

**ICOMOS International Wood Committee Symposium, “A Focus on Africa”,  
23 – 28 January 2019 - Background Information**

Historical background

**Early links with South Arabia:** the Ethiopian national myth – that the imperial dynasty is descended from Menelik I, the son of a one-night union between Solomon and the Queen of Sheba – reflects a real and demonstratable connection between Ethiopia and South Arabia in the first millennium BC. Ethio-Sabaeen communities in the northern highlands were responsible for the development of a number of important sites; the Great Temple of Yeha, built c. 700 BC, to be visited by Group 2 on Day 1 (23 January), is one of a number of major monuments. Ethiopic script is derived from “Epigraphic South Arabian” and was developed into a full syllabary in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> or in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD by amending the consonants so that each letter has seven forms to indicate the vowels.

**Axumite civilisation:** Axum developed as the capital, probably in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, of what was to become the Axumite empire, which enjoyed trading links with the Roman empire and with India. Amongst its most spectacular monuments are the stelae in the royal cemetery, the most impressive (and probably the latest) examples, dating to the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, represent multi-storey timber-laced buildings which are related to the design of excavated “elite buildings” or palaces. The stelae will be visited by Group 2 on Day 1 (23 January). Axum was converted to Christianity in the second quarter of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, making Ethiopia the second-oldest Christian country in the world after Armenia. Christian Ethiopian culture developed from this period; for example, the Abba Garima Gospel 2 dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century and is the oldest complete Christian manuscript in the world; the manuscript tradition has continued from that date up to the present. Scholarly opinion now dates the collapse of the Axumite empire to c. 700, when the rise of Islam deprived it of its trade network based on access to the Red Sea, with climate change (possibly linked to the Late Antique Little Ice Age) and the Justinian plague being probable added factors.

**The Zagwe and restored Solomonic dynasties:** the history of northern Ethiopia in the two centuries after the fall of the Axumite empire is obscure. Now that the cave church of Yimrahanna Kristos has been dated to the first half of the eleventh century, the Agau-speaking Zagwe dynasty, of which King Yimrahanna Kristos was a member, must have assumed power no later than the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with an overall date of c. 900 - 1270. We will visit many monuments dating to this period on Days 3 and 4 (25 – 26 January). The rise of the Zagwe Dynasty in the Lasta mountains illustrates a recurring theme in Ethiopian history - the shift of centres of power progressively southwards. Yekuno Amlak seized power in 1270, establishing the “restored” Solomonic Dynasty, which claimed 225 rulers from its founder, Menelik I (purported son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba), to the murder of Emperor Haile Selassie by the brutal communist Derg dictatorship in 1975. Some of the monuments to be visited on Days 3 and 4 (25 – 26 January) date to the early period of the restored Solomonic Dynasty.

**The post-medieval period:** the Ethiopian highlands suffered annual incursions from 1529 to 1543 by an army led by Imam Ahmed Grañ (“the left-handed”), in alliance with Ottoman forces. The Ethiopian imperial army lacked firearms and was unable to defeat the invaders until Ahmed Grañ was killed in 1543 with the assistance of a troop of musketeers from Portuguese India led by Cristóvão da Gama, son of Vasco da Gama. Medieval Ethiopian civilisation (together with its towns and cities) was largely destroyed during this period and the culture which developed afterwards lacked towns and cities and developed significantly different architectural forms, including a masonry palace architecture which fused Moghul and Indo-Portuguese elements, seen in its grandest form in the new capital of Gondar, established in 1635. During the “Era of the Princes”, starting in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, successive emperors were puppets of competing provincial rulers. This period ended in 1855, when Tewodros II seized power, deposed the last Gondarine emperor, started the re-establishment of



a centralised imperial government and developed international diplomatic contacts. The accession of Menelik II as emperor marked another shift of the centre of power southwards and the acceleration of modernisation and economic development of the country. Addis Ababa was established as the new capital in 1886 by his redoubtable empress, Taitu, and its development into a cosmopolitan city accelerated after the defeat of an invading Italian army at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. We will visit late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century timber buildings in Addis Ababa on Day 5 (27 January). In the 1880s and 1890s, during the “scramble for Africa” by the great powers, Menelik’s armies led his own “scramble” and doubled the size of the country by adding extensive territories to the east, south and south west, establishing the multi-ethnic, linguistically and culturally diverse Ethiopia which exists today.

## Architectural history and development

**Axumite period:** it is generally agreed that the church of Debra Damo, to be visited by Group 1 on Day 1 (23 January), dates to the 6<sup>th</sup> century and is therefore, we suggest, the oldest surviving timber building in the world. Before the collapse of the Axumite empire, Axum had been replaced as capital by *Kubar*, an as-yet-unlocated site to the south-east. On Day 2 (24<sup>th</sup> January) we will visit three very early timber churches in this area - (Tcherqos Agabo, Debra Selam Mikael and Zarema Giyorgis), which are described as “late-Axumite” or “post-Axumite”, probably dating no later than the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, and which unusually survived the invasion of Ahmed Grañ. Rock-hewn architecture also starts in the Axumite period; on Days 1 – 2 (23<sup>rd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> January) we will visit two examples, Wukro Tcherqos and Mikael Imba, which reflect timber-and-masonry construction and which are probably of a similar date, of which the five-aisle basilica of Mikael Imba retains important contemporary interior woodwork.

**Medieval period:** the PROHEDEV Programme is currently assisting in the preparation of a proposal for a World Heritage nomination of “Medieval Cave Churches” and we will visit three churches built inside caves – Yimrahanna Kristos (11<sup>th</sup> century), Makina Madhane Alam (?12<sup>th</sup> century) and Lideta Maryam (?13<sup>th</sup> century) on Days 3 – 4 (25 – 26 January). Ethiopian tradition ascribes the excavation of the large group of monolithic churches in Lalibela to the eponymous King Lalibela of the Zagwe Dynasty, assisted by angels, but modern scholarship suggests that the monolithic and rock-hewn structures were excavated over a far longer period, with the earliest, possibly dating the 7/8<sup>th</sup> century, originally functioning as fortified palaces. Many of the churches, probably dating from the late 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, represent timber-and masonry construction translated into carved stone. Group 2 will visit rock-hewn monuments on Day 4 (26 January), but all participants will see Beta Giyorgis (?13<sup>th</sup> century), one of the finest examples of a monolithic church, on Day 5 (27 January) before leaving for the airport.

**The rise of modern Ethiopia:** the development of Addis Ababa as the new capital of Ethiopia from 1886 onwards is reflected in an interesting fusion of architectural traditions. Traditional construction continued and the recently conserved *adarash* (reception hall) of Princess (later Empress) Zauditu, now the Addis Ababa Restaurant, where we plan to have dinner on Day 5 (27 January), is a fine example. The rapid adoption of imported foreign fashions for daily living soon resulted in new architectural forms. As far as timber buildings are concerned, Indian influence is particularly important, but Armenian builders introduced plan forms, constructional details and designs originating from Anatolia and also utilised timber construction. For example, timber-laced construction seen in some buildings of this period probably has no connection with Axumite tradition, but is instead a reintroduction of the construction technique by Armenian builders. We will visit a number of timber buildings of this period on Day 5 (27 January). Greek architects, in contrast, were responsible for masonry buildings in a neo-classical style. There are also buildings designed by Italian architects/engineers.

**Impermanent wood-and-earth construction:** on Day 6 (28 January) IWC participants will visit Zoma Museum, where the exterior walls of modern wood-and-earth buildings are faced with astonishing earth sculptures. Wood-and-earth is still the main construction technique in many rural areas and tertiary towns.



## Select bibliography

*Ethiopian studies have generated a large academic literature. In this bibliography, we present a selection of recently published works of particular relevance to the sites to be visited during the Symposium.*

- Di Salvo, Mario, 2017. *The basilicas of Ethiopia: an architectural history* (I.B. Taurus, London and New York).  
[an analysis of Axumite and medieval churches with a basilica plan form, including a number which are otherwise inadequately covered or absent from the academic literature. In terms of dating, Phillipson 2009 is to be preferred].
- Fitzgerald, Mary Anne, and Marsden, Philip, 2017. *Ethiopia: the living churches of an ancient kingdom* (American University in Cairo Press, Cairo and New York).  
[a beautiful coffee-table book which contains outstanding photographs, including interiors, of many of the churches which we will visit, including Lideta Maryam cave church (pages 362-9), which is not covered by the academic literature).
- Giorghis, Fasil, and Gerard, Denis, 2018. *Addis Ababa: the city and its architectural heritage from 1886 – 1941* (Shama Books, currently in the press).  
[the primary study on the early architecture of Addis Ababa].
- Phillipson, David W., 2009. *Ancient churches of Ethiopia, fourth-fourteenth centuries* (Yale University Press, Newhaven and London).  
[presents the best modern academic overview of Axumite and medieval architecture, including a reassessment of the dating].
- Phillipson, David W., 2012. *Foundations of an African civilisation: Aksum and the northern Horn, 1000 BC – AD 1300* (co-published by James Currey and Addis Ababa University Press, 2014).  
[a valuable modern overview of the archaeology, history and architecture of Ethiopia during the pre-Axumite, Axumite and Zagwe periods].
- World Monuments Fund, 2017. *Conservation at Yemrehanna Kristos, Ethiopia: final report*.  
[the Symposium organisers will be happy to share a digital copy of the report on the WMF's recent work on this outstanding, early, cave church].

## Access to the sites to be visited

The programme describes the ease of access and time taken to reach each site. In particular:

- On Day 1 (23 January), male participants (women and female animals are not allowed) have the choice of joining Group 1 to visit the 6<sup>th</sup>-century monastery church of Debra Damo, which involves climbing 17 metres to the top of the *amba* (flat-topped mountain) with the aid of a plaited leather rope, although we hope to provide trained guides with safety harness from the Gheralta Sacred Landscape to assist in the climb. Those who do not want to try the ascent should join Group 2 and visit the Great Temple at Yeha.
- On Day 4 (26 January), there will be the opportunity to join Group 1 to visit the cave churches of Makina Madhane Alam and Lideta Maryam. We are providing mules and their accompanying muleteers to make the climb up the mountain easier, but it will be necessary to dismount and climb some short, steep, rocky sections on foot. The climb up the mountain will take 4 hours and participants who think this would be too taxing should join Group 2 and visit the monolithic churches in Lalibela World Heritage Site.

## Miscellaneous information

**Visiting churches:** participants should dress modestly when visiting churches (as in Mediterranean countries, for example); shoes must be removed before entering a church and in some cases the area considered sacred extends a good distance outside the church. Ethiopian churches are divided into three sections and the innermost section on the east - the sanctuary, or *maqdas* - houses the *tabot* and is only accessible to priests and deacons. The *tabot* is a portable carved altar slab, made of wood or stone, which is placed on a stand, the *minber tabot*, and it is the *tabot* rather than the church building which is consecrated. On the occasion of some

major festivals, such as Epiphany (20 January 2019), the *tabots* are taken outside the church and carried on the heads of priests, wrapped in cloth. Although it may in origin be a portable altar, the *tabot* is now understood to symbolise the Ark of the Covenant, the original of which Ethiopian Christians believe to be preserved in a chapel in Axum, where it had been taken by Menelik I in the first millennium BC. In the case of some churches which have later been extended, the whole original building now functions as the *maqdas*, as in the case of Debra Selam Mikael and Zarema Giyorgis, to be visited on Day 2 (24 January).



Celebration of Epiphany at the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Royal Bath in Gondar World Heritage Site, the most famous location to witness the ceremony

**Altitude:** the lowest altitude participants will experience will be at Axum, which is 2,130 metres above sea level, and the highest altitude will be at Makina Madhane Alam cave church, which is 3,010 metres above sea level. It is advisable to avoid unnecessary violent exercise until your body has adjusted to the reduced oxygen level - no visits to the gym immediately after arrival!

**Climate and clothing:** although Ethiopia lies completely within tropical latitudes, the altitude means that the weather can be chilly when the sun is not shining. The Symposium is taking place during the dry season and the weather can be expected to be beautiful. Nevertheless, participants should include a light jumper in their luggage to wear in the evenings, if necessary. Participants who intend to visit medieval cave churches in Group 1 on Day 4 (26 January) should also pack suitable walking shoes.

**Currency and costs:** the Ethiopian birr (ETB) is currently trading at about ETB 28 to US\$ 1. Currency can be exchanged on arrival at Bole International Airport and at the numerous banks found across the country. There are many ATM machines, but it should be noted that the maximum which can normally be withdrawn at any one day from a given bank is two withdrawals of ETB 4,000 each, i.e. two withdrawals of approximately US\$ 143, total US\$ 286. The ATMs of the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia, Dashen Bank and Awash Bank are usually the most reliable when using a foreign bank card, in our experience. Credit cards are widely used, but not universally.

The Symposium fee covers all accommodation (including breakfast) and internal transport within Ethiopia from the evening of 22 January until 5 p.m. on 28 January. The other costs which will need to be paid will be moderate, probably not more than US\$ 20 per day. The cost of living is relatively inexpensive; for example a

cup of Ethiopian coffee normally costs the equivalent of US\$ 0.18, a bottle of beer in a local bar or restaurant costs typically US\$ 0.55.

**Measurement of time:** Ethiopians use the Ancient Egyptian calendar, as reformed by Roman Emperor Augustus in 25 BC, which contains twelve months of 30 days and an additional month of 5 days (or 6 days in a leap year). The current year is EC 2011.

As in other parts of East Africa, the day starts at 6 a.m. (around sunrise) and noon is therefore 6 o'clock by Ethiopian reckoning. When making appointments, it is very important to establish if the person you are talking to is using Ethiopian or standard measurements of time, as misunderstandings continually arise.

**Coffee:** wild coffee, *Coffea arabica*, is native to the southern highlands of Ethiopia, and coffee consumption spread from Ethiopia around the world in the early post-medieval period. Ethiopians often stir a piece of the bitter herb rue in their coffee.

**Souvenirs:** Ethiopia has many beautiful traditional crafts products. For example, in Addis Ababa, we can recommend a visit to Shiro Meda, the wholesale / retail market for traditional textiles, where a beautiful hand-woven scarf might cost US\$ 7.15. The organisers will be happy to offer advice on where to go and what might be available to buy.

