Yemrehannä Krestos church
– documenting cultural heritage in Ethiopia

Zara Thiessen
The Swedish Foundation Cultural Heritage without Borders, CHwB, has been working mainly in the Western Balkan region since 1996, with the restoration of historical and cultural buildings, such as mosques, churches, museums and traditional houses, damaged in wars or by neglect. CHwB has been supporting and cooperating with national heritage institutions and organizations in the Western Balkans and capacity building has always been an important part of our work. We often support young professionals in the field by offering opportunities to gain practical experiences and training in the interpretation and use of international rules and conventions regarding restoration. Workshops are often organized with the participation of international experts.

CHwB is a small organization and this has limited our scope of work. We have thus been forced to choose our projects with care and strict criteria. The situation has also constrained our geographical focus. Despite having identified similar situations and needs in other countries, on other continents, we have been restricted by inadequate funding to expand into these areas.

In order to widen our own perspective and possibly also area of work, CHwB has decided to fund this publication of monographs, which is closely related to our own work and which we feel can contribute to the knowledge of, and debate on an important part of national cultural heritage.

The article presented here is part of the work of a young Swedish architect involved in a project concerned with the Yemrehannâ Krestos church, built in a large cave near Lalibela in northern Ethiopia.

We hope that this publication will contribute to raising the interest in cultural heritage issues in Ethiopia and elsewhere.

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Margareta Husén
Secretary General
Introduction

Ethiopia is in many respects a unique country. Situated in sub-Saharan Africa, with close political and cultural contacts since at least the 7th century B.C with Southern Arabia. Ethiopia embraced Christianity in the 4th century and became part of the Christian world with special ties to the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly to Coptic Egypt, Syria and the Holy Land. These connections were enhanced over many centuries. The war with expanding Islam drew 16th century Ethiopia into congenial relations with the Christian West, particularly with Portugal and Italy. Despite the fact that these contacts lasted for little over a century, they were crucial for the development of Ethiopia’s political and spiritual life. Although the country was successful in retaining its political autonomy within a largely Muslim sphere, Islam has been present in Ethiopia since the religion’s earliest beginnings. The large southern and western territories which were incorporated into Ethiopia in the late 19th century led to the further integration of a variety of African peoples, and with their respective cultures. Through the centuries, Ethiopia also housed small, well established, Falasha communities which emigrated to Israel from mid 1970s.

Ethiopia’s rich history, its diversity in ethnicities and religions, and multiplicity of political and cultural contacts, resulted in the country’s strong cultural heritage. One of the most important scholars of Ethiopian cultures, Carlo Conti Rossini (1872-1949), called Ethiopia “a museum of peoples and cultures” with numerous treasures, which include precious examples of endemic, monolithic architecture, visual art and crafts. The state of preservation of many of these art treasures is poor and many have turned into dust, been stolen, or left to disintegrate. Ethiopia’s weak economy, the constant threats of famine and drought, bureaucracy, tensions with Eritrea and Somalia, and generally inadequate infrastructure, have made field research and any serious conservation project very difficult.

In an attempt to address the present problems and situation of the church a group of researchers from Canada, Sweden, Poland and France undertook a pilot project in 2007-2008 to make a detailed study of one of the finest surviving example of Ethiopian art and architecture: the royal church and residence of the 11th-/12th-century King Yemrehane Krestos. The purpose of the study was to bring this ancient history monument to the attention of international scholars and to try to obtain sufficient financial support for its full and proper restoration.

Uppsala, January 2010

Ewa Balicka-Witakowska
Yemrehannä Krestos church project

In November 2007 I participated in a research project on medieval church art and architecture in Ethiopia. The aim of the project is to examine the 12th century church of Yemrehannä Krestos, built in a large cave near Lalibela in northern Ethiopia, and its wall paintings, manuscripts, sacred objects, tombs and adjacent palace building.

The Yemrehannä Krestos church is a three-aisled basilica with a cupola and a tall saddle roof, constructed according to the Aksumite building tradition. It is one of the oldest standing examples of Christian architecture in Ethiopia. Ethiopia was the second country in the world, after Armenia, to convert to Christianity in the 4th century. A majority of Ethiopians are Christian, and vividly so, mainly in the northern highlands.

The Yemrehannä Krestos church is a high point in Ethiopian medieval architecture with great cultural and historical importance and one of the major tourist attractions in the area.

According to tradition, and a 17th century biography kept at the site, the church was founded by the saintly King Yemrehannä Krestos, and named after him. He ruled in the 12th century from nearby Lalibela, then centre of Ethiopian power, and is said to have retired to the site where the church and the palace were built. The biography gives a detailed description of how he discovered the cave and constructed the church:

“The Archangel Raphael instructed the blessed Yemreha that the Lord had told him to build a stone sanctuary here, to clear out and cut the trees in the cave and to burn them in a fire. After burning them Yemreha found a large lake inside the cave, and was told to put logs in it, to put straw on them and on the straw put some mud, then put down some soil and build a monastery.”

The aim of this study is to initiate a conservation process, focused on the wall paintings and the most acute damages of the buildings, and to publish a report which may help to put Yemrehannä Krestos on the UNESCO list of protected sites and result in a full restoration of the complex.

In order to place the Yemrehannä Krestos church in its historical, cultural and...
architectural context, the study includes a group of similar churches, all of which are found in caves in the Abuna Yosef massif in northern Ethiopia. The project also concerns the organization of liturgical space. As religious ritual developed, so did the arrangement and use of space. The study of these changes is a way of dating a church.

A better understanding of Ethiopia’s little-known religious heritage would fill an important gap in our knowledge of Christian religiosity, particularly in the Christian Orient. Ethiopia remained isolated from the Christian world for centuries, partly because of its geographical location in the highlands, and partly because of the political situation, the region being encircled by Islam. Ethiopia is still far from being sufficiently investigated but is considered to be a treasure house of Christian traditions which have long since disappeared, often without trace, from other parts of the Christian world. Working to protect Ethiopian cultural heritage is challenging, but to describe,
protect and restore it is very important since unique treasures are lost at rapid speed, due to the country’s lack of knowledge and resources.

The Aksumite heritage

The kingdom of Aksum, on the western shores of the Red Sea, is believed to have been one of the great super powers of its time. It traded in gold from the 2nd century AD and struggled with Rome and Persia for
power in Egypt and the Middle East, until these areas were conquered by Muslims in the 7th century. The city of Aksum is in the present Tigray region in northern Ethiopia.

Little Aksumite architecture remains. The construction type is based on a tradition which goes back to pre-Christian times and the architecture of pre-Islamic South Arabia. The term usually implies a construction on a raised foundation, with half-timbered walls of alternating layers of stone and square wooden beams. The beams, on each face of the wall, carry cross-timbers that tie the beams together across the width of the wall. The projecting ends of these cross-timbers form the characteristic “monkey heads”. Early Aksumite architecture uses this strengthening element along the entire wall, while in later stages they are only used in the corners of door and window frames. Where two walls meet at a corner, the beams are jointed half-in-half, their ends projecting in a similar way. Vertical indentions throughout the height of the wall add stability, the wall forming a series of recesses and salients.

Elements of early Aksumite architecture are represented in the giant monolithic stelae of Aksum – stone monuments carved to represent tall buildings with false doors and windows. The stelae also imitate monkey heads and corner salients. A sixth-century merchant travelling to Ethiopia spoke of a royal palace crowned by four towers, which may have referred to the corner salients reaching a storey higher than the central parts of each façade, as they do at Yemrehannä Krestos.

The king of Aksum converted to Christianity in the early 4th century, influenced by Syrian missionaries. Aksumite architecture adopted Christian building types and arrangements, and was increasingly influenced by the Coptic tradition of Egypt. When Islam spread to the areas around Aksum, the kingdom lost contact with Byzantium and Europe. Trade declined when access to the international market was cut off and Aksum’s power began to ebb. A new centre of power emerged further south, at a place that would become known as Lalibela.

Pilgrims in the rock-cut church of Abreha-Atsbeha, Tigray.
A unique type of Ethiopian church architecture had evolved parallel with the half-timbered construction type. From perhaps as early as the 7th century, churches were cut out of the rock, either in imitation of a free-standing building, or more or less within the mountain. Aksumite elements such as monkey heads, bracket capitals and basilica-type ground plans appear in many of the rock-cut churches. The development reached its peak with the church complex ascribed to and bearing the name of King Lalibela who reigned in the 13th century, but still today new churches are hewn out of the rock.

The 12th century church of Yemrehannä Krestos is constructed in a cave in the massif of Abuna Yosef, an hour’s drive from Lalibela. The cave opening, about 45 meters wide and six meters high, is surrounded by great cedar trees. A narrow waterfall creates a small pool in front of the cave. The view is blocked by a recent wall across the opening.

The façades of the church and the adjacent palace, with their alternating horizontal layers of dark wooden beams and plastered, whitewashed masonry, look “striped”. The church has windows on two levels, each window with a different decoration made of wood or white stone. The lay-out of the church is determined by the east direction, and seemingly where the height of the cave allowed the tallest possible roof. The palace, which is the only secular Aksumite building still standing, is not as well built as the church, and is in a dilapidated state. Two sections of the roof and an upper floor have caved in.

The ground throughout the cave is covered with straw, remains of the fresh
grass that is strewn on floors and grounds at days of religious celebration. There are three tombs behind the church, supposedly containing the coffins of King Yemrehannä Krestos, his daughter and a patriarch. At the back of the cave, which stretches 50 meters into the mountain, pilgrims have for centuries found their final resting place.

The buildings in the cave are said to be constructed on top of a “boat”, which refers to the story of how King Yemrehannä Krestos prepared the ground for the church foundation where there was previously a lake. A well in front of the church is said to lead to an underground water supply. A few years ago a patch of ground was excavated in the cave of a similar church, Emakinä Medhane Alem, which is part of the study. It showed an elaborate and extensive construction of heavy timbers below the earthen surface. It was said that the church of Yemrehannä Krestos has a very similar construction, although nothing of it can be seen.

There are different theories of why churches were built in caves. It may have been for protection, either from enemies or from the torrential highland rains. The cave may also have been seen as a symbol of a divine dwelling, in connection to the birth and resurrection of Christ. In the Protevangelium of James, Christ’s birth is described as taking place in a cave – a prefiguration of his Entombment and Resurrection from the rock-cut tomb. According to Porphyry (3rd century) caves are connected to birth and death, meaning that one enters life through the darkness of the cave and departs from it in the same way.
Caves were also sites of worship for the older, pre-Christian religion in the area.

**Church interior**

There are three entrances into the church, at the north, south and west sides. The clergy traditionally uses the west entrance, which is opposite the sanctuary, while women enter from the south and men from the north. At Yemrehanna Krestos church today, the north entrance which faces the cave opening is used as the main entrance.

Four large stone pillars divide the main space, which is accessible to the congregation, into three aisles and three bays. The two easternmost bays of the central aisle form the **nave**, which is higher than the side aisles and the area to the west. The **sanctuary** lies east of the nave. A tall altar is placed in the middle of the sanctuary. Two sacristies, the **pastophoria**, on each side of the sanctuary and east of the side aisles, were originally used for the **prothesis**, the preparation of the bread and wine for the Eucharist, and for storing sacred objects. The sanctuary and **pastophoria** can only be accessed by clergy, but the priests gladly helped to measure these spaces.

The central pillars and the engaged pillars in the outer walls are connected by arches. The arches and the superstructure are
constructed of wood, while the central pillars are made of well-cut stone ashlar
in a way that imitates the half-timbered outer walls. The nave clericory windows,
opening onto the roof above the side aisles, alternate with false windows. Above the
clerestory, a tie beam across the nave carries a double kingpost, which supports
the saddle-back roof. The sanctuary walls are decorated with a so-called “Aksumite
frieze” of false windows. The cupola is constructed of curved timber ribs converging
at the top.

Wall paintings
There are three types of painted decoration: figural wall-paintings on two walls in the
northern aisle, geometrical paintings of crosses and interlaces on plaster covering
arches and other architectonic elements, and geometrical and figural paintings covering
wooden elements like capitals, beams and
The wooden surfaces are painted throughout. The geometrical paintings are contemporary with the construction of the church, and the figural wall-paintings may have been created somewhat later in that century, which means that they are the oldest wall-paintings known so-far in Ethiopia.

The wooden ceilings are decorated with painted and carved medallions, made of smaller pieces. They are clearly Coptic in their inspiration and technique. Two ceiling sections have figural representations inside the medallions, the iconography of which show Byzantine influence and may illustrate parts of the mediaeval text known as the “Physiologus”. The wall paintings also provide strong evidence of direct artistic influences from Coptic Egypt.

An important part of the project was to do a trial-cleaning of the wall paintings. They are covered with dirt, as is the entire church, and very difficult to see. Cracks affect both the paintings and the wooden decoration. The aim was to clean a few small areas to be able to suggest the amount of time and resources needed to make a full restoration. The initial cleaning procedure was difficult to carry out. After many discussions and a number of long village meetings – the local population was divided as to whether we
should be allowed to work in the church, although we had the support of all levels of religious and secular authorities – it was agreed that the village should appoint a committee to oversee our work and at the same time give assistance when needed. However at the end, we were never able to finish the trial-cleaning as planned, due to local contradictionary opinions.

Despite the problems, cleaning parts of the murals made it possible to identify iconographical details and the precise subjects of the paintings. One previously unknown painting was discovered representing the four apostles holding scrolls. The wall-paintings represent, among other themes, Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt; Baptism of Jesus and Jesus washing the apostles feet; Crucifixion; Two women at the Holy Grave; Apparition of Christ to St. Mary Magdalen; Christ and doubting Thomas; Entry into Jerusalem; Ascension; Pentecost; Four Egyptian warrior saints.

**Manuscripts and sacred objects**

An equally important part of the project was to photograph the 17th century biography of King Yemrehannä Krestos, a manuscript kept in the church. It will be interpreted and compared to other similar but later texts, in order to determine whether it can be relied on as a historical document. Other objects that we photographed and measured were crosses and portable wooden altars.
Related cave churches

Three churches, similar to but smaller than Yemrehannä Krestos, are included in the study. They are all basilica type churches built in caves in the massif of Abuna Yosef. Emakinä Medhane Alem and Lidetta Maryam are situated a few kilometers apart, a steep and sandy three-hour climb up a mountain in the Lalibela area. Zammadu Maryam is in the area of Kobo, one day’s drive north from Lalibela. Emakinä Medhane Alem was probably built in the late 13th century, Zammadu Maryam maybe as late as the 15th century, and Lidetta Maryam probably between the latter two.

Emakinä Medhane Alem is something of a smaller version of Yemrehannä Krestos, incorporating the same building elements, but far more simple and with a somewhat different floor plan, due to
Emakinä Medhane Alem (above left) with an image inside the cupola of the *Maiestas Domini* accompanied by three archangels (above right). Interior wall-painting at Lidetta Maryam (below left).

liturgical development. The interior is painted with geometric motifs and wall-paintings representing Bible scenes, saints and other holy figures. Lidetta Maryam is tiny and crude, and has neither cupola nor clerestory. Its interior walls have paintings of angels, saints and animals. Zammadu Maryam has a cruciform floor plan, different from the other churches.
The project also explored a number of rock-cut churches in the Gheralta and Atsbi Dera areas around Wukro in Tigray, near the Eritrean border.

There are different types of rock-cut churches. They can have a carved outer façade, so that the sides and roof are detached from the surrounding rock, in which case they are called “monolithic”, or they can be excavated entirely from within the mountain, for which the term is simply “rock-cut”; or a combination of these two, sometimes also with built additions.

The churches of Wukro Cherkos, Mikael Amba and Abreha Atsbeha all have an inner, “rock-cut” part entirely within the rock, and an outer, “monolithic” part with a cut-out

The monolithic, outer part of Mikael Amba.

Rock-cut churches in Tigray

Mikael Amba
Based on floor plan by Jean Gire
Mikael Amba
Based on floor plan by Jean Gire
Cultural heritage in Ethiopia

Ethiopians in general are immensely proud of their Christian heritage, but as in any poor country, ridden with famine and war, there are more urgent priorities – like the daily survival – than protecting cultural heritage. Tourists, pilgrims or scholars can be a possible source of income. Entrance fees at churches and other sites however rarely go to the upkeep of a building or the protection of its possessions, and therefore there is little or no maintenance. Lightning fixtures may be hammered right through mediaeval wall paintings if necessary, if electricity is available to a church. If there are no other means of lighting up a painted wooden ceiling, a lit taper is fastened to a stick and held up close to the paintings, with great risk of fire. Paintings, never restored or properly preserved, suffer from constant deterioration, and art objects frequently disappear.

Even though people attach great religious value to the churches, many seem to have limited awareness of their historical value and the value of historical research. On the other hand the Lalibela officials and others involved with our project went to great lengths to support it and seemed to have a genuine will to promote research, although their possibilities to do so were often limited.
The project participants

The Yemrehannä Krestos project is managed by Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, art historian and Associate Professor of Byzantine Studies at the Uppsala University, and Michael Gervers, Professor of History at the University of Toronto. They have conducted research on different aspects of Ethiopian art, history and culture for more than 20 years and have developed the website Mäzgäbä Se’elat¹, which contains over 55,000 photos, largely their own, of Ethiopian art and culture. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska is a member of the editorial board for the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica, and author of Crucifixion sans crucifié dans l’art

¹ Mäzgäbä Se’elat, image database on Ethiopian culture at http://ethiopia.deeds.utoronto.ca (username and password: student)
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éthiopien (Warsaw-Uppsala, 1989) and of numerous articles on Ethiopian art. Michael Gervers has published six books and over sixty articles on aspects of medieval history, as well as many articles on Ethiopian architectural history and material culture.

A third team member is Emmanuel Fritsch, liturgist, collaborating author with the Encyclopaedia Aethiopica and author of several books and articles on Ethiopian liturgy and architecture, including The Ethiopian Liturgical Year (Addis Ababa, 2001). He is a resident of Ethiopia. Ewa Parandowska, conservator and Head of the Conservation studio at the National Museum in Warsaw, joined the team to examine the wall paintings at Yemrehannä Krestos. She is involved in major restoration projects in Italy, Cyprus, Egypt, Sudan and Syria.

Scholars involved in the project are also Gianfranco Fiaccadori, semitist and art historian, director of the Dipartimento di Storia delle Arti della Musica e delle Spettacoli at the University of Milano; and

The entrances of the rock-cut church of Mikael Gundo and adjacent “community cave”.

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Marie-Laure Derat, historian specialising in the Zagwe period, member of the Centre Nationale des Recherches Scientifiques, Paris.

My task within the project was to make a complete architectural survey of the Yemrehannä Krestos complex – to measure the church, palace and situation in the cave and to draw plans for the projected monograph, and to examine the structural condition of the buildings. It also included to survey the group of similar churches included in the Yemrehannä Krestos project; Emakinä Medhane Alem, Lidetta Maryam and Zammadu Maryam, as well as a number of rock-cut churches.

A monograph on Yemrehannä Krestos will be printed soon at Skira publishers.
Cultural Heritage without Borders is an independent organisation based in Sweden dedicated to rescuing and preserving tangible and intangible cultural heritage touched by conflict, neglect or human and natural disasters. We see our work as a vital contribution to building democracy and supporting human rights. CHwB is neutral when it comes to conflicting parties, but not to the rights of all people to their cultural heritage.