This volume reports findings and interpretations of archaeological research carried out between 2013 and 2016 at the Late Aksumite (c. 550-c. 700 CE) site of Mifsas Bahri, located west of Lake Hashenge in southern Tigray, Ethiopia. Mifsas Bahri is the most southerly Aksumite culture site documented in Ethiopia and comprises a rectilinear church structure (Mifsas Bahri site 001) measuring 29m × 15m. The site includes fourteen monolithic pier capitals sculpted from volcanic red scoria rock, a cemetery with multiple human burials, terrace features, and a village settlement located immediately west of the church. The focus of reported research centers on excavation of the church structure and burials at Site 001. In addition, among other topics, the authors report on local oral traditions and surface investigations of thirty archaeological sites and various archaeological features and artifacts in the surrounding Lake Hashenge area.

The book opens with a foreword by the editors and project directors, Michela Gaudiello and Paul A. Yule, and a second foreword by Tesfay Girmay of Mekelle University. Both forewords describe the genesis of the project, acknowledge contributors and supporters, and highlight the important role the project played in training students at Mekelle University in archaeological research. Thirteen chapters follow, including a “sources used” bibliography (listed as Chapter 14). In total, the volume displays 47 tables and 173 figures, plates, and illustrations.

Chapter 1, “The Excavation, 2013-16” by Paul A. Yule, Curt Hilbrig, and Manjil Hazarika, describes the general geography of the Lake Hashenge area in which Mifsas Bahri is situated, a brief review of previous research at the site in 2001, and summary descriptions of excavations at Mifsas Bahri Site 001 during four field seasons between 2013 and 2016. Chapter 2 is divided into two sub-chapters. Chapter 2a, “Catalogue of the Survey of the Lake Hashenge Area, 2014” by Baldur Gabriel, Johannes Gebre Selassie, and Hiruy Daniel, and Chapter 2b, “Survey around the Archaeological Site Mifsas Bahri, 2014” by Baldur Gabriel and Paul A. Yule, both relate regional site survey that resulted in the location and description of thirty archaeological sites. Chapter 3 also is divided into sub-chapters, both authored by Anne Mortimer. Chapter 3a, “Archaeological Survey, 2015”, and Chapter 3b, “Mifsas Bahri Survey Gazetteer 2015”, report findings of a field walking survey within an area 1km north and south of Mifsas Bahri Site 001, with the intent of taking a “more detailed approach to place the excavation site in its immediate landscape context” (p. 33). Chapter 4, “Lake Hashenge and Archaeological Sites in 19th Century Cartography – From a Documentation of Local Traditions to Claims of Exactness” by Wolbert G.C. Smidt, provides a thorough historiography of European cartography and travelers accounts concerning the Lake Hashenge area and argues that such material provides insights into the past settlement and livelihood of the area and the value of maps for “research in ethno-history, historical geography and regional territorial and political history” (p. 72).

Chapter 5, “Brief Description of Scoria from Mifsas Bahri 001” by Michael Raith, provides a one-page overview of findings from a petrographic examination with a polarizing microscope of two weathered scoria breccia pyroclastic rock fragments from Mifsas Bahri Site 001 and two figures presenting photomicrographs that illustrate petrographic features of the two samples. Chapter 6 is divided into two sub-chapters. Chapter 6a, “The Small Finds Mifsas Bahri Site 001” by Paul A. Yule, and Chapter 6b, “Small Lithic Finds from Mifsas Bahri” by Manjil Hazarika and Tsehay Terefe, summarize the non-ceramic material culture assemblages recovered from surface and excavation contexts at Mifsas Bahri Site 001 and from site surface surveys of other site areas. These sub-chapters also present photographs and line drawings of representative artifacts and a comprehensive table of finds (including ceramic material) from survey and excavation carried out between 2013 and 2016. Chapter 7 is divided into two sub chapters, both authored by Michela Gaudiello respectively titled,
“The Pottery” (Chapter 7a) and “The Pottery Wares and Typology” (Chapter 7b). These sub-chapters are richly illustrated comprehensive overviews of the ceramic assemblages recovered through excavation at Mifsas Bahri Site 001 and survey surface collections between 2013 and 2016. Chapter 8, “Human Skeletal Remains 2013-2016” by Svenja Partheil, analyzes human osteological material excavated at Mifsas Bahri Site 001, providing information on mortality age, biological sex profiles, stature, and pathologies from both scattered osteological finds and nine individual grave burials, comprising 98 adults and 50 sub-adults.

Chapter 9, “Architecture and Architectural Sculpture” by Paul A. Yule and Michela Gaudiello, focuses on the architectural components of the church building at Mifsas Bahri Site 001, identifying three facies of church construction, describing functional and decorative elements of dressed monolithic piers and approximately 100 hewn “architectonic” stones made of red volcanic scoria, and comparing and contrasting briefly the Mifsas Bahri church building to other known Aksumite church structures in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Chapter 10, “Stratigraphy and Chronology” by Curt Hilbrig and Paul A. Yule, puts forward a summary interpretation of the Mifsas Bahri Site 001 stratigraphy and dating of excavated contexts, describing the site’s “ploughing horizon,” landscape levelling, human burial features, walls of three building/occupational facies, inter-wall fillings, twenty three soil layers, sixty-five contexts, and bedrock revealed through excavation of twenty-four trenches and four “horizontal spits” in an anthropogenic deposit ranging 0.30 to 2.76 meters in depth. The chapter text is augmented by thirty-six profile and plan view maps, seven photos, a stratigraphic diagram, seventeen radiocarbon plots, and a profile drawings table, soil layer description table, and radiocarbon data table.

Chapter 11, “Dialect and Agricultural Terminology in Mifsas Bahri” by Werner Arnold and Fesseha Berhe, is very brief: just two paragraphs and one photo in a single page of the text, relating a summary of an interview with a farmer from the Lake Hashenge area in the effort to “gather some information on the dialect of Mifsas Bahri and the agricultural terminology” (p. 266). Chapter 12, “On the Oral Traditions of Hašāngä and its Environments: A Preliminary Field Report” by Fesseha Berhe, imparts information from oral traditions collected from elders and priests concerning the Mifsas Bahri archaeological site and other archaeological areas in the immediate region, but also integrates a discussion centering on kin and ethnic group identifications, customary law and traditional administration, and historical personages from the region, such as the 19th-Century Ethiopian King Yoḥannās IV. The final chapter, Chapter 13, “Conclusions”, briefly recounts the chronology of Mifsas Bahri Site 001 and offers speculation concerning the role climate and external polities may have played (or not) in the founding and abandonment of the church building. It further states that the church building was part of a larger settlement at Mifsas Bahri during the Late Aksumite period and calls for future excavation work and the need to protect the site from theft and vandalism. The volume’s references cited section or bibliography is curiously titled “Chapter 14 Sources used,” and presents all but a few of the references cited in the publication.

This is an important volume and a very welcome addition to the archaeological literature of the northern Horn of Africa, as it represents one of very few book-length publications focused on a single Aksumite archaeological site area and the only one relating to the Late Aksumite period. In addition, it is the first comprehensive study focused on an Aksumite site area from southern Tigray, an area largely neglected by previous archaeological research. Perhaps as important is that the volume is the outcome of a project with a sincere dedication to university undergraduate student field training and pedagogy in Ethiopian archaeology. Much of the work carried out by the project and reported in the volume seems guided, in part, by this noble mission. The speed of publication (field work ending in 2016 and publication in 2017) is admirable and will serve to assist with site preservation and protection by increasing public awareness of the Mifsas Bahri sites and the cultural heritage of the Lake Ḥashenge region. The project’s searchable online data base of inventoried finds and images, hosted by heidICON at the University of Heidelberg and referenced in several chapters of the book, contains more than two thousand entries of site features, artifacts, landscapes, drawings. This digital resource is a vital component of the project’s commitment to systematic and transparent documentation and supplements an already richly illustrated volume. BAR Publishing’s inclusion of color photos is testimony to the overall high quality presentation.

Several chapters stand out for their level of descriptive detail and analytic rigor, especially Chapter 7a and 7b concerning pottery and Chapter 8 about human skeletal remains. These chapters provide the most careful and comprehensive analyses and the most convincing interpretations of archaeological findings in the volume. Chapter 6b, “Small Lithic Finds from Mifsas Bahri”, is a useful descriptive introduction to the flaked stone artifacts of the region and chapters 2a, 2b, 3a, and 3b provide substantial preliminary documentation, including a valuable gazetteer with color photos and multiple lengthy tables with various information, of site areas located during survey in