

Archaeological survey around Igre Hariba (Ethiopia, Tigray)



Fieldwork Preliminary Report 8-15 March 2018



This fieldwork preliminary report is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 726206).

TEAM COMPOSITION

Pr. Julien Loiseau (Aix-Marseille University) - team leader

Pr. Bertrand Hirsch (Sorbonne University)

Dr. Amélie Chekroun (Aix-Marseille University)

FIELDWORK OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the mission was to survey the area around the village of Igre Hariba (Tigray region, Kwiha Woreda) in order to find new evidence of ancient Muslim communities in Northern Ethiopia.

The area was chosen according to epigraphic evidence, Arabic inscriptions being major sources for the history of early Islam in Ethiopia. Arabic inscriptions have been found so far in four distinct locations in Ethiopia: Eastern Tigray, Tchertcher, South Amhara and Ifat. Presence of Arabic Inscriptions in Eastern Tigray was first witnessed by the English traveller Nathaniel Pearce in the beginning of the 19th century around Igre Hariba¹ (also Egär Hariba, Wegär Hariba, Wäger Hariba, Eger Hariba, Uogher Hariba, Wober Hariba - አገር፡ሐሪባ).

Between Pearce's journey and our survey in March 2018, 22 stelae bearing Arabic inscriptions have been witnessed around Igre Hariba and Kwiha:

- 1 by the Italians in 1935-1936, which, according to Carlo Conti Rossini, was brought to Brescia (Italy)². Its present location is unknown.
- 4 by Carlo Conti Rossini in 1937. Their present location is unknown³.
- 14 by French archaeologists in 1962 and 1966 (among which 11 are preserved in the National Museum of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa: see below)
- 2 by Prof. Tekle Hagos (Addis Ababa University) in 1993. They are currently preserved in the museum of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray, Mekelle.
- 1 by Dr. Wolbert Smidt in 2000 (preserved in the church of Kwiha Kirkos)

The Arabic inscriptions of 15 stelae (out of 21) have been published and translated so far:

- 2 by Costantino Pansera in 1945⁴, publication revised by Madeleine Schneider in 2009⁵
- 12 by Madeleine Schneider in 1967⁶
- 1 by Wolbert Smidt in 2004⁷

¹ N. PEARCE, *The life and adventures of Nathaniel Pearce, written by himself, during a residence in Abyssinia, from 1810 to 1819*, J. J. Halls ed., London, 1938, vol. 1, pp. 121-124.

² Carlo CONTI ROSSINI, "Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana presso Uogri Hariba nell'Enderta", *Rivista di studi orientali* 17 (1937-1939), pp. 399-408

³ C. CONTI ROSSINI, *ibid.*

⁴ C. PANSERA, "Quattro stele musulmane presso Uogher Haribà nell'Enderta (fine sec. IV Egira)", *Studi etiopici raccolti da C. Conti Rossini*, Roma, Istituto per l'Oriente, 1945 pp. 3-7.

⁵ M. SCHNEIDER, "Des Yamāmī dans l'Enderta (Tigré)", *Le Muséon* 122 1-2 (2009), pp. 131-148.

⁶ M. SCHNEIDER, "Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha", *Annales d'Ethiopie* 7 (1967), pp. 107-122

⁷ W. G. C. SMIDT, "Eine arabische Inschrift in Kwiḥa, Tigray", in Verena BÖLL, Denis NOSNITSIN, Thomas RAVE, Wolbert SMIDT, Evgenia SOKOLINSKAIA (eds.), *Studia Aethiopica in Honour of Siegbert Uhlig on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2004, pp. 259-268.

The stelae with Arabic inscriptions already found around Igre Hariba and Kwiha call for two comments:

1. These inscriptions all belong to Muslim gravestones and are dated from the 4th to the 6th Century A.H. / 10th to 12th Century C.E. They bear insofar witness of the presence of Muslim trade and communities in Tigray before and during the Zagwe period. The Muslim presence in Tigray might have been linked to the Dahlak Islands (today in Eritrea), considering that the name of Ḥafs b. ‘Umar al-Yamāmī is mentioned on stelae found in both places. It should be stressed that no other written document, neither Ge’ez nor Arabic, mentions the existence of a Muslim community in Tigray at that time.

2. The original location of the gravestones is not precisely known. According to N. Pearce (beginning of the 19th Century), Wagar Ḥaribā / Igre Hariba was the main place of the area, where an important leader of the region, the brother of Walda Sellāšē, was settled. The same witness located the original place of the stelae near the village of “Quened”. More than a century later, Carlo Conti Rossini did not recognize the site described by N. Pearce and, moreover, did not identify the original location of the stelae⁸. Like his successors (the French archaeologists in the 1960’s and W. Smidt in the 2000’s), he witnessed only displaced and re-used stelae, in a place named “Bilet”. In the 1930’s, according to Conti Rossini, the main locality of the area was hence Kwiha, the rise of which being probably linked to the construction of the road Asmara-Addis Ababa by the Italians and to the layout of a fountain still in use.

The **two main objectives** of the fieldwork were **to identify the exact location of the Muslim graveyard** from which the stelae were shifted and **to understand the link between this Muslim community and the ancient trade route** driving south from the Red sea shore and crossing the area. Identification of archaeological sites and their possible excavation will shed new light on the issue of islamization and the history of the earliest Muslim communities in Eastern Tigray.

OFFICIAL AUTHORIZATION

Producing the official letter and authorization by the ARCCH, signed by Ato Demerew Dagne (Ref. n^{os} 08/R2-8-2/019 & 08/6h-8-2/020 – see Annex), we introduced ourselves to Ato Dawit Hailu, director of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray (Mekelle), on 7 March 2018, in order to start our fieldwork on 8 March. Ato Dawit Hailu valued our project, reminding the important and long-standing history of the region. Considering that we were only supposed to survey the area, and not to excavate, Ato Dawit Hailu decided to not assign us an expert from the office, provided that we introduce ourselves to the officials of the kebele.

⁸ ROSSINI, “Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana”, *loc. cit.*

STELAES IN MEKELLE CULTURAL AND TOURISM OFFICE MUSEUM

Ato Dawit Hailu gave us the authorization to visit the Museum of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray, where two stelae with Arabic inscriptions coming from Igre Hariba/Kwiha are preserved. They have been given to the Museum by Pr. Tekle Hagos (Addis Ababa University) in 1993 G.C. According to personal information given to us afterwards by Pr. Tekle Hagos, these two stelae were brought to him by people from “Old Kwiha” while he was surveying the area. No information about their original location is available, despite the fact that they belong to the same corpus than the stelae preserved in the National Museum of Ethiopia. The Arabic inscriptions of the two stelae have never been published.

Mekelle Museum Stele 1



Fragment in basalt stone: H. 52 x W. 52 x Th. 6 cm. Only the last seven lines of the Arabic inscription are preserved.

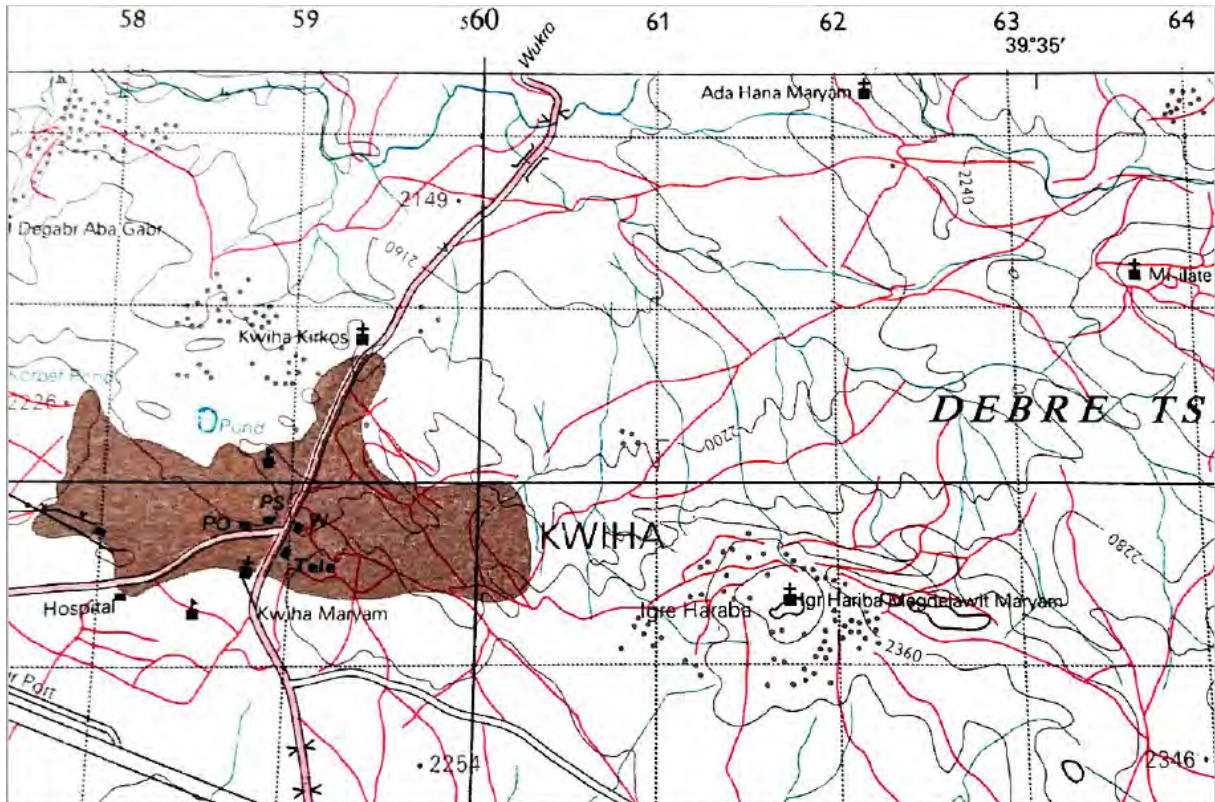
Mekelle Museum Stele 2



Fragment in basalt stone: H. 13 x W. 27 x Th. 14 cm. Only the first four lines of the Arabic inscription are preserved.

IGRE HARIBA: THE ISSUE OF TOPONYMY

On 8 and 9 March 2018, the fieldwork was dedicated to the survey of the area of Igre Hariba, a village located East of Kwiha (N 13°30.895'; W 39°30.615'; see Map 1:50.000 ETH 4, 1339 D1, 1 EMA 1997 “Kwiha”).



Megdelawit Maryam Church is supposed to be, according to the inhabitants of Igre Hariba, the oldest church of the area. Located on the North side of the main hill, the church is surrounded to the South by a graveyard. Ruins are present on the top of the hill: they might be the remains of the settlement of local leaders, like Ito Debbib, Walda Sellāsē's brother, who welcomed Nathaniel Pearce in the beginning of the 19th century.



The survey of Igre Hariba revealed very few evidence.

A basalt stone adorned with a cross and the inscription “1801 EC” is present on a path leading to the village on the North side. It seems of recent production.

GPS: 13° 28 mn 30 s. North / 39° 33 mn 60 s. East, altitude 2330 m.



Two water reservoirs built in stones (out of three mentioned by the inhabitants) have been also observed:

1. the first on the East side of the hill of Megdelawit Maryam Church. GPS: 13° 28 mn 28 s. North / 39° 33 mn 58 s. East



2. the second on the West side of the same hill. GPS: 13° 28 mn 27 s. North / 39° 34 mn 18 s. East, altitude 2368 m.

According to Igre Hariba inhabitants, both of them have been built during the reign of Haile Selassié (1930-1974): their modern datation is confirmed by material observations.

No evidence of an old settlement has been found during the survey of Igre Hariba. The few places indicated by local people (e.g. Kelkal, Gedel Kebatsani) did not provide any clue. Inhabitants were not informed of any archaeological finding in the area. But they identified the place name “Bilet”, mentioned in the documentation since Conti Rossini’s visit in 1937, as a collective field for grazing located two kilometers North of Igre Hariba, on the valley bottom, near the church of Kwiha Kirkos, outside Kwiha (see map above).



Bilet seen from Igre Hariba



Igre Hariba seen from Bilet

This toponymic evidence is all the more important. According to the 19th-Century testimony of Nathaniel Peirce, at a time when Igre Hariba was the main place of (and the name given to) the whole area, we named this fieldwork “Igre Hariba” and first surveyed the village known today as Igre Hariba. But the evidence we were looking for seemed to be located in the area called today “Kwiha”, since the latter replaced the former as the main place (and the main name) of the area after the construction of the road in the 1930’s.

KWIHA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AROUND KWIHA KIRKOS CHURCH

On 10 March 2018, we introduced ourselves to the head of the kebele where Kwiha Kirkos and the field called “Bilet” are located. Ato Goitom Besrat stayed with us on behalf of the local administration during the whole time of the survey around Kwiha Kirkos and Bilet: he was of great help and support.

The church of Kwiha Kirkos (or Kwiha Tchärqos) was built in 1985-86 on the top of a hill at the Northern end of the town, on the Western side of the road: surrounding lands then became Church lands. Ruins are known on this location since their first description by Carlo Conti Rossini in 1937: about 30 broken columns and carved stones have been observed, along with occasional findings of pottery⁹.



⁹ ROSSINI, “Necropoli musulmana ed antica chiesa cristiana”, *loc. cit.*

According to C. Conti Rossini, these ruins are the remnants of a rectangular building dating back to the early Middle Ages. In 1970, Francis Anfray suggested to compare the columns observed near Kwiha Kirkos with those of Däbrä Gärgiš (Ḥaramat), which he proposed to date from late Aksumite or early post-Aksumite times¹⁰. In 1977, Eric Godet also attributed the stones and columns from Kwiha to late Aksumite or post-Aksumite times¹¹. Local traditions attribute the ruins to an ancient church founded by *aše* ‘Amdä Şeyon and later destroyed by imam Aḥmad “Grāñ” in the 1530’s. Archaeological research has not been carried out yet on the site.

The survey of the surroundings of the present Kwiha Kirkos church revealed that the hill is, at least partly, an archaeological tell. Ruined walls were observed in three various locations:

1. on the edge of the new road leading to the new church under construction: fragments of pottery and bones were also noticed. GPS: 13° 29 mn. 12 s. North / 39° 32 mn. 57 s. East. Altitude: 2180 m.



2. in a hole of 2,5 meters depth dug near the graveyard of the present church



¹⁰ Francis ANFRAY, “Notes archéologiques”, *Annales d’Éthiopie* 8 (1970), pp. 31-56.

¹¹ Eric GODET, “Répertoire des sites pré-axoumites et axoumites du Tigré (Ethiopie), *Abbay* (1977), fasc. 8, pp. 19-58.

3. in a path leading to orchards located bellow the tell: fragments of pottery and bones were also noticed, within 2,5 m. of archaeological stratigraphy. GPS: 13° 29 mn. 9 s. North / 39° 32 mn. 54 s. East. Altitude: 2120 m.



This archaeological evidence (walls, pottery, bones) observed all around the site strongly suggests that **a permanent (urban?) settlement** was located in the fields surrounding the present Kwiha Kirkos church built in the 1980's. It also suggests that the so-called Aksumite or post-Aksumite columns, known since Conti Rossini's first description, are not any more in their original location.

In light of such evidence, we propose **to dig archaeological test pits in various locations of the site for a better understanding of this old settlement and the search for datation elements.** Provided that the ARCCCH gives its agreement, these first excavations could begin in December 2018.

KWIHA: THE STELAE FROM BILET

The present church of Kwiha Kerkos preserves a basalt stone bearing an Arabic inscription. Wolbert Smidt first witnessed the stone inside the church in 2000 and published its Arabic inscription according to a drawing he made on site¹².

According to W. Smidt, the inscription was believed to be written in Hebrew by the inhabitants, hence witnessing their "descent from ancient Israel", the reason why it was kept inside the church *mäqdas*. Local opinion about the stone has changed since Smidt's first observations: its Arabic script has been identified and its location changed inside the church. Moreover, according to oral tradition, a nun used the stone for cooking and the fire broke it: indeed, as we observed, part of the Arabic inscription has been lost.

¹² W. G. C. SMIDT, "Eine arabische Inschrift in Kwiha, Tigray", *loc. cit.* For a re-reading of its inscription, see also Frédéric BAUDEN, "Inscriptions arabes d'Ethiopie", *Annales Islamologiques* 45 (2011), pp. 285-306.



Basalt stone kept in Kwiha Kerkos church: H. 31 x W. 20 x Th. 20 cm. Only the first seven lines of the inscription are partly preserved.

Ato Goitom Besrat introduced us to Ato Neguse Hagos, a farmer living in the vicinity of the Kwiha Kirkos church. Ato Neguse Hagos confirmed the location of the place name “Bilet”, on the Eastern side of the road. He also informed us that a stone bearing an Arabic inscription was currently lying in the fields of Bilet, used with other stones to delineate paths and plots of land.



Sample of stelae used in Bilet to delineate paths and plots of land

A first stone was found on 9 March according to Ato Neguse Hagos’ indications. GPS: 13° 29 mn. 17 s. North / 39° 32 mn. 56 s. East. Altitude: 2200 m.

With the help of Ato Neguse Hagos, Ato Goitom Besrat, Ato Ephrem Kidane, Ato Kibrom Belay, and of inhabitants of the area, we found in four days of survey 15 stelae and 6 fragments of stelae bearing Arabic inscriptions. All these basalt stones were used to delineate paths and plots of land, with the exception of one fragment in limestone found on the ground (B02).

According to Ato Goitom Besrat’s instructions, these 21 archaeological artefacts have been stored in Kwiha Kirkos church, waiting for their preservation by the Cultural and Tourism Office of Mekelle. On 12 March 2018, we informed Ato Gidey Gebre Egziabher, archaeologist at the Cultural and Tourism Office of Mekelle, of the discovery of the stelae and of their storage in Kwiha Kirkos church. Each stone received a number, paint on the side, for a safer storage and a better preservation. The list of the 21 stones is the following:

B01. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 67 x W. 26 x Th. 15-22 cm.



B02. Fragment of stele on limestone: H. 16 x W. 19 x Th. 5 cm.



B03. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 28 x W. 8-13 x Th. 13 cm.



B04. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 21 x W. 33 x Th. 11 cm.



B05. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 37 x W. 25 x Th. 9-15 cm.



B06. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 46 x W. 15-18 x Th. 13-19 cm.



B07. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 36 x W. 22 x Th. 8-11 cm.



B08. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 50 x W. 34 x Th. 20 cm.



B09. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 50 x W. 17-30 x Th. 15 cm.



B10. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 22 x W. 21,5 x Th. 14 cm.



B11. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 19 x W. 12 x Th. 6 cm.



B12. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 31 x W. 19,5 x Th. 11 cm.



B13. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 39 x W. 20 x Th. 13 cm.



B14. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 54 x W. 27 x Th. 23 cm.



B15. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 48 x W. 19-33 x Th. 21 cm.



B16. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 50 x W. 28 x Th. 23 cm.



B17. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 62 x W. 34 x Th. 12 cm.



B18. Fragment of stele on basalt stone: H. 13-40 x W. 30 x Th. 12 cm.



B19. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 48 x W. 30 x Th. 13 cm.



B20. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 41 x W. 33 x Th. 6-18 cm.



B21. Full stele on basalt stone: H. 60 x W. 17-31 x Th. 23 cm.



STELAE FROM BILET AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ETHIOPIA, ADDIS ABABA

The National Museum of Ethiopia (Addis Ababa) preserves within its historical collections stelae in basalt bearing Arabic inscriptions. On 15 March 2018, we get the authorization to study the stelae and take pictures of them. Historical collections were opened to us with the precious help of Ato Salomon Kebede.

11 stelae belong to the corpus of Bilet: they have been brought to the Museum by French archaeologists in 1962 and their inscriptions published by M. Schneider in 1967¹³. The list (with the current reference number) is the following:

RO – 004 : H. 29-39 x W. 36 x Th. 12 cm.



RO – 006 : H. 40 x W. 29 x Th. 13-18 cm.



RO – 008 : H. 57 x W. 30-60 x Th. 20 cm.



RO – 0010 : H. 32 x W. 23 x Th. 17 cm.



¹³ M. SCHNEIDER, “Stèles funéraires arabes de Quiha”, *Annales d’Ethiopie* 7 (1967), pp. 107-122

RO – 0011 : H. 37 x W. 51 x Th. 14 cm.



RO – 0013 : H. 63 x W. 34-37 x Th. 12-22 cm.



RO – 0017 : H. 54 x W. 15-42 x Th. 23 cm.



RO – 0020 : H. 46 x W. 42 x Th. 13-19 cm.



RO – 0024 : H. 44 x W. 17-27 x Th. 10-24 cm.



RO – 0026 : H. 32 x W. 12-33 x Th. 27 cm.



RO – 0031 : H. 20 x W. 15-42 x Th. 23 cm.



RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The fieldwork of March 2018 was fulfilled under the supervision of the ARCCH (Addis Ababa) and of the Tourism and Culture Office of Tigray (Mekelle), with the academic support of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies and of the French Centre for Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa), and with the academic and financial support of Aix-Marseille University (France). It opens promising avenues of research.

1. **New archaeological evidence** found around the present church of Kwiha Kirkos, in addition to the broken columns and carved stones known since the 1930's, suggests that a permanent (urban?) settlement developed there during the Middle Ages in link with the old trade route crossing the area from North to South.
2. **New epigraphic evidence** found in reuse in the fields of Bilet, on the Eastern side of the present road exiting Kwiha from the North, increases the number of Arabic inscriptions coming from the area to **45 items**. The corpus of Arabic inscriptions of Bilet is now the larger one known in Ethiopia.
3. The **identification of the exact location of the Muslim cemetery** of Bilet opens for the first time the opportunity to study Muslim burials from the Middle Ages in Ethiopia.

In regard with these promising results, we will submit in 2018 to the ARCCH a new application to conduct excavations in the area of Igre Hariba/Kwiha.

Prof. Julien Loiseau, Aix-Marseille University
Prof. Bertrand Hirsch, Sorbonne University
Dr. Amélie Chekroun, Aix-Marseille University

ANNEXES

1. Official letter and authorization by the ARCCH Ref. n° 08/6h-8-2/020 (in Amharic)
2. Official letter and authorization by the ARCCH Ref. n° 08/R2-8-2/019 (in English)



በኢትዮጵያ ፌዴራላዊ ዲሞክራሲያዊ ሪፐብሊክ
 በባህልና ቱሪዝም ሚኒስቴር
 የቅርስ ጥናትና ጥበቃ ባለስልጣን
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Ministry of Culture & Tourism
Authority of Research & Conservation of
Cultural Heritage

ቁጥር Ref.No. 08/ሪክ-8-2/020

ቀን Date: 26 የካቲት 2010

በትግራይ ብሄራዊ ክልላዊ መንግሥት

ለባህልና ቱሪዝም ቢሮ

መቸሌ፡

ጉዳዩ፡- ተመራማሪዎችን ወደ ክልሉ ስለመላክ፡

በ Dr.Julien Loiseau የሚመራ ጥናትና ምርምር ቡድን በክልሉ እግሪ ሀሪባ በሚባለው ስፍራ እ.አ.አ ከማርች 8-15/2018 በታሪክ ዘመን አርኪዎሎጂ የአሰሳ (ሰርቪይ) ጥናት ለማድረግ ፈቃድ ጠይቆ የቅርስ ጥናትና ምርምር ፈቃድ አሰጣጥ መመሪያ ቁጥር 14/2006 በሚያዘው መሰረት አስፈላጊው ግምገማ ተደርጎ ፈቃድ ተሰጥቶታል። የጥናት ቡድኑ አባላት፡-

1. Dr. Julien Loiseau
2. Romain Mensan
3. Dr. Bertrand Hirsch
4. Dr. Amelie Chekroun ሲሆኑ የቡድኑ አባላት ቆይታ አጭር እና ዋነኛ አላማውም ቁፋሮ ሳይሆን ሰርቪይ በመሆኑ ክልሉ ተገቢ የዘርፉን ባለሙያ መድቦ አስፈላጊውን ክትትልና ድጋፍ እንዲያደርግላቸው እየጠየቅን ቡድኑ ስላከናወናቸው ተግባራት አጭር ሪፖርት ክልሉ የሚመድበው ባለሙያ እንዲልክልት-በብራችሁን እጠይቃለን።



ከሰላምታ ጋር
 ደምረው ዳኚ
 የቅርስ ጥናትና ምርምር
 ዳይሬክቶሬት ዳይሬክቶር

እንዲያውቁት፡

ለዋና ዳይሬክቶር ጽ/ቤት

በቅርስ ጥናትና ጥበቃ ባለስልጣን፡

Cc. Dr.Julien Loiseau – Research Team leader



በኢትዮጵያ ፌዴራላዊ ዲሞክራሲያዊ ሪፐብሊክ
 በባህልና ቱሪዝም ሚኒስቴር
 የቅርስ ጥናትና ጥበቃ ባለስልጣን
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
Ministry of Culture & Tourism
Authority of Research & Conservation of
Cultural Heritage

ቁጥር
 Ref.No. 08/RL-8-2/019
 ቀን
 Date: 23 FEB 2018

Dr. Julien Loiseau
 Aix-Marseille University
 Email:amelie.CHEKROUN@univ-amu.fr
 France
 Subject: Field Research Permit 2018 Field Season

Dear Dr. Julien Loiseau

The Cultural Heritage Directorate of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage has received your application to conduct field research on Archaeological survey Around Igre Hariba, Tigray regional state, Ethiopia.

The Directorate has carefully evaluated your permit application and approved your request to conduct field work from 8th to 15th of March 2018.

We kindly inform you that the newly approved Cultural Heritage Research Permit Directive no.14/2006 will be effective as of last field season (2009 E.C.). We, therefore, would like to inform you that Archaeological survey around Igre Hariba permit is active for two consecutive years with annual renewal.

We remain cooperative for the success of your project planned in 2018 field season.

With regards,

Demerew Dagne

Cultural Heritage Research
Directorate Director



CC:

Director-General, ARCCCH

ስ/ቁ +251 11 154 00 44 ፋክስ / Fax/ +251 11 154 00 33 ኢ-ሜይል / E-mail / :- crcch@ethionet.et
 Tel.No. +251 11 154 00 54 የመሣ.ቁ / P.O.Box/ 13247 ዌብ ሳይት / web site: www.arcch.gov.et

መልስ በሚጽፉልን ጊዜ እባክዎን የኛን ደብዳቤ ቁጥር ይጥቀሱ
 Please Quote Our Ref. No. When Replying