier to understand, but their lettering is often too small to read.

The order of the chapters is not optimal. It is not until Chapters 9 and 10 (dealing with architecture and site stratigraphy) that aspects of the earlier chapters are clarified. Presenting Chapter 10 after Chapter 1 would have made more sense. The survey chapters provide the broader landscape context and could have followed the excavation chapters.

*The Excavation, 2013–16*, by Paul Yule, Curt Hilbrig and Manjil Hazarika, presents a summary of the different seasons with the goals of each. The work in Mifsas Bahri was initiated because stones were taken from the site, known as the location of an ancient church. Although the term is not used, this work could be deemed rescue archaeology. Nevertheless, it would have been useful to explain why this site was important to save, since many archaeological sites in Tigray are facing similar threats.

Chapter 2a *Catalogue of the Survey of the Lake Hashenge Area, 2014*, by Baldur Gabriel, Yohannes Gebre Selassie and Hiruy Daniel, and Chapter 2b *Survey around the Archaeological Site Mifsas Bahri, 2014*, by Baldur Gabriel and Paul Yule, are descriptive and lack explanations for the finds. On p. 21, at Site 14.11 WP 268, for instance, it is said that 'we found an interesting kind of pottery', without specifying what was interesting about these sherds. The chapter discusses lake levels, but the purpose of this discussion is not mentioned until the last sentence of Chapter 10, viz., 'To judge from lowest place where the lake could drain, this is at the same height as our excavation surface. If this is true, at that time our two buildings were erected water no longer flowed from the lake from this outlet. Otherwise, they would have been flooded.' (p. 264)

Chapter 3a, *Archaeological Survey, 2015*, and Chapter 3b, *Mifsas Bahri Survey Gazetteer 2015*, both by Anne Mortimer present the methods and a summary of the results and a repetitive description per site in tabular format. No effort was made to give dates for the various sites, nor to compare the ceramics and lithic artefacts with those from the church excavations. The conclusion of Chapter 3a that 'it can be tentatively said that the land in the immediate environs of the site was being farmed whilst the church was in use' (p. 39) is not supported by any arguments.

Chapter 4, *Lake Hashenge and Archaeological Sites in the 19th Century Cartography – From a Documentation of Local Traditions to Claims of Exactness*, by Wolbert Smidt, is a thorough discussion of toponyms in the nineteenth century, representing a human geography, where local tradition determines what appeared on the map.

Chapter 5, *Brief description of Scoria from Mifsas Bahri 001*, by Michael Raith, presents the analysis of two samples, described in one page, with two pages of photomicrographs. The chapter does not explain why these samples were selected and what the study contributes to the overall understanding of the site. Chapter 1 briefly mentioned scoria breccia pillars. In

Chapter 9 we find out that this was the material from which monolithic pier capitals were sculpted. If I read between the lines, it seems that the building materials for the outline of the church (facies 1) and the foundation walls (facies 2) as represented by sample 2 are all volcanic scoria breccia, but with differing appearance due to differences in size and possibly condition. This is confusingly not highlighted in the publication, which says that the facies 2 foundation walls are made of ‘broken mortared flagstone’ (p. 3) or ‘broke yellowish flagstone in mud-mortar’ (p. 244).

Chapter 6, *The Small Finds Mifsas Bahri Site 001*, is written by Paul Yule. An uninformative pie chart lists find groups by weight, without discussion. The chapter states that the ‘most interesting find, a now crushed saucer made of gold foil’ was found in surface soil, but no argument is given as to why this is interesting. Nor is reference made to the archaeological context other than that ‘[t]he stratigraphy is of little help in dating these small finds’ (p. 79), which is also the last sentence of this brief chapter. Chapter 6b, *Small Lithic Finds from Mifsas Bahri*, by Manjil Hazarika and Tsehay Terefe, is good, but the authors state that their interpretation is hampered by the absence of comparative data for the Late Aksumite period.

Chapter 7a, *The Pottery*, and Chapter 7b, *The Pottery Wares and Typology*, both by Michela Gaudiello, are very well illustrated, although the Google Earth images of the surveyed sites lack a legible scale and the different wares are photographed in sun and shade, which makes colour comparison hard. Chapter 7a does have a discussion of the evidence. The church site is given a Late Aksumite date based on the ware classification. The eastern part is thought to be a ‘cultic room’ because of the occurrence of fine wares and incense burners, while the western area has cooking pots and bowls with burned surfaces. There is evidence for communal meals having taken place outside the church after Mass. The burials and re-use phases are dated to the Post-Aksumite period. The ware classification is good, but the terminology for the shapes is completely undefined. What makes a ceramic vessel a plate, dish, bowl, pot, vase bottle or a cup? How are small cups (violet in figure 7.24) defined in relation to four other types of cups (green in 7.24)? The pie charts are not nearly as informative as a table with absolute numbers and percentages would have been.

Chapter 8, *Human Skeletal Remains 2013–16*, by Svenja Partheil, is a brief discussion and a well-illustrated catalogue of the burials. Nine intentional graves were recovered and the conclusion is that the people at the site were tall. Their height suggests a good diet with minimal stress, but other elements suggest malnutrition (p. 231).

The chapter on *Architecture and Architectural Sculpture* by Yule and Gaudiello, provides descriptions and good photographs of the church’s monolithic piers (square pillars) and their integrated decorated capitals. I was surprised to read a complaint on the removal of back-fill (p. 243), which is standard archaeological practice, is part of planning and should not be used as an excuse. The architecture includes fine incrementally stepped masonry as part of the façade, 1.5 m below the present surface, which was ‘too fine to be wasted as foundation courses’ (p. 243). The church, with a 29 × 15 m ground plan, probably had three naves perhaps with a bema (a platform for the sanctuary) at the east end.

Chapter 10, *Stratigraphy and Chronology*, by Curt Hilbrig and Paul A. Yule, is the other chapter that should have been moved to the front of the book. I tried to find Context 57 in trench 21 on a plan, to solve the riddle of scoria sample 2, and I found it in Profile 32 (p. 260), but could not locate it on any of the plans. The <sup>14</sup>C plots of the survey could not be linked to the survey results.

While the half page on *Dialect and Agricultural Terminology in Mifsas Bahri* should have been saved for a more substantial research project, Chapter 12, *On the Oral Traditions of Hsanga and its Environs: A preliminary field report*, by Fesseha Berhe, does contain very


useful information, gathered over a three-year period on the site. It is the only chapter that is called ‘a preliminary report’, yet it is one of the most substantial contributions to the book.

The final chapter, 13 *Conclusions*, by Paul Yule, shows every sign of being very hastily written, with the climate section, in particular, slapped together. The conclusions are presented without real argumentation: ‘Given the quality of the stone-work, there must have been an outside financial sources (*sic*)’ (p. 272). Why? The only argument given for financing from Byzantium is that a church in Sana’a, Yemen, is known to have been built partly by masons and architects sent from Byzantium. This is not a solid argument for similar support in a place that was not likely to have been an important political or religious centre.

After stating that Mifsas Bahri should be protected, the final sentence of the book is a complete *non sequitur*: ‘There appears to be a general cultural continuity between the Aksumite and Post Aksumite Periods, up to the 13th century CE’, with a reference to an external source. This is not based on everything that came before, as one would expect, even though a conclusion should be rooted in the accumulated evidence as presented in the book.

This publication, without an index, reads like a preliminary report in which most of the pages, catalogues, lists, and endless tables do not need to be printed. Instead, the findings warrant much deeper discussion. As it stands the book does not need 299 pages; a substantial article with online components that could have been used by others would have been more valuable.

Willeke Wendrich  
*Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California Los Angeles, CA,  
United States of America*

 [wendrich@humnet.ucla.edu](mailto:wendrich@humnet.ucla.edu)

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**Histoire et voyages des plantes cultivées à Madagascar**, by Philippe Beaujard. Paris, Karthala, 2017, 416 pp., €29 (paperback), ISBN 978-2811117870. Also available as an e-book (€22.99).

Philippe Beaujard has written extensively on Madagascar and published a substantial dictionary of a specific Malagasy language, Tanala, as well as a two-volume history of Indian Ocean trade and interchanges. He is therefore well qualified to write on the topic of the origin of the cultivated plants of Madagascar. Madagascar stands between the island world of Southeast Asia and the African mainland and has been the subject of multiple influences over a millennium and a half; hence its repertoire of domestic plants provides a valuable guide to the nature and chronology of those interactions. Since the archaeobotany of Madagascar remains very limited, and most of the plants under discussion have no record of direct finds, Beaujard’s method is historical and linguistic, uncovering the history of individual species through interdisciplinary methods. In the case of major domestic species, there are maps of the entire island, with the vernacular names given for each dialect area, which is extremely helpful in following the linguistic argument. Linguistic data for Malagasy plants draw heavily on the four volumes of Boiteau *et al.* (1999), a massive conspectus of vernacular names of all types of flora. For some reason the *Atlas of Madagascar Plants* (Allorge 2008) is omitted from the bibliography, although presumably the author made use of it.