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Restoration of the empire : a search for a new identity : Ethiopian architecture in the tenth-fifteenth centuries

Series Byzantina 7, 75-82

2009

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Restoration of the Empire. A Search for a New Identity. Ethiopian Architecture in the Tenth–Fifteenth Centuries

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The phenomenon of a state using artistic patronage as a political tool is universal. Regardless of the country, continent and culture, authorities use art to propagate certain ideas in society. Amongst all types of art, architecture has an exceptional function, in that in its forms, messages about new ideas and politics might be encoded. This trend may often be observed in European architecture, and the same thing happened in Ethiopia, in the age of cultural revival in the tenth century.

The analysis of the Ethiopian history of arts is exceptionally hindered by the consequences of the Islamic raid of Imam Gran and the thirty-years' war (1529–59), which devastated a large portion of the cultural achievements of Ethiopia. Most of the medieval monuments, as well as objects from the ancient Aksum period, were destroyed. In the face of the insufficient amount of both extant and published written sources, the preserved architectonic objects might be treated as a historical source from which one might try to read ideological content in order to comprehend the role of art in the Ethiopian state. In this discussion, architectonic objects will be treated as texts, except that they are edited with non-verbal means of expression.¹ Division into epochs in the history of Ethiopia can be marked by times of wars and crisis, which destroyed the world of culture and disturbed the continuity of Ethiopian statehood. If we furnish ourselves with the aid of terms drawn from the periodization of European history, we could call the period of existence of the Aksum state antiquity (sixth century BC - seventh century AD), while the moment when the Zagwe dynasty (ca. 940–1270) gained power should be treated as the beginning of the Middle Ages.

¹ Cf. J. Tromp, 'Aksumite Architecture and Church Building in the Ethiopian Highlands', *Eastern Christian Art in its Late Antique and Islamic Contexts*, 4 (2007), pp. 49–75.



Fig. 1. Lalibela. The new capital city of the Zagwe dynasty. Photo by J. Jeziorski

The history of architecture started in the Abyssinian region around the fifteenth century BC and its development commenced with, as in Europe, the erection of funeral buildings (mounds), sepulchral stelae and megaliths. Around the year 1000 BC Arabic settlers started to arrive from the region of what is today Yemen, and then created a trade colony on the African shore of the Red Sea. The oldest known stone building in Abyssinia was built in the sixth century BC, consisting of an Arab temple of the pre-Muslim cult in Yeha. The Yemeni colonists formed the Aksum state which, through acting as an agent in trade between India, Arabia and Rome, became a significant, local power. This country created the first architectural tradition in this region of Africa, as well as the first repertoire of artistic forms and monumental buildings.² The remains of palaces, grave chambers and sepulchral stelae of the Aksum rulers are still visible in the former ancient capital city.

Aksumite architecture adopted an exceptional artistic style due to technological difficulties caused to the builders by the low quality of mortar. In order to erect a several-story high palace, the builders had to reinforce the walls by putting horizontal strips of wood on their surface. These slats were placed longitudinally on both sides of the wall and joined together using transverse beams. Set at intervals, the wooden strips created horizontal lines on the façades of buildings which protruded beyond the face of the stone wall. The frames of the window- and door-openings were especially reinforced - the use of horizontal

² The tradition of stone architecture in Aksum may come from the region of the present-day Yemen. The excavations carried out in the temple in Mareb in Yemen point to the general similarity of the written and stone relics.

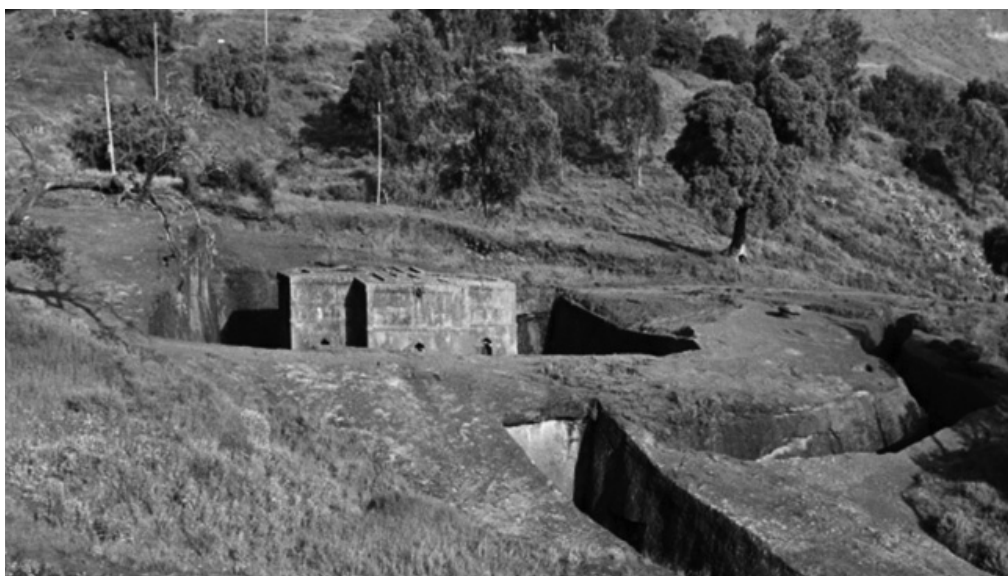


Fig. 2. Lalibela. The Bet Gijorgis church. Photo by T. Sowa

wooden elements, placed transversely to the wall, resulted in the fact that in every corner of the opening there protruded the end of a wooden beam. Monolithic stelae are characteristic of Aksumite buildings, placed near grave chambers of emperors. There are several of them in the city of Aksum and the highest of them is 37m tall. The source of the architecture of these objects is most probably the Egyptian obelisk, although their expression and function seems to be completely different. In contrast to Egyptian obelisks, the Aksumite stelae have designed façades in the form of multi-storey towers with imitations of windows and doors. They were, supposedly, the home for a soul or a tower that a soul used in order to climb into heaven. The fictional architecture of those stelae is the first example of imitating the wooden-stone architecture of Aksumite palaces in buildings carved in solid rock.

The adoption of Christianity was an important event in the history of Aksum. In 331, the ancient predecessor of the contemporary Ethiopia became the second country in the world to accept Christianity as the state religion. Syrian three-naved churches became the source of the sacred Christian architecture of Aksum. According to local tradition, the first church erected in Ethiopia was the cathedral in Aksum, built between 535–40. It had five naves and an external colonnade. Excavations conducted in the nineteenth century in Jerusalem showed that the church built in 340 by Bishop Maximus on the Zion hill also had five naves and was surrounded with a colonnade. The correspondence between the sizes and architectural forms of these buildings indicates that the cathedral in Aksum could



Fig. 3. Lalibela. The imitations of aksumian windows in stone. Photo by T. Sowa

have been an imitation of the church on the Zion hill in Jerusalem³. Unfortunately, neither church exists today. The Aksum cathedral was destroyed during the raid of Imam Gran.⁴

Aside from stone architecture, the building of rock-churches became a specific trend in Ethiopian architecture. In Ethiopia there are currently about 300 churches sculpted in mountain slopes. This tradition might presumably have been born in the time of Aksum. It may be assumed that the Egyptian tombs in the Nile valley are the source for such architecture, because it is certain that the first churches of that type were connected with funeral functions.⁵ The Ethiopian churches, regardless of the technique of building, were usually built on the plan of Early Christian Syrian basilica, in which three naves and an unseparated apse remain inscribed in the rectangular plan. It is stunning that this simple plan, quickly enriched in Europe and Byzantium with a transept and a separate apse, was used in an unchanged form in the sacred architecture of Ethiopia until the seventeenth century.

After the fall of the state of Aksum in the seventh century⁶, medieval Ethiopia inherited from its ancient predecessor a double capital: the Christian religion and the local tradition of stone building. One could suppose that the Zagwe dynasty, while seizing power and under-

³ M. Gervers, 'The Rehabilitation of The Zagwe Kings and the building of the Dabra Sina – Golgotha – Sellasie Complex in Lalibala', *Africana Bulletin*, 51 (2003), pp. 23–50.

⁴ The church standing at present in the place of the first cathedral was built in the seventeenth century.

⁵ C. Lepage, 'L'art du Xe au XVe siècle, des 'siècles obscures' aux 'siècles des lumieres' in: *Etiopie Millénaire. Préhistoire et art religieux*, Paris 1975, p. 125.

⁶ The current research on liturgical books, the results of which have not yet been published, suggests that the Aksum state existed continuously from the accession to the throne of the Zagwe dynasty, even though its capital city has been depopulated and fallen into ruin. The Aksum state may have been subjected to a significant decentralization and cultural regression, but it still existed and the succession of power was continuous. However, we do not have the complete picture of history between the seventh and ninth century and we do not know any buildings from that period.

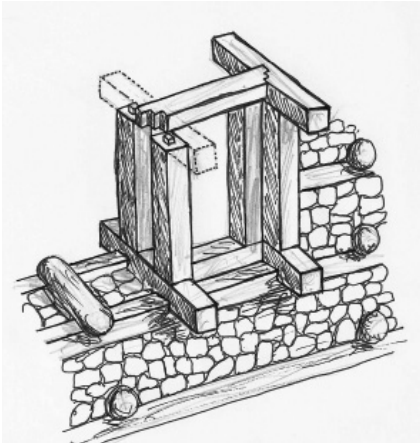


Fig. 4. The technique of building stone-wooden walls and the scheme of a window.

Picture by T. Sowa, based on D. Buxton

taking to consolidate the Ethiopian state, based its rule on the Church⁷. Apart from religion, culture became the element integrating and cementing the Zagwe state. The tenth century became, for Ethiopia, the age of cultural rebirth. The capital city of the Zagwe dynasty moved from Aksum a couple of hundred kilometres to the south, from the Tigray region to the mountainous Lasta region. The country of the Zagwe Dynasty had to face the problem of its identity. In order to maintain its connection with its great predecessor and its capital city in the ideological and visual sphere, medieval Ethiopia created a new cultural formation, still based on the tradition of the ancient country of Aksum. The medieval Ethiopian architects, while undertaking the theme of church architecture had to face the problem of expressing in this theme the idea of re-

capturing the splendor of the ancient state of Aksum. In effect they managed to merge two different languages: they integrated the plan and decorations of an Early Christian Syrian basilica with the architecture of an Aksumite palace. In sacred buildings they made a harmonious synthesis of local and foreign elements.

According to the current state of research, the oldest medieval church that is preserved today, is the monastery Debre Damo from the ninth to the eleventh century. It is the first example of an antique-styled, wooden-stone building constructed using techniques analogous to those in ancient Aksumite palaces. Given the lack of other preserved buildings, it would seem that this church began the process of the rebirth of architecture in the Abyssinian region. In comparison to Aksumite buildings, the only difference is the thickness of the walls of the later buildings, a better mortar allowing the building of thinner walls. A monument of high quality is the Yemrehanna Krestos church from the twelfth century⁸, built inside a cave. It is a representative building with an excellent design of the facades and interior. The wooden strips on the exterior façade are smaller than those in the Aksumite prototypes. The angular risalits are reminiscent of the towers of the Aksumite palaces, but they do not disturb the regular plan of the basilican inside of the church. Another church, Madhane Alam from the thirteenth

⁷ The dynasty has founded a large number of churches, including the extensive complex of churches in Lalibela.

⁸ The dating has been established by Ewa Balicka-Witakowska on the basis of inscriptions placed on the mural paintings. Cf. E. Balicka-Witakowska, M. Gervers, "The Church of Yemrahanna Krestos and its wall-painting. A preliminary Report", *Africana Bulletin*, 49 (2001), pp. 9–48.

century⁹, shows the progressive reduction of the amount of wood used for the construction of the walls. However, in all the churches listed above the typical rich plasticity of the façades is visible, which is the result of using alternate wood and stone strips in the construction of walls and the use of characteristic frames for doors and windows.

The rulers of the Zagwe dynasty initiated the construction of the religious centre in Lalibela. The technique according to which the churches in Lalibela were built differs completely from the examples of medieval sacred architecture commented upon up until now; the churches in Lalibela were hewn out of volcanic tuff. In order to obtain a rock fragment from which the church was to be constructed, firstly the top layer of soil was removed in the desired place. Secondly, ditches were carved out in the ground that cut the cubical block from the surrounding rock. The separated rock fragment

was transformed into a church by preparing its façades and drilling its interior to form a basilica with galleries. The technique used is innovative, there were no buildings constructed in a similar way in the ancient Aksum. But this technique still draws from previous experience: in Aksum there were sculpted grave chambers of the emperors and monolithic sepulchral stelae which had designed façades. The churches in Lalibela are grouped into two sets placed on the opposite banks of the Jordan stream. The church of St. George (Bet Gijorgis) which is beyond the two groups of churches is the only centrally planned building. The interior organisation of the rest of the churches refers to the three-naved Syrian basilica. The interesting element is the design of the church façades. Because the buildings were made from stone, there was no structural justification for creating horizontal rustication lines or windows with the characteristic angles. Those elements were imitated in stone during the building process, giving the churches in Lalibela an appearance similar to the palaces of Aksum.

The Bet Emanuel church has the best designed façade of all the Lalibelan churches. The surface of the whole façade, as well as the pilasters, is “disrupted” by the horizontal rustication lines and prominent cornices; the window and door openings have an offset design with characteristic angles. The inside of the church is arranged on the plan of a pseudo-basilica with galleries. The main nave is surrounded by a two-storey line of Aksumite windows. The fact that the façade of no other church of Lalibela presents such



Fig. 5. Lalibela. The Bet Emanuel church, condition from year 2002.

Photo by T. Sowa

⁹ E. Balicka-Witakowska 'The wall paintings in the church of Madhane Alam near Lalibela', *Africana Bulletin*, 49 (2001), pp. 9–29.



Fig. 6. Lalibela. The Bet Medhane Alem church. Photo by T. Sowa

a rich facture and carefully designed light-and-shadow effects indicates that in the following realizations architects reduced the elements of the Aksumite style, leaving flat designed façades with small cornices. The element that remains unchanged is the characteristic framing of window and door openings.

The building with a special position is the Bet Medahne Alem church (The Church of the Savior of the World). It is the biggest monolithic church in the world, about 33.5 m in length and 23.5 m in width. Outside it is surrounded by a colonnade, which appears to be a distant echo of Greek temple architecture. However, this church has a much closer and direct prototype: it is a replica of the first cathedral Maryam Seyon in Aksum, which is no longer extant. In this symbolic way the most important church of Aksum found itself in the new capital city in Lalibela.¹⁰ The architecture of the neighboring churches of the complex recalling the palaces of Aksum, could therefore create an impression of an ideologically and architectonically stylized copy of the ancient capital city. The second meaning of this complex is also worth mentioning, for the churches of Lalibela are dedicated to places and figures connected with biblical history, they are an ideological “copy” of Jerusalem, functioning until now as a Calvary. The new capital city of Ethiopia became at the same time the “new Aksum” and the “new Jerusalem”, linking the importance of the centre of power with the main centre of religion.

Taking into account the technique used and the antique-styled architectonic costume, the Lalibelan complex of churches is without doubt a precedent in the whole range of Ethiopian architectural history. One could wonder if the use of Aksumite style in the Middle

¹⁰ M. Gervers ‘The Rehabilitation of The Zagwe Kings and the building of the Dabra Sina – Golgotha – Sellasie Complex in Lalibala’, *Africana Bulletin*, 51 (2003), pp. 23–50.

Ages was a symptom of backwardness, or a natural continuation of an uninterrupted process of development¹¹. Although we can not give a certain answer to this question, the use of an antique-styled architectural costume in medieval architecture seems to have a clear goal. Art sometimes goes back to the forms used in the past times, but whenever it does so, it is for a particular reason. In Lalibela we deal with the phenomenon of historicism¹² – in other words, the conscious feeding on history, the realized achievements of the former culture, taking place somewhere else (in the Tigray region) and at other time (several hundred years before). In medieval Ethiopia, during a period lasting a few hundred years, Aksumite antiquity played a similar role to Graeco-Roman antiquity in Europe, it was the only ideal, the only epoch that could be related to and browsed in search of a repertoire of artistic forms. By building the complex in Lalibela medieval Ethiopia created its own architectural tradition, based on its own, local antiquity. The medieval architects did not create a new style, but only followed their great predecessors, their own past “golden age”.

Architecture has an exceptional significance in the world of politics, for it visualizes the political regime and has the power of “making” the nation – renovating, after a period of regression, pride and people’s faith in their own country. There has already occurred a comparable precedent in the cultural history of Africa – the pyramids of the Fourth dynasty in Giza, which were built once the Egyptian nation was founded and nobody repeated this achievement thereafter. In Lalibela a similar building fervor can be seen in the newly integrated Ethiopian state – a great political and religious vision that united the nation. Architecture can serve as a political message, it might be used for expressing ideas, by translating them into a special language of architectural forms. In Lalibela it is the idea of the new, reborn state of Aksum. In this sense the medieval Ethiopian architecture, being a form of performance of the past, shows the nation-building process. The Ethiopian rulers recreated the country of their dreams, in which Lalibela becomes the symbol of the reborn kingdom, a political manifesto, a testimony to the power and faith of the rulers of the Zagwe dynasty. The medieval epoch draws from the ancient myth of Aksum. In the tenth century it gains its own face and finds its own architectural language, following the patterns of the ancient Aksum buildings. Ethiopia gains its own identity, it is the new Aksum, just as many of the European countries found themselves to be the new Rome. We can see that medieval Ethiopia is a self-conscious country, knowing its history and drawing from its experience. This consciousness and integrity which started in the Middle Ages denotes a civilization. That is why we can speak of a continuous civilizing process which takes place in Abyssinia until today, second next to the ancient Egypt such a long-lasting culture in Africa.

Translation: N. Augustynowicz, M. Sowa

¹¹ The results of current research on medieval manuscripts, and dating the extant churches may bring the answer to this question closer.

¹² It is indicated by the deliberate imitation of the characteristics of the Aksumite stone-wooden buildings in the monolithic churches erected in Lalibela and neighboring towns.