

Early Christianity on the Margins (?)



Limina/Limites 16

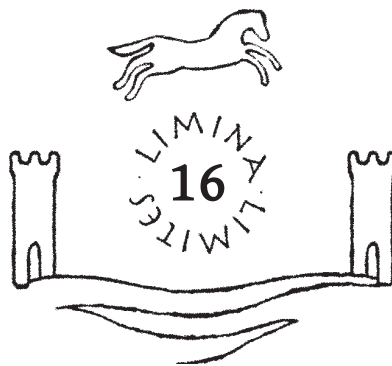
Archaeologies, histories, islands and borders in the Mediterranean (365-1556).

Early Christianity on the Margins (?)

The PIAC excavations in Adulis,
Eritrea (2017-2020)

Edited by
Gabriele Castiglia and Philippe Pergola

With texts by
Gabriele Castiglia, Marco Ciliberti, Božana Maletić, Matteo Pola,
Marilena Polosa, Elie Essa Kas Hanna, Philippe Pergola



ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

Limina/Limites

*Archaeologies, histories, islands and borders in the Mediterranean
(365–1556)*

An Archaeopress International Series

Series Editors

**Miguel Ángel Cau Ontiveros, Demetrios Michaelides, Philippe Pergola,
Guido Vannini, Enrico Zanini**

The title, subtitle, and chronological span of the series require a few words of explanation. In the first place, the title “Limina/ Limites” echoes the clear assonances between the root of two Latin words that respectively indicate “thresholds” and “boundaries” (and thus “frontiers”), as well as that of the Greek word for “harbour” (λιμὴν), which, for an island — and, more broadly speaking, for any coastal city — is both a point of connectivity and a boundary of isolation.

Islands and boundaries/borders are two of the many possible keys through which we can study the post-Classical Mediterranean. Ever since the Mediterranean ceased to be a great Roman “lake”, that same Sea became an often uncrossable boundary that both separated and protected the many worlds that developed in different ways and at a different pace along its extensive coast. At the same time, however, the Mediterranean continued to be a unifying element: it provided a shared identity to communities that were culturally and geographically distant; and it could still be crossed to reach other frontiers, and even beyond.

From this point of view, islands and borders, forming connecting lines and lines of separation, and offering unified identities but also socio-cultural diversities, can become spaces for reflection. As such, they are ideal for disciplines that seek to understand the past but also aim to make much more widely available the tools with which to interpret some of the basic needs of the contemporary world. The subtitle — with all nouns in the plural — alludes to the need for a multiplicity of different approaches. Today, history and archaeology — especially in the Mediterranean — are understood as multiple disciplines — disciplines that search not so much for an a priori monolithic, specific definition, but rather for an exploration of the limits that must be overcome and the intersection points that need to be exploited.

The chronological span, 365–1556, providing a long-term vision, is essential for exploring in time depth the multiple themes of study. AD 365, or, more precisely, the 21st of July 365, the day of the most violent tsunami documented in the literary sources, marks the moment at which, in the midst of transformation of the ancient world, the Mediterranean seems to reclaim its physical centrality. This was due to the devastating effects of this natural disaster and, above all, to its global visibility, as is evident from the many different witnesses describing the event, from both the eastern and the western shores of the Mediterranean. At the other end of the chronological span, January 16th, 1556, the day of the coronation of Philip II of Spain, symbolically marks the date on which the Mediterranean enters contemporary historiography, as understood through the vision of the historian Fernand Braudel and his rewriting of the rules of historiographical analysis, pursuing directions that often cross paths with archaeology.

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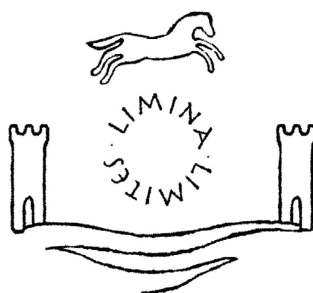
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Miguel Ángel Cau Ontiveros, Demetrios Michaelides, Philippe Pergola, Guido Vannini, Enrico Zanini



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Titolo, sottotitolo e ambito cronologico di una serie editoriale richiedono qualche parola di spiegazione da parte dei curatori. Il titolo gioca evidentemente sull'assonanza della radice delle parole latine che indicano rispettivamente soglie e confini, dunque frontiere, con quella della parola greca che indica il porto, che per un'isola — e in senso lato per ogni città che si affacci sul mare — è al tempo stesso una soglia di connettività e un confine di isolamento.

Isole e frontiere sono due delle tante possibili chiavi di lettura per provare a studiare il Mediterraneo post-antico. Da quando cessa di essere un grande lago romano, il Mediterraneo diviene una frontiera spesso invalicabile, che separa e protegge reciprocamente i tanti mondi che si sviluppano con ritmi e forme diversi lungo le sue coste. Al tempo stesso però il Mediterraneo continua ad essere un elemento di unità: fornisce una identità condivisa a comunità culturalmente e geograficamente distanti; può essere attraversato per spingersi verso, e al di là di, altre frontiere.

Isole e frontiere, linee di connessione e linee di separazione, identità unitarie e molteplicità socioculturali divengono da questo punto di vista spazi di riflessione per discipline volte alla conoscenza del passato, ma che intendono mettere a disposizione della collettività strumenti per interpretare alcune esigenze fondamentali della contemporaneità, risolvendo, ad esempio, in termini di 'Archeologia Pubblica' spunti, risultati ed esiti delle ricerche proposte o almeno di alcune di esse, fra ricerca pura e ricerca applicata.

Il sottotitolo, tutto al plurale, allude alla necessità di una molteplicità di approcci diversi. Storia e archeologia — a maggior ragione nel Mediterraneo — sono discipline che appaiono oggi declinabili solo in forma plurale, alla ricerca non di una monolitica definizione disciplinare a priori, ma di un'esplorazione di limiti da superare e di punti di intersezione da sfruttare. Luogo di incontro tra le discipline non può che essere il territorio, inteso come prodotto della interazione tra culture e natura: unità minima di osservazione del fenomeno storico e unità minima di contestualizzazione delle tracce archeologiche.

Le date di riferimento (365-1556) — in un'ottica di "lungo periodo" — sono sembrate ai curatori una possibile conseguenza logica delle premesse e possono quindi rendere più esplicito il progetto. Il 365 — per la precisione il 21 luglio del 365, giorno del più violento maremoto narrato dalle fonti letterarie — segna il momento in cui, nel bel mezzo della trasformazione del mondo antico, il Mediterraneo riconquista, quasi per metafora, la sua centralità fisica, fatta di onde e di venti, dando vita a un fenomeno epocale, per i suoi effetti disastrosi e soprattutto per la sua visibilità globale, come dimostrano i tanti testimoni diversi che dalle sponde orientali e occidentali descrivono lo stesso evento con lingue e voci differenti. Il 1556 — per la precisione il 16 gennaio 1556, giorno dell'incoronazione di Filippo II di Spagna — segna simbolicamente la data in cui il Mediterraneo entra nella storiografia contemporanea attraverso la grande lezione di Fernand Braudel, riscrivendo le regole del gioco storiografico in una direzione che ha molti punti di intersezione con l'archeologia.

Limina/Limites accoglie ormai atti di convegni e seminari, singole monografie e studi collettivi che, indipendentemente dalla loro origine disciplinare, si propongano come obiettivo l'integrazione di fonti e sistemi di dati diversi in funzione di una ricostruzione globale orientata alla lunga durata e alla dimensione spaziale mediterranea.

Tutti volumi sono sottoposti a una doppia peer review anonima.

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Titre, sous-titre et arc chronologique d'une collection éditoriale ont besoin que leurs responsables s'en expliquent. Le titre joue à l'évidence autour de l'assonance des racines des mots latins qui indiquent à la fois des lieux de passages et des limites, donc des frontières, comme pour le mot grec qui indique le port, lequel représente, pour une île -et plus largement pour toute ville qui donne sur la mer- un lieu de connexion et à la fois une limite qui isole.

Iles et frontières sont deux des innombrables clés de lecture pour tenter d'ouvrir les portes de l'étude de la Méditerranée post antique. A partir du moment où elle cesse d'être un grand lac romain, la Méditerranée devient une frontière parfois insurmontable, qui sépare et protège réciproquement les nombreux mondes qui se développent à des rythmes et sous des formes différentes le long de ses côtes. Au même moment, la Méditerranée continue à être un élément d'unité : elle fournit une identité partagée par des communautés culturellement et géographiquement distantes ; elle peut être traversée pour aller vers, et au-delà, d'autres frontières.

Iles et frontières sont à la fois des lignes qui unissent et qui séparent, des identités unitaires et des multiplicités socio culturelles. Elles deviennent ainsi de vastes espaces de réflexion pour des disciplines tournées vers la connaissance du passé, mais qui entendent mettre à la disposition des collectivités des instruments pour interpréter certaines exigences fondamentales du monde contemporain, en résolvant, par exemple, en des termes d'« Archéologie publique », des pistes, des résultats et des issues pour les recherches proposées, ou du moins pour une part d'entre elles, entre recherche pure et recherche appliquée.

Le sous-titre, entièrement au pluriel, est une allusion à la nécessité d'une multiplicité d'approches différentes. Histoire et archéologie — à plus forte raison en Méditerranée — sont les disciplines qui apparaissent devoir être aujourd'hui déclinées au pluriel, non pas à la recherche a priori d'une définition disciplinaire monolithique, mais qui doivent explorer les limites à dépasser et les points de rencontre à exploiter. Le lieu de rencontre entre les disciplines ne peut qu'être le territoire, entendu comme le produit de l'interaction entre cultures et nature, à savoir des unités minimales où contextualiser les traces archéologiques.

Les dates de référence se situent dans une optique de longue durée et se sont imposées comme l'une des conséquences logiques possibles de notre postulat de départ, pour rendre plus explicite encore notre projet. L'année 365 — et pour être plus précis, le 21 juillet 365, jour du raz-de-marée le plus violent qu'aient jamais rappelé les sources littéraires — marque le moment où, au beau milieu de la transformation du monde antique, la Méditerranée reconquiert, de manière quasiment métaphorique, sa centralité physique, faite de vagues déchaînées et de vents violents, pour donner vie à un phénomène qui marque cette époque par ses effets désastreux et surtout par la visibilité globale qu'il acquiert, comme le

prouvent le grand nombre des témoins qui décrivent les dévastations de ce même phénomène, depuis les rives orientales et occidentales, en des langues et avec des voix différentes.

L'année 1556 — et pour être plus précis, le 16 janvier 1556, jour du couronnement de Philippe II d'Espagne — marque symboliquement la date retenue pour l'entrée de la Méditerranée dans l'historiographie moderne à travers la grande leçon de Fernand Braudel, en réécrivant les règles du jeu historiographique dans une direction qui a de nombreux points d'intersection avec l'archéologie.

Limina/Limites accueille désormais à la fois des actes de congrès et colloques, de séminaires, des monographies et des études collectives lesquelles, indépendamment de leur discipline d'origine, ont pour objectif l'intégration de sources et de systèmes, autour de données différentes, en fonction d'une reconstruction globale, orientée vers la longue durée et la dimension de l'espace méditerranéen.

Tous les volumes sont soumis à une double évaluation anonyme.



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Forewords

From 2017 to 2020, the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology in Rome took part in an excavation and research project in the Aksumite city of Adulis, currently in the Northern Red Sea Region, Eritrea. Adulis was the main sea outlet of the Aksumite kingdom, which extended mainly into Tigray and Eritrea from the 1st to the 8th century AD: a crucial location for trade between West and East and the cradle of sub-Saharan Christianity.

The mission, directed by Prof. Gabriele Castiglia and Philippe Pergola - as part of a broader Eritrean-Italian project, under the general coordination of the Ce.R.D.O. of Varese - was dedicated to the excavation of two of the three 6th-century Christian basilicas present in the urban fabric of Adulis, as well as to the study of the dynamics of Christianisation throughout the Aksumite kingdom, with particular attention to the processes of religious conversion, relations with other creeds, and trade and cultural relations with the Byzantine Empire.

Now, in occasion of the final publication of the excavations it is an honour and pleasure for me to introduce the book with congratulations on behalf of me and all colleagues, not only because Philippe Pergola and Gabriele Castiglia - his follower on the chair of topography of the “Orbis” at our Institute - have done such an intense work, but also because their former students and collaborators contribute to this important volume.

It is my duty to underline the importance of the archaeological excavations that have been carried out for many decades by the Institute’s two Chairs of Topography, with renewed intensity in recent years. Especially the excavations on the so-called or apparent ‘periphery’ in difficult local conditions are a hallmark of the Institute and bring it nearly worldwide attention and visibility. Above all, however, these excavations are characterised by the fact that they not only serve academic research, but also involve local young people and offer them a certain amount of training. As an institution of the Holy See, the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology has always endeavoured to serve as an instrument of peace and social commitment.

Mons. Prof. Stefan Heid

Rector of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology



Je me réjouis de cette publication rare, qui met en lumière l'histoire et l'archéologie du christianisme oriental dans la Corne de l'Afrique ; en particulier celles de l'ancien royaume d'Aksoum qui rayonnait, dès le IV^e siècle, sur les deux rives de la Mer Rouge depuis son port d'Adulis. Rappelons que le christianisme est apparu dans la région lorsque le roi 'Ezana se convertit vers 340 grâce à l'influence d'un missionnaire de Tyr, Saint Frumence.

Les fouilles archéologiques menées à Adulis, aujourd'hui en Érythrée, par l'Institut Pontifical d'Archéologie Chrétienne et soutenues par la Fondation ALIPH illustrent à quel point chaque vestige, chaque inscription épigraphique, chaque pierre, chaque bâtiment archéologique est une clé pour déchiffrer le récit de l'Église primitive et sa présence millénaire sur ces terres.

Ces travaux rendent aussi hommage à la richesse culturelle et religieuse de la région, tout en soulignant l'importance de sauvegarder et d'étudier ces témoins du passé pour éclairer notre avenir commun. L'Œuvre d'Orient est engagée dans ce combat depuis sa création, et plus encore aujourd'hui où de nombreux conflits mettent ce patrimoine en péril.

Je remercie chaleureusement tous les chercheurs et intervenants impliqués dans ce travail scientifique rigoureux. Que cette publication, réalisée grâce au précieux appui de la Fondation ALIPH, contribue à renforcer la mémoire de notre patrimoine partagé et à inspirer de nouveaux projets au service de la vérité, de la paix et de la fraternité.

Mgr Pascal Gollnisch

L'Œuvre d'Orient - Directeur général



L'Alliance internationale pour la protection du patrimoine (ALIPH) est le principal fonds mondial dédié à la sauvegarde du patrimoine dans les zones en conflit, post-conflit ou en crise. Depuis sa création à Genève en 2017, ALIPH soutient avec détermination celles et ceux qui, sur le terrain, s'engagent à conserver les témoins précieux de notre histoire.

Dans ce contexte, ALIPH travaille étroitement avec L'Œuvre d'Orient en Erythrée mais également dans plusieurs pays du Moyen-Orient. Ce partenariat fidèle s'inscrit dans une vision partagée : protéger le patrimoine, c'est préserver les racines des communautés et favoriser le dialogue entre les cultures.

À Adulis, ancienne cité du vaste Royaume d'Aksoum sur les rives de la mer Rouge, ce travail y a pris tout son sens. L'Œuvre d'Orient a porté ce projet avec l'Institut Pontifical d'Archéologie Chrétienne (PIAC) qui a mené une importante mission de recherche, de conservation, de formation et de transmission, révélant l'héritage singulier d'un site à la croisée des civilisations. ALIPH est fière d'avoir accompagné ce projet, qui incarne son engagement commun pour un patrimoine protégé, documenté et partagé.

Ce livre en est le témoignage. Il illustre une démarche exigeante, menée avec passion.

Valéry Freland

ALIPH Foundation – Executive Director



Preface

Gabriele Castiglia, Philippe Pergola

This book is the final result of a five-year project divided into multiple phases, in which the *Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana* (Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology - PIAC) of Rome took a leading role in the excavation and study of some of the most significant areas of the ancient city of Adulis, now in Eritrea. From the 1st to the 7th to the 8th centuries AD, Adulis was the main port of the great Aksumite Kingdom and, as we will see, a flourishing Christian center from the mature 5th century AD onward (fig. i).

An invitation from Ce.R.D.O. (*Centro Ricerche sul Deserto Orientale* in Varese), which was then directed by brothers Alfredo and Angelo Castiglioni, made the PIAC's presence at the archaeological site from 2017 to 2020 possible. Dr. Serena Massa was in charge of the scientific direction of the project on behalf of Ce.R.D.O., in cooperation with the Commission for Culture and Sports of Eritrea (represented by Tsegai Medin) and the Northern Red Sea Regional Museum of Massawa (represented by Yohannes Gebreyesus).

PIAC's involvement was prompted by the need for specialists in Christian Archaeology, given the numerous churches emerging from the urban fabric of Adulis. Under a formal agreement with Ce.R.D.O. and the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan (*Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*), PIAC was responsible for the excavation and study of Christian monuments in the city and surrounding area, with full autonomy to act and publish the findings from the excavation areas assigned, as stipulated in the agreement mentioned above. The scientific direction of the project on behalf of PIAC was entrusted to Philippe Pergola, with on-site leadership by Gabriele Castiglia, the authors of this introduction and editors of the volume.

Unfortunately, in 2021, Ce.R.D.O. abruptly and unilaterally terminated the agreement, preventing PIAC from continuing its on-site work and denying us the opportunity to complete the study of specific contexts and materials—primarily ceramic finds—which accounts for particular gaps in the volume we present here. Nevertheless, the PIAC team has been able to publish the results of its excavations in several leading national and international journals, firmly establishing its contributions in the literature and discourse on Late Antique studies of the Horn of Africa, particularly concerning the origins, development, and consolidation of Christianity in the area, along with the emergence of Islamic dominance and the complex intercultural and interreligious relationship between these two monotheisms.



Fig. i: Signpost indicating the archaeological site of Adulis, in the village of Foro (Northern Red Sea Region – Eritrea) (G. Castiglia).



Fig. ii: The local workers from the villages of Afta, Foro and Zula
(G. Castiglia).

In this volume, we comprehensively and definitively present our project's archaeological and historical data and interpretations despite the abovementioned omissions. Given the missing information, mainly represented by ceramics (omissions not attributable to PIAC, as stated), we have nonetheless chosen to complete this publication in the spirit of scientific transparency, transcending the limited ideological barriers of one-sided academic controversies and jealousies.

Despite these aspects, the mission at Adulis has represented an extraordinary opportunity not only for the Chair of Topography of the *Orbis christianus antiquus* but for the entire PIAC, greatly expanding the institute's scientific scope. For the first time, we were able to apply the principles and methods of Christian Archaeology to the Horn of Africa—an approach that also helped debunk certain historiographical myths about the interpretation of basilicas, often addressed with excessive sensationalism and limited regard for our discipline's specific challenges.

Moreover, PIAC's presence in Adulis was a significant mark of international cooperation. The team actively trained young Eritrean archaeologists who, with enthusiasm and an optimistic outlook for the future, demonstrated a deeply moving commitment to their historical and monumental heritage. The local communities from the villages of Afta, Foro, and Zula, composed mainly of fishermen and farmers, provided invaluable support with their diligent work at the archaeological site. Without them, none of this would have been possible (figg. ii-iii).

His Eminence Cardinal Leonardo Sandri of the *Congregazione per le Chiese Orientali* played a crucial role in the mission's success.

PIAC is deeply grateful to the *ALIPH Foundation* (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas) for its financial support. This support was crucial to the success of the archaeological



Fig. iii: On-site visit of the local schools
(G. Castiglia).

missions, the training of young Eritrean archaeologists, and the publication of scientific and outreach materials produced since 2018, together with *L'Œuvre d'Orient*. This non-profit organization also made critical financial contributions alongside the Holy See.

Our sincere thanks go to the Rectors (Prof. Danilo Mazzoleni, Mons. Stefan Heid) and the Secretary of PIAC (Mons. Carlo Dell'Osso) for facilitating the academic partnership with the Holy See and supporting the Chair of Topography of the *Orbis christianus antiquus* in building various collaborations with us. It was Prof. Mazzoleni who proposed to PIAC's Academic Council in 2017 that Prof. Gabriele Castiglia be appointed field director of a sector of the excavation at Adulis, paving the way for the signing of the agreement with Ce.R.D.O. the following year.

We are also immensely grateful to Dr. Tsegai Medin of the Commission for Culture and Sports of Eritrea and Dr. Yohannes Gebreyesus of the Northern Red Sea Regional Museum of Massawa.

A huge thank you to the PIAC team's archaeologists, extraordinary workers and scholars, great friends, and unforgettable travel companions: Stefano Bertoldi, Marco Ciliberti, Božana Maletić, and Matteo Pola (figg. iv-v).

Thanks also to Matteo Delle Donne, Paolo Lampugnani, Omar Larentis, and Chiara Mandelli.

In conclusion, our gratitude extends once again to the Eritrean authorities and colleagues, who were always friendly and supportive, and to all the local workers and young people who dedicated themselves daily at the Adulis site, ensuring high-quality work and, above all, contributing crucially to the preservation of historical and cultural heritage as exceptional as it is fragile.



Fig. iv: The PIAC team and the Eritrean archaeologists and workers in Adulis.



Fig. v: The PIAC team and the Eritrean archaeologists and workers in Samidi.