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## **War's Impact on Heritage: Preliminary Assessment of Damaged Cultural Sites in the Tigray Regional State, Northern Ethiopia**

16 February 2024

A report by Heritage for Peace Organization and the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau in Tigray Regional State, Ethiopia.



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**"In memory of Tigrean martyrs who paid all forms of sacrifices for survival and heritage protection"**



## Preface

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Heritage for Peace is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting countries in conflict in safeguarding their cultural heritage. With a belief that cultural heritage can serve as a common ground for dialogue and peacebuilding, Heritage for Peace has been actively involved in initiatives to protect cultural heritage in conflict zones.

In recent years, Heritage for Peace has expanded its efforts to include regions such as Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Gaza, and now Ethiopia's Tigray Regional State. The organization's partnership with the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau marks its first involvement in Ethiopia.

The situation in Tigray is indeed alarming, with reported hostilities and plundering of cultural sites posing a significant threat to the region's rich cultural heritage. The recent conflict in Tigray, from November 2020 to November 2022, has resulted in substantial damage to cultural sites, including looting of manuscripts and damage to iconic landmarks.

To address the challenges and lack of information regarding the state of cultural heritage in Tigray, Heritage for Peace, in collaboration with the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, has prepared the report titled *"War's Impact on Heritage: Preliminary Assessment of Damaged Cultural Sites in the Tigray Regional State."* This report highlights the urgent need for action to safeguard Tigray's cultural heritage and prevent further loss and destruction.

Heritage for Peace hopes that this report will raise awareness among international organizations, governments, and heritage preservation organizations. By garnering support for documentation and protection efforts, the organization aims to preserve Tigray's cultural heritage for future generations.

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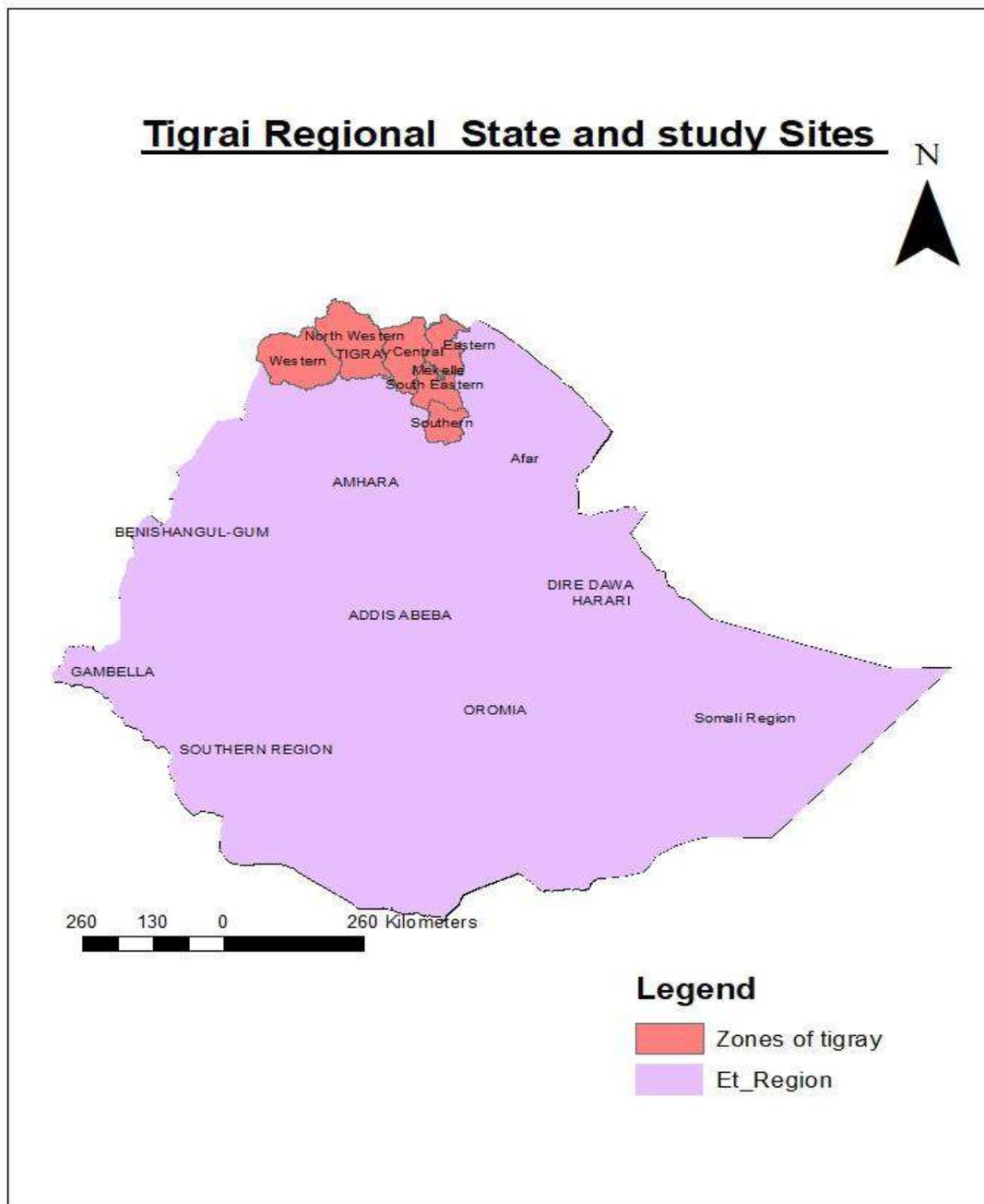
## 1. Introduction

Tigray Regional State is located in Northern Ethiopia. Initially branded as 'Tigray: The Open-Air Museum' and later as 'Tigray: The Cradle of Ancient Ethiopian Civilization,' the region boasts an intriguing history of ancient and contemporary civilization. It is endowed with magnificent monuments, innumerable stone inscriptions, palaces, temples, dozens of rock-hewn churches, imperial tombs, archaeological sites, rock arts, classical paintings, and age-old monasteries and mosques (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019b; Tigray Culture and Tourism Agency, 2014). Additionally, it is the treasury of various iconic heritage resources of the country (Asmelash & Kumar, 2019a).

The recent war in Tigray, which occurred from November 2021 to November 2022, ruthlessly damaged both forms of heritage: tangible and intangible, natural and cultural, and so on. The ceaseless aerial and ground bombardment for two years completely upended our natural ecology. The natural environment and its creatures suffered irreversible harm. Archaeological sites, movable cultural collections, and a large number of tangible cultural assets were targeted for deliberate destruction throughout the war. In terms of built heritage, regular heritage restoration plans were derailed; learning centers were destroyed, bombarded, and converted into military camps and command centers; guardians were killed while defending their historical places.

Following the outbreak of the war, several movable heritage collections were robbed, burned, and became the target of illicit heritage trafficking, with some appearing on online marketplaces like eBay. Future research on the magnitude must be done carefully, though. Archaeological sites were destroyed, over 14 projects were put on hold, and artifacts that had been preserved were transformed into ash before being examined. This report is simply a preliminary assessment focusing only on a few cases, showing a simple picture of the heritage damage and loss in the region. It is

neither a complete nor an exhaustive study. What happened to Tigrai heritage during the recent war needs serious investigation and documentation.



(Source: Prepared by Gidey Desta (PhD), 2024)

## 2. Damage of Tangible Heritage

### A. Destruction of Christian Sacred Places

**Saint Amanuel Maego Church:** Located 2 km east of Negash Town on a hill along the Mekelle-Adigrat main road, this sacred place was intentionally damaged with the help of artillery. According to local witnesses, the church was set ablaze after three or four deliberate rounds of artillery firing, with the steeple being the most severely damaged.



(Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)

**Abune Penteleon Monastery:** Situated in a pre-Aksumite site, the Abune Penteleon Monastery was founded by Aba Penteleon, one of the Nine Saints, in the late 5th century.

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It blends Pre-Aksumite and Aksumite history. This sacred place was affected by the war in the 1980s and the recent conflict of 2022. It was bombarded during both periods, causing serious vibration, and sliding more than 50 meters down. Currently, it is under restoration with local contributions.



(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**Saint Cherkos Church:** In Zelambesa, Eritrean troops shelled St. Cherkos Church using artillery (Gnisci, 2021; Plaut, 2021a). Due to its geographical proximity to Eritrea, this church was one of the first worship places to suffer from Eritrean attacks. The walls, pillars, and iron sheet cover of the church were seriously damaged. Not only was the church shelled and ruined, but also its priceless cultural properties were reported to have been stolen by the armed forces.



(Source: Eritrean Hub, 2022)

**Medhane Alem Cathedral Church of Adigrat:** Several religious places dedicated to the Catholic Church in Tigray were destroyed during the war in Tigray. For example, what happened to the Cathedral of Medhane Alem Church, located in Adigrat Town, is a good case in point. Although a reputed worship center, this heritage site was disrespected, destroyed, and looted by Eritrean troops. Windows, doors, documents, and many more properties were obliterated in this heritage site.



(Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)

**Abune Abrham Debretsion Rock Hewn Church:** Located in the scenic sacred landscape of Gheralta, this rock-hewn church is one of the most magnificent and extraordinary works of art in Tigrai. Although it is included in the tentative list of UNESCOs, it remained the target of the war. It was bombarded, causing serious vibration, and spilling of the wall paintings, as indicated below. It was also disgraced, as many

soldiers had entered inside in search of suspected local leaders without removing their shoes, which is totally prohibited in the dogmas of Orthodox Christianity.



(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**The Cathedral of Axum Tsion** is the oldest church in Ethiopia, founded in the 4th Century AD (Henz, 2000; Munro-Hay, 2005; Plant, 1985). As the haven of the Ark of the Covenant (Briggs, 2012; Munro-Hay, 2005), it suffered from the war in Tigrai. According to informants, the attempt to loot the Ark of the Covenant proved unsuccessful at the expense of several hundred lives. An article in Apollo - The International Arts Magazine stated that "civilians were killed while preventing the looting of their church" (Gnisci, 2021). A supportive report comes from The Observer, stating "At the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in Aksum, fleeing civilians have said the aim of the attack, in which people hiding in the church were brought out and shot, was to remove the ark to Addis Ababa" (Sherwood, 2021:1).



(Source: Accessed from the Internet)

**Kidane Mihret Church of Mekelle:** Located in Mekelle City, it faced an air raid on November 13, 2020. Because this air strike took place on Monday, market day, it was a reminder of what happened to the people of Tigrai and the city 80 years ago when Emperor Haile Selassie bombarded Mekelle during market day (Monday) using British aircraft. Some individuals lost their lives while windows and walls of the church were razed. Classrooms and residences of students attending religious education in the church were ruthlessly smashed up (Tesfay & Gebreananya, 2021).

**Firedashum Saint Cherkos Church:** Located in Gulomekeda Wereda, Eastern Tigrai, this was one of the most destroyed churches in Tigrai. It lost numerous priceless church collections, such as manuscripts, crosses, and others due to firing following shelling by Eritrean artillery.



(Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)

**Debre Damo Monastery:** Founded by Abune Aregawi in the 6th century, it is considered the "mother of [Ethiopian] monasteries" (Lepage & Mercier, 2005; Phillipson, 2010), having "...a long and checkered history and a strong influence upon the religious literature of the Abyssinian Orthodox Church" (Plant, 1985:190). Panicked, on January 11, 2021, Eritrean troops deliberately shelled the monastery and its environs. The monks' ancient dwellings nearby were destroyed (Plaut, 2021b; Ruiz, 2021). It is mysterious to imagine that armed forces would take advantage of war to destroy such age-old monasteries (Plaut, 2021a; Sherwood, 2021). This monastery was subjected to 118 shells, of which 18 shells were reported to have hit its upper part, killed one monk, and destroyed 6 monastic houses (Shaw, 2021). Published in the Eritrean Hub, an article reveals that "Eritrean troops climbed onto the 6th-century [Debre Damo] monastery and looted old manuscripts and treasures" (Tadros, 2021).



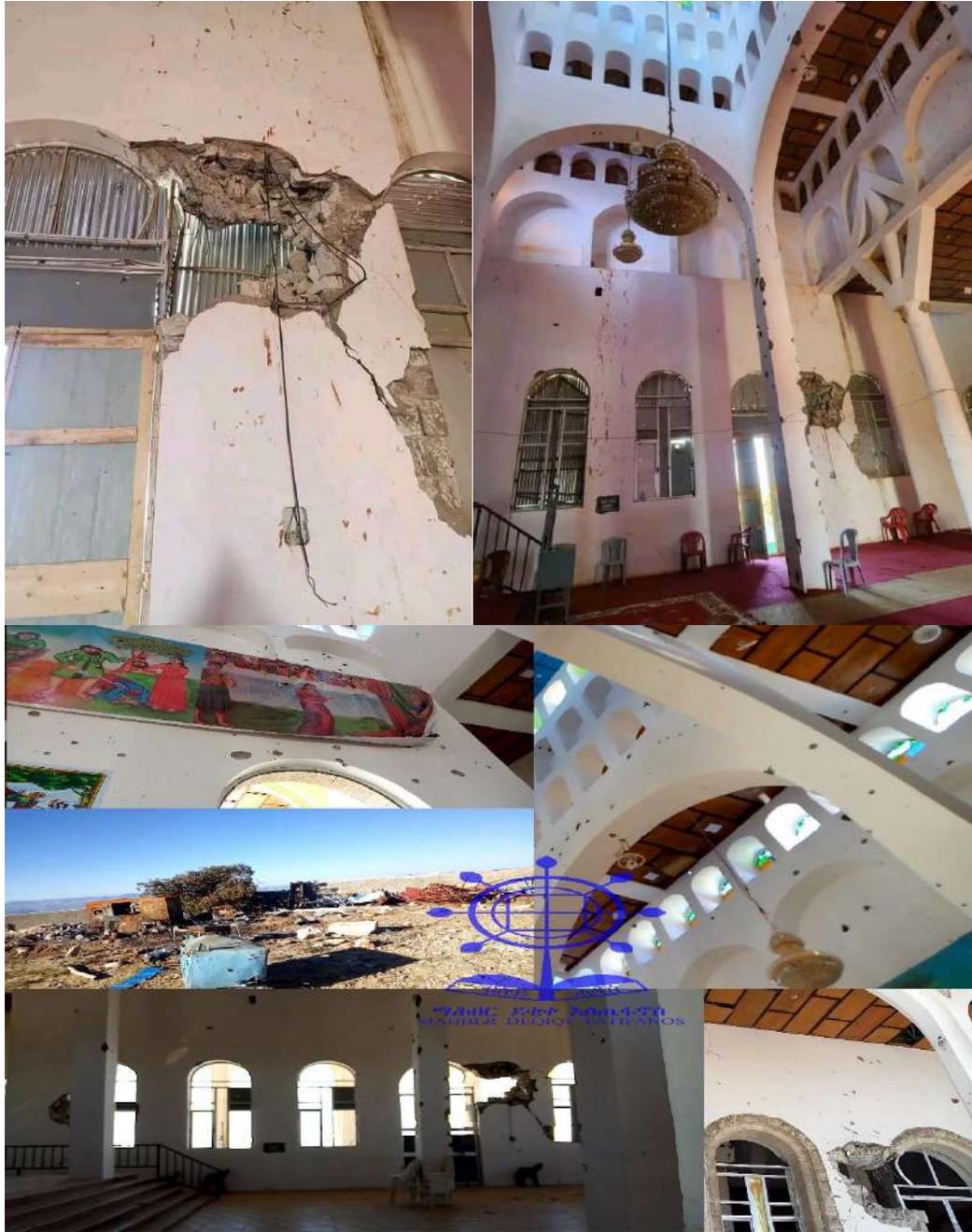
(Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)

**Gundagundo Monastery:** Founded by the followers of Aba Estifanos (locally called Dekike Estifanos) in the 15th century (Elias, 2008; Nosnitsin, 2000), this monastery is an important religious and cultural center known for its rich manuscript collections, crosses, and crowns (Nosnitsin, 2000). Some months after its restoration by Mekelle University, in collaboration with Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau and other key stakeholders, Eritrean troops intentionally targeted Gundagundo Monastery to humiliate the people of Tigray by destroying its sources of pride, courage, and identity. They fired numerous artillery shells to raze the monastery on January 23, 2021, though the attempt ended in vain.



(Source: Atsbha Gebreegiabher (PhD, 2020))

**Enda Meskele Kristos Monastery:** Another key sacred place established by Aba Zewengel, the Holy Father, at Assimba of Irob Wereda. Located on a scenic plateau, this monastery is among the most visited religious places, attracting numerous pilgrims. Unfortunately, Eritrean troops destroyed it using artillery, and they plundered its precious heritage resources and vehicles.



(Source: Mahber Dekike Estifanos, 2021)



**Debre Abay Monastery:** Another very important religious place founded in the 14th Century (Tigrai National Regional State Culture and Tourism Agency, 2010). This monastery contributed significantly to the development of church education and is known for its collection of numerous illustrated manuscripts, gold crosses, thrones, and other priceless heritage resources. This rich monastery faced a deliberate attack (Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies, 2021). They fired artillery and besieged the town. The monastery was plundered, and most of its movable heritage resources were reported to have been shipped to the Amhara region. However, the number and types of looted properties remain to be investigated.



**Waldiba Enda Abune Samuel:** Located in Northwest Tigrai, this magnificent monastery is known for its rich collection of manuscripts and a religious school. Sadly, this sacred place was targeted during the war, resulting in aggressive looting of numerous movable heritage items and the displacement of monks and nuns. Its recovery remains challenging as the area has not been freed from the invasion yet. A clear picture of the exact number of manuscripts and other portable collections being looted remains to be studied.

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(Source: Dimtsi Weyane TV, 2022)

**B. Destruction of Islamic Sacred Places:** These sacred places were directly targeted during the war in Tigrai. Especially heartbreaking is what happened to the Al-Nejashi Mosque. Situated in the Negash village, the Al-Nejashi Mosque was founded in the 7th Century after the followers of Prophet Mohammed came to Axum in 615, escaping persecution in Quraysh. Ancient Negash is considered "the most holy Islamic town after Mecca" (Briggs, 2012:279). It serves as a symbol of peaceful coexistence between Muslim and Christian societies in Tigrai. However, it is quite shocking that this important heritage site was seriously attacked by Eritrean troops who willfully destroyed it using artillery firing and besieged it to confiscate priceless heritage resources.



(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**C. Pillaging Palaces and Museums:** Some historical palaces and museums were victims of the dirty war in the region. For instance, what happened to the Axum Church Museum, Axum Archaeological Museum, Martyrs' Memorial Monument and Museum, and Atse Yohannis Palace and Museum are good cases in point.

**Martyrs' Memorial Monument and Museum:** In Mekelle the Martyrs' Memorial Monument and Museum was destroyed and looted. Contrary to its heritage value, this site was made a military command center where numerous red-caped unethical people have stationed to date. It was affected by the destruction of large-scale of museum collections referring to the history of the 17 years' bitter liberation struggle of Tigrai people. They destroyed the displayed collections and martyrs' corpses in the museum. Similarly, they

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burnt down the library and ruined the international standard meeting halls found inside the monument.



Pictures showing how the collection were burnt and turned into debris (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher, (PhD), 2022)



Pictures portraying rape, torture, and military training inside the center (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2022)

**Atse Yohannis Palace and Museum:** One of the famous heritage sites in Tigrai, it became another military camp during the war in the region. The people of Tigrai had no access to this heritage site. The museum was deliberately destroyed, the museum collections as well, in addition damaged classic windows and doors, and looted numerous priceless heritage properties. The museum and palace need serious attention and intervention to rescue their missing collections and repair the damaged ones.





Photos indicating the empty showcases after looting and destruction (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2022)

#### **D. Damages of Archaeological Sites and Projects**

Before the war, there were 14 active archaeological projects in Tigrai. Not only did the war suspend all these projects, but also almost all project sites were subjected to different levels of damage. Some indicators are mentioned below.

**Aksum Archaeological Museum:** Located in the historic town of Aksum, it houses rich archaeological collections. As a museum situated in the World Heritage Site, it was a very famous tourist site. Sadly, it was targeted for looting, resulting in the theft of 26 ancient Aksumite coins.



Pictures showing the museum and how the local people saved the collection by molding the windows and doors during the war (Source Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)



Pictures showing the broken showcase from where the 26 ancient coins were looted and the fallen open tomb inside the museum (Source Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**Dungur (Queen Sheba) Palace:** It is one of the most attractive and historic heritage sites in Aksum, Tigrai. Traditions strongly attribute the palace to the famous legendary Queen of Sheba, who ruled Aksum some 3000 years ago. Most of the surviving podium walls of the palace were furnished at all corners with large and carefully cut granite corner blocks, which protected, linked, and supported the weaker parts of the walls. The podium was strengthened by a complete row of cut granite blocks.



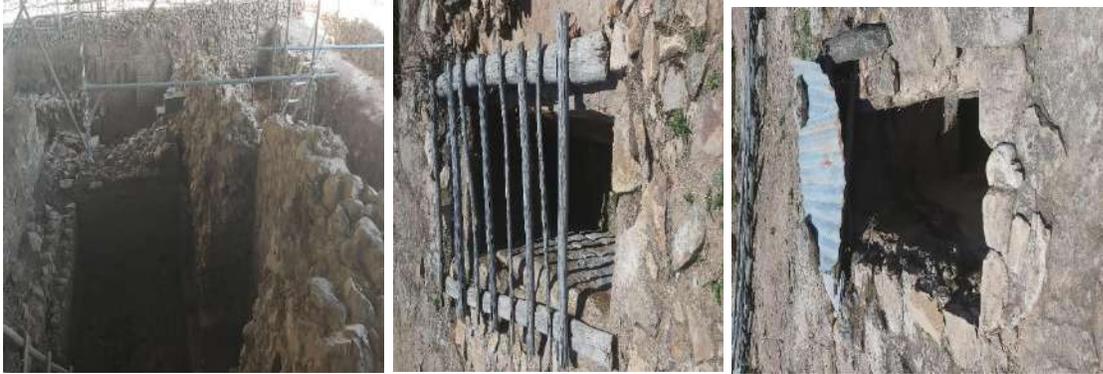
(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**Mausoleum in Aksum:** This is one of the most important heritage sites in the Aksum World Heritage Site. However, it faced severe damage and sliding due to a lack of attention and preventive measures, vibration caused by shelling in Aksum, mobility of heavy-load trucks along the obelisk field, and other reasons. Such destruction also directly affects the standing longest and heaviest monuments in the globe, the Aksum Obelisks.



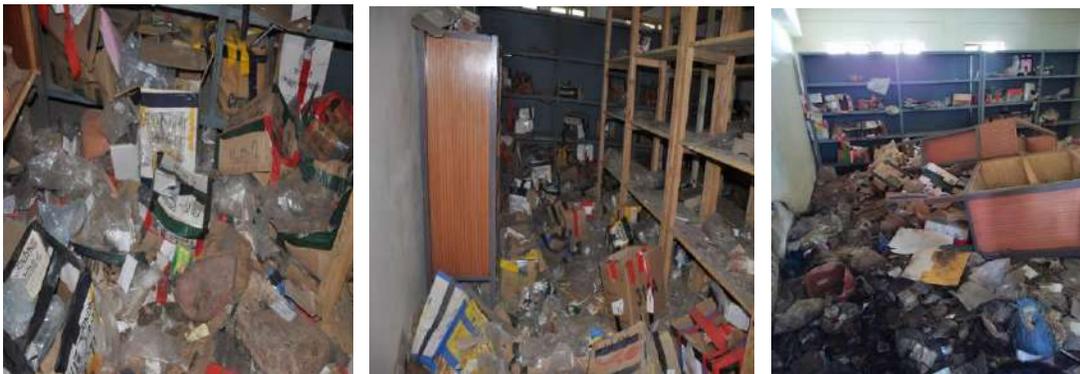
(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**Yeha Archeological Site:** This place was under an active archeological project led by Dr Iris Gerlach and her German Archeological Institute team. However, this project was interrupted, and the site faced serious damage due to the recent war. Various emergency works and comprehensive conservation project are demanding in this site.



(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**Mai Adrasha Archeological Site:** This was another very important archaeological project area before the outbreak of COVID-19. Professor Willeke Wendrich and her team were conducting large-scale investigations with planned development activities. However, the war caused serious damage to the site and its excavated collections. The following pictures indicate the trashed collections of the Shire archaeological storage, in Shire Museum. These collections were gathered by the archaeological project working on the site of Mai Andresha, a project directed by Willeke Wendrich (UCLA).



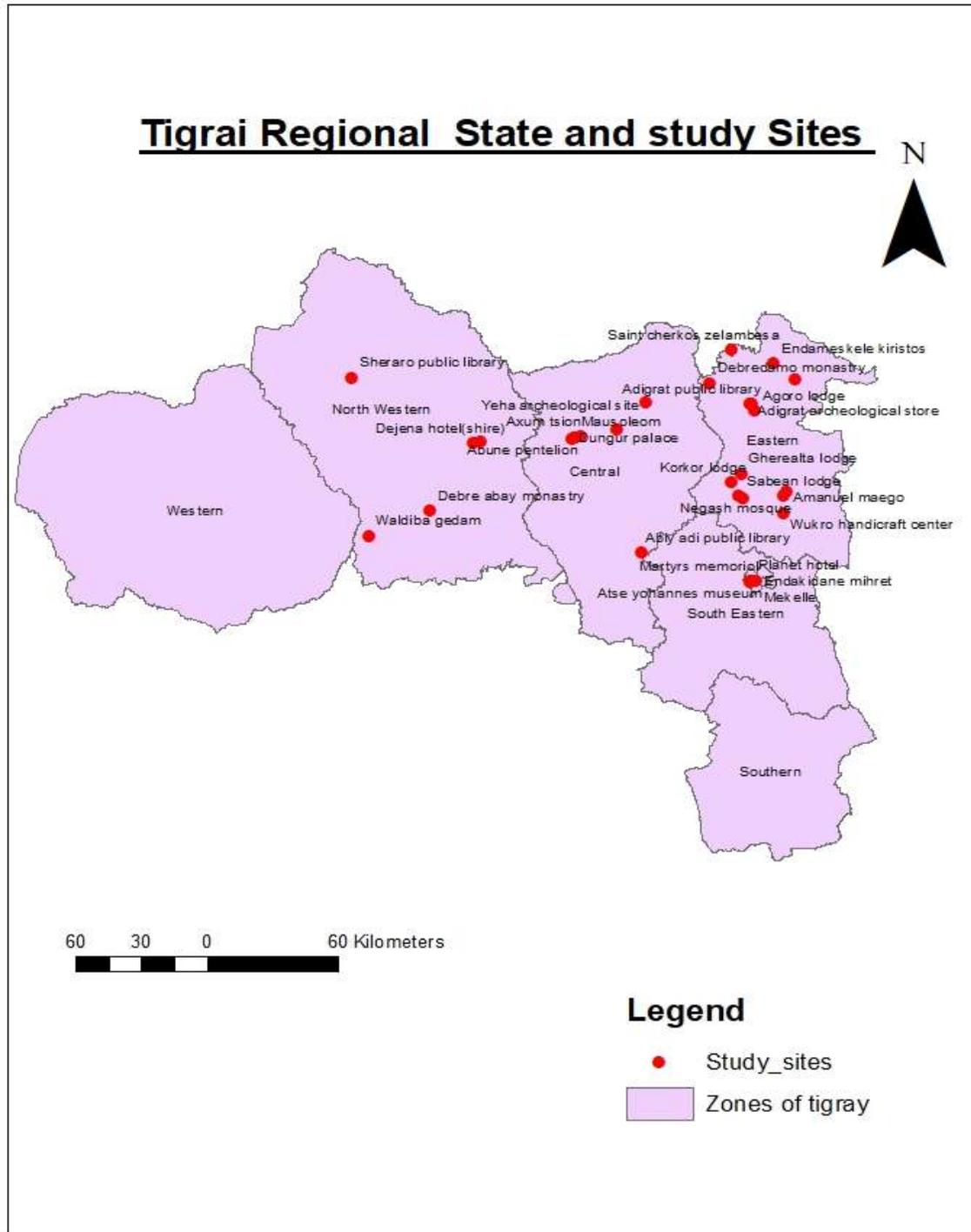
(Source: Gidey Gebreegziabher, Archeologist in TCTB, 2023)



**Adigrat Archaeological Storehouse:** Professor Chatrine Andrea, a Canadian archaeologist, spent many years carrying out an archaeological project in Menebeyti, Gulomekeda, Eastern Tigrai. This project was first halted due to COVID-19 and later destroyed because of the recent war. The pictures below indicate ruined collections in the Adigrat Archaeological store.



(Source: Tigrai Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)



(Source: Prepared by Gidey Desta (PhD), 2024)

### E. Damage on Handicraft Centers and Public Libraries

**Wukro Handicraft Center:** This was an EU-funded critical project in which women and youth were provided with organized handicraft training, job creation, and market linkage. However, this innovation and creativity center was burned down, its machinery was looted, and it ended up being a refugee center. Now, as youth unemployment, poverty, and food insecurity skyrocket in Tigrai, such centers need serious attention and quick recovery.



(Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)

**Aksu Handicraft Center:** This was the second largest handicraft center in Tigrai before the war. Unfortunately, its collections were looted and burnt and its service as innovation center was replaced with refugee or IDP center. Considering its contribution in preserving cultural innovation and knowledge preservation and job creation, it is worthy of fast rehabilitation.



(Source: Tigrai Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)

**Damage to Public Libraries:** The war caused the aggressive erasure of collective memory and the loss of rare books and valuable archives. Almost all public libraries were intentionally destroyed during the war. This is an unaffordable loss in terms of knowledge, creativity, innovation, and generation-building opportunities. What happened to the public libraries of Adigrat, Abi Adi, and Sheraro are good examples.



Damaged Marta Public Library at Adigrat (Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)



Damaged RADA Public Library at Abi Adi (Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)



Damaged Public Library at Sheraro (Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2021)



### 3. Damage on Intangible Heritage (Overview)

Although comprehensive investigation remains to be done, it is evident that the recent war in Tigray has had an unimaginable impact on intangible heritage. Not everyone could determine the precise degree of such damage as most of such assaults remain untestable. To indicate some sorts of intangible heritage damage, the following indicators are noted.

- ✍ **Halting Religious and Cultural Festivals and Transforming Some into Massacred Days:** To give a few instances, various annual religious and cultural festivals were halted, and some were transformed into "massacred days." Axum Tsion, Mariam Dengelat, Debre Abay, Mahbere Dego, and many more massacres serve as excellent examples.
- ✍ **Outlawing sociocultural customs:** It was forbidden for people to practice marriage, funeral rites, and other rituals. People were forced to flee and settle as internally displaced persons (IDPs), shattering social cohesiveness.
- ✍ **Gang Rape and Sexual Violence:** The local population was dehumanized, humiliated, and demoralized by the use of sexual assault and gang rape. More than 120,000 Tigrean women and girls were victims of such evil deeds. The goal of the enemy forces is demonstrated by the barbaric remarks made during rape, such as "I am purifying your blood." Numerous women were sexually assaulted in front of their relatives, and some were coerced into engaging in sexual activity with them.
- ✍ **Destruction of Cultural Associations and Centers:** Creativity and innovation were deliberately halted by the deliberate demolition of numerous cultural associations and centers. Planned acts of burning and destroying rare books, as well as the assassination of political, religious, and older figures, were used to control the erasure of collective memory. Everything in Tigray is supposed to be destroyed, including its elite, women, youth, peasants, leadership, food supply,



property, infrastructure, development projects, health care, education, history, and people.

- ✍ **Cultural assimilation:** The people of Western, Southern, and some parts of Eastern Tigray were forced to assume Amhara and Eritrean identity. These actions created serious problems to the moral and identity of Tigray people who suffered.

#### 4. The Recent War and Tourism Industry in Tigray

The impact of the war on Tigray tourism industry is paramount. These can be noted as:

- ✓ The image of Tigray tourist destinations was spoiled and disrespected due to bad news of massacre, atrocities, gang-rage, and many more disinformation.
- ✓ Attractive tourist hotspots were turned into military camps, IDPs, and command centers.
- ✓ Almost all tourist infrastructure and facilities were demolished.
- ✓ Over 200 service providing areas faced total damage (hotels, lodges, tour operators, travel agents, tour guide associations)
- ✓ Tourism workforce in the region were got out of job, their properties were looted & many were killed.
- ✓ Over 250 tourism investment projects were stopped.
- ✓ Tourist flow to the region was dropped from 90,000 in 2020 to “0” since 2021
- ✓ Regional bureau and district tourism offices faced human and material loss and damage.
- ✓ Tourist hotels, lodges, restaurants, and other service centers were totally ruined.



Damaged and looted Gheralta Lodge (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)



Damaged and looted Korkor Lodge (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)



Damaged and looted Agoro Lodge (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)



Damaged and looted Sabeen Lodge (Source: Atsbha Gebreegziabher (PhD), 2023)



## Summary and Conclusion

The recent war in Tigray caused unimaginable heritage damage and loss in the region, and this is a global loss as well. The above-mentioned cases are simply to provide highlights about what happened to Tigray's heritage due to the recent war. A comprehensive heritage damage assessment has not been conducted yet due to financial and technical limitations. Not only during the war but also the post-war period witnessed further heritage deterioration in the region.

The post-Pretoria Peace Agreement of November 2022, which ended the war between Tigray and the Federal Government and its supporters, gives hope to plan for heritage recovery and preservation in Tigray. There are various enablers to collaborate with key partners such as Heritage for Peace to perform heritage rescue and preservation. These include peace being restored in the region following the Pretoria Peace Agreement, the local people being eager to move forward and work for a better future, promising local efforts, and high demands to sustain heritage at risk. The Interim Administration of Tigray is committed to supporting such efforts, and heritage professionals working in the four universities located in Tigray are collaborative in such endeavors.

The collaboration between Heritage for Peace and the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau and other international partners will benefit us in avoiding further heritage damage, preserving heritage at risk of extinction, enriching existing peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts in the country, and creating good job opportunities for veterans of war and youth with no job and hope. It keeps the local people resilient and looking forward to regaining their hope and morale withdrawn due to the war affecting and destroying their collective memory and all legacies of their forefathers. As the Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, It has started various heritage recovery efforts, most of which are successful and impactful. It hopes that establishing linkages and partnerships will allow them to address the contemporary hurdles affecting our heritage rescue operations.



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