

# Preserving Ethiopia's cultural heritage



Rock-hewn church in Lalibela

Rock paintings, rock-hewn churches, monasteries, palaces, mosques and fortifications give Ethiopia a rich and varied heritage. Six sites are on UNESCO's World Heritage list. Ethiopians are proud of these treasures, but the condition of many sites and objects does reflect the country's poverty. Much has disappeared and the country is now making an inventory of its most important treasures, seeking the return of stolen objects and putting in place a scientific conservation policy.

Axum is Ethiopia's oldest city and, for Christians, its holiest. It has stunning antiquities. Visitors who have archaeologist Haile Selassie Berhe as a guide are lucky. His tour starts before noon in the archaeological museum and finishes after sunset in a famous field of stelae (standing stones) on the outskirts of Axum. "Between Axum and the Eritrean border there are 48 archaeological sites. Less than ten per cent of what is hidden in the sites has been discovered," he says.

The first site is a small locked shelter. Inside is a large stone with inscriptions beginning "I am King Erzana..." in Ge'ez (the language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church), Arabic and Greek. "During the reign of Erzana," says Haile Selassie Berhe, "the first Christian church was built in Ethiopia. Christianity arrived earlier here than in many European countries" (in the first half of the fourth century). The Axumite Empire stretched as far as Yemen and Sudan and the first kings lived here 3,000 years ago. On the wall of the shelter hangs a memorial plate with the names of the three farmers who found the stone slab.

"A good relationship with the local people is a precondition for the preservation of cultural heritage".

The next sites show how thoroughly the work of preservation is being done; burial chambers of ancient warrior kings; the 52-room palace of the Queen of Sheba, who is said to have given birth to Ethiopia's first King of Kings, Menelik I; a cemetery on the opposite side of the road; and the tomb of Menelik himself. All have been described in detail. Pictures have been taken and detailed studies have been made. "We closely cooperate with western archaeologists and depend upon the money they bring in", says Haile Selassie.

## The Ark of the Covenant

King Erzana was the founder of the fourth century St Mary Zion church, destroyed during the Muslim domination of Ethiopia in the sixteenth century. A new church was built and its sanctuary chapel contains Ethiopia's most precious religious object: the "Ark of the Covenant" (believed by the Church in Ethiopia to be the original sacred chest of the Hebrews – the outward sign of God's



St Mary of Zion Church, Axum. The icons and wall paintings are of a rare beauty

covenant with the people of Israel). It used to be taken out of the chapel for processions, but for quite some time this has only been done during the timkat (Epiphany) ceremony in January. Its origin and authenticity are considered in Graham Hancock's controversial book, *The sign and the seal: a quest for the lost Ark of the Covenant*.

"One guard is responsible for the Ark. He is there for all his life. No, he will not be willing to show it", says Haile Selassie, who is a devout Christian himself. Close to the chapel some gold and silver ritual objects are on display. The golden crowns are impressive. "Three hundred Ethiopian rulers have been crowned in this church", says the guide. The main church is open to visitors, though only men are allowed in. The icons and wall paintings are of a rare beauty. Most of the colours were made from vegetable dyes. One particular red is from a vegetable that apparently does not exist any more and which no one knows how to reproduce.

The stelae field is dominated by a solid block of granite, 23 metres high. This obelisk is accredited to King Erzana. The longest one lies shattered on the ground. "In this region there are 3,000 stelae. The only support they have is a stone in the back and one in the front. Most were taken from a spot a few kilometres from here." How were they transported? "This area used to be savannah with many elephants. These animals dragged the stones."

Between the standing and the fallen stones is a large hole. "This place is awaiting a stela that is still in Rome in front of the FAO headquarters. Mussolini's soldiers took it after they had occupied Ethiopia in 1935", says Haile Selassie. It was recently damaged by lightening. In Addis Ababa the Italian ambassador later confirmed that the governments of both Ethiopia and Italy had agreed on its return. "Experts from both sides are discussing the repair and restoration of the obelisk. The restoration will be done in Italy. Then the obelisk will be returned." The ambassador admits that its return will have taken a long time.

### Conflicting views

According to UNESCO and INTERPOL, an inventory can be crucial in tracing stolen treasures. "Many churches have been emptied already", says the French expert, Jacques Mercier. Together with Ethiopian scholar Girmay Elias

(who died recently) he was responsible for an EU-funded survey and inventory of the treasures of churches and monasteries in the Amhara and Tigray regions. "Priests and monks are not aware of the value of the manuscripts, icons, crosses and other ritual objects."

Mercier and Girmay visited 345 churches, which is less than ten per cent of the total number in these two regions. "Priests are not used to showing their precious objects to outsiders. It took a long time before they would do so. We have taken photographs of the most precious ones and described the site, their dimensions, the materials they are made of, and the name of the first owner."

However, the Ministry of Culture and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church would not accept the explanatory notes that had been added to the inventory. Mercier explained:

### The theft of Lalibela's healing cross

In the heart of the majestic mountains of northern Ethiopia, in the city of Lalibela, there are eleven churches. They are remarkable as they have been carved out of the rocks. The major church, the Medhane Alem, harbours one of Ethiopia's most precious treasures, the Afro Ayigebea, a heavy, richly decorated cross, 60 centimetres long. Its value is not only religious and historical, but Ethiopians also ascribe healing power to it. Two men permanently guard it.

Despite this, in a night of confusion – 9 March 1997 – with one guard off sick and the other asleep, the cross was stolen. For days the theft was front-page news in Ethiopia. Despite a confession soon after the initial investigation, it was not until two years later that the police traced it. They discovered that it had been smuggled out of Lalibela to an antique dealer in the neighbouring city of Desi, and from there had been sold to an antique dealer in the Ethiopian capital. This dealer had kept it hidden for a year, and then sold it on to a Belgian collector for \$25,000.

The Ethiopian Embassy in Brussels engaged a Belgian lawyer, who advised that legal proceedings would take years, and it would be very difficult to prove the bad faith of the buyer. Instead negotiations took place and agreement was eventually reached on its return. The precious cross was flown back to Addis Ababa, where experts concluded that it was indeed the 800-year-old cross of Lalibela.

The Belgian collector, who had visited Ethiopia several times and was interested in Ethiopian artefacts, must have known about the theft of the magic cross and its value for Christians in the country. But the price for its return was that no further action would be taken against him – and he even got his money back – while in Ethiopia seven people were jailed for several years.



"I wrote that not all eleven rock-hewn churches had always been churches. Possibly one or two had been used as houses for the priests. This observation was not new. We had also argued that foreigners might have been involved in the building of the churches of Lalibela. Other scholars have concluded the same thing. We also differed about the dating of some objects. For example church dignitaries might claim that a cross dated from the fourth or sixth centuries, while in reality

it was not more than one hundred and fifty years old."

Jara Hailemariam, general manager of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, strongly disagrees with Mercier. "Mercier is undermining our tradition. He wants to correct a history that only we know." Mr Jara has written a paper challenging Mercier's conclusion that foreigners had imported building techniques and art works. "The clergy of Lalibela strictly adhere to the tradition to this day", he concludes. "To the priests and people of Lalibela, Mercier is no longer welcome." It is an interesting conflict between western scholarship and the right of a country to foster its own historiography, traditions and legends.

Conservation of sites and objects is a pillar of Ethiopia's preservation policy. The Government is worried about the condition of the roofs and walls of the rock-hewn churches in Lalibela. They are becoming porous and as a result humidity is reaching the icons and wall paintings on the inner walls. Most churches are in poor condition. Provisional shelters have been constructed to cover five of them, but there is an urgent need to replace them with more technically and aesthetically appropriate ones. The decision to do so was made several years ago and the European Union is willing to finance it, but so far no company – either Ethiopian or foreign – has been found to carry out the work. Mr Jara denies that it has anything to do with Ethiopian bureaucracy, which can scare off foreign companies. ■

### Manuscripts on microfilm

Some are small scrolls, others are sizeable books. They can be as old as the sixteenth century. Most of them are in Ge'ez, a few are in Arabic. The Christian ones contain hand painted illustrations of the Virgin Mary, St Michael, St George and other saints. Some of the stories depicted are unique illustrations of the country's history.

Through the centuries many manuscripts have left Ethiopia. The University of Leiden in the Netherlands received the first one in the early sixteenth century. During the 1980s they were sold in large quantities.

"The situation in Ethiopia was bad at that time. Many churches and monasteries were willing to sell manuscripts", says Professor Jan Just Witkam of the Leiden University Library. He bought whole boxes, filled with old books and scrolls. "Because of the favourable prices and knowing that another box would follow, I accepted every parcel. I also bought a few manuscripts at Sotheby's and Christie's in London."

The university libraries of Uppsala and Leiden and the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin have presented microfilms of several hundred manuscripts to the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa. Microfilm allows the institute to put together a comprehensive collection in Ethiopia, wherever the originals are housed. It can easily be reproduced and is ideal for research.

### The renovation of two palaces

The palaces of Menelik II in Addis Ababa and of Yohannes IV in Makelle are to be renovated. The two rulers are considered to have laid the foundation of modern Ethiopia.

The Menelik Palace was built in 1877, when the city of Addis Ababa was founded and has African, Arabic

and Indian elements in its structure. The most beautiful part of the palace is the prayer house. It has the bedrooms of the Emperor and the Empress, the office of the Emperor's Minister of Defence, a Council building, a dining hall and a coronation hall.

The Palace in Makelle was built during the reign of Yohannes (1872-1889). It is a big square, stone structure – more like a defensive work than the Menelik palace. Austria will fund a feasibility study and the renovation. Austrian architects and restorers will work with Ethiopian experts. The project will take four-and-a-half years and cost around \$13.5 million.

Lalibela priest praying from a manuscript

