

A social archaeology of colonial war in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The archaeology of 20th century warfare, with its focus on Western armies and military issues, has often neglected indigenous experiences of war and social aspects, particularly the role of women in reproducing culture through material practices in situations of great distress. In this article, we propose a postcolonial examination of imperialistic war in Ethiopia. We study the Cave of Zeret, the refuge of a large guerrilla group that was massacred by the Italian colonial army in 1939. Using the material evidence available, life underground is described, as well as the military events that led to the destruction of the place and the killing of most of its inhabitants. We argue that archaeology can be a way of revealing, with material facts, the brutality of fascism and colonialism. Finally, drawing upon Spivak and Derrida, we ask: What are the ethical problems of representing the voice of the subaltern? What is the role of materiality in evoking her presence?

Keywords

Archaeology of the contemporary past; Ethiopia; Italian colonialism; guerrilla war; resistance, massacre; maintenance activities; postcolonial ethics

Introduction

The archaeology of modern conflict has enjoyed a great development during the last decade. Along with new methodological and theoretical proposals, the scope of research questions and topics has broadened significantly, going beyond the focus on battlefield archaeology (Pollard and Banks 2007; Robertshaw and Kenyon 2008) to address a variety of topics and periods and include heritage and ethical concerns (Schofield and Cocroft 2007; Moshenska 2008a). In this article, we would like to present the site of Zeret, a base of the Ethiopian patriots fighting against the Italian colonial army and the scenario of a brutal massacre in 1939. Through the example of Zeret we would like to address what we perceive as two shortcomings in the study of the archaeology of modern conflict: its Western bias and its tendency to delve into military details, forgetting the larger historical and social picture. We argue that to overcome both problems we should develop a postcolonial archaeology of conflict.

Regarding the first problem, whereas violent indigenous resistance has received some attention for the 19th century and before (Adams and White 2001; Tapia 2005; Johnson 2009; Laumbach 2009), the archaeology of 20th century conflict is too focused on the armies of industrial societies and does not pay enough attention to indigenous

resistance to colonial invaders and non-Western wars. This is regrettable, because our knowledge on guerrillas and indigenous ways of waging war can benefit much from an archaeological approach (Sánchez et al. 2004, Banks 2007; Faulkner and Saunders 2007; Ayán Vila 2008; Papadopoulos 2008; Pisano forthcoming), as we either lack the rich textual sources that are often available for conventional armies or the extant evidence has been produced by the Western side —as it happens in our case. Although much excellent work has been done on symbolic resistance, hybridity and cultural negotiation by postcolonial archaeologists (see Van Dommelen 2006), issues of overt violence have been seldom addressed, probably due to the discursive focus of postcolonial theory. However, it would be wrong to say that postcolonial theory per se bypasses violence. Ironically, the literary texts on which postcolonial hermeneutics are based are full of references to the experience of direct, brutal exploitation by colonial powers (see also Given 2004). After all, it is (very physical) violence on which the colony is based, as Achille Mbembe (2003: 23) reminds: ‘in modern philosophical thought and European political practice and imaginary, the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end’. By looking at guerrilla bases, colonial military camps and burnt down indigenous villages, the archaeology of modern conflict can offer a counterpoint to pacified visions of cultural contact and colonialism from Roman times (Mattingly 2004) to 19th century colonialism (Lightfoot et al. 1998). Needless to say that the nature and scale of war and violence has varied wildly through history, but the fact of violence itself as the foundation of colonial conquest remains. ‘Pacifist’ discourses of the colony mirror unwittingly a modern postpolitical stance that downplays violence and inequality at the edge of neoliberal empires and emphasizes in turn multiculturalism and creative globalization.

The scarce attention paid to colonial wars and non-Western forms of political violence has to be related with a wider oblivion of other cultures in the expanding archaeological research on the contemporary past. In a recent review of the subdiscipline, Harrison and Schofield (2009: 186) rightly say that the archaeology of the contemporary past ‘engages critically with what it means to be ‘us’’. This ‘us’, however, is problematic. If we take a look at their bibliography or the rest of the contributions in the same journal, the meaning of this ‘us’ would be ‘white, Euro-American middle-class citizens’. Not that all research has to do with this ‘us’ (see Byrne and Nugent 2004; Harrison and Williamson 2004; Funari et al. 2009), but there is a clear bias towards it

(also González-Ruibal 2008). The archaeology of the contemporary past and modern conflict would benefit from a postcolonial turn. This turn implies bringing new social actors into play, especially those that have been doubly crossed out, women, children (see Moshenska 2008) and the elderly. In any case, the interest for recovering the subaltern experience of conflict goes beyond academia, as proved, for example, by the story of colonial troops fighting in the Free French Army in the film *Indigènes* (Bouchareb 2006).

The second issue that we want to address here is the necessity to undertake an archaeology of modern conflicts that is truly archaeological and for that we mean an archaeology that is concerned with historical events and cultural phenomena, not just with military details or with the management of war remains (as in Adams and White 2001; Banks 2007; Johnson 2009; Laumbach 2009, to mention those who study indigenous warfare). Our interest here, then, is less with military operations than with the social context of war. On the other hand, the archaeology of the contemporary past often focuses on heritage and issues of identity, different perceptions and uses of the past in the present, the aesthetics of ruination and the enchantment of empty spaces. In paying attention to these topics, the archaeology of recent periods allows us to rethink not just the contemporary world, but also the way we do the archaeology of whatever period (Harrison and Schofield 2009). Yet fascinated by the peculiar qualities of our material and its current implications, we run the risk of stop using the particular modes of archaeological reasoning to make sense of history. By paying too much attention to the present, we may forget to comply with our ethical compromise with the people of the past. Furthermore, a too excessive focus on disturbing details, may lead us to forget the wider historical context. One of the advantages of being an archaeologist is that one is trained to make the most of minute material data and at the same time keep the large historical and cultural picture in mind, tracing connections between the micro and the macro scale, past events and present concerns. This is true for prehistoric and historical archaeology alike. However, it is the material minutiae (and the feelings that they evoke) that often take the attention of contemporary archaeologists to the detriment of a more complex historical and anthropological understanding.

Through the example of the guerrilla base of Zeret, we will demonstrate that it is possible to undertake an archaeology of the recent past that is doubly social, as it explores past social issues from the material record without forgetting ethical and political implications of the archaeological remains in the present.

War without end

The war of conquest conducted by fascist Italy in Ethiopia started in October 1935 and ended in May 1936 (Del Boca 1969). The origins of the conflict are diverse and can be traced back to the late 19th century, but the immediate political reasons lie in Benito Mussolini's interest in renewing the Roman Empire. Ethiopia, the only uncolonized country in Africa and surrounded by Italian colonies (Eritrea and Somalia), was the obvious target for the expansionist policies of the fascist state. Ethiopia was also the only country that had been able to obtain a lasting victory over a colonial power during the scramble for Africa. The Ethiopian victory at Adwa (1896) was a thorn in Italy's imperial pride. The 1935-36 war was short but very costly in human lives, especially on the Ethiopian side. Ethiopia suffered almost 300,000 battlefield deaths (Del Boca 2010: 252), over 30 times more than Italy. Despite the modernizing efforts of the Ethiopian Army in the 1920s and 1930s, the massive firepower of the Italians and their systematic use of airplanes, tanks and poison gas gave no chance to the Ethiopians in the field of conventional war. Typical of a colonial conflict, the treatment of prisoners and civilians was ruthless: thousands were led into concentration camps where they died of disease or starvation (Del Boca 1969: 240-241).

When Mussolini declared victory on 7 May 1936, the country was far from vanquished: two thirds of it were still under Ethiopian control and there had not been any formal surrender (Del Boca 1969: 213). After the rainy season (June-August), armed conflict resumed: Open battles were superseded by guerrilla actions led by patriots (*Arbeñoch*) and counter-insurgency operations orchestrated by the Italian colonial army. Italian reprisals were particularly violent and bloody in 1937. It was then that the massacres of Addis Ababa (Ethiopia's capital) and Debre Libanos took place. The first (February 19-22) was the enraged response to an assassination attempt on Marshall Graziani, the Viceroy of Ethiopia at that time (Sbacchi 1985: 189-194). After grenades were thrown by Ethiopian patriots in front of Graziani's retinue, Italian soldiers and fascists started shooting all Africans in sight. The killings continued for several days, leaving several thousand dead. The second great massacre occurred in Debre Libanos, one of Ethiopia's most important monasteries, on May 8 (Sbacchi 1985: 194-195). After discovering the links between monks and guerrilla fighters, Graziani ordered the execution of almost 300 monks, whose corpses remained unburied until well after the end of the war (Buxton 1967: 65). Graziani's massacres convinced many

to take up arms against the Italians. Among them was Abebe Aregai, the guerrilla leader who would end up besieged in Zeret (Sbacchi 1985: 201).

The reprisals and mopping-up operations against the guerrilla fighters and their supporters continued in 1938. Historians used to think that, compared to the previous years, 1939 was relatively peaceful due to the exhaustion of both combatants and the changes that had occurred in the political panorama (Sbacchi 1985: 200). The brutal Graziani had been removed in December 1937 and a new, more 'progressive' policy was being implemented by his successor, Amadeo, Duke of Aosta, who tried to combine military action and political negotiation with the partisan chiefs (Del Boca 1969: 225). However, if the character of the political leadership changed, the military did not. The person in charge of coordinating the operations against the Ethiopian resistance was Ugo Cavallero, a general who followed the 'Graziani method' down to the last detail (Sbacchi 1985: 198). The attacks launched by the military in February-April 1939 in the region of Northern Shoa proves how little had changed in the mentality of the fascist commanders.

The historic region of Shoa, in central Ethiopia, was of key strategic importance. It was through Addis Ababa, the country's capital founded in 1886, that the main means of communication (railway and roads) passed and crisscrossed Shoa (Dominioni 2008: 205). The Italians, though, found this to be an area of strong partisan resistance, which was backed by popular support and an extremely rugged terrain. The military could not run the risk of ignoring the guerrillas so close to Addis Ababa and the main arteries of the new empire. Thus, several operations were organized in Shoa after the official end of the war. The most destructive offensive was that between March 14 and April 12, 1939 in the Mofar Valley, near the town of Debre Birhan, 150 km northeast of Addis Ababa. A large number of troops, mostly African *askaris*, were mobilized for this purpose, as well as bombers and artillery. No difference was made between civilians and military. Women, children and the elderly, who were part of the partisan chiefs' retinues, were often bombed and gassed from the air when they tried to escape from the areas invaded by the Italians (Dominioni 2008: 208). Mussolini himself wrote to the commanders in charge of the mopping-up operation that 'no truce is to be given to the runaway' (*che nessuna tregua sia data ai fuggiaschi*) (ibid).

Matteo Dominioni (2006, 2008) has studied in depth the raids conducted by the Italians in the Ethiopian countryside. During his investigations, he discovered documents about massive killings in the cave of Zeret, a remote place where hundreds

of followers of Abebe Aregai had taken refuge (FIGURE 1). The documents describe the attack on the cave with mustard gas and the execution, by machine-gun, of 800 men who had surrendered. Many of the people inside the cave were women, children and old people. The siege was short lasting, April 9th to the 11th. Only 15 men managed to escape during the battle and a handful of women and children reportedly survived as prisoners, according to Italian documents and testimonies of local people.

Dominioni wanted to check in situ the veracity of the Italian documents regarding the events at Zeret. With the help of one of the co-authors of this article (YS), located the site (Dominioni 2006), which had survived virtually untouched since 1939. As a historian, he was interested in confirming the existence of that historical episode (Dominioni 2008), not in the site per se. In 2007, YS informed the other authors of this article about the existence of the cave and pointed out its extraordinary archaeological potential. Thus, in February 2009 we visited together the cave and documented the archaeological remains. Since 2005 we had been recording sites and monuments related to the Italian occupation of Ethiopia (González-Ruibal 2010), but we had not had the opportunity to study places of fascist massacres or guerrilla camps. Zeret offered us the possibility of an insight into both phenomena.

A peasant culture

Manz, the historical province where Zeret is located within the wider Shoa region, is characterized by high plateaus (over 3,000 metres ASL), surrounded by dramatic basalt cliffs and carved out by deep ravines and canyons. The region is inhabited by Amhara peasants, whose culture and livelihood has changed little since the 1930s, despite dramatic political transformations in the country (FIGURE 2). They are Orthodox Christians who figure among the most conservative believers in Ethiopia (Levine 1964: 206). The Manz Amhara adhere to a strong ethos of bravery and systematically resist foreign influences (including schools for a long time). Manz was also the only region of Shoa not to be conquered by the expanding Oromo people coming from the south in the 16th century, and later became the cradle of an important royal line. The father of Emperor Menelik, founder of modern Ethiopia and victor over the Italians at Adwa in 1896, was from this area. The Manz Amhara thus say that their country is *yamara min'ch* and *yänegus agär*, the source of the Amhara people and land of kings (Levine 1964: 206, 211). All these facts part explain the stiff resistance put up by the region against the Italians.

The livelihood of the Amhara is based on intensive plough agriculture, which is unique in Sub-Saharan Africa. Barley is the main cultigen in the highlands, along with sorghum and *teff* (a local cereal) at lower altitudes. Peasants also keep cattle for drawing the plough, milk and butter, and have many sheep, whose wool is used to make blankets (*banna*), needed in the cold afro-alpine weather. Cow dung is used as fuel, as there is very little wood in the region. The Manz Amhara live in circular houses made of stone, in isolated farms or small villages. Domestic structures are arranged forming compounds surrounded by stone walls, topped with brush. In this world of small settlements situated wide apart, markets and parish churches are important focal points for creating and maintaining social relations. In the weekly markets, cattle, agricultural products and handicrafts (pots, calabashes, baskets and iron tools) are bought and sold. Traditionally, Amhara peasants had to pay tributes and tithes to the local lord (*gulteña*), the State and the Church. To meet these impositions, they had to work more land and more intensively than needed for their mere survival. This in turn has produced massive deforestation and the cultivation through terraces of almost every inch of terrain, including steep slopes and ravines (Kebbede 1992; an overview of Amhara traditional culture in Levine 2000: 113-127). This, in brief, was the cultural panorama that the Italians found when they arrived to Shoa in 1936.

Much attention has been paid in recent decades to the mutual shaping of war and the modern city (Virilio 2005). Less space has been devoted to explore the relations between technologically advanced war and pre-modern cultures and landscapes, despite this being a constant since the late 19th century—but see Atkinson (2000) for another example of a traditional society actively resisting modern Italian colonialism. When the relationships between repressive politics, conflict and peasantry are analyzed, they are usually approached from the point of view of resistance as supple adaptation rather than open opposition (e.g. Fitzpatrick 1996). The Amhara of Manz were the representatives of a truly preindustrial society, with highly developed survival skills, tested in war, conflicts and food shortages for centuries. It was only logical that many of them decided to fight colonial invasion, rather than adapt to the new political situation. It is important to note, however, that war in Ethiopia, as any other colonial confrontation, was not unaffected by ethical ambivalences, stances of collaborationism, and ethnic and religious faultlines (cf. Omer 2000; González-Ruibal 2010). Besides, the patriot leaders were often far from being liberal and incorruptible anticolonial fighters: most of them had been exploiters of their peasants before the advent of the war (Caulk 1978). In any

case, this article is not concerned with the often ambiguous leaders of the rebellion (including Abebe Aregai), but with the peasants that resisted colonialism and, within this group, the subalterns among the subalterns: women and children. It is them, as we will see, that are better represented in Zeret's archaeological record.

Remaking life underground: an archaeology of the Ethiopian guerrilla

Those who took refuge in the cave of Zeret tried to reproduce their traditional way of life underground, far from the omnivoyance of the Italian colonial army. This seems to be a characteristic of 20th century war: from the Madrid tube in the 1930s to the present Al-Qaeda bunkers in Afghanistan, all the way through the Vietcong tunnels and the American nuclear shelters of the 1960s. Talking about the Iraq War, Stephen Graham (2004: 18) writes: 'this time... the key is between trans-global, near instantaneous killing power, operating on the fringes of the outer space, and deep, subterranean, terrestrial space'. Except for the outer space, though, there is nothing really new in the War against Terror—an offspring of colonial warfare (Mbembe 2003). For the last hundred years, against the destructiveness of industrial war, the only option of survival has been going underground. And this is what the followers of Abebe Aregai did.

In studying the cave of Zeret, we created a general plan of most of the place and then mapped the main gallery in detail (Figure 3). The first thing that the archaeological remains show is that the number of women in the cave was great. Cooking, preparing and serving coffee, preparing butter, winnowing and grinding cereals, spinning cotton, carrying water and transporting wood are all female activities among the Amhara (Levine 2000: 113-114). The guerrilla fighters would have considered very debasing to carry out those activities themselves: it is known that the guerrilla leaders carried large numbers of female porters and servants (*gamboña*) with them to undertake such tasks as preparing traditional beer (Dominioni 2008: 269). It is female activities that are better preserved in the archaeological record at Zeret, which is not surprising, as they carry out most of the activities needed for the reproduction of Amhara society in normal life. Male activities are ploughing, sowing and threshing, making iron tools, and building houses (Doresse 1972: 270; Levine 2000: 113), none of which are directly represented at Zeret. The other main activity of Amhara men was war: defending the cave was obviously their main task at Zeret.

The organization of space inside the cave seems to indicate that people were ready to spend a long time there. As we said, most of the activities took place either in

the main room, near the mouth of the cave or in the surrounding areas, where at least some light and fresh air arrived. Activities of socialization, such as drinking traditional liquor and coffee, and eating, all took place in the front part, which offered more space and light than the rest of the cave. A comfortable place is particularly necessary for the coffee ceremony, which is a lengthy, sophisticated and ritualized activity among the Amhara (Doresse 1972: 267-268). All cups of coffee (*sini*), which are made of porcelain, appeared near the entrance in Zone I/Area 7 (FIGURE 4). A fragment of a glass bottle used to contain distilled liquor (*areki*) also appeared in this zone, as well as two flat baskets (*gäbäte*) used for serving food and snacks (such as *k'olo*, roasted corn served with coffee).

Cooking was carried out near the mouth of the cave. We identified three hearths in Zone V/Area 8, all of them still with broken pots on top (FIGURE 5). One of them was used for baking *injära*, a fermented crêpe-like bread which is the base of Amhara meals. Fragments of *met'ad* (a flat clay plate used for baking the cereal paste) were broken over the hearth. The function of the other two hearths could be identified by the fragments of *dist*. This is a pot with lid used for cooking *wät*, a sauce variously made of vegetables, beans, meat or chicken that accompanies the *injära*. Innumerable fragments of pottery were found in two large concentrations in Zone V. The distinction in hearths is not trivial. Among the Amhara, as among other Ethiopian peoples, *wät* and *injära* cannot be made in the same place. In normal houses, the kitchen (*mad bet*) is subdivided into two spaces: *wät bet* (house of the sauce) and *injära bet* (house of the flat bread) and, in the case of wealthier households, *tej bet* (house of the honey wine, Doresse 1972: 253). This routine is so deeply ingrained in the cultural behavior of the Amhara that even in disturbing and traumatic circumstances the division is maintained—although we might as well say: *precisely* in disturbing and traumatic circumstances.

The grinding area (Areas 6-8/Zones I-IV) occupies a large space. Thirteen grinding stones have been identified in these areas. There are two different kinds: mortars (*muk'äch'a*) and quern stones (*wäfch'o*). The former (FIGURE 6) are used for grinding coffee, *nug* (an oil seed) and *tälba* (flaxseed). The latter, for grinding *teff*, sorghum and other cereals. Cereals were taken to the cave before winnowing, a task that was performed inside the refuge: four complete winnowing baskets (*säfeid*) were located in Zone II, all near granaries. Many *säfeid*, quite degraded, appeared in Area 2, next to a concentration of granaries.

The granaries are of the *dibiñit* type: a conical, portable container made of mud and straw (FIGURE 7). They could hold up to 50 kg of cereal on average. We documented 81 granaries, but there might have been more, as some granaries were too shattered to be individually counted. Therefore, around five tons of cereal could have been stored in Zeret using the *dibiñit* only. Several holes are visible near the granaries, where the earth was dug up for making the containers (for example, in Zones II and VI). Granaries were kept in the limit of the light zone, removed from the entrance. As we pointed, there are four main areas of grain storage (Areas 2, 3, 6 and 9). By far, the area with the highest number of granaries is Area 3, where we were able to count 46 *dibiñit* (FIGURE 7, above). Along with the grain, other things were stored. In Area 9/Zone VI, we found an accumulation of cotton, ready to be spun and some calabashes for butter (*k'il*). In front of the granaries of Area 3, there were many broken pots, mostly *gan* and *ensera*, which are amphoroid vessels used for storing beer and water. The *gan*, though, is much bigger than the *ensera*, which was the traditional means of transporting water from the river to the village (FIGURE 8). Storing water and beer (*t'alla*) was very important for survival inside the cave. The latter, made of *teff*, barley or other cereals, is quite nutritious. Many fragments of *gan* and *ensera* turned up in Areas 6-7/Zones Ia-c and in Area 1. The many beer containers also reveal the presence of many women who could look after the production.

Some animals were doubtlessly kept inside the cave. Many faunal remains were documented, most of them in Zones Ia, III and IV—the place where food was prepared and eaten (cf. FIGURE 3). The great majority of the bones belonged to cows or oxen (a complete skull turned up in Zone IV), with other, fewer, remains pertaining to sheep or goats. A few bones of the horse family were also identified. The animals were perhaps kept in Area 4, where the ground surface was covered with straw and a few skeletal parts turned up (including a horse shoulder blade). In all likelihood, people slept in the areas 4 and 5 in close proximity to animals to keep warm, because the weather is very cold at night. They also could have slept in the easternmost part of Area 9 and Area 10, where few artifacts were discovered.

The remains at Zeret give us a rare glimpse into the daily life of a guerrilla base. They are extremely important for the way in which they reveal the presence of women and their contribution to the war effort. The fact that women were fundamental in carrying out daily activities, however, does not mean that they did not have more active roles. Many women fought side by side with men, some of them in leading positions

(Del Boca 1969: 243, n. 8; Hilton 2007), as in other colonial wars (Cooke 1994). What is particularly interesting about Zeret is that it offers a set of practices which are systematically forgotten not just in conventional history, but in the narrations of the historical actors themselves, both men and women (cf. Hilton 2007). Thus, what Zeret manifests is much more than forgotten subjects in history. It is an epistemic and political void. This void is the place of the unrepresentable, that shakes history's foundations.

The concept of 'maintenance activities' is useful in this context. It was developed from the late 1990s by a group of feminist Spanish archaeologists (Picazo 1997) to encompass 'a set of practices that involve the sustenance, welfare and effective reproduction of all the members of a social group' (González Marcén et al. 2008: 3). Such activities include the basic daily tasks that regulate and stabilize social life, such as 'care giving, feeding and food processing, weaving and cloth manufacture, hygiene, public health and healing, socialization of children and the fitting out and organization of related spaces' (ibid.). Maintenance practices have been usually downplayed by archaeologists and historians not just because they are the kind of activities carried out by women until the present, but also because they entail continuity, collectivity and routinization instead of individualism, change and progress, which is associated to men and regarded as positive.

Since the Annales School there has been a growing conscience among historians that what does not change is also a legitimate object of interest (Braudel 1979). However, change is still very much at the hearth of archaeology and history as sciences. As Hernando (2008: 13) reminds us: '(m)aintenance activities are vital for the support of the group, but they are structurally opposite to activities that are associated with individuality and power. Because of this, they have not been recognized by History'. The names history tends to preserve, then, are those of highly individualized men who developed public activities. In the case of the Ethiopian war, the protagonists of the struggle for liberation are the patriot leaders, such as Abebe Aregai, those who took up arms or fought in the diplomatic front. Actually, the struggle for colonial emancipation in Africa is often cast in aggressive, masculinist terms and tropes, such as in Frantz Fanon's work (2004; see Chow 1999). Archaeological remains somehow vindicate the subaltern who has been doubly effaced: in colonial narratives and in the epic male-centred accounts produced in the former colonies after independence. As Spivak (1988: 288) has aptly put it: 'The woman is doubly in shadow'.

Traces of massacre: reconstructing the attack

The social world that women took pains to maintain underground was not meant to last. In a few days, the inhabitants of Zeret would be almost completely annihilated. Written sources, oral data and the archaeological record allow us to depict quite precisely the assault on the cave by the Italian army.

Once the Italians located the rebel troops in Zeret, they attacked the mouth of the cave with artillery and machine-gun fire. The effects of artillery fire are difficult to identify today, because columnar jointed basalt, when impacted, has a prismatic fracture that is hardly distinguishable from natural fall (FIGURE 9). The shells, however, also destroyed most of the defensive wall that protected the entrance to the cave and this is clearly visible as large heaps of rubble (see figure 5). Given the probable difficulty in taking the place without suffering many casualties, the Italians requested flamethrowers and mustard gas and even considered blowing out the facade of the cave and burying the patriots and their families alive. Mustard gas was eventually dispatched from the port of Massawa (Eritrea) in the guise of a C500T bomb (Dominioni 2008: 210). This was an aerial gas bomb widely used by the Italians during the war and after (Del Boca 1996, 2010: 102-152; Longo 2005: 829-830). Mustard gas was the most lethal of the gases employed during the First World War. The chemicals attack the skin provoking severe blisters and hemorrhages and, as they enter the organism, they cause internal bleeding and peel off the mucous membrane of the bronchial tubes. It may take several extremely painful days to die. The cave of Zeret prevented the use of airplanes for delivering the gas and forced the fascist troops to resort to other methods. Mortars were used elsewhere in the Mofar Valley (Dominioni 2008: 213), but in Zeret another, more effective method was devised.

What the Italians did was to transfer the contents of the C500T bomb to twelve *bidoncini* ('cans'). These were tied to a rope, which had attached an electrical cable for detonation. The complex operation of bombing the cave was carefully described by the main protagonist, Sergeant Major Boaglio, whose memoirs were discovered by Matteo Dominioni. Boaglio was ordered to abseil at night the vertical cliff where the entrance to the cave opened (see FIGURE 9). At dawn on April 9, he threw a charge near the cave's entrance. Simultaneously, a 65 mm howitzer started to fire tear gas shells. Despite the hell into which the cavern must have been transformed, the Ethiopians resisted for another full day. Only at dawn of the 11th did they, not before attempting

another escape the previous night. The memory of the act, and in particular Boaglio's descent by rope, is still vividly remembered among the inhabitants of the village. During our survey, we discovered an intriguing piece—a flat aluminum ring—next to the mouth of the cave (FIGURE 10, see Figure 4 for location in map). We showed photographs of the piece to three military experts without telling them about the actual context and supposed nationality of the find. They all concurred in saying that it was a safety pin from an Italian 2-kg incendiary aerial bomb from the 1930s. This kind of small bombs was often used in irregular ways, for instance by replacing the incendiary liquid with high explosive or gas.

As soon as the Italians started the siege, most if not all the non-combatants must have sought refuge in the interior galleries. This, however, did not prevent many women, children and old men from being killed. The highest concentration of human remains was located in Area 5 of our map (see figure 3), followed in number only by the neighbouring Area 4 (which leads to the former). In Area 5, remains of at least 11 individuals were identified. At least two of them were women, as shown by the clothes that were well-preserved, and another a child. A fourth individual was an old person. In Area 4 two fragments from the cranial vault of two small children (under 24 months) were located, as well as the almost complete cranium of a third child, with remains of skin still attached to it (FIGURE 11). More human remains were found near the entrance (Area 7, one individual) and in Area 2 (a skull with spine and skin).

Despite the fact that many skeletal remains still preserved large patches of skin and that clothes were plentiful, most of the bones were quite degraded, disarticulated and broken, which has to be interpreted as evidence of scavengers, perhaps hyenas. Thus, although three skeletons in Area 5 appear quite articulated, all of them have lost a substantial part of their bones and no one had their head in situ (FIGURE 12). The absence of shoulder blades and pelvises, the scarcity of vertebrae and the small number of ribs, as compared to the total number of individuals, clearly points to the intervention of scavengers after the killings with poison gas. In fact, some of the remains show marks of gnawing, such as the epiphyses of the femurs in one of the adult skeletons of Area 5. The skull from Area 2 was broken by a scavenger as well. The large quantity of corpses available to the carnivores probably explains that the remains were not more scavenged and disturbed than they were. We have to take into account that, apart from the people that died in the cave, at least 800 people had been executed outside and their corpses must have littered the entrance to the cavern and the surrounding cliffs and

ravines. On the other hand, the fact that the skin has been preserved in several cases can be attributed not only to environmental conditions (the area is cold and dry), but especially to the combined effects of the mustard gas and smoke. Once in the soil, the mustard gas remains active for a week. This might have prevented the entrance of carnivores, thus helping to preserve the tissue.

Clothes, either alone or associated to human remains, are abundant in different parts of the cave. Area 5 is the one that furnished more clothes, most of them in association to skeletal parts. All fabrics found in this area are partially burned (FIGURE 13).

In all, remains from 18 individuals could be singled out, which is small when compared to the estimated number of residents in Zeret. The limited number of casualties inside the cavern, however, corroborates the information provided by Italian army documents, as they state that most of the patriots were led outside and executed. Women and children were separated from the men and their fate is unknown. In all likelihood many of them succumbed as a result of the exposure to the gas days after the surrender. Others died in all probability while trying to escape the cave, in the steep valley that leads to it. Their remains, like those that were executed by machine-gun, must have been eaten and dispersed by scavengers.

Strangely enough, only another piece of military debris appeared during the survey of the cave—apart from the safety pin from the bomb: a shell casing from a 10.4 mm x 47R Vetterli-Vitali rifle. This was a model from 1870, widely used by the Italians until the turn of the century but soon replaced by the Mannlicher-Carcano and Mauser. The Ethiopian army, however, had many Vetterli in use in the 1930s, most of which had been bought during Emperor Menelik's time from 1883 onwards (Pankhurst 1968: 590), and they can still be seen being used in remote parts of the country. As with other European rifles, they were culturally appropriated by the Ethiopians, who renamed them. The Vetterli became *Wächefo* (thunder) in Abyssinia (Hilton 2007: 31). The shell casing is obviously related to the defense of the cave by the patriots. The question is why did only one item turn up? The most reasonable explanation for the absence of shell casings is that the Ethiopians collected and reused them, as they still do today, being as they were scarce and precious objects. During the war, the making and use of recycled bullets (*kilis*) was widespread (Hilton 2007: 61, 70). We have to keep in mind that the main source of unused ammunition for the patriots, before the outset of the Second World War, was the attacks to Italian troops and depots. Those patriots who managed to

escape the siege of Zeret undoubtedly took many cartridges with them, while the rest surrendered their ammunition to the enemy after the capture of the cave.

According to our local informants, no one from the village set foot in the cave after the attack. The place is considered to be inhabited by evil spirits (*kifu mänfäs*). Besides, the cave is off the beaten track and very difficult to access. This explains the large amount of materials that could be identified and their location in situ. However, all pots and granaries appeared smashed. Even if some people did get into the cave after 1939, it would have taken them an enormous effort to vandalize the whole place to such a degree. The action of scavengers does not account for the scale of the destruction, either. It is more logical to consider that the Italian troops devastated the guerrilla base inside the cave after they left, breaking everything that might be reused either by resistance fighters or the local peasants. The patterns of breakage show intentionality (cf. FIGURE 8). Destruction, however, was probably not carried out just for the sake of it, but also in the search of valuables: looting was legal in the Italian army in Africa until it was banned in 1940 (Sbacchi 1985: 196). The tactics of scorched earth were applied to traditional villages by the Italians, who meticulously recorded the number of houses they burnt, so why would they spare this troglodyte refuge? On the other hand, since at least the 1890s, the regular procedure in punitive expeditions led by colonial armies in Africa was to be as destructive as possible, without distinguishing civilians and guerrillas, with the aim of setting an example for the rest of the population.

Discussion: the ethics of unearthing fascist colonialism

In our opinion, it is important to ‘unearth fascism’, for several reasons. First, because material remains are so important in shaping the collective memory of fascism in Ethiopia. Archaeological vestiges are not innocent: they are part of a prevalent remembrance of the Italian occupation, one that has privileged monumental works over much less visible traces of abuse and conflict. Norindr (1996: 158) points out that in Indochina, the focus of neocolonial imagination is on French ‘ornate beaux-arts buildings’. In Ethiopia, the mythologies of the Italian occupation rest upon modernist houses, roads and bridges. Significantly, during our fieldwork in the region of Gambela (western Ethiopia) most buildings attributed to the Italians were (wrongly) identified as schools, in keeping with the idea propagated by the colonizers themselves that they were spreading civilization. This clearly goes against historical facts: the Italian policy in the Horn of Africa was, even before the advent of fascism, guided by the maxim: ‘no

schooling for Africans' (Barrera 2003: 90). Even in ruins, the ideological function of some monuments and buildings continues unabated. They are part of the colonial unconscious that many African scholars strive to shake off. As archaeologists, we can help deconstruct this colonial unconscious by revealing the truth of the buildings and infrastructures as a technology of power, control and exploitation, by opposing traces of massacres to the clean surface of the fascist monuments.

On the other hand, the European authors of this article consider that they have a responsibility concerning the misdeeds of colonialism in Africa. Like Italy, Spain also resorted to a strategy of scorched earth in its colonies, including the use of poison gas (Kunz and Müller 1990). As in other Mediterranean countries, the Spanish massacres in Morocco and Equatorial Guinea (Pando Despierto 1999; Guernín 2008) have been deleted from cultural memory and replaced by nostalgic accounts of the empire. We have to help construct a critical memory that reviews the works of totalitarianism and racism in other continents, because our societies have to learn about a history that has been so often forgotten, sanitized or sweetened through popular films, books and magazines. 'These new visual and textual formations... today shape the mental geography and the imaginary of people who travel blindly and unencumbered through geographic and historical space. As temporal distance increases, these popular constructions may even, one day, be regarded as factual truth and assimilated as knowledge by those who have only a remote inkling of colonial history' (Norindr 1996: 158). By exposing colonialism, we may contribute to rethink its legacies in the present. Zeret is a powerful argument against fascism and colonialism, perhaps because the remains illustrate in an intimate way civilian, domestic life (cooking, eating, grinding cereals), shattered in an instant by the minions of a remote ideology. They tell us about normal people—honest peasants, like those one can see today in the neighboring villages—trying to get on with their daily lives against the odds. The same image of peasant life destroyed by fascism in an instant appears in other places: the kitchen implements abandoned in Oradour-sur-Glane (Olivier 2001: 182-185), the broken pots and ladles of Lidice (Stehlik 2004: 80-98). The archaeological signature of totalitarian reprisals bears the same mark.

In relation to this point, we can talk of an 'extended ethics' that goes beyond the living and concerns itself with every human being of the past, present and future. This is in line with Derrida's concept of a justice which 'beyond right or law, rises up in the very respect owed to whoever is not, no longer or not yet, living, presently living'

(Derrida 2006: 121). The philosopher argued that no justice seems possible ‘without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism’ (his italics). This could be properly called ‘archaeological ethics’, a truly archaeological one that breaks the temporalities of conventional ethics, its narrow temporal limits. This ethics beyond linear time were already envisioned by Walter Benjamin when he wrote that the only historian able of ‘setting alight the sparks of hope in the past’ could be the one convinced that ‘not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious’. Benjamin’s enemy—fascism—might be dead, but its spectre reappears under different cloaks today. To those who consider that looking back into the errors of the past is useless, we can tell, with Derrida: ‘The future can only be for ghosts. And the past’ (Derrida 2006: 45).

Conclusion: on the subaltern’s voice

Our work at Zeret has not only unearthed a fascist massacre. It has also dug up an alternative history (rather than story) of resistance, one in which forgotten people have the main role: the women and children. Their vital contribution is seen in the small, everyday objects that made resistance—and eventually victory—possible: the maintenance activities materialized in pots, coffee cups and mud granaries. It is actually another temporality that is encapsulated in those objects, which is related to what Assmann (2001: 35) calls ‘the cyclical time of regeneration’, opposed to the linear time of history. ‘In every society, writes Assman, there are institutions, sites or loci of history and account-giving as there are sites or loci of cyclical regeneration’. As we have shown in this article, the loci of history have been traditionally privileged over those of regeneration—the loci of the subaltern.

The site of Zeret also raises the issue of the uncanny presence of the subaltern. In her famous essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ Spivak (1988: 287) writes: ‘Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly affected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is ‘evidence’. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological

construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow'. The point is not to make the subaltern speak, as there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak (Spivak 1988: 307). Yet there is always the temptation of forcing a discourse into the subaltern, a temptation from which archaeology itself is not free—for example, through invented narratives (Joyce 2002; Given 2004). Spivak (1988: 295) warns against these well-meant attempts which paradoxically 'cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization'. We may try to make women speak, but women 'will be as mute as ever' (ibid.). Against this epistemic violence of the discourse, archaeology should dwell silently beyond the limits of the speakable. We have not tried to make the women of Zeret talk: we have shown the spectral traces of their daily activities and have vindicated their importance. Yet we cannot (want not, should not) give women a voice.

Through working with the debris of the past, archaeology can avoid the temptation of ventriloquism and adopt a more modest yet crucial mission: let the void of the unrepresentable open.

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Figures

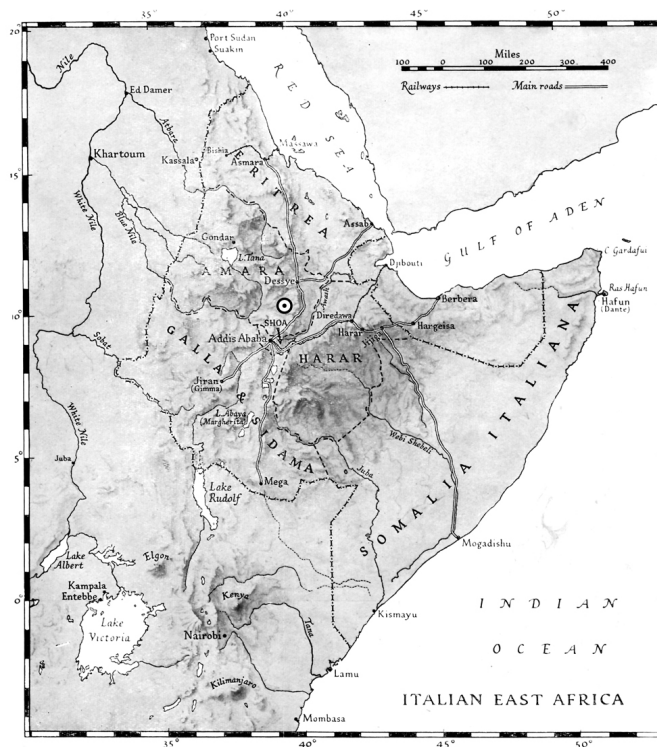


Figure 1. Map of Italian East Africa (AOI) with the location of Zeret (after Rennell of Rod 1948).



Figure 2. A typical Amhara village near Zeret.

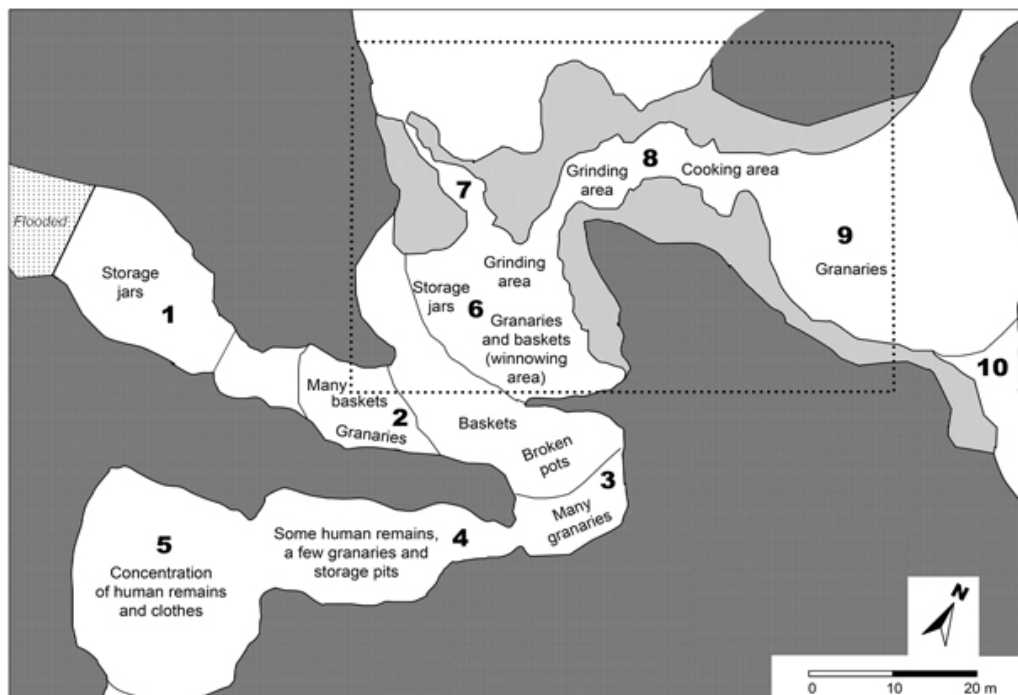
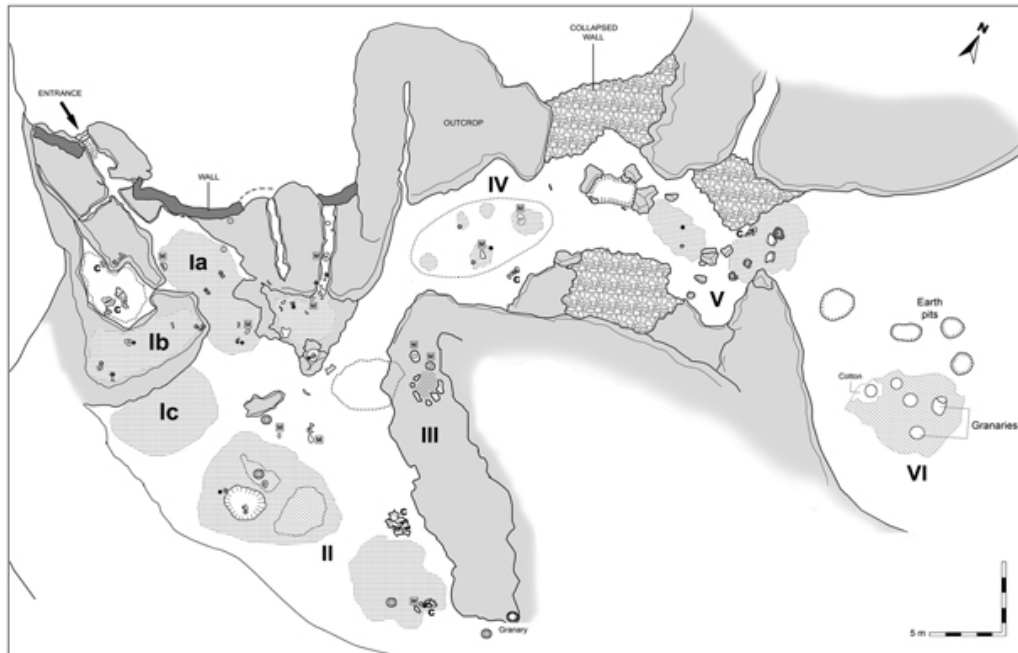


Figure 3. General map of the cave and detail of the front space.

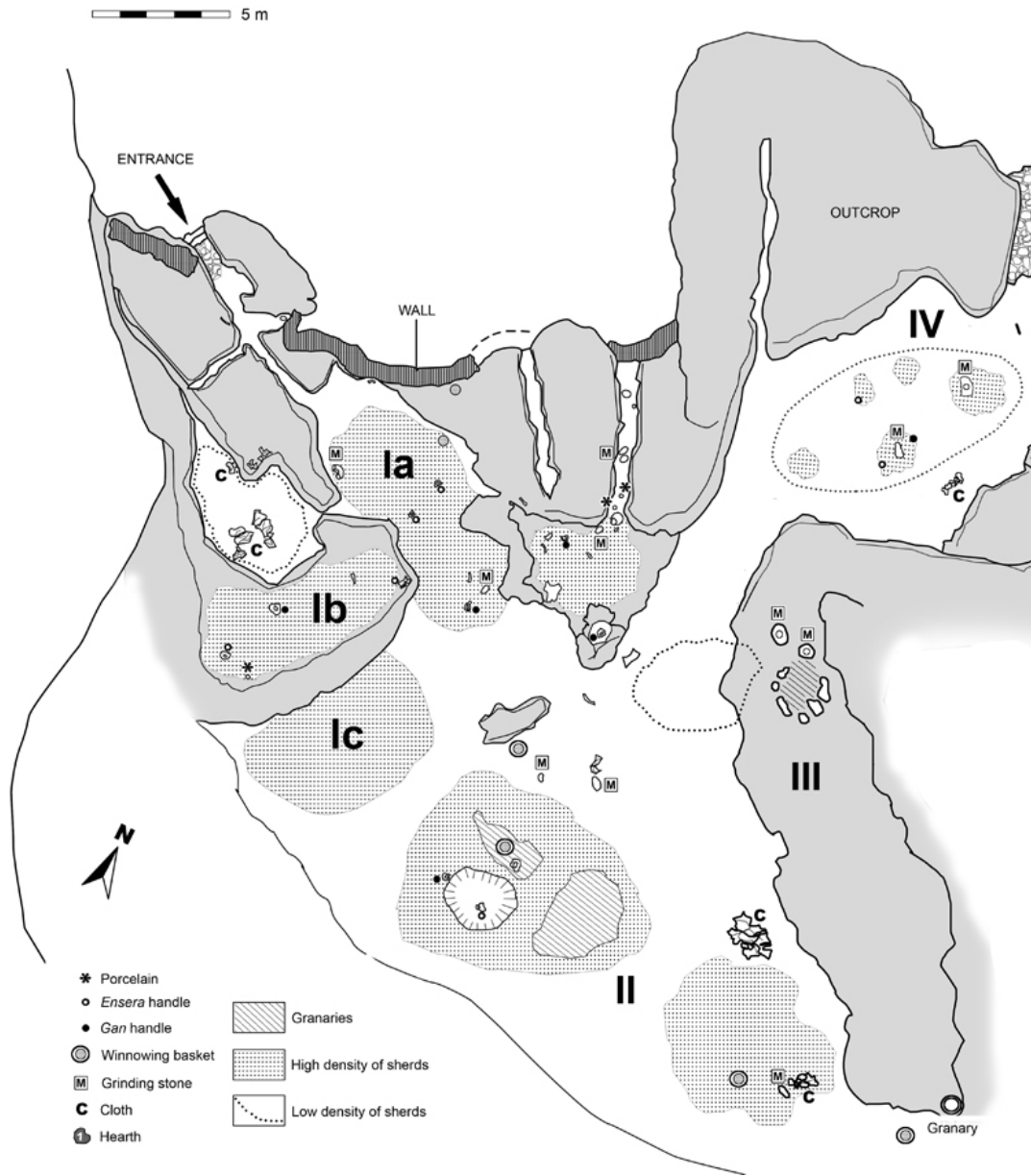


Figure 4. Detail of the west side of the front space.

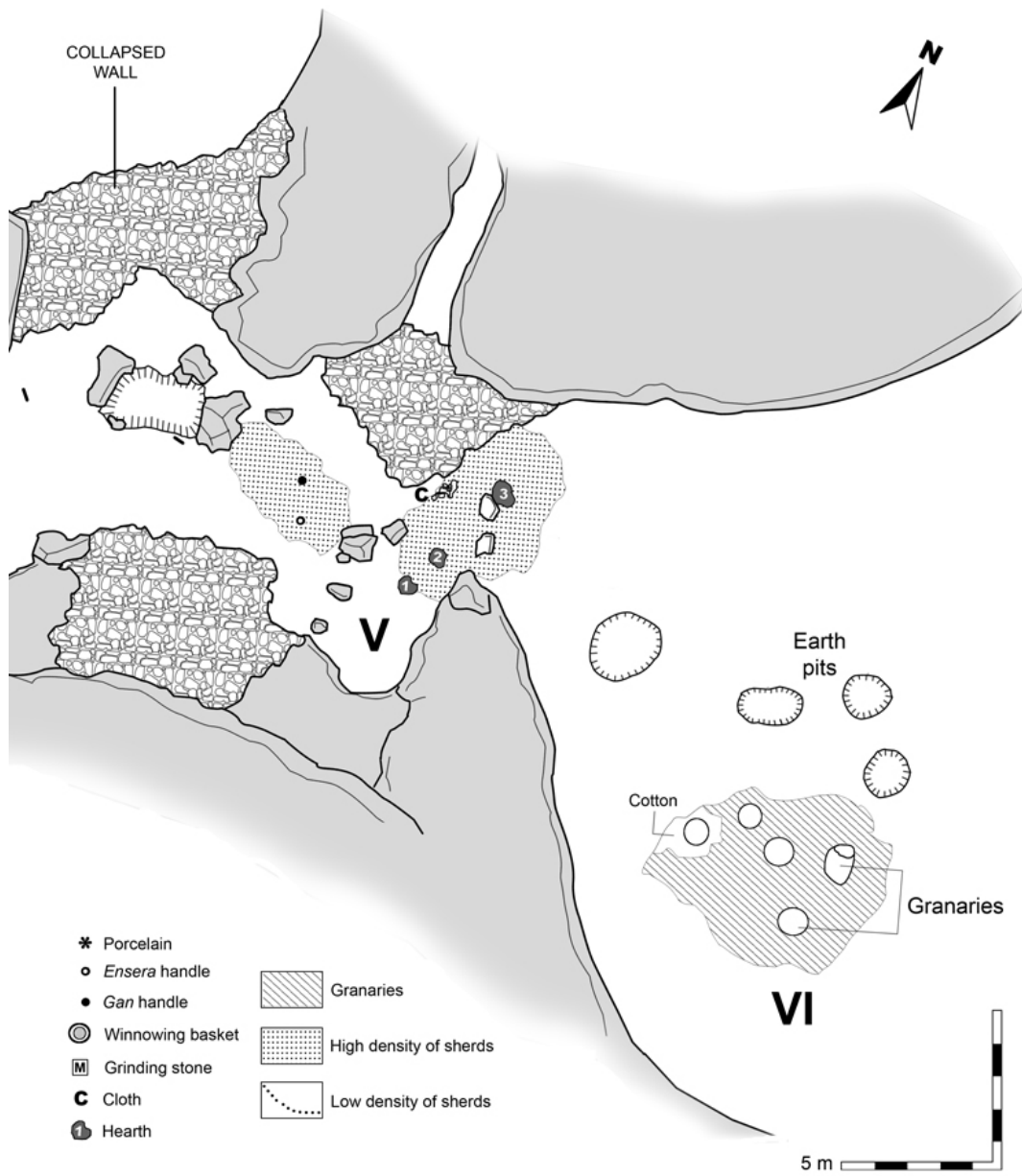


Figure 5. Detail of the east side of the front space.



Figure 6. Mortar for oil seeds with broken pots around.



Figure 7. Mud granaries, as found in Zeret-Area 3 (above) and in an Oromo village today (below).



Figure 8. Broken *ensera* in Area 1.



Figure 9. General view of the basalt facade where the cave of Zeret is located (to the right).



Figure 10. Safety pin from a 2-kg bomb used to deliver mustard gas into the cave.



Figure 11. Skull of a child from Area 4.



Figure 12. Human remains in Area 5 with large part of the back skin preserved but without skull.



Figure 13. Traditional cotton scarf from area 5.