

Restoration in Ethiopia – presentation of a pilot project and a preliminary inventory of damage



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Front cover photograph: The project is blessed by an abba during a boat journey on Lake Tana

Presentation of the pilot project



Abba Gäbrä-Sellasié in the rock-hewn church of Debre Tsion Abraham, Tigrey, Ethiopia.

This image depicts the old priest, abba Gäbrä-Sellasié, sitting in his church, Debre Tsion Abraham. This is a rock-cut church, situated at a height of more than 2000 metres in the breathtakingly beautiful landscape of central Ethiopia. The church was hewn out of the mountain sometime during the 13th century. There are more than a hundred such churches in the same area. Debre Tsion Abraham has pillars and vaults and is richly decorated with murals dating from the same era, executed in a style typical of Ethiopian sacred art of the time. Abba Gäbre is obviously distressed by the chunk of plaster in his hands which has recently fallen from the heavily damaged roof. This church is a piece of Ethiopian cultural history, but the stone has started to decompose and the painted plaster is disintegrating.

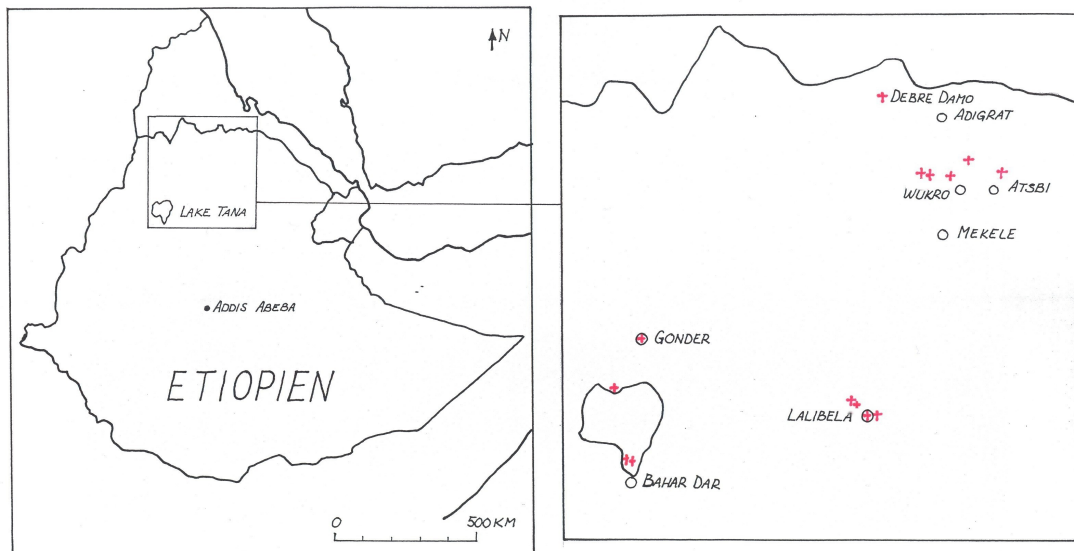
The portrait of this abba serves to illustrate the deterioration not only of medieval murals painted on plaster, but also of other works of art on canvas in the old round churches on the islands of Lake Tana, in the famous Gondar church of Debre Berhan Sellasse, sometimes called “the Ethiopian Sistine chapel”, and in many other churches. During visits to these churches one cannot but be moved by the tenderness and creativeness of their highly imaginative, gaily coloured and, from a stylistic point of view, often highly sophisticated pictorial program. The Ethiopian Orthodox church has a unique cultural heritage with roots in the middle of the 4th century and one of the oldest liturgical traditions in the world. It is a tragedy that the paintings in many churches are deteriorating so badly.

A small initiative was undertaken earlier this year when my colleague, Petter Jansson, and I made a three-week long expedition to Ethiopia, financed by Lunds Society of Mission. During this we made a preliminary inventory of 14 churches in the regions of Tana, Gonder and Tigrey, the first step in a project called “Restoration in Ethiopia – a pilot project”, whose aim is to examine the current state of the paintings and pave the way for a future restoration program in the country.



Lars Gerdmar and Petter Jansson on the way up to one of the famous rock-hewn churches in Tigrey.

I am an icon painter and restorer, Petter Jansson is a building antiquarian. We are both from Sweden where much of our work is directed towards restoring and protecting the Romanesque churches which are found in abundance in the southern parts of the country. In planning our expedition we were greatly helped by Dr Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, Uppsala, Sweden and Professor Michael Gervers, Toronto, Canada, who for several years have been studying ancient church art in Ethiopia. Professor Samuel Rubenson, Lund, Sweden, an expert on the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, has also been most helpful.



Map of Ethiopia showing the churches visited.

The expedition started in Addis Abeba and continued through the regions of Tana, Gonder, Lalibela and Tigrey. During our journey we were able to meet representatives of the churches as well as regional and national officials.



Lars Gerdmar in conversation with an abba in front of Debre Berhan Sellasse.



Professor Shiferaw Bekele, Addis Abeba.

Our intention was to get an overview of what needs to be done, and also to see if the local people would be able to continue the restoration projects in Ethiopia after our departure. We were able to make contact with the priests responsible for the churches and the short conversations that we had with them were very valuable. They were very interested to hear what is involved in a professional restoration as unfortunately some paintings have been further damaged by amateur cleaning attempts.

On a regional level, we had the opportunity to meet with Mr. Kebede Amare who is responsible for the Tourism and Cultural Heritage Office in Tigrey. This meeting resulted in an agreement about possible future co-operation. On a national level, we met, amongst others, the Director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Abeba, Elisabeth Wolde Giorgis, as well as Professor Shiferaw Bekele, head of the Department of History at Haile Selassie University. Both of them offered their support for our suggested project.

We were unable to get permits for closer examination and sampling as we had hoped, so this could only be a preliminary, visual investigation.. However we gained so much information about the condition of the churches we visited, that we find it worthwhile to present short reports from all the churches, together with some photos, to shed some light on the situation.

The churches we visited date from the 12th to the 19th centuries and are adorned with unique and priceless art, a religious and cultural heritage, which, if nothing is done, is in danger of

being destroyed. Magnificently painted on walls and ceilings, executed in *al secco* on plaster and distemper on canvas, the paintings are often in great need of restoration, but Ethiopia has neither the means nor the resources to undertake this. We hope that the project which we have started will demonstrate the need for professional and economic aid with a view to protecting these treasures, not only for the Ethiopian people, but for the world.

The steps in the restoration process are :

1. Fixing plaster/canvas and colours.
2. Removal of all old surface treatments, varnish on canvas; wax on plaster.
3. Cleaning of all surfaces.
4. Retouching and repairing where colour and plaster are missing. Repairing canvas where necessary. Replacing wood where needed.
5. Possible new surface treatments.

Some conclusions

These churches are situated in inaccessible places, far out in the countryside and high up in the mountains and travel is hazardous because the roads are in extremely bad shape. Moreover the churches often lack electricity and water. The paintings, as well as the plaster or canvas they are executed on, are generally in bad condition. Scaffolding must be erected, which would be difficult in such an environment. It would take a group of 4-5 people, working full time, several months to restore just one of these churches. Restorers would have to become exceptionally interested to undertake such a project, and have salaries guaranteed in international funds, as well as adequate housing. Permission has to be obtained from the Ethiopian authorities and the responsible clergy must be fully informed about all aspects of the project and give their permission. It is probably not possible to close most churches completely during restoration.

After evaluating our experiences, we are of the opinion that it would be difficult, but not impossible to do these restorations in Ethiopia. Good planning and a reliable source of funding, in co-operation with the Ethiopian authorities and a group of interested restorers, is essential. Can these conditions be met? This question has to be answered before we can take the next step in this project.

Lars Gerdmar

A preliminary report from 14 Ethiopian Orthodox churches

Kebran Gabriel (Lake Tana). Detached round-church in wood.

Painting on canvas from 15th to 16th century and al secco on wall, dating unknown.

The paintings here, as in other round-churches in Ethiopia, are executed on the outside of the four walls and the drum which is placed above these, which together form the room where the service is celebrated. These walls are called *maqdas* and are covered with paintings done both as cotton-cloth glued to the plastered wall and as mural-paintings.



Two saints. The paint is falling off. Detail from the former photo.

Maqdas' west side, painted gateway.

Some of the paintings here are very dirty and the damage is extensive. In some places there are holes that go straight through the canvas and the plaster. In other places the canvas has come loose from the wall and is hanging free. Here is also al secco-painting on plaster in great need of cleaning as well as refastening and retouching.

Kota Maryam (Lake Tana) Detached round-church in stone.

Painting on canvas from 16th to 17th century and al secco on wall, dating unknown.

The paintings are very dirty and the damage extensive. In many places and to a great extent the canvas has come loose from the wall and is hanging free. On the murals, paint is falling off and colour flaking is also taking place.



Maqdas' north face. The painting is coming loose.



Detail of the former photo.

Debre Berhan Sellasse (Gonder) Detached church in stone.

Paintings on canvas and on wood from 19th century.

This is one of the most famous Ethiopian churches, the so called “Ethiopian Sistine chapel”. The shape of the church is rectangular and it is covered with paintings from the floor to the ceiling. Even the ceiling is richly painted, with charming cherub-paintings, with faces in natural scale, painted directly onto the wood construction.

The paintings are in general very dirty and the damage partial, but serious. Paint is falling in several places and beginning to flake in others. There is extensive water damage in the painted ceiling and the straw covering of the roof seems not to be in the best condition.



Cherub paintings on the ceiling are very damaged by water.

Debre Sina Maryam (Gorgora) Detached round-church in wood.



The Crucifixion, western wall. Very dirty. Colour flaking.



The wall of the choir, right side. Relatively clean. Colour flaking.

Painting on canvas from 17th century and older paintings.

The paintings are relatively clean. However paint is falling off and paint flaking may well occur. The older paintings have sustained small amounts of damage. The straw roof is newly done and in good condition, lying on reinforced plastic.

Beta Maryam (Lalibela) Rock-hewn church.

Painting on plaster, al secco, from the 13th century.

The paintings are quite dirty. Paint is falling off the arches and other places. If nothing is done this will continue. This church is listed as a World Heritage Site. There is a Finnish roof of sheet-metal.

Gännätä Maryam (close to Lalibela) Rock-hewn church.

Painting on plaster, al secco, from 12th century.

The murals are very dirty and there is serious damage to both plaster and painting. In certain parts of the church the plaster is falling down. Dark lines of dirt are present all around the church. In some of the churches we could see the stone disintegrating. It is probable that this will prove to be the case, even in this church, on closer examination. A very recent installation of electrical wiring and light bulbs has recently been attached directly into a painting. The deteriorated original roof is covered by a Finnish roof of sheet-metal.

Yemrehannä Krestos (close to Lalibela) Detached church.

Painting on plaster, al secco, and on wood from the middle of the 12th century.

This is one of the most interesting churches in Ethiopia, built in the so-called Aksumite style, which imitates the building technique in Aksum during the first centuries of the Ethiopian Church. There were only a few churches built in this style in Ethiopia and this church is unique of its kind. Besides murals on the walls and in the apse, there is also an impressive wooden construction which has been partially painted.

The paintings are very dirty and have a surface treatment of some kind of wax mixture. There are big diagonal cracks in the painted plaster. Paint is flaking in the girdle-arches and the ceiling and inventories of wood are in great need of cleaning. The painted ceiling has been partially damaged by smoke and fire.

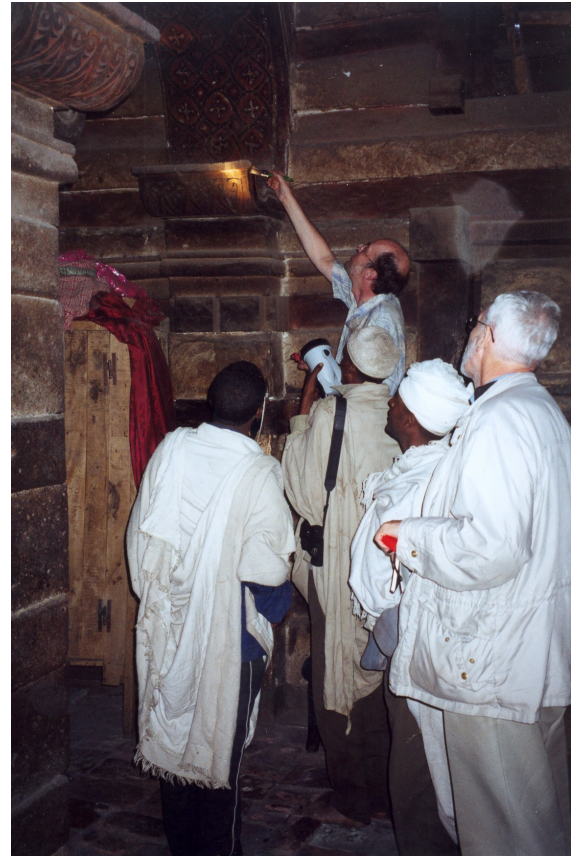


The colour is flaking in the girdle-arches.

Very dirty mural-painting with a surface of wax. A crack goes straight through the plaster diagonally across the painting.



Ceiling damaged by smoke with hardly visible decorative painting.



Lars Gerdmar is conducting a cleaning test with Marseille-soap and clean water on one of the wooden pillars, which proves to be very dirty.

Painting on plaster, al secco, from the 12th century.

All in a very bad condition and a large portion of the earlier plastered areas on the walls and ceiling are already ruined. The stone is deteriorating and loosening plaster is hanging from the walls and ceiling in several places and may fall down at any moment. The paintings in the apse of the choir are hard to see (we did not have permission to enter) but seem to be in better condition than in the other parts of the church. If nothing is done soon, all the paintings here will be ruined.

Debre Tsion Abraham (Tigrey) Rock-hewn church.

This is one of the most notable rock-hewn churches in Ethiopia, richly adorned with paintings.

Painting on plaster, al secco, from the 13th century.

Everything here is in alarmingly bad condition. The stone is decomposing and where the painted plaster has not yet fallen there is great risk that this will happen soon. If nothing is done, all the paintings here will be lost. As the stone deteriorates, the plaster, covered with paintings, is loosening. This can only be helped by an impregnation of the stone itself. An impregnation process of that kind should take about one year. The roof has fairly recently been provided with a layer of concrete, as well as a water drain. There is a liturgical fan in relatively good condition, however in need of examination and restoration.



The stone is decomposing and the plaster is falling off.



Detail: A lonely angel is still clinging firmly, but for how long?



Three saints in the early stages of decay.



Detail: The plaster has started to fall, in the long run nothing will be left.

Asheha Atsbeha (Tigre) Church partly detached, partly cut into the mountain.

Painting on canvas and on wall, from the 17th century.

The painting on canvas in the narthex has been taken down for restoration by people in Ethiopia, whom we do not know. The murals in the nave are more or less in good condition although paint is falling down in several places. The ceiling has been extensively damaged by smoke and fire and is in great need of repair and cleaning.

Maryam Korkor (Tigre) Rock-hewn church.

Painting on plaster, al secco, from the 13th century.

The paintings are in better condition than in the above-mentioned Debre Tsion Abraham, but here too there is serious damage, with plaster falling down because of deteriorated stone. If this continues, a large part of the painting will be ruined.

Debre Selam Michael (Tigrey) Rock-hewn church.

Medieval painting on plaster and canvas on wall.

Very dirty painting with surface treatment of wax. Serious damage to the murals of the apse.

Debre Damo (Tigrey) Detached church in stone.

This is probably the oldest church in Ethiopia. It may date from the 7th century, but more probably from the 10th century. As with the above-mentioned Yemrehannä Krestos, this church is built in the Aksumite style. It is situated on a high plateau and is surrounded by a monastic colony where about 80 monks are living today.



Petter Jansson on the way up to Debre Damo.

The whole church is showing a tendency to collapse. Inside you can see serious damage to the building construction. Probably this damage has been worsened by the new sheet-metal roof which has been laid recently. The situation should be investigated carefully very soon.

The famous animal reliefs in the ceiling of the narthex are decaying. The wood is drying out and piece by piece is falling down. Without impregnation and repair, these reliefs will be lost.



The wooden ceiling in the narthex. The reliefs are drying out and falling down.



Detail: One of the reliefs which is decaying.

Petros and Paulos (Tigrey) Detached church in stone.

This small church dating from medieval times is also built in the Aksumite style and is situated just a few miles north of Mekele. At the moment it is not used for worship and the whole building is available for study. This church would not be too difficult to work with and might be suitable as a first subject for restoration. It is situated close to an urban centre and connected to a good road, which would facilitate the work. It also has window openings which give enough light to make it possible to work without artificial lighting. Water could be transported from Wukro, just a few kilometres away without much problem. Perhaps most importantly, members of the team could stay in Wukro or Mekele, which would allow an “ordinary life” after work.

Painting on plaster, al secco from the 17th century and general building construction

The entire building construction is in quite bad condition and this is also true of the roof. The paintings are relatively clean but in several places are in bad condition. The paint is falling off and there are large cracks; the plaster is loose in some places.



Exterior: This small church is placed on the edge of a cliff some way up in the mountains.



Extensive damage to wall and plaster.



Cracks in the plaster and paint falling down.



Large painted surfaces with paint falling off.