

Cartographic Representation of African History: Ethiopia and Eritrea, 1875-1914

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Abstract:

Thematic maps of African history often present simplified and spatially homogenised views, particularly when compared to the detailed treatment of European regions in standard atlases. Using Ethiopia and Eritrea between 1875 and 1914 as a case study, this project challenges the reduction of African historical contexts to low-resolution representations, which cannot always be justified by fragmented or incomplete source material.

The project presents a thematic map of the region's territorial development, developed as a response to this challenge. The objective is to demonstrate how thematic cartography can represent complexity, uncertainty and layered sovereignty while remaining accessible beyond specialist audiences. To achieve this, established methods such as gradients, hatching and generalised dashed lines are applied to convey approximate extents, territorial dependencies, zones of influence and nominal rule.

The work is based on a critical reading of heterogeneous sources, including Italian cartography, contemporary accounts, modern historical research and ethnographic data. These sources vary in accuracy and perspective. Colonial Italian maps, for example, provide detailed geographic information while simultaneously projecting political claims that were not always realised. Ethiopian sources may reflect one-sided imperial narratives, while temporal inconsistencies arise in some 19th-century European accounts that failed to properly translate the Ethiopian calendar system into Western chronology.

Acknowledging uncertainty is not a limitation but a prerequisite for a more accurate and transparent representation of historical territorial dynamics. Rather than reducing diverse forms of uncertainty and incomplete knowledge to a single cartographic category, the map seeks to represent them explicitly and invites further cartographic and historical discussion. The resulting map is therefore not intended as a definitive reconstruction, but as a critically informed model of the period's territorial relationships.

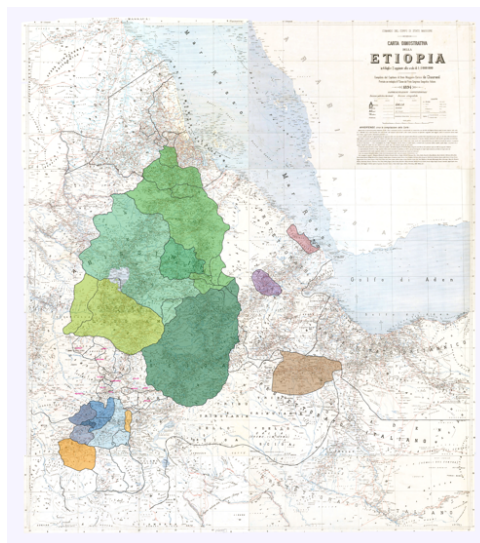


Figure 1. Partial analysis of the Carta Dimostrativa della Etiopia 1894, originally compiled by Capitano di Stato Maggiore Enrico de Chaurand

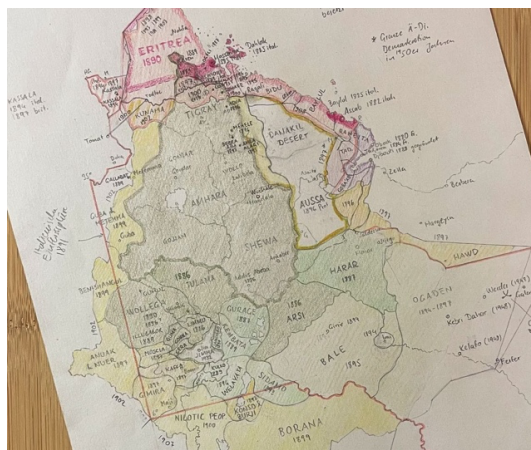


Figure 2. A hand-drawn cartographic sketch supporting iterative analysis, allowing for deep cognitive engagement with the subject.

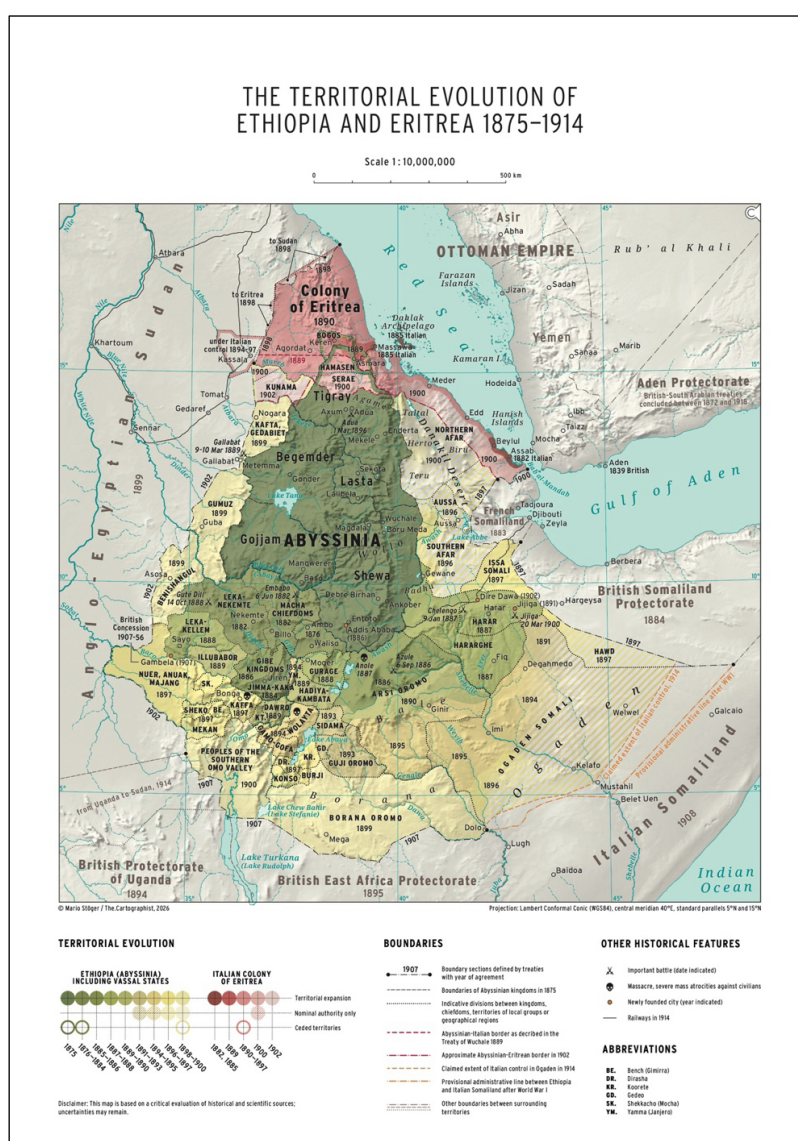


Figure 3. Current map model depicting the territorial development of the Ethiopian Empire and the Italian colony of Eritrea, 1875-1914. Originally developed in 2023 for an Instagram carousel format. Reassessed for print in 2026.