



STABILIZATION OF HISTORICAL ARCHIVES  
IN MEKELLE CITY

# RESCUE OF FIRE AND WATER DAMAGED DOCUMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION:

The archival materials within the Mekelle Municipality building face severe threats due to poor storage conditions and safety hazards. An exposed electrical panel with open wires presents a significant fire risk, which became a reality in a recent incident likely triggered by compromised wiring or nearby cooking activities. This fire caused substantial damage to numerous documents, necessitating the urgent intervention of the municipal fire brigade. Although their quick response prevented further loss, the water used to extinguish the flames soaked many records, hastening their deterioration. The wet papers quickly morphed into a pulpy, unidentifiable mass, combining soot, dirt, and charred remnants, rendering many documents permanently unreadable. This situation underscores the urgent need for immediate archival preservation efforts, as each document represents a vital piece of Mekelle's history that must be rescued before it is lost forever.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND:

The "Stabilization of Historical Archives in Mekelle City Municipality" project was initiated to address the deteriorating condition of invaluable archival materials housed within the city's historic municipality building. These documents, which include court records, municipal correspondence, land deeds, budgetary reports, and urban planning documents dating from the 1930s to the 2000s, represent a comprehensive record of Mekelle's administrative history. Recognizing the risk of losing this irreplaceable heritage, a structured project was developed with the goal of rescuing, preserving, and eventually digitizing these archives.

The project officially commenced with a half-day inception workshop on October 30, 2024, bringing together stakeholders from the Bureau of Culture and Tourism, Mekelle Zonal Administration, and Mekelle University. This workshop provided an overview of the project objectives, introduced technical requirements, and outlined immediate and long-term goals for preservation. Presentations covered topics such as the restoration of the Old Municipality building, spatial planning for archival storage, and strategic phases for inventorying and cataloging scattered materials. The workshop emphasized the importance of converting the building into a functional archival and museum space, with recommendations on best practices in archival preservation and initial handling protocols.

An additional sub-project aims to collect pre-1980 historical photographs from local sources, expanding the archival collection and offering materials for potential exhibitions. Given the historical value and community significance of these records, the project also seeks to build a collaborative framework with local institutions to secure additional funding and to provide ongoing training for archival management.

Despite the urgent need, the project has faced several challenges. Bureaucratic hurdles, resource limitations, and environmental hazards within the building compound have highlighted the importance of strong support and cooperation among municipal and

regional authorities. The project underscores the value of safeguarding Mekelle's cultural memory as part of the city's broader post-conflict recovery, emphasizing that preserving these archives is not only an act of conservation but also a foundational step in documenting and understanding Mekelle's rich historical legacy.

The project's phased approach, which includes stabilization, preservation, and digitization, aims to protect these historical documents while aligning with the immediate priorities of the local government. By doing so, the initiative seeks to ensure that Mekelle's administrative and cultural heritage remains accessible for future generations and supports the city's ongoing efforts to rebuild its identity.

On November 2, the team focused on the rescue of archival materials from a room that had suffered extensive damage due to a fire, which was subsequently extinguished with water. The condition of the materials was extremely dire, necessitating immediate intervention to salvage what remained of the archives.



*Condition of archives in Projector room (Under staircase). The doorless opening is towards a hall of people's circulation.*



*Some other scattered archival materials at the corner of the meeting hall. The meeting hall is in active use for several purposes.*

## CONDITION OF ARCHIVAL MATERIALS:

Our assessment of the archives at the Mekelle Municipality building has highlighted several critical challenges. These issues threaten not only the preservation of the documents but also their accessibility for future municipal use and research. The following details outline the specific conditions of the archival materials:



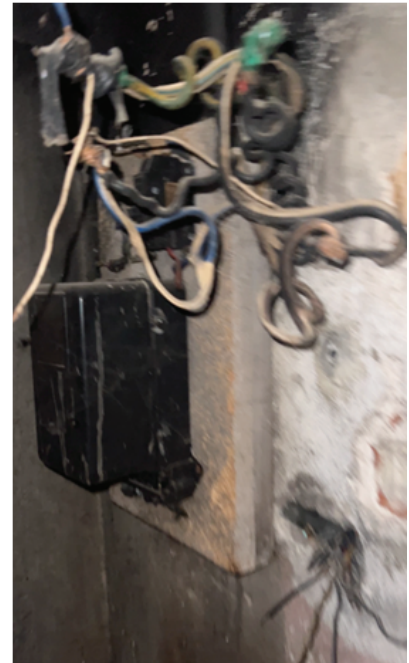
### 1. Physical Condition of Documents:

- The majority of the documents in the compound, which include city documents, municipal correspondence, land deeds, financial records, and building permits, span a historical period from the 1930s through the early 2000s. These records are irreplaceable sources of historical data that document significant aspects of Mekelle's administrative, legal, and social history.
- Although there are several documents in other rooms, the documents at the interest of this task are stored under the staircase of the main municipality hall, an area with inadequate and damaging storage conditions. After they were exposed to fire and dumped with water, the lack of protective enclosures, papers are exposed to fluctuating temperatures, humidity, and dust accumulation. As a result, many documents have become brittle, warped, and discolored. Several are also permanently damage and decomposed.

- From the surviving documents, several bundles of paper show advanced signs of fungal growth due to prolonged exposure to moisture. The organic decay of these papers has led to visible mold stains and a strong musty odor, indicating potential health risks for those handling the archives.

## 2. Environmental Hazards:

- The archives stored in a small projector room beneath the main lobby staircase face particular risks. This room, meant for occasional storage, is adjacent to a communal open fire cooking area that serves nearby personnel. The smoke, heat, and humidity from this cooking area seep into the storage space, exacerbating the degradation of documents through exposure to high levels of moisture, soot, and fluctuating temperatures.
- An exposed electrical panel with open wires within the storage room poses a serious fire hazard. In recent months, a fire incident occurred within this room, causing significant damage to the archives. The fire, likely triggered by the compromised wiring or close proximity to cooking activities, charred multiple documents and triggered the municipal fire brigade's intervention. Water used to extinguish the fire soaked a considerable portion of the remaining records, accelerating their degradation. These wet papers quickly turned into a pulpy, unidentifiable mass, combining soot, dirt, and charred remnants, making some documents permanently unreadable.



*Electric wires and switch/meter.  
Possible cause of earlier fire  
incident.*

## 3. Human Impact and Misuse:

- The Old Municipality building itself lacks the infrastructure needed to house sensitive archival materials safely. No temperature or humidity controls exist, and the storage areas have little natural ventilation, causing stagnant, damp conditions that accelerate decay.
- The structure of the building shows signs of deterioration, with areas prone to leaks during rainy weather, which introduces moisture directly to archival spaces. During the most recent rainy season, water leaked into several parts of the storage area, leading to pools of stagnant water near bundles of paper. Without immediate action, the archives face significant additional damage from potential flooding and increased mold growth.

## INITIAL RESCUE ACTIONS:

Given the critical state of the archival materials in the Mekelle Municipality building, our team organized a targeted rescue intervention to mitigate further damage and establish a preliminary preservation framework. This initial phase involved a coordinated approach among experts from the Bureau of Culture and Tourism, Mekelle Zonal Administration, Mekelle University, and labor support. The primary objective was to stabilize the documents, assess the level of deterioration, and separate salvageable materials from irreparably damaged ones. Below is a detailed account of the steps taken during this rescue operation:



*Sorting archives from the remnants of fire damage and a year of water exposure.*

### 1. Assessment and Triage of Materials:

- Our team began with a thorough inspection of the storage area to assess the condition of the documents. Using a preliminary grading system, we classified documents into categories based on their stability and potential for recovery. This categorization allowed us to prioritize items in the worst condition for immediate intervention.
- The documents were divided into four main groups:
  - **Sorted Bundles (Unopened):** These bundles were in relatively stable condition and mostly intact. We prioritized moving them to a cleaner, safer location within the building to prevent further exposure.
  - **Unsorted Loose Papers:** These papers were scattered across the storage areas and at high risk of further damage due to lack of organization. Each loose sheet was carefully gathered and temporarily sorted to prevent additional fragmentation.
  - **Heavily Damaged Papers:** This category included documents with significant

fire, water, and mold damage. These papers were set aside for more intensive restoration efforts in the next action.

- **Irretrievably Damaged Materials:** These papers, often mixed with debris and reduced to unrecognizable pulp, had suffered complete structural degradation. Although mostly unsalvageable, we documented their existence and made note of the types of records they had once contained, when discernible. We haven't move these and left them in their location for further decision.

## 2. Removal of Contaminants and Debris:

- The storage spaces were littered with various contaminants, including plastic bottles, food wrappers, clothing, and other miscellaneous debris that had accumulated over time. These items were removed to reduce the risk of further contamination and to create a more stable environment for the archival documents.
- A team of laborers assisted in this debris removal, carefully ensuring that fragile papers were not accidentally disturbed or damaged during the cleanup process. However further of this action need to be done in the future.

## 3. Salvage and Stabilization of Damaged Documents:

- In the case of heavily water-damaged documents, there is a need in the future to undertake emergency drying procedures to prevent further mold growth. This included carefully separating wet pages to allow airflow between them, placing them on clean surfaces, and positioning fans at a distance to promote gradual drying.
- For documents that had been affected by fire, there is a need to conduct gentle surface cleaning to remove soot without compromising the integrity of the paper. There is need for soft brushes to lift away loose debris and ash, a step critical to making the remaining text visible for potential digitization in the next phase. These activity need to be done immidiately.
- There is a need for mold-affected documents were isolated from the rest of the collection to prevent cross-contamination. Whenever possible, we cleaned moldy surfaces but there will a need to clean with archival-grade sponges, following best practices to avoid spreading spores and worsening the mold problem.



*Placing document in safer temporary place.*

#### 4. Temporary Relocation and Improved Storage Conditions:

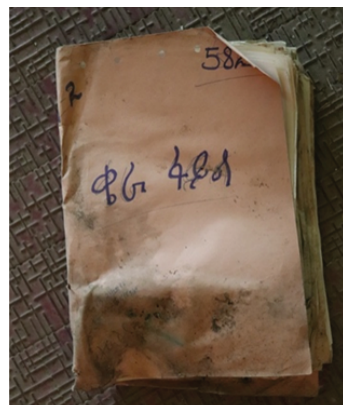
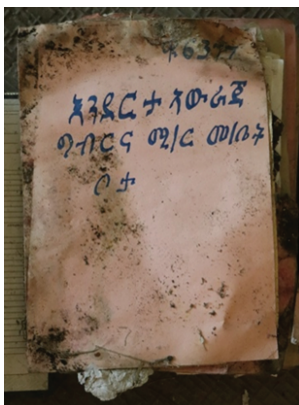
- A safer storage room within the municipality building was designated for the temporary relocation of salvageable documents. Although still not ideal, this area offered better protection against moisture and temperature fluctuations than the original storage areas.
- We placed the documents in this room on clean, protected sheet to reduce contact with the damp floor. To minimize further environmental damage, we ensured no direct exposure to sunlight or heat sources and maintained consistent air circulation to control humidity levels as much as possible within the constraints of the building. However, there is a need for shelving to sustainably cure the papers.



Placing and separating file for temporary storage.

#### 5. Inventory and Documentation of Materials:

- As each document was handled, we made a sample records of its condition, type, and potential historical value. This documentation process will provide a foundational inventory of the materials that survived the initial triage, laying the groundwork for cataloging and digital preservation in future project phases.
- For totally damaged and unrecoverable materials, we made notes about their location, appearance, and possible origin, when identifiable. This record-keeping was essential for maintaining a historical account of the types of documents that were present, even if they could no longer be preserved in their original form



Some samples of document types.

## 6. Interim Training and Protocol Establishment:

- During the rescue actions, our team provided on-the-spot guidance for laborers and support staff. This included basic handling protocols with fragile paper, lifting items gently etc.
- Additionally, we developed preliminary guidelines for safe handling, storage, and transportation, which will serve as interim measures until more comprehensive training can be organized. These protocols aim to minimize accidental damage as the project moves forward and to instill an initial level of archival care among team members.

## 7. Immediate Protection Against Ongoing Risks:

- Recognizing that fire hazards remain a significant risk in the building, we planned to discuss issues and coordinated with the municipality to increase awareness and institute additional protective measures. This included reinforcing the importance of keeping open flames, communal cooking, and other potential fire sources at a safe distance from storage areas.
- There is also a need to address potential rodent and insect threats, we conducted a basic pest control sweep, removing food remnants and other attractants from the storage areas.

## CHALLENGES AND CONSIDERATIONS:

In undertaking the stabilization of the Mekelle Municipality archives, we recognize the competing priorities of government bodies in a post-conflict environment. In light of pressing demands across multiple sectors, we acknowledge that allocating resources and attention to archival preservation may not be viewed as immediately essential. However, this unique project offers an opportunity to safeguard a critical component of the city's heritage that might otherwise be lost. Below are the specific challenges and considerations, with an emphasis on the need for balanced support from municipal and government authorities.

### 1. Priority Alignment with Immediate Post-Conflict Needs:

The municipality and regional government understandably prioritize urgent post-conflict recovery issues, including infrastructure repair, social welfare, and administrative restoration. These immediate needs are vital for the well-being and resilience of the local population. However, this has led to limited attention and resources available for archival preservation, which is often seen as less critical in times of recovery. Despite this, the archives hold extensive historical value, documenting Mekelle's administrative legacy and collective memory, which could greatly benefit future generations and inform ongoing efforts to rebuild and restore local identity.

### 2. Administrative and Approval Challenges:

Bureaucratic processes, which are necessarily cautious in a post-conflict context, have resulted in delays for approvals, access permissions, and coordination efforts essential to the project's timely progress. While the commitment of the municipality and regional administration has been invaluable, the complexities of inter-departmental communications, combined with overlapping administrative responsibilities, have slowed down initial phases. We remain hopeful that streamlining these processes in cooperation with government stakeholders will enhance the efficiency of the project without diverting attention from other critical matters.

### 3. Resource Allocation Constraints:

The immediate post-conflict environment has understandably directed funding toward sectors with direct impact on public welfare and infrastructure repair, leaving limited funds for archival preservation efforts. This scarcity impacts the ability to acquire specialized preservation materials, establish secure storage, and digitize documents efficiently. Acknowledging these limitations, we seek collaborative solutions to ensure that these historical records can be stabilized with minimal impact on already-strained budgets.

This pilot rescue project was conducted with a small amount of fund from Gerda Henkel Foundation under scholarship provided to Dr. Alula Tesfay. To undertake, the rescue in bigger and effective scale, larger funds need to be mobilized.

#### **4. Balancing Public Safety and Preservation Needs:**

The dual-use nature of the municipal building, which currently houses Tigray Defense Forces personnel and serves as a communal center, creates logistical challenges for both preservation and safety. The government's commitment to maintaining a functional municipal space, even with limited alternatives, is essential for community stability. Yet, this setup brings certain risks to the preservation environment, including exposure to heat, smoke, and fire hazards. We value the government's efforts to balance these needs and look forward to working together to secure an alternative archival space, if feasible, to mitigate these risks.

#### **5. Supporting Long-Term Heritage Preservation Goals:**

In addition to its administrative function, the Mekelle Municipality archive represents an irreplaceable repository of Mekelle's history. Recognizing the immediate post-conflict needs, we aim to frame this project as a long-term investment in Mekelle's heritage preservation and historical resilience. With government support, the project can advance gradually through stages that align with ongoing recovery efforts, such as implementing digitization initiatives and strengthening archival oversight within the existing governmental structure.

## CONCLUSION:

The stabilization of the Mekelle Municipality archives is a crucial endeavor, safeguarding a unique record of the city's administrative, cultural, and social heritage. The initial rescue phase has helped to mitigate further damage to the archives, yet these materials remain at risk without sustained preservation efforts. While immediate post-conflict recovery needs understandably occupy municipal and regional authorities, this project presents an opportunity to secure and digitize Mekelle's historical documents, contributing to a deeper sense of continuity and identity in the community's rebuilding process.

Moving forward, a collaborative approach that aligns with the region's broader recovery efforts will be essential. Support in the form of policy integration, resource allocation, and training for archival management can ensure these documents are preserved and made accessible. By addressing the stabilization needs alongside the immediate priorities of the municipality, this project can protect Mekelle's historical legacy and serve as a lasting resource for the city's future.



*Archive place in secured area for temporary storage until shelving. Two side are open for ventilation.*

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*Additional information:*

*About project;*

<https://sites.google.com/view/historical-archives-in-mekelle/home?authuser=2>

*Project proposal:*

<https://doi.org/10.60763/africarxiv/1603>