CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Fieldwork and the Team

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The story of this book began in June 2005 when a small team from the Complutense University of Madrid visited the historical city of Gondär for the first time.¹ It was our fourth field campaign in the country. My own

African archaeological career began more than twenty-five years earlier with excavations in Nubia (1978–81), followed by work on the eastern bank of the Blue Nile River south of Khartoum (1989–2000). During my archaeological work on the Blue Nile, it became clear that a number of unaddressed questions could be answered by looking to the source of the river in the Ethiopian highlands, farther upstream.2

One of the issues that had yet to be resolved concerned the reasons behind the long period in which human activity in and around the Nile River seems to have come to an end—while the banks of the Nile River in Central Sudan had been occupied for millennia, the archaeological evidence points to a phase of around a millennium and a half without any human presence. This period occurred just before the creation of the centralized Nubian kingdoms, first with the capital in Napata and afterwards in Meröe, in the first millennium BCE. Our four field campaigns in the western Ethiopian borderlands (2001–3, 2005), north and south of the Blue Nile in the region of Benishangul-Gumuz, sought to find conclusive answers to this problem. The evidence we uncovered suggested that the pastoral populations from the Sahelian plains in Sudan had migrated toward the highlands for climatic and social reasons; indeed, the excavations we carried out in a few rock shelters on the edge of the Ethiopian escarpment showed signs of mutual cultural influences and hybridization between the two areas (i.e., the highlands and lowlands).3

After working in Sudan for a long period, our attention turned to Ethiopia, which seemed a promising place in which to carry out further research. The remote and variegated area of Benishangul, in particular, appeared to offer the potential for fruitful ethnographic work.4

The last field season in the border region was carried out in June 2005, when the present author, together with Alfredo González-Ruibal and Alfonso Fraguas, traveled for the second time to the area north of the Blue Nile, in Mätäkkäl, the country of a frontier Nilo-Saharan speaking people known as the Gumuz (previously “pre-Nilotes”). While working in this area, it became

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4 Although I was unable to conduct this type of research at the site, it was later fruitfully mined by Alfredo González-Ruibal. See Alfredo González-Ruibal, An Archaeology of Resistance: Materiality and Time in an African Borderland (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).