

**International Conference on Eritrean Studies:  
Interviews of Scholars and Activists**



Prof. Sarena Masa

Habtom Tesfamichael

***Prof. Sarena Masa, please, introduce yourself and tell us what inspired the establishment of the Adulis Project.***

I am a professor of archaeology at the Catholic University of Milan and current president of the Research Center on the Eastern Desert. The Adulis Project was initiated twelve years ago at the request of the Eritrean government, who approached the late Professor Alfredo Castiglioni, my predecessor at the Research Center. With their extensive experience in African archaeology, we embarked on a journey to explore the significance of Adulis, a site that had long been overlooked.

This initiative was driven by a vision to demonstrate the African continent's connections to renowned civilizations, particularly the Egyptian civilization. Adulis was chosen as a focal point to showcase the archaeological origins of civilization in sub-Saharan Africa. After twelve years of excavation, we are now poised to present a narrative that differs from the traditional accounts.

***What is the significance of the project and its impact on revisiting the historical narratives around it?***

Historically, many studies have identified the Axumite area as the cradle of urban civilization in the Horn of Africa. However, our findings suggest that Axum rose to prominence after Adulis. This was the central theme of my recent presentation at a conference held with my colleagues. This project is a collaborative effort, involving the Commission of Culture and Sports (CCS), with Dr. Tsegay Medin as codirector and myself as the scientific coordinator. Institutions such as the Polytechnic University of Milan and various other universities are also integral to this initiative.

An essential aspect of our work encompasses environmental studies surrounding Adulis and conservation efforts for the architecture and artifacts uncovered during excavations. I am honored to present our findings, but it is crucial to acknowledge the numerous Eritrean and Italian collaborators involved in this project.

***Can you tell us some of the key findings of your research on the archaeology of Adulis?***

Our research utilizes both traditional excavation methods and non-destructive techniques such as surface surveys, geophysics, and aerial surveys. Aerial surveys, combined with surface studies, revealed that the site's extent is significantly larger than previously estimated. While earlier estimates suggested an area of approximately 40 hectares, our investigations have uncovered archaeological evidence extending beyond the western limits of the site, on the bed of the Haddas River. This has led to the discovery of new buildings and materials that indicate a much longer history than previously believed.

We have also identified a rich variety of archaeological materials that elucidate the chronological sequence of stratigraphy, demonstrating connections between the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and Egypt. Among our significant discoveries is the earliest known church building in the Horn of Africa, constructed between the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

Additionally, while it was previously thought that the main development of Adulis occurred between the third and seventh centuries AD, we have found evidence suggesting that its significance dates back much further.

***How does the project engage the local population, and how can the findings contribute to nation building?***

Our project actively engages with local communities through collaboration with the CCS and the Northern Red Sea Region Administration. We also invite students from local schools to visit the site, where we provide briefings on Adulis's historical significance and our ongoing research.

A key topic discussed at the recently held conference was the role of national identity in nation-building. Our research project contributes to this conversation by scientifically documenting the archaeological and historical foundations of the nation. My extensive literature review has highlighted the unique characteristics of the Adulis civilization, which developed independently despite its connections to various overseas civilizations, including those from the Mediterranean, the Arabian Peninsula, and Indian cultures. The archaeological evidence of goods exported from the hinterland—such as ivory, turtle shells, and spices—illustrates Adulis's critical role as a nexus of sea and caravan routes.

***What are the future goals of the Adulis project?***

We have ambitious goals ahead. One of our primary objectives is to establish an archaeological and natural park at Adulis to protect the area from environmental threats like flooding. Additionally, we plan to extend our excavation efforts to explore deeper stratigraphy for a more comprehensive understanding of the site's evolution.

However, we face challenges especially due to the hot climatic conditions of the region, limiting our working months. To address this, we are developing plans for a self-sufficient mission house powered by renewable energy, along with introducing agricultural activities to ensure the project's sustainability.

***Your reflections on the conference...***

The conference presented a rich tapestry of Eritrean studies across various fields, from the past to the present. I hope for more frequent gatherings of this nature to facilitate the sharing of diverse perspectives and knowledge. Together, we can further enrich our understanding of Eritrea's historical and archaeological heritage.



Mr. Daniel Sillas

***Please, tell us your background?***

I was born and raised in Asmara and later moved to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to further my education. Eventually, I settled in Italy, where I became deeply involved in activism surrounding migration issues.

***How did you discover that various entities are profiting from the exploitation of migrants?***

In my book, I utilized a reversed pyramid structure divided into nine levels, identifying key players involved in the migration crisis, including human traffickers, activists, journalists, politicians, NGOs, and organizations like UNHCR and Amnesty International.

For instance, I highlighted the case of FIAT, which had employed thousands of Italian workers. However, in recent years, the company has shifted to employing migrants in various camps across the country, paying them meager wages. This shift exemplifies how entities exploit vulnerable populations for profit.

***You encountered censorship and boycotts. Can you clarify that and how it affected your work?***

The publication of my book sparked significant backlash from various sectors. Those involved in the migration business attempted to block its distribution through severe censorship and boycotting efforts. Despite my extensive research and firsthand experiences, attempts were made to discredit my work and silence my voice on the matter.

The efforts to undermine my findings only reinforced my commitment to speak out. I believe it is crucial to expose the hidden hands behind the migration business and shed light on the systemic issues that perpetuate this crisis. My journey from Asmara to Italy has been one of resilience and determination to advocate for those whose stories are often overlooked.

*Issayas Tesfamariam*



***Please, introduce yourself and tell us about your journey to becoming the coordinator of the National Public Diplomacy Group NPDG?***

I am Issayas Tesfamariam, currently teaching at Stanford University and also working at Hoover Institute within Stanford University.

Public diplomacy has a rich history for Eritreans, dating back to the arrival of Abraham Elfe in the United States in 1924. I recently spoke with his 80-year-old son, who revealed that two other Eritreans arrived around the same time, though their records are harder to trace. We've secured important documents that illuminate Abraham's life during the Italian colonization of Eritrea, highlighting the evolving migration patterns that have led to a vibrant Eritrean community in the U.S.

The NPDG was established to reshape perceptions of Eritrea and its people. While traditional diplomacy often focuses on governmental relations, our group emphasizes engaging the public to enhance understanding of our communities. By sharing our educational and cultural narratives, we seek to foster a more positive image of Eritrea.

Reflecting on our struggle for independence, many Eritrean groups actively engage in public diplomacy to support our cause. Today, we utilize culture as a foundation for our narrative. Owning our story is vital; if we don't, others may misrepresent us. The NPDG aims to share our collective memory, using it as a platform to tell our story.

### ***What initiatives has the NPDG taken and what are its objectives?***

Since launching the NPDG, we have worked to correct misconceptions surrounding Eritrea. Our identity and culture have faced scrutiny, and we are committed to sharing our story and values with future generations, especially the children and grandchildren of Eritrean immigrants.

In 2022, we initiated the quarterly online magazine Eritrean-American Harmony, which has published twelve issues covering diverse topics and reached approximately 38 countries. We also produce a quarterly newsletter to keep our members informed of our activities.

Recognizing the need for a strong online presence, we prioritized building a website to support our ongoing initiatives.

Empowering the youth is central to our mission. We engage young people interested in technology and public diplomacy, creating a platform that reflects our diverse activities. With over 400 young professionals surveyed, we are building a growing network that helps us effectively reach our communities.

Addressing negative portrayals of Eritrea in U.S. media is another critical aspect of our work. We have established our media platform, Harmony, which encompasses publishing, music, and film. By producing our own content, we can better control our narrative and counter misrepresentations.

Currently, our initiatives are largely volunteer-driven, as we dedicate our time and resources to ensure their sustainability. We believe that this work is crucial and should be ongoing, rather than solely reactive.

***What is NPDG's vision over the next few years and how do you see the role of Eritrean-Americans evolving in the context of public diplomacy?***

Looking ahead, we aim to institutionalize our efforts and encourage more young people to participate. By distributing responsibilities according to individual passions and expertise, we hope to create an online platform that serves as a collective memory for all Eritreans, inviting everyone to contribute to this important narrative.

By harnessing the diverse talents within our community, we can effectively engage in public diplomacy and ensure that Eritreans are heard and understood on their own terms.