

# Stabilization of Historical Archives in Mekelle City

Stabilization and digitization  
of Mekelle's historical  
archives to ensure long-term  
preservation and accessibility  
of critical cultural and public  
records.

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website



## Project Proposal

# **Stabilization of Historical Archives in Mekelle City Municipality**

## **1. Introduction**

Mekelle, the capital of Ethiopia's Tigray Region, is home to significant historical and cultural archives that date back to the formation of the modern Ethiopian state. These archives, which include important landmarks such as the Martyrs' Museum and the Yohannes IV Palace, have been severely impacted by recent conflicts, particularly the Tigray War. This conflict has diverted attention away from the cultural sector and exacerbated existing humanitarian and socioeconomic challenges in the region.

Among the affected sites is the old municipality building in Mekelle, which holds a wealth of archival material crucial to understanding the city's administrative, social, and economic history since the early 1940s. This building was designed in the modernist style by (potentially) Arturo Mezzedimi, a renowned architect favored by Emperor Haile Selassie and Ras Mengesha. It originally included offices, a multi-purpose hall, a cinema, a meeting terrace, a garden, and archival storage areas. With the relocation of the municipality to a new facility at Enda Mariam Gugsu area Ageazi Square, there is a shared vision with colleagues from Mekelle University to transform the old building into a museum dedicated to the city's history.

During my recent visits to Mekelle to document the effects of the conflict on cultural heritage, I examined the old municipality building using 360-degree photography to assess its current condition. This work builds on my previous PhD fieldwork from 2019 and aims to support future restoration and development efforts.

Unfortunately, I discovered that the archives housed within the building are in a state of severe disarray and neglect. Documents from the Dergue regime and the Haile Selassie era are in critical condition, threatened by environmental hazards such as rodents and moisture. The loss of these documents would be a significant blow to the understanding of Mekelle's history and the broader historical narrative of Ethiopia.

Despite the critical importance of preserving these archives, efforts are constrained by the ongoing post-conflict crisis and a lack of funds. Discussions with the Mekelle city municipality, the Office of the President of Mekelle University, and the Tigray Bureau of Culture and Tourism have underscored the need for urgent action. To address these challenges, we have partnered with an experienced archivist from

the Society for the Promotion of Museums in Ethiopia, an organization equipped to provide the necessary technical support for this project.



The building of the old municipality where the archive is hosted. The building compound is under Tigray Defence forces and access is only granted with permission letters. Picture Feb. 2024

A 360 tour of the building I made in Feb. 2024 can be accessed through this link: <https://kuula.co/post/n1/collection/7Kn6M> . A scattered documents of the files can be seen under the stairs.

## **2. Current Status of the Archives**

The historical archives of Mekelle City are presently housed in a single room within the old municipality building. Due to the ongoing conflict in the Tigray region, the condition of these archives has significantly deteriorated. The documents, which include permits, letters, photographs, and other important records, are disturbed, mixed, and piled haphazardly. Below is a detailed assessment of their current status:



## **Physical Condition**

### **Storage Environment:**

The archives are stored in a room without proper climate control, exposing them to significant humidity and temperature fluctuations. The lack of adequate ventilation and protection against moisture has led to the growth of mold and mildew on some documents, accelerating their degradation.

### **Pest Infestation:**

The archives are highly susceptible to pest infestations. There is clear evidence of damage caused by rodents, such as rats, which have torn and chewed through many papers. This physical degradation poses a serious threat to the integrity of the documents.

### **Document Arrangement:**

The documents are piled without any systematic organization, making it exceedingly difficult to access specific records. Many papers are crumpled and mixed up, increasing the risk of further damage during attempts to retrieve them.

## **Historical Importance**

### **Time Period:**

The archives cover significant periods in Ethiopian history, including the Haile Selassie era (1930–1974) and the Dergue regime (1974–1987). These documents are invaluable for understanding the historical, administrative, and cultural evolution of Mekelle City.

### **Document Types:**

The collection includes a wide range of materials, such as government records, correspondences, financial documents, legal papers, and other historical records. These documents provide deep insights into the city's past governance and socio-economic conditions.

## **Urgency of Preservation**

### **Risk of Loss:**

Due to their fragile condition and environmental exposure, the risk of losing these documents is alarmingly high. Immediate action is essential to prevent further deterioration and the irreversible loss of valuable historical information.

**Lack of Security:**

The archives currently lack proper security measures, leaving them vulnerable to theft, vandalism, and unauthorized access. This lack of security further exacerbates the risk of losing these important records. The safety now comes partly because the site is occupied by the Tigray Defence Forces.

In light of these conditions, there is an urgent need to stabilize and preserve the archives to ensure their continued accessibility for research and educational purposes. Implementing measures to improve storage conditions, prevent pest infestations, and enhance security will be crucial steps in safeguarding Mekelle's cultural heritage.

**3. Objective**

The primary objective of this project is to stabilize, preserve, and digitize the historical archives of Mekelle City, ensuring their protection and accessibility for future generations. The archives, currently at risk due to poor storage conditions, require both immediate and long-term actions:

**Immediate Objective (Stabilization and Organization):**

- **Assessment and Documentation:** Conduct a thorough inventory and condition assessment of all archival materials.
- **Environmental Control:** Implement climate control measures to regulate temperature and humidity, and improve ventilation to prevent mold and mildew.
- **Pest Management:** Establish a pest control program to mitigate rodent and insect infestations.
- **Physical Organization:** Systematically sort and categorize documents, using acid-free folders, boxes and shelves for storage to protect against physical damage.
- **Security Enhancements:** Improve security with controlled access systems and surveillance to protect against theft and unauthorized access.

**Long-term Objective (Digitization and Preservation):**

- **Digital Archiving:** Develop a plan to digitize the archives, prioritizing at-risk documents, and create high-quality digital copies.
- **Digital Storage and Access:** Establish a secure digital archive with robust backup systems, and create an accessible online platform for researchers and the public.
- **Preservation Training and Capacity Building:** Provide training for local archivists and staff to maintain both physical and digital archives effectively.
- **Community Engagement and Education:** Develop programs and exhibitions to raise awareness of the archives' historical significance and promote public involvement in preservation efforts.

Additional details in website:



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Principal Investigator:

**Alula Tesfay Asfha** (Ph.D),

Frobenius Institute at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, Germany.

[asfha@uni-frankfurt.de](mailto:asfha@uni-frankfurt.de). Assistant Prof. at School of Architecture and Urban Planning, Mekelle University, Ethiopia. [alulatesfay@mu.edu.et](mailto:alulatesfay@mu.edu.et)

Project members:

**Dawit Gebrehiwot**, Mekelle University

**Selam Gebrekiristos**, Mekelle University

**Wolbert Smidt (Ph.D)**, Society for the Promotion of Museums in Ethiopia, Berlin, Germany

**Nega Tadesse**, Mekelle Municipality Office

**Yirga Asefa**, Tigray Bureau of Culture and Tourism Staff

**Student Assistants**

Mekelle University

Hatsey Yohannes Preparatory Highschool