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Review

MICHELA GAUDIELLO and PAUL A. YULE, eds,

*Mifsa Bahri: a Late Aksumite Frontier Community in the Mountains of
Southern Tigray, Survey, Excavations and Analysis, 2013–16*

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er's publications). Felix Girke (pp. 357–371) reflects on the role of anthropologists, tourists, and the camera in southern Ethiopia. This is what all Ivo Strecker's students have learned to be sensitive and aware of: 'ethnographic fieldwork requires the negotiation of social roles between the fieldworker and his or her interlocutors, which in turn needs to be reflected upon for the positionality and perspective it creates' (Bierschenk, p. 11). We learned to unfold our methods, results, and failures, like Sophia Thubauville (pp. 373–383) describes in her research project on transgender in Maale.

Nagaya (Hamär greeting, 'a wish for well-being') to Ivo Strecker.

Alke Dohrmann, Hamburg

MICHELA GAUDIELLO and PAUL A. YULE, eds, *Mifsas Bahri: a Late Aksumite Frontier Community in the Mountains of Southern Tigray, Survey, Excavations and Analysis, 2013–16*, BAR International Series, 2839 (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2017). xix, 279 pp. Price: £55. ISBN: 978-1-4073-1579-9.

The book, edited by Michela Gaudiello and Paul Yule, reports on the results of a three-year (2013–2016) project of archaeological excavations and a survey conducted by Universität Heidelberg in collaboration with Mekelle University at the site of Mifsas Bahri, near Lake Ḥaṣṅgä, in southern Təgray. The researches, co-directed by Paul Yule and Michela Gaudiello, brought to the light the remains of a late Aksumite basilica that had been disturbed, in the fifteenth century but presumably already from the eleventh/twelfth century, by a cemetery, and documented a series of potential ancient sites in its vicinities.

The book is organized into thirteen chapters provided by various authors. Chapters 1 to 3b provide the description of excavation and survey procedures and results; Chapter 4 presents a nineteenth-century cartography of the region under investigation; Chapter 5 reports of petrographic analysis; Chapters 6a to 8 describe small finds, lithics, ceramics, and human remains; Chapters 9 and 10 discuss architectural remains, stratigraphy, and chronology; Chapters 11 and 12 are accounts on local agricultural terminology and traditions; Chapter 13 provides a general overview. The text is paralleled by an exhausting corpus of 234 black-and-white and colour illustrations and 44 tables. The authors also provide access to an open digital archive in which all the photographs of the project have been catalogued.

Some weaknesses of the book can be clearly perceived when looking at its organization. The results of the archaeological activities have been pre-

sented according to the year of investigation rather than in an aggregate way, which is questionable. In so doing, the editors prevented any comprehensive view of the results which would have highly increased the quality of the book. Alongside this, a few other relevant criticisms have to be addressed. Firstly, the lack of information on the provenance of the ‘rock fragments’ (Chapter 5) and of some of the small finds (Chapter 6a); at times the raw materials have not been identified. Moreover, the results of the survey are presented in a confusing manner, which makes them difficult to comprehend; for instance, do the dimensions noted in the Gazetteer refer to the size of the survey unit or to the actual extent of artefacts scattered on the surface. Finally, the most updated chronological and cultural sequence of the area of Aksum should have been preferred as reference chronology.¹

Alongside these limits, the book has several strong points. Primarily, valuable evidence is presented of the history of an area thus far archaeologically unexplored, providing intriguing information on open questions such as the relationship between the core area of the Aksumite kingdom and the peripheral regions, the gradual shift of the core of the kingdom to the south, and the progressive Christianization of these territories. Furthermore, for the first time there is a detailed typological description of ceramics assemblages from these southern fringes of the Aksumite kingdom (Chapter 7b), where few typical Aksumite ceramics shapes and styles juxtapose to regional and local traits, as well as a first comprehensive study of the demography and palaeopathology of an ancient community of northern Ethiopia (Chapter 8). The reconstruction of the ancient levels of Lake Ḥašəngä waters and of the ancient shores also deserves a particular mention as it provides important palaeoenvironmental and palaeoclimatic insights for this region. Finally, the survey section indicates relevant sites in the area, perhaps deserving of further investigation, for instance site 14.23, a remarkable ancient rock-cave site, and site 14.29, possibly an ancient settlement.

To conclude, in spite of its limitations, Gaudiello and Yule’s book is very important as it presents the results of the first investigations conducted in this region thus far. It may be recommended to all scholars interested in the archaeology and history of northern Ethiopia and the kingdom of Aksum’s process of development.

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¹ K. A. Bard, R. Fattovich, A. Manzo, and C. Perlingieri, ‘The chronology of Aksum (Tigray, Ethiopia): a view from Bieta Giyorgis’, *Azania*, 49/3 (2014), 285–316.