

Megalithic Monuments in the Horn of Africa

Past and current archaeological research in perspective

22nd January 2026 – 9.30 am to 5 pm

(11.30 am to 7 pm, Addis Abeba time/EAT)

9.30 – Introduction, *A century of research*

Anne-Lise Goujon (ANR InterMedÉ, IREMAM / CFEE),

Alebachew Belay (Debre Berhan University / Getty research Institute, Los Angeles / Université Grenoble Alpes / CFEE)

Amélie Chekroun (CNRS, ANR InterMedÉ Coord., IREMAM / CFEE)

10.00 – *Mégalithisme, monumentalisme et pratiques funéraires dans la Corne de l'Afrique*

Jean-Paul Cros (Senior researcher, ArScAn) & **Roger Joussaume** (CNRS, Emerit researcher)

When discussing this subject in relation to East Africa, our focus will be on standing stones, which are often arranged in specific patterns. We will see that these monolithic structures do not always serve a funerary purpose, and that depending on the region, they may have been erected over a long period of time. Dolmen-type monuments, on the other hand, are relatively rare, being found only in the Harar region of Ethiopia and in Mänz.

This presentation will focus on excavated and studied sites, whether funerary sites, such as Tiya and Tuto Fela in Ethiopia, the Ghoubet and Gobaad sites in Djibouti, and Laas Geel in Somaliland, or memorial sites, such as Chelba Tutitti and the stele alignments among the Gewada in southern Ethiopia. The presentation will also pay tribute to the pioneers of research in this region of Africa: Capuchin Father François Azaïs, Roger Joussaume and Francis Anfray in Ethiopia; Roger Joussaume in Djibouti; and Georges Révoil in Somaliland.

10.45 – *Squeezing stones. Funerary archaeology, GIS and Islamization in the Horn*

Pablo Gutierrez de Leon (ASPR Junior postdoctoral researcher. Anthropology Department, Harvard University)

Funerary architecture has been an important and constant trope in the studies about the northeastern Horn of Africa's lowlands. Somalis and Afar pastoralists were and are characterized by tremendously rich funerary traditions, some dating back to the 1st millennium. These traditions have captivated foreign visitors that began to classify them by their physical characteristics like size, stone color and the presence or lack of certain elements. By using fields surveys, primary sources and GIS tools the speaker was able to construct a mapping and a classification system that can help researchers analyze and understand the Horn's funerary architecture from a long-term perspective. During this talk I will briefly reflect on the possibilities of typology-building using remote sensing, field surveys and bibliographical analysis. Moreover, I will show how mapped funerary structures can help archaeologists and historians to understand Islamization as well as centrifugal and centripetal dynamics on the landscapes. The main goal is not just to display a data and analysis sample from the speaker's thesis, but to also set the bases for a dialogue about the use of common categories that would ease data sharing and, ultimately, our research.

11.30 – Break

11.45 – Islam in the Horn of Africa and its Megalithic Landscapes: Some Thoughts on Chronology, Typology and Islamic megalithic practices

Simon Dorso (ANR EcoMED, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Orient & Méditerranée)

In the Horn of Africa, a region marked by ancient and medieval traditions of megalithism, typically associated by historiography with non-Abrahamic societies, the relationship between Muslim communities and their megalithic environment has received comparatively little attention. Recent advances in Islamic archaeology in eastern Ethiopia (including Djibouti and Somaliland) now provide new evidence for understanding how pre-Islamic megalithic monuments were integrated into the evolving cultural landscapes of areas where Islam became predominant during the medieval period. This, however, requires rethinking several long-standing paradigms and assumptions—particularly regarding the chronology of Islamization, a process poorly documented in written sources and for which funerary monuments have long served as the main indicators of changing practices.

Drawing on material collected during recent fieldwork in the Somali region of Ethiopia and in Somaliland, along with comparisons from more distant contexts, this presentation will caution against the biases of typological approaches to tackle complex transition like religious conversion, as it obscures the often-gradual transformation of norms and practices and tend to freeze or essentialize individual and collective identities. In this regard, one will underscore the enduring influence of modern narratives and colonial-era research on the categorization of social groups and the attribution of religious or ethnic identities.

Ultimately, the presentation proposes examining both the appropriation and the production of megalithic structures by Muslim communities, exploring their diversity in terms of cultural and memorial significance as well as their relationships to spatial practices and access to geological resources.

12.30 – Lunch

14.00 – Stelae, cairns and society. Comparing contexts across the Horn of Africa

Alfredo González-Ruibal (Independent Researcher, CHEUROPE project Coord.)

Megalithic monuments occur across the Horn of Africa in very different times, places and cultural contexts. In this paper I present three different scenarios in which I have conducted research and where both stelae and cairns occur: southern Djibouti, the Shewa region in Ethiopia and northeastern Somalia, between the 1st and 13th centuries AD. The same material phenomena had different social and cultural meanings in each of these contexts, but at the same time they reflect awareness of other traditions, some shared ideas and regional and long-distance contacts. Based on materials from survey and excavations and 14C dates, I will try to outline a historical interpretation of the megalithic phenomena in the three regions under study.

14.45 – The funerary site of Soditi (6th-12th century): two cairns, one stelae and some disappeared long the eastern foothills of the Abaya Lake

Vincent Ard (CNRS, TRACES) & **Anne-Lise Goujon** (ANR InterMedÉ, IREMAM / CFEE)

The Ethio-French Abaya Archaeological Mission is working in the Gedeo Zone to better understand the exceptional megalithic landscape of the eastern Rift Valley foothills. This presentation shares the results of the research conducted on the site of the Soditi, where a unique phallic stele initially stood

on a promontory occupied by a visible cairn. The extensive excavations allow us to discover much more structures and to describe in detail a new type of long-term funerary site. The research sheds light on the previously unknown phallic stelae phenomenon and establishes a connection with funerary sites featuring cairns topped by decorated and anthropomorphic stelae in the same region.

15.30 - Break

15.45 – Megalithic Landscapes in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia: Current State of the Research

Alebachew Belay (Debre Berhan University / Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles / Université Grenoble Alpes / CFEE)

Hundreds of megalithic structures were found in the Central Highlands of Ethiopia. Geographically, the monuments are located between the towns of Debre Berhan and Dessie, which include historical provinces such as Tegulet, Menz & Yifat, as well as adjacent areas in the south and east of Wollo. Tumuli of different morphological features principally characterize megalithic culture in the region. There are also stelae, dry-stone structures, and hypogea associated with the tumuli. In terms of material culture, the sites so far excavated and surface collections yield grave goods of local and exotic provenances. Chronologically, C-14 dates imply that the culture prevailed from the 10th to 14th centuries. In this talk, the speaker will highlight the genesis of archaeological research in the area, with the major findings obtained so far.