

BACKDIRT

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Changing
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Willeke Wendrich
Director of the Cotsen Institute

Randi Danforth
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Hans Barnard
Editor, *Backdirt*

Roz Salzman
Assistant Editor, *Backdirt*

Peg Goldstein
Copyediting

Sally Boylan
Design

FRONT COVER: Graduate students Brandon Keith (UCLA) and Mia Evans (University of Kent) use geophysical methods to investigate the remains of the Church of San Giovanni di Dustria, near Turin, Italy, in September 2022.

BACK COVER: Anya Dani, director of community engagement and inclusive practice as well as a lecturer at the UCLA/Getty Interdepartmental Program in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage, works on ancient pottery. (Photograph by Peter Ginter, Okinawa Institute of Science and Technology.)

ABOVE: After years of online meetings, Moupi Mukhopadhyay, a graduate student in the conservation of cultural heritage, presents “Understanding Pigment Composition in Kerala Temple Murals Using Non-Invasive Imaging Techniques,” the first of our hybrid (both in-person and online) Wednesday Talks (formerly Pizza Talks), on October 12, 2022.

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The Forgotten War in Tigray, Northern Ethiopia

Hans Barnard¹ and Willeke Wendrich²

Having worked in the Tigray region in northern Ethiopia since 2014, we were greatly surprised by the terrible conflict that erupted in November 2020 and still carries on today. We had always been impressed with the levels of organization and education in the region, the obvious efforts to increase the economic prosperity of the population, and the genuine interest in our work.³ After the bloody Wars of Eritrean Independence (1961–1991), the brutal regimes of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974–1991), and the great famines of 1983–1985 and 2003, we assumed that a period of peace and progress had begun, despite warnings to the contrary by some of our local collaborators. Blissfully ignorant of what was brewing behind the unexplored archaeology, the breathtaking landscapes, the enchanting wildlife, and the fascinating foodstuffs, we came and went to study the local archaeology ranging back to at least the Middle Stone Age (Finneran et al. 2003). We were always excited to come back and continue our work and collaboration where we had left off the previous year.

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excited to come back

Obviously, this is not the place to discuss the conflict in any detail.⁴ Nor can we do justice to the resulting immeasurable human suffering. Indeed, the situation on the ground is far from clear as the region has been cut off from (cell) phone and internet infrastructure for most of the duration of the conflict. We know that some of our collaborators safely made it to Europe; others are alive at the time of writing. We also learned that at least two of our collaborators perished in the conflict, and we have not heard from many others. The lack of communication has also greatly hampered our feeble efforts to help, either by sending money, providing immaterial assistance, or offering words of support and comfort.

1. Associate researcher, Cotsen Institute, and associate adjunct professor, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures.

2. Joan Silsbee Chair of African Cultural Archaeology, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, and director of the Cotsen Institute.

3. See *Backdirt* 2015, pp. 48–53, and *Backdirt* 2019, pp. 54–59.

4. For this we refer to, for instance, “Master of the Horn?” *Economist*, May 22, 2021, pp. 37–38; “Defeat in the Mountains,” *Economist*, July 3, 2021, pp. 51–52; “Down from the Mountains,” *Economist*, July 31, 2021, p. 40; “Bodies in the Fields,” *Economist*, October 9, 2021, p. 46; “A Battle for the Capital Looms,” *Economist*, November 6, 2021, pp. 39–40; “Back to the Mountains,” *Economist*, December 18, 2021, p. 36; “Happy Christmas, War Is Over?” *Economist*, January 15, 2022, p. 39; “Falling Apart,” *Economist*, August 27, 2022, pp. 35–36; <https://emnetnegash.wordpress.com>; and other news sources.



Figure 1. Map of Ethiopia indicating the position of the Tigray region.

In December 2021 we received an email message from someone we had gotten very close to. To quote his words (edited for clarity and with the names of individuals removed): “At this time the only challenge is no bank, no internet, no electricity, no money, no clean water, and I am very hungry much of the time.”

After this understatement, he reports on the state of our living quarters and site: “The dig house is partially destroyed by Eritrean soldiers, especially the room on the first floor. Some of the project materials were stolen, including the generator and some of the excavation equipment. . . . [The custodian] and his family were not in the city or the dig house at the time because of the heavy war in Shire. The last day of their stay in Shire, Eritrean forces killed a lot of people and they moved into a nearby cave to save their lives. After they came back they found the dig house broken into and burnt. The windows were repaired and repainted in September 2021. . . . Regarding the site of Mai Adrasha, it is fully damaged, there is no reason to continue archaeological work there. It is now full of plants like avocado, mango and others, deep wells have been dug, and the site is used as a quarry for stones for building houses. . . . The archaeological finds store-room in the regional administrative office is 100% damaged and burnt by both Eritrean and Ethiopian forces.”

We received a second message in April 2022 (likely copied from an external source): “The human cost in any conflict is the first and highest priority; however, archaeology and heritage are extremely vulnerable to attack and damage during conflict, and conflicts continue to inflict damage to numerous sites, both large and small, around the Tigray region. Conflict is impacting the lives of millions of people, and the archaeology and heritage of many nations. All conflict-damaged archaeology and heritage can play a vital role to help rebuild damaged communities and offer hope of employment and reintegration to those impacted by war. . . . In the last 18 months, Ethiopian and Eritrean government troops in Tigray have repeatedly shelled archaeological sites, archaeological finds, archaeological excavations, churches and mosques, as well as towns and villages. The shelling has been carried out with a total disregard for the buildings or their importance. Many are not simply of local or national importance, but are cultural treasures of global significance. These attacks have been accompanied by the killing of dozens of local people, including priests, and by extensive looting. So deliberate has this been, that it must be considered to be a conscious decision by both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments; part of a strategy to try to destroy the cultural heritage and the social fabric of the local society.”

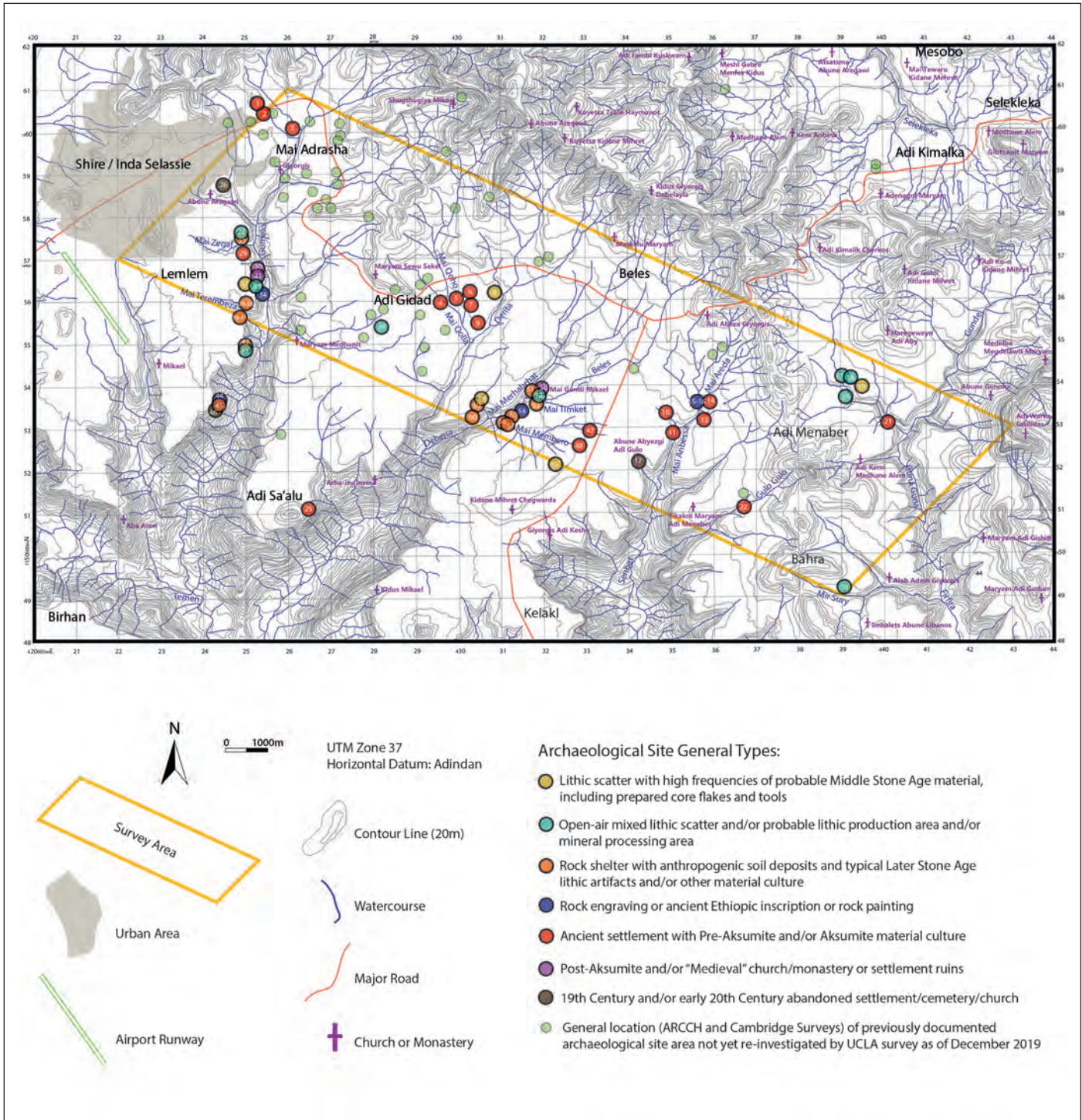


Figure 2. Map showing the results of the UCLA survey just east of Shire (Inda Selassie), Tigray, December 2019. Note the site of Mai Adrasha in the northwestern corner of the survey area. (Map created by Matthew Curtis.)



Figure 3. Aerial view of the UCLA excavations at Mai Adrasha, Tigray, December 2019. Trench 1 is in the center of the image, Trench 2 toward the top right, and Trench 6 toward the bottom left. (Photograph by Jeremy Là Zelle and Kristin Gates.)

Farther down he continues in his own voice (again edited for clarity): “The project has made a lot of sacrifices to build good relationships with the local communities, including the local administration, in order to make the site a tourist attraction and tell the rest of the world the story of the Tigray region and the ancient civilizations in the northern Horn of Africa. Excavated finds from Mai Adrasha have been dated back to 1250 BCE, making it the oldest site in northern Ethiopia. All finds were washed, documented, catalogued and analyzed, after which they were stored in a room in the regional administrative building. In December 2020 this building was bombed by Ethiopian and Eritrean forces. As you can see in the pictures, the shelves are now empty and all boxes thrown to the ground. Later, some of the local people took the opportunity to visit the storeroom and further damage the boxes. Not a single box is now in a

I am very hungry much of the time

good condition; every box is destroyed and most of the finds are broken, some of them stomped into dust.”

Writing about our living quarters he continues, “Until November 2020 the house was safe and very clean, but after the Eritrean forces occupied the city of Shire and made access impossible it became very dirty. . . . In July 2021, Eritrean forces broke down the gate and every room was searched for weapons, electronics and other materials. During that time, there was a heavy war and a lot of houses and hotels were damaged and vandalized.



Figure 4. Airstrike on Mekele, the capital of the Tigray region, November 2020. (Image courtesy of Voice of America.)

Not a single box is now in a good condition

. . . I could not visit the storeroom or the site due to the presence of Eritrean soldiers, making any attempt to visit very dangerous. According to informants from the area, Eritrean forces were vandalizing project equipment and private houses nearby. In August 2021, I could visit the site, the storeroom, and the dig house. During this visit, I was heartbroken because the storeroom appeared to have been totally destroyed, burnt and looted, the site severely damaged, and the dig house broken into.”

Remarkably, he ends his message on a more positive note: “The archaeological site of Mai Adrasha and its finds are totally destroyed. It is true that the project cannot continue there, but it is possible to initiate a new project in the Shire region, for instance in Mezaber Adi Menaber, the caves [with Paleolithic remains], or another site. . . . To develop a new proposal for a new archaeological project would be beneficial for both sides.”

Unfortunately, we do not share this optimism and fear that the conflict will continue for a considerable time. Also outside the Tigray region, academics with a Tigrayan background are now fearing not only for their jobs but for their lives.⁵ Help for Tigray is hindered by an attitude that Tigray called this on itself, but the people we know and love are not politicians but rather farmers and field archaeologists who have a difficult time making a living under the best of circumstances. For the sake of the people of Tigray and their history, we have to make sure they will not be forgotten with the attention of the world continuously shifting to other events (Ogundiran 2021).

5. “Obituary Professor Meareg Amare (1959–2021),” Emmet Negash, November 9, 2021, <https://emmetnegash.wordpress.com/2021/11/09/obituary-professor-meareg-amare-1959-2021>.



Figure 5. Satellite image of Aksum Airport, Tigray, November 2020. Note the walls built across the runway to render it inoperable. (Image courtesy of Maxar Technologies/Google Earth.)



Figure 6. Internally displaced people receive drinking water in Shire (Inda Selassie), Tigray, April 2021. (Image from Wikimedia Commons, reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.)

Figure 7. The site of Mai Adrasha in August 2021.





Figure 8. The site of Mai Adrasha in August 2021.

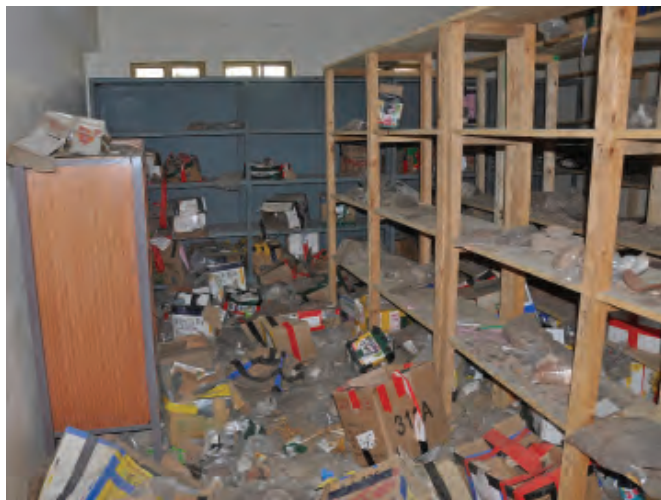


Figure 9. The storeroom of the UCLA project in the regional administrative office in Shire (Inda Selassie) in August 2021.



Figure 10. The storeroom of the UCLA project in the regional administrative office in Shire (Inda Selassie) in August 2021.

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UCLA

COTSEN INSTITUTE OF
ARCHAEOLOGY

Cotsen Institute of Archaeology
University of California, Los Angeles
405 Hilgard Avenue
Box 951510
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1510
www.ioa.ucla.edu

