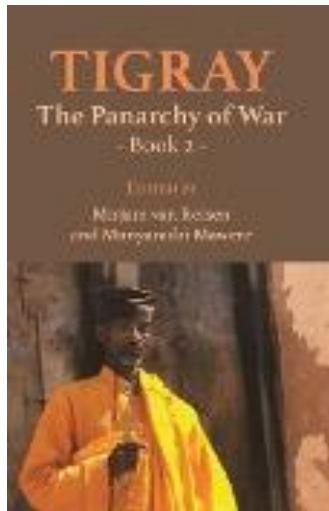


# Deliberate Destruction: Targeting Symbols of Cultural and Religious Identity in Tigray

*B. G. Kahsay, Habtom Teklay Shifare & A. H. Tefera*

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# Deliberate Destruction: Targeting Symbols of Cultural and Religious Identity in Tigray

*B. G. Kahsay, Habtom Teklay Shifare & A. H. Tefera*

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*As for the mother of ten, a hyena ate her.*

### Abstract

This study concerns the extensive and systematic destruction of cultural heritage in Tigray during the war, focusing on the first months of the war. Churches, mosques, monasteries, heritage sites, museums, and historical places were deliberately destroyed, along with holy books and manuscripts. The damage was geographically widespread and involved looting, burning, and breaking of cultural assets. Massacres, especially against clergy and religious leaders, accompanied the destruction of cultural artefacts, with significant civilian casualties. The Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF), Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), and Amhara Special Forces and militias were identified as perpetrators. The presence of Eritrean soldiers, operating under a siege, and who were heavily involved in the perpetration of the crimes, was denied by the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders. The Ethiopian government failed to protect cultural and religious assets and civilians, thus violating international laws. A pathway to ensure accountability for those responsible, compensation for destroyed assets, and the return of looted items, is needed.

**Key words:** Tigray war, heritage, cultural heritage, religious heritage, Eritrea, Ethiopia

## Introduction

Contemporary armed conflicts that use the destruction of cultural heritage and property as a weapon of war are attracting the attention of the international community (Brammertz *et al.*, 2016). Attacks against cultural heritage are acts that affect the common history and values of the international community on a larger scale (Ellis, 2017). This type of crime deeply harms the universal values held by the international community (Ellis, 2017) based on the destruction of cultural and religious identity (Kingston, 2015).

The importance of culture and religion in maintaining a group's identity and, thus, ensuring their survival, is often raised in contemporary discourse (Beyers, 2017). There is more to cultural heritage sites than “just stones” (Rubin, 2014). Instead, they represent a people's identity and history for all of humanity (Ellis, 2017). Concerning this, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) under Article 27 states that “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits” (UDHR, 1948).

In no way is the wilful destruction of property that is regarded as symbols of cultural and religious identity a modern phenomenon. This age-old practice is now recognised as an international crime, because it has increasingly evolved into both a weapon and a by-product of war (Ellis, 2017). Sabine von Schorlemer in her study indicated that “Deliberate and systematic acts against cultural heritage have spread to a considerable extent” (von Schorlemer, 2020). The deliberate targeting of Ukrainian cultural heritage during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was reported by the European Parliament's CULT committee on March 2023, can be mentioned as a manifestation of the spread (EU Parliament, 2023). International law has banned the deliberate capture, devastation, or damage of cultural property starting from the early attempts to codify the laws and customs of war. These efforts indicate that even though cultural and religious properties, artefacts, and science may be confined to the territory of a state, “they attracted international protection because of their importance to all humanity, such acts constituted war crimes” (Vrdoljak, 2016). Consequently, several legal regimes protect cultural

heritage, the destruction of which may amount to a war crime if committed under the context of armed conflict.

With this, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) (Statute) of 1998 establishing the ICC article 8(2) (b) (ix) for example provides:

*For this Statute, “war crimes” means: Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals, and places where the sick and wounded are collected, provided they are not military objectives. (ICC, 1998)*

The rules and customs of war stipulate that a war crime is committed when the legal, material, and mental elements of the crime are fulfilled. This means the alleged act of cultural destruction should fit into the list of elements mentioned under art. 8(2)(b) (ix) and the perpetrator should commit the act intentionally or negligently. About the destruction of cultural heritage, the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) Appeals Judgement under paragraph 277 indicated that the mental element (intent requirement) that constitutes war crime is “deliberate or with reckless” that results in the destruction or damage of a protected cultural or religious property (ICTY, Prosecutor v Pavle Strugar, 2008)

Global experiences reveal that cultural destruction often occurs in the context of an armed conflict. (Nersessian, 2019). During the wars of subjugation, interstate and civil wars by governments and insurgents around the world, cultural property has always been under attack (Brosché *et al.*, 2016). Attacks on cultural heritage have been used frequently as a weapon of war, frequently in conjunction with intentional attempts to eradicate the symbols of identity and pride of a particular people (Viejo-Rose & Killean, 2020). In the Tigray war, several reports have come out that cultural destructions have occurred as such (Kahsay *et al.*, 2024).

The research question examined in this study is: *What was the extent and nature of the damage to cultural property during the war in Tigray, were symbols of cultural and religious identity targeted and, if so, do these acts amount to war crimes?*

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach in which fieldwork and desk research were both used to acquire the data. The study has also combined a doctrinal approach to examine whether the acts of targeting symbols of cultural and religious identity amount to being a war crime. To that effect, the study has used a variety of primary data gathering procedures, including semi-structured interviews, observation, and case studies. One of the authors of this chapter has participated as a co-principal investigator of a damage assessment conducted that covered 217 cultural heritage sites in all zones of Tigray, except the Western Zone, which involved 16 data collectors. The study's main conclusions are included in this chapter. A detailed list of locations, asset destruction, and quantified damaged properties has been documented. Data collection methods included taking field notes, taking pictures, and capturing audio. An administrative ethical clearance was obtained from regional authorities to conduct the damage assessment.

**Key informant interviews:** Professionals/experts and government employees working in relevant bureaus/offices functioning at the regional, zone, woreda (district), and town levels were the subjects of key informant interviews. Semi-structured interviewing was the method chosen for the interview. For this study, 30 persons were interviewed. The purpose of the interviews was to gather information from experts and decision-makers about different types of heritages present in their area of expertise (especially concerning heritage/s of immense value or to unique treasures that define Tigray and those of premium importance to Tigray) as well as the heritage management and conservation practices of local communities, government offices (at woreda/town, zone, and regional levels), and other stakeholders. The primary data was collected in Mekelle, Wukro, Adigrat, Samre, Adigudom, Hagereselam, Aby-Adi, Enderta, and Maichew. The key informants were 12 experts from government offices at different levels (woreda, zone, and regional offices), 4 experts in tourism management, 4 experts of archaeological site management, 4 experts of heritage conservation, and 6 local community leaders and religious leaders that amounts to 30 key informants.

A total of 20 interviews with randomly selected individuals have been conducted in addition to the key informant interviews with randomly selected people present around the heritage sites. Depending on the wishes of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded and thoroughly noted using notebooks. The interviews took place over the course of two phases; the first phase took place in May and June 2021, and the second one in May and early June 2023.

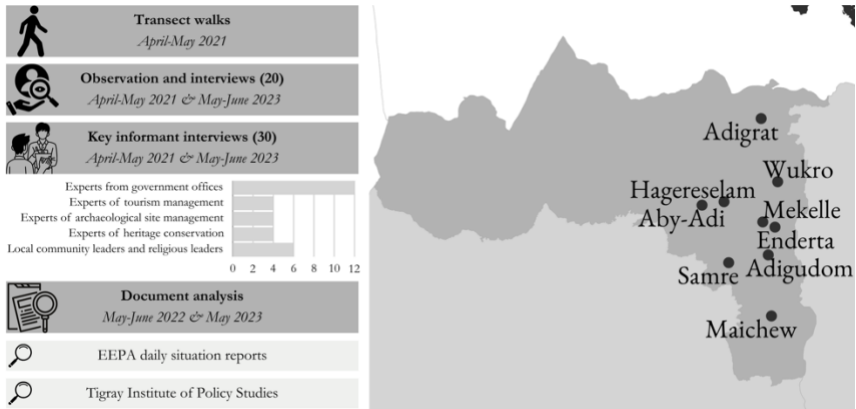


Figure 7.1. Data used and collected in the study

**Observation:** By employing an observation method, the research team were able to collect accurate data on the damage (caused by the war) and risk level (due to existing damage caused by the war and pre-existing exposure and vulnerabilities of sites) of some heritages chosen for extensive quick assessment. Additionally, pictures were taken to record the harm that had already happened, current risks, and the exposure of heritages and heritage sites.

**Transect walk:** Another technique employed in the assessment was a transect walk (sometimes lengthy journeys) to find damaged heritages, a visual inspection to evaluate the damage and condition of the damaged heritages.

**Case studies:** To some extent, detailed assessments (damage and risk assessments) on specific sites/heritages chosen as case studies have been made.

**Desk review:** Desk review has been a crucial data-gathering approach used to help triangulate or validate the conclusions gathered



by the primary data collection methods, even though the condition assessment was mostly done based on the data collected through fieldwork. In any case, the desk review required obtaining and studying historical records, as well as published and unpublished data, especially the damage assessment by the Tigray Institute of Policy Studies (TIPS) and the Situation Reports by Europe External Programme with Africa, which have been used to triangulate the findings. Moreover, the study has also relied on the legal frameworks protecting cultural heritages and those that penalise the deliberate destruction of cultural heritages.

Based on two assessments, an overview was obtained of the number of churches destroyed. This study has significantly relied on data obtained from the fieldwork by the first author, carried out from May to June 2021, and the report written in 2022. The result of the two assessments covers the destruction of all the church buildings found in the six zones. The Western Zone of Tigray which has faced heavy destruction, is not included in the assessment due to the inaccessibility of the region which is still occupied.

### **Obligation to protect**

Cultural properties are the concern of the international community and are accorded international protection because:

*These earliest efforts made clear that although cultural and religious sites and monuments, and works of art and science, may be bound to the territory of a state, they attracted international protection because of their importance to all humanity, such acts constituted war crimes, and perpetrators of such acts would be held to account.* (Vrdoljak, 2016, p. 2)

The origin of legal tools to defend cultural heritage during armed conflicts started at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Gerstenblith, 2016). Since the first codifications of the rules and customs of war in the nineteenth century, purposeful taking, destruction, or damage of cultural property has been outlawed by modern international law (Vrdoljak, 2016).

The discourse on the protection of heritage as a human rights issue is especially important (Bennoune, 2016). There are provisions inferring

rights related to cultural heritages, including the right to participate in cultural life and the rights of minorities and native communities to appreciate their way of life, exercise their religious conviction, and speak their language; and “the right to self-determination, the rights to freedom of expression and religion, the right to respect for private life, and the right to education” (Donders, 2020).

Cultural properties under the Hague Convention, Article 1 are defined as:

*For the purposes of the present Convention, the term “cultural property” shall cover, irrespective of origin or ownership: (a) movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above; (b) buildings whose main and effective purpose is to preserve or exhibit the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a) such as museums, large libraries and depositories of archives, and refuges intended to shelter, in the event of armed conflict, the movable cultural property defined in sub-paragraph (a); (c) centres containing a large amount of cultural property as defined in sub-paragraphs (a) and (b), to be known as ‘centres containing monuments’.*  
(Hague Convention, 1954)

The deliberate destruction of cultural assets, artefacts, and customs that belong to other human groups continues to be a major issue for the international community today. Cultural heritage is often under threat during any armed conflict: “it may be attacked deliberately because it represents a symbol of the enemy and its identity, be it historical, cultural or religious” (Techera, 2007). It may also be subject to pillage or theft for profit. Or it may simply suffer incidental damage during hostilities. Today it is widely accepted that attacks against symbols of cultural and religious identity may qualify as act of war crime provided the act is committed in the context of armed conflict. Many argue that “destruction is the inevitable consequence of armed conflict” (Ryška, 2021). However, efforts have been made to mitigate the futile consequences of armed conflict by limiting the means and methods of warfare (Ryška, 2021).

Consequently, cultural and historical properties in an armed conflict are protected based on the instruments of international cultural heritage protection and international humanitarian laws (Ristoldo, 2017). The overarching norms that regulate cultural and historical properties include the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two (1954 and 1999) Protocols; the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the means of prohibiting and preventing illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property; and the 1972 UNESCO Convention concerning the protection of the world's cultural and natural heritage. Moreover, the 2003 UNESCO Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (2003), which was adopted after the destruction of the Budha statues in Afghanistan, ordered by the Taliban in 2001 is also relevant. Moreover, international conventions governing cultural destruction as a war crime, such as the ICC, ICTY statutes, and case laws, provide a prescribed protection framework which is discussed because of the alleged acts of destruction in this chapter.

The 2003 UNESCO Declaration defines “intentional destruction” as:

*[...] an act intended to destroy in whole or in part cultural heritage, thus compromising its integrity, in a manner which constitutes a violation of international law or an unjustifiable offence to the principles of humanity and dictates of public conscience, in the latter case in so far as such acts are not already governed by fundamental principles of international law. (UNESCO, 2003)*

The above definition also implies the responsibility of state parties involved in the conflict for failing to take all necessary measures to protect cultural heritage. Moreover, a state that fails to take appropriate measures to prohibit, prevent, stop, and punish any intentional destruction of cultural heritage of great importance to humanity is responsible for the destruction. About this, the Hague Convention states “Parties to an armed conflict are not allowed to direct hostilities against cultural property and must avoid incidental damage to such property. Using cultural property for military purposes is prohibited” (Hague Convention, 1954). This protection concerns any cultural heritage, listed or not by UNESCO. More specifically article 28 of the Hague Convention requires member

states “to take, within the framework of their ordinary jurisdiction, all necessary steps to prosecute and impose penal or disciplinary sanctions upon those persons, of whatever nationality, who commit or order to be committed a breach of the [...] Convention” (Hague Convention, 1954).

This framework establishes that cultural and religious heritage is protected by international law, and acts of intentional destruction constitute war crimes if committed within the context of armed conflict and provided the elements of the crime are fulfilled. Moreover, the above legal frameworks provide that states must prosecute those responsible for the intentional destruction of cultural properties.

Statutes of the international criminal tribunals have also provided punitive provisions to the acts of cultural destruction committed in the context of armed conflict. For example, article 3(d) ICTY Statute stipulates: “[S]eizure, destruction or wilful damage done to institutions dedicated to religion, charity and education, the arts and sciences, historic monuments and works of art and science” amounts to a war crime (ICTY,1993). This provision also indicates that it applies to war crimes committed in the context of an armed conflict, international or internal (Vrdoljak, 2016). After the legal prescriptions, international criminal courts and tribunals have been responding to unlawful acts of destruction through criminal prosecutions. About this, it is to be recalled that Mali, in 2012, requested the ICC to investigate attacks against the religious and cultural sites which are also registered as World Heritage sites of Timbuktu under UNESCO (Ba, 2020).

The preservation of heritage helps link communities to identify their identity that is rooted down the generations and bridges across time towards new generations (ICCROM, 2011). This reflects the way of life of communities, which describes their history and categorises their identity (ICCROM, 2011), and shall be protected. Nevertheless, cultural property has always been under attack in most cases during armed conflicts (Brosché *et al.*, 2016); attacks on heritage and cultural properties have become a regular phenomenon in several recent armed conflicts (UNESCO, 2014). Furthermore, attacks on cultural

heritage refer to acts of targeting cultural property, which constitute an international crime involving the damage or destruction of such property, often described as ‘cultural destruction’ (Brammertz *et al.*, 2016).

The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954) and its two protocols of (1954 and 1999) mention that attacks on cultural property can constitute a war crime (Kelly, 2021). Destruction of cultural and historical possessions may also “meet the definition of a war crime” under the 1998 ICC statute (Weiss & Connelly, 2017). The Rome Statute of the ICC, under Article 8, states:

*Intentionally directing attacks against buildings dedicated to religion, education, art, science, or charitable purposes, or against historical monuments, provided they are not military objectives, is considered to fall within the meaning of war crimes, both in the framework of international armed conflicts and armed conflicts not of an international character.* (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 2011)

International humanitarian law restricts military attacks in that the attacker must comply with the principles of proportionality, necessity, and distinction (Townley, 2017). Under those principles, any military attack should be proportionate, and the recourse to violence/attack must be justified. On top of that the attackers must distinguish military objects from civil objects, (Article 51 (4) of AP1). This also goes in line with the stipulations of the ICC statute mentioned above that prohibit attacks on cultural heritages if they are not military objects. The Hague Regulations and Geneva Convention (GC, 1949) also provide that precautionary measures must be taken by combatants to spare civilians and civilian objects (Articles 26 & 27 of the Hague Regulations, 1907; Article 19 of Geneva Convention IV, 1949). In this case, cultural properties are regarded as civilian properties unless they are exclusively used for any military purposes and are bestowed special protection.

Ethiopia is a party to many of the above international legal regimes protecting the destruction of cultural properties. That means the state has legal duties to enforce the core obligations of the legal instruments to which it has vowed to implement. Therefore, Ethiopia

has obligations that emanate from the laws and customs of war to protect the destruction of properties that symbolise cultural and religious identity within its territory and anywhere during military engagements.

### **Findings from the EEPA Situation Reports**

The EEPA Situation Report (SR) finds that the ENDF-allied forces, together with EDF, Amhara special forces, and militias, such as Fano have deliberately bombed churches and monasteries, including but not limited to Debre Damo monastery, the historic Al Nejashi Mosque, the ancient Monastery of Maryam Qaretsa, Maryam Dengolat's Church, Amanuel Church in Eastern Tigray, Cherkos Church in Zalanbesa, and the Catholic Religious artefacts are stolen from 1,200 monasteries and churches (EEPA, 2021, SR 181). Historical and heritage structures that were built by kings and rulers who resided in Tigray such as Emperor Yohannes IV, Ras Alula Aba Nega, Ras Seyoum, and Enda Ra'esi were also destroyed and burned (EEPA, 2021, SR 92).

The acts of destruction were deliberate and aimed at destroying the religious knowledge of Tigrayans because the destruction was accompanied by the killing of the religious leaders, priests, deacons, and elders, and they were killed while providing church services and prayers (EEPA, 2021, SR 125). In addition to the killings of religious leaders, sexual violence including rape was committed against religious sisters and nuns, and mothers and daughters were gang-raped (EEPA, 2021, SR 150). The Amhara forces targeted the monks from Waldeba Monastery based on their Tigrayan ethnic background, who were killed, beaten with clear welts, and forced to be displaced from those areas (EEPA, 2021, SR 123). The EEPA SR reported the killing of 28 priests in Guetelo Medhanialem Church (EEPA, 2021, SR 181) and the massacre of six priests and 12 young deacons between the ages of 15 and 20 in the church of Adi'Zeban Karagiorgis in the middle of celebrating the birth of the Virgin Mary, which occurred on 9 January 2021 (EEPA, 2021, SR 145). Those acts are a few of the incidents that reveal the cruel acts of the ENDF and its allied forces perpetrated against civilians in Tigray.

According to a press release issued by Mahbere Kidus Yared Ze Orthodox Tewahdo Church, more than 1,200 monasteries and churches were ruined, religious treasures were looted, more than 160 priests and worshippers were massacred, and nuns and children were raped (EEPA, 2021, SR 181). The Consortium of Religious Institutions of Tigray documented over 326 priests, deacons, Sunday school students, and sheiks massacred by Ethiopian and Eritrean troops in the Tigray region since the war erupted. (EEPA, 2021, SR 153).

The intention of the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments to wipe out the Tigrayan culture was labelled as ‘cultural cleansing’ by many scholars, like Professor Michael Gervers of the University of Toronto (EEPA, 2021, SR 79) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) (EEPA, 2021, SR 99). In addition, the Global Society of Tigray Scholars (GSTS) sent a letter to UNESCO President Audrey Azoulay, drawing his attention to the problem that a unique part of humanity’s heritage was at risk, including UNESCO heritage old monolithic tomb markers that are 1,700 years old, fragile rock churches, and archaeological sites that date to between 800–1,000 AD, for acknowledgment of the concern that this is evidence for the perpetration of an international crime. (EEPA, 2021, SR 79).

From the analysis of the evidence reported in the EEPA Situation Report, it can be concluded that the destruction of cultural and religious heritage was widespread and systematic and contradicts the rules and customs of war to which Ethiopia has obligations to comply. Consequently, the GSTS requested protection from UNESCO, pointing to the importance of the heritage and expressing concern that the destruction of heritage amounts to a war crime. The reports further indicated that the attack also targeted people protecting the sites and those who were providing leadership to the cultural and religious practices.

The pattern and widespread nature of the attacks on religious communities, which were desacralized, further speaks to the belief that the attacks were intentional and cannot be qualified as simply collateral damage of the war. Rather, the indiscriminate nature of the attacks reveals that they were not consistent with the principles of

‘proportionality’, ‘distinction’, and ‘necessity’, which constitute the core pillars of the laws and customs of war.

### **Findings regarding the destruction of heritage**

In the following section, the outcome of the fieldwork on the ground in Tigray is discussed. The assessment was conducted in six zonal administrations in 18 sampled woredas and 50 kebele administrations covering 78 cultural heritage and religious sites. Woredas (districts) are divided into kebele (municipalities). This is the smallest administrative division and is sometimes called *tabiya*.

It was found that out of the total 164,666 cultural heritage objects registered before the war, 116,763 (70.90%) were damaged after the war. The highest percentage of the damage goes to the Eastern and Central zones, with a total damage of 60.8% and 17% of objects, respectively (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). The damage included: religious heritage, paintings, natural attractions, historical objects, manuscripts, paleontological and archaeological objects, and archives (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021).

With a variation in the numbers and extent of damage, the destruction of churches occurred in all the zonal administrations, including Mekelle. In the Southern Zone, 16 church buildings; in the Southeastern Zone, 10 church buildings; in the Central Zone, 120 church buildings; in the North Western Zone, 65 church buildings; and in the Eastern Zone, 21 church buildings were damaged (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021; Hadush *et al.*, 2022). According to the assessment of Hadush *et al.* (2022), more than 292 churches have sustained partial or complete damage, 14 of which are monasteries; transgression orders were passed against 121 churches; more than 5,347 large and small sacred objects have been stolen, and vandalised; 4,055 people have been physically hurt; as many as 1472 houses related to the sites were destroyed; and more than 383 women were raped or gang raped in the course of attacking the cultural heritage sites (Hadush *et al.*, 2022).

In the sample locations of the fieldwork by Habtom it was found that 61.11% of the damage to the cultural heritage was because of looting, while 24.76% and 5.56% were targeted by bombardment and targeted



burning, respectively (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). Inadvertent bombardment and collateral burning, together with other factors, accounted for only 8.5%. Looking at the magnitude of the damage, 77% of cultural heritage was completely damaged, 15.85% was severely damaged, 5.82% was mildly damaged, and only 1.24% was partially damaged (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). The complete damage constitutes 87 of the manuscripts, 57.55% of religious heritage objects, 94.85 of paintings, 72.6% of archives, 67.8% of historical objects, 13% of paleontological and archaeological objects, and 23% of the natural attraction sites. Physical assets of cultural heritage sites, cars, cash, and office equipment belonging to the heritage sites have been damaged as well (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). This is valued at a worth of Ethiopian birr (ETB) 273 million, which converts into approximately USD 5 million.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Habtom found that the administrative and professional staff of the cultural heritage were directly or indirectly affected by the war, which included death, physical disability, internal displacement, sexual violence, and forced disappearance.

Church regulations were broken as part of the attack against religious identity. The offenses included the carrying of a pistol into a church, which is contrary to religious regulations. The perpetrators have misused and abused church premises and properties; they have used buildings in church compounds as slaughterhouses, dwelling quarters for medical facilities, wearing shoes, etc. Church activities such as worship services, religious rites, feasts, and festivals were stopped, and some churches were completely shut down. Priests and monks were forced to throw away their turbans, take down their hats, and throw their hand-crosses, respectively. Churches were used as fortresses, contrary to the stipulations of the Hague Convention and general principles of the IHL, with holy vestments being used for everyday clothing and the churchyard being used as a residence (Hadush *et al.*, 2022). The sites were desacralized.

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed list of damaged items with their estimated cost has been documented as part of the damage assessment conducted.

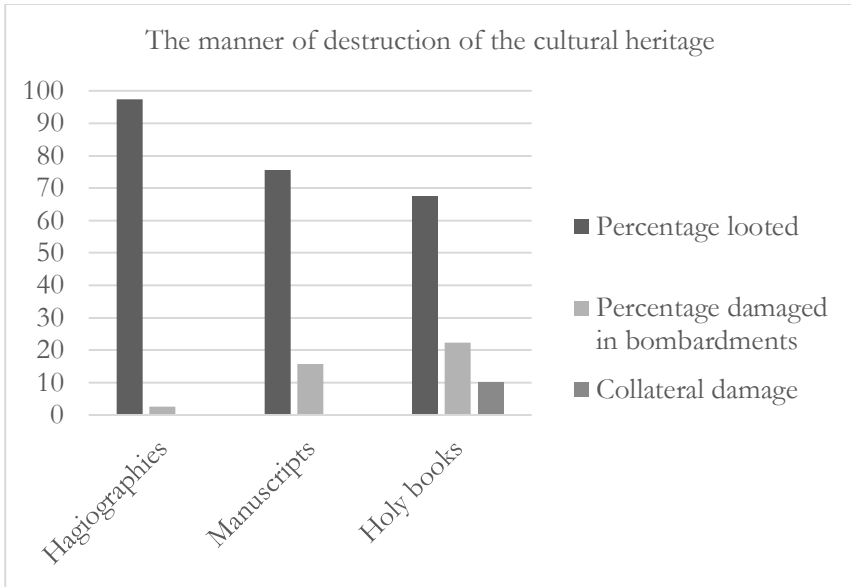
### ***Damage to holy books and parchments***

The assessment revealed out of the total 5,255 heritage books registered before the war, 2,351 (44.73%) were damaged by the war. Specifically, 348 (72.19%) of the 482 hagiographies were damaged, and 1,146 (41.14%) of the 2,783 manuscripts (parchments, codex) registered before the war were damaged (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). In addition, 817 (45.3%) Holy Bible books out of 1,801 and 40 Holy Quran books were damaged by the war (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021).



**Figure 7.2. Percentage of cultural heritage damaged during the war**

While 67.5% of the holy books were looted, 22.25 of them were damaged as a result of bombardments. It is concluded that only 10% of the holy books were damaged as a result of collateral damage. For the parchments, 75.5% of the manuscripts and 97.4% of the hagiography were looted, while 15.8% of the manuscripts and 2.6% of the hagiography were damaged by targeted bombing (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). Of the total damage of heritage books, 97.8% was complete damage, while only 2.16% was severe damage. The manuscript's hagiography was destroyed (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021).



**Figure 7.3. Manner in which cultural heritage was destroyed, i.e., by looting, bombardments, or collateral damage**

Other precious heritage assets like crosses, coins, cloths, and household items from pre-Aksumite and Aksumite kingdoms have also been looted from museums (Interviewee LP, interview with B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, 7 June 2023). Several historical books, holy books, missionary diaries, files that documented the profile of more than 1,000 rock-hewn churches, a Ge'ez-Latin dictionary, etc. have also been partially or fully damaged in the libraries of the Catholic Church in Tigray (Interviewee BB, Archaeologist and lecture in Adigrat University, interview by Habtom, face-to-face, 13 May 2021).

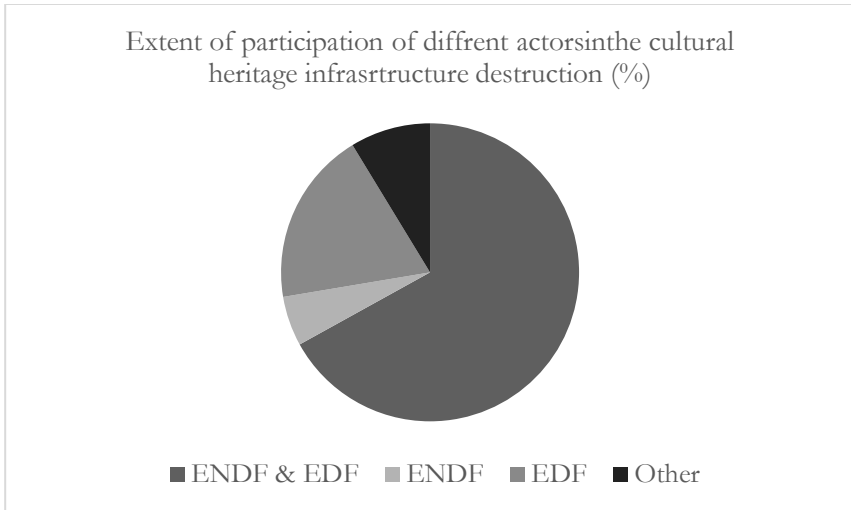
The magnificent rock-hewn cathedrals and the enormous Aksum stele are examples of technological innovation and the early growth of Christianity. Artifacts, documents, and inscriptions are essential because they serve as archives for the identity of the Tigray people. These cultural legacies define Tigray as the birthplace of Ethiopian civilisation. The findings suggest that adversaries of the Tigrayan people deliberately attacked these irreplaceable cultural treasures in the context of the armed conflict. The pattern of the actions of the actors reveals that their ultimate objective was to damage priceless

items with symbolic value to undermine the populace’s ingrained morals (Interviewee GJ- tour guide expert, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, 8 June 2023).

**Perpetrators**

The assessment specifically looked at the alleged perpetration of the damage to the heritage sites. The study found that the damage was perpetrated by the ENDF, EDF, Amhara Special Forces, militias, and gangsters from the local community.

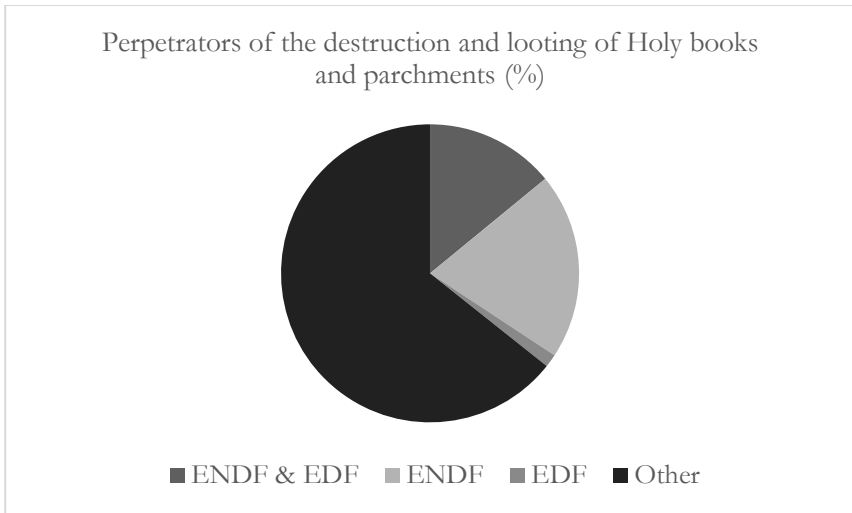
Acts of destruction committed by the combination of the ENDF and EDF accounted for 66.96% of the total damage assessed, while both forces caused the damage separately with 5.4% allegedly perpetrated by ENDF and 18.93% allegedly perpetrated by EDF alone. The ENDF and EDF are together responsible for 86% of the destruction of cultural and religious infrastructure. Also, Amhara Special Forces, militias, and gangsters from the local community perpetrated the remaining attacks.



**Figure 7.4. Percentage of destruction of cultural heritage infrastructure carried out by various perpetrators**

As opposed to the damage to cultural heritage infrastructure, the destruction and looting of holy books and parchments goes to Amhara Special Forces and militias, accounting for 59% of the total damage, followed by the ENDF, which damaged 18.54%. Theft by

Eritrean troops specifically of holy books and parchments was relatively limited at only 1.3%, while it occurred at 12.9% jointly with the ENDF. Again, as opposed to the destruction of infrastructure of heritage sites, the assessment conducted in 2021 revealed that massive damage and looting of holy books and parchments was higher in the Southern Zone, accounting for 42.66%, followed by the central and Eastern Zones with 17.99% and 15.14%, respectively (Fieldwork, HTS, May to June 2021). This percentage does not include the destruction that occurred at the locations after June 2021.



**Figure 7.5. Percentage of looting, damage, and destruction of holy books and parchments carried out by various perpetrators**

A high percentage of the holy books and parchments were looted. This action could have economic importance as some of the items were seen on the online market, but the action and intention of the perpetrators is more than just getting money (Interviewee LP, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle).

The cultural destruction was not limited to the Tigrinya-speaking people of Tigray; it also affected the Kunama and the Irob communities, minor ethnic groups in the Tigray region. The cultural museums of the Kunama and the Irob communities established in Sheraro and Dewhan towns respectively have been destroyed (Interviewee FJ, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 8 June 2023,

Mekelle). The cultural museum of the Irob community has been destroyed by the EDF (Interviewee FK, interview by B. G. Kahsay, phone, 9 June 2023, Mekelle).

As Tigray is a regional state within the sovereign republic of Ethiopia, the ENDF was supposed to take precautionary measures to protect against any destruction within the territory. More significantly, as a party to the Geneva Conventions, Ethiopia has also the legal obligation to protect civilian property and particularly cultural heritage in the context of armed conflicts. “Tigray region has always been part of Ethiopia. It was therefore not reasonable to expect that the ENDF would destroy a cultural property of its people” (Interviewee MS, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle).

***‘Their name is God’s servant, while their acts are anti-God’***

Intangible heritage, such as the protocols for worshiping, the respect and value given to religious leaders, and the symbolic attributions of religious materials were violated during the Tigray war (Interviewee MS, interview with B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, Mekelle, June 7, 2023). Pilgrimage ceremonies of important religious events in Aksum and Dengelat and other areas were attacked, and a bloody massacre of civilians and church leaders took place, costing hundreds of lives. This seriously undermined the religious institutions, and the social fabric of the society attached to religious beliefs (Interviewee BB-archaeologist and lecturer in Adigrat University, interview by Habtom, face-to-face, 13 May 2021).

The damage of the cultural heritage included destruction or/and cracking of physical buildings, erasure of paintings and drawings from the buildings, and looting of movable assets. The destruction of holy books, and other manuscripts, would appear to be aimed at undermining the knowledge of the people of Tigray, after which the identity that has depended on them for centuries will also disappear (Interviewee LP, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle). Linking the cultural destruction with all the massacres that occurred and the orchestrated siege, this level of destruction could not have another meaning other than that it was meant to threaten the culture of the people of Tigray (Interviewee LP, interview by B.

G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle). More importantly, the impression of an interviewee (a historical museum guide who witnessed the destruction of heritage in a place where there had never been fights) was that everything happened with full knowledge of the perpetrators about the consequences of their acts and the context within which their acts occurred (Interviewee MS, interview by B. G. Kahsay, face-to-face, 7 June 2023, Mekelle).

The interviewees expressed the impression that the looting of the holy books and parchments demonstrated the clear intention of the perpetrators to purposefully damage the culture of the people of Tigray contrary to the laws and customs of war. The pattern and context in which the damage occurred prove that the act was deliberately caused to denigrate the Tigrayan people.

A clear example of cultural significance in Tigray is the Tigray Martyrs' Monument Museum, which serves as a source of pride for many Tigrayans, symbolizing the resilience and values of the Tigray people. Located in the center of Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, the museum houses numerous photographs, narratives, and artifacts related to the liberation struggle against the former Derg regime. It also highlights the alliance between the Tigrayan people and the Eritrean People's Liberation Movement (EPLF), showcasing their joint achievements in the fight against the Derg regime. However, the museum suffered extensive damage.

A particularly striking detail related to the destruction is the discovery of a written message at the museum: “ስግቸው ገ/እግዛኣብሄር ስራቸው ፀረ እግዛኣብሄር”, which translates to, “their name is God's servant, while their acts are anti-God” (Field observation, Habtom, 10-June 2022). This message implies that, despite their religious practices and names, the Tigrayan people are considered unworthy in the eyes of God.

In a deeply religious society such as Tigray, this statement is highly offensive, striking at the core of the community's spiritual identity and challenging their very right to exist. Such expressions could provide a justification for the destruction of religious sites and institutions, and even rationalize violence against the Tigrayan people themselves.

In some cases, Eritrean troops were overheard declaring their intention to destroy the infrastructure and assets of the Tigrayan people, with the aim of setting Tigray back by 30 years. Ethiopian forces also left derogatory messages in the buildings and sites they occupied.

As a prominent Ethiopian government figure during the war in Tigray, Deacon Daniel was understood to argue that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), along with its social structures and ideology, should be completely eradicated from the Ethiopian state and the collective memory, ensuring no trace of Tigray would remain in history. This rhetoric, coupled with the messages left behind by soldiers, was understood by many Tigrayans as an explicit intent to target civilians and civilian infrastructure, particularly focusing on the destruction of Tigrayan culture and religious identities.

Observations in Tigray revealed that many people widely interpreted the actions as aligning with statements made by Deacon Daniel Kibret, a member of the Ethiopian House of Representatives and special advisor to the Prime Minister. Deacon Daniel publicly suggested that bombs should be dropped on major towns in Tigray to intensify destruction and fulfil the planned objectives.

## **Discussion**

This chapter has attempted to incorporate different sources of data on the destruction of cultural and religious heritage in Tigray. The purpose of the study was to take a wide reach with inclusion of as many locations as possible, using different studies that have been undertaken, and to evaluate whether they amount to war crimes. The validity of different sources is triangulated and the overall conclusion is that there was deliberate, extensive, and widespread destruction of cultural and religious heritage contrary to the laws and customs of war; that the attacks involved demeaning treatment of the sites and that the communities associated with the sites were directly affected in multiple ways.

Despite the attempt to integrate different types of sources, the study does not present a comprehensive inventory of all the destruction and has not covered all the religious and historical heritage sites of Tigray



that have been destroyed. This is due to a lack of access to all areas of Tigray. The scale of the destruction reported in this chapter is likely to be conservative. From the interviews and observations, the population has been widely affected.

The findings of this chapter confirm and converge with findings by Tesfa & van Reisen (2024a and b); Tesfa et al., 2024 and Gebremariam & Abrha, 2024. The evidence, direct or indirect, connected to the destruction has proved that the destruction was deliberate, indiscriminate, and contrary to the rules of engagement to which Ethiopia Government is obliged to respect. The pattern and context in which the destruction occurred prove the deliberate, systematic, and widespread nature of the attack and that this cannot be construed as collateral damage.

In this context, the United Nations (UN) Committee of Human Rights Experts, tasked with investigating violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Ethiopia, highlighted in its 2023 report that “religious buildings, in particular churches, were attacked by the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) and allied forces,” with paragraph 217 of the report noting that many of these actions, under the reasonable grounds standard, amount to war crimes (ICHREE, 2023).

This chapter gives further evidence to the hypothesis that the systematic and widespread destruction of cultural and religious heritage was aimed at attacking the social fabric through the eradication of the distinct features of the Tigray people as a particular nation and ethnic group, to target civilians and their properties that symbolise the culture and religion of Tigrayans. According to the stipulations of the Geneva Convention, the Hague Regulations, and the statute of the ICC, the above acts amount to war crimes as they were committed in the context of an armed conflict and this was fortified by the reports of the UN Committee of Human Rights experts in Ethiopia. The ICC Draft Policy on Cultural Heritage. (ICC: The Office of the Prosecutor, 2021) elaborates further on the determination of this crime.

## Conclusion

The war in Tigray has resulted in the massive deliberate and systematic destruction of cultural heritage. The destruction that has occurred to the cultural properties in Tigray has been serious. Buildings of churches, mosques, monasteries, heritage sites, museums, and historical places have been destroyed during the war without due regard to the rules of engagement. In addition to the structures and buildings, holy books and parchments have also been destroyed, looted, and damaged. This study provided a detailed inventory of the cultural buildings and heritage assets that have been destroyed, damaged, or looted.

The nature of the damage to cultural heritage during the war in Tigray was wide in terms of geographic coverage; destruction occurred in every place where the perpetrators stayed with similar patterns. The damage extended from the destruction of physical buildings of heritage value and holy places to the looting, burning, and breaking heritage assets, holy books, manuscripts, and hagiographies. Moreover, the pattern and nature of the destruction demonstrates that the acts violated the rules of engagement particularly, the 'proportionality', 'distinction' and the 'precautionary measures' required from all parties to hostility.

Massacres, particularly against clergy and religious leaders, were committed alongside the destruction of significant cultural and religious artefacts, in which civilians were injured and hundreds killed. Evidence reveals that the pattern of the destruction was not the result of collateral damage, but that the destruction was deliberate and indiscriminate that systematically targeted the cultural heritages. The evidence collected in this study suggest that these acts amount to war crimes.

With varied levels of participation and contributions in each location and heritage type, the perpetrators were identified to be the ENDF, EDF, and Amhara Special Forces and militias. In this regard, the Ethiopian government failed to discharge its obligations in respecting the rules of engagement particularly to protect the cultural and religious assets together with the civilians and pilgrims participating in the cultural and religious events.

The perpetrators who ordered and conducted what may constitute international crimes under the Rome Statutes should be held to account. Accountability for committing war crimes as resulting from the deliberate destruction, compensation for the destroyed assets, and returning the looted assets should be among the key priorities of any future negotiations and proceedings. The study identifies the need for an independent investigation into the atrocity crimes that were allegedly committed during the Tigray war, including the war crimes of the intentional destruction of cultural and religious artefacts and the crimes committed against the religious leaders, servants, and pilgrims. Moreover, the study calls for the international community to ensure reparations for the affected communities and rehabilitation of the cultural and religious heritage destroyed during the Tigray war.

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## **Authors' contributions**

The study was planned and carried out by the first author. He is a GAIC PhD fellow. In addition to reviewing previous iterations and helping with data analysis, the second author contributed to the data collection process. The third author evaluated versions of the chapter and made contributions to the legal section of the analysis.

## **Ethical clearance**

No specific clearance was requested.

This chapter should be read in conjunction with the 'Note on content and editorial decisions'.

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