

## ETHIOPIA

### A Christian Frontier: Archaeological survey of a religious landscape in Metema, NW Ethiopia (ca, 1400-1800)

Alfredo González-Ruibal  
Institute of Heritage Sciences  
Spanish National Research Council (Incipit-CSIC), Spain  
alfredo.gonzalez-ruibal@incipit.csic.es

Álvaro Falquina-Aparicio  
Archaeologist, Spain  
falquina@gmail.com

Chalachew Simenew  
Amhara National Regional State Culture & Tourism Bureau, Bahr Dar, Ethiopia  
chalachew.simeneh@gmail.com

Hailemeleket Agizew  
Authority for the Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia  
hailethegreat@yahoo.com

#### Introduction

The project “Archaeological and Ethnoarchaeological survey of Metema and Qwara (NW Ethiopia)” began in 2013 aimed to understand the long-term history of the borderland between Sudan and Ethiopia. The area is not only a political and cultural border zone, but also a religious one –between Christianity and Islam, monotheism and paganism. In this article, we describe a religious landscape that developed along the middle Gendewuha valley (Metema district) between the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The monastic sites that were part of this religious landscape were, for a very

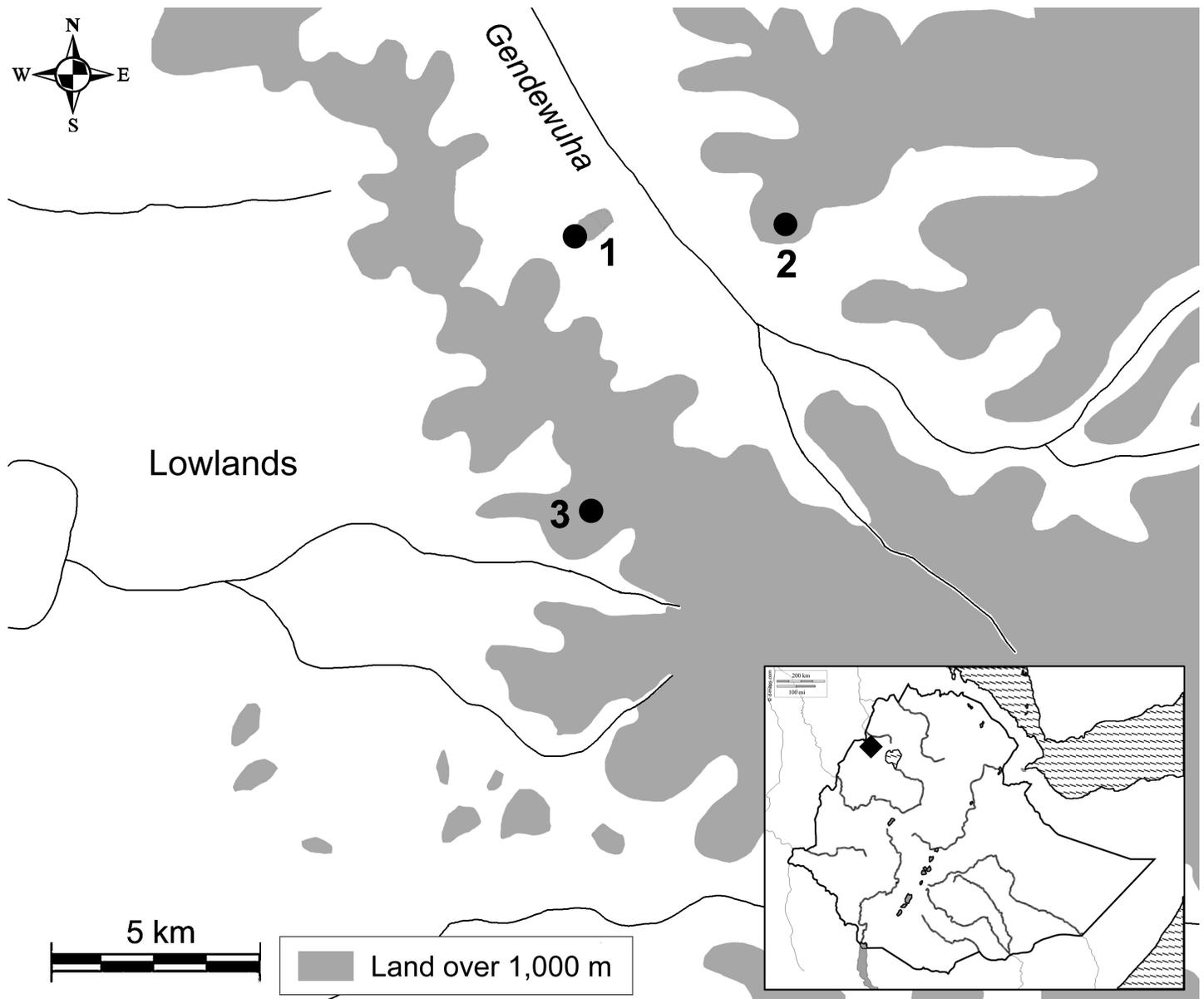
long time, the westernmost bastion of Christianity, facing the “pagan” and Muslim lowlands. Their presence has to be understood in relation to the westward expansion of the Ethiopian Kingdom. Our archaeological survey contributes to the knowledge of the borderlands of the Ethiopian state, monastic landscapes, and the material culture of the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the best represented period at the sites that we have studied. In this article we briefly describe the main monastic center in the valley, Mahbär Silasse, which is still active, and examine the archaeological remains of two further sites that have been abandoned: Gännätä Maryam and Ayzenbil.

#### A Christian landscape in the Ethiopian periphery

The Gendewuha river is a tributary of the Atbara from the left. Our archaeological survey that took place in its middle valley found no trace of human presence between the LSA and the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. This coincides with oral information provided by the current inhabitants, Christian Amhara from Ch’ilga (the *wereda* or district adjacent to Metema from the west), stating that all families arrived to the valley during the last three generations. Local peasants also note the abundance of old religious centers in Ch’ilga, where 33 churches and monasteries exist, and their scarcity in Metema: indeed, only half a dozen pre-19<sup>th</sup> century religious sites exist in the entire district. The same impression of an empty land is transmitted by historical sources. As late as the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the region was a hunting ground for the Ethiopian nobility and kings. It is reported that Emperor Iyasu I hunted giraffes along the Gendewuha and Shinfa rivers in 1737-38 (Budge 1928: 452-453), whereas the Atbara was teeming with large game until the 1940s. This isolated character of the area, however, was perceived as an asset and not as a disadvantage by Ethiopian monastic communities wishing to withdraw from the profane world. Thus, in the Gendewuha valley the monks created a religious landscape centered in the monastery of Mahbär Silasse. During our fieldwork, we visited the monastery and explored the ruins of two other sites associated with it: Gännätä Maryam and Ayzenbil (Figure 1).

#### Mahbär Silasse

Mahbär Silasse (meaning “association of the Trinity” in Amharic), erected on a steep mountain (1,262 m.a.s.l) towering over the Gendewuha valley (850-800 m), is a remote and isolated monastery that follows very strict

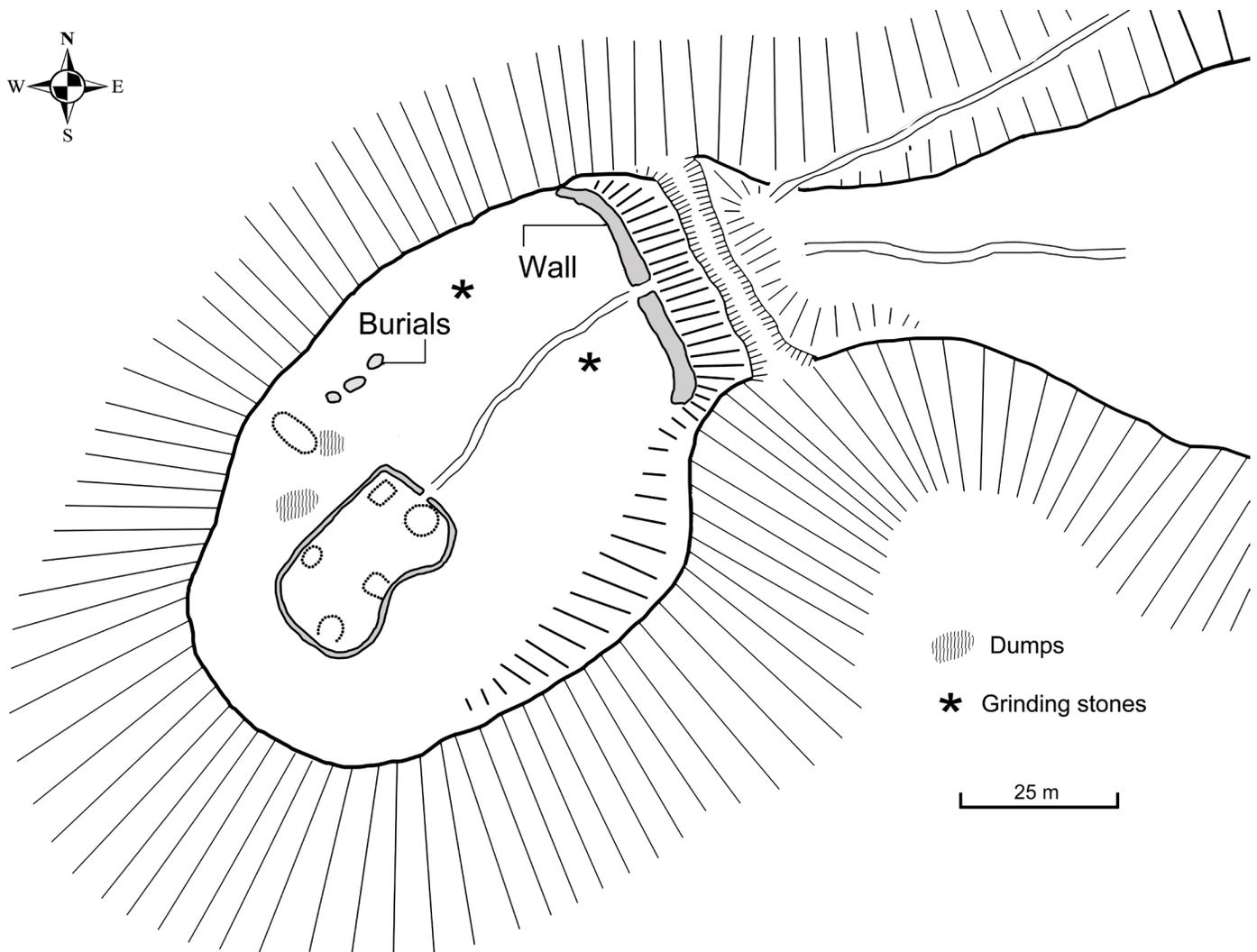


**Figure 1.** The religious landscape of the middle Gendewuha valley: 1. Mahbär Silasse; 2. Gännätä Maryam; 3. Ayzenbil.

monastic rules. Such rules include several prohibitions, such as women entering the site, consuming water or food along the way to the monastery, using shoes, making maps and drawings, taking photographs or accessing the church.

Little is known historically about the place and oral traditions, myths and data coming from academic and popular historiography are conflicting. According to tradition, the monastery would have been founded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Abba Sälama (Saint Frumentius, d. 383), to whom is attributed the evangelization of the Kingdom of Axum. According to the same folklore Mahbär Silasse

would have been razed to the ground three or four times, by as many key characters in Ethiopian history: Gudit in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Ahmed Grañ in the 16<sup>th</sup>, the Sudanese Mahdist in the 1880s, plus a fourth destruction attributed either to the Italians or the British during the Second World War. Interestingly, the episodes of destruction are related to traumatic moments in the history of Ethiopia, when the faith of the country was at risk: Gudit, Grañ, Mahdists and Italians were all followers of other religions (paganism/Judaism, Islam, Catholicism). Destructions associated with Grañ’s jihad, in particular, are very common throughout Ethiopia (Fauvelle-Aymar 2012: 317).

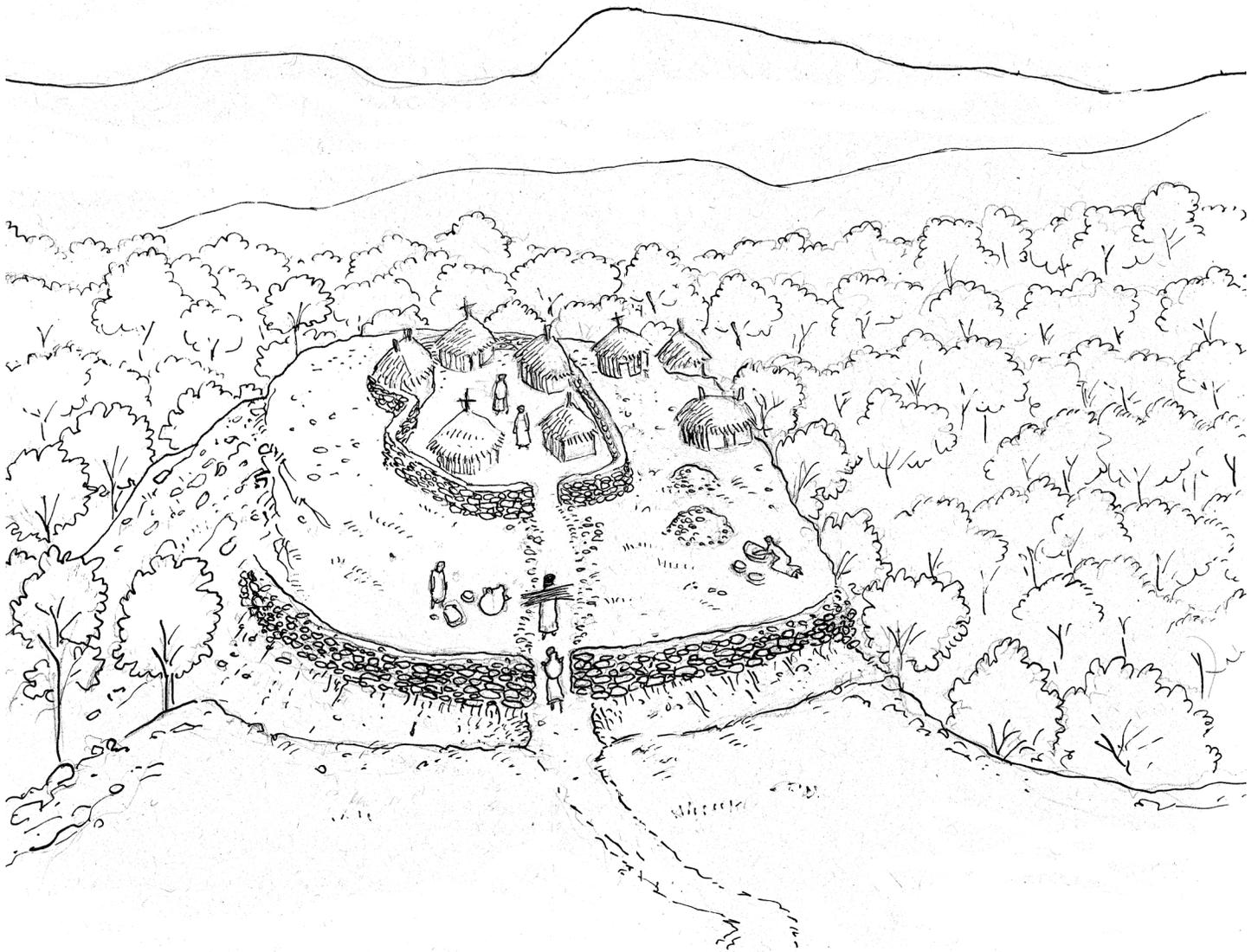


**Figure 2.** Plan of Gännätä Maryam.

From the few available historical sources, we know that Mahbär Sīlasse played an important role in religious debates. According to James Bruce (1791: 319), the superior of the monastery was the head of the order of Saint Eustathius (Ewost’atewos). Abba Ewost’atewos (1273- 1352) was the founder of a rigid monastic line that encouraged eremitic life. This implied the foundation of monasteries in isolated and inhospitable places, as in earlier Christian times (see Finneran 2012: 253-254), the mortification of the flesh, respect for norms of the old gospel, such as the Sabbath (Doresse 1972: 176), and a particularly aggressive attitude towards vestiges of paganism, which implied the destruction of “pagan” shrines (Tadesse Tamrat 1972: 206-209; for the use of the concept of “paganism” see Fauvelle and Poissonnier 2016). The location of Mahbär Sīlasse, in a remote

place surrounded by people perceived as pagans, tallies well with Ewost’atewos ideas of a return to eremitism and it is probably to his times that we should trace the establishment of the monastery. This could, in fact, be contemporary with the first attempts at evangelizing the Agäw of western Ethiopia during the reign of Amdä S’iyon (1314-1344; Tadesse Tamrat 1988: 12). Monasteries were not only a tool to Christianize the new subjects of the Ethiopian Empire, but also a means to incorporate them into the state (Derat 2003: 79-81).

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mahbär Sīlasse was still the center of the monastic order of Saint Eustathius (Bruce 1791: 319). Little information exists for the place afterwards, although we know that the future emperor and unifier of Ethiopia, Kassa Haylu (Tewodros



**Figure 3.** Hypothetical reconstruction of the monastery. The mountain range in the background is where Mahbär Silasse is located.

II) was sent there to study (ca. 1830). Unfortunately, the church was totally reconstructed in 2013 and no ancient architectonic elements can be identified in the exterior. A photograph taken during the reconstruction, however, shows a rectangular stone building that might be the *makdas* or *sancta sanctorum*. Most of the buildings visible today in Mahbär Silasse are recent and made of perishable materials (wood, thatch, bamboo) or industrial ones (corrugated sheet). They include the monks' houses and several communal buildings (refectory, kitchen, latrines). Each monk builds his own home, which is a circular thatched-hut made of bamboo. There are two abandoned stone cisterns, one of which is attributed to Empress Zawditu (r. 1916-1930). Currently, the monastic

community oscillates between 350 and 400 people as there is no commitment of permanence for members. Today, Mahbär Silasse possesses a territory of ca. 20,000 hectares, but in the past it was larger as it included wider areas where peasants had to pay taxes to the monastery. Mähber Silasse was the center of a wider ecclesiastical landscape that included other religious establishments, such as Gännätä Maryam and Ayzenbïl, where monks and nuns cultivated the land, raised cattle and produced honey.

### **Gännätä Maryam**

Gännätä Maryam was founded as a female monastery. However, the date of its foundation or of its abandonment is unclear. Regarding the latter, there are

two traditions: local peasants consider that the monastery was destroyed by invading Mahdist troops at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The version that we gathered at Mahbär Sīlasse, instead, situates the end of the site during the time of Emperor Susīnyos (r. 1607-1632). Yet this ruler is a *topos* in Ethiopian cultural memory and cannot be taken as a good chronological marker. The reasons given for the abandonment are in both cases related to a sexual issue. In the local folklore, a man had sexual intercourse with one of the nuns, a sin that was punished by God with the Mahdist attack. In the monastic version, the abbot of Mahbär Sīlasse decided to create a new female monastery far away to avoid temptations amid the male community.

The site occupies the edge of a spur (963 m.a.s.l.) that emerges from an isolated hill concealing the monastery from those travelling along the Gendewuha valley. The place is naturally defended by steep slopes and has been further fortified with the construction of a ditch and a basalt wall which cut off the isthmus that joins together spur and hill (Figure 2). Both the fortifications and the location indicate a desire for protection and concealment. The name Gännätä Maryam means “Mary’s Paradise” and is used in other monastic foundations. The location of the monastery seems to obey to an attempt to reproduce paradise on Earth: in the inhospitable lowlands, Gännätä Maryam is located in an idyllic landscape of rivers and green forests. The site is 100 meters long and 75 meters wide and covers a surface of about 0.5 hectares. In fact, only half that surface would have been really occupied, since the slope is steeper to the sides. The interior of the monastery has a kidney-shaped enclosure surrounded by a low, 80-cm wide basalt wall.

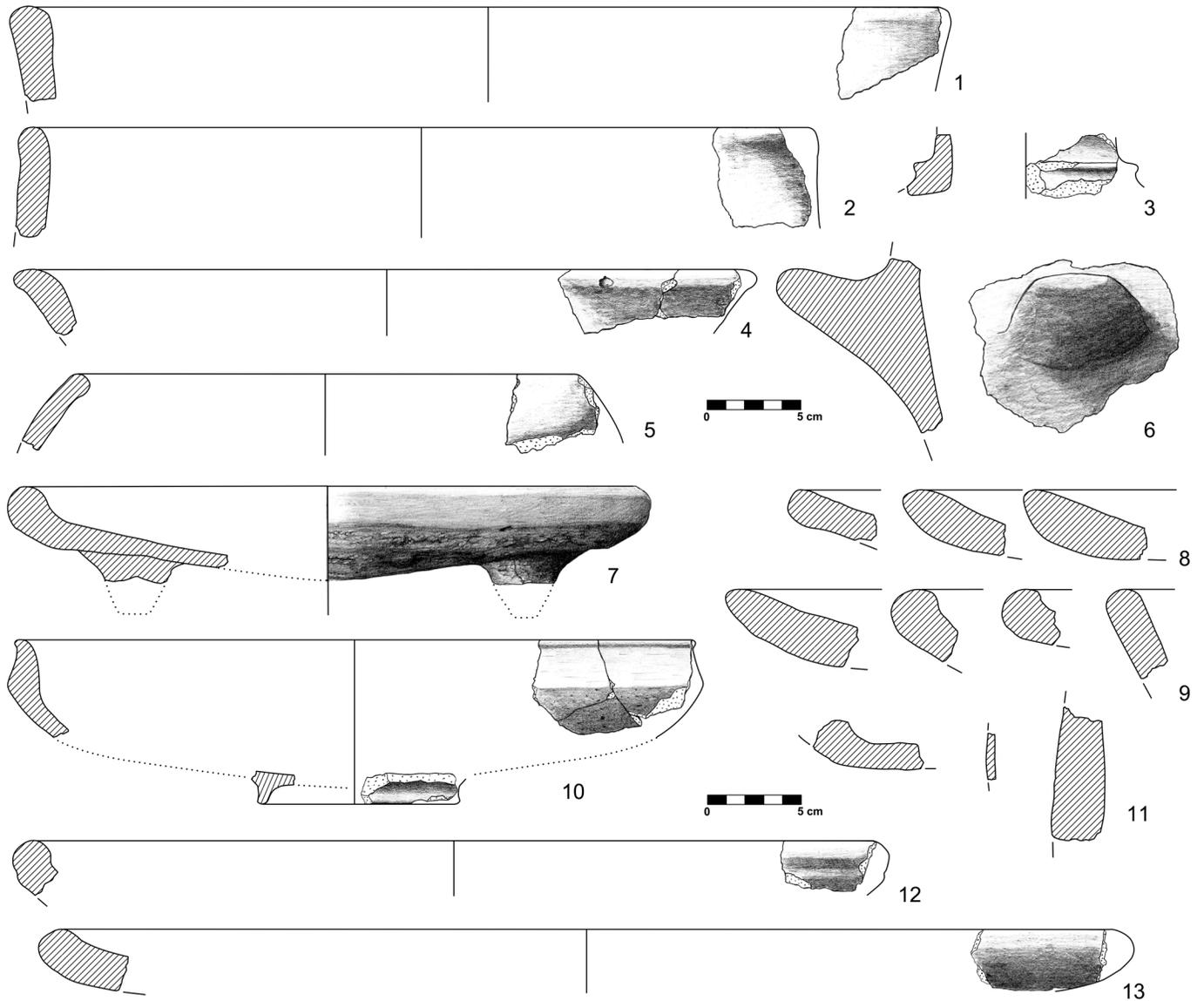
Inside this enclosure, the stone foundations of five structures can be seen. Seemingly, they all had walls made of perishable materials (Figure 3). We conducted a test pit in one of the structures, but found only one undiagnostic sherd. A line of medium-sized basalt blocks demarcated the structure, which was rectangular, had wattle-and-daub walls and a floor of packed, reddish earth. We found another hut foundation, oval in this case, outside the enclosure. Near this hut, we discovered two pottery dumps.

The nuns conducted a variety of activities in the open space between the inner enclosure and the defensive wall. We documented two grinding stones and handles of storage jars (*gan* in Amharic). Some of the members of the

community were probably buried in this area also: there are three stone cairns that we tentatively identify with tombs, given their shape and size. Since the monastery was feminine, it lacked a proper church. It probably had only a chapel (*s’älot bet*), which could be any of the structures that exist in the inner enclosure. The others would be the nuns’ huts and the kitchen. The *teketo bet*, the shack where they had to retreat when they were menstruating to avoid polluting a sacred space (Pankhurst 2000: 7), was probably situated outside the central enclosure.

The pottery from Gännätä Maryam is consistent with the Ethiopian highland tradition (Figure 4). The problem is that this has changed little in general terms since ca. 1200 AD (Dombrovski 1972). The assemblage that we have recorded, however, bears strong resemblances with the Gondarine sites around the Lake T’ana (Torres forthcoming) and with the pottery documented in the Manz area, Shäwa (Chuniaud 2012) for the 15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century period. We found fragments of at least two different *gan*, which are large jars used to store water or beer (Fig. 4, n. 6). The fragments belong to two massive handles (which are not as common as perforated ones). A fragment of a neck with a molding (Torres forthcoming, fig. 11, 3) can be identified with a *madiga*, which is a jar similar in shape but smaller than a *gan* used to transport and store water (Fig. 4, n. 3). One of the most abundant types of pottery is the *mugogo* or *met’ad*, a

baking plate employed in the preparation of *injära*, the Ethiopian flat bread (Fig. 4, n. 8a-c, 9a-c, 12, 13). They are very similar to modern examples: they have a rough exterior surface with traces of exposure to fire, whereas the interior is intensely polished to prevent the pancake from sticking to the pot. The only item whose dimensions could be reconstructed (n. 13) provided a diameter of 55 cm, which coincides with the average size of current *mugogo*. This type of pot is very frequent in 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century sites. In Amba Gabriel (Manz), they made up to 16.8% of the pottery assemblage (Chuniaud 2012: 270) and they are also very common in Gondarine sites around Lake T’ana (Torres forthcoming, fig. 19). In the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century contexts excavated by Dombrowski (1972: 120, fig. 30) *met’ad* are already frequent and do not differ typologically from more recent examples. Cooking pots are also very abundant (Fig. 4, n. 1, 2, 4, 5, 9d) similar to Torres’ types (forthcoming, fig. 20). Slightly everted rims and vertical rims are known in Gondarine sites, such as those documented in Gännätä Maryam. A specific type



**Figure 4.** Pottery from the dumps of Gännätä Maryam.

of cooking pot is the *dist*, which is a bowl used to prepare and serve *wät*, the sauce or stew that is eaten with *injära*. We only found one piece (Fig. 4, n. 10), which coincides typologically with Torres’ bowls and small plates (forthcoming, fig. 13 and fig. 14, 3), with its carinated profile and annular base, and with the “coupe carénée” of Chuniaud (2012: tab. 9.5, fig. 9.1., 4: 9.12, 4-5). In the Lake T’ana area, they appear in 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>-century contexts, whereas in Manz they have a 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup>-century dating. Dombrowski (1972: 125-126, figs. 20 and 29) found many carinated bowls in the caves of Nachtabiet and Lalibela, dated to the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The treatment of the surface in our piece is of remarkable

quality, with an intense burnishing inside and an orange slip. The upper exterior face is polished, but the inferior only smoothed. Finally, an odd piece is a tripod vessel (Fig. 4, n. 7), which was used as a serving tray. We know of no modern parallels in clay, but similar forms exist in wood and are used to serve food and snacks.

**Ayzenbil**

The site of Ayzenbil is located on top a volcanic hill (1,100 m.a.s.l) that raises abruptly 250 meters over the Gendewuha valley, 4.5 km to the east of Gännätä Maryam. The almost inaccessible location of the settlement is typical of monastic sites, but no information could be gathered as to the identification of the place with a monastery. As

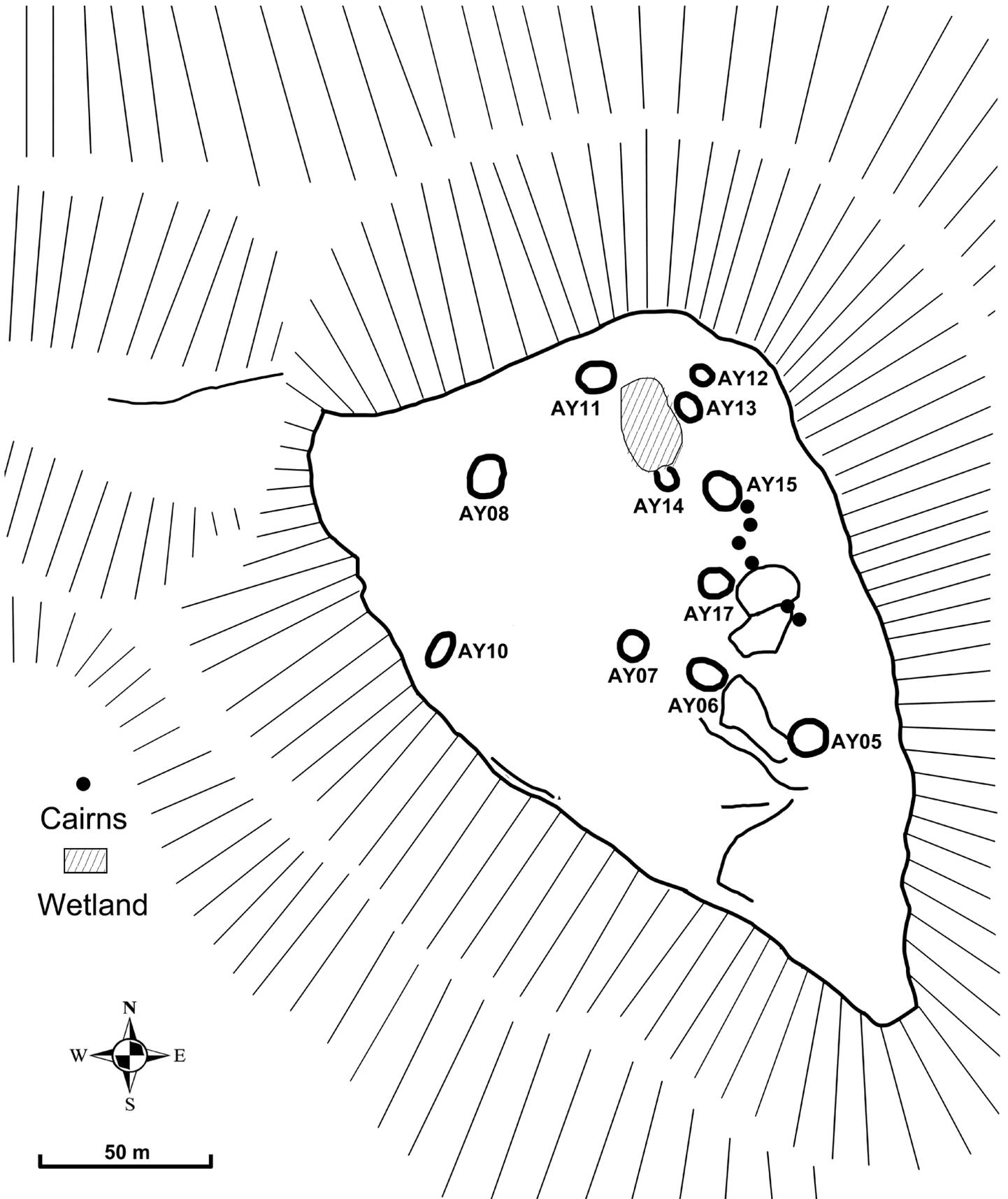


Figure 5. Plan of Ayzenbil

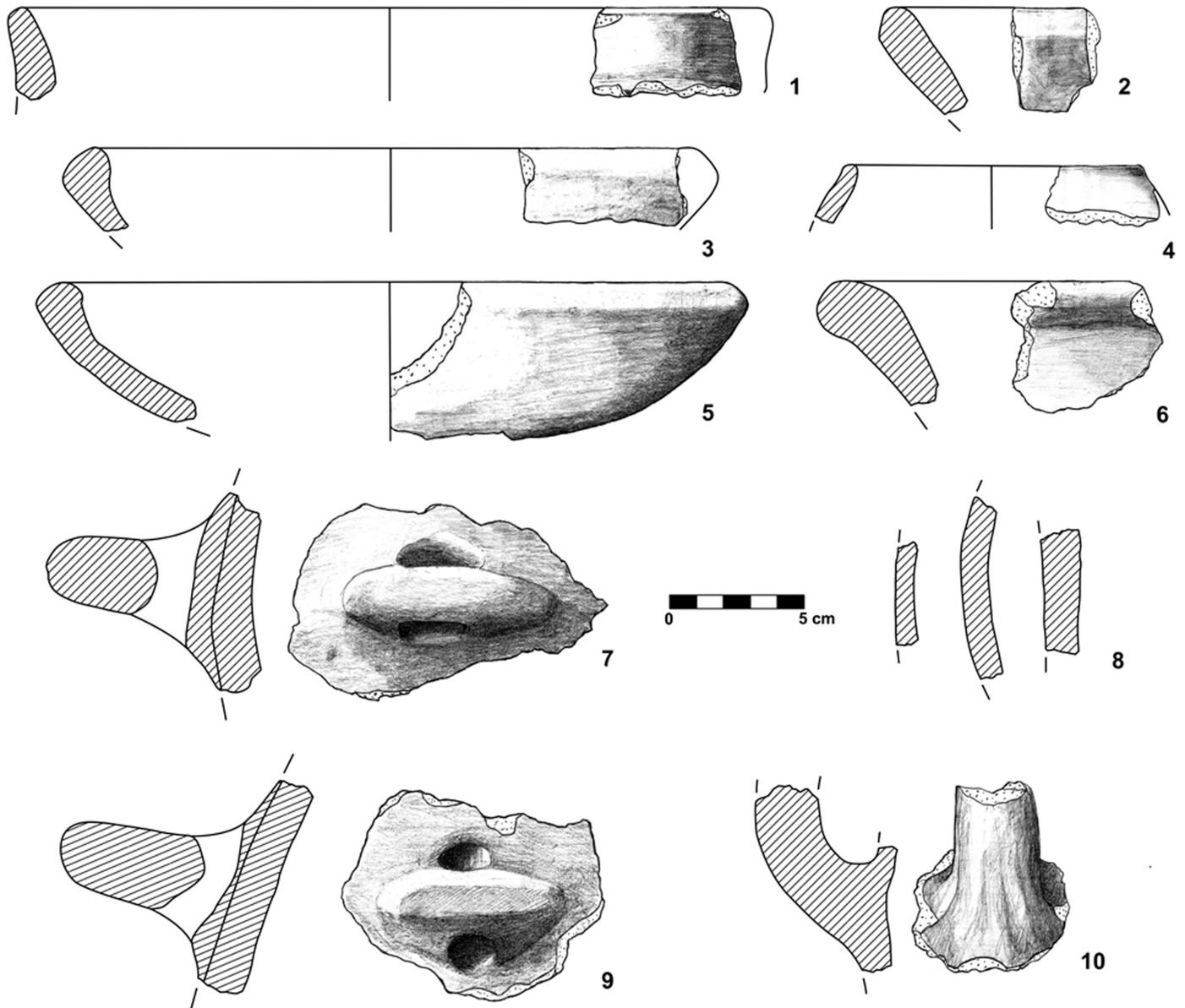


Figure 6. Pottery from Ayzenbil.

in the case of Gännätä Maryam and Mahbär Silasse, the place is naturally defended by very steep and slippery slopes. The only access is from NW through an extremely rough pathway. Like the other monasteries, Ayzenbil also has an impressive visual command over the surroundings: it controls a tract of over 10 km of the Gendewuha river. In the northern part of the hilltop there is a small seasonal pond that probably has water during several months a year (the grass was still green when we visited, at the end of the dry season). The pond was originally surrounded by a stone enclosure.

The plateau where the settlement is located is 200 meters long (N-S) and 150 wide (E-W). Although the site occupies a wide surface, the density of the occupation is low, since there are not many structures and these are generously spaced (Figure 5). During survey, we identified a total of 17 stone structures, 11 corresponding to huts or corrals (AY05-08, 10-15, 18). Others (such as AY02), which are larger, seem to be enclosures, similar to those that currently delimit compounds, corrals or spaces for storing straw. Other additional structures are terrace and boundary walls. It is possible that spaces that today

are empty may have had structures made of perishable materials that left no trace on the surface. The higher density of structures is found in the northeast side of the settlement. All buildings have an oval or para-circular plan and are of large size: the maximum diameter of 80% of the structures lies between 7.5 and 14 meters. The wider structures are probably stone enclosures, inside of which house made of perishable materials would have been located. Smaller stone constructions, such as AY12 (6 meters of diameter) could have been domestic spaces. Grinding stones are always found outdoors. They appear in small clusters, thus indicating that grinding was a social activity that people conducted together, which is consistent with a monastic community rather than an ordinary village life. Other outdoor activities perhaps included eating or preparing food, since we recorded two open-air stone hearths. We also documented six stone cairns, probably tombs, all located in the same area of the settlement, supporting the idea that they may be part of a funerary space, as it is the case in Gännätä Maryam. Again, this makes sense in a religious settlement, because secular ones have cemeteries separated from residential areas.

Archaeological materials recorded on the surface include a large number of grinding stones, handstones, pestles and some pottery. Several polished spherical stones have been found whose function was probably to sharpen mortars so as to facilitate grinding after the surface became blunt through use – identical stones are used for this purpose today in the region. The material employed for all lithic artifacts is local basalt. Pottery was not abundant (Figure 6). Among the fragments collected we can mention two flat handles belonging to two different *madiga* (Fig. 6, n. 7 and 9), and a cylindrical handle that might have belonged to a *masero* (Fig. 6, n. 8), an amphora-shaped pot with two handles. Cooking pots have parallels to the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> century sites excavated in the Lake T'ana region (Torres forthcoming). Typical, flat and wide *mugogo* are absent, but there are two sherds that may be interpreted as baking plates for *injära* (Fig. n. 3, 6) and consistent with the “plats” of Period 3 in Amba Gabriel, dated to the 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Chuniaud 2012: 9.12, 8). A small inverted bowl (Fig. 6, n. 4) has parallels for the same time period (Torres forthcoming fig. 20, 10) and might have been used for cooking and serving sauces. Pottery has generally smooth walls (polished in the case of bowls).

## Conclusion

The survey of the Gendewuha valley in Metema has allowed us to document a Christian landscape that developed in unison with the expansion of the Ethiopian Kingdom on its western frontier. During the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, state and church expanded into the western regions as well as into the south. In both cases, monks created landscapes that replicated those of the Ethiopian plateau. Such replicas were not limited to landscape, but they brought from the plateau material culture (architecture, agricultural tools, pottery, etc.), that were the vehicle for a new set of eating and drinking habits, forms of socialization and relations with nature and the supernatural. These forms of material culture and social behavior helped incorporate the western fringe into the “Amhara system” (Levine 1974). Nevertheless, the monastic settlement of the Gendewuha did not simply reproduce the ordinary world of the Ethiopian highlands, rather it tried to materialize a sacred spatiality in tune with the aspirations of the Ewostat'ewos order, characterized by isolation, asceticism, and a return to the roots of Christianity (Finneran 2012). The borderland, regarded as a desert and an open zone, became the perfect slate into which these ideas could be inscribed and materialized.

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