Archaeological survey around Igre Hariba  
(Ethiopia, Tigray)

Fieldwork Preliminary Report  
8-15 March 2018
This fieldwork preliminary report is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 726206).
TEAM COMPOSITION
Pr. Julien Loiseau (Aix-Marseille University) - team leader
Pr. Bertrand Hirsch (Sorbonne University)
Dr. Amélie Chekroun (Aix-Marseille University)

FIELDWORK OBJECTIVES
The main objective of the mission was to survey the area around the village of Igre Hariba (Tigray region, Kwiha Woreda) in order to find new evidence of ancient Muslim communities in Northern Ethiopia.

The area was chosen according to epigraphic evidence, Arabic inscriptions being major sources for the history of early Islam in Ethiopia. Arabic inscriptions have been found so far in four distinct locations in Ethiopia: Eastern Tigray, Tchertcher, South Amhara and Ifat. Presence of Arabic Inscriptions in Eastern Tigray was first witnessed by the English traveller Nathaniel Pearce in the beginning of the 19th century around Igre Hariba1 (also Egär Hariba, Wegär Hariba, Wäger Hariba, Eger Hariba, Uogher Hariba, Wober Hariba - እገር፡፡ሓሪባ).

Between Pearce’s journey and our survey in March 2018, 22 stelae bearing Arabic inscriptions have been witnessed around Igre Hariba and Kwiha:

• 1 by the Italians in 1935-1936, which, according to Carlo Conti Rossini, was brought to Brescia (Italy)2. Its present location is unknown.
• 4 by Carlo Conti Rossini in 1937. Their present location is unknown3.
• 14 by French archaeologists in 1962 and 1966 (among which 11 are preserved in the National Museum of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa: see bellow)
• 2 by Prof. Tekle Hagos (Addis Ababa University) in 1993. They are currently preserved in the museum of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray, Mekelle.
• 1 by Dr. Wolbert Smidt in 2000 (preserved in the church of Kwiha Kirkos)

The Arabic inscriptions of 15 stelae (out of 21) have been published and translated so far:

• 2 by Costantino Pansera in 19454, publication revised by Madeleine Schneider in 20095
• 12 by Madeleine Schneider in 19676
• 1 by Wolbert Smidt in 20047

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2 Carlo CONTI ROSSINI, “Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana presso Uogri Hariba nell’Enderta”, Rivista di studi orientali 17 (1937-1939), pp. 399-408
3 C. CONTI ROSSINI, ibid.
The stelae with Arabic inscriptions already found around Igre Hariba and Kwiha call for two comments:

1. **These inscriptions all belong to Muslim gravestones and are dated from the 4th to the 6th Century A.H. / 10th to 12th Century C.E.** They bear insofar witness of the presence of Muslim trade and communities in Tigray before and during the Zagwe period. The Muslim presence in Tigray might have been linked to the Dahlak Islands (today in Eritrea), considering that the name of Ḥafs b. ṢUmar al-Yamāmī is mentioned on stelae found in both places. It should be stressed that no other written document, neither Ge’ez nor Arabic, mentions the existence of a Muslim community in Tigray at that time.

2. **The original location of the gravestones is not precisely known.** According to N. Pearce (beginning of the 19th Century), Wagar Ḥaribā / Igre Hariba was the main place of the area, where an important leader of the region, the brother of Walda Sellāšē, was settled. The same witness located the original place of the stelae near the village of “Quened”. More than a century later, Carlo Conti Rossini did not recognize the site described by N. Pearce and, moreover, did not identify the original location of the stelae\(^8\). Like his successors (the French archaeologists in the 1960’s and W. Smidt in the 2000’s), he witnessed only displaced and re-used stelae, in a place named “Bilet”. In the 1930’s, according to Conti Rossini, the main locality of the area was hence Kwiha, the rise of which being probably linked to the construction of the road Asmara-Addis Ababa by the Italians and to the layout of a fountain still in use.

The two main objectives of the fieldwork were to identify the exact location of the Muslim graveyard from which the stelae were shifted and to understand the link between this Muslim community and the ancient trade route driving south from the Red sea shore and crossing the area. Identification of archaeological sites and their possible excavation will shed new light on the issue of islamization and the history of the earliest Muslim communities in Eastern Tigray.

**OFFICIAL AUTHORIZATION**

Producing the official letter and authorization by the ARCCH, signed by Ato Demerew Dagne (Ref. nos 08/R2-8-2/019 & 08/6h-8-2/020 – see Annex), we introduced ourselves to Ato Dawit Hailu, director of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray (Mekelle), on 7 March 2018, in order to start our fieldwork on 8 March. Ato Dawit Hailu valued our project, reminding the important and long-standing history of the region. Considering that we were only supposed to survey the area, and not to excavate, Ato Dawit Hailu decided to not assign us an expert from the office, provided that we introduce ourselves to the officials of the kebele.

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\(^8\) ROSSINI, “Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana”, loc. cit.
STELAES IN MEKELLE CULTURAL AND TOURISM OFFICE MUSEUM

Ato Dawit Hailu gave us the authorization to visit the Museum of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray, where two stelae with Arabic inscriptions coming from Igre Hariba/Kwiha are preserved. They have been given to the Museum by Pr. Tekle Hagos (Addis Ababa University) in 1993 G.C. According to personal information given to us afterwards by Pr. Tekle Hagos, these two stelae were brought to him by people from “Old Kwiha” while he was surveying the area. No information about their original location is available, despite the fact that they belong to the same corpus than the stelae preserved in the National Museum of Ethiopia. The Arabic inscriptions of the two stelae have never been published.

Mekelle Museum Stele 1

Fragment in basalt stone: H. 52 x W. 52 x Th. 6 cm. Only the last seven lines of the Arabic inscription are preserved.

Mekelle Museum Stele 2

Fragment in basalt stone: H. 13 x W. 27 x Th. 14 cm. Only the first four lines of the Arabic inscription are preserved.
IGRE HARIBA: THE ISSUE OF TOponymy

On 8 and 9 March 2018, the fieldwork was dedicated to the survey of the area of Igre Hariba, a village located East of Kwiha (N 13°30.895'; W 39°30.615'; see Map 1:50.000 ETH 4, 1339 D1, 1 EMA 1997 “Kwiha”).

Megdelawit Maryam Church is supposed to be, according to the inhabitants of Igre Hariba, the oldest church of the area. Located on the North side of the main hill, the church is surrounded to the South by a graveyard. Ruins are present on the top of the hill: they might be the remains of the settlement of local leaders, like Ito Debbib, Walda Sellâšé’s brother, who welcomed Nathaniel Pearce in the beginning of the 19th century.
The survey of Igre Hariba revealed very few evidence. A basalt stone adorned with a cross and the inscription “1801 EC” is present on a path leading to the village on the North side. It seems of recent production. GPS: 13° 28 mn 30 s. North / 39° 33 mn 60 s. East, altitude 2330 m.

Two water reservoirs built in stones (out of three mentioned by the inhabitants) have been also observed:
1. the first on the East side of the hill of Megdelawit Maryam Church. GPS: 13° 28 mn 28 s. North / 39° 33 mn 58 s. East

2. the second on the West side of the same hill. GPS: 13° 28 mn 27 s. North / 39° 34 mn 18 s. East, altitude 2368 m.
According to Igre Hariba inhabitants, both of them have been built during the reign of Haile Selassié (1930-1974): their modern datation is confirmed by material observations.

No evidence of an old settlement has been found during the survey of Igre Hariba. The few places indicated by local people (e.g. Kelkal, Gedel Kebatsani) did not provide any clue. Inhabitants were not informed of any archaeological finding in the area. But they identified the place name “Bilet”, mentioned in the documentation since Conti Rossini’s visit in 1937, as a collective field for grazing located two kilometers North of Igre Hariba, on the valley bottom, near the church of Kwiha Kirkos, outside Kwiha (see map above).
This toponymic evidence is all the more important. According to the 19th-Century testimony of Nathaniel Peirce, at a time when Igre Hariba was the main place of (and the name given to) the whole area, we named this fieldwork “Igre Hariba” and first surveyed the village known today as Igre Hariba. But the evidence we were looking for seemed to be located in the area called today “Kwiha”, since the latter replaced the former as the main place (and the main name) of the area after the construction of the road in the 1930’s.

KWIHA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AROUND KWIHA KIRKOS CHURCH

On 10 March 2018, we introduced ourselves to the head of the kebele where Kwiha Kirkos and the field called “Bilet” are located. Ato Goitom Besrat stayed with us on behalf of the local administration during the whole time of the survey around Kwhiha Kirkos and Bilet: he was of great help and support.

The church of Kwiha Kirkos (or Kwiha Tchārqqos) was built in 1985-86 on the top of a hill at the Northern end of the town, on the Western side of the road: surrounding lands then became Church lands. Ruins are known on this location since their first description by Carlo Conti Rossini in 1937: about 30 broken columns and carved stones have been observed, along with occasional findings of pottery⁹.

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According to C. Conti Rossini, these ruins are the remnants of a rectangular building dating back to the early Middle Ages. In 1970, Francis Anfray suggested to compare the columns observed near Kwiha Kirkos with those of Däbrä Gärgiš (Haramat), which he proposed to date from late Aksumite or early post-Aksumite times. In 1977, Eric Godet also attributed the stones and columns from Kwiha to late Aksumite or post-Aksumite times. Local traditions attribute the ruins to an ancient church founded by ase ‘Amdä Şeyon and later destroyed by imam Aḥmad “Grāñ” in the 1530’s. Archaeological research has not been carried out yet on the site.

The survey of the surroundings of the present Kwiha Kirkos church revealed that the hill is, at least partly, an archaeological tell. Ruined walls were observed in three various locations:

1. on the edge of the new road leading to the new church under construction: fragments of pottery and bones were also noticed. GPS: 13° 29 mn. 12 s. North / 39° 32 mn. 57 s. East. Altitude: 2180 m.

2. in a hole of 2,5 meters depth dug near the graveyard of the present church

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3. in a path leading to orchards located bellow the tell: fragments of pottery and bones were also noticed, within 2,5 m. of archaeological stratigraphy. GPS: 13° 29 mn. 9 s. North / 39° 32 mn. 54 s. East. Altitude: 2120 m.

This archaeological evidence (walls, pottery, bones) observed all around the site strongly suggests that a permanent (urban?) settlement was located in the fields surrounding the present Kwiha Kirkos church built in the 1980’s. It also suggests that the so-called Aksumite or post-Aksumite columns, known since Conti Rossini’s first description, are not any more in their original location.

In light of such evidence, we propose to dig archaeological test pits in various locations of the site for a better understanding of this old settlement and the search for datation elements. Provided that the ARCCH gives its agreement, these first excavations could begin in December 2018.

KWIHA: THE STELAE FROM BILET

The present church of Kwiha Kerkos preserves a basalt stone bearing an Arabic inscription. Wolbert Smidt first witnessed the stone inside the church in 2000 and published its Arabic inscription according to a drawing he made on site12.

According to W. Smidt, the inscription was believed to be written in Hebrew by the inhabitants, hence witnessing their “descent from ancient Israel”, the reason why it was kept inside the church màqdas. Local opinion about the stone has changed since Smidt’s first observations: its Arabic script has been identified and its location changed inside the church. Moreover, according to oral tradition, a nun used the stone for cooking and the fire broke it: indeed, as we observed, part of the Arabic inscription has been lost.

Basalt stone kept in Kwiha Kerkos church: H. 31 x W. 20 x Th. 20 cm. Only the first seven lines of the inscription are partly preserved.

Ato Goitom Besrat introduced us to Ato Neguse Hagos, a farmer living in the vicinity of the Kwiha Kirkos church. Ato Neguse Hagos confirmed the location of the place name “Bilet”, on the Eastern side of the road. He also informed us that a stone bearing an Arabic inscription was currently lying in the fields of Bilet, used with other stones to delineate paths and plots of land.

Sample of stelae used in Bilet to delineate paths and plots of land

A first stone was found on 9 March according to Ato Neguse Hagos’ indications. GPS: 13° 29 mn. 17 s. North / 39° 32 mn. 56 s. East. Altitude: 2200 m.

With the help of Ato Neguse Hagos, Ato Goitom Besrat, Ato Ephrem Kidane, Ato Kibrom Belay, and of inhabitants of the area, we found in four days of survey 15 stelae and 6 fragments of stelae bearing Arabic inscriptions. All these basalt stones were used to delineate paths and plots of land, with the exception of one fragment in limestone found on the ground (B02).

According to Ato Goitom Besrat’s instructions, these 21 archaeological artefacts have been stored in Kwiha Kirkos church, waiting for their preservation by the Cultural and Tourism Office of Mekelle. On 12 March 2018, we informed Ato Gidey Gebre Egziabher, archaeologist at the Cultural and Tourism Office of Mekelle, of the discovery of the stelae and of their storage in Kwiha Kirkos church. Each stone received a number, paint on the side, for a safer storage and a better preservation. The list of the 21 stones is the following:
B01. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 67 x W. 26 x Th. 15-22 cm.

B02. Fragment of stele on limestone: H. 16 x W. 19 x Th. 5 cm.

B03. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 28 x W. 8-13 x Th. 13 cm.

B04. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 21 x W. 33 x Th. 11 cm.

B05. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 37 x W. 25 x Th. 9-15 cm.

B06. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 46 x W. 15-18 x Th. 13-19 cm.

B07. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 36 x W. 22 x Th. 8-11 cm.

B08. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 50 x W. 34 x Th. 20 cm.
**B09.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 50 x W. 17-30 x Th. 15 cm.

**B10.** Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 22 x W. 21,5 x Th. 14 cm.

**B11.** Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 19 x W. 12 x Th. 6 cm.

**B12.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 31 x W. 19,5 x Th. 11 cm.

**B13.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 39 x W. 20 x Th. 13 cm.

**B14.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 54 x W. 27 x Th. 23 cm.

**B15.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 48 x W. 19-33 x Th. 21 cm.
**B16.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 50 x W. 28 x Th. 23 cm.

**B17.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 62 x W. 34 x Th. 12 cm.

**B18.** Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 13-40 x W. 30 x Th. 12 cm.

**B19.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 48 x W. 30 x Th. 13 cm.

**B20.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 41 x W. 33 x Th. 6-18 cm.

**B21.** Full stele on basalt stone: H. 60 x W. 17-31 x Th. 23 cm.
The National Museum of Ethiopia (Addis Ababa) preserves within its historical collections stelae in basalt bearing Arabic inscriptions. On 15 March 2018, we get the authorization to study the stelae and take pictures of them. Historical collections were opened to us with the precious help of Ato Salomon Kebede.

11 stelae belong to the corpus of Bilet: they have been brought to the Museum by French archaeologists in 1962 and their inscriptions published by M. Schneider in 1967. The list (with the current reference number) is the following:

RO – 004 : H. 29-39 x W. 36 x Th. 12 cm.

RO – 006 : H. 40 x W. 29 x Th. 13-18 cm.

RO – 008 : H. 57 x W. 30-60 x Th. 20 cm.

RO – 0010 : H. 32 x W. 23 x Th. 17 cm.

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RO – 0011 : H. 37 x W. 51 x Th. 14 cm.

RO – 0013 : H. 63 x W. 34-37 x Th. 12-22 cm.

RO – 0017 : H. 54 x W. 15-42 x Th. 23 cm.

RO – 0020 : H. 46 x W. 42 x Th. 13-19 cm.

RO – 0024 : H. 44 x W. 17-27 x Th. 10-24 cm.

RO – 0026 : H. 32 x W. 12-33 x Th. 27 cm.

RO – 0031 : H. 20 x W. 15-42 x Th. 23 cm.
RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The fieldwork of March 2018 was fulfilled under the supervision of the ARCCH (Addis Ababa) and of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray (Mekelle), with the academic support of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and of the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa), and with the academic and financial support of Aix-Marseille University (France). It opens promising avenues of research.

1. **New archaeological evidence** found around the present church of Kwiha Kirkos, in addition to the broken columns and carved stones known since the 1930’s, suggests that a permanent (urban?) settlement developed there during the Middle Ages in link with the old trade route crossing the area from North to South.

2. **New epigraphic evidence** found in reuse in the fields of Bilet, on the Eastern side of the present road exiting Kwiha from the North, increases the number of Arabic inscriptions coming from the area to **45 items**. The corpus of Arabic inscriptions of Bilet is now the larger one known in Ethiopia.

3. The **identification of the exact location of the Muslim cemetery** of Bilet opens for the first time the opportunity to study Muslim burials from the Middle Ages in Ethiopia.

In regard with these promising results, we will submit in 2018 to the ARCCH a new application to conduct excavations in the area of Igre Hariba/Kwiha.

Prof. Julien Loiseau, Aix-Marseille University
Prof. Bertrand Hirsch, Sorbonne University
Dr. Amélie Chekroun, Aix-Marseille University

ANNEXES

1. Official letter and authorization by the ARCCH Ref. n° 08/6h-8-2/020 (in Amharic)
2. Official letter and authorization by the ARCCH Ref. n° 08/R2-8-2/019 (in English)
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Ministry of Culture & Tourism
Authority of Research & Conservation of Cultural Heritage

Dr. Julien Loiseau

Ref.No. 08/14-8.2/2020
Date: 26 February 2010

Dr. Julien Loiseau
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Please Quote Our Ref. No. When Replying
Dr. Julien Loiseau
Aix-Marseille University
Email: amelie.CHEKROUN@univ-amu.fr
France

Subject: Field Research Permit 2018 Field Season

Dear Dr. Julien Loiseau

The Cultural Heritage Directorate of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage has received your application to conduct field research on Archaeological survey Around Igre Hariba, Tigray regional state, Ethiopia.

The Directorate has carefully evaluated your permit application and approved your request to conduct field work from 8th to 15th of March 2018.

We kindly inform you that the newly approved Cultural Heritage Research Permit Directive no.14/2006 will be effective as of last field season (2009 E.C.). We, therefore, would like to inform you that Archaeological survey around Igre Hariba permit is active for two consecutive years with annual renewal.

We remain cooperative for the success of your project planned in 2018 field season.

With regards,

Demerew Dagne

Cultural Heritage Research Directorate Director

CC:

Director-General, ARCCH