

Wukro Medhane Alem: A Medieval Rock-hewn Church in Historic Gondar, Ethiopia



Tsegaye, Ebabey Demissie ^a

^a Department of Anthropology, Hawassa University, Ethiopia, tsegayeeb@hu.edu.et

ARTICLE INFO

Received 19th October 2022

Accepted 18th January 2023

Keywords:

Architecture; Ethiopia; Ethiopian church; history; rock-hewn churches; Wukro Medhane Alem church

ABSTRACT

This study explores the historical and architectural heritage of Wukro Medhane Alem, a least-known monolithic rock-hewn church in South Gondar. Primary and secondary sources of the study were collected through fieldwork, interviews, and literature review. The study shows that it is one of the medieval churches traditionally attributed to King Lalibela (r. 1181-1221). The hypogeum has a rectangular plan being deeply excavated out of bedrock. There is a built-up feature added over the roof's edge of the rock-hewn church. It imitates a Gondarine architectural tradition, implying the transition from the earlier rock-hewn tradition to the building architectural orientation of the Gondarine period (1636-1769). Its hypogeum reflects an Aksumite and medieval architectural tradition. Internally, the basilica is partitioned into kine mahilet (chanting), kiddist (holy) and mekides or kiddiste kiddusan (sanctuary) rooms through the arranged rock-hewn pillars, which are refined with arches, capitals, and entablatures that create the ceiling of the roof which is also decorated with engraved cruciform, geometrical, quadrifoliate, and crown-like protruding features. The kiddiste kiddusan has six sub-sanctuaries with doubled circular domed roofs and rectangular altars cut from the main rock. The hypogeum, thus, has such potential values to be promoted as an alternative tourist site in historic Gondar, which is mainly known to tourists for its built palaces.

1. INTRODUCTION

The tradition of decorating and furnishing churches and monasteries using different styles of architectural and artistic features has been commonly evidenced in different parts of the early Christian world. These features are symbols which are engraved, depicted, painted and sculpted in a manner having meanings related to the thoughts and values of the religion. Different research works show that Christians used symbolical features of crosses, geometric elements, saints, animals, plants and other features which are evidenced in different private Christian house churches, catacombs, caves and Jewish Synagogues in the Roman/Byzantine Empire before the fourth century A.D (Humphries, 2006; Johnson, 2000; Kilde, 2008; White, 1990; 2000).

As Christianity became the official religion of the Byzantine Empire in the fourth century A.D, the construction of churches was given a particular emphasis among the Christians, including the royal families who were converted to Christianity. This was accompanied by the development of art and architecture dominantly manifested in the basilica and dome plans and styles. Historically, the Byzantine church plan is centrally planned with multi domes and half domes, while the basilica plan has colonnades dividing its space to a central nave and side aisles (Kilde, 2008; White, 2000). Integrating different architectural experiences of pre and early Christian architectural and artistic experiences of different areas of the vast empire, the Byzantine basilica evolved imitating a rectangular plan with a central nave, apse and aisles that are partitioned, suiting with different spiritual practices (Browne, 1912; Kilde, 2008). Basilica has been developed as a sacred form of architecture having canonical and historical discourse (Hoi-Yan, 2003). In line with this, the dome architectural style was increasingly developed, symbolizing the Heavenly Jerusalem of Christians (Stephenson, 2005).

In addition to the basilica and dome forms of architecture, the use of different artistic symbols was part of the construction of churches and monasteries in the ancient Christian world (Johnson, 2000; Ross, 2009). All symbolic features in the church buildings and monuments fall under architectural spaces, elements, and furnishing artworks which can be executed in the interior and exterior parts of churches. These features which have symbolical meanings are part of the metaphorical character of Christianity (Guirguis, *et al.* 2020). In the church building history of the Byzantine Christendom, caves of natural and manmade features are evidenced in different ancient Christian centers. The use of caves and the subsequent development in the excavation of churches from rock was associated with the expansion of monastic life. The most venerated ancient Christian cave sites are the Cappadocia caves, which have evidence of the artistic and architectural implementation of the Byzantine Christians. These caves were sites of Christian dwellings during persecution (Cooper & Decker 2012; Inomata & Kijima, 2016; Rodley, 1989; Yildiz, 2006).

In the history of Ethiopian Christianity, the tradition of church construction embracing Christianized symbolical arts and architectural elements began to have been practiced mainly since the adoption of Christianity as a state religion in the fourth century A.D. In relation to the plan and/shape of church buildings, rectangular (basilica style) and circular types are dominantly known in Ethiopia. In many cases, rectangular churches are those which are excavated from bed rock. These types of churches are better survived than churches built from conventional materials such as stone, wood and mud and are best defined as hypogeal which have internally a basilica plan (Phillipson 2009; Di Salvo 2017). In terms of planning, church building, either of rock-hewn or built, follows unique liturgical orientations, being arranged eastward. Despite the shape (either rectangular, round or cruciform) it has, a church mostly includes three fold ritual spaces: the *kine mahilet* (chanting room), *kiddist* (holy) and *mekides* or *kiddiste kiddusan* (sanctuary or holy of holies). These are arranged eastwards, corresponding with the liturgical practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC). In the course of time, Ethiopian Christian architecture has been developed into a special character by integrating Aksumite and introduced Byzantine architectural and artistic affinities. The decoration and furnishing of church buildings employed different architectural and different styles with signs of crosses, saints, geometrical features and other figures which mainly have meanings related to Christianity (Heldman, 2003; Lule, 2008; Phillipson 2009). The embodied symbolical architectural

and artistic elements have meanings of religious values and thoughts (Aleign, 2017; Mengistu, 2012). In the tradition of the Ethiopian church, the cross, a symbol of faith and protection against evil, is a dominant feature which Christians engrave, paint, and sculpt it in their church buildings, chapels, homes, books, and necks and other materials (Lamp, 2012, Sergew, 1970).

The tradition of the early Christian art and architecture of Ethiopia is mainly preserved in the ancient rock-cut churches that have been constructed in the rugged landscape of the country, mainly in the Tigray and Amhara regions. Different research works have been made to explore the living rock-hewn churches in the areas of Lasta, Tigray and Shewa mainly from historical, archaeological and architectural perspectives (Buxton, 1947; Findlay, 1943; Gerster, 1970; McGrath, 1925; Mercier & Lepage, 2012; Phillipson, 2009). The works of these scholars are concentrated on the ancient churches found in Tigray and Lasta areas. The most comprehensive work that covers numbers of rock-hewn and built-up churches of Tigray, Lasta and Shewa is prepared by Phillipson (2009). However, in the historic area of Gondar, which is dominantly known to scholars for its Gondarine built architectural orientation, the palaces of Gondar (Berry, 1995), research work on rock-cut churches is very scanty. With the exception of Zoz Amba Giorgis church in North Gondar (Finneran, 2007; Gervers et al., 2014; Lepage & Mercier, 2002; Phillipson, 2009), most of the rock-hewn churches in this historic area are not documented. The rock-hewn churches, particularly in Farta and Lay Gayint Districts of South Gondar, are not well documented except with a few mentions found in literature (Behailu & Haftamu, 2017; Fritsch, 2010). This study aims to explore the architectural and artistic features of the overlooked rock-hewn church of Wukro Medhane Alem (the church of Savior of the World), which is located in Farta District, between the two world heritage sites, Gondar and Lalibela, along the Bahr Dar-Dessie main highway.

2. SOURCES AND METHODS OF THE STUDY

This study employed both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were collected during field observation which was part of my survey work of more than 35 rock-hewn churches in South Gondar and North Wollo between 2014 and 2021. On my visit to the site in June 2021, I was accompanied by devoted independent explorers such as Marco Vigano and Dagwmawi Shibru. However, there are still unvisited churches mainly because of financial problems. During the field observation at Medhane Alem church, the physical features of the church were recorded using photography and observation remarks written in a handbook. The location of the site (UTM coordinates) was also taken using GPS. Secondary sources were collected through a review of literature in which different published and unpublished sources were consulted. An interview with local informants was also made to collect information related to the historical background of the rock-hewn church. The study followed a qualitative descriptive and explanatory approach to analyzing the data collected through different techniques.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Location and vicinity of Wukro Medhane Alem Rock-hewn Church

In the fieldwork conducted in North Wollo and South Gondar, more than 35 least known rock-cut churches (see Figure 1) were recorded. Seven of these churches are found in the South Gondar Zone, Amhara Region, and the remaining churches are found in North Wollo, the adjacent zone of South Gondar. About twenty of these churches were included under Tsegaye (2014). Others are not yet well documented.

The church of Wukro Medhane Alem (it is denoted on the map with number “28”) is located 35km from Debre Tabor (the main town of South Gondar Zone), 132km from Bahr Dar (the main town of Amhara Region), 160km from Gondar (one of the main tourist centers of the country), and 666km from Addis Ababa. It can be accessed by car driving northward from a small town, Kimmir Dingay, which is located to the east of Debre Tabor, along the Bahr Dar-Dessie main highway. The church is established on a rocky landform surrounded by cliffs in its southern, southeastern and southwestern directions. This site has an elevation of 2732m (above sea level) with 0411336 E and 1310622 N UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) coordinates. The *kebele* (locality) of the church is named Wukro, derived from Geez word to mean rock-hewn, which indicates the church hewn out of a single bed of rock. The vicinity is inhabited by local communities who have close socio-religious attachment to the church.

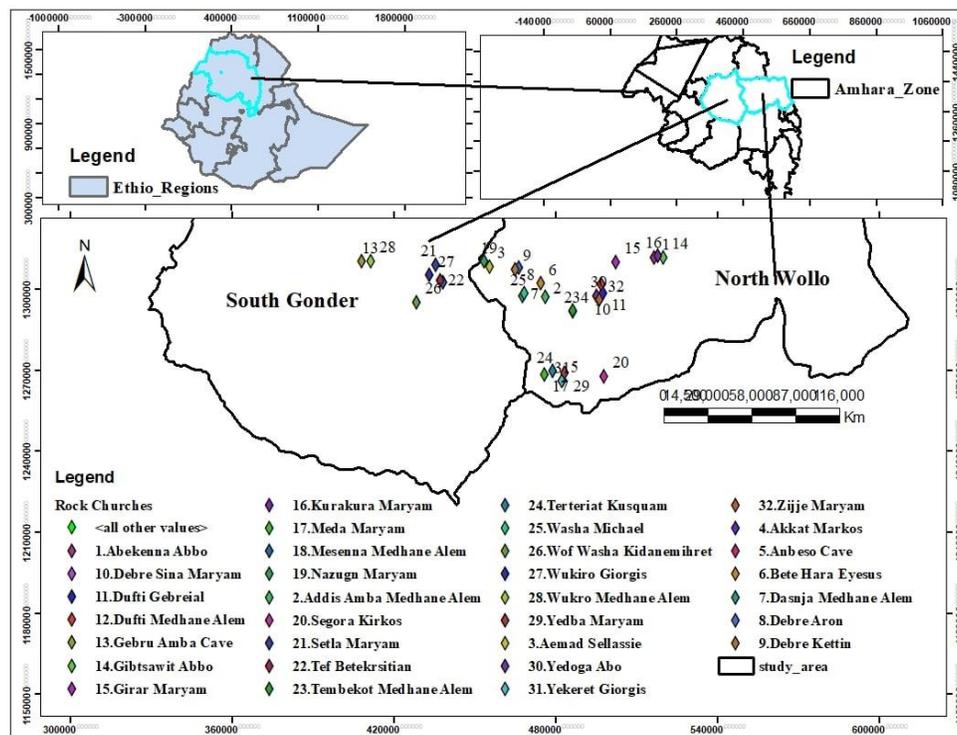


Figure.1 Distribution of rock churches in South Gondar and North Wollo. Source: author (2022).

3.2 Historical background of the church

To discuss the historical background of rock-hewn churches in Ethiopia, the main problem is the lack of original written evidence. This problem is associated with the lack of written evidence that primarily indicates the hewer of the churches. Therefore, the reconstruction of historical narrations is based on secondary written and oral sources. This short historical overview of Wukro Medhane Alem church is not an exception and this overview depends on oral tradition, which may be rarely supported by some architectural affinities.

The rock-hewn church of Wukro Medhane Alem is one of the major cultural sites in the vicinity of Debre Tabor which had a close link with medieval and Gondarine kings. Local oral traditions place the period of the church's excavation during the Zagwe Dynasty (930-1270). It is believed that its excavation was started by King Lalibela (r. 1181-1221) and completely excavated by a Shewan monk, Abune Melke Tsedeq (Solomon, 2012) probably between the 14th or 15th centuries. The same story is also narrated by the famous church scholar, Aleqa Lema, as compiled by Mengistu (2003). It is also narrated under Merkoriwos (1998) that Abune Melke Tsedeq, whose main monastery is found in Shewa, was given monkhood by Abune Aron, the founder of Debre Aron in Meket District, North Wollo, during the reign of Seife Ar'ed (r. 1344-71). This story has a connection with the 14th century evangelization activity that covered areas such as Beggemidr as far as Lake Tana. These areas served as centers of refuge for monks and the expansion of Christianity (Taddesse, 1972).

My collection of oral sources from informants also tells us similar stories. The excavation of the church was started by Lalibela and completed by Abune Melke Tsedeq with the help of 700 monks who came with him from Shewa (Tigab Abeje, a priest of the church, personal communication, 2015). Its establishment as a monastery seems to have been in the late 14th or early 15th centuries, after the excavation was completed. As a result, this tradition is the most important source for narrating the history of the church. It is important to note here that Wukro Medhane Alem church is not the only church with local traditions related to King Lalibela. Among the rock-hewn churches with a tradition that is attributed to King Lalibela are Adadi Maryam church to the southwest of Addis Ababa; Zoz Amba Giyorgis church in Belesa, North Gondar (Finneran 2007; Gervers et al., 2014; Mercier & Lepage, 2012; Phillipson, 2009) and the abandoned rock-hewn church in Lay Gayint, South Gondar (Tsegaye, 2019). With the exception of Adadi Maryam, the other rock-hewn churches have some architectural similarity with the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. On the basis of this reference, Adadi Maryam church is suggested to be established in the 14th or 15th centuries (Phillipson, 2009).

There are some architectural elements at Wukro Medhane Alem church to support the claim based on the local tradition. Its Aksumite door features, the excavation of underground trenches, and other artistic expressions in the interior parts of the church have similarities with the period's architectural tradition. As a result, it may be plausible to say that the church was founded during the Zagwe Dynasty (930-1270) and it might have played a great role in the evangelization activity, mainly in the 14th century. Such local claims of affinity with Lalibela may be an indication of the saintly king's journey in search of a convenient bed rock to realize Lalibela's massive project, which excavated a number of churches within a single bed rock in Lasta. The unfinished project of an abandoned rock-hewn church in Lay Gayint (Tsegaye, 2019) can help us understand this assumption. Thus, the

excavators might have left such areas in search of better rock plains. Such attempts may be taken as predevelopment for the establishment of the unique and outstanding rock-hewn monuments of Lalibela in Lasta.

The above stories may have some importance in inferring a temporary period of the church. The church also reflects the Gondarine style of architectural features, which are assumed to have been built over the rock-hewn church for the purpose of protection from water infiltration or as a repair work. The local tradition states that this addition was made by St. Arsema, a relative of Abune Melke Tsedek (Informant: Misganaw Wube, a priest and head of the church, personal communication, 2015). However, it is difficult to know the period when this was made. It may probably be made as a rehabilitation activity if the church was minimally injured by the war of *Imam Ahmed Gragn* (1529-1543) who brought a huge devastation on the antique cultural heritage of Christian Ethiopia (Tadesse 1972).

3.3 Architectural and artistic features of the rock-hewn church

The monolithic rock-hewn church of Wukro Medhane Alem is found sunken into the ground (see Figure 2), sculpted from a grayish and white soft rock. Currently, it is covered with a structure made of steel trusses and corrugated steel sheets, which has recently been constructed to protect the hypogeum from deterioration because of sunlight and rainfall. The church is monolithic in its type and has a rectangular plan with an internal basilica (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). It is carefully excavated downwardly and horizontally (methods possibly used to shape monolithic rock-hewn structures) along its entire facades to separate the hypogeum from its parent rock. It is supposed that the molding of the exterior facades of the church was done before the expansions and compartments were made inside of the church. In the western facade of the church, the parent rock is not totally detached from the main church, but two flanged rocks are left connected with the main church, probably left for people to have access to the roof of the church for some purposes. However, this connection does not imply that the church is semi-monolithic. As a monolithic feature shaped from a single rock, the excavation of the church was done carefully to make expansion of the interior parts of the church and to keep the balance or the thickness of the rock wall both in its internal and external facades.

The dimensions of the monolithic rock-hewn church are: externally it measures 19 meters in length (not including the preliminary parts and trenches of the church), 18 meters in width, and 6 meters in maximum height. Its height varies, 5.5m on the eastern side and 6m on the west. The rock-hewn church has a kind of small-scale built-up feature (masonry) added on the top of the roof along its battlement (see Figure 4). This situation makes Wukro Medhane Alem unique in such that it involves both rock-hewn and built-up features. The built-up feature follows the Gondarine style of architecture. It is built of brown stones, probably plastered with lime mortar. It has corner towers with a semi-circular shape. There are also corresponding open features with a rough arch shape. As Berry (1995) states, the use of brown basalts and lime mortars and the domed angle towers are among the major characteristics of the Gondar-style of construction. This feature, therefore, reflects the influence of the early Gondarine architectural progress, which was practiced in different parts of Gondar. Based on these insights, this rock-hewn church can be taken as a transition from the

medieval rock-hewn architectural tradition to the construction-oriented architectural tradition of the Gondarine period.



Figure 2. The view of the rock-hewn church, from its eastern side. Source: author (2015).



Figure 3. The view of the rock-hewn church from its western side. Source: author (2021).



Figure 4. The masonry over the roof's edge of the rock-hewn church. Source: author (2021).



Figure 5. The flanked rock not detached from the main rock and the church. Source: author (2021).

The access into the church is through a tunnel (trench) excavated into the rock on the northwest side of the church. It is excavated systematically with stairs, and it turns to the left to access narthexes that we can get before the main hypogeum (see Figure 6). About 17 small holes for burials are arranged one over the other along the sides of this trench. Two trenches are opened towards the cliff on the western and southern sides of the church to drain water collected from the courtyard of the church (see Figure 7). From this, a lesson can be taken that the excavation of trenches had a dual purpose: for access and draining.

The narthex, which is placed before the main hypogeum, is excavated into a rock. It is divided into sub-spaces. The first space has an average measurement of 4 meters in length and 3 meters in width and is 2 meters in height. The next space has subdivisions separated by a rock wall that is detached from the roof. It has three columns with no arches and capitals. This space measures 7 meters in length, 8 meters in width, and 2.3 meters in height. Next to this part is a space that provides access to the southern and western entrances of the main hypogeum. Over the heads of these narthexes, there are two sculptures, or flanked rocks, not extended to the floor. These sculptures created a space to observe from an opened window in the western facade of the church (see Figure 6). There is a small storey which can be seen being from the narthex.



Figure 6 (left). The tunnel (entrance) of the church. Source: author (2021).

Figure 7 (right). A trench that drains water in to the cliff. Source: author (2021).

More attention is given here to the monolithically excavated hypogeum. Its exterior features are explained above. Architectural and artistic elements of the church are executed in its internal parts, which are prepared carefully by keeping the expected thickness of the rock wall. The compartmentalization of the internal parts follows an eastward arrangement, fitting the liturgical activities of the EOC. It has fully completed divisions, including the baptism room, the *kine mahilet*, the *kiddist* and the *kiddiste kiddusan*. All these parts have relevant architectural implementations. Its first part is a baptism room, which is found before the *kine mahilet*. The entrance to the church bears a rectangular shape with corner posts, testifying to evidence of Aksumite architectural kinship in the historic area of Gondar. There are also windows with rectangular and irregular shapes. This room measures 4 meters in length, 4.75 meters in width, and 2.5 meters in height. It has two columns that have no arches or capitals. The next compartment is the *kine mahilet*. It has an entrance with Aksumite door styles in the west. Over this entrance, a window with an Aksumite architectural affinity is placed. Its features are seen inside the *kine mahilet*. It is the only window in the church carved in the Aksumite style.

Eight pillars give the partition of the *kine mahilet*, the *kiddist* and the *kiddiste kiddusan* which is the easternmost part of the church. Two of the pillars are shaped separately in the south innermost of the *kiddiste kiddusan*. The remaining six pillars are connected to each other with arched entablatures that form a portico view towards the *kiddiste kiddusan*. The pillars have four sides sculpted in line with the direction of the arches. At the convergence point, the arches are shaped to form the ceiling of the roof. Their capitals are well carved, proper to their entablatures, which are part of the roof (see Figure 8, Figure 9).



Figure 8 (left). Partial view of arched pillars. Source: author (2015).

Figure 9 (right.) A pillar in the nave with its capitals. Source: author (2015).

The *kine mahilet* and the *kiddist* rooms assume the architectural expressiveness of the church. The general average measurement of these parts is 9.5 meters in length, 9.8 meters in width, and 4.8 meters in height. The most exciting architectural and artistic features are implemented on the roof, which is decorated by the arches and entablatures of the pillars as well as different engraved cruciform, geometric, and quadrifoliate features. The projection of the arches of the pillars has created a portico with a view towards the *kiddiste kiddusan*. The cruciform engravings vary in terms of their style and the geometrical motifs they bear. Some of the cross engravings have a protruding feature at their midpoint. One of the protruding bosses is carefully shaped, possessing a crown-like feature which is projected at the center of the *kine mahilet's* roof (see Figure 10). Rectangular geometrical engravings encircle some of the cruciform features. The quadrifoliate motifs are also engraved in a cruciform shape. These features are interwoven with each other and are accompanied by rectangular geometrical motifs. The peaks of the quadrifoliate relief are designed in parallel with the corners of the geometrical feature (see Figure 11). The roof of the *kiddist* resembles more complex cross designs than the *kine mahilet*. One of the embellishments is manifested in doubled crosses, which are engraved on a rectangular and circular geometric plan. The four sides of the outer cross are connected by a circle. There is a ceiling decorated with consecutive parallelograms that are developed one over the other. At the corners (angles) of the outer geometrical relief, small crosses are also being engraved (see Figure 12, Figure 13).



Figure 10 (left). A cruciform engraving with crown like boss. Source: author (2015).
 Figure 11 (right). A quadrifoliate motif with geometrical engraving. Source: author (2015).



Figure 12 (left). A cross relief in the kidist's roof. Source: author (2015).
 Figure 13 (right). A cross relief in the kidist's roof. Source: author (2015).

The eastern and innermost part of the church is the *kiddiste kiddusan*, which is further divided into six chaples (sub-ritual places) dedicated to St. Gabriel, Medhane Alem, St. Michael, Kidane Mihret, Be'ale Egzi'abher and St. Maryam, from north to south, respectively. Each chapel has its own immovable rectangular *menber* (altar), which is carved from the main rock in a completely fitting way to the services of liturgical activities. The altars have small windows which are created being convenient for liturgical activities and for the placement of the *tabot* (Ark of the Covenant). The windows are made along the four sides of the altars. The altars also have a podium at their base carved by considering the height of priests during a mass ceremony. In terms of size, the altar of Medhane Alem is the biggest. It has approximately a 2.25m width and a 2.25m height, including its plinth. The rest of the altars have almost similar adjustments. The roofs of all the chaples of the *kiddiste kiddusan*, parallel to the altars, have a cupola or dome. Some of the domes have doubled circles with small crosses in their middle. The dome over the altar of Medhane Alem is the widest and best refined (see Figure 14 and 15).



Figure 14 and 15. Some of the domes in the *kiddiste kiddusa*. Source: author (2015).

Generally, the artistic and architectural features which are expressed in terms of cross shape, in the rock-hewn churches of Ethiopia in particular and other Orthodox churches in general have symbolical meanings with reference to the bible (Mengistu 2011; Wesler 2012; Aleign 2017). The local tradition of the artistic expressions of Wukro Medhane Alem church show meanings related to Christian teaching. Cruciform signs have a symbolic reference to the cross on which Christ was crucified to give life to humans. This symbolical feature is commonly evident anywhere within an Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The pillars in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church symbolize the ancient religious fathers such as the apostles, the apostolic fathers, and the martyrs. As it has been common in the ancient Christian world, the dome in the Ethiopian church also implies the Heavenly Jerusalem. Quadrifoliate figures with cruciform shapes are symbols of the wooden cross of Christ. The circular geometric feature also symbolizes this world and the divinity of Christ. In addition to its service during liturgical activity, the altar is carved to symbolize St. Mary, the Mother of Jesus Christ (Tigab Abeje, personal communication, 2015).

4. CONCLUSION

In the history of Christianity, the excavation and construction of churches have been endowed with a special character by developing their own Christianized art and architectural tradition. Since the early Christian era, the use of symbolical artistic and architectural features has been common, and it has become well developed since the fourth century A.D when the Byzantine Emperors paid attention to the construction of grand churches in the main centers of the empire. The expansion of monastic life also facilitated the development of rock-hewn-based Christian art and architecture. The basilica and its dome features were the main architectural legacies of the Byzantine Empire. The empire's art and architectural developments had a far-reaching impact not only on Christian centers both within and outside its realm, but also on Islamic centers, which showed the development of Islamic architecture in later periods.

In the case of Ethiopia, Christian art and architecture have their own special character, which integrates both Aksumite and Byzantine traditions. The sacred Ethiopian art and architectural

tradition are well preserved in its ancient rock-hewn churches, which are found in different parts of the country. This study explores the ecclesiastical architectural elements of the rock hewn church of Wukro Medhane Alem, one of the least known medieval hypogea in historic Gondar, the area which is mostly known for its built world heritage, the Castles of Gondar. This hypogeum is rectangular in shape and monolithic in construction. With its rock-hewn and the built-up feature added on the top of the roof along its edge, this church can be considered as a transition from the medieval rock-hewn architectural tradition to the building (built-up) architectural orientation of the Gondarine period. Its entrances have corner posts resembling kinship with Aksumite architectural tradition. This basilica church is partitioned into main ritual spaces, including *kine mahilet*, *kiddist*, and *kiddiste kiddusan*, which are the three common liturgical partitions of the EOC and are arranged eastward to match with the liturgical services of the church. This compartment is made of connected rock-hewn pillars, which are refined with arches, capitals, and entablatures, which form part of the ceiling of the roof.

The symbolic architectural and artistic expressions of the church are displayed in the internal parts, mainly in the roof of the *kine mahilet* and *kiddist*. These expressions are manifested in terms of engraved cruciform, geometric, quadrifoliate, and other signs, which have their own religious meaning. The cruciform features are adorned by different credo geometric designs, which have circular and rectangular shapes and quadrifoliate motifs, as well as a crown-like protruding boss. The quadrifoliate engravings imitate the wooden cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. The circular feature shows the eternal and absolute divinity of God, while the rectangular feature symbolizes the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, writers of the Gospel. The *kiddiste kiddusan* has six sub ritual spaces with doubled circular domed roofs, symbolizing Heavenly Jerusalem. It also has monolithic rock-cut altars that symbolize Saint Mary, the mother of Christ. In terms of its current management situation, the rock-hewn church is better preserved than others, and currently, it is sheltered with an iron sheet cover constructed to protect it from rain fall and sunlight deteriorative agents. As this study reveals, this rock-hewn church potential tourist attraction, and it can be promoted as part of the tourist's historic route between Gondar and Lalibela.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge some individuals who had great contribution to the realization of this study. My first gratitude goes to Denise E. Allen and her Zion Ministry in Palatine Bridge, New York, for the financial support that was employed to conduct my field visit to the Church of Wukro Medhane Alem in June 2021. I would also like to thank Marco Vigano and Dagmawi Shibru for their commitment to accompany me during the field visit made to the site. Finally, my gratitude goes to my informants who provided me with valuable information about the study.

REFERENCES

- Alelign A. (2017). The cross in Ethiopia: Decoding the symbolisms in the Christian traditions. *Journal of Ethiopian Church Studies*, 5, 105-146.
- Behailu, A., & Haftamu, M. (2017). An investigation of the potential attributes for tourist destination in six selected heritage sites of South Gondar, and the challenges in availing these heritage sites for tourists. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality*, 6(3), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2167-0269.1000289>
- Berry, La V. (1995). Architecture and kingship: The significance of Gondar style architecture. *Northeast African Studies*, 2(3), 7-19. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nas.1995.0003>
- Browne, E.A. (1912). *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*. Adam and Chales Black.
- Buxton, D. (1947). The Christian antiquities of northern Ethiopia. *Archaeologia*, 92, 1-42.
- Cooper, J. E. & Decker, M. (2012). *Life and Society in Byzantine Cappadocia*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Di Salvo, M. (2017). *The Basilicas of Ethiopia: An Architectural History*. I.B.Tauris.
- Findlay, L. (1943). *The Monolithic Churches of Lalibela in Ethiopia*. La Société d'Archéologie Copte,
- Finneran, N. (2007). *The Archaeology of Ethiopia*. Routledge.
- Fritsch, E. (2010). Tabot: Mänbärä tabot. In Siegbert Uhlig (Ed.) *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* (Vol. 4, pp. 804, 80). Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Gerster, G. (1970). *Churches in Rock: Early Christian Art in Ethiopia*. Phaidon Press.
- Gervers, M., Balicka-Witakowska, E., & Fritsch, E. (2014). Zoz Amba. In Alessandro Bausi (Ed.), *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* (Vol. 5, pp. 198-200). Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Guirguis, M. N., Dewidar, K. M., Kamel, S. M., & Iscandar, M.F. (2020). Categorization of symbolism in religious architecture; a case study of the Coptic Orthodox Church architecture. *Alexandria Engineering Journal*, 59, 533-545. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aej.2020.01.031>
- Heldman, M. E. (2003). Church buildings. In Siegbert Uhlig (Ed.) *Encyclopedia Aethiopica* (Vol. 1, pp. 737-740). Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Hoi-Yan, G.C. (2003). *Basilica: Historical and Canonical Development*. Toronto. Accessed through <http://www.gcatholic.org/basilicas/bas001-excerpts.pdf>
- Humphries, M. (2006). *Early Christianity*. Routledge.
- Inomata, K., & Kijima, M. (2016). Special composition of Christian paintings in the cave churches of Ihlara Valley, Cappadocia. *Proceedings on Archi-Cultural Interactions through the Silk Road*, pp. 25-28. Mukogawa Women's University.
- Johnson, M. E. (2000). Worship, practice and belief. In Philip F. Esler (Ed.), *The Early Christian World* (Vol. I-II, pp. 475-499). Routledge.
- Kilde J. H. (2008). *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship*. Oxford University Press.

- Lamp, F. J. (2012). Designs against evil: An Ethiopian Orthodox processional cross. *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, pp. 112-115. Yale University Press.
- Lepage, C. & Mercier, J. (2002). Une église lalibélienne, Zoz Amba. *Annales d'Ethiopie*, 18, 149-54. <https://doi.org/10.3406/ethio.1963.1336>
- Lule M. (2008). *History of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Part I*. Addis Ababa.
- McGrath, R. (1925). Lalibala. *The Geographical Journal*, 66(6), 507-518.
- Mengistu, G. (2011). *Yimrhane Kirstos: A Bridge between Aksum and Lalibela Civilizations*. Yimrehane Kiristos Church Parish Council.
- Mengistu, G. (2012). *Lalibela: A Museum of Living Rocks*. Addis Ababa: Master Printing Press.
- Mengistu, L. (2003). *Metsihafe Tizzeta Ze'aleka Lemma Hailu Wolde Tarik*. Huletegna Etim (In Amharic). Addis Ababa University Press.
- Mercier, J., & Lepage, C. (2012). *Lalibela Wonder of Ethiopia: The Monolithic Churches and Their Treasures*. Paul Holberton Publishing.
- Merkoriwos, A. (1998) *Yekiddusan Tarik. 5gna Metsihaf* (in Amharic). Asg Lusi Printing Press.
- Phillipson, D. W. (2009). *Ancient Churches of Ethiopia: Fourth-fourteenth Centuries*. Yale University Press.
- Rodley, L. (1989). Cave monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia. *The American Historical Review*, 94(2), 425-426. <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/94.2.iv>
- Ross, L. (2009). *Art and Architecture of the World's Religions*. Greenwood Press.
- Sergew, H. (1970). The expansion and consolidation of Christianity. In H. Sergew (Ed.), *The Church of Ethiopia: A Panorama of History and Spiritual Life*, pp. 7-10. Ethiopian Orthodox Church.
- Solomon, A. (2012). A history of Farṭa Wārāda, 1935–1991. MA Thesis. Addis Ababa University.
- Stephenson, D. (2005). *Visions of Heaven: The Dome in European Architecture*. Princeton Architectural Press.
- Tadesse, T. (1972). *Church and State in Ethiopia: 1270-1527*. Oxford University Press.
- Tsegaye, E. (2014). A survey of rock hewn churches in Mäqēt Wārāda. MA Thesis. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University.
- Tsegaye, E. (2019). Tefu Bete Kristian: A preliminary investigation on a neglected rock-hewn church, Lay Gaynt District, Northern Ethiopia. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 24(10), 84-93.
- Wesler, K. W. (2012). *An Archaeology of Religion*. University Press of America.
- White, L. M. (1990). *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture*. Maryland: John Hopkins University Press.
- White, L. M. (2000). Architecture: The first five centuries. In Philip F. Esler (Ed.), *The Early Christian World*, (Vol. I-II, pp. 693-746). London and New York: Routledge.
- Yildiz, P. (2006). Analysis of the 'Cappadocian cave house' in Turkey as the historical aspect of the usage of nature as a basis of design. *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, 87, 61-70. <https://doi.org/10.2495/DN060061>