Michela Gaudiello, Paul A. Yule (eds.)


The book describes in detail, the survey, the excavation and the analysis conducted between 2013–2016 at Mifsas Baḥri, a site on the southernmost border of Tigray. Several archaeological sites were recorded during the surveys around Mifasa Baḥri and the Lake Ḥashenge while the excavations concentrated mainly on Mifsas Baḥri 001, where three building phases of a structure identified as a church and dated at the end of the Aksumite period was discovered. This site, already labeled as “ruins of a Byzantine Ch[urch]” in a map of 19th century AD, was the subject of regular excavations during 2001 by Tekle Hagos. In 2013, Steffen Wenig launched the research project, involving P. Yule, and a few years later M. Gaudiello.

The volume consists of 13 chapters, bibliography, several tables, maps, plans and images. Most of photos are available online in heidICON database.

The book could be divided into three sections. The first one, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 4, presents the surveys and the excavations, laying more emphasis on the campaigns of 2014 and 2015. The second section presents the analysis of artefacts and human remains, and it includes seven chapters. The last section deals with ethno-linguistic information. In this division, although respecting the issues addressed in the chapters, the description of stratigraphy and chronology discussed in Chapter 10 appears to be mismatched. In the Foreword, the editors, in a few lines (p. xvii), justify this choice by asserting that Chapter 10 constitutes a discussion which draw on the previous chapters. That is why Chapter 9 includes a paragraph on architectural analysis where the authors describe the three building phases of the church, also presented in detail in Chapter 10.

Chapter 1, by Paul A. Yule, Curt Hilbrig and Manjil Hazarika, introduces the geography, geology and climatic situation of the area of interest in the first paragraph. The paragraph is brief but enough to give descriptions of the site. It is followed by a report of the Seasons 2001–2016, which for each campaign, briefly indicates the excavations, progress in research, and the objectives for the following campaign. The description of excavations is accompanied by the plans of the site, while indications of stratigraphy and chronology, as I mentioned earlier, were included in Chapter 10.

Chapter 2 is divided in two parts. Chapter 2a, by Baldur Gabriel, Yohannes Gebre Selassie and Hiruy Daniel, is a catalogue of sites surveyed in 2014 in the area of the Lake Ḥashenge. A table resumes information for each site of
way-points, coordinates, day of survey, number of photos and relevant evidences. Chapter 2b, by Baldur Gabriel and Paul A. Yule, clarifies the goal of the survey. It is aimed at the archaeological contextualization of the site Mifsas Baḥri, and mapping evidences, relevant to the study of the main site 001. The results of the survey show that no Paleolithic nor Neolithic cultural groups have been identified, probably because of the erosion and accumulation processes. Indeed, this raises up an interesting issue: the interaction between the land-use and landscape evolution. The area is characterized by a series of terraces as vestiges of ancient landscape. Several archaeological sites found during the survey, testifies to the presence of settlements and the strategies farming communities applied there. According to the collected data, B. Gabriel and P.A. Yule discuss the age and origin of the agricultural terraces, and attempt to extend interpretative reconstructions to questions of social practices and interactions, asking “who invested this enormous energy, when and for what purpose? Were there different periods of expansion-building, which may reflect the population dynamics, the security situation or changing farming systems and crops?”. Of course, only archaeological excavations could probably clarify the dynamics in settlement location and exploitation of the terraces. Moreover, the changing levels of Lake Hashenge show geomorphic processes that—as the authors highlight—could be interpreted through the combination of social change, land-use change and climate change that produced the modern landscape. In my view, this chapter and in particular the conclusion of it, introduces interesting research questions. May be, these interesting issues could be indicated at the beginning of the book, giving more relevance to one of the aims of the project.

The third chapter, dedicated to the campaign of 2015, is divided in two parts, 3a and 3b, written by Anne Mortimer. Chapter 3a focuses on the archaeological survey of the immediate environs of Mifsas Baḥri. The investigated areas are introduced by a plan and a map from Google Earth. Unlike the previous chapters, there is a different organization of the description of the survey here. The Chapter 3a includes aims and objectives, methodology and results of the survey. This is accompanied by four tables. The first table indicates the site number, position, place-name and a brief description, which is of very limited utility here, because it is repeated with more details in the gazetteer (Chapter 3b). The second table indicate the size of each site and some relevant evidences of ploughing, vegetation or terraces. Also, this table presents redundant information, because it includes site positions already presented in the first table and in the gazetteer. The third table is dedicated to finds made during the survey. The last one is a list of photos, and describes the subject, point of view, scale, date and author of photos. This table is linked to the database heidICON.