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An appeal for the salvation of the cultural heritage of Tigray

From the researchers and fellows of the Hiob Ludolf Centre for Ethiopian and Eritrean Studies at Universität Hamburg

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We have been following the reports on the military conflict that has erupted between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the Regional Government of Tigray with great concern. In addition to continuing reports of the heavy toll that the conflict is taking on the civilian population, there are reports that the cultural property of Tigray is highly endangered and directly affected. Tigray is a part of Ethiopia that hosts an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage. The cultural heritage of Tigray has contributed to the development of the region and the entire country and has increased the visibility of Ethiopia as one of the most vibrant tourist destinations in Africa. In recent years, much has been done for its study and preservation—with newly recorded historical artefacts and manuscripts, archaeological sites, new museums, restored historical buildings, paintings and manuscripts, and collections of research data—but even more remains to be done.

Some of the recent reports have been suggesting that hostilities are taking place in close proximity to renowned cultural sites, and others mentioning that they have been plundered and damaged. In this context, sites of symbolic importance for all of Ethiopia have been referred to, such as the church at Yeha, al-Najashi Mosque, the church of Maryam Dengelat, the monastery of Dabra Abbay, the monastery of Dabra Dammo, and even St Mary Cathedral in Aksum (the city of Aksum itself is entered in the UNESCO World Heritage List). There are reports of looting of manuscripts from Tigrayan churches and monasteries, and warnings that they will sooner or later be taken out of Ethiopia to be sold at antiquities markets in other countries. It is beyond any doubt that the conflict is causing heavy damage to the cultural heritage, but since most communication lines remain cut off and the information coming from the region is minimal, it is difficult to assess the real scope of the losses.

As part of a research community that has been involved for many years in the study of Ethiopian culture, we are saddened about the plight of the civilian population. And we are increasingly concerned by the effect of the conflict on the cultural heritage of Tigray. We appeal to all parties involved to pay serious attention to the issue. We hope that the authorized state institutions will fulfil their obligations and do everything possible to protect the cultural property of Tigray from further destruction. They should investigate the cases of loss and looting reported by local communities, and make the results of the investigations public. In addition, special measures should be taken to secure the research materials accumulated in Tigray's institutions from misappropriation and dispersion. We further urgently call upon the warring parties to abstain from attacking the cultural heritage and to respect the integrity of the places, both religious and secular, where this heritage is preserved. National or international initiatives aimed at recuperation of the negative effects of the war upon the cultural heritage should be encouraged and supported, as should urgent salvation measures. We appeal to all

colleagues to assist, where necessary, in measures for restitution of the cultural property and assessing the damage inflicted upon it.

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The appeal has also been endorsed by several other scholars (see <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/en/ethiostudies/news/appeal2021.html>).