The rock-hewn church of Nazugn Maryam: an example of the endangered antiquities of North Wello, Ethiopia.

Tsegaye Ebabey

ABSTRACT

Most of the rock hewn and cave churches of Ethiopia to the west and south of Lalibela have escaped the notices of scholars who in different times visited the rock hewn churches of Lalibela and its surroundings. Nazugn Maryam, one of the ancient rock hewn churches of this area is neither scholarly researched nor professionally conserved. The main objective of this study was to document the architecture and the conservation problems of this hypogeum. Data of the study was collected through interview, field observation and analysis of the archives. The study intimates that the church is traditionally believed to have been carved by Abunâ Musé, who is regarded as the second bishop of Ethiopia. Being carved out of a single rock, it is rectangular and monolithic. Pointed and arched styles of both opened and false windows, buttresses, and horizontal beam are some of the dominant architectures of the church projected on its exterior facades. Internally it has a basilica with aisles divided by pillars, with no arches and capitals. However, its architectural values are deteriorating due to natural agents such as torrential summer rainfall and sunlight. Besides, the elements attempt at conservation since 1950s have also contributed to its deterioration. New materials like cement and basaltic stone were introduced during the restoration and this has exacerbated its deterioration endangering this important hypogeum. This paper examines how this introduction of new material poses challenges to the future conservation decisions.

Key words: Mäqét, Nazugn Maryam, history, architecture, destructive agents

Introduction

Ethiopia has a variety of built heritages of deep antiquity and thus heritage management is on top of government's agendas. Cultural heritage tourism attracts a large number of visitors to Ethiopia. The most visited sites include rock hewn structures that ranged from simply carved grotto caves to grandiosely shaped monolithic churches and buildings. As one of the early centers of Christianity Ethiopia boasts some of the most prominent rock hewn churches in the world. These churches are a source of shared history and identity as well as assets that are used in development.

1 Department of Anthropology, Hawassa University, Ethiopia. Email: tsegayearchae12@gmail.com
With the current drive to mobilize cultural heritage in the development process, the employment of appropriate heritage management procedures is essential. Tourism puts pressure on the fragile heritage and it is worse when the heritage places are not documented. Previous research (Layton & Thomas 2001; Feilden 2003; Cassar 2009; Elene 2010; Delmonaco et al. 2010) has shown that destructive agents around cultural heritages are uncompromising threats and can destroy significant cultural values for ever. Ethiopia thus needs to establish a viable heritage conservation programme before the expected tourism boom.

The increasing boom in tourism industry at national and global level means that new tourist destinations are identified, and Ethiopia has become one of the preferred destinations. The inclusion of the Rock Hewn churches on the World Heritage list and the rapid development in the country have created an interest in tourism products of Ethiopia. This will increase the threat to cultural heritage, making the need for inventories essential. Finneran (2007, p. 266) notes that 'Ethiopia is best placed to play upon its heritage' implies that the country can be very competitive in the global tourism industry if it utilized its cultural resources effectively and with care. The major problem is that Ethiopia has started to market and open its cultural heritage sites before putting in place heritage management regimes that can protect it from increased tourism. The result of this could be the fast deterioration of the cultural heritage, as Ethiopia will not have heritage preservation protocols and enough conservators to protect these sites from tourism.

In the absence of documentation and conservation of the tourism resources, it will be difficult to manage the sites sustainably. Many heritage sites on the periphery like Nazugn Maryam are still neglected and their promotion as tourism products would negatively affect them. The absence of concern on the part of the state implies that the country's distant cultural heritages can be sacrificed for development. Work on Rock Hewn churches has been concentrated in Lasta, Tigray and, in some extent, Shawa. Churches in the western and the southern areas adjacent to the famous Lalibela have been ignored. This paper advocates for the inventorying of these remotely-located, hidden cultural sites. It will give details about the architectural elements, challenges and threats that the isolated Nazugn Maryam Rock Hewn Church faces. The study is significant as it
will be a document that insures that the architecture of this church is recorded and that policy makers would be made aware of how some of their policies are affecting cultural heritage places.

**Archival sources and Mäqét region**

The first written source by an outsider is Francisco Alvarez’s 16th century documentation of churches in Lasta, Tigray and Shawa. Other researchers have also written on some of these churches but have hardly given information on their conservation status (Buxton 1947; Bidder 1958; Bekingham & Huntingford 1961; Pearce 1970; Gerster 1970; Jager, O. & Pearce, I. 1974; Schuster 1994; Kassaye (1995); Mengistu 2004; Phillipson 2009; Elene 2010; Mengistu 2011, Mercier & Lepage 2012). Historical and conservation information is even scantier for the rock-cut churches in Mäqét. Others like Wright (1957, pp. 7-9) were only interested in the tourist potential of the famous monastery of Däbrä Aron, a 14th century rock cave church carved by an Ethiopian monk, Aron of Mäqét. Wright gave a description of some of the architectural features of this particular cave church.

However, his descriptions do not give a complete image of the complex cave of Däbrä Aron. It focuses on the caves and ignores the rock hewn churches associated with Dabbra Aron. He also seemed confused about its founder, Abunä Aron, with another monk of similar name from Syria. Phillipson (2009, p. 121) who documented various ancient churches of Ethiopia mentioned a fairly recent carved-cave church situated west of Mäqét and east of Çäçäho Mädhané Aläm, between Wällo and Bäggémder border. This church is now dedicated as the Church of Saint George. However, all these efforts to document the rock hewn churches ignored over 18 rock-cut churches of Mäqét, including Nazugn Maryam. Tsegaye (2014) provides a comprehensive survey of these sites that have been missing in previous researches. However, the survey does not give a complete description of the conservation status of these rock hewn churches.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of the Rock-cut Church</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dabrä Qättìn Maryam</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Abunä Aron Mänkrawi</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nazugn Maryam</td>
<td>Monolithic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Quraqura Maryam</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Abäkäna Abbo</td>
<td>Cave (?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gəbșawit Abbo</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>A’emad Śallasé</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Bētä Hara Eiyyäsus</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Dasnja Mädhané Aläm</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Washa Michael</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Tämbäqot Mädhané Aläm</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Aqqat Marqos</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Zajjä Maryam</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Dabrä Sina Maryam</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Garar Maryam</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yadoga Abbo</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Dufti Gabriel</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Dufti Mädhané Aläm</td>
<td>Cave</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Rock hewn and cave churches of Mäqét and their types (Source: Tsegaye 2014, p. 24)
Figure 1. A map of Rock-cut Churches of Mäqät Wäräda, North Wällo.

Methodology

The general objective of this paper is to discuss the architectural features and heritage management problems of the rock hewn church of Nazugn Maryam. It also highlights the history, architectural and structural problems of the churches and provide preliminary solutions to these problems while also identifying future work that could be carried out before these cultural places are opened for tourism.

The study examined previous archival and library sources that discuss the church of Nazugn Maryam. The church is historically and architecturally significant but is poorly managed. Data was collected through field observation, in-depth interview (with local elders), library, and archival works. Through the field work, both external and internal elements of the church were observed.
A copy of Gädlä Abunä Musé² (the Life of Our Father Moses) that narrates the life of Abunä Musé was also consulted. Oral traditions about the church were also collected from local communities. Field instruments such as GPS, digital camera and sound recording were used to document the site. Standardized transliteration system is used for Ethiopic terms. Data analysis is processed qualitatively through descriptive and explanatory approaches.

**Physical and Historical Description of Mäqét**

Mäqét is one of the administrative districts in North Wällo, Amhara Region. Its main town, Falaqit, lies 660km north of Addis Ababa. Physically, the area is characterized by impressive and rugged topographical setting- elongated escarpments, mountains, hills, highlands and gorges. A chain of highland runs from Bäggémdär in the west through Däbrä-Zäbiţ to the eastern corner of Mäqét as far as Yäjju and to the head of Žiţa river that flow between Wadla and Dawnt towards Bäshilo river. The Çaçäho ravine, which was the most important geographic link between North Wällo and Bäggémdär, is a bridge between Mäqét and Gayәnt (Crummey 1975, p. 2; Shiferaw 1990, p.158).

This rocky escarpment and the rugged physical landscape of Mäqét have inspired the establishment of various ancient rock-cut churches. Mäqét has played a significant historical role in the religious life of Ethiopia since the 14th century A.D. It was a corridor that Gondärine Kings used expand their political domination over Lasta and Yäjju rulers (Tesfaye 2013, p. 25). During the reign of Emperor Susәnyos, Mäqét was a major corridor and campsite in his campaign to Yäjju and Lasta (Sokolinskaia 2007, p. 768). It was also at Däbrä Zäbiţ, a village to the west of Falaqit, where Wagshum Gobäzé crowned himself as Emperor Täklä Giyorgis (Tesfaye 2013, p. 25). In later years Mäqét became the first town in which an aircraft was employed in the battle of Anchim, fought between ras Gugsa, the ruler of Bäggémdär, and ras Täfäri, the later Emperor Hailä Sallasé, in 1930 (Bahru 2002, p. 137). The area was also one of the major centers of Christianity. The local oral tradition insists that Christianity was brought to the area by Abunä Musé in the 5th century A.D (Tsegaye 2014). However, Taddesse (1972. pp. 193-194) postulates

---

² Its copy is available in the monastery of Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm, Mäqét. Its original parchment is found at Yädǝbba Maryam, in the district of Dawnt, North Wällo.
that the Christianization of Mäqät was carried out by Abunä Aron in the 14th century A.D. Since then, Mäqät became one of the major religious teaching centers between Bäggémдар and Wállo. Because of this, most people from Mäqät are dominantly Orthodox Christians and have different socio-cultural practices to other Ethiopians. Though Amharic speaking people now occupy this area, it was an area of influx of different ethnic groups including the Gafat, Oromo, and Fälasha (Wudu 1995, pp. 11-12, 227-230).

The Rock Hewn Church of Nazugn Maryam

The church of Nazugn Maryam is best reached from the town of Däbrä Zäbiṭ, 2hrs walk north west direction along the escarping area of Çäçäho-Dabra Zäbiṭ, to the north-east of Çäçäho Mädhané Aläm. The surroundings of the church are characterized by rugged hills which are thinly populated.

Figure 2: Nazugn Maryam and its vicinity, view from east (Source: Author)
To the west is the Zoga River, which is a tributary of Bäshilo River. The church has a stone-fenced yard with various indigenous trees. Much of the yard is used as a burial site by the local communities. The northern and western parts of the yard, including its courtyard, are left for spiritual activities.

**Historical Background of the Church**

The history of the church is mainly based on the oral traditions of the local communities. According to narratives collected from the local storytellers and Gädlä Abunä Musé (the Life of Our Father Moses), the church was carved by Abunä Musé during the reign of Ezana and Saizana. According to Gädlä Abunä Musé, Abba Sälama, the first bishop of Ethiopia, was succeeded by Abunä Musé who was anointed by Athanasius, the then Patriarch of Coptic Church. The following is quoted from his gädәl:

“...አሸምንም ከሸ ፈለከት ከአትኩሽ ከርሳታ ይታል።። መሸም ለሸ ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርሳታ ይታል።። ይታል።። መሸም ከርዳውን ይታል።። መሸም ከርዳውን ይታል።። ይታል።፻... በአብርሃ ይታል።፻...[...After this, a message reached the Patriarch Athanasius and he grieved much when he heard the death of our father Sälama. ...after this, he searched a strong spiritual man capable to the anointment among the monks in the monastery of Scetis. He finds out his grace the truthful Moses. The monks also acknowledged his anointment. ....during the government of Ezana and Saizana. ...].”

---

3 According to his gädәl, Abunä Musé was born from families who had a wedding at Galilee, where Jesus Christ joined a wedding together with his mother, St. Mary and his Apostles. He became a king in Egypt a districts of Roman Empire, and where he learned monastic life at Scetis monastery (Monastery of Macarius). It was during this time that the Patriarch, Athanasius, selected Musé as the second bishop of Ethiopia.

4 Destaw Tsegaye, a priest serving in the church of Nazugn Maryam; interviewed on 5/09/2013; Mitku Tsegaye, leader of the Nazugn Maryam church, interviewed on 5/09/2013.

5 Gädlä Abunä Musé, p. 148.
Figure 3: Abunä Musé, a mural painting taken at Yädabba Maryam, Dawnt (Source: Author)

The above quote from the Gädlä Abunä Musé may indicate that Abunä Musé arrived at Aksum during the reign of Ezana in the 4th century A.D. However, it may not refer to the ruling period of Ezana himself; rather it may refer to a period after the death of Ezana when the government was ruled by one of his relatives or successors. Thus, the evangelization of Abunä Musé might be between the late 4th and 5th centuries A.D. After moving from Aksum to Bäggémdar, he reached the land of Wällo preaching Christianity and carving churches as far as Žaṭa river, where he carved his resting place and complex cave church of Yädabba Maryam, Dawnt, which is described by Wright (1957, p. 10) and Witakowska (2014, p. 3).

Nevertheless, the works of Abunä Musé are little known among religious scholars. As it is stated by Sergew (1972, pp.109-110), the history of 5th century of Ethiopian Christianity is not clear and there is no precise history about the second Ethiopian bishop who succeeded Sälama I who was also called Frumentius, the first bishop of Ethiopia. A certain Minas, whose origin is not yet known succeeded Frumentius (Sergew 1972, p. 110). It is also stated that there was a bishop of Adulis whose name was Moses (Sergew 1972, p. 110; Munro-Hay 1988, p. 114). However, the bishop of
Adulis, Moses, should not be confused with the bishop of Aksum, the so-called Musé. As Sergew (1972, p. 110) states, "there was more than one bishop in Ethiopia before the sixth century" which means that Adulis and Aksum had their own bishops. Here, the confusion seems to be raised due to lack of understanding about the deeds and names of the second bishop of Aksum.

There is a local tradition regarding the second bishop of Aksum which also gives different names. The Gädlä Abunä Musé mentions the bishop's two names, Musé and Kal’ē Sālama (Sālama II), the former is repeatedly mentioned. It is also mentioned by Kinefe-Rigb (1975, p. 85) that Musé or Sālama II was the successor of Sālama I (Frumentius) and he built various churches in Amhara. Oral tradition also claims that Minas was his anointment name. There is a dedication attesting to this in the cave monastery of Yädabba Maryam. Therefore, like that of the first bishop of Aksum, Frumentius or Kāsaté Barhan or Sālama I, the second bishop was also known by his different names, Musé, Minas and Sālama II. Nazugn Maryam is one of the rock-hewn and cave churches believed to have been carved by Abunä Musé. It is among the churches to be mentioned in his gādāl: “...EventHandler · EventHandler · EventHandler · EventHandler · EventHandler · EventHandler...[...And then, he crossed the River Zoga and carved on the hill of Nazugn...].” (Gädlä Abunä Musé, 151)

1.3.3 Architecture of the Church

The church of Nazugn Maryam is carved out of a red sedimentary sandstone rock. It is monolithic and stands freely from its parent rock. It is rectangular and externally, it measures 15 metres in length, 10 metres in width and is 10 metres in height. Trenches are excavated in the north eastern and western sides of the sunken courtyard. At its present situation, the monolithic hypogeum is deteriorated and traditionally repaired. Therefore, the discussion on its architecture is based on the existed evidences that can possibly provide a general architectural picture of the church.
The hypogeum has four facades with architectural characters that are quite common in rock-hewn churches. Sixteen blind, and one open windows are projected along the four facades. Five of the blind windows were carved on the northern facade of the church and another five similar windows are on the southern facade. Three blind windows are also carved on the western part, and other three windows with a similar character are also there in its eastern facade. The only open window is found on the lower levels of the eastern facade. Though it is temporarily closed, it was opened for the entrance of light in to the sanctuary.
All the windows have a rectangular shape at the bottom and arched and pointed features at the top. The styles of the windows bear some resemblance to Bétä Abba Libanos in Lalibela, Zoz Amba Giyorgis in North Gondar and Gәbәsawit Abbo in Mәqәt. The windows were protected by a short porch or edge of the roof. According to the local tradition, the number of the blind windows, the existing five equivalent windows in the northern and southern facades represents the five Pillars of Secret⁶, the dogmatic center of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahdo Church.

---

⁶ The five Pillars of Secret in EOTC theological tradition are the secret of Holy Trinity, the secret of Incarnation, the secret of Epiphany, the secret of Resurrection and the secret of Holy Communion or Eucharist.
(EOTC). On the other hand, the three windows carved either in southern or eastern facades symbolize the nature of Holy Trinity.\footnote{Informant: Mitku Tsegaye, interviewed on 5/9/2013.}

![Image of Nazugn Maryam, southern facade, view from south west](Source: Author)

Figure 6: Nazugn Maryam, southern facade, view from south west (Source: Author)

Between each window is a vertical buttress or salient vertical beams. There is also a horizontal rock beam that lies along the mid part of the rock wall, just immediately below the row of blind windows. Despite the deterioration, these features also have appositeness to the wall structures at Lalibela. There are three doorways; two of them present in the northern facade and the rest one lies in the southern facade.
The architecture in the western facade is difficult to describe because of the collapses that have erased the architectural details. However, it is possible that this facade had common feature with its counterpart in the east. Though their major motifs are totally demolished, the three windows are evidenced from their ruins. The plan of this facade is very confused. In the southern facade, one of the five false windows is currently covered by repairing activity. The other windows demonstrate their original features. The beams and buttresses of the wall are also observable in parts not reached by previous restorations. There are also very narrow cross-shaped windows opened that allow the light into the church. The architecture of the eastern facade church is better preserved. From this facade, it can be generally concluded that the hypogeum manifests a good workmanship in its architecture.
Internally, the church has very few architectural elements which is largely basilican. The chanting room and the holy consist little decorated aisles partitioned by columns which are carved from the main rock. The easternmost part of the church is a sanctuary, the most sacred part of any church. It is the part where altar of the Ark of the Covenant of EOTC rests. Four rectangular columns separate these parts. The columns have no arcades and capitals. There is an altar at the front of the church in the sanctuary which has been hewn from the main rock. There is also amdä wärq, a circular protruding feature of roof immediately above the altar. The roof is little decorated and is predominantly dominated by signs of excavating tool that show the use of a local excavation instrument such as ax or chisel.

Heritage Management Problems of the Rock Hewn Church

Nazugn Maryam church, as it is discussed above, has significant architectural and historical values. It is probably the only monolithic rock hewn church in Mäqét District. It embodies cultural testimonies pertinent to some of the rock hewn churches in the country. Despite of this, the hypogeum is deteriorating due to the elements. Agents of deterioration include anthropogenic and natural factors.

Natural Factors: High rainfall followed by dry and hot weather have contributed to the deterioration and destruction of the hypogeum. Rainfall which comes in the hot summer months have hollowed out different parts of the rock. The mixture of water and rock components cause salt crystallization threatened the integrity and thickness of the rock. Salts they are soluble and can dissolve and recrystallise, often within the pores of the stone at the point of evaporation. Water that has salts can move through the stone in different ways, depending on the wetting and drying conditions. Due to the heavy rainfall experienced in the region, water collects on the roof and trickles through the cracks and capillary action further aggravating the deterioration. The torrential rainfall during summer season is followed by the cold and dry winter temperatures which causes the flaking and fracturing the exterior part of the church. Despite of the local communities' attempt to repair the exterior of the church at different times this has not slowed down the deterioration as there is no conservation protocols for preserving the rock hewn churches. The impact of these threats is most serious on the western façade where almost all the
architectural features are extremely eroded. The impact of climate is less on the other facades of the church. Water that collects on the roof has a great impact on the integrity of rock wall. Most of the windows have lost their most aesthetic features as a result of the effects of water. There is also a fracturing of wall beam and buttresses at different parts of the rock hewn church. The problem is increasing from time to time and the profound impact of high rainfall is recently evidenced. The north western face of rock fence of the courtyard is partly destroyed during a heavy rainy season of summer of 2013. Internally, there is also a sign of cracking and water seeping through the cracks in the roof and the wall.

Figure 8: Impact of high rain fall and dryness, western facade of Nazugn Maryam (Source: Author)

**Anthropogenic Factors:** Uninformed reconstructions are also a major contributor to problems that are faced by the church of Nazugn. The lack of collaboration between the local communities and professionals in the process of intervention has resulted in new materials being used. Basalt instead of sandstone has been used in repair work and this has been mortared with cement. This
has not only caused further structural problems but has also changed the aesthetics of the church. Most of the reconstructions are knee-jerk reactions to an immediate problem caused by the rain. These repairs have not been effective as the roof still leaks.

Figure 9. Nazugn Maryam, a bad intervention along the southern facade(Source:- Author)

The repairing work has negatively affected architectural values of the monument. The lack of support from government in providing conservation professionals as well conservation guidelines has led to haphazard methods being tried causing the structural problems as well as changing the aesthetic values of the church. Some of the most important architectural features of the church have been covered by repair work. For example, one of the false windows on the southern facade is now obscured. Secondly, the reconstructions have also impacted the historical value of
the church. The church’s uniqueness is that it is rock-hewn, and the reconstructions have changed this, as stone and mortar have been added to facades.

**Conclusion and Recommendation**

The monolithic rock hewn church of Nazugn Maryam is one of the rock hewn and cave churches believed to have been carved by Abunä Musé. It is actually one of the missed ancient monolithic antiquities of Ethiopia to the west of Lalibela. It can probably be a representative example of rock hewn churches carved before Lalibela churches. It embodies significant architectural and historical values. In a general observation, it has architectural elements that apposite with the rock hewn churches of Lalibela. Despite of its architectural and historical values, the church is left for continuous architectural deterioration and historical demolition. The natural factors such as high rainfall and sunlight have profound impacts during summer and winter times, respectively. Unprofessional conservation activity has also imposed its own impact upon the monument. The hypogeum, therefore, is one of the endangered rock-cut churches of Mäqét.

This study tried to provide significant issues particularly on the rock hewn church of Nazugn Maryam. However, this is not an end work and further works are expected to be done by different stakeholders at regional or national levels. Studying architectural elements of the church through comparison is significant. Its history is also still depended on the local sources. Future archaeological studies are expected to reveal more the architectural and historical values of the church. A linguistic study on the Gädlä Abunä Musé will have a great significance to know well its history. An urgent professional conservation is needed. It is because that the hypogeum is an endangered heritage. It is necessary to reassess the deterioration, discuss and report their impacts. This needs a collaboration of researchers, heritage managers, and other concerned stakeholders. Promotion of such remote antiquities at a national level is significant. Moreover, a comprehensive inventory work is needed to reveal other unknown antiquities of the district.
References


