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# ADDIS AMBA MÄDHANÉ ALÄM: THE UNCOMMON TROGLODYTIC HERITAGE OF ETHIOPIA<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia is one of the mainstays of the zeniths of early African Christianity that was introduced into the country, most probably during the apostolic period. Christianization in Ethiopia or elsewhere in the world particularly since the fourth century A.D was accompanied by the excavation of chapels, churches and/or monasteries in and from rock. The development of this tradition is associated with biblical references. In the teaching of Christ, rock is symbolically mentioned as ways of expression of the words of the Gospel. For his devotion and wonderful faith, Peter, the apostle, was privileged as the “rock” on which the Church of Christ would be established (Matthew 16:18). Moreover, the life of Jesus Christ was associated with caves; his life begins in a cave at Bethlehem and also ends in a cave at Golgotha (Lubke 1958, p. 56, cited in Mengistu 2018, p. 43). The following is quoted from the New Testament records:

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at *The Eighth National Research Conference* organized by Debre Markos University, Ethiopia, April, 2017.

And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid in his own new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed (Matthew 27: 57-61).

The caves that attributed to Christ were symbolical instruments for the expansion of troglodytic monasticism in the history of Christianity. The early excavation of caves for spiritual activity was associated with the beginning of hermitage, a self-denial life of Christians associated with troglodytism, a life in rock. In this trend, hermits hollow their cells out of rocks. Since the 3rd century A.D, Christian practices and asceticism in the early centres of Christianity, particularly in Egypt and the Middle East (such as Cappadocia), were initiated in form of troglodytic life. This is evidenced by the troglodytic caves that are shaped ingeniously to meet spiritual purposes (Meinardus 1999, pp. 207, 210; Rodley 1986, pp. 425–426).

Excavating churches from rock has a long history in Ethiopia. The establishment of monastic life has greatly inspired the excavation of rock-cut chapels and churches across the country. This development was accompanied by Christianized artistic and architectural expressions. Later, the accumulative architectural lore of the tradition became reflected on the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, one of the world heritage sites of Ethiopia. The spatial distribution of the tradition decreases as one comes to the central part of the country. The concentration of rock-cut churches in the northern part of the country is mainly associated with the nature of the landscape, which was more convenient to securely perform spiritual activities. The availability of easily carving rock was the other factor that sponsored the excavation of various rock churches. The concentration of these churches in this area was also associated with the expansion of early troglodytic monastic life that made its first base of establishment in the northern part of the country (Mengistu 2004, p. 37; Phillipson 2009, p. 87). Most of these rock-cut churches in Tigray, Lasta and Shawa are discussed by different scholars from different perspectives (McGrath 1925; Findley 1944; Buxton 1947; Pankhurst 1960; Huntingford 1965; Buxton 1971; Gerster 1972; Buxton and Mathews 1974; Kidane, Hecht 1983; Schuster 1994; Jager, Pearce 1994; Finneran 2007; Phillipson 2009; Mengistu 2011 and Mercer, Lepage 2012, to mention few).

However, there are various antiquities of the country that have escaped the notices of scholars mainly due to their geographical inaccessibility. Most of these least known troglodytic sites are also daunted by natural and anthropogenic destructive agents. Mäqét, a district in North Wällo, Amhara Region, is one of the major centres of unseen rock-cut churches of the country and an area where these

kinds of cultural values are being endangered. My MA thesis<sup>2</sup> that surveys more than nineteen rock-cut churches (see table 1) in the rugged landscape of the area attests to this fact. Among these, the famous cave church of *Däbrä* Aron is the only to be witnessed by Stephen Wright who travelled to the area for pleasure in the late 1940s (Wright 1957, pp. 7-9) Nazugn Maryam, the other little known rock-hewn church, is also recently evidenced (Tsegaye 2016, pp. 1–26; 2018, pp. 1–21). Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm (Saviour of the World of Addis Amba) is one of the hidden and least known troglodytic heritages found in this area. It is explored here with its features some of which are common in the cave church tradition of the country. This study intends to provide historical, artistic and architectural records of this peculiar cave monastery for readers, researchers and tourists.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study was to uncover the artistic and architectural values of the troglodytic monastery of Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm. The specific objectives of the study were to introduce the history of the cave monastery, explain the major artistic and architectural values of the monastery and describe the mural paintings of the monastery.

## METHODS AND SOURCES OF THE STUDY

To effectively achieve the objectives of this research, appropriate methods and sources were employed. A pre-field data acquisition was initially conducted to assess published and unpublished text-based sources related to the area. It is understood from this revision work that the troglodytic monastery of Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm is little known. After understanding this gap, the next step was data collection that was done during my field works conducted since 2013. In September 2013, I surveyed more than 19 rock-cut churches, including Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm, in Mäqät District. Following this, my field work was extended to again visit the site focused on in my study and other sites in different areas. Geographical and physical (architectural) data of the study were collected through observation and photography. The UTM coordinates (northing and easting degrees) and altitude of the site was also taken by a GPS. Interviews with intentionally selected interviewees (locally acknowledged story tellers) were scheduled to collect data related with

2 Tsegaye Ebabey 2014. A Survey of Rock Hewn Churches in Mäqät Wäräda, North Wällo. MA Thesis. Department of Archaeology, Addis Ababa University.

history of the monastery. *Gädlä Abunä* Muse (the Deeds of Our Father Moses), a parchment manuscript written in Geez (the liturgical language of Ethiopian Orthodox Church) which is available in the monastery was also consulted. The data are described and explained qualitatively.

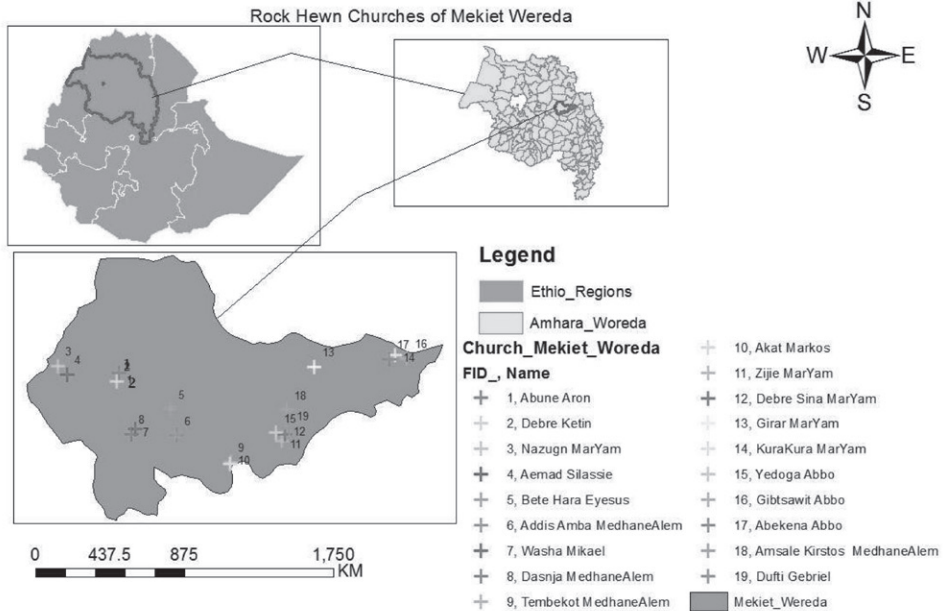
## THE CAVE CHURCH OF ADDIS AMBA MÄDHANÉ ALÄM

### Location and Vicinity

The church of Addis Amba *Washa* Mädhané Aläm (the cave church of Saviour of the World of Addis Amba), also known as *Abunä Musé Gädam* (the monastery of Our Father Moses), is located in the locality called Addis Amba in Mäqét District, North Wällo, Amhara Region. It is situated 660 km north of Addis Ababa, 146 km west of Wäldiya and 90 km southwest of Lalibela. The landscape of Mäqét in particular and North Wällo in general is characterised by rugged topographical settings: gorges, mountains, escarpments and highlands. Mäqét was geopolitically significant particularly during the Gondärine period because it connects the old Bäggedmör and Wällo Provinces via Çäçäho that served as corridor of Gondärine rulers to control Yäjju and Lasta rulers (Crummey 1975, p. 2). The escarpment that stretches from Çäçäho to the eastern corridor of Mäqét was the base for the excavation of various rock-cut churches (see their list and type on Table 1 and their distribution on Map. 1). The cave church of Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm (indicated on the map as Addis Amba MedhaneAlem) is located 8 km east of Filaqit, the main town of Mäqét, with an altitude 2567 m above sea level and 0476140 E & 1297278 N UTM coordination.

Table 1. Types of rock-cut churches in Mäqét District (Tsegaye 2014, p. 69)

No	Name of the Rock-cut Churches	Category	No	Names of the Rock Hewn Churches	Category
1	<i>Däbrä Qäṭṭin</i> Maryam	Cave	11	Washa Michael	Cave
2	<i>Däbrä</i> Aron	Cave	12	Ṭämbäqot Mädhané Aläm	Cave
3	Gəbşawit Abbo	Cave	13	Aqqat Marqos	Cave
4	Quraqura Maryam	Cave	14	Zəjjä Maryam	Cave
5	Abäkäna Abbo	Semi-monolithic(?)	15	<i>Däbrä</i> Sina Maryam	Cave
6	Nazuḡn Maryam	Monolithic	16	Gərar Maryam	Cave
7	A'emad Šəllasé	Cave	17	Yädoga Abbo	Cave
8	Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm	Cave	18	Dufti Gabriel	Cave
9	Bétä Hara Eiyyäsus	Cave	19	Dufti Mädhané Aläm	Cave
10	Dasnja Mädhané Aläm	Cave			



*Map 1. Distribution of rock - cut churches in Mäqét District, North Wällo  
(Source: Tsegaye 2014, p. 25)*

Highlands, gorges and cliffs characterise the vicinity of the monastery. It lies between Addis Amba and Säändäj, highlands separated by a gorge. These two highlands form a V-shaped corridor overlooking the low land area of Shädäho Mäqét (see figure 1). There are few old trees around the monastery that have escaped the local forest exploitation made overtime. Holy spring water which is used by the people to heal from different diseases is located to the south-west of the monastery, near the gorge.

### **Historical Background of the Monastery**

According to the local sources, the cave monastery of Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm has a long history. The elders of the monastery state that it was established by *Abunä*<sup>3</sup> Musé who was the second bishop of Aksum<sup>4</sup>. The origin, period of heading the Ethiopian church and activities of *Abunä* Musé are still unclear. It is significant to put here some explanations to briefly answer the question “who was *Abunä* Musé?” based on available local and intellectual sources. According to *Gädlä Abunä* Musé

3 *Abunä* is a Geez term which means “our father” It is a honorary name given mainly to bishops and monks.

4 Informant: Zéna Täka (*Abba*), abbot of the monastery, interviewed on September 3/09/2013.

and the local oral tradition, *Abunä Musé* was born from early Christian families. These families had a wedding at Galilee where Jesus Christ, St. Mary and the Apostles were presented and where Jesus made his first scene (see John 2: 11-11). This wedding was conducted in the home of Dokimas who was the father of the bride, named Maryam Soliyana or Pərsqəla. The bridegroom was Yoştos, the son of Yosef who was the servant and protector of St. Mary. Musé, whose name was given by St. Gabriel, was born from these blessed families. This shows that Musé was a Hebrew in his origin. However, he became a governor of Egypt under Byzantine Empire and later on he retired and moved to the monastery of Macarius (Scetis) where he adopted the monastic life of the Desert Fathers. Anointed by the Egyptian patriarch, Athanasius, Musé became the second Egyptian metropolitan to Ethiopia by succeeding Frumentius, also known as Sälama I or Käsaté Bərhan, the first bishop of Ethiopia<sup>5</sup>.

In the bishop order of Ethiopia, a bishop with the name of Minas is mentioned to be the second bishop (Taddesse 1972, p. 110; Sergew 1970, p.7; Nosnitsin 2007, p. 971). In local sources, this bishop is dominantly mentioned by his name, Musé or *Dagəm Sälama* (Sälama II). The tradition associated with Musé is described in some pieces of literatures (Kinefe-Rigb 1975, p. 85; Witakowska 2010, p.1150; Ficcadadori 2007, pp.1080–1081). However, most scholars do not give a clear description about the bishop other than mentioning him by his anointed name, Minas. Local sources also acknowledge his anointed name. One of the sanctuaries at the cave church of Yädəbba Maryam<sup>6</sup> is dedicated as *Bétä* Minas. A painting attributed to Musé is also evidenced in this cave church (see figure 2). Thus, like that of the first bishop of Ethiopia, Frumentius, the second bishop, Minas, was also known by his different names as Sälama II and Musé. Unlike that of Frumentius who did much in the translation of religious books in to Geez language, Musé had spent his life by excavating churches from rock. Various rock-cut churches are mentioned in his *gädəl* (deed) to be excavated by him. The cave monastery of Addis Amba Mädhane Aläm is one of them to be excavated by Musé as it is quoted from his *gädəl* as follow:

ወእምዛ እንዘ ያንሳሱ እምሀገር ለሀገር በጽሐ ጎብ ምድረ እምባ ውሃ ዘትሰመይ ኦዲስ እምባ መድኃኔዓለም ወበሀዩ ገብረ ብዙኃ ተእምረ ወሐነፀ ቤተ ክርስቲያን በዕብን ውቁር በሰሙ ለመድኃኔን ወሐነፀ ካልፀ እለ ኢተከሰቱ እሰከ ይእዙ። [And thus, while wandering from place to place, he arrived at the land of Amba Wəha called

5 *Gädlä Abunä Musé*, unpublished manuscript (a parchment written in Geez), available in the monastery; Informant: Gälaw Dubalä (*Liqä Kahnat*); he served as a manager of Parish (Priesthood) Church Councils of Mäqät District (in the old Wällo Province Dioceses) for more than 30 years; interviewed on 19/09/2013.

6 This cave church is located along Zita River in Dawnt district, North Wällo. It is mentioned in *Gädlä Abunä Musé* (leaf 152). It has paintings probably dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is described by writers (Wright 1957, pp 7–9; Witakowska 2014, pp. 3–4).

Addis Amba Mädhane Aläm. He performed various miracles there and he carved a rock hewn church in the name of Our Saviour. He also carved others which have not yet been revealed]<sup>7</sup>.

### **Compartment of the Cave**

The cave monastery of Addis Amba Mädhane' Aläm has about seven independent caves excavated into a soft rock in the direction of east-west (see also figure 3). The first three divisions in the west are caves of the guest room and treasury. One of these caves was recently changed in to a sanctuary which is dedicated to St. Arséma. Its planning indicates that this cave was originally excavated as a treasury room. The other three caves are the main cave church, ground chapel and Bétälhém.

The ground chapel is excavated below the main cave church and is repeatedly modified on its external side. The Bétälhém is located east of the main church which is allowed to be accessed solely by priests. A small cavern lies in front of this part. In this study, emphasis was placed on the main church which is significant in its plan, art, architecture and painting. The other caves have no unique features to describe here.

### **The main Cave Church: Its Plan, Art, Architecture and Mural Paintings**

The main cave church can be accessed from the main gate in the south west direction. A dome which is recently made from steel sheet is erected over its head. It has a cross attached with it to indicate the cave which is the main church. It is a storey like structure that can be accessed via two quarried entrances. The first stepped male's entrance leads to a small irregularly shaped and repeatedly modified anteroom (see figure 4).

Internally, the cave church is planned and excavated fitting with the ritual practices of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It includes the major parts- the chanting room, holy (where the priests pray together and the Holy Communion given to the believers) and holy of holies or sanctuary (where the altar is placed), which are partitioned according to the different liturgical services. The chanting room, where hymns are sung, is found separated from the nave that includes the holy and the sanctuary. It surrounds the nave and tends to have a round shape. It is the widest part which congregates both chanters and believers together. It becomes narrow in its space towards its eastern and southern sides. Some part of its floor is occupied by burial holes consisting of bones of saints. There are also wooden boxes containing human bones. Attention is drawn to a unique property of the church, a sacred

<sup>7</sup> *Gädlä Abunä Musé*, leaf 151.



handcraft canopy displayed over the chanting place (see figure 5). It is unfurled or stretched out and attached with a benched wood inserted in to the upper part of the rock wall approaching the roof of the chanting room. The reading of Gospel is usually taken place under this canopy and stretching out contemporary processional umbrella or canopy<sup>8</sup> is not as such necessary. As a result, the canopy is immovable and serves as it is once placed. It is a good example of local art (handcraft product) showing the early attempts of forging a traditional canopy in the area. Tradition shows that it had a light to serve as a florescent<sup>9</sup>.

Great attention was paid to the skill and materials used for its production and the paintings depicted on it. Remarkably, the materials used are bark of tree, rope and wood. The bark could be of the acacia tree which is available in the area. This type of bark is naturally hard and can last for a long period of time. The barks are skilfully intertwined in the way the local people used to prepare *dawuja*, a local mat prepared from the bark of trees or fibres. Some flat and thin woods are inserted around its mid part to give it an overtopped shape like a contemporary umbrella or canopy used in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. However, it has no handling (stick) that makes it unique from any processional umbrella or canopy of the church.

The other astonishing features of this traditional canopy are its paintings and decorative embellishments. The paintings are iconographic elements which represent the 120 Families of Jesus Christ<sup>10</sup>. Its entire part was painted and decorated with red, white and black colours probably prepared locally from soil. However, most of the paintings are demolished, and there are only some examples preserved to this day. The icons were described in the Geez version though most of the words are destroyed except the word "ሐዋርያ" (*hawaria* which means apostle). This shows that some of the paintings were representative of the apostles. Its innermost paintings are vanished. The relatively preserved icons are found around the internal edge of the canopy. The canopy is also decorated with small cruciform features and zigzag lines. The icons have round face and big eyes which are the major characteristics of Ethiopian medieval paintings (see figures 6 & 7).

The nave which is further compartmented into the holy and holy of holies is a rock-hewn (monolithic) feature excavated from the main rock at the centre of the main cave church. It is detached from its parent rock in all sides except on its base and roof. This structure makes the cave monastery to be unique in its planning.

8 In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, stretching out umbrella or canopy during processional or ritual activities is a common tradition.

9 Informant: Hailä Gabriel (*Abba*), a servant of the monastery, interviewed on September 3/09/2013.

10 Informant: Hailä Gabriel (*Abba*); interviewed on 3/09/2013.

That is, a monolithic rock-hewn nave within a cave is uncommon and probably not found elsewhere in the country. This planning implies the hewer's knowledge about nature of the rock which is soft. If it was a monolithic church carved outside of the cave, it would be destroyed earlier as the rock is naturally soft and less capable to resist deteriorative agents. However, the monolithic nave is still well protected by the thickness of the cave's parent rock. Its facades have no equivalent planning. The western and in some extent, the northern facades are almost rectangular whereas the eastern and southern facades tend to be round. Architecturally, the significant features of the wall are the cross-cut windows sculpted in the western facade of the nave. Their style is not unique as it is common for the rock hewn churches of Lalibela, for example, Bétä Maryam.

The nave has three liturgical wooden doorways which are opened in the northern, western and southern facades of the nave. All of them imitate a rectangular shape and are carved keeping the doorway tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (see figure 8). The nave is further partitioned in to holy and holy of holies (sanctuary). The holy was separated from the sanctuary by arched pillars. However, a wall connected with the pillars was recently built to safely protect the sanctuary. Three doorways to access the sanctuary are also prepared. The sanctuary is again partitioned in to *gab'atä mäntola'et*, a space that is found next to the holy, and the innermost part of the holy of holies where the altar is kept. Access into this part is allowed only for priests. This partition is made by two flat and rectangular pillars which have relatively unique style and are carefully sculpted (see figure 9). These pillars have twofold architraves that connected one with the other. Vertical buttresses are also designed on the sanctuary's rock wall. The cave's roof is only slightly decorated. Marks of chiselling tool that implies the application of local excavation tool (such as axe) is evidenced on the roof. The roof of the sanctuary immediately above the altar has a domed feature. There are also engraved crosses around the dome.

Examples of early mural paintings of the cave church are evidenced on the exterior part of the western facade of the nave. Rarely, some painted icons can be observed on the rock wall. The icons can be observed mainly above their necks. Evidence is not available whether they refer to angels or human saints. Locally produced black and red colours are used for the paintings that have similar styles of paintings with the icons preserved at the traditional canopy. Their features imply either they are old or painted by unskilled painters. But at their appearance, the paintings seem to be ancient and present an attempt to symbolize saints or angels. Similar icons are also painted on the upper part of the western entrance (see figures 10 & 11).

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Inquiring about troglodytic heritage in Ethiopia is indispensable to have a better understanding about the early practices of Christianity. In relation to this, this study comes across with the significant values of the rock cave monastery of Addis Amba Mädhane Aläm which was stated to be established by *Abunä* Musé, the second bishop of Ethiopian Orthodox Church. This may contribute to the progressing academic interest in artistic and architectural study in the context of Ethiopia. The study has uncovered the unique features of this cave monastery. This rock-cut church appears unusual in its monolithic rock-hewn nave. This shows the multiple skills of stone artisans, the spiritual devotees, and the knowledge they have about the nature of rock. The traditional hand craft product (the canopy) is also unique. The skill and materials used for its production show that the possibility of forging an umbrella and canopy using local materials and knowledge. This is a good experience of the church and it can be recorded as one of the exceptional antiquities of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The cave's paintings are also relevant to discuss the cave and rock paintings of Ethiopia. Some of the paintings have survived mainly on the internal side of the traditional canopy and on the western exterior facade of the nave.

Generally, this study is an attempt to introduce the basic cultural values of the cave church. However, future detailed investigation works have to be done to provide detail facts about *Abunä* Musé and his deeds. It should be also noted that its values need recognition from heritage managers and other stakeholders as a new alternative tourism destination. The dating of the cave, based on local evidences, is suggested to be in the late fourth or fifth centuries A.D. However, it needs a critical archaeological work to put it in line with the general chronology of Ethiopian rock-hewn churches, which is still a difficult task for many scholars. Material behaviours of the canopy also require a detailed archaeological investigation. Its features are also being deteriorated. Not more than five iconographic paintings were preserved during the time of this study. The moral wall paintings are also fading. Therefore, a study-based conservation is very much needed.



*Figure 1. Vicinity of Addis Amba Mädhané Aläm Monastery<sup>11</sup>*



*Figure 2. Abunä Musé, a mural painting taken from the cave church of Yädäbba Maryam, Dawnt*

11 All the pictures inserted in this article were taken during the field work by the author.



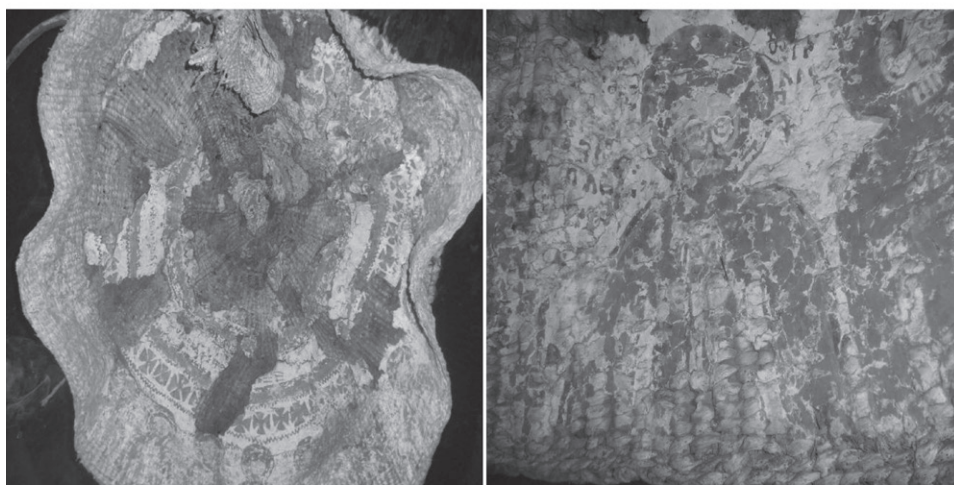
*Figure 3. Exterior face of the caves-west to east view*



*Figure 4. The main cave church of Mädhané Aläm, a view from south-west*



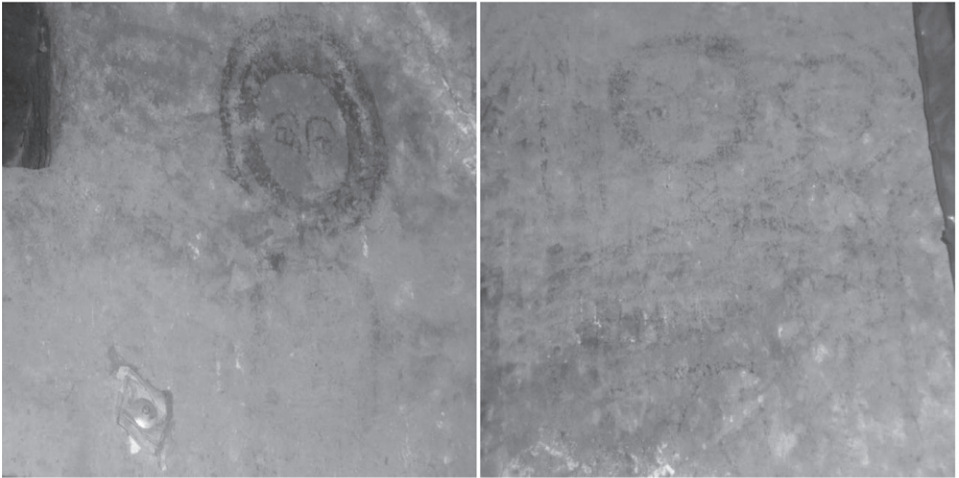
*Figure 5. A handcraft canopy projected over the chanting room*



*Figure 6. (left) Interior view of the canopy;  
Figure 7. (right) Partial view of the iconographies of the canopy*



*Figure 8. (left) Cruciform windows of the nave  
Figure 9. (right) A flanged pillar in the sanctuary*



*Figures 10. (left) and 11. (right) Evidences of mural paintings  
on the western external facade of the nave*

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# ADDIS AMBA MÄDHANÉ ALÄM: THE UNCOMMON TROGLODYTIC HERITAGE OF ETHIOPIA

## SUMMARY

Ethiopia is one of the few African countries that have preserved the antiquities of early and medieval Christianity. The cave church of Addis Amba Mädhane Aläm (the church of Saviour of the World), is one of the little known troglodytic heritages found in Mäqät, North Wällo. This study aims to uncover the historical, architectural and artistic values of the cave church that has unique cultural testimonies. Data for the study were collected through fieldwork, interviews, and archival consultations. The cave is believed to have been excavated by Musé, the second bishop of Ethiopia. The church has six different caves cut into a rock face. Five of them are chapels, treasuries and gusting rooms. This paper discusses the cave which is the church of Mädhane Aläm. It has a complex layout compartmented into chanting room, holy and sanctuary. The holy and sanctuary form the nave which is rock-hewn monolithic feature detached from the main rock except on its roof and base. This planning is uncommon in the rock cave church tradition of Ethiopia because the nave is monolithically carved within a cave that should not be confused with churches built under a natural cave. The old enough canopy, a large artistic processional umbrella permanently projected over the chanting place also distinguishes this cave church. This is an indigenous piece of handcraft crafted locally from the bark of a tree. It is painted with different symbols and saint icons. The cave is also home to archaic mural paintings.

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